Bocconi

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# PhD Seminar: Research Design in the Social Sciences

2026-2027 **Provisional** Syllabus

## Course Description

The PhD seminar aim to equip students with the skills necessary to design, conduct and write up empirical studies in the social sciences. We will critically discuss what constitutes 'good' research questions (i.e., important, interesting, novel and answerable), and consider examples from an array of fields and methodological traditions. Our overarching focus will be on the key issues that come up when pursuing any kind of empirical research: identifying a 'puzzle' in the literature, theory building and testing, and considering causality, measurement, sampling, generalizability and research ethics. Finally, we will examine how these elements of research design come together in a single manuscript that stands a reasonable chance of publication in a reputable journal. By the end of the course, students will develop a clear understanding of what kind of social-scientific puzzles they wish to solve over the medium-term, and how this ambition fits with designing their independent research projects.

## Readings and assessment

This syllabus offers a battery of readings on research design, and students are not expected to read all of them in advance of each class. Many of the readings are simply offered as exemplars of particular research designs or argumentation styles and can be skimmed. Nonetheless, every effort should be made to consult as many of the 'main readings' as possible. Overall, the aim of much of the assigned material is twofold: to provide inspiration for how to design and carry out individual research projects; and to offer access to key works that will be relevant throughout the PhD and that students may wish to return to at a later stage (e.g., while writing up research findings). Readings are drawn from several social science subfields to cater to different research interests and models of scientific production.

The course entails three assignments:

1. Memo on the case study on state capacity (20% of grade)
2. Peer review of paper "**TBC**" (20% of grade)
3. Write up the abstract and introduction to your empirical project in a journal article format; ~4 pages. We will collectively discuss each introduction (Is there clear scope for making an original contribution? How is the contribution building on social scientific theories or arguments?) (60%)

## Summary Course Plan

| Class | Topic |
|---|---|
| 5/2 | How the social sciences are structured<br>Building blocks of research design: Concepts, measurement, causation, sampling and generalizability |
| 12/2 | Building blocks of research design, *continued* |
| 19/2 | Building blocks of research design, *continued*<br>Case study: how to conceptualize and measure state capacity **(Assignment 1)** |
| 26/2 | How to contribute to a literature and convince sceptics<br>Case study: how to peer review |
| 5/3 | Presenting findings, passing peer-review, and registration of pre-analysis plans<br>**Assignment 2**: write up your own peer review! Paper TBC. |
| 12/3 | Student presentations **(Assignment 3)** |

## Background

Becoming a social scientist means committing to a life where communicating your ideas and findings in written form will take up a lot of your time. As political scientist Adam Przeworski points out, "this is the job: you rewrite, and you rewrite, and you rewrite." However, nobody will teach you how to write well, so proactive measures are necessary. The readings below hopefully provide insights and suggestions, and their advice should be taken seriously: writing like a social scientist is a skill that can be (and has to be) learned and internalized.

General

Williams, Joseph M. 1990. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Strunk, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style.* New York: Macmillan.
Zinsser, W. 2012. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins.

Specific advice for social scientists

Becker, H. S. 2008. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Miller, Jane E. 2004. *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers: The Effective Presentation of Quantitative Information*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Miller, Jane E. 2005. *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Multivariate Analyses.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Practical advice

Belcher, W. L. 2009. *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
Little, A. T. 2016. "*Three Templates for Introductions to Political Science Articles*." Retrieved from: http://www.andrewtlittle.com/papers/little_intros.pdf.
The University of Wisconsin at Madison has aggregated some helpful writing resources: https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/gender/?page_id=70

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## How social sciences are structured

Designing, carrying out, writing up and publishing a research project may appear daunting, as social-scientific knowledge has expanded rapidly in recent decades: we know quite a lot about quite a lot of social, political and economic phenomena. The introductory class will demystify the research process and examine how scientific fields operate and how to approach them as an early-career social scientist. First, the class aims to introduce you to the ways in which social-scientific fields emerge and develop, and the implications this has for publishing. Further, we will discuss the norms in social science subfields, and the different publication models and outlets. Second, the class is designed to help you deconstruct and reconstruct the workhorse of contemporary academic publishing: the empirical journal article.

Main readings

King, G., R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Chapters: "The *Science* in Social Science" and "Descriptive Inference.")
Rothman, S. B. 2008. "Comparatively Evaluating Potential Dissertation and Thesis Projects." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41(2):367–69.

