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HA716 \\ Quantitative Research Methods in Health and Aging \\ Course Outline

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Tuesday 11:30 am to 2:20 pm,

Room: LRW 3001 (Wilson Building).

Contents:

- [1 Course Description](#)
- [2 Course Objectives](#)
- [3 Required Materials and Text](#)
- [4 Class Format](#)
- [5 Course Evaluation: Overview](#)
- [6 Course Evaluation: Details](#)
 - [6.1 Seminar Preparation](#)
 - [6.2 Seminar Participation](#)
 - [6.3 Seminar Papers](#)
- [7 Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings](#)
- [8 Course Policies](#)
 - [8.1 Submission of Assignments](#)
 - [8.2 Grades](#)
 - [8.3 Late Assignments](#)
 - [8.4 Absences, Missed Work, Illness](#)
 - [8.5 Avenue to Learn](#)
- [9 University Policies](#)
 - [9.1 Academic Integrity Statement](#)
 - [9.2 Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#)
 - [9.3 Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances \(RISO\)](#)
 - [9.4 Faculty of Social Sciences e-mail communication policy](#)
 - [9.5 Course Modification Notice](#)
 - [9.6 Extreme Circumstances](#)

1 Course Description

This course provides an introduction to and overview of the use of numbers (“quantitative”) and formal inference (“hypothetico-deductive”) in research on the social aspects of health and aging.

What this course is not: I will not teach you a series of recipes (“how to”) on a bunch of statistical methods that are commonly used in quantitative research.

What this course wants to do: We will look for reasons why social scientists use (or should use) such or such method. The “why” has to do with the following:

1.

The type of question one wants to answer (or explore further)

2.

The type of data that are available

3.

The underlying theoretical model one has in mind

2 Course Objectives

The detailed intended learning outcomes are as follows (I add the names of methods in italics):

1.

To explain the difference between qualitative/inductive and quantitative/deductive approaches to social science questions.

2.

To explain the role of theoretical frameworks in hypothesis generation and the use of empirical restrictions in hypothesis testing (*Qualitative Comparative Analysis*.)

3.

To explain the role of information in induction (another route to generate hypotheses) (*Factor Analysis and Structural Equations Model*.)

4.

To explain what causality and inference are and the role of identification in the determination of causality (concepts of co-variation, correlation, and *ceteris paribus*) and discussion of Experiments in the field of health and aging).

5.

To explain why social scientists use a stochastic approach called statistical inference (sampling, hypothesis testing, decision rules.)

6.

To explain the difference between statistical inference and theoretical inference.

7.

To explain how regression analysis and related basic econometric tools work (*Maximum Likelihood Estimator*.)

8.

To explain how to expand these methods in cases where observations are not independent random draws: analysis of chronological data (time series, panel data: what happened in the past influences what happens in the future) and analysis of peer effects (clusters, spillover.)

9.

Explain what remains of interpretative approaches in quantitative methods: the rhetoric of social sciences and evidence-based policy.

Specificity of Aging and Health Studies within Social sciences

Health and aging can be studied from a variety of perspectives (clinical, biological, molecular, or social). Social scientists study health and aging as they relate to “society” (more detail below) and ask questions such as:

- What are the perceptions of age, aging, old, age groups, health, healthy, illness, sickness, disease, disability, treatment, rehabilitation in societies and groups within societies?
- What are the effects of changes in the age distribution of the population on the economy, society, and perceptions of age and aging?
- What are the effects of health and medicine on the economy, society, and perceptions of and expectations toward health and treatment?

These questions have in common an interest in health and aging from the perspective of human beings living in society (groups of human beings linked by norms, institutions, rules, or resource allocations). The methods and research designs used by social scientists to address such questions are generic methods and designs used by social scientists in general. There is no specific method or design used in health studies or studies of aging that is not used elsewhere in the social sciences. However, some specific issues, designs or concepts distinguish social scientists studying health and aging: among others, the use of chronological data, the distinction between population level and individual level phenomena, and proximity to health sciences and their methods (systematic reviews, knowledge transfers, randomized controlled trials).

3 Required Materials and Text

- Required:
 - David Bartholomew, *Statistics Without Mathematics*, Sage, 2015 (\$55.00)
 - Paul S. Maxim, *Quantitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Oxford University Press. (not easy to find, and quite costly; I have a few second hand copies that I am happy to share with you).
 - Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. (available at the library, second hand editions for low prices).

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Recommended:

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Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams (2008 - 3rd edition) *The Craft of Research*
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4 Class Format

We meet once a week for three hours. Each session will be used as follows:

1.
Discussion of material, based on textbook or papers and chapters distributed in advance. These discussions follow a seminar format and are led by small groups of students, with the help of the instructor.
2.
Discussion of a chapter or section of Émile Durkheim's "Suicide: A Study in Sociology". The book is on reserve at Mill's library. We will use this classic to illustrate and understand how hypotheses are generated through theoretical frameworks and then tested based on logical restrictions and empirical data. It is a classic in sociology but it is also a public health issue that is of interest to gerontologists (suicide is more frequent among the elderly).
3.
Hands-on applications (either examples provided by the instructor or based on students' research projects)

5 Course Evaluation: Overview

To achieve its objectives, this course requires a good understanding of the readings, active participation in seminar discussions, and interest in research and writing. The evaluation of your understanding, participation, and research will be based on the following components:

1.
Seminar Preparation (20%), Week 2 to Week 11
2.
Seminar Leadership and Participation (20%)
3.
Research: Three short Seminar Papers (20% each) due any time before the end of the term (but not accepted after the end of term).

