

Sociological Research Methods: Research Project

Soc 318.002 - Fall 2009

Instructor: Stacy Keogh

Overview:

The purpose of this assignment is to provide students the opportunity to “do” sociology by designing your own, original research project. All students will conduct and report sociological research using content analysis. The basics of the Research Project involve selecting a topic, reviewing existing research on the topic, conducting research, and writing a report summarizing the research.

Project Requirements:

The Research Project is worth 50% of your final course grade, so do not take this project lightly. The written report is due at the beginning of the last day of class. There are two mandatory meetings with the instructor to discuss, and give feedback on the research project. See the syllabus for scheduled meeting dates. A sign-up sheet will be distributed during class in the week leading up to the meeting date. You will receive project points for attending these meetings, so failing to meet with me is a direct penalty on your overall project grade.

The total project is worth 120 points. Throughout the course, you will submit various papers to demonstrate your progress. This includes:

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Due Date</u>
Research Proposal	5	9/14
Data/Methods	10	10/21
Preliminary findings	10	11/23
Annotated Bibliography	5	11/13
Student Meetings (2)	5	10/9 & 11/20
Presentation Outline	5	12/4
Final Paper	50	12/11
Presentation	30	Last week/TBD
Total	120	

Guidelines: Picking your research question.

- Pick a topic that is meaningful. Sociology is not about the trivial and thus your research should not be about trivial matters. You will need to be able to justify the sociological importance of your work. For instance, you should not ask a question like “do men dress differently than women?”
- Find a project with a central theme. For instance, it is better to ask “what are the positive and negative images of the family in the TV show *The Simpsons*” rather than “how does the TV show *The Simpsons* depict the images of the family, race issues, sexual orientation, and patriotism.”
- Make sure your research topic is “doable”. There are lots of potentially great ideas but many of them require data that are either unavailable or too time consuming to collect. Pick a topic that you are interesting in and/or already know some about to cut down on some of your outside work.
- Comparative studies can be helpful and make it easier to generate interesting results. For instance, a person can examine magazine depictions of Anglos and Latinos and examine such images across two different types of magazines.
- You do not have to report everything that you originally tested. For the example noted above, perhaps you find interesting differences between Anglos and Latinos but no differences across the two different types of magazines that were examined – in this case, it is best to simply discuss your race/ethnicity findings and combine the results for the two types of magazines.

Paper Structure: The written report will have eight sections or headings labeled: *Introduction* (1 pg), *Literature Review* (2-4 pgs), *Hypotheses* (1 pg), *Data & Methods* (2-3 pg), *Findings* (2-3 pgs), *Discussion & Conclusion* (2-3 pg), *References*, & *Appendix*.

1. *Introduction*. Clearly state what is the purpose or objective of your research. This is typically done in the first paragraph of your written report. It is helpful, for instance, to start the paper off with a sentence like: “The purpose of this content analysis is to ...” Typically, 2 or 3 sentences is needed to fully explain the purpose of your research. Next, and (typically) in the same paragraph, discuss why this topic is important – that is, why is it worthy of our attention. An introduction is typically about one page long.

2. *Literature Review*. Discuss five research articles/books that have addressed your research question or a related question. Ideally, these are the works you submitted for your annotated bibliography. Remember, it is likely that you are not the first person to do research on your specific topic or a closely related topic, and thus you want to summarize what others have done and what others have found.

There is no one correct way to organize your *Literature Review* section. Perhaps the easiest approach for this assignment and the one that I would recommend is to spend one paragraph discussing/summarizing each article that you reviewed. While there is no precise formula for what needs to be summarized, the three most important things to discuss are (a) what was the dependent variable (i.e., what is the author trying to explain), (b) what method did the author use to answer the research question; (c) what did the author find (especially in terms of the main findings that are relevant to your research), and (d) how is the article relevant to your study. Avoid direct quotations – always try to summarize ideas in your own words. When summarizing, articles/books can be cited in the text in one of two ways:

- “Men earn more money than women” (Smith 1995)
- Smith (1995) found that men earn more money than women.

If you absolutely have to use a direct quotation, use page numbers. Example: Smith (1995:45) noted that “men have all the economic fun.”

