

GSHS 50080

PhD Social Science Methodology

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Introduction

The focus of this course will be on the logic of inquiry in the social sciences in general. General elements of research design and philosophy of social science will be debated, while details of the various specific methods one can apply will be discussed in separate courses, on qualitative methods and on quantitative methods.

Many of the topics discussed in this course are controversial—practitioners of social science research disagree on fundamental issues of research methods, design, interpretation, epistemology, inferences, etc. The course will stimulate a critical view towards methods and you are encouraged to be critical in your writings for the course and your participation during the course meetings. While the assignments can be written from different points of view and while debate is encouraged, the course does provide a somewhat more positivist perspective on social science.

The course will be mostly based on group discussions and small group exercises. Many of you will have their own ideas about what makes good social science research and most topics we discuss do not have one clear answer. Through group discussions we can sharpen our sensitivities for the most important methodological issues, without fixating too much on one particular perspective on social science.

The course will make use of a textbook by Gerring (2001)¹ and to a lesser extent Risjord (2014), supplemented with articles and individual book chapters.

¹Note that a new version of Gerring's book is available, Gerring (2012), but for the required reading we only use the 2001 version.

Classes

Classes take place once a week, Fridays 9–11 am in E003 of the Newman Building at UCD. Since classes will primarily consist of seminar-style discussion and work in small groups, it will be essential that all the readings are carefully studied in advance of the class.

Contact

We do not have fixed office hours, so if you want to make sure the person you want to meet is present, you can make an appointment by email. If a personal visit is not necessary, the easiest way to reach us is by email.

Schedule overview

Week	Topic	Instructions
Theory		
1	27/1	Research questions in social science
2	3/2	Concepts and conceptualisation
3	10/2	Theories, models, and hypotheses
Inference		
4	17/2	Descriptive inference and measurement
5	24/2	Causal inference and counterfactuals
6	3/3	Experiments in social science
	9/3	<i>Grant proposal</i> due 5pm, email to jos.elkink@ucd.ie
Philosophy of social science		
7	10/3	Human agency: naturalism
8	31/3	Human agency: interpretation
	3/4	<i>Panel feedback</i> due 5pm, email to jos.elkink@ucd.ie
9	7/4	Critiques of rational choice theory
	14/4	<i>no class</i>
10	21/4	Collective agency and social ontology
	21/4	<i>Review essay proposal</i> email to markus.schlosser@ucd.ie
11	28/4	Science, value, and objectivity
	5/5	<i>Review essay</i> due 5pm, email to markus.schlosser@ucd.ie and hard copy to Margaret Brady (D504)

Assignments

There are two types of assignments, namely weekly discussion questions that will not be graded, but that are an essential part of the module, and four formal assignments that will together determine the module grade. All formal assignments should be submitted electronically **in PDF format**. Discussion questions should be sent by email (not in attachment) to the lecturer of that particular week.

Short assignments

Research question: In the first class, you will be asked for a formulation of the main research question of your MLitt / PhD research. Note that this should be a question – not a set of questions, not a topic description, and not a statement. *Due: in class week 1.*

Discussion questions: Submit one discussion question that occurs to you when reading the assigned material – ideally critical of one (or several) of the readings, or alternatively because you find something confusing. These are to be submitted by email (not in attachment) to the lecturer of that week's class. Beware that questions might well be used in class, with proper attribution. *Due: 24 hours before class (except week 1).*

Formal assignments

Grant proposal (30%): Based on your own MLitt / PhD project, write a full grant application. A form will be distributed that emulates the form used by grant agencies such as the Irish Research Council, with specific details on contents and required word length. Pay particular attention to using the contents of the course in writing up the proposal, but also “sell” the research as one would for a real grant applications and note that grant reviewers tend to look closely at the feasibility of the research. The proposal will go through in-class peer review, but will also be graded in a regular manner by the module coordinator. *Approximately 2500 words. Due: Thursday 9 March, 5 pm.* Submit to jos.elkink@ucd.ie in PDF format.

Grant proposal feedback (20%): You will receive three of the submitted grant proposals and will be asked to write a review on each, as if you are on a the board of a grant awarding agency (e.g. the Irish Research Council). You will be provided with a scoring sheet. The feedback will be returned to the author of the proposal and will be graded by the module coordinator. The feedback will not impact the grade of the proposal. *Approximately 700 words each. Due: Monday 3 April, 5 pm.* Submit to jos.elkink@ucd.ie in PDF format.

Presentation (10%): You are required to give one short (5–10 minute) presentation in class, in which you present and elaborate on your written discussion questions (see above). The presentation should try to identify a couple of points that seemed particularly important or problematic, and it should aim to offer some constructive analysis or critique that facilitates discussion. Please let me know (markus.schlosser@ucd.ie) if you are willing to present in the first session (Week 7). The remaining slots will be assigned as we go along.

Article review (40%): elect a published article (or book chapter) and provide a critical review. This article should be on a topic that is closely related to one (or some) of the issues discussed in class. You may focus on empirical, normative, conceptual, methodological, or purely philosophical questions. This review should not be a mere summary, in the style of a literature review, but a critical review: it should offer reasons, arguments, and a critical analysis. *Approximately 3000 words. Due: Friday 5 May, 5 pm.* The article (or chapter) itself needs to be submitted for approval, approximately *Friday 21/4*. Submit to markus.schlosser@ucd.ie in PDF format and one hard copy to Margaret Brady (D504).

Late submission policy

All written work must be submitted on or before the due dates. Students will lose one point of a grade per working day late or part thereof (taking B+, B and B to be “points” of a grade), and receive an NG (no grade) for essays over 1 week late. Exemptions will only be made in extenuating circumstances and need to be requested in writing. Note that “bad planning” and “work commitments” do not count as extenuating circumstances.²

Note that late submission of the research proposal homework creates problems for your classmates in the peer review assignment!

