

Social Studies 40:
Philosophy and Methods of the Social Sciences

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TEACHING FELLOW
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1 GENERAL

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the methodological and philosophical problems, and their possible solutions, posed by reflection on the human—or “social”—sciences. The diverse branches of social science—sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and history—share the aim of producing knowledge that explains “social” phenomena. We will explore questions such as the following.

- Are the social sciences continuous or discontinuous with the natural sciences?
- How do social scientists know what they know?
- How do we assess social-scientific knowledge-claims?
- What rival or complementary methods can make sense of the actions, intentions, and beliefs of individuals and groups?
- What normative assumptions are nested in social inquiry?
- And, finally, given the (inherent) limitations of social-scientific inquiry, how should we think about designing and implementing rigorous research in the social sciences?

A significant portion of the course will examine case studies as examples of the diverse methods used in the social sciences. The course will also include guest lectures from Harvard faculty in the social sciences.

2 READING & LECTURE SCHEDULE

All readings listed below are required, unless otherwise noted. Students are expected to have read and reflected on the required readings prior to the relevant lecture.

2.1 Unit I. Historical and Conceptual Backdrop

1. (T., Jan. 28) Social Studies and Social Science (DT)
 - (a) Salmon, “Philosophy of the Social Sciences”
 - (b) Elster, “Explanation” (recommended)
 - (c) J.S. Mill, *System of Logic* (excerpt) (recommended)
 - (d) Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History” (recommended)
 - (e) Hollis, “Understanding Social Action” (recommended)
 - (f) Kincaid, “Defending Laws in the Social Sciences” (optional)
 - (g) Dunn, “Practicing History and Social Science” (optional)
2. (Th., Jan. 30) Science as the Product of Social Action (CM)
 - (a) Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chs. 2–5, 9
 - (b) Porter, T. “Is Science Made by Communities” in *Trust in Numbers: the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*

2.2 Unit II. Holism and Individualism

3. (T., Feb. 4) Positivist and Interpretive Social Sciences: Core Debates (CM)
 - (a) Weber, Max. “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy”
 - (b) Durkheim, Emile. *Rules of the Sociological Method*. Selection
4. (Th., Feb. 6) Prospects for Reconciliation? (DT)
 - (a) Jackson and Pettit, “Structural Explanation in Social Theory”
 - (b) List, “Methodological Individualism and Holism in Political Science”
 - (c) Klinenberg, *Heat Wave* (“Prologue” and “Introduction”)
 - (d) Watkins, “Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences” (recommended)
 - (e) Miller, “Methodological Individualism and Social Explanation” (recommended)
5. (T., Feb. 11) The Individual and the Collective as Units of Action (CM)
 - (a) Eric Klinenberg. *Heat Wave*. “Dying Alone” and “Race, Place, and Vulnerability”
 - (b) Duneier, Mitchell. “Scrutinizing the Heat” and “Ethnography, the Ecological Fallacy, and the 1995 Heat Wave”
 - (c) McLeod, Jane. “Dissecting a Social Autopsy”

2.3 Unit III. Interpretation

6. (Th., Feb. 13) Interpretation and the Sciences (DT)
 - (a) Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”
 - (b) MacIntyre, “Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?”
 - (c) Kuhn, “The Natural and the Human Sciences”
7. (T., Feb. 18) Guest Lecture: Prof. David Armitage: History as a Social Science: Interpretation and Its Discontents (**UPDATED**)
 - (a) Sewell, “Theory, History, and Social Science”
 - (b) Skinner, “‘Social Meaning’ and the Explanation of Social Action”
 - (c) Armitage and Guldi, “The Return of the *Longue Durée*”
8. (Th., Feb. 20) Description, Explanation, and Understanding (DT)
 - (a) Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society”
 - (b) Evans-Pritchard, “Witchcraft” (required as background for Winch)
 - (c) Skinner, “‘Social Meaning’ and the Explanation of Social Action”
 - (d) Hollis, “Witchcraft and Winchcraft” (recommended)
9. (T., Feb. 25) “Casing” and Units of Analysis in the Social Sciences (CM)
 - (a) Ragin and Becker. *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Selection

