

# Experimental Research Proposal

## Research Topic/Question

SOC 201 - Research Methods

Group Review #1: February 21, 2018

This is arguably the most important step in the research process. The quality of your research question will determine the significance of the contribution your research makes in your field of inquiry. Although you will not be handing in anything to me until the final assignment is due, I expect all of you to have completed the steps below and to be ready in class to discuss your progress with your peers in small groups -your participation grade in the class depends on it! Please note that everyone's chosen topic/research question must be approved by me via email. Please seek that approval at your earliest convenience because the sooner you get approval from me the sooner you can make progress on your proposal. Please follow the step-by-step directions below.

### Instructions

- 1) Pick a research topic you find interesting in any field of social science or public policy. Examples include poverty, elections, consumer behavior, family planning, and education, just to name a few.
- 2) You need to do enough research on your chosen topic to identify a nontrivial empirical question. It need not be a question others have yet to address (more than likely it won't be) but it needs to be a question whose solutions you find either unconvincing or incomplete. Moreover, the question must be fundamental enough that it speaks to either an existing theoretical paradigm or to one you have devised yourself. At this stage, you will likely have identified what we discussed in class as a "wicked problem". Potential questions might include *how we address income inequality (if at all)* or *should we be making it easier to vote?* But some of you may arrive at an already tame question. For example, *does subsidizing higher education for the poor reduce income inequality* or *do voter ID laws dampen voter turnout?* If that's the case then you can move on to step 4. If your problem is "wicked", however, proceed to the next step.
- 3) If your problem is "wicked" then reduce it down to two or more tame questions and then choose the most tractable question or one that appeals to you the most as a scholar in your field.
- 4) Because your methodological approach is experimental, you need to ensure that the question

you choose is amenable to experimentation. Not all viable research questions can be pursued via experimental designs. Because experiments involve the manipulation of the treatment to one or more groups, ethical concerns often prevent experimentation in certain settings. For example, if we are interested in the effect of policing on crime rates, it would be unethical to randomize which neighborhoods the police patrol and which they do not. Research questions of that sort are better pursued via an observational approach, which you will not be conducting for this assignment.

- 5) Identify two competing theories that speak to your question and describe each in 1-3 sentences.
- 5) Make sure you can answer each of the questions listed below (1-3) and their constituent elements in the affirmative.
- 6) Everyone must obtain approval for their question/topic from me! Those who fail to do so risk failing this assignment. Approval must be obtained via email. The sooner you get approval the sooner you can continue your research. I urge you to seek approval no later than a week after we meet in class for our first group review. To seek approval, send me an email with the subject line: "Research Proposal Approval". In the body of the email simply state your research question (it should be no longer than one sentence).

## What makes an experimental research question good?

- 1) Is it empirical?
  - Does it ask a question about the observable world?
- 2) Is it amenable to experimentation?
  - Does it pose any ethical concerns?
  - Is it tractable and feasible to address in experimental form?
- 3) Does it force you to take a side?
  - Can you identify the potential sides/stances easily?
- 4) Is it tractable?
  - Does "good enough" data exist to address the question?
  - Is acquiring the data feasible?
- 4) Does it make a contribution to your field?
  - Does answering this question have any scholarly or policy implications?
  - Does it speak to existing theories on the topic?