Teacher responsible:
Dr Paul Mitchell (PM)
Kings Chambers 308; p.l.mitchell@lse.ac.uk

Additional Teachers:
Dr Martin Bauer (MB)
Prof George Gaskell (GG)
Dr Ilina Singh (IS)

Wednesdays 14.00-16.00: Clement House, Room D1.

Abstract

This course focuses on research design in the social sciences, especially for those types of ‘qualitative’ studies that are less amenable to statistical analysis. After all, much of the political and social sciences are not strictly quantitative. For example, case studies have traditionally been one of the main methods of collecting evidence and suggesting arguments in comparative politics. A careful research design can help transform what otherwise may be an idiosyncratic case study of one country into a more theoretically informed contribution to knowledge.

The key purpose of this course is to think through the main stages of designing a research project such as an MSc dissertation. Most research projects, like most buildings, are better if they are carefully designed. (another way of saying this is that ‘neither architecture nor social science are much like impressionistic painting’). This course will help you to think through the stages of planning your dissertation. Having said that, it is a course about generic research design for the political and social sciences, and not ‘how to do footnotes properly’ (for advice on technical and style issues, see for example, the Government Departments Handbook for MSc Students, which has a section on ‘Advice on Writing Essays and the Dissertation’).
Mi401 has several parts. In week 1 there will be an overview of the process and organisation of writing an MSc dissertation. In week 2 we turn to a consideration of the scientific nature of social science; how is the latter different from natural science and with what consequences?

Then in the ‘middle’ part of the course (weeks 3-6) there are lectures on the sequential ‘stages’ of designing a research project. Any useful research project must seek to answer at least one significant question (otherwise it is just ‘thick description’); thus the first thing that you logically have to do is to find a research topic that you are going to study, and develop some ‘questions’ within that ‘topic’. Also, for the project to be of general interest it is better if the research questions are theoretically informed rather than haphazardly selected. These three related and vital matters - selecting a research ‘topic’, ‘question(s)’ and an appropriate ‘theoretical motivation’ are the subject of week 3. Once you are equipped with theoretically informed questions, the next consideration to think about is essentially – ‘how can I seek to explain (rather than just describe – whatever I am interested in ?’. Thus week 4 focuses on ‘explanation’. But of course once we have a theory, questions and an approach, we still need to decide ‘what’ are we actually going to study – for example, which cases or countries shall we analyse? Week 5 pays a lot of attention to the crucial matter of case selection. In week 5 we begin with the logic of comparative enquiry and case selection, and pay some attention to the problem of selection bias.

The final part of the course (week 6 through week 9), then present an overview of a variety of particular approaches. These are prominent examples, rather than a comprehensive account of the range of approaches that are available. We will cover rational choice theory in comparative studies, methods of content analysis of text (Week 7), the design of social surveys (Week 8) and the design, conduct and analysis of individual and group interviews (Week 9).

We believe that if you consider this material carefully and follow these research design steps you will write a better dissertation, than if you don’t.

**Organisation**

Note that this is a lecture based course (crucially of course supplemented by the students own reading of the course materials). There are no seminars, tutorials or computer classes, or homework.

**Assessment**

A two hour unseen examination in the summer term.
Lecture Topics and Schedule

All lectures are on Wednesdays 14.00-16.00: Clement House, Room D1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>12 Jan</td>
<td>Writing an MSc Dissertation: An Overview of the Process</td>
<td>GG, PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>19 Jan</td>
<td>Is Social Science Science? Explanation and Evidence in the Social Sciences.</td>
<td>GG, PM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3.   | 26 Jan  | (A) Selecting a Research Topic: ‘How the questions you choose affect the answers you get’  
(B) Selecting a theory: Literature review, theory development, and linking theory to empirics | PM      |
| 4.   | 2 Feb   | How do I ‘Explain’ anything? it’s all about Inference                | PM      |
| 5.   | 9 Feb   | But which Cases should I study?  
(a) Intro to the logic and practice of comparative study  
(b) Case selection, case studies and selection bias | PM      |
| 6.   | 16 Feb  | How the types of evidence and approach that you use affects the conclusions that you reach.  
(a) non-quantitative measurement and hypothesis testing rational choice in comparative politics.  
(b) rational choice in comparative politics | PM      |
| 7.   | 23 Feb  | Content analysis of texts                                           | MB      |
| 8.   | 2 March | Social Surveys                                                       | GG      |
| 9.   | 9 March | Conducting Interviews                                               | IS      |
READING

