Syllabus: Sociology 210  
**Research Methods**  
Fall 2011

Tuesdays and Thursdays 4:30-5:45  
Gasson 207  
Professor: Betsy Leondar-Wright (betsy@classmatters.org • 781-648-0630)  
Office hours: Tuesday 1:30-2:30 and Thursday 3:30 to 4:15 pm in McGuinn 410B

**Required textbook:**  
Adler and Clark, *An Invitation to Social Research: How It’s Done* (Wadsworth 2011)

If the cost of buying the book poses a hardship for you, please notify the professor.  
All other readings are posted on the library reserves and also accessible through Blackboard.

**Overview:**

The core concepts of social research are powerful tools even for those who never do social science professionally. Systematic framing of hypotheses and careful marshalling of evidence are useful skills for anyone who is curious about any aspect of the social world. Avoiding logical fallacies, asking good questions, and finding relevant data sources and literature: this course will put these universally useful tools into students’ hands.

The course will also prepare students to write research proposals and conduct original research, which are professional skills used in social science, the natural sciences, program evaluation and other fields. Each student will define a hypothesis and variables, design and carry out and analyze a survey and interviews, and design several proposed study components using different methodologies. The assignments will add up to a pilot study and a proposal for a full study, similar to sociologists’ proposals for research funding.

Throughout the course we will focus on one of the most-studied question in sociology: Why do educational outcomes in the United States tend to vary by race and socio-economic class? Readings will include examples of how sociologists have applied various methodologies to understand this important question. Collectively the students will add to the understanding of this question with their original research.

Social problems can only be solved if their causes are understood correctly. In the history of investigation of educational outcomes, poor-quality research, riddled with logical flaws, has spread mistaken explanations for educational disparities and perpetuated stereotypes about people of color and about working-class and poor people of all races. Students will not only learn to debunk these particular fallacies, but will gain competence at identifying and debunking logical flaws generally, a key skill for participating in public affairs.
SCHEDULE OF SESSIONS

Tuesday September 6 – Curiosity: the root of social research

Thursday September 8 – Types of social research; Diagramming educational disparities data
  Reading: Adler and Clark, Appendix A

Tuesday September 13 – Core concepts of social research; Is sociology a science?
  Reading: Adler and Clark, Chapters 1 and 2

Thursday September 15 – Logical fallacies and stereotypes
  Readings: • Adler and Clark, Chapter 4;
  • Logical fallacies list, including links to examples for first 4 (red) categories

Tuesday September 20 – Explaining education gaps
  Readings: • Conley, Dalton, Being Black Living in the Red, pp. 55-81
  • All abstracts in course reserves folder “Presentation Options: Articles”
  Assignment due: Come to class ready to express opinions about one article abstract you find convincing, one you have doubts about, and why

Thursday September 22 – Research design, hypotheses and variables
  Readings: Adler and Clark, Chapters 6 & 7
  Assignment due: Letter to the editor and paragraph on its logical flaw(s)

Tuesday September 27 – Student presentations on research on education gaps
  Reading: One article for presentation
  Assignment due: 5-minute presentation on one article this session or next

Thursday September 29 – Student presentations on research on education gaps - continued

Tuesday October 4 – Research Ethics
  Reading: Adler and Clark, Chapter 3
  Assignment due: Turn in your draft hypothesis and why you are curious about it or suspect it has merit.

Thursday October 6 – Operationalizing variables
  Readings: • Adler and Clark, Chapter 5
  • 3 short Pathways articles (Shonkoff, Evans, Duncan)
Tuesday October 11 – Sampling; Types of interviews  
*Reading:* Adler and Clark, Chapters 9  
*Assignment due:* Submit draft research plan: variables, ideas for operationalizing them, pros and cons of options, source(s) of subjects, category of research.

Thursday October 13 – What makes a good interview?  
Midterm evaluation of course  
*Reading:* Adler and Clark, Chapter 10

Tuesday October 18 – How to analyze qualitative data  
*Reading:* Lareau, Annette, “Invisible Inequality”  
*Assignment due:* Turn in revised operationalized variables

Thursday October 20 – What makes a good survey question?  
*Reading:* Noguera, Pedro A, “The Trouble with Black Boys”  
*Assignment due:* Turn in sampling plan and list of interview questions

Tuesday October 25 – How to analyze survey results; Multivariate tables  
*Reading:* Hand-out with sample multivariate table

Thursday October 27 – DIFFERENT CLASS LOCATION: O’Neill 307  
Using online databases and doing literature reviews, with guest speaker Sarah Hogan, Sociology Librarian; Writing research reports and proposals  
*Reading:* Adler and Clark, Appendices C and D

