

Methods in Social Sciences

Bachelor 1st year, Spring term 2024-2025
English track

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Description

This seminar aims to familiarize first-year students with the research methodology in social sciences. Social research is all around us. Teachers, government officials, business managers, human service providers, and health care professionals make frequent use of social research findings. Many people use social research to raise children, reduce crime, improve health, sell products, or just understand life. Daily broadcast news programs, magazines, newspapers, and websites disseminate research results. It is thus important to understand what social research is and what distinguishes it not only from other social practices (e.g. journalist investigations), but also from other types of research (e.g. legal research). How can research tools help us better understand the world around us? How to construct a protocol capable of producing reliable knowledge about human societies? These questions lie at the heart of this seminar.

In this perspective, all major steps of a scientific approach in social sciences are addressed, from the epistemology of science and formulating the research questions to the final writing of results, including the development of the analytical framework, the implementation of both quantitative and qualitative social sciences techniques, and the analysis of collected data. Moreover, the seminar places a central emphasis on acquiring basic skills for any researcher in social sciences, whether in a strictly academic context or a broader perspective: conducting observation, semi-structured interviews, content analysis, using descriptive and bivariate statistics.

The class will be structured in three main blocs. The first block will focus on the epistemology and ethics of science: what is science, its purpose and its neutrality, as well as the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods. The second block will address qualitative methods (e.g. ethnographic observation, the semi-structured interviews), while the third block the analysis of quantitative data (e.g. descriptive statistics).

Objectives

This seminar will not transform you into an expert researcher, but it will teach you to be a better consumer of research results, help you to understand how the research enterprise works, and prepare you to conduct your own small-scale studies. At the end of the semester, you will be aware of what research can and cannot do, and why conducting research properly is important.

More precisely you will be able to:

- a) identify the techniques in social sciences, along with their benefits, drawbacks and ethical implications.
- b) develop a precise strategy to address a research question in social sciences.
- c) conduct an observation, carry out a semi-structured interview, and/or assemble a corpus to collect initial empirical materials.
- d) statistically analyse an already established database using accessible software.
- e) develop a critical perspective on quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques.
- f) critically analyse published research on methods.
- g) write a study report providing initial elements of response to the research question using collected qualitative and quantitative data.

Method

Each seminar is divided in three parts: a lecture, a class discussion of a theoretical text and a presentation by a group of students and/or an individual/collective exercise. The lectures will be focused on the presentation of a particular method of social sciences (e.g. individual interview). They aim to answer the following questions: what is the method about? Why do we use it? When? How? What are its strengths and weakness?

To supplement the lectures, every week students must read the mandatory text(s), write a one-page note summarizing the text and discuss it with their fellows and the lecturer in class.

For each seminar, a group of maximum 4 students will deliver a presentation on a predefined topic linked to the lecture. A list of topics will be provided beforehand, and students will choose their presentation topic during the first class. The seminars seek to strengthen student's ability to make oral presentations, while developing critical thinking and abilities to evaluate scientific publications. Some seminars may include practical individual/collective exercises.

Assignments and Grading

The presence in class is mandatory (cf. art 1.4 of the "Règlement des études et des examens").

Please try not to worry too much about your grade, and just do your best and learn the most you can. However, you will be getting grades on most of your assignments, and a final grade.

The seminar requires **active participation** from students before and during class:

- *Before class*: reading and writing notes to summarize the mandatory reading(s), preparation of the presentations, reviewing knowledge and skills before evaluations.
- *During class*: taking notes of the lecture, student presentations, their evaluation, actively participating in discussions, and practical exercises.

Laptop and Phone Use: It is very easy to distract yourself with technology/social media instead of being fully present during class, but that is rude to your colleagues and to me. So: **phones must be kept out of sight and on silent mode during class**, and a computer is allowed **ONLY** for class-related purposes (presentations or practical exercises).

