This is a workshop on issues in the design of life course research. It aims to provide students with experience in planning a "doable" research project in conjunction with an orientation in the methods and theories central to life course research.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

Because the goal of this course is to offer students hands on experience with research design issues, there are few required readings. Students will be expected to read only one or two articles or chapters each week. This will provide them with a sample of the approaches, concepts, data sources, and methodologies frequently used in life course research. A fuller list of readings is provided for those wishing to examine this topic more thoroughly.

In addition, students will create a portfolio of exercises (described below), designed to sensitize them to the research process, and provide peer guidance to one another on each exercise. This will model the professional practice of using networks as resources to stimulate, revise and improve scholarly work at every phase in the process. Scholars engaged in hands on research as well as individuals engaged in collecting and disseminating data will visit the class periodically. Students are expected to use this opportunity to question experts their strategic approaches to doing research.

**REQUIRED COURSE READINGS**

A course packet containing required readings is available at the Campus Store.

**RECOMMENDED COURSE READINGS**

None of the books listed below will be used in the course. However, the following texts offer an introduction to the life course perspective, as well as an introduction to practical matters of data analysis that may be useful. For those with little or no experience analyzing statistical data or using a professional statistics program, Sweet (1999) offers a general orientation to data analysis in an SPSS environment. Green, Salkind and Akey (1999) offer a similar guide designed for more advanced students. The Ragin (1994) volume describes the goal and process of social research more generally, describing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Elder (1999) and Giele and Elder (1998) provide guidance on the framing of issues from a life course perspective.


Designing Research: A Workshop on Life Course Analysis  
HD 685  
Fall 1999

Phyllis Moen ♦ Stephen Sweet  
Cornell University ♦  
Discipline: Human Development


Also refer to the links on Bill Trochim's home page. It has an immense amount of information on statistics and design. The page is [http://trochim.cornell.edu](http://trochim.cornell.edu)

**GRADING**

Students will be graded on their participation and contributions to the class. They are expected to attend and actively participate in class discussions. In addition, their grade will be determined by the quality of their research exercise portfolio to be handed in the last week of classes. This portfolio will consist of assigned exercises and copies of the guidance they have offered to peers throughout the course.

**CLASSROOM PREPARATION**

The success of this workshop hinges on the critical analysis of scholarly research and linking past scholarship to research design. The class will read and discuss a selected sample of articles (in course pack). Students are expected to read these articles prior to class and focus on the following concerns:

- What is the central research question?
- Why (or why not) is this a “life course” study?
- What are the hypotheses of the study?
- What are the key concepts in the study?
- How are the key concepts operationalized?
- How good (i.e., valid and reliable) are the measures?
- What causal processes or causal connections does the researcher posit?
- What statistics are presented? Are they appropriate?
- What special issues related to life course analysis?
- What do the findings suggest about social behavior in the life course?
- What ethical issues confront researcher as they engage in life course research?

**EXERCISES**

**Exercise #1 – The Research Evidence**
Locate 3 (recent) articles addressing a (single) topic of interest. Briefly summarize the research question posed and their findings (in a chart or in 2 pages maximum). Optional: Reframe the questions posed by the authors in Exercise #1, reorienting their studies towards life course research.

**Exercise #2 – The Research Question**
Write a compelling 2-3 page statement describing a life course oriented research question that is appropriate to your level of expertise and that has strong potential for a successful outcome,(i.e., something that is actually “doable”). Include references to 3 sources that document the centrality of your question to current academic debates.

**Exercise #3 – Hypotheses**
Make an exhaustive list of life course oriented hypotheses that directly relate to your research question. Make a nominal and operational definition of your dependent variable(s) and most central independent variables. (1 page)

**Exercise #4 – Concepts, Variables and Measures**
In the articles you summarized, (in Exercise 1 or 2) make a chart showing 1) how the authors of each article define the concept, 2) the variables they use, and 3) the actual operationalizations (e.g. the questions asked in a survey). Drawing and building on the previous research, how would YOU define and measure the concept? Include your own definitions and operationalization on the chart.