While there is no course textbook, for a general overview and chapters that are relevant to several week’s topics you should find some of these books useful, especially the first three books that are listed immediately below.


B. Guy Peters (1998), *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods*, Macmillan. (a very readable introduction to the methodology of comparative politics). There are 6 copies in the library.

Additional General Reading


Paul Pennings, Hans Keman and Jan Kleinnijenhuis (1999), *Doing Research in Political Science: An Introduction to Comparative Methods and Statistics*, Sage

David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (eds) (1995), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, Macmillan. (This is a very introductory undergraduate text that is not sufficient for this course. Nevertheless, genuine neophytes might take a look).


Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman (eds) (1997), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure*.


Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek (1997), *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions* W. W. Norton

In the reading guide on specific topics that follows, all books listed above will be referred to by author and year.

*****************************************************************************

DETAILED READING WEEK-BY-WEEK

1. **Writing an MSc Dissertation: An Overview of the Process**

   George Gaskell and Paul Mitchell

2 The *Science* in Social Science

**Issues**

- Is social science different to natural science? If so, in what sense?
- What is the relationship between explanation and prediction?
- What is the relationship between theories and their relationship to evidence?
- What is the difference between verification and corroboration?

Popper is one of the most famous philosophers of science, and his home for most of his academic life was the LSE. We will spend some time on his work, and consider briefly what he was criticising, and some of his critics including Imre Lakatos, who also lectured here at the LSE (see below for audio information). The main purpose of the lecture however, is not simply to introduce some philosophy of social science, but to interrogate the idea that explanation in the social sciences must bring together theory and evidence. It will consider their relationship, and what role theory should play in a dissertation; and what role empirical evidence should play. The answer, to some extent, depends on the nature of the questions that are asked.

**Key questions**

What is the relationship between prediction and explanation? What is the relationship between theory and evidence? How can evidence corroborate theories?

**Audio**

Let's listen to this 20 minute broadcast (on the LSE website at the address below) by Imre Lakatos first broadcast by the BBC in 1973 shortly before the speaker died at only age 51.

*Science and Pseudoscience* is Lakatos's most succinct public summary of his philosophy of science. In this talk he outlines his distinctive view of the importance of ‘the demarcation problem’ in the philosophy and history of science, namely the normative methodological problem of distinguishing between science and pseudoscience, and of why its solution is not merely an issue of 'armchair philosophy', but also one of vital social and political significance, and even of life and death itself. He outlines his own methodology of scientific research programmes, and argues that it solves some of the problems posed by the work of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. *Science and Pseudoscience* is Lakatos’s most succinct public summary of his philosophy of science. (and of course his last). Go to - [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/lakatos//scienceAndPseudoscience.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/lakatos//scienceAndPseudoscience.htm)

**Essential Reading**


2) KKV chapter 1.
Additional Reading

Brown, Fauvel & Finnegan (eds) (1981) Concepts of Inquiry: A Reader, OUP, samples from chapters 4, 5, 6, and 10 – i.e. J.S. Mill (pp. 96-100 & 145-149), Popper (pp. 100-107 & 138-140), Kuhn (pp. 107-114 & 127-138), Lakatos (pp. 114-121), Easton (pp. 149-154), hmpel(pp.154-179), Weber (pp. 295-300)

Chalmers, A.F. (1999). What is this thing called Science? Buckingham: Open University Press, 3rd edition. At minimum read chapters 5 and 9 (ideally also 6 and 7). [You will discover that your lecturer KD does not think much of any of the commentators on Popper including Lakatos and Chalmers, so beware!]