The final grade is composed based on the following categories:

Due date	Assignment	Type	Coeff.
All semester	Oral presentation	Collective	20%
All semester	One-page note summarizing the mandatory reading	Individual	10%
Friday February 14 th	Presentation: research question and qualitative data collection protocol	Collective	10%
Friday February 21 st	MCQ block 1	Individual	20%
Sunday April 27 th	Report on fieldwork	Individual	20%
Friday April 25 th	Test quantitative methods	Individual	20%

Oral presentation (20%)

For some seminars, a group of max 4 students will deliver a presentation on a predefined topic. Students have 10-12 minutes to make their presentation, and they will afterwards engage in a 10-minutes discussion with the lecturer and the class. The presentation can be supported by a Power Point (max 3 slides). The evaluation will consider both the content and the form of the presentations. An evaluation form will be made available on Moodle.

Text discussion/One page note summarizing the text (10%)

Before the class: For every session, students must read and write a one-page note summarizing the mandatory reading(s) (except for students already responsible for the presentation of the day). Notes will be collected and graded randomly.

Reading and note-taking should be guided by the following questions:

- What is the thesis, the main idea developed by the author in the text?
- What are the main arguments supporting the thesis? Do arguments seem valid to you?
- What are the case studies/empirical data used by the author (if applicable)?
- What are the sources, the methods of data collection and the methods of analysis of the data (if applicable)?
- What lessons can be drawn from the text for the practical use of the method?

During the class: Students should be able to address the aforementioned questions. They must also actively participate in the discussion.

Multiple choice questions related to Block 1 (20%)

After the first block, students will take an MCQ test containing content questions related to block 1 (research in the social sciences). The MCQ is meant to test the acquisition of fundamental knowledge related to social science methods.

Qualitative Research report – semi-structured interview or practice ethnography (30%)

The aim of the seminar is also to prepare students to conduct their own small-scale study. To this end, a group of 4-5 students will chose one of the following topics and will conduct a small-scale qualitative study that included: formulation of a research question, presentation of the data collection strategy and a qualitative inquiry (e.g. interviews or participatory observation).

- ◆ International students in French universities
- ◆ Political activism among students

Interviews: Identify at least two people whom you can interview for at least 30-45 minutes each and whose responses might shed some light on your research question. Design an interview guide, a consent form, and record your interviews. Transcribe as much of your interviews (don't spend more than 2 hours on the transcription; it's OK if you don't get them fully transcribed, especially if they ran long).

Ethnographic/observational study: Identify a site where you can observe or participate in social life in a way that is relevant to your research question. Spend at least 2.5 hours there (all at once, or in up to three instalments, depending on what makes the most sense for your site and your research question). Take extensive, detailed field notes, during (if possible) and directly after your observation. You should write as complete a narrative of the time you spent participating/observing as you can, but if you find you've spent more than 3-4 hours writing and have not recounted your whole experience, you can stop.

The grade of the research report is composed of a presentation of the research question and data collection strategy (1) and a report on the fieldwork (2).

1) Presentation of the research question and data collection strategy (10%)

The group of students will make a short presentation (max 10 minutes) of the research question on which the group will work during the semester, as well as the data collection strategy and how the data collection strategy helps them answer their research question.

2) Report on fieldwork/qualitative inquiry (20%)

You will hand in:

- A memo of around 9000 characters (approx. 3 pages), including spaces (+/- 10%), describing your experience. You should discuss what you wanted to know or thought you might find, why you thought interviewing or ethnography was your best strategy, how and why you chose your interviewees or your site, what you found (be thoughtful about how or whether your findings are generalizable), and how you might improve on it in further research.
- Your (as complete as possible) interview transcripts or field notes.

Reports will be sent by email **before April 27, 2025, 5 p.m.**

Test related to Block 3: quantitative methods (20%)

At the end of Block 3, students will take an in-class computer test to assess their competence in calculating, reading and interpreting descriptive statistics.

Course material

Moodle: You can find all readings on (or linked to from) Moodle. **The mandatory reading(s) must be read in preparation for the class.**

I will also use our course Moodle for announcements and updates, including an up-to-date version of the syllabus should there be any changes. You are responsible for reading everything posted on the course site and/or sent to you by email.


General bibliography include:


- Clark Tom, Liam Foster, Luke Sloan, and Alan Bryman (2021). *Bryman's Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6th edition or Bryman, Alan (2016 or 2012) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, L., Diamond, I., and Jefferies, J. (2014). *Beginning Statistics: An Introduction for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.
- Flick, Uwe. (2002). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2nd edition.
- Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*. Harvard University Press.


