Theory Construction and Research: A Seminar for Thesis Writing
Sociology 594

Spring 2012

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By registering for the course, you assent to four goals:

1) Complete and submit your thesis proposal and IRB (if appropriate).
2) Draft a section (i.e. Literature Review, Theoretical Framework) for your thesis.
3) Build a circle of peer support for thesis writing.
4) Solidify your faculty committee.

The seminar is a writing workshop in which students share successive drafts of their work and benefit from others’ constructive criticism. Regular attendance and participation is required.

The course has three purposes
1. To understand the correspondence between theory-construction and empirical work.
2. To show how sociologists theoretically-inform research in practice.
3. To help frame theoretically-informed questions for researching and writing a thesis.

Soc 594 asks what can be done in the ten to twelve months remaining in the master’s program to complete your thesis. You need to set limits on your ambition, set marks to measure your progress with your committee, and to acknowledge that doing a thesis is a learning experience that qualifies you for moving on to more challenging research projects.

How do the question-forming and research-framing processes of sociological theory connect with doing research? Sociology courses show the products of research, but rarely show how the research was actually done, how one gets from research idea to a journal article, book or thesis. In this seminar, we will learn from reading or hearing their accounts of false starts, wrong turns, unfunded grants, unfinished work, shocking discoveries, and honest compromises that culminated in completed projects. What you read as the final report is a polished product that leaves out the surprises, frustrations, and most of the early drafts and analyses.

To best learn how sociology is practiced, you must do it yourself. The course operates as a workshop to write successive drafts that culminate in a submitted proposal, thesis section and progress report. Theory construction is introduced as an activity concurrent with data gathering, analysis, and reporting your results. For the purposes of this course, theory construction does not mean a philosophical enterprise, rather it is a way of working with sociological observations. In other words, theory construction is how does one logically organize empirical knowledge.
How Soc 594 is different from other grad courses:

Soc 594 marks a transition in the graduate program, a time to switch from completing coursework for a grade to beginning a doable thesis project needed for your degree. From here on, most of your course credits will be thesis-related. Doing well in courses got you to here, but getting a degree depends on finishing a thesis, the result of a yearlong process and a working partnership between you, your committee, and your graduate student peers. You need to think about how much time you can devote to data collection (collecting your own adds time) to analysis (do you already know the techniques you’ll use) to writing (a thesis testifies that you can not only do research but produce a report ready for the web or a conference).

Partners: The problem and potential of different starting-points

Some of you will arrive in class with a topic, a dataset, and preliminary analyses. Others will arrive with some promising but unsure ideas for a thesis. Accordingly, some of you may have already done some of the assignments below and others of you may not be able to do them by the dates indicated because you have not yet defined your thesis. These very different starting points seem at first glance to be a problem, but, in my experience, offer great potential for partnering. Because each of you is at a different point in the proposal-writing process, you can teach and learn from each other. We will switch partners during the term, hoping to have effective partnerships for different tasks: conceptualizing a research question, choosing data, knowing appropriate methods, etc. Partners will also share the work of some weekly assignments.

Course Requirements

1) Regular attendance and participation. Read all assignments carefully and come prepared to discuss them. Recognize that in a seminar, all of us have responsibility for each other’s work and an obligation to offer good criticism. The watchwords for the seminar are feedback and facilitation. Learning the skills and courage to be a good critic is a requirement for the seminar.

2) Presentation of work-in-progress, either oral or written. There is not time for all to present each week, so you should have a 1 page handout. Expect to make 3-5 presentations during the term. There is a 5-6 minute limit for presentations.

3) Completion of occasional short assignments from the list below

4) Delivering an acceptable draft of a thesis section (and progress report).

A thesis proposal is an anthology of short pieces:

| 1. A topic |
| 2. Some research questions/hypotheses that focus and frame it |
| 3. Introduction/Preview of chapters |
| 4. Literature review/Theory section(s) that defines key concepts and links prior work |
| 5. Research design, including expected data sources, analyses, and findings |
| 6. List of references |
| 7. A list of committee members, especially a sympatico chair |
| 8. Timeline including expected Human Subjects waiver or approval |
Final grades will be based on 3 components

1. **Progress** - For a final grade, you must submit a portfolio of all written work, chiefly your drafts and partner critiques. Please **date all work** so I can see progress. **I will not accept undated work.** Because I email comments, please keep a copy of all work for your files.

