---Conducting Research in the Social Sciences1---

Much like biology, physics, and chemistry, the study of the social sciences holds that assumptions regarding human thinking and behavior must be supported with evidence. When conducting research, sociologists tend to follow the same general procedure consisting of five steps: developing a research question, forming a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, analyzing the results, and drawing conclusions. You will be tasked with conducting research to find an answer to a question of your choosing surrounding the pursuit of happiness that you find at once intriguing and whose results are worthwhile in sharing with others. What follows will act as a guide as you advance through the research procedure.

**Developing a Research Question**

*Your question should be something that you will be enthusiastic about researching. Be certain, though, that your question is specific and can be “answered” by means of applying the scientific method. Precisely narrowing down your question is of utmost importance to ensure a smooth transition from one step to the next. The following are examples of testable research questions:

*Are girls more politically active than boys?*

*Do drug education programs in health class decrease drug use?*

*Why are so many high school students tired so much of the time?*

Time is of the essence in a semester course, so please keep in mind that the research process should not take any longer than one week to complete.

**Forming a Hypothesis**

*After developing your research question, form a hypothesis about the answer to that question; an educated guess, if you will. Based on your life experiences and what you know, what do you anticipate the response will be to your question?*

**Review of the Literature**

*Chances are good that your research question has been tested before and the results have been documented and published. As such, I would like for you to explore the results of published research dealing with your topic that you will use to compare to your findings (three or four studies should suffice). Be cognizant of the validity of the information you gather and the reputability of the source(s) of that data. Accessing statistics from research-based universities and/or reliable media outlets is imperative.

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1 An activity developed by Adam Rossi and presented at the Pitt Sociology of Social Studies Fall Workshop, October 21st, 2014.
Testing the Hypothesis

*In order to either support or refute your hypothesis, you need to test its validity. Because we are void of the time and resources necessary to conduct research utilizing other avenues (observations, experiments, etc.), I am asking you to either conduct a survey or a series of interviews. While it is difficult to put a number on how many participants will yield a response indicative of the population they are a part of, it is safe to assume that thirty (30) contributors would suffice for a survey, and ten (10) for an interview.

*Who will you choose to be a part of your survey? Who will you interview? Will your participants be chosen at random or will you hand-pick the responders? For the purposes of this research endeavor, and to provide more robust results, it might be best to make a concerted effort to gain responders that differ in age, gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

*For those who will be creating a survey, you will need to include items/questions that allow you to quantify, or measure, in a numerical sense, the things you believe affect happiness (your independent variables). Think about reporting results using averages, percentages, etc. You might include a few open-ended response questions, but this should not constitute the bulk of your survey. Refer to the handout on survey/interview design and Likert Scales for assistance in formulating questions. If you are choosing to interview participants, your conclusion will be of a qualitative sense (think narrative and detail-specific), so questions do not need to be as precise.

Analyzing the Results

*What do your findings mean? Look for patterns and relationships in your data. It is vital to make certain that you develop some sort of organizational method, such as a spreadsheet, with which you can easily maintain accurate records of your data. Once you have everything sorted out, dive in, dig around, and see what you uncover!

Drawing Conclusions

*So, what did you find out? Consider the following:

-Do the results mirror what you thought they would?

-Did your hypothesis prove correct or incorrect? How do you explain your results?

-Can you be certain that your results would hold true if you were to replicate your research? Why or why not?

-Do you fear that your results are biased based upon your research sample? Why or why not?
-How do your results compare to those that you found in your literature review?

Note that your conclusion will “look” different based on whether you chose the survey method or conducted interviews. Surveys, being more quantitative, will reveal more numerical data in your conclusion. Interviews, being more quantitative, will reveal more personal, descriptive, and unique data in your conclusion.

When all is said and done, I would like for you to share with the rest of the class what you discovered regarding the pursuit of happiness. The method in which you choose to present your findings is entirely up to you, so long as it is something that pulls everything together and is at once intelligent, cohesive, and scholarly. In preparing your presentation, think about the importance of visuals to further drive home your results.

You will have two weeks (a total of ten (10) days in-class) to conduct your research and prepare your findings to present to your classmates. While this timeline is by no means set in stone, please use this as a guide to make certain you are utilizing your time in class in the best way possible:

Day 1: Formulate research question, state hypothesis, begin review of literature

Day 2: Continue and conclude review of literature

Day 3: Create survey/interview questions

Day 4: Create survey/interview questions—Pilot test with classmates

Day 5: Conclude creation of survey/interview questions

Days 6-10: Testing hypothesis/gathering and analyzing data/drawing conclusions

Presentations will commence following Day 10. Imagine, at the end of this, you may unlock the secret to living a happier, more fulfilling life! This could be your ticket to superstardom and primetime spots on Ellen and Dr. Oz, along with private dinner dates to discuss your findings with everyone from the Dalai Lama to Beyonce! Have fun with this! Know that I am anxiously awaiting your results and that I will be here for you every step of the way as you embark on this fascinating look at humanity. The research portion will be worth 50 points, as will your conclusion, for a total of 100 points. Good luck!
I'm in the pursuit of happiness.