Schedule, readings and presentation topics

First block: Research in social sciences


Week 1: Doing social research	24/01/2025
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 **Lecture:** This lecture will present the outline of the course; it will distinguish research in social sciences from other methods of understanding and exploring the social work. The main objectives and requirements of the course will also be explained in detail.

 **Workshop:** Distinguish and characterize research in social sciences, scientific expertise and investigative journalism.

 **Seminar:** Students will choose the topic of their presentations. The lecturer will expose methodological guidelines for text readings and oral presentations.

Week 2: Scientific reasoning and ethics in social science research	31/01/2025
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 **Lecture:** This lecture will explain scientific reasoning and practices: the scientific writing and publishing; the peer-review process; as well as the notions of neutrality and ethics in social research.

 **Mandatory reading:**


Gingras, Y. and Godin, B. (2000), The place of universities in the system of knowledge production, *Research Policy*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, pp. 273–278.

 **Presentation 1: Are Academic Freedom(s) Under Threat?**

- Kabasakal Badamchi, D. (2022). Academic freedom: How to conceptualize and justify it? *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 619-630.
- Prelec, T., Furstenberg, S., Heathershaw, J., & Thomson, C. (2022). Is academic freedom at risk from internationalisation? Results from a 2020 survey of UK social scientists. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 26, Issue 10, pp. 1698–1722.


Week 3: Methodological approaches in social science research

07/02/2025

 **Lecture:** This lecture will explain the distinction between theory, empirics, and methodology; between inductive, deductive and abductive approaches; between quantitative and qualitative methods. It will also explain reliability and validity in both quantitative and qualitative research.


 **Mandatory reading:**

Sutton, Robert I. and Barry M. Staw (1995). What Theory is Not, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 371-384.

 **Workshop:** group brainstorming on the delimitation of the topics and the research questions


Week 4: Research questions and hypotheses

14/02/2025

 **Lecture:** This lecture aims to explain the type and importance of research questions and hypotheses and how to correctly formulate them.

 **Mandatory reading:**

Eidlin, F. (2011) The Method of Problems versus the Method of Topics. *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, pp. 758–61.

 **Presentation:** All groups presentation of the research question and qualitative data collection protocol

Some readings to help you formulate your research questions and research strategy:


- White, Patrick (2009). *Developing Research Questions: A Guide For Social Scientists*, Chapter 2 What makes a research question? London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 33-58.
- Becker, Howard S (2009). How to Find Out How to Do Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, pp. 545-551.

Second block: Qualitative methods

Week 5: Case study and comparison

21/02/2024

 **Multiple choice questions test**

 **Lecture:** The lecture will present and explain case study and comparison. It will also explain the qualitative conceptualization and how to evaluate the internal and external validity of a qualitative research.

 **Mandatory reading:**


Flyvbjerg, Bent (2006). Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 219-245.

 **Presentation 2 : Strengths and weaknesses of case study methods.**

- Gerring, John (2004). What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 2 pp. 341-354.
- Lieberman, Stanley. ([1991] 1992). "Small N's and Big Conclusions: An Examination of the Reasoning in Comparative Studies Based on a Small Number of Cases." In *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*, ed. Charles S. Ragin and Howard S. Becker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Week 6: Participant Observation

28/02/2025

 **Lecture:** The lecture is devoted to the most classic qualitative research technique: participant observation. It explains the fields of application of this method, access to fieldwork, the analysis of the empirical material and its limits.

 **Mandatory reading:**

Baird Adam (2018). Dancing with danger: ethnographic safety, male bravado and gang research in Colombia. *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 342-360.

 **Presentation 3: How can readers know if researchers conducting participant observation have gotten the evidence and its interpretation right or how can we assess the validity and value of ethnographic work?**


- Boelen, W. A. Mariannne (1992). Street Corner Society. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 11-51
- Whyte, William Foote (1993). Revisiting "Street Corner Society", *Sociological forum (Randolph, N.J.)*. vol.8 no 2. p. 285-298.
- Jerolmack, Colin, and Shamus Khan (2014). Talk Is Cheap Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research Vol.* 43, Issue 2, pp. 178–209.

No class

07/03/2025

Week 7: The qualitative interview

14/03/2025

 **Lecture:** The lecture focuses on collecting data by asking questions. It will present the various types of qualitative interviews; it will explain how to conduct such interviews and it offers suggestions concerning how to analyse material collected through interviews.