**Exercise #5 – The Data**
Locate a potential source of secondary data that could be used to answer your question. Write up a brief statement describing the data and how it could potentially be obtained. Give a ballpark figure of how long you think it will take to execute the study effectively and roughly estimate the financial costs. (1-2 pages)

or

Provide an executive summary outlining an appropriate methodology for the collection of primary data to answer your research question. Outline your ideal sample size and overarching approach. Give a ballpark figure of how long you think it will take to execute the study effectively and roughly estimate the financial costs. (1-2 pages)

**Exercise #6 – Causal Model**
Identify the causal mechanisms in your study with a theoretically informed model that incorporates life course dynamics. (1 figure)

**Exercise #7 – Ethical Issues**
Write a brief statement detailing the ethical considerations in your study and how your design appropriately deals with these considerations. (1 page)

**Exercise #8 – Policy Relevance**
Take a published article that is closely related to your own study (from Exercise #1 or #2) and write bullets of findings that would be of interest to policy makers and the public (1 page of 3-5 bullets).

**Exercise #9 – Writing and Publishing**
List the potential titles for your research articles, each title representing a different article to be submitted for publication. Identify two journals, in order of preference, where you would stand a good chance of getting your work published. One should be a highly competitive journal with a large readership and the second a highly specialized journal especially focused towards issues surrounding your research question.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates (Week of)</th>
<th>Topics/Outline/Exercises</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| August 30<sup>th</sup> | **I. Introduction: Social Science as “Science”**
  A. Seeking Patterns in Behavior, Developmental Processes, Relationships, Resources, Cognitions
  B. Basic Research Addressing Issues of Societal Importance
  C. Cumulative Evidence
  D. Community of Scholars

  *Researchers on the Front Lines:* |

| September 6<sup>th</sup> | **II. Key Life Course/Developmental Themes**
  A. Continuity and change in behavior and in development
  B. Transitions and trajectories
    1. Biographical continuity
    2. Path dependence
    3. Resource conversion
    4. Markovian processes
  C. Ecology of Human Development
  D. Linked Lives
    1. Irrational attachments
    2. Conjoint transitions
    3. Power relations
  E. Mediating Institutions, Family, Community, Work
  F. Biography and Society
    1. The Structural perspective: The social organization of childhood, work, family, the life course
    2. Social change
    3. Technology
    4. Customs and norms
    5. Policies and practices
    6. Institutionalizing and deinstitutionalizing the life course
  G. Actors as Rational, Pragmatic, Strategic |
Readings: Moen and Wethington (1992) and Lachman and Burack (1993)

Exercise #1: The Research Evidence (Due September 13th)

Readers on the Front Lines: Urie Brofenbrenner

September 13th III. Existing Evidence

A. What Do We Know?
B. How Do We Know It? (Sample, Procedures)
C. Generalizability?
D. Relevance to Question? Key Concepts / Variables / Measures
E. Temporal Considerations (Age of Subjects/Respondents, Cohorts, Date of Study)
F. Cumulation of Evidence

Exercise #1 Due

Readings: Duncan, et al. (1998) and Ali and Avison (1997)

Exercise #2: The Research Question (Due September 20th)

Readers on the Front Lines: Mary Ann Erickson

September 20th IV. Framing the Research Question

A. Antecedents, Consequences, Mechanisms
B. Considering Social Policy and Practices
C. Considering Time, Place, and Context
D. The “So What?” Question

Exercise #2 Due


Exercise #3: Hypotheses (Due September 27th)

Readers on the Front Lines:

September 27th V. Theoretical Underpinnings and Hypotheses
A. Deductive Approach (testable / falsifiable)
B. Inductive Approach
C. Science in the Discovery Mode (Bronfenbrenner)
D. Interventions
E. Natural Experiments

Exercise #3 Due


Researchers on the Front Lines: Urie Brofenbrenner

October 4th

VI. Unit of Analysis

A. Theoretical/Empirical
B. Group Differences and Trends

C. Individual Differences and Trends

Readings: Heckhausen and Schulz (1993)

Exercise #4: Concepts, Variables, and Measures (Due Oct. 18th)

Researchers on the Front Lines:

October 11th

FALL BREAK!