KKV clearly believe that falsifiability is one of the hallmarks of social scientific inquiry and their remarks on this matter seem to be influenced by Lakatos as well as Popper. See KKV (1994), pp. 19-23, 100-105.

For anyone who wants to get into this material in more depth -

**Popper: Falsifiability**

Popper presents a variety of accounts of falsifiability while the 1959 text is the original, it is also the most complex.

Karl Popper (1959), The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Hutchinson, ch. 1
Karl Popper (1972), Objective Knowledge, Oxford UP, ch. 1
Karl Popper (1969), Conjectures and Refutations, Routledge and Kegan Paul, ch. 1
Karl Popper (1983), A Pocket Popper, David Miller (ed.), Fontana. See the essays collected in part II.

There are numerous textbooks and edited collections on the work of Popper. One of the most recent (and best) is:

Geoff Stokes (1999), Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method, Polity

**Lakatos and the Idea of a Research Programme**

The key primary source for Lakatos’s philosophy of science is:

Imre Lakatos (1970), ‘Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes’ in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds), Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, Cambridge UP, also available as ch. 1 of the first volume of Lakatos’s collected papers: Imre Lakatos (1978), Philosophical Papers Volume 1, John Worrall and Gregory Currie (eds), Cambridge UP.

The best available secondary accounts and critical commentaries are listed in the overview section. The best textbook on his work is:

3. Research Questions and Theories

Introduction

Once you have an idea of about what you want to research, the next stage is working out what “research question” you want to answer. Remember, “the question you choose affects the type of answer you get” (B. Geddes). The trick in an MSc dissertation is to ask a question that has a theoretical and empirical component, and that can be answered in 10,000 words. In general, “why” questions are better for theoretically-driven social science research than “what” questions.

Once you have a question, you need to do three things:

1) Find out how other people have answered the question already. This is where a the infamous “literature review” comes in. There are good and bad ways of writing ‘lit reviews’. For example, good lit. reviews critically evaluation the different types of answers rather than simply repeating the findings of individual pieces of research.

2) Work out your own answer to the question/theoretical ideas. Next week will cover this in more detail, but this week will discuss how to construct and evaluate a theory. For example, what makes a good theory – explaining everything poorly vs. explaining a few things well.

3) Work out what you need to do empirically to demonstrate that your theory/answer to the question is better than other theories/answers.

Essential reading


Patrick Dunleavy (2003) Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation, London Palgrave. (Although this book is designed primarily for PhDs a lot of it applies to any non-fictional writing project, such as an MSc dissertation. Of particular interest here are the parts of the chapters on “Envisioning the Thesis as a Whole” and “Organizing a Chapter or Paper” on finding a research question and how to organise a literature review).

Additional reading


4. How do I ‘Explain’ anything? : its all about Inference

Introduction
How can we actually ‘explain’ rather than just describe something. Is there a useful distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, or between an inductive and a deductive logic of inquiry? The concepts of descriptive and explanatory inference, causality and uncertainty will be introduced. Remember, ‘the content is the method’. In other words, social science, indeed all science, depends primarily on its rules and methods, not on its ‘subject’ matter.

Key questions
1) ‘The only reliable method of making gains in knowledge and social progress is through scientific enquiry. Anything else is just chat.’

2) What is inference?

Essential reading
KKV (1994), ch. 1-2

Additional reading
KKV (1994), ch. 3. ‘Causality’ and ‘Casual Reasoning’ are difficult topics both in social scientific and philosophical accounts of established knowledge. There is no settled consensus. Ch 3 presents KKV’s counterfactual definition of causality. This is not an easy chapter but it is worth reading carefully. In general, KKV is an excellent text on scientific approaches to social inquiry. Note, however, that we do not present it as a bible or other sacred text. Many political scientists contest aspects of KKV’s book. For a sample see the next item on this reading guide.