2.4 Unit IV. A Model Science

10. (Th., Feb. 27) Prediction (DT)
 - (a) Friedman, “Methodology of Positive Economics”
 - (b) MacIntyre, “The Character of Generalizations in Social Science”
 - (c) Rosenberg, “If Economics Isn’t Science, What Is It?”
 - (d) Nagel, “Assumptions in Economic Theory” (recommended)
11. (T., Mar. 4) Rational Choices (DT)
 - (a) Satz and Ferejohn, “Rational Choice and Social Theory”
 - (b) Sen, “Rational Fools”
 - (c) Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior* (excerpt)
 - (d) Elster, “Rational Choice History” (recommended)
12. (Th., Mar. 6) Are All Actors Rational? “Goin’ to the Chapel”...as Rational Actors (CM)
 - (a) Becker, Gary. 1991. *A Treatise on the Family*. Selection
 - (b) Edin, Kathryn and Kefalis, Maria. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. Selection
 - (c) Schwartz, Christine R. 2013. “Trends and Variations in Assortative Mating: Causes and Consequences”
13. (T., Mar. 11) Guest Lecture: Prof. Meghan Healy-Clancy: Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Social Science
 - (a) Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction,” in *The Second Sex*
 - (b) Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”
 - (c) Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Simone de Beauvoir and Women: Just Who Does She Think ‘We’ Is?”
 - (d) Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”
 - (e) Judith Lorber, “Feminisms and Their Contributions to Gender Equality” (recommended)
 - (f) Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, “Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: Africa” (recommended)
14. (Th., Mar. 13) Functionalism and Ideology (DT)
 - (a) Sehon, “Goal-Directed Action”
 - (b) Elster, “Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory”
 - (c) Cohen, “Reply to Elster on ‘Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory’”
 - (d) Rosen, “The Theory of Ideology”
 - (e) Railton, “Marx and the Objectivity of Science” (recommended)
 - (f) Elster, “Cohen on Marx’s Theory of History” (optional)
 - (g) Cohen, “Functional Explanation: A Reply to Elster” (optional)

2.5 Unit V. Doing Causal Analysis

15. (T., Mar. 25) Causal Problems (DT)
 - (a) Strevens, “Against Lewis’s New Theory of Causation”
 - (b) Tuck, *Free Riding* (excerpt)
 - (c) Skinner, ““Social Meaning”” (revisit from Feb. 20; required)
 - (d) Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (excerpt) (recommended)
16. (Th., Mar. 27) Guest Lecture: Prof. Peter Hall
 - (a) Peter A. Hall, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 373-406
 - (b) Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Process Tracing from Philosophical Roots to Best Practices.” Ms.
 - (c) Peter A. Hall, “The Dilemmas of Contemporary Social Science” *boundary 2* (34.3) (2007): 121-41 (recommended)
17. (T., Apr. 1) Guest Lecture: Prof. Christopher Winship: Causal Inference
 - (a) Reiter, “Using Statistics to Determine Causal Relationships”
18. (Th., Apr. 3) Value as Explanatory (DT)
 - (a) Cohen, “The Arc of the Moral Universe”
 - (b) McDowell, “Autonomy and Its Burdens”
 - (c) Macarthur, “Taking the Human Sciences Seriously”

2.6 Unit VI. Doing Interpretive Social Science

19. (T., Apr. 8) Guest Lecture: Prof. Nicole Newendorp: Entering the Field
 - (a) Newendorp, Nicole. 2008. *Uneasy Reunions: Immigration, Citizenship, and Family Life in Post-1997 Hong Kong*. Selection
 - (b) Goffman, Erving. “On Fieldwork”
 - (c) Emerson, Robert. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Selection (recommended)
20. (Th., Apr. 10) Learning to Listen in Multiple Modes (CM) (**UPDATED**)
 - (a) Jack and Anderson. “Learning to Listen”
 - (b) Rubin and Rubin. “Structuring the Interview,” in *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*
 - (c) Schaeffer, N.C. and Presser, S. “The Science of Asking Questions”
 - (d) Weiss, Robert. *Learning from Strangers*. Chs. 4 and 5
21. (T., Apr. 15) Power Relations in Social Analysis: “Studying Down” (CM) (**UPDATED**)
 - (a) Becker, H. “Whose Side Are We On?”
 - (b) Hill-Collins, Patricia. “The Sociological Significance of the Outsider Within”
 - (c) Smith, Dorothy. *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Selection

- (d) LaMont, Michele. “A Life of Hard, But Justified, Choices: Interviewing Across Too Many Divides”
- 22. (Th., Apr. 17) Power Relations in Social Analysis: “Studying Up” (CM) (**UPDATED**)
 - (a) Thomas, R. “Interviewing Important People in Big Companies”
 - (b) Yeager and Kram, “Fielding Hot Topics in Cool Settings”
 - (c) Ostrander, S. “Surely You’re Not in This Just to Be Helpful”
 - (d) Hunter, A. “Local Power and Local Knowledge: Ethnography of Local Community Elites”
- 23. (T., Apr. 22) Interpreting Data in Context: “Who is Dying, and When?” (CM)
 - (a) Geertz. “From the Native’s Point of View”
 - (b) Geertz. “Thick Description”
 - (c) Becker. “Concepts”
 - (d) Macdonald. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts

2.7 Unit VII. Conclusion

- 24. (Th., Apr. 24) Guest Lecture: Prof. Eric Beerbohm: Relativism
 - (a) Readings TBA
- 25. (T., Apr. 29) Concluding Lecture (CM & DT)
 - (a) Topic and readings TBA

3 TEXTS

With the exception of Eric Klinenberg’s *Heat Wave*—a required text, available at the Coop—all readings will be available on the course iSite. Students are required to bring hard copies of the required readings to the corresponding lecture.

4 ASSIGNMENTS

4.1 Accommodation

Students who need academic accommodation for a documented disability should contact University Disability Services (Smith Campus Center, #935). Academic accommodation will be made only if the appropriate documentation is provided to the instructors and your teaching fellow in advance of the assignment deadline.

4.2 Academic integrity

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics, and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you must ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing, and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline—in this case, in humanistic and social-science research—and must properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your own writing (e.g., feedback on drafts, etc.), you must acknowledge this assistance.

4.3 Assessment

4.3.1 Overview

All assignments must be completed for the student to pass the course; these include the *brief exercises* described below.

1. Participation (30%), including:
 - (a) Lecture and section (15%);
 - (b) Seven brief exercises (15%).
2. Paper 1 (20%), due around Mar. 17 (5–7 pp.).
3. Paper 2 (25%), due around Apr. 20 (8–10 pp.).
4. Take-Home Exam (25%), due around May 10 (open book, open notes).

4.3.2 Engaged attendance

Active and engaged participation is required both at lecture and in section. Each student is allowed two unexcused absences from lecture and one unexcused absence from section, before penalties will be enforced. The student will be penalized $\frac{1}{3}$ of his or her *lecture-and-section* grade—e.g., $\{A-\}$ \rightarrow $\{B+\}$ —for every absence beyond this allowance. Exceptions will be made only in documented cases of medical and family emergency. Your teaching fellow may choose to add additional assignments, for computation of your *lecture-and-section* grade, as may the instructors.

4.3.3 Paper 1, Paper 2, and the Final Exam

Additional instructions for the major assessments of the course will be distributed as the term proceeds. However, note here that late submissions will be penalized at $\frac{1}{3}$ per 24-hour period past the deadline; penalties are triggered as soon as the deadline passes. Exceptions will be granted only in cases of documented emergency.

4.3.4 Brief exercises (UPDATED)

Over the course of the semester, you will be required to submit seven brief exercises—*in hard copy*—in response to seven of the eleven prompts listed below. Each submission should be typed, double-spaced, and 2–3 pp. in length. These assignments are generally keyed to the Reading & Lecture Schedule, and your exercises will be due by the start of the Thursday lecture to which they correspond. In addition, be sure to upload your Brief Exercise replies to the relevant iSite folder by the deadline; submission in both forms, electronic and print, is required for work to count as complete and on-time. The course iSite contains an electronic drop-box, with folders for the relevant Brief Exercise assignment and with sub-folders for your section; please be sure to upload your work into the relevant folder and sub-folder; also be sure to conform to the naming convention for your file-name, in accordance with your teaching fellow's instructions.

Every student must complete Exercise 1—due Feb. 6—but, with respect to the remaining six submissions, students are at liberty to economize on their time, energy, and interest, so long as seven assignments per student will have been submitted. Except in cases of documented emergency, late submissions will not be accepted: for instance, by 10:15 AM on Thursday, Feb. 13, no assignment keyed to Lecture 6 will be accepted. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that he or she is on track to complete seven brief assignments on schedule.

You should approach these brief exercises as opportunities to enter into the core debates of the course, and to grasp our readings' key concepts, often by applying them to an article of your own choosing. (See the instructions provided by Exercise 1, below.) Given that you must complete *seven of eleven* possible assignments, be sure to choose carefully, bearing in mind the demands of your academic schedule as well as the shape of your own interests.

1. Due Th., Feb. 6, for all students: The Model Article

Choose your *model article*, and write a précis. Please include a hard copy of the article with your brief exercise.

