SOC/SWK 400
Senior Thesis
Preassignment
Spring 2019

You will be required to carry out an empirical research project (i.e., a project which requires the collection and analysis of empirical observations) to complete Soc 400. This preassignment will help to ensure that you are fully prepared to complete that task. The purpose of this preassignment is to begin to build a coherent and realistic plan for carrying out your own social science research project.

***Instructions for Completing the Proposal***

1. Develop and refine your research question. Recall that qualitative methods can address different kinds of questions than quantitative methods. It is also important to keep in mind that the question will have to be something that can realistically be answered in one semester. Be specific! Research questions specify relationships between specific variables (e.g., "What effect does depression have on household income?" or "How do the immediate family members of drug addicts attribute the causes of their loved one's addiction?"). It is helpful to begin to plan your research design at this stage (will answering your question likely require a survey? semi-structured interviews? focus groups? experimental design? some combination of methods?). However, settling on a final research design should always be done after one reads the scientific literature on their topic. Sometimes the research question itself will need to be revised after reviewing the published literature. If your review of literature reveals that your question has already been answered, you will need to revise it so that it makes an original contribution.

2. Review and systematize the existing literature on the subject. As a scholar and a scientist, it is your responsibility to be familiar with everything that has ever been published on your topic. This is a process that can potentially take years to accomplish, and of course I don't expect you to have completely mastered a literature by the end of this semester. However, this is an appropriate context for you to begin the process of developing your expertise. Mastering a literature means that you are responsible for knowing all of the *arguments*, *evidence*, *methodological techniques, and theoretical perspectives* associated with your topic. This includes a familiarity with kinds of data, sources of data, common conceptualizations and operationalizations, analytical procedures, and findings associated with your topic that are in the published literature. While search engines such as Google Scholar are useful for finding articles initially, eventually you will find the most appropriate literature by following citations in articles you have already read. Reading is the most effective way of finding the literature you need. For projects that include hypotheses, state them *after* you have reviewed the literature. Hypotheses should appear as natural extensions of the literature you have reviewed.

    **Tip:** For every article you read, create a summary sheet that includes all of the arguments, evidence, methodological techniques, and theoretical perspectives the

researchers use to answer their question. I usually also include a few quotations for illustrative purposes, as well as any citations to other studies that will likely need to be followed up on. Summary sheets are useful for retaining the most important or relevant contributions contained in an article. As you accumulate summary sheets of the articles you've read, you can create an outline of all of the most important points in the literature. Later, you can use the summary sheets to fill out details relevant to the points in your outline. If done properly, the outline will become the literature review for your paper as you write prose around the points of your outline.

3. Develop a research design. **I cannot stress this point enough**: *research designs should be developed so as to maximize their relevance to the published literature on your topic*. This means that you should be familiar with the published literature on your topic, be able to identify the most important unanswered questions, and then design a study that will accurately and reliably provide answers to one (or several) of those questions. Although you may not necessarily faithfully imitate the research designs of other studies in your field, it is necessary to understand the methods others have used to study your topic, and also how others have critiqued, criticized, adopted, and adapted those methods. In your proposal, the description of your research design should include the following:
    - **Conceptualization** of important terms. Remember that conceptualization means providing *precise definitions* of the concepts in your project. Giving precise definitions is necessary for creating appropriate measures, collecting the correct data, and for interpreting your results. Vagueness is anathema to science.
    - **Operationalization** of the concepts that you intend to measure. Operationalization means developing ways of getting access to information that is relevant to the concepts in your study, as you have defined them. For studies that make use of questionnaires, operationalization means developing questions that will capture information that reflects your conceptualizations. For example, if you conceptualize alcoholism as drinking to intoxication at least once per week, in order to determine if your research subjects fit this precise definition you might ask them:

      How often do you drink to intoxication?

        - Never
        - A few times a year
        - About once per month
        - About once per week
        - A few times per week
        - Every day

      For some concepts, a single measure will not be enough to operationalize them properly. Some concepts have multiple **dimensions** that will need to be captured by separate measures. For example, studies of intimate partner

violence would likely need to develop measures that capture both physical abuse, as well as separate questions capturing verbal abuse.

- **Data Collection Methods**: This is your general strategy for collecting data. Survey? Ethnography? Semi-structured interviews? Content analysis? Etc. At this point in your education you should be able to describe the major methodological approaches in some detail. For your paper, describe how you will adapt one (or several) to your project.
- **Sampling Procedure**: Sampling is a very important part of both the study design, and for interpretation of your results. Remember that sampling procedures always include identifying the **population** you want to study. The various data collection methods can require different sampling procedures. Circumstances can also affect sampling procedures (for example, even if a cluster sample is the most appropriate for your project, you may not have the resources to cluster sample your population). Be sure to review materials from your research methods course to determine which sampling procedures are the most appropriate for your study.
- **Analytic Strategy**: After you have collected your data, what will you have to do to it in order to answer your research question? For qualitative projects the analytic strategy will likely involve coding for emergent themes. For quantitative projects, the analytic strategy will likely involve statistical procedures, such as estimating correlations, or comparing the means of variables between different groups.

4. Develop a realistic timeline for carrying out your research and writing up your results. Please keep in mind that the project will need to be completed by the end of April. Please also keep in mind that any projects that will require direct interaction with, or observation of human research subjects, will need to first be approved by IRB; please allow up to 2 weeks for the IRB approval process to be completed.

***Structure and Minimum Length of Research Proposal:***

1. Introduction (2 pages): All research papers should have an Introduction section with the following components (in this order):
    a. Why the topic is important to understand
    b. What we already know about the topic
        i. Cite a few (but not all) of the studies that demonstrate what we already know
    c. What we still do not know about the topic
        i. Your research question should be included here
    d. How your study will answer what we do not know about the topic.
2. Review of Literature (5 pages):
    a. For studies that pose hypotheses, state your hypotheses at the conclusion of the literature review.

    b. For studies that do not pose hypotheses, re-state your research questions at the conclusion of the literature review
        i. Hypotheses and research questions should appear as natural extensions of the conversations scholars are having about your topic, as captured in the literature.
3. Research Design (5 pages)
4. Timeline for Completion (1 page)
5. References (1-2 pages)
    a. APA or ASA style only

**[Proposal must be at least 12 pages long NOT including references. Proposal must be double-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font, with 1 inch margins on each side. Proposals that fail to meet these requirements may receive a grade of F]**