Late submissions of the seminar preparation documents will not be accepted.

6 Course Evaluation: Details

6.1 Seminar Preparation

You must arrive in class having carefully done the readings and well-prepared to engage in the seminar discussion. In order to contribute to a better understanding of the readings, you are expected to come to the seminar with documents (one document for each of the required readings), which have the following three components:

1.

List of core concepts and terms

2.

Brief summary statement of the central arguments (written in your own words)

3.

List of important questions and issues

Upload these documents on the dropbox on Avenue.

6.2 Seminar Participation

You will take turns leading the course. As a seminar leader, you should:

1.

ask participants to define and clarify the core concepts and terms

2.

ask participants to summarize and discuss the central arguments

3.

ask participants to raise important issues and questions related to the readings

4.

ask participants to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the readings

I do not expect you to have all the answers (I don't), but to do your best to understand the question raised in the reading and be ready to discuss what you understand and compare it with what others understand.

Slides are NOT recommended - I do not ban slides but I do not encourage their use to lead a seminar discussion. Firstly, producing slides while preparing for a seminar is a waste of your time (especially if you use Powerpoint) and will distract you from the main task, which is to read, understand, and discuss. Also, human beings are so built that they cannot think deeply and fine tune presentation details at the same time. In this course, you should privilege substance over packaging. Secondly, presenting slides kills discussion: your listeners will focus on what is written on a screen and will not listen to what you have to say. If you simply say out loud what is already written on your slides, what is the point? If you feel more comfortable with an outline of the discussion (the main points you want to cover during the discussion) projected on a screen behind you, and used as a reference, that is fine with me. Also, if you prefer to think and discuss based on graphs and diagrams, that is fine as well. But shy away from the never ending slide deck that simply paraphrases what is in the reading.

As a seminar participant, you are expected to answer the questions raised by seminar leaders and other participants, respond to their contributions to our seminar discussions, provide information and examples, and raise your own questions and issues. The seminar is not only about making sure we understand the readings but also about using them

as a springboard for our discussion of the day.

All: feel free to use the black or paper board to write down ideas or suggest charts that we might then discuss. All suggestions are welcome and no idea is a silly one. I strongly encourage active participation to the seminar, even though that might seem a bit chaotic at times.

6.3 Seminar Papers

Each short paper will discuss issues of research design and methods in the study of health and aging. I do not have any recommendation for the length of these papers. I am only interested in the logic of your argument and how you support it with logic and evidence, not packaging. Having said so, keep in mind that it takes time to write short pieces but it pays off (a well-organized short piece presenting all the argument but nothing but the argument will be better received than a long and winding one that I will have to read 10 times to understand). Please use class time (so-called hands-on periods) to discuss your papers and get feedback and suggestions from your peers (and me). Here are the topics (you can start right away and hand them in any time before the end of the term):

1.

Select an interesting topic or problem in health and aging (possibly your MRP or thesis topic) and define a research question, based on a theoretical framework. Detail how you came upon your research question and how it will add to knowledge.

2.

Causal inference: explain what empirical restrictions you will use to reject competing hypotheses (empirical tests) to answer your research question (has to build on paper 1).

3.

Statistical strategy: explain how you would statistically test your empirical restrictions and how you would address measurement issues (has to build on papers 1 and 2).

7 Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings

This course is divided into four parts:

1.

Scientific method in social sciences and the role of quantified information.

(a)

The scientific method and social sciences.

(b)

Hypothetico-deductive approaches, theory formalization and qualitative comparative analysis.

(c)

Inductive approaches, theory of information, and co-variation (regression analysis).

2.

Inference and identification.

(a)

Measurement theory.

(b)

Causality and self-selection biases

(c)

Experiments and randomization (2 weeks)

3.

Statistical (stochastic) inference.

(a)

Probabilities, Law of Large Numbers, Sampling and inference.

(b)

Hypothesis testing and decision making.

4.

Statistical inference in the social world: serial correlation.

(a)

Maximum Likelihood Estimator

(b)

Correlation over time

(c)

Correlation across individuals

I will post on the course shell on Avenue a series of weekly documents (class preparation) providing information on required readings, expectations for seminar/discussion, optional readings as well as resources you may find helpful.

8 Course Policies

8.1 Submission of Assignments

Each week, on dropbox on Avenue to Learn

8.2 Grades

Grades will be based on the McMaster University grading scale.

8.3 Late Assignments

See Course Evaluation section

8.4 Absences, Missed Work, Illness

Contact me in case of absence.

8.5 Avenue to Learn

In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn. Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

9 University Policies

9.1 Academic Integrity Statement

Academic Integrity: You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1.
Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2.
Improper collaboration in group work.
3.
Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

9.2 Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or e-mail sas@mcmaster.ca. For further information, consult McMaster University’s Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities: <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicAccommodation-StudentsWithDisabilities.pdf>

9.3 Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students requiring a RISO accommodation should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

Please review the (clickable link) [RISO information for students in the Faculty of Social Sciences](#) about how to request accommodation.

9.4 Faculty of Social Sciences e-mail communication policy

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.

9.5 Course Modification Notice

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

9.6 Extreme Circumstances

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.

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