Tuesday November 1 – Ethnography and participant observation  
*Reading:*  
• Adler and Clark, Chapter 11  
• Carter, Prudence, 2004, “Beyond Ascription”

Thursday November 3 – NO CLASS

Tuesday November 8 – Flawed research on educational inequities 1: Ruby Payne  
*Readings:*  
• Payne, Ruby, “A Framework for Understanding Poverty” pp. 59, 64-80  
• Gorski, Paul, “Peddling Poverty for Profit”  
*Assignment:* Turn in analysis of 3 or more interviews with findings

Thursday November 10 - Flawed research on educational inequities 2: *The Bell Curve*  
*Readings:*  
• Fisher et al., *Inequality by Design*, pp. 217-224  
• Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, pp. 269-340  
*Assignment due:* Turn in survey questions and plan for administering survey

Tuesday November 15 – Debunking *The Bell Curve’s* dependent variable, IQ  
*Reading:* Fisher et al., *Inequality by Design*, pp. 22-69

Thursday November 17 – Debunking *The Bell Curve’s* racial findings  
*Reading:* Fisher et al., *Inequality by Design*, pp. 171-203

Tuesday November 22 - Experiments  
*Readings:*  
• Adler and Clark, Chapter 8
• Spencer and Castano, “Social Class is Dead!”

*Assignment due:* Turn in analysis of 20 or more surveys as multivariate table and findings

Thursday November 24 – No class – Happy Thanksgiving!

Tuesday November 29 – Content analysis and analysis of existing datasets

*Reading:* Adler and Clark, Chapters 12 and 13

Thursday December 1 – Evaluation research and other applied uses of social research

*Readings:* • Adler and Clark, Chapter 14
• Hursh, 2007 “Exacerbating inequality”

Tuesday December 6 – Pooling students’ findings

*No reading*

*Assignment due:* Come to this session and 12/8 prepared to describe how your survey and interviews went and to summarize your findings

Thursday December 8 – Summing up educational inequity findings and methods

*No reading*
Course Expectations and Grading:

1) The **readings** are a very important part of the course. Readings are due *on the date they are listed*. Please come to class ready to discuss them and do exercises and quizzes based on them. You may be called on and asked to summarize the main points of a reading whether or not you raise your hand. Evidence of widespread failure to read the assigned readings on time will result in additional pop quizzes.

2) **Class participation** is also important, as this course involves learning by doing and discussing. Both speaking and focused listening will be valued; either too much silence or too much over-participation (dominating discussions) could negatively affect your grade.

Looking at or listening to unrelated content on a screen (laptop, phone, iPod, etc) during class will lower your grade by 2 points per offense. Offline laptops may be used for taking notes only; all other devices must be turned off during class sessions. Repeated violations may result in disallowing all laptops for note-taking as well.

**Absences:** If you miss a class session, you are responsible for getting notes from a classmate. More than two unexcused absences will lower your grade by 3 points per absence. A doctor, school administrator, or other certified official must verify an absence in order for it to be excused on the basis of illness, death or hospitalization in the family or other emergency (defined as an unforeseen and unavoidable crisis). Notes from family members will not be accepted.

If you have a special circumstance that makes a non-medical excused absence likely (e.g., if you are a single parent with no back-up in case of childcare cancellation; if you have a required trip for an internship), please let me know at the beginning of the semester; don't wait until you actually miss a class.

Arriving more than 10 minutes late counts as an absence.
3) ASSIGNMENTS

A) **Letter to the editor critique.** By **September 22**, find a letter to the editor, published in a newspaper, in which you see one or more logical flaws. Submit the text of the letter and a 50- to 200-word paragraph with your critique, including the name of the logical fallacy if appropriate.

B) **Presentations.** First, each student will give a 5-minute presentation on **September 27 or 29** summarizing an article about research on educational inequities. (Sign up for an article by 9/20 in class or on Blackboard.) Summarize the author(s)’s hypothesis, variables, methodology and findings, and your own critical evaluation of the research. Besides summarizing verbally, please provide the class with a visual aid (outline of main points and/or diagram in a hand-out, on the blackboard, or on a poster).

   In the last two sessions of the course, **December 6 and 8**, students will share their original research experiences, not just their findings, but also what they learned from their methodological mistakes and successes.

