

# 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)<sup>1</sup> and to a lesser extent Risjord (2014), supplemented with articles and individual book chapters.

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<sup>1</sup>Note 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, Tuesdays 9–11 am in E003 of the Newman Building at UCD, except for 23 February, when it will take place in G317 of the Newman Building. 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	26/1	Research questions in social science
2	2/2	Concepts and conceptualisation
	8/2	<i>Conceptualisation proposal</i>
3	9/2	Theories, models, and hypotheses
4	16/2	Formal theory
Philosophy of social science		
	22/2	<i>Conceptualisation essay</i>
	22/2	<i>Review essay proposal</i>
5	23/2	Philosophy of science and social science
6	1/3	Human action: Explanation and interpretation
7	8/3	Critiques of rational choice theory
Inference		
8	29/3	Descriptive inference and measurement
	1/4	<i>Review essay</i>
9	5/4	Causal inference and counterfactuals
10	12/4	Experiments in social science
11	19/4	Social mechanisms and complexity
	25/4	<i>Grant proposal</i>
12	26/4	Is science value-neutral?
	16/5	<i>Panel feedback</i>

## 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

**Conceptualisation (20%):** Select one concept relevant for your research and find two conceptualisations (i.e. social scientific definitions) in the literature. Using the assigned literature for the class, critically evaluate these two conceptualisations. *Approximately 1500 words. Due: Monday 22/2, 5 pm.* The concept and the two conceptualisations (definitions) need to be submitted for approval, approximately *Monday 8/2*. Submit to [jos.elkink@ucd.ie](mailto:jos.elkink@ucd.ie) in PDF format.

**Article review (30%):** 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 1/4, 5 pm.* The article (or chapter) itself needs to be submitted for approval, approximately *Friday 18/3*. Submit to [markus.schlosser@ucd.ie](mailto:markus.schlosser@ucd.ie) in PDF format and one hard copy to Margaret Brady (D504).

**Grant proposal (25%):** 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: Monday 25/4, 5 pm.* Submit to [jos.elkink@ucd.ie](mailto:jos.elkink@ucd.ie) in PDF format.

**Grant proposal feedback (25%):** You will receive three of the submitted grant proposals and will be asked to write a review on each, as if you are on 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 16/5, 5 pm.* Submit to [jos.elkink@ucd.ie](mailto:jos.elkink@ucd.ie) in PDF format.

## 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> A more extensive description of what is plagiarism and what is not can be found at the UCD Library website.<sup>4</sup>

## 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).

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<sup>2</sup>See [http://www.ucd.ie/registry/academicsecretariat/docs/extcstudent\\_g.pdf](http://www.ucd.ie/registry/academicsecretariat/docs/extcstudent_g.pdf) for more details on extenuating circumstances.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.ucd.ie/regist/documents/plagiarism\\_policy\\_and\\_procedures.pdf](http://www.ucd.ie/regist/documents/plagiarism_policy_and_procedures.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.ucd.ie/library/students/information\\_skills/plagiari.html](http://www.ucd.ie/library/students/information_skills/plagiari.html)

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*

*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: Formal theory**

*Jos Elkink*

Fiorina (1975); Laver (1997: ch 1-2); Morton (1999: ch 2, 4).

Optional reading: Chick (1998); Schrodtt (2001); Signorino (2003); Little (1991: ch 3, 7, 9); Osborne (2004); Tomassi (1999: ch 1); Morton (1999: ch 3); Scharpf (1994); Geddes (1999); Golden (1999); Levi (1999); Friedman (1962: 3–43); Dion (1992); de Mesquita and Lalman (1990); McCubbins and Thies (1996).

Optional reading (computational models): Almond and Genco (1977); Lewin (1993); Johnson (2001); Lieberman and Lynn (2002); Macy and Willer (2002); Gilbert (2004).

## **Week 5: Philosophy of science and social science**

*Markus Schlosser*

*Why philosophy of science (and social science)? Is there a fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences?*

Risjord (2014: ch 1); Rosenberg (2012: ch 1–2); Popper (1963: excerpt); Hempel (1942); Kuhn (1970: excerpt).

Optional reading: Bortolotti (2008: ch 1).

## **Week 6: Human action: Explanation and interpretation**

*Markus Schlosser*

*What is human action? Can human action be explained in the same way as natural phenomena?*

Risjord (2014: ch 5, pp 81–94); Taylor (1971); Grimm (N.d.).

Optional reading: Rosenberg (2012: ch 3); Salmon (1989).

## **Week 7: 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?*

Risjord (2014: ch 5, pp 94–117); Steele (2014); Sen (1977); Sánchez-Cuenca (2008).

Optional reading: Rosenberg (2012: ch 6); Caporael et al. (1989); Batson and Shaw (1991); Lehtinen and Kuorikoski (2007).

## **Week 8: 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 9: 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 10: 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 11: Social mechanisms and complexity**

*Jos Elkink*

*What are social mechanisms? What role do recent conceptions of complexity theory play in social science? How do social mechanisms and complexity relate?*

Boudon (1991); Hédstrom and Swedberg (1996); Elster (2007: ch 1-2); Vicsek (2002).

Optional reading: Schrodtt (2001); Laver (1997: ch 1-2); Little (1991: ch 3, 7, 9); Osborne (2004); Tomassi (1999: ch 1); Morton (1999: ch 2-3).

Optional reading (computational models): Almond and Genco (1977); Lewin (1993); Johnson (2001); Lieberman and Lynn (2002); Macy and Willer (2002); Gilbert (2004).

## **Week 12: Is science value-neutral?**

*Markus Schlosser*

*Can science be free from political and ethical values? Should science be free from such values? Can scientists be free from bias?*

Risjord (2014: ch 2); Douglas (2014); Nagel (1961: excerpt); Williams (2006).

Optional reading: Rosenberg (2012: ch 14); Longino (1990: excerpt);  
<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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