Background readings: understanding the field

Almond, G. A. 1988. "Separate Tables: Schools and Sects in Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 21(4):828–42.
Clemens, E. S., W. W. Powell, K. McIlwaine, and D. Okamoto. 1995. "Careers in Print: Books, Journals, and Scholarly Reputations." *American Journal of Sociology* 101(2):433–94.
Grant, J. T. 2005. "What Divides Us? The Image and Organization of Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 38(3):379–86.
Hargens, L. L. 2000. "Using the Literature: Reference Networks, Reference Contexts, and the Social Structure of Scholarship." *American Sociological Review* 65(6):846–65.

Lamont, M. 2010. *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Moody, J. 2004. "The Structure of a Social Science Collaboration Network: Disciplinary Cohesion From 1963 to 1999." *American Sociological Review* 69(2):213–38.
Seabrooke, L. and K. L. Young. 2017. "The Networks and Niches of International Political Economy." *Review of International Political Economy* 24(2):288–331.

Practical advice from *AMJ* (but applicable broadly)

Colquitt, J. A. and G. George. 2011. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 1: Topic Choice." *The Academy of Management Journal* 54(3):432–35.
Bono, J. E. and G. McNamara. 2011. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 2: Research Design." *The Academy of Management Journal* 54(4):657–60.
Grant, A. M. and T. G. Pollock. 2011. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 3: Setting the Hook." *The Academy of Management Journal* 54(5):873–79.
Sparrowe, R. T. and K. J. Mayer. 2011. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 4: Grounding Hypotheses." *The Academy of Management Journal* 54(6):1098–1102.
Zhang, Y. A. and J. D. Shaw. 2012. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 5: Crafting the Methods and Results." *The Academy of Management Journal* 55(1):8–12.
Geletkanycz, M. and B. J. Tepper. 2012. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 6: Discussing the Implications." *The Academy of Management Journal* 55(2):256–60.
Bansal, P. T. and K. Corley. 2012. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ - Part 7: What's Different About Qualitative Research?" *The Academy of Management Journal* 55(3):509–13.

Practical advice from *Sociologica* (but applicable broadly)

Espeland, Wendy. 2019. "What's Good Enough?" *Sociologica* 13(1):13–16.
Fligstein, Neil D. 2019. "Publishing in Modern Times." *Sociologica* 13(1):17–20.
Kreiner, Kristian. 2019. "On Publication Strategies." *Sociologica* 13(1):29–31.
Lamont, Michèle. 2019. "How to Publish, but Most Importantly, Why." *Sociologica* 13(1):33–35.
Musselin, Christine. 2019. "A Balanced Publication Strategy." *Sociologica* 13(1):45–50.

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## Building blocks of research design: Concepts, measurement, causation, sampling and generalizability

Journal reviewers and your PhD assessors will always evaluate your work according to a few main parameters (in addition to examining its methodological rigour). First and foremost, empirical research entails selecting, operationalizing and measuring concepts. Our class discussion will examine the goals of measurement and how to assess whether measures of theoretical constructs are valid and reliable. Second, proving that change in one variable causes a change in another variable (e.g., that Protestantism caused capitalist development) is mired in methodological difficulties. We will discuss the development of causal arguments, and the identification of social mechanisms linking phenomena of interest. Finally, we will focus on the related issues of sampling and generalizability: What should be the unit(s) of analysis? What is the universe of such units? How are these units of analysis selected? How can hypothesised causal relationships be tested?

Concept development & measurement

Adcock, R. and D. Collier. 2001. "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *American Political Science Review* 95(3):529–46.
Becker, H. S. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Chapter: "Concepts.")
Collier, D. and J. E. Mahon. 2013. "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis." *American Political Science Review* 87(04):845–55.
King, G., R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Chapter: "Measurement Error.")
Sartori, G. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *American Political Science Review* 64(4):1033–53.

Causation

Gerring, J. 2005. "Causation: A Unified Framework for the Social Sciences." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 17(2):163–98.

Hedström, P. and R. Swedberg. 1998. *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter: "Social Mechanisms: An Introductory Essay.")

Hedström, P. and P. Ylikoski. 2010. "Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36(1):49–67.

King, G., R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Chapter: "Causality and Causal Inference.")

Mahoney, J. 2008. "Toward a Unified Theory of Causality." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(4):412-36.