 **Mandatory reading:**

Dow, Dawn Marie (2016). The Deadly Challenges of Raising African American Boys: Navigating the Controlling Image of the 'Thug'. *Gender & Society*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, pp. 161–88.

 **Presentation 4: The challenges of interviewing and interview data**


- Fontana, A. and Frey, J.H. (2000) The Interview: From Structural Questions to Negotiated Texts, in N. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. pp. 645–672.

- Arendell, Terry (1997). Reflections on the Researcher-Researched Relationship: A Woman Interviewing Men. *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 20, pp. 341–368.
- Welch, C., Marschan-Piekkari, R., Penttinen, H. and Tahvanainen, M. (2002). Corporate elites as informants in qualitative international business research. *International Business Research Review*, Vol. 11, pp. 611–28.

Third block: Quantitative methods

Week 8: Sampling

21/03/2025

 **Lecture:** The lecture focuses on the main concepts of quantitative measurement: variable, population, sampling, representative sample, inference, confidence interval. It will present the various types of sampling and the logic of survey research (how to construct the questionnaires, the types of surveys, the survey interview etc.)

Mandatory reading:

Westbrook, Laurel, and Aliya Saperstein (2015). New Categories Are Not Enough. Rethinking the Measurement of Sex and Gender in Social Surveys. *Gender & Society*, Vol. 29, Issue 4, pp. 534–560.

Presentation 5: Can we trust surveys?


- Meterko, M., Restuccia, J. D., Stolzmann, K., Mohr, D., Brennan, C., Glasgow, J., and Kaboli, P. (2015). ‘Response Rates, Nonresponse Bias, and Data Quality: Results from a National Survey of Senior Healthcare Leaders’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 79, Issue. 1, pp. 130–44.
- Hargittai, E., and Karaoglu, G. (2018). ‘Biases of Online Political Polls: Who Participates?’, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, pp. 1–7.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. “Public Opinion Does Not Exist.” In *Communication and Class Struggle*, edited by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, 1:124–30, 1979.

No class

28/03/2025


Week 9: Descriptive statistics I

04/04/2025

 **Lecture:** This lecture will present methods used to describe data and their characteristics (descriptive statistics). It will explain the classification of different types of variables according to the level of measurement, make the distinction between indicators and indexes.


Mandatory reading:

Frederick J Gravetter and Larry B. Wallnau (2014). *Essentials of Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*, 8th Edition. Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Chapter 2 Frequency distribution, pp. 37-58.

 **Workshop Excel:** Building, reading and interpreting frequency distribution tables and cross tables

Week 10: Descriptive statistics II

11/04/2025

 **Lecture:** Students will learn to elaborate and understand a frequency table, the measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode), the measures of dispersion (range, standard deviation) and to do and interpret crosstabs.

 **Mandatory reading:**


Walgrave, S., & De Swert, K. (2007). Where Does Issue Ownership Come From? From the Party or from the Media? Issue-party Identifications in Belgium, 1991-2005. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 37–67.

 **Presentation 6: The limits of telling a story using descriptive statistics**

- Brown, Norman R., and Robert C. Sinclair (1999). Estimating Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners: Men and Women Do It Differently. *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 36, Issue 3, 1999, pp. 292–297.
- Einon, Dorothy (1994). Are men more promiscuous than women?. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, Volume 15, Issue 3, pp. 131-143.
- Mitchell, Kirstin R et al. (2019). Why Do Men Report More Opposite-Sex Sexual Partners Than Women? Analysis of the Gender Discrepancy in a British National Probability Survey. *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 56, Issue 1, pp. 1-8.


Week 11: Correlation and regression

18/04/2025

 **Lecture:** This lecture will teach students to distinguish between correlation and causation; to understand and test statistical significance; to read, interpret and calculate the different correlation coefficients.

 **Mandatory reading:**

Laurison, D., & Friedman, S. (2016). The Class Pay Gap in Higher Professional and Managerial Occupations. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 81, Issue 4, pp. 668–695.

 **Workshop Excel:** Calculating and interpreting correlation coefficients and test statistical significance

Week 12: Test quantitative methods

25/04/2025