American Political Science Review 89:2 (June 1995), 454-81. Five other political scientists review different parts of KKV’s book and then KKV respond.

Geddes (2003), chpt 1 ‘Research design and the accumulation of knowledge’.

Laver (1997) chs 1-2

Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek (1997), chs 1-2 (‘It Isn’t Rocket Science, but . . .’, and ‘Rationality: The Model of Choice’).

Jon Elster (1990), ‘When Rationality Fails’, and Geoffrey Brennan (comment on Elster above) ‘What Might Rationality Fail to Do?’, in Cook and Levi, ch. 1. Jon Elster’s chapter is a very interesting and provocative argument that ‘rational choice theory is first and foremost a normative theory and only secondarily an explanatory approach’ (p. 19).


David Sanders (1995), ‘Behavioural Analysis’ in Marsh and Stoker, ch.3


From the philosophical literature see also:

Chalmers (1999), ch. 4 (‘Deriving Theories from the Facts: Induction’)


Hollis (1994), ch. 3 (‘Positive science: the empiricist way’).
5. Case Selection and the logic of comparative enquiry

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government)

“A common error has been to equate sampling with survey research and to assume that field research does not involve any form of sampling”. (Burgess, 1982).

Introduction

Why compare? What is meaningfully comparable? And what should not be compared? This session will examine the importance of comparison and outline the logic of comparative inquiry. A range of common errors will be observed including parochialism, misclassification, degreeism and conceptual stretching. Note that many published academics break the rules of good comparative inquiry on an almost daily basis! But that is not a recommendation!

Small-N- Large N problems and strategies for ‘solving’ them will be considered.

How can we best ensure that our results are not merely an artefact of the cases that we chose?

Think of a comparative study that you would like to design? What would you compare and how?

Essential reading

1) Peters (1998), chs.1-3

2) Richard Rose (1991), ‘Comparing Forms of Comparative Analysis’ from *Political Studies*, 39, 446-62

3) Geddes (2003), chpt 3 ‘How the cases you choose affect the answers you get: selection bias and related issues’.

Additional reading

A. On the general logic of comparative enquiry:

Dogan and Pelassy (1990), part 1 (‘The Compass of the Comparativist’) and if possible part 2.


KKV (1994), ch 6

Lichbach and Zuckerman (eds) (1997), contains several useful essays.

Gene D. DeFelice (1980), ‘Comparison Misconceived: Common Nonsense in Comparative Politics’, *Comparative Politics*, 13, 119-26

B. Selection of Cases (or Nations) for Comparison and Selection Bias

In principle anything could be compared with anything. In practice some comparisons are likely to be better than others, in the sense of producing meaningful non-obvious findings. Time permitting this session will focus on three or four aspects/problems in comparative studies:

1. **Compare what? The need to segment before comparing.** The choice of countries: which countries?; how many countries or cases? Most common choices: binary comparisons; comparing ‘similar’ counties; comparing ‘contrasting’ countries; asynchronous comparisons.

2. **Does a Case Study really deserve to be called a ‘comparative’ method?**

3. **Problems of Selection Bias.** Especially in qualitative (small n) research, the decision as to which cases, observations or countries to include is often crucial, indeed may even determine, the results that we get.

4. **Problems of Endogeneity.** This is the problem of ambiguous directions of causality. In other words, since most political research is not genuinely experimental (as in a laboratory), we usually cannot manipulate or alter our ‘independent’ (explanatory) variables. Our inability to do this leads to the problem of endogeneity, that is, that the values of our explanatory variables are sometimes a consequence, rather than the cause of, our dependent variable.

**Additional readings**

KKV (1994), chs 4-5.

Dogan and Pelassy (1990), parts 3-4

Peters (1998), chs 5, 8-10.


