

SOCIOLOGY 8
SENSE AND NONSENSE IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Course Outline

Dr. Carole Barnes California State University, Sacramento
Fall 1999

This course fulfills the critical thinking requirement in the basic subjects category of the general education program introduced in Fall 1983. As such, it is skill-oriented rather than exclusively content-oriented. The course provides basic information about the research process, but the emphasis in classroom time and grading will be on the development and application of critical thinking skills. Since practice is essential to the improvement of any skill, regular attendance and active participation in class discussion is particularly helpful.

In addition to its general education function, this course serves as an introductory research methods course for students majoring in the social sciences. It would also be appropriate for students preparing for a professional career in business or public administration, social work, law, medicine, journalism, education or engineering.

COURSE GOALS

As professionals, consumers or citizens, we are continually required to decide upon and justify a course of action. The quality of our decisions depends upon our ability to gather and evaluate appropriate information, distinguishing opinions from facts, beliefs from knowledge. The primary goal of this course is to develop skills in evaluating information and research to improve the decision-making process. Using non-technical research described in newspapers, news magazines and professional journals, you will learn to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of research efforts and data-based arguments on issues that may affect your personal and professional lives. These skills should help you to share responsibility for health-related decisions with the medical professionals treating you and your family; to participate knowledgeably in policy discussions at the local, state and federal level as decisions are made that affect your health, welfare and economic opportunities; and to act effectively in the conduct of your professional career.

The critical thinking skills covered in this course include:

- identifying testable arguments
- recognizing outcomes that support or refute an argument
- evaluating the appropriateness of measures testing an argument
- evaluating the qualities of samples chosen to test an argument
- identifying logical limitations in the design chosen to test an argument
- entertaining alternative explanations for observed research outcomes
- recognizing and interpreting patterns in simple descriptive statistics (percentages, rates and ratios, measures of central tendency and dispersion)
- identifying basic errors in the presentation of statistical data

TOPIC OUTLINE

- I. The Distinguishing Characteristics of Research Week 1
 - Controlled observation
 - The search for patterns and explanation
 - The tentative nature of conclusions based on data and valid inference rather than authority
 - The dual goals of science: understanding and problem-solving

- II. Limitations on Research in the Social Sciences:
The Peculiarities of People as Objects of Research
 - Reactivity of human subjects
 - The influence of the investigator
 - Ethical constraints
 - Limits on experimentation

- III. Steps in the Research Process and Common Errors
 - A. What's the Problem? Weeks 2 - 4
(types of research, types of variables,
null and directional hypotheses)

 - B. It's all a matter of definition Weeks 5 - 6
(measurement)

First Midterm Week 7

 - C. Good, bad, and adequate designs (research Weeks 8 - 9
design and consideration of alternate
explanations)

 - D. Who, how, and how many? (and, incidentally, Weeks 10 - 11
who's missing?)

Second Midterm Week 12

 - E. What's the meaning of all this? Weeks 13 - 15
(data analysis and the public presentation
of conclusions)

 - F. Final Exam Week 16

CLASS RESPONSIBILITIES

There will be three equally weighted exams (100 points each). Using a short answer format, the questions are word problems requiring the application of concepts covered during the lectures and practiced in approximately eight homework assignments. These graded assignments make up a fourth of the total course grade (100 out of 400 total points). The 100 homework assignment points represent the proportion of points earned on 8 20-point assignments.

No credit can be given for late assignments, since they are returned for discussion purposes to the class. The courtesy of a make-up can only be given if the instructor is notified before the exam and then only for rare and compelling reasons. Students missing an exam will be given a zero grade for that exam.

Each exam will emphasize the lectures, readings and exercises covered in the preceding section of the class. However, the skills being taught are cumulative and improve with practice. Therefore, concepts covered on earlier exams will also reappear on later ones. Exams can be expected in the 7th and 12th weeks and during the final exam period. Each exam will cover the following lecture sections and readings.

- First exam..... lecture sections I, II, and III A
and B
Babbie, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 (pp. 75-79), 5 and 6
- Second exam..... lecture sections III C and D
Babbie, Chapters 4 (pp. 70-87), 8, 9
- Third exam.....emphasizing lecture section III E
Babbie, Chapters 6, 15
but covering all lectures and readings

Text: Babbie, The Basics of Social Research, Wadsworth, 1999.

Office: Amador 460A

Office Hours: Wednesday: 2:30-3:30 & by appointment

Tel.: 278-6423

E-mail: cwbarne@csus.edu