Plagiarism

Although this should be obvious, plagiarism – copying someone else’s text without acknowledgement or beyond “fair use” quantities – is not allowed, including self-plagiarism. UCD policies concerning plagiarism can be found online.³ A more extensive description of what is plagiarism and what is not can be found at the UCD Library website.⁴

Readings

If from your own work you have examples of useful readings on below topics, do let me know for future revisions of the syllabus.

Week 1: Research questions in social science

Jos Elkink

What is social science? What makes for a good research question?

Gerring (2001, ch 1-2); Geddes (2003, ch 2).

Optional reading: King, Keohane and Verba (1994, ch 1); Przeworski and Salomon (1995); Chalmers (1999); Watts, Bowen and Rudenstein (2001); Kiparsky (2006); Rothman (2008); Gerring (2012, ch 1-2).

Week 2: Concepts and conceptualisation

Jos Elkink

²See <http://www.ucd.ie/registry/academicsecretariat/docs/extcstudent.g.pdf> for more details on extenuating circumstances.

³http://www.ucd.ie/regist/documents/plagiarism_policy_and_procedures.pdf

⁴http://www.ucd.ie/library/students/information_skills/plagiari.html

What is a concept? How to define social science concepts? What makes for a good conceptualisation? – Note that this is on the definition of concepts for empirical research, not conceptual analysis.

Gerring (2001, ch 3–4); Sartori (1970).

Optional reading: Collier and Levitsky (1997); Shively (1997, ch 3); Collier and Mahoney (1993); Collier (1999); Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006); Gerring (2012, ch 5); Choi et al. (2005).

Week 3: Theories, models, and hypotheses

Jos Elkink

What is the role of theory in social science? What is the difference between a paradigm, theory, model, hypothesis?

Gerring (2001, ch 5); Popper (1962, ch 1).

Optional reading: Little (1991, ch 1); Kuhn (1970); Gerring (2012, ch 3-4); Chick (1998).

Week 4: Descriptive inference and measurement

Jos Elkink

What is the relation between concept, theory, operationalisation, and measurement?

Gerring (2001, ch 6); Adcock and Collier (2001); Shively (1997, ch 4-5).

Optional reading: Goertz (2006, ch 4); Shively (1997, ch 4-5); Gerring (2012, ch 6-7); King, Keohane and Verba (1994, ch 2, §5.1).

Week 5: Causal inference and counterfactuals

Jos Elkink

How to go from descriptive to causal inference? What is the counterfactual model of causal inference? What is the “Fundamental Problem of Causal Inference”? What role to causal mechanisms play?

Gerring (2001, ch 7); Morgan and Winship (2007, ch 2, 10); King, Keohane and Verba (1994, ch 3).

Optional reading: Gerring (2007, 2010); Gerring (2012, 8); Mahoney (2008); Scriven (1966); Shively (1997, ch 6); Little (1991, ch 2); Faletti and Lynch (2009); Goldthorpe (2001); Morgan and Winship (2007); Holland (1986); Fearon (1991); Gerring (2012, ch 8-11).

Week 6: Experiments in social science

Jos Elkink

What place do experiments have in social science? What are different types of experimental design? What is the relation between experimental design and observational studies?

Christensen (1997, ch 8-9); Dunning (2008a); McDermott (2002).

Optional reading: Moses and Knutsen (2007, ch 3); Green and Gerber (2003); Campbell and Stanley (1963); Druckman et al. (2006); Humphreys and Weinstein (2009); Gerring (2012, ch 10-11); Moses and Knutsen (2007, ch 3); Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008); Dunning (2008b); Camerer (2003); Kagel and Roth (1995); Kinder and Palfrey (1993); Gomm (2004, ch 2-3, 5-5).

Week 7: Human agency: naturalism

Markus Schlosser

What is human agency? Can human actions be explained in the same way as natural phenomena?

Rosenberg (2012, ch 1–3); Goertz (2012).

Optional reading: Risjord (2014, ch 5); Hempel (1942).

Week 8: Human agency: interpretation

Markus Schlosser

Is the explanation of human agency necessarily interpretive? Does this preclude naturalistic explanations?

Risjord (2014, ch 4); Grimm (2016); Roth (2003).

Optional reading: Taylor (1971); Salmon (1989).

Week 9: Critiques of rational choice theory

Markus Schlosser

What are the uses and limits of rational choice theory? Does rational choice theory sacrifice plausibility and predictive power for mathematical precision?

Steele (2014); Kahneman and H. (2006); Lehtinen and Kuorikoski (2007).

Optional reading: Sen (1977); Kahneman (2003); Risjord (2014, ch 5); Rosenberg (2012, ch 6).

Week 10: Collective agency and social ontology

Markus Schlosser

Can collective agency be reduced to the interaction of individual agents? Are groups real entities?

Risjord (2014, ch 6, 8); Pettit (2009).

Optional reading: Pettit and Schweikard (2006);
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shared-agency/>;
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/collective-intentionality/>.

Week 11: Science, value, and objectivity

Markus Schlosser

Can science be free from political and ethical values? Should science be free from such values? What does it mean to say that science is (or should be) objective?

Risjord (2014, ch 2); Douglas (2014); Williams (2000, ch 6).

Optional reading: Rosenberg (2012, ch 14);
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-objectivity/>.

Suggested Additional Readings

Dunleavy (2003) provides a good book length manual for writing a PhD thesis; King (2006) provides a very good manual for writing publishable papers in social science.

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