October 18th

VII. Data Collection

A. Pilots and Pretests
B. Original
   1. Experimental
   2. Observational
   3. Interviews
   4. Surveys
C. Secondary
   1. Reanalysis of Existing Surveys
   2. Meta analyses
   3. Historical Archives
5. Simulation

D. Sample Size, Appropriateness, and Representativeness

E. Incorporating Time
1. Cross-Sectional Data
   a) Age / Stage / Cohort
   b) Retrospective Life Histories
   c) Working backward/forward
2. Panel (Longitudinal) Data
   a) Single Cohort
   b) Cohort Comparisons
   c) “Catch-up” samples
3. Time Series Data
   a) Age / Stage Comparisons
   b) Synthetic Cohorts
4. Daily diaries and experience sampling
5. Biographical / Ethnographic / Contextual Data

F. Incorporating Context
1. Constant Comparisons
   a) across subgroups
   b) across cultures
   c) across cohorts
2. Multilevel Analysis
3. The Policy Context

Exercise #4 Due

Readings: Moen, et al. (1992) and Han and Moen (1999)

Exercise #5: The Data (Due October 25th)

Researchers on the Front Lines:

October 25th  

VIII. (Re)framing the Question

Concepts, Variables, Measures

1. Independent / Dependent Variables
2. Validity & Reliability
B. Nature of Relationship
  1. Linkage: Linear? Curvilinear? Context-Dependent?
  2. Control Variables
  3. Mediators
  4. Moderators
  5. Colinear Variables

Detecting Spurious Linkages Moderators

Exercise # 5 Due

Readings: Menaghan (1997)

Researchers on the Front Lines:

November 1st

IX. Analysis: Seeking Patterns

A. Coding and Recoding
  1. Interval, Ordinal, or Categorical Level Data
  2. Missing Data
  3. Scales
  4. Counts, Proportions, Rates

B. Descriptive
  1. Means, Medians, Modes, Standard Deviations, Minimum, Maximum, Outliers.
  2. Correlations, Cross-tabs, Analysis of Variance
  3. Describing Variables versus Describing People
     a) Crosstabs, ANOVA
     b) Cluster analysis (k-cluster)
     c) Sequence analysis
  4. Temporal Considerations

Readings: Sanchez and Thompson (1997)

Exercise #6: The Causal Model (Due November 8th)
November 8\textsuperscript{th} IX. \textbf{Analysis: Seeking Patterns (contd.)}

C. Multivariate

1. Variable-Focused
   a) Multiple regression
   b) Structural equation modeling
   c) Cluster analyses (q-cluster)

2. Person Focused
   a) Log-linear analysis
   b) Logistic regression
   c) Event history analysis

D. Locating in Time and Place

1. Interactions
2. Mediating Links

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Exercise \#6 Due}
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Readings:} Brines and Joyner (1999) and Ryff and Keyes (1995)

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Exercise \#7: Ethical Issues (Due November 15\textsuperscript{th})}
\end{itemize}

\textit{Researchers on the Front Lines:}

November 15\textsuperscript{th} XI. \textbf{Ethical Issues}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Exercise \#7 Due}
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Readings:} Wethington, et al. (1999)

\textit{Researchers on the Front Lines:}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Exercise \#8: Policy Relevance (Due November 22\textsuperscript{nd})}
\end{itemize}

November 22\textsuperscript{nd} XII. \textbf{Reporting the Findings}

A. Tables, Figures, Graphs

B. Summary of Findings:

1. Presentations
2. Papers

B. Locating Findings in Context
Exercise #8 Due

Exercise #9: Writing and Publishing (Due November 29th)

Researchers on the Front Lines:

November 29th XIII. Revisions and Reanalysis

Exercise #9 Due: Portfolio of Exercises Due

REQUIRED READINGS (in course packet)