Now, for our purposes, what is a “model article”? It should be a work of substantive empirical research in the social sciences: a journal article that you find either compelling or otherwise interesting. Typically, your model article will concern a topic that might motivate your own future research; ideally, it will concern a topic around which your senior thesis will, or could, be oriented—as far as you can tell at this point in your academic development. Your model article should have been published within the past ten years; and it should be drawn from a major journal in the social sciences. For the purposes of these brief exercises, try to limit yourself to the following journals.

- *American Journal of Political Science*
- *American Journal of Sociology*
- *American Political Science Review*
- *American Sociological Review*
- *Gender & Society*
- *Journal of Politics*
- *Polity*
- *Social Science History*

If you come to favor an article from a different journal, consult one of the instructors to seek permission to adopt it: by 5 PM on Wednesday, Feb. 5. If, as the term proceeds, you come to find your chosen article stale or insufficiently provocative, you may request to adopt a second model article; but this request will be granted by an instructor only in exceptional circumstances. Recall that your favored article must ask, and purport to answer, an empirical question about social phenomena, broadly construed.

How does one go about searching for potential model articles? The easy answer is this: *Consult a friendly reference librarian at Widener or Lamont!* A more opaque answer: Access a database of indexed journal articles, such as JSTOR or EBSCO Academic Search Premier, via <lib.harvard.edu>. After lecture on Thursday, Jan. 30, one of the instructors will give a brief tutorial on using EBSCO Academic Search Premier. Nevertheless, feel free to consult a reference librarian for additional help.

Now what is a précis? For our purposes, it is a summary that outlines the research question explored, the theoretical or methodological arguments engaged, and the methods used to support the article’s core claims. Consider the following as you summarize your model article. What is the author trying to understand, describe, or explain? What are the data? Do they count as qualitative or quantitative in nature? Is there a causal argument in view? Does the article aim at an explanation? A description? Something else? What conclusions does the author draw?

2. Due Th., Feb. 13: Skepticism

Is any of Taylor, MacIntyre, and Kuhn committed to an objectionable form of skepticism? Define the kind of skepticism you think might be reasonably suggested by one of these writers, and describe what is putatively objectionable about it. Can the unattractive appearance of this kind of skepticism be nullified? If so, how?

3. Due Th., Feb. 20: Description and Understanding

Winch seems concerned to articulate the difficulties in coming up with adequate “descriptions” of human action. Would Winch raise any concerns about the way your exemplar—your model article—describes the things people do? How might your exemplar be defended against Winch’s objections?

4. **Due Th., Feb. 27: Must Models Lie?**

Rosenberg suggests that economics should be viewed, not as an empirical science of human behavior, but as a branch of mathematics. Do forms of Rosenberg’s criticisms apply to the outlook or procedures on display in your exemplar? If so, how might the article be changed so as to mollify Rosenberg’s worries? If not, how is it that your article deserves to be called a work in empirical social science, and not merely a form of mathematics?

5. **Due Th., Mar. 6: Uses of the Rational Actor**

Becker and Schwartz use rational-actor theory to explain why people marry and how they choose a partner. Does the perspective offered by Edin and Kefalis also rely on a view of utility-maximizing rational actors? If so, how? If not, why not? Is there another kind of rationality involved here? Do you think there are limits to the kinds of human actions that can be explained by the model of the utility-maximizing rational actor? If so, what are those limits?

Alternative exercise. Choose someone you know who is married. Conduct an interview with them (either by phone or in person) on why they married their current partner. Given what you find in this interview, how much does their experience reflect the theories of utility-maximization in mate-selection as advanced by Becker, or Assortative Mating as defined by Schwartz? How do you explain the similarities/differences in these accounts?

6. **Due Th., Mar. 13: Functionalism**

Given that the appearance of a functionalist explanation is given by an explanation of the form “X is as it is because X is good for Y,” does your model article rely on forms of functionalist explanation? How might the research on display in your model article be modified, so as to avoid relying on functionalist explanations? Alternatively, how would the research on display in your favored article be changed, so as to come to rely on functionalist explanations?

7. **Due Th., Mar. 27: Causal Inference**

Does your exemplar make a causal argument? If so, what is the unit of analysis? What are the dependent and independent variables? What is the nature of the relationship between the two? Do you find the candidate causal mechanism convincing? Why or why not? Does it seem to leave anything out? Alternatively, if your exemplar does not rely on a causal argument, can you re-frame it so that it does? What would that re-framing look like? What variables would you use as dependent and independent variables, and as controls? How might this re-framing of the article change its findings?

