

# Practicum in Social Research

SRPP-UH 3210  
Spring 2019  
Division of Social Science

Tuesday and Thursday, 4:05 to 5:20

Credit hours: Four

*Instructor:*

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*Office hours:*

Tuesday and Thursday, 2:45 to 3:45, or by appointment  
A5-1203

*Associate Instructor:*

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Sunday, 3:00 to 5:00, or by appointment  
A5-1158A

## 1 Course overview and goals

Original research projects are intellectual fun, but they are also a demanding craft. This course prepares you for the challenge of conducting original research. Through a detailed, creative comparison of two seemingly disparate research approaches common in the social sciences—ethnography and digital social science—we will discuss how to find an interesting question, design a way to answer it, and communicate your work. Our comparison will also explore what ethnographic and digital data and analyses can learn from each other, as well as from other common approaches, such as experiments. In addition, we will plan, write, and fine-tune a project proposal by debating and critiquing each other's ideas during presentations, one-on-one meetings, and class-wide workshops. As a whole, the course provides a strong foundation for senior Capstones, as well as future research projects.

### 1.1 Learning outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Develop and refine a research question
- Articulate a main hypothesis and plausible competing hypotheses
- Understand the logic of common research approaches
- Identify data that can be used to test hypotheses
- Interpret empirical findings
- Present an original project proposal in a precise and compelling narrative and presentation

## 1.2 Activities and preparation

The course has an empirical focus: It is designed to build upon sociological theory and methodology to help you conduct original research. With this in mind, I strongly encourage as a prerequisite the successful completion of the Theory course and two or more methods courses, such as Data Analysis, Econometrics, Ethnography, Survey Research, and Statistics.

Students are expected to regularly attend the twice-weekly class meetings, read scholarly material, prepare interim assignments, distribute written material to classmates, and read and discuss classmates' work. At the conclusion of the course, students will present and submit an original proposal for a research project.

## 2 Courses materials

- *Abductive Analysis* (2014) by Iddo Tavory and Stephan Timmermans
- *Approaches to Social Research* (2017) by Royce Singleton and Bruce Straits
- *Bit by Bit* (2017) by Matthew Salganik  
Read it online at <https://www.bitbybitbook.com/en/1st-ed/preface/>
- Various scholarly articles, found on the NYU Classes site

## 3 Course methodology

### 3.1 Meeting

We will meet twice per week in a seminar setting. Students are expected to attend all seminars and be prepared to participate actively by completing assignments, presenting their work, and discussing the readings. Students should also meet regularly with the associate instructor to deepen their understanding of the material and develop their proposal throughout the semester.

### 3.2 Assignments

#### 3.2.1 Classwork

Student will apply and develop their understanding of the course material through two assignments.

##### 1. *Reading response questions*

- **Due:** After each reading; questions should be distributed the night before a class meeting.
- Students will take turns formulating and presenting at least three questions about the assigned reading. The questions can seek clarification about the reading or critique the authors' arguments. At least one question must link insights from the assigned reading to a previous reading the course.

##### 2. *Presentation of computational abductive analysis project*

- **Due:** Week 12
- In small groups, students will apply insights from the course's examination of ethnographic methods and digital social science to a shared data set.
- Upon completion of their analysis, project groups will explain their research question, design, analysis, findings, and conclusions to the class during a 10 minute in-class presentation.

### 3.2.2 Research proposals

Students will design and write an original research project proposal. It will be developed throughout the semester outside of the classroom and during in-class workshops. During the workshops, students will present, discuss, and critique their own proposals, as well as those of their classmates. Completion of the proposal is broken down into the follow stages, each of which will be graded.

#### 1. *In-class workshop of research question*

- **Due:** February 10
- A statement introducing a potential research question. In addition to the question, the statement should discuss the unit of analysis, operationalize key concepts, propose ways to measure key concepts, and sketch out how the concepts relate to one another. The statement should not be more than one-page, singled spaced. It will be distributed to the class by Sunday, February 10.

#### 2. *Presentation of in-progress project proposal*

- **Due:** Week 10
- An in-class presentation lasting no more than 10 minutes. The presentation should include the following information in clear, concise, and compelling visual aids.
  - Research question
  - Motivation for the research question (*i.e.*, Why should we be asking this question?)
  - Reasoning and argument for an anticipated answer to the research question
  - Alternative arguments and answers to the research question
  - A possible research design for investigating the research question

#### 3. *In-progress written proposal*

- **Due:** April 21
- A draft of a written proposal no more than five pages long, single-spaced. The draft proposal should include the following information and be written in a clear and direct manner. It will be distributed to the class by Sunday April 21.
  - Research question
  - A review of what existing research has found on topics related to the research question
  - Motivation for the research question (*i.e.*, Why should we be asking this question?)
  - Reasoning and argument for an anticipated answer to the research question
  - Alternative arguments and answers to the research question
  - A proposed research design for investigating the research question, including anticipated data, data collection plans, and analytical strategy
  - A list of cited research

#### 4. *Final presentation and submission of proposal*

- **Due:** Week 15
- A 15-minute presentation of the revised project proposal and a written proposal, composed in a narrative style and no more than five pages, single-spaced. The presentation should be presented with clear, concise, and compelling visual aids. The written proposal should build on the draft version. Both should contain the following information.
  - Research question