See also the symposium entitled:

‘Controversy in the Discipline: Area Studies and Comparative Politics’ (Robert Bates, Chalmers Johnson and Ian Lustick), Political Science and Politics, 30:2 (June 1997), 166-79.
How do I design a ‘good’ case study?

‘You can’t prove anything with a case-study. Or can you?’ What is the purpose of case-study research? What are its advantages and the disadvantages. How should case studies be designed and conducted?

**Essential Reading**

**Additional Reading**

Roger Gomm, Martin Hammersley and Peter Foster (eds, 2000). *Case Study Method*. Sage. [a reader of the most influential articles, including the Eckstein and Lieberson pieces]


Stanley Lieberson (2000), ‘Small N’s and Big Conclusions: An Examination of the reasoning in Comparative Studies based on a Small Number of Cases’, in Roger Gomm, Martin Hammersley and Peter Foster (eds, 2000). *Case Study Method*. Sage


Lars Christiannsen and Keith Dowding (1994) ‘Pluralism and State Autonomy? The Case of Amnesty International (British Section): the Insider/ Outsider Group’ *Political Studies* 42(1): 15-24. (This is a case study that will be referred to during the lecture.)
6. **How the types of evidence and approach that you use affects the conclusions that you reach.**

Paul Mitchell (Government / Methodology Institute)

How the evidence you use affects your conclusions. Non-quantitative measurement and hypothesis testing

Rational choice theory in comparative politics.

**Essential readings**


**Additional readings**

1. **Evidence and Conclusions**


‘Controversy in the Discipline: Area Studies and Comparative Politics’ (Robert Bates, Chalmers Johnson and Ian Lustick), Political Science and Politics, 30:2 (June 1997), 166-79.


2. Rational Choice Theory

Laver (1997), chs 1-2

Shepsle and Bonchek (1997), ch. 10 (‘Public Goods, Externalities, and the Commons’)


Shepsle and Bonchek (1997), ch. 8 (‘Cooperation’) and ch. 9 (‘Collective Action’).

Laver (1997), chs 3 and 8


Nozick (1993), ch. 5.

Donald Green and Ian Shapiro (1994), Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science, Yale UP.


Michael Laver (1997), Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues, Oxford UP.


Peter Ordeshook (1992), A Political Theory Primer, Routledge.

Robert Gibbons (1992), A Primer in Game Theory, Prentice Hall/ Princeton UP.
7. Content Analysis of Newspapers and Documents

Martin W Bauer (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology)

Issues: Since the Enlightenment newspapers and other mass media are part of the complex of public opinion and freedom of the speech and public expression. Mass media analysis makes at least two contributions to social and political research: First, mass media are reflections as well as agenda setters in the public opinion processes. Analysis of mass media allows us therefore to gage past, present and maybe future public opinion on issues. Secondly, mass media reports allow us to reconstruct historical facts, such as involvement of various actors in social conflicts. The mechanics of how one conducts such analyses will be addressed.

Essential reading


Additional readings


8. Social Surveys

George Gaskell (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology)

Introduction
The social survey/questionnaire is probably one of the most widely used data collection instruments in social research. In an increasingly data dependent society, surveys are used in a variety of contexts to provide indicators of, for example, political participation, social capital and citizenship, political attitudes, expenditure patterns, transport use, public understanding of science, and in academic research to develop and test theory. This session outlines the key issues in the design of questionnaires and surveys.

Reading


9. Qualitative Analysis: Conducting Interviews

George Gaskell (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology)

Introduction
The objective of qualitative research is a fine grained understanding, a ‘thick description’ of the beliefs, attitudes and values, and the motivations and behaviours of people in particular social contexts. It aims to understand how people construct and understand their social world, their paramount reality. This session outlines approaches to qualitative inquiry, with an emphasis on how to design, conduct and analyse individual and group interviews.

Reading