Stinchcombe, Arthur L. 1968. *Constructing Social Theories*. New York: Harcourt. (Chapter: "Complex Causal Structures.")

Sampling and generalizability

Becker, H. S. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Chapter: "Sampling.")

Gerring, J. 2006. *Case Study Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter: "Techniques for Choosing Cases.")

King, G., R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Chapters: "Determining What to Observe," "Understanding What to Avoid," and "Increasing the Number of Observations.")

Lukes, S. 1968. "Methodological Individualism Reconsidered." *British Journal of Sociology* 19(2):119–29.

Ragin, C. C. and H. S. Becker. 1992. *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter: "Introduction: Cases of What is a Case?.")

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**Case study: State capacity**

Baten, Jörg, Thomas Keywood, and Georg Wamser. 2021. "Territorial State Capacity and Elite Violence from the 6th to the 19th Century." *European Journal of Political Economy* 70 (December): 102037. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2021.102037.

Becker, Sascha O, Katrin Boeckh, Christa Hainz, and Ludger Woessmann. 2015. "The Empire Is Dead, Long Live the Empire! Long-Run Persistence of Trust and Corruption in the Bureaucracy." *The Economic Journal* 126 (590): 40–74. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12220.

Brambor, Thomas, Agustín Goenaga, Johannes Lindvall, and Jan Teorell. 2019. "The Lay of the Land: Information Capacity and the Modern State." *Comparative Political Studies*, May 27, 0010414019843432. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019843432.

Cingolani, Luciana, Kaj Thomsson, and Denis de Crombrugghe. 2015. "Minding Weber More Than Ever? The Impacts of State Capacity and Bureaucratic Autonomy on Development Goals." *World Development* 72 (C): 191–207. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.02.016.

Garfias, Francisco. 2018. "Elite Competition and State Capacity Development: Theory and Evidence from Post-Revolutionary Mexico." *American Political Science Review* 112 (2): 339–57. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000715.

Guillén, Mauro F, and Laurence Capron. 2016. "State Capacity, Minority Shareholder Protections, and Stock Market Development." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61 (1): 125–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839215601459.

Hanson, Jonathan K., and Rachel Sigman. 2021. "Leviathan's Latent Dimensions: Measuring State Capacity for Comparative Political Research." *The Journal of Politics* 83 (4): 1495–510. https://doi.org/10.1086/715066.

Li, Jia, and Joseph Wright. 2023. "How Personalist Parties Undermine State Capacity in Democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 56 (13): 2030–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231169014.

Reinsberg, Bernhard, Alexander E Kentikelenis, Thomas H Stubbs, and Lawrence P King. 2019. "The World System and the Hollowing Out of State Capacity: How Structural Adjustment Programs Affect Bureaucratic Quality in Developing Countries." *American Journal of Sociology* 124 (4): 1222–57. https://doi.org/10.1086/701703.

Suryanarayan, Pavithra, and Steven White. 2021. "Slavery, Reconstruction, and Bureaucratic Capacity in the American South." *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 568–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000933.

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## How to contribute to a literature and convince sceptics

Engaging with the 'literature' is a key element of all social-scientific research: publications are expected to build on and expand what is previously known and to make connections between unconnected strands of work to develop better explanations of social phenomena. This class will focus on developing a set of skills to better navigate the literature and crafting your own contribution. We will examine a set of inter-related questions: What is currently known about a phenomenon? Why is this phenomenon interesting and important? What is this phenomenon a case of? Which disciplines have studied it? Have they developed in dialogue? How do you join a debate in the literature? How do you develop a 'theoretical contribution'? What is a good social-scientific theory?

Main readings

Becker, H. S. 2008. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Chapter: "Terrorized by the Literature.")

Stinchcombe, A. L. 1987. *Constructing Social Theories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Chapter: "The Logic of Scientific Inference.")

Walton, J. 1992. "Making a Theoretical Case," in Ragin, C. C. and H. S. Becker, eds. *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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## Presenting findings and passing peer-review

This class will discuss the presentation of findings and examine how to deal with common problems that emerge while doing research (e.g., data availability). We will also examine the peer-review process on the basis of actual reviewer comments on articles that eventually appeared in major journals. The class will conclude with a discussion and how-to explanation on developing and registering pre-analysis plans.

Main reading

Ragin, C. C. and H. S. Becker. 1992. *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Chapter: "Introduction: Cases of 'What is a Case?'.")