- A review of what existing research has found on topics related to the research question
- Motivation for the research question (*i.e.*, Why should we be asking this question?)
- A clear connection between your precise, answerable empirical question and broader themes of theoretical interest
- Reasoning and argument for an anticipated answer to the research question
- Alternative arguments and answers to the research question
- A proposed research design for investigating the research question, including anticipated data, data collection plans, and analytical strategy
- Anticipated theoretical implications
- A list of cited research

### 3.3 Grading

- Course activity 30%
  - Class meetings, reading questions, and CAA project
  - Graded on a scale of 0 to 3 (“unsatisfactory” to “excellent”)
- Research proposal progress 30%
  - Research question, in-progress presentation, draft proposal
  - Marked with letter grades (“excellent”, “very good”, “sufficient”, or “not sufficient”)
- Final research proposal 40%
  - Presentation and revised written proposal
  - Marked with letter grades (“excellent”, “very good”, “sufficient”, or “not sufficient”)

## 4 Course schedule

### Part I: What’s the question?

#### Week 1 (January 29 and 31): The basics

- Tuesday reading: 1. Review the syllabus  
 2. Singleton & Straits, Chapter 4, “Elements of Research Design”
- Thursday reading: 1. Singleton & Straits, Chapter 5, “Measurement”  
*Recommended:* Singleton & Straits, Chapter 6, “Sampling”

#### Week 2 (February 5 and 7): Formulating research questions

- Tuesday reading: 1. Szelenyi, Ivan (2015), “The Triple Crisis of Sociology”, *Contexts*  
 2. Singleton & Straits, Chapter 2, “The Nature of Science”
- Thursday reading: 1. Salganik, Chapter 2, “Observing Behavior”

### **Week 3 (February 12 and 14): Research questions**

In-class workshops of research questions

## **Part II: Computational Abductive Analysis**

### **Week 4 (February 19 and 21): The ethnographic approach**

- Tuesday reading: 1. Tavory, Iddo and Daniel Winchester (2012), “Experiential Careers: The Routinization and De-Routinization of Religious Life”, *Theory and Society*
- Thursday reading: 1. Timmermans, Stefan and Mara Buchbinder (2010), “Patients-in-Waiting: Living Between Sickness and Health in the Genomics Era”, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*

### **Week 5 (February 26 and 28): Theory and computation**

- Tuesday reading: 1. Nelson, Laura. 2017. “Computational Grounded Theory: A Methodological Framework”, *Sociological Methods & Research*.
- Thursday reading: 1. Tavory and Timmermans, Introduction and Chapter 1  
2. Housley, William and Smith, Robin James (2017), “Interactionism and Digital Society”, *Qualitative Research*

### **Week 6 (March 5 and 7): Logic of inference**

- Tuesday reading: 1. Tavory and Timmermans, Chapter 3, “Abduction and Multiple Theories”  
*Recommended:* Tavory and Timmermans, Chapter 2, “Semiotics and the Research Act”
- Thursday reading: 1. Tavory and Timmermans, Chapter 4, “Abduction and Method”

### **Week 7 (March 12 and 14): Observing social life**

- Tuesday reading: 1. Salganik, Chapter 2, “Asking Questions”
- Thursday reading: 1. Tavory and Timmermans, Chapter 5, “Variation and Consequences-in-Action”

### **Week 8 (March 19 and 21)**

*No classes: Exams for seven-week courses*

### **Week 9 (March 26 and 28)**

*No classes: Spring break*

### **Week 10 (April 2 and 4): Project proposals**

Presentations of in-progress project proposals

### **Week 11 (April 9 and 11): Data and analysis**

- Tuesday reading:
1. Housley, William, et al. (2017), “Digitizing Sacks? Approaching Social Media as Data”, *Qualitative Research*
  2. Wang, Qi, et al. (2018), “Urban Mobility and Neighborhood Isolation in America’s 50 largest Cities”, *PNAS*
  3. Vallée (2018), “Urban Isolation and Daytime Neighborhood Social Composition from Twitter Data”, *PNAS*
  4. Wang, Qi, et al. (2018), “Reply to Vallée: Different Questions for Different Data”, *PNAS*
- Thursday reading:
1. Tavory and Timmermans, Chapter 7, “The Community of Inquiry”

### **Week 12 (April 16 and 18): Results!**

Presentation of computational abductive analysis projects

### **Week 13 (April 23 and 25)**

Group workshop of project proposals

## **Part III: Alternative approaches**

### **Week 14 (April 30 and May 2): Experiments**

- Tuesday reading:
1. Singleton & Straits, Chapter 7, “Experimentation”
- Thursday reading:
1. Salganik, Chapter 4, “Running experiments”
- Recommended:*
- Hernán, Miguel and James Robins (2015), “Using Big Data to Emulate a Target Trial When a Randomized Trial Is Not Available”, *Practice of Epidemiology*

### **Week 15 (May 7 and 9): Mechanisms**

- Tuesday reading:
1. Hedström, Peter and Peter Bearman (2011), “What is Analytical Sociology All About?”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*
- Thursday reading:
1. Hedström, Peter and Petri Ylikoski (2010), “Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences”, *Annual Review of Sociology*
  2. Lizardo, Omar (2012), “Analytical Sociology’s Superfluous Revolution”, *Sociologica*

## **Part VI. Conclusion**

### **Week 15 (May 14 and 16): Project proposals**

Final presentations of project proposals

### **Week 16 (May 21 and 23)**

*No classes: Exam week*