8. **Due Th., Apr. 3: Naturalism**

Macarthur lists various forms of what he calls “naturalism,” some more stringent and some more relaxed. He also lists philosophical positions that are often taken to lend support to particular forms of naturalism. Does your exemplar seem committed to some such form, or to some such position? Would your model article profit by being modified so as to suggest a different form of naturalism?

Alternative exercise. Those of you who plan to take on an interpretive research project in the future may want to try this exercise. Every researcher is the lens through which her data is filtered; as such, this lens may illuminate some aspects of the social world, obscure some aspects, and distort others. This exercise is designed to assess and calibrate your lens.

Go to a fast-food restaurant. Note: not a coffee shop, but a restaurant—it can be McDonald’s, KFC, or whatever; but it must serve food, not mainly coffee. You may need to travel out of Harvard Square to find a suitable field site, and so much the better. Spend at least one hour at your chosen location and write down all that you observe. Note: it will be useful to read the selections from Emerson’s

Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes from the class Web site before attempting this exercise. Emerson describes the distinction between field-based “jottings” and the “desk notes” the ethnographer creates on returning from the field. Turn in your “desk notes” from your observations to Prof. Macdonald for evaluation.

9. Due Th., Apr. 10: Voices as Data

Does your article use survey data or in-depth interviews as its foundation? If it is quantitative, find a qualitative article that speaks to the substance of your exemplar. If not, find an article using survey data that speaks to the substance of your model article. To what extent does the argument in your new article differ from that in your exemplar? Is this a function of the type of data being used? How? How not? What are the benefits of using one type of data over the other? What are the costs?

Alternative exercise. The readings on in-depth interviewing inform us that *technique* matters in getting good information in an interview. Consider what Rubin, Rubin, and Weiss suggest in their advice to interviewers and conduct an interview with someone you do not know well on how they came to be in their current job/profession. Bear in mind that you want to understand as much about what influenced them to take their current job—early influences, aspirations, blocked opportunities—as possible. Transcribe your interview verbatim and upload the *best* six pages of the interview for commentary.

10. Due Th., Apr. 17: The Challenges of Border-Crossings

This week’s readings address the ethical and empirical challenges in attempting to understand the perspective of various “others.” Does your exemplar encounter any of these challenges? If so, what? Do you think that “studying up” or “studying down” is more challenging for the researcher? Why?

11. Due Th., Apr. 24: Interpreting Data in Context

Some theorists (e.g., Becker, Hill-Collins) suggest that the social scientist should empower the disempowered by giving voice to, and perhaps privileging, their perspectives in our research. Others suggest that the “normal” course of social science (Kuhn) involves building on and re-affirming pre-existing paradigms, a process that often advantages the perspectives of the powerful. What if these perspectives collide? How should the social scientist interpret multi-vocal, conflicting data? In looking at Macdonald’s field notes and interviews, whose accounts of prognostication do you find convincing, and why? Do the doctor- and patient-perspectives inherently conflict? If so, how do you justify taking a side? Or is there another interpretative approach that reconciles them?

5 AVAILABILITY

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Don Tontiplaphol

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Office Hours. Starting on February 4: Social Studies Program Office, room #6: Tuesday, 4–5 PM, and Thursday, 1–2 PM; and by appointment.

Tim Beaumont

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Office Hours. TBA

6 SECTIONING

We expect that, by 9 PM on Wednesday, January 29, the course will have been configured to accept your sectioning preferences. Our tentative plan is for the course's discussion sections to be held on either Friday or Monday; but this may change, for obvious reasons. All students who wish to enroll in the course must register for sectioning via the site to which the course iSite will be linked: between 10 PM on Wednesday, January 29, and 5 PM on Friday, January 31. As you may realize, it is difficult to accommodate all sectioning preferences, when there will only be a small number of sections; if you are interested in the course, please make every effort to be flexible.

7 REVISION HISTORY

- Updated on Wed., Jan. 29, at 10:30 AM:
Minor wording throughout;
Tontiplaphol's office hours (see §5);
minor wording on sectioning preferences (see §6);
addition of §7, on Revision History.
- Updated on Mon., Feb. 10, at 11 AM:
Readings updated for Prof. David Armitage (Lecture 7; see §2.3);
Alternative exercises given for Brief Assignments 5, 8, and 9 (see §4.3.4).
- Updated on Mon., Apr. 5, at 11:30 AM:
Room information has been corrected;
Readings for Lectures 20, 21, and 22 have been slightly revised;
BE 9 has been revised, in light of the above changes.