

Experimental Methods in the Social Sciences

HBSDOC 4075

ECON 2042

Spring 2019

Instructor

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Office hours are by appointment, encouraged.

Littauer Center 324 (NB: Not the Littauer at HKS)

Teaching fellow

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Office hours are by appointment, encouraged.

Time and location

Fridays, 1:30-4:10pm (May adjust start time if too difficult to start right at 1:30)

Cumnock 202, except April 5th, when we will meet in Cumnock 230

Summary of the course

This class is an introduction to experimental methods, particularly those developed across the social sciences (e.g. Economics, Psychology, Political Science, and Sociology). We will cover all the steps of an experiment, from design, measurement and randomization, to practical considerations like cost and power analyses. This is mainly a methods course; the experiments we discuss are chosen to give a broad understanding of experimental methods (e.g. lab, field, and online studies, experiments in developing countries, interventions in organizations, and so on). The course is not intended to provide a foundation of famous experimental results overall or for any one topic. The take-away of the course is to develop the ability to design a confound-free experiment regardless of question or context.

Grading and assignments

Students are encouraged to work hard and focus on the aspects of the class they find most useful or helpful. Good grades will follow. Graduate students should not focus on grades.

Grades are a function of three components:

Weekly readings and reflections (24%): Each week, a menu of readings will be posted related to that week's topic. Students are to pick one paper to read and reflect on. Reflections should be between 1-2 pages and take the following form:

1. A discussion of insightful comments related to what the paper did well or poorly, design-wise. Please do not simply repeat the strengths or weaknesses the author(s) point out in the paper; the goal of this exercise is to develop your critical thinking skills around experimental design.

2. Any questions you had when reading the paper, e.g. why did the authors do it this way instead of that, what does this term mean? These questions will help me to understand what to emphasize in class.

The menu of papers will be intentionally interdisciplinary to suit each student's interests. There will be seven such reflection pieces, plus one design exercise (which will be explained at the time).

Final projects (56%): The goal of the class is to be able to design an experiment. To this end, we will do so for our final projects. The idea here is to go through the whole process: identify a question you find interesting that can be investigated using experimental methods and outline how you would attack the problem (specify the broad outline of an experimental design). You will present your idea/design on the last day of class and write up a "research proposal" incorporating feedback from the presentation. The goal here is to come up with a confound-free experimental design that challenges your abilities as a designer. Though you will not be graded on the quality of the research question, better questions will certainly make these projects more interesting and helpful to you. You will meet with us to discuss your ideas and submit a one-page proposal by March 15th; you must get approval for an idea by spring break. You will then review the experimental and empirical literature on the topic (we will help you to identify the relevant research) and design an experiment. There is no final exam for this class – your research proposal is your "final". Written proposals will be between 5 and 10 pages. The length of presentations depends on how many students are in the class. Group projects are allowed.

Attendance and participation (20%): Grades are meant to reflect how much of the course knowledge you have absorbed. Though measuring attendance and participation may feel paternalistic for a graduate school class, being an active member in class is a good measure of how much you are learning. This does not mean talking a lot; it means paying attention, asking questions when you have them, and making comments when they are helpful. If you must miss a class, let us know in advance. We will be lenient on this front.

Tentative Schedule

The schedule below is a moving target. These topics are merely suggestions. Students are encouraged to request topics not on the list. Every year, one or two student-requested topics are added to the list (and one or two were removed with input from students).

Feb 1st

Introduction to experimental methods, the course.

Readings (pick one): None

Feb 8th

Decision-making under risk; decision-making over time

Readings (pick one):

1. Ariely, Dan, and Klaus Wertenbroch. "Procrastination, deadlines, and performance: Self-control by precommitment." *Psychological science* 13.3 (2002): 219-224.
2. Ashraf, Nava, Dean Karlan, and Wesley Yin. "Tying Odysseus to the mast: Evidence from a commitment savings product in the Philippines." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121.2 (2006): 635-672.

Feb 15th

Social preferences, charitable giving, moral decision-making

Readings (pick one):

1. Small, Deborah A. "Reference-dependent sympathy." *Organizational behavior and human decision processes* 112.2 (2010): 151-160
2. Hamman, John R., George Loewenstein, and Roberto A. Weber. "Self-interest through delegation: An additional rationale for the principal-agent relationship." *American Economic Review* 100.4 (2010): 1826-46

Feb 22nd

Discrimination and gender

Readings (pick one):

1. (Will post working paper version) Small, Deborah A., et al. "Who goes to the bargaining table? The influence of gender and framing on the initiation of negotiation." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 93.4 (2007): 600.
2. Correll, Joshua, et al. "The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 83.6 (2002): 1314.
3. Gneezy, Uri, Muriel Niederle, and Aldo Rustichini. "Performance in competitive environments: Gender differences." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118.3 (2003): 1049-1074.

March 1st

Experiments in developing countries

Readings: None. Will distribute a design exercise for this week.

March 8th

Guest speaker [Mattie Toma](#), the psychology of scarcity, and environmental influences on poverty

Readings (pick one):

1. Schilbach, F. Schofield, H. Mullainathan, S. (2016). "The Psychological Lives of the Poor," *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*. 106(5): 435-440.)
2. Shah, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E. (2012). "Some Consequences of Having Too Little," *Science*. 338(6107): 682-685

Mar 15th

Guest speaker [Ben Enke](#), measuring preferences around the globe

Readings: None. Make sure your final project idea is approved by either Lucas or Mattie.

Mar 29th

Recruiting, retaining, and motivating employees

Readings (pick one):

1. Gneezy, Uri, and Aldo Rustichini. "Pay enough or don't pay at all." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115.3 (2000): 791-810.
2. Lepper, Mark R., David Greene, and Richard E. Nisbett. "Undermining children's intrinsic interest with extrinsic reward: A test of the 'overjustification' hypothesis." *Journal of Personality and social Psychology* 28.1 (1973): 129.

Apr 5th

****Class meets in Cumnock 230 this date only****

Guest speaker [Michael Faye](#) (Give Directly), cash versus in-kind transfers

Readings (pick one):

1. Schroeder, Juliana, Adam Waytz, and Nicholas Epley. "Endorsing help for others that you oppose for yourself: Mind perception alters the perceived effectiveness of paternalism." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 146.8 (2017): 1106.
2. Haushofer, Johannes, and Jeremy Shapiro. "The short-term impact of unconditional cash transfers to the poor: experimental evidence from Kenya." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131.4 (2016): 1973-2042

Apr 12th

Nudges

Readings (pick one):

1. Milkman, Katherine L., et al. "Using implementation intentions prompts to enhance influenza vaccination rates." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108.26 (2011): 10415-10420.
2. Bertrand, Marianne, et al. "What's advertising content worth? Evidence from a consumer credit marketing field experiment." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 125.1 (2010): 263-306.

Apr 19th

Student presentations