C) **Original study and research report**

   1) **Research plan:**
   By **October 4**, identify one hypothesis for some aspect of race &/or class variation in educational outcomes which you will test through original research and propose ways to investigate further; submit a few paragraphs about the hypothesis and why it has merit (totaling 250 to 500 words). By **October 11**, turn in a draft research plan including variables, ideas for operationalizing them, pros and cons of options, source(s) of subjects, category of research (eg “exploratory and inductive”) (totaling 250 to 750 words). By **October 18**, submit a revised research plan.

   2) **Interviews:**
   By **October 20**, submit draft interview questions and sampling plan (in 250 to 500 words). By **November 3**, submit description of 3 or more face-to-face or phone interviews you conducted, with your analysis and findings from them (in 500 to 1500 words).

   3) **Survey:**
   By **November 8**, submit survey questions and plan for administering survey (in 150 to 500 words). By **November 22**, submit analysis of 20 or more completed surveys, including a multivariate table with percentages by variables and your analysis of findings (in 500 to 750 words).

D) **Overall research proposal for multiple-methods study and pilot study report – Submit electronically on Monday December 19** (or Tuesday morning 12/20 before 8 am) (3,000 to 5,500 words)
   Your final project will be evaluated as if it were a proposal for research funding. It will include a report on an original pilot study (your interviews and survey covered in C above), a literature review of four or more sources in addition to assigned readings, and proposals for more three or more additional research components, all designed to investigate the same hypothesis for why educational outcomes vary by race and/or class.
1) For the **literature review**, find four or more sources in addition to any relevant assigned readings, and write up summary and critical evaluation about what social science already knows about your hypothesis (in 500 to 750 words, plus list of references.) Use APA format for citations.

2) **Research report:** Include your analysis of your interviews and survey (as submitted earlier or revised) as the results of a pilot study.

3) **Proposed research components:** For three major methodologies covered in the course - Ethnography or participant observation; Experiment; Content analysis or analysis of existing dataset - design a research proposal testing your hypothesis and write it up as if proposing a study (in 250 to 750 words each). Extra credit will be given if four or five methodologies are proposed instead of the required minimum of three (adding evaluation research and/or proposing both content analysis and existing dataset analysis).

4) Add an **introduction, conclusion and transitions** (totaling 250 to 750 words) to turn all components into comprehensive research proposal.

**How to submit:** Written assignments may be submitted as hard copies during class sessions or electronically, via Blackboard or via email to betsy@classmatters.org. During the semester, submit before the class session starts on the deadline date, i.e. by 4:30 pm.

**GRADING**

Grades will be calculated on a 100-point scale:

- Participation in class sessions; in-class presentations: 20%
- Homework assignments and quizzes: 20%
- Overall research project and research proposal: 60%

  **Breakdown of the 60%:**
  - Hypothesis, variables, operationalization: 10%
  - Survey design, implementation, analysis: 10%
  - Interview questions, implementation, analysis: 10%
  - Literature review: 10%
  - Content analysis or dataset analysis proposal: 5%
  - Experiment proposal: 5%
  - Ethnomethodology or participant observation proposal: 5%
  - Intro, conclusion, integration, overall fundability: 5%

**Extra credit:** up to 5 points for an evaluation research proposal, and up to 5 points if proposal contains both content analysis and analysis of existing dataset

Grades for analysis of original research will be finalized only after submission of the overall research project and proposal by December 19, allowing students to revise and improve their earlier work.

Late submissions will lose 1/10 of maximum points for that assignment for each day late without an approved excuse (e.g. 1 point off per day late for interview questions; .5 off per day late for letter to editor critique; 6 points off per day for final overall project).
Grading Scale:

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**Policy on students’ opinions:** The presentation, classroom exercises and discussions, and research project all require you to put forward critical opinions. Feel free to try out views new to you or ones you aren't sure you actually agree with. If you disagree with the professor or the author of a reading, you will not be graded more strictly for that; if you agree, you will not be graded more leniently. All positions you take will be evaluated by whether you have used evidence-based reasoning and appropriate methodological tools.

**Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity standards are of utmost importance in this course. Guidelines for academic integrity in written work are posted on the BC website at:

http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/resources/policy/#integrity

Outright plagiarism of a written assignment or cheating on the midterm exam will result in failing the course and notification of the dean. Lesser degrees of noncompliance with BC’s policies on academic integrity will result in a lower grade on the assignment in question. It is your responsibility to know the rules of citation. If you have any questions pertaining to the academic integrity guidelines, please come and talk with the professor.

**Disability accommodation**

Students needing a change in the time, location and/or format of the midterm exam due to a disability, or needing any other disability accommodation, should inform the professor at the beginning of the semester. For more information, please see http://www.bc.edu/offices/odsdl/disabilityservices.html or call the Dean for Students with Disabilities at 617-552-3470.