2. **Proposal** - Full draft of thesis proposal that has all the parts mentioned above

3. **Partnership** - Contributions to others through your critiques and discussion in the seminar

**Required Readings (books available at PSU Bookstore)**

- Howard S Becker, Writing for Social Scientists, 1st edition is OK
- Thomas, Gary, How to do Your Research Project
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. The Clockwork Muse

Most weeks will require online reading selections

**Recommended Readings**

- Joan Bolker, Writing Your Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day  
  [http://www.cs.umb.edu/~eb/joan/diss15/review.html](http://www.cs.umb.edu/~eb/joan/diss15/review.html)

- Jane E. Miller, Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers

- Charles Lipson, Cite Right (ch 5 on APA Citation Style)

- Arthur Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories

- Howard S Becker, Tools of the Trade

- Charles Lave and James March, An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences

- Edward Tufte, Visual Explanations  
  ----, Envisioning Information  
  ----, Visual Display of Quantitative Information

**Useful websites, e-articles, and collections**

1. Learning page of the Writing Center of the Central European University  
  [http://www.ceu.hu/caw/resources](http://www.ceu.hu/caw/resources)  
  Named “a website I would like to have found while I was trying to write my thesis!” Be sure to see the menu of topics

2. One has to sign-up for this listserv. It's only 1 message per week, so you won't get a lot of inbox clutter. Very insightful reflections, and most importantly, tips and techniques to prioritize writing in the midst of all the other things going on. You can sign up at  

3. Submitting a draft to a journal: editorial filtering  
  [http://www2.asanet.org/footnotes/feb06/indextwo.html](http://www2.asanet.org/footnotes/feb06/indextwo.html)

3. Listing of 211 PSU Sociology Master’s & PhD theses
4. Human Subjects
https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity/human-subjects

5. What Can I Do With a Master’s Degree in Sociology?
Over 1,400 Master’s candidates in sociology have been invited to participate in a longitudinal study of the Master’s degree. Visit our new webpage What Can I Do With a Master’s Degree in Sociology? to learn more the study, read survey findings, and preview the student questionnaire.
http://www.asanet.org/research/masters.cfm
Also see:
http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_jobs_can_you_get_with_a_master's_degree_in_sociology
http://www.usi.edu/libarts/socio/socdegree.asp
https://www.standford.edu/dept/soc/coterminal/indes.html

6. PSU Sociology Proposals from the 1980s forward
The Department has a collection in a 3-ring binder.

**Theory Construction and Research**

Dates and topics may change for weather, workflow, or unforeseen opportunities

The exercises below culminate in a finished and approved thesis proposal, completed IRB, and draft of one section of your thesis. As you do each new exercise, rework prior installments. From time to time, discuss your draft [both what is on paper and what is in your head] with your adviser or potential committee members. Keep your partners informed of what you’ve written and what you plan to add. Your proposal should be ready for your committee during the 5th week of Spring 2011.

Assignment Due Dates:
(IMPORTANT: Maintain documentation of ALL progress for Final Portfolio submission)

****ADDITIONAL READING ASSIGNMENTS TBD: based on guest speaker availability***

Week 1 April 5:

(1) Write an Individualized Term Plan, Submit via Email by Tuesday, April 3rd 7 pm: Stepick@pdx.edu.
   Include answers to the following: Where are you now in your thesis progress, where do you think you need to go? What do you perceive you need from this course? Are you applying to PhD programs in the fall?

(2) Read the first half of the Becker text.
Week 2: April 12

(1) Submit Current Proposal: Include where you would like it to go and a timeline for submitting it to your committee.

(2) Read “The Clockwork Muse”.
   Guest: Kimberly Pendell, Social Sciences Librarian, PSU

Week 3 April 19:

(1) Create an outline of “Theory” and “Literature Review” sections.
(2) Determine which section is most appropriate for you to complete for this course.
(3) Peer-edit current proposals.
(4) Read Thomas, “How to Do Your Research Project”
   Guests: Cathleen Gal and Ann Sinkey, IRB office

Week 4 April 26:

(1) Incorporating peer comments; complete Final Thesis Proposal for chair submission.
(2) Read second half of the Becker text.
   Guests: Jacqui Frost and Maura Pisciotta

Week 5 May 3:

(1) Submit Final Proposal to Committee Members.
(2) Meet with Chair to determine thesis plan and schedule. Submit a write up of your progress via email.
   Guests: Frank Goulart

Week 6 May 10:

(1) Follow up with committee on proposal approval.
(2) RCR (Responsible Conduct of Research) Training on-line. Read and follow the instructions for CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative at the bottom.
(2) Submit IRB draft (if applicable) via email.
(3) Bring list of final committee member to class.
   Guest: Jen Rainer

Week 7 May 17:

(1) Write first draft of thesis (Theory or Lit Review) section to email to peer group.
(2) If applicable- Email list of potential Ph.D. programs you are going to apply to and names of at least eight professors whom you would benefit from working with. Send a draft of email inquiring about programs.
   Guest: Meredith Talbert
Week 8 May 24:
(1) Bring peer edits to class - print out for in-class review.
(2) Following class, incorporate peer edits to draft and submit via email.
Guest Jena Zarza

Week 9 May 31:
(1) Report to class on IRB progress.
(2) Provide a report on a second year Thesis Defense you attended via Email.
(3) Guests: Jordan Folks (and maybe Katsuya Oi)

Week 10 June 7:
Finals: Final Portfolio Due: Turn in Binder with ALL writing assignments and table of contents

Final Portfolio must include at least the following:

- Finished Thesis Section (Theory or Lit)
- Approved Proposal
- Reviewed work and term progress (writing drafts and peer comments)
- List of Approved Committee Members
- Timeline of Thesis Writing Plan (Calendar)
- IRB Submission and current response from IRB Review Board.