3. *Hypothesis*. All projects should make predictions, or hypotheses, concerning your findings. Discuss at least three but no more than five of these predictions or hypotheses in about a paragraph or two (you do not have to list ALL of your hypotheses). Make sure to explicitly state your hypotheses (a predicted relationship between variables). If it is not clear from the Literature Review section of your paper, make sure to specify why you made such predictions. Hypotheses can be supported from past research, from common sense, or from sociological theory. Hypotheses typically take the following format:

H₁: Advertisements will show men in higher prestige occupations than women.

4. *Data & Methods*. Report in detail on what you did and how the research was conducted. This section counts for most of your point total for this assignment. The key is to be as explicit as possible. The general rule is to ask yourself could someone else use your descriptions to replicate the analysis. Be sure you include the following explanations in this section.

- a. Sample: One major part of this section includes a discussion and justification of your sample (e.g., why the specific magazine was picked, why the specific year was chosen, why the specific issue was selected), including a description of your criteria for data inclusion (e.g., did you examine all ads, just full page ads, just full page ads with pictures of women, just full page ads with pictures of at least one woman but no more than two women, etc.). Remember to include sample size. All this should take about one page.
- b. Operationalization. The measurement of your variables. In terms of variable operationalizations, it is often very helpful to provide two or three examples to illustrate how you coded certain variables. This should take at least two pages, if not longer. In addition, be sure to note your unit of analysis.

c. Methods. My expectation is that students will spend at least 20 hours coding data. How many observations are necessary for this project? If an observation takes five minutes to code and record, then the expectation is that one could code easily 200 or more observations (e.g., coding an advertisement along a few easily observable dimensions). If an observation takes an hour or more to code (e.g., coding a ½ hour long television sitcom), perhaps only 20 can be collected.

5. Findings. Summarization of your findings. Detail what you found, what patterns emerged, which of your hypotheses were confirmed, and what if anything was surprising. This may include examining variable means, percentages, bar charts, frequencies, etc. It is also helpful for those who analyze written statements or pictures to provide some of these as a way to better illustrate a particular argument.

6. Discussion & Conclusion. Begin with a brief summary of your findings – typically no more than one paragraph – and then discuss how your findings comment upon a larger sociological issue(s). If, for instance, you examined gender and magazine advertisements, what do your findings tell us about gender relations in US society? This section should roughly parallel your discussion on the importance of your project that was elaborated upon in the *Introduction* section, but it is typical for a new issue or two to be raised or expanded upon. Finally, discuss any weaknesses of your project (e.g., what went wrong, what concepts were difficult to measure, how might this study be improved upon) and directions for future research.

7. References. List alphabetically the citations you used in your text. Use ASA format. For example:

Portes, Alejandro, and Cynthia Truelove. 1987. "Making Sense of Diversity." *Annual Review of Sociology* 13:359-85.

Stack, John F., and Christopher L. Warren. 1992. "The Reform Tradition and Ethnic Politics." Pp. 160-85 in *Miami Now!*, edited by Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick. University Press of Florida.

8. Appendix. Here, you should include material that is attached to the back of your document. In the appendix, attach supplemental material to your written report which will include (but not be limited to): (1) all of your completed hand-written code sheets (see me if you do not have hand-written code sheets) or a print out of your SPSS, Excel data set (if used); and (2) a copy of the five articles you used. The appendix is not counted in the minimum page requirement.

Further Instructions:

The written report must use 12 point font and one inch margins on all sides; must be typed and stapled or firmly bound together; must be left-justified only; and must be double spaced and include page numbers. Reports should include a cover or title page that contains your name, our course number, the date, and the title of the paper. Five percentage points will be deducted for papers not meeting these requirements. Papers should be about 10-15 pages in length, not including appendix material.

This is a lot of work, but if you keep up on the assignments throughout the course of the semester, the workload will not seem as overwhelming. Remember to have fun with it! Sociologists make a living out of doing original research that they are interested in!

Presentation:

The presentation component of your project allows you present your original research to the class. In general, presentations should be approximately 12-15 minutes in length and include all of the components of the paper. You should have an outline, or an overhead prepared so students can follow along with your project. Allow 3-5 minutes for a question and answer period so you can explain any unclear points or ambiguous findings. This should be fun, since you will know your project better than anyone else and can claim full expertise. This is worth 20% of your final grade and is considered the final examination for this course. Presentations will be during the last week of class, and possibly into the final exam period. Exact dates will be determined later in the semester.