

Investigating the Social World

Dr Chao-Yo Cheng



Lecture 1: Welcome to Investigating the Social World



#OwS



Today's plan

- ▶ Introduction: Welcome to the club
 - Module organization
 - Weekly syllabus and roadmap
 - Assessment
 - Student support
 - Ground rules and tips
 - Tell us more about you
- ▶ Discussion: What makes "good" social science research?
- ▶ Conclusion: "Investigating the social world as a vocation"



Module organization



- ▶ When: Every Wednesday, 6-9pm
- ▶ Where: Room 210, Birkbeck Central
- ▶ Meeting formats
 - In-person or recorded lectures
 - Seminar discussions: In-person; remote participation is possible for students on *online* or *flexible* routes



Weekly syllabus and roadmap

► Weeks 1-5: Varieties of social research (Dr Chao-Yo Cheng)

- What makes good social research
- Theory in social research
- Epistemology and theory-empirics alignment
- Using numbers to study the social world
- Comparative and intl research

► Weeks 6-10: Theorising the social world (Dr Margarita Aragon)

- Knowledge production about the social world
- Psychosocial framing
- Intersectional sensibilities
- Situating lived experience
- More-than-human worlds



Assessment

- ▶ Critical methodological review (40%)
- ▶ Analytical essay (60%)



Assessment

- ▶ Critical methodological review (40%)
 - Examine a published **peer-reviewed** article
 - Answer **three** questions; write up to **500 words** (max) for each response
 - More will be discussed in **Week 5**
 - Due on **April 2, 2026**
- ▶ Analytical essay (60%)



Assessment

- ▶ Critical mmethodological review (40%)
- ▶ Analytical essay (60%)
 - Write a 2,500-word essay
 - More will be discussed in **Week 6**
 - Due on **April 22, 2026**



Is the module right for you?

- ▶ MSc/PgDip Social Research: Complete the transition from methods technicians to informed social researchers
- ▶ MA Sociology (or Psychosocial Studies): Learn more about more possibilities of social sciences research
- ▶ All other subject areas: Introduce you to the study of social sciences



Student support



Module convenor

- ▶ Office hours (Friday 2-4pm)
- ▶ c.cheng@bbk.ac.uk

Module administration

- ▶ Ask (<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/ask>)
- ▶ fhss-edu-sss@bbk.ac.uk

Student Services



STUDENT SERVICES

Birkbeck administrative and support services offer the [highest levels of service and accessibility](#).

When you enrol as a student at Birkbeck you become a [member of our uniquely diverse community](#), which has been committed to fostering inclusion, excellence, learning and growth for more than 200 years.



WELCOME TO STUDENT SERVICES

At Birkbeck, we have a range of student services support to help you during your studies. Student Services is the place to go for support and information. Our student advisors are here to help you - whether it's money matters, wellbeing, careers or general advice.

[FIND OUT HOW TO ENROL](#)

<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/student-services>



Ground rules and tips

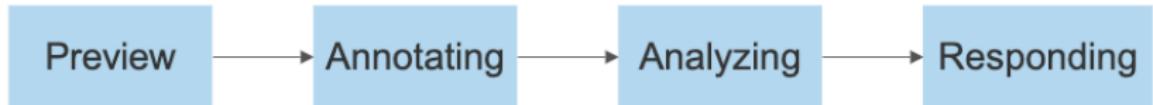
- ▶ **Active learning:** We embrace *interactive* learning; come to in-person seminars/tutorials, having watched the lecture videos and completed the readings for the week
- ▶ **Stability with flexibility:** We aim for stability, but acknowledge the need for flexibility
- ▶ **Good communication:** We want to make this *fantastic*; please be your own best advocate and give us feedback and constructive suggestions
- ▶ **Safety:** We all want to keep you safe during your year at Birkbeck but need to work collaboratively with you to make that happen



Strategic/deep reading in social sciences

- ▶ Know why you are reading (see the topic statement of each week)
 - Read the weekly description carefully
 - Skim first before you dive in
 - Pay attention to the big picture
 - Find the key information and read closely
 - Formulate your response and views
 - Know there is always more to read (e.g., further readings)
- ▶ Build and use your support system





- ▶ **Preview:** Get as much information about the reading before you actually read it
- ▶ **Annotating:** Read with a pencil and making notes as you read
- ▶ **Analyzing:** Break the reading apart to see how different parts relate to each other
- ▶ **Responding:** Think again how the reading relates the topic of each week; come up with questions



- ▶ Know why you are reading
- ▶ Build and use your support system
 - Study Skills workshops and online tutorials
 - Personal/module tutor office hours
 - Study clubs



STUDY SKILLS

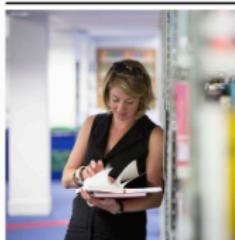
We offer online and face-to-face advice, guidance and support to help all Birkbeck students develop the study skills they need for academic success at university. This includes:

- Study skills resources, including interactive guides, videos and recordings of past workshops in the [Study Skills Moodle module](#).
- Live [study skills workshops](#) which are offered multiple times a week during term time. There are many different topics, they are always free and you can attend as many as you wish.
- Specialist, subject-based help via our [Learning Development Tutors and resources](#).
- Access to personalised writing feedback and online tutoring via [Turnitin Draft Coach](#) via Office365 - [learn more in this Moodle module](#).

CONTACT US

If you would like further information or advice about study skills, please contact the [Student Advice Service](#) or [raise a query](#) on Birkbeck's 'Ask' system.

If you would like further information or advice about subject-specific study skills or library services, please [contact our dedicated subject-specific tutors](#).



OUR SUPPORT

Studying in the evening at Birkbeck presents many opportunities and challenges, so we offer a range of support mechanisms both before you begin and during your course.

STUDY SKILLS WORKSHOPS

We offer workshops throughout the year to help you develop your academic skills.

TURNITIN DRAFT COACH

Find out more about the new online writing tool that will help you improve your assignments.

ONLINE TUTORIALS

We offer a range of online resources to help you study effectively and fulfil your potential.



Breaking the ice: Humanities and social sciences in crisis

- ▶ Social sciences as "pseudoscience?"
- ▶ Debates over epistemological positions: Constructivism versus positivism
- ▶ "Methodology:" Qualitative v quantitative? Or even computational?
- ▶ Identity and representation: How do you introduce yourself as a social researcher? How does "who you are" matter?
- ▶ Replication, transparency and "open" social sciences



	Economics	Politics	Sociology	Social Anthropology
What is reality?	One reality exists; reality is <i>independent</i> of our thoughts; what is observable is real	One reality exists. reality is <i>independent</i> of our thoughts	One reality exists; reality is <i>independent</i> of our thoughts, but much of reality is unobservable	There are <i>different</i> realities associated with different standpoints and cultures
Goal of enquiry?	Acquisition of a <i>single</i> truth -- a universal, general law	We can establish truths or <i>generalizations</i> about human beings	Truth needs to be understood in terms of <i>practical adequacy</i>	<i>Interpretation</i> of local meanings; there is <i>no universal truth</i>
How are the researcher (you) and the "researched" related?	The researcher is <i>objective</i> and is <i>independent</i> of the "researched"	The researcher is <i>subjective</i> and is <i>not independent</i> of the "researched"	The researcher is <i>subjective</i> and is <i>not independent</i> of the "researched"	The researcher is <i>subjective</i> and is <i>not independent</i> of the "researched"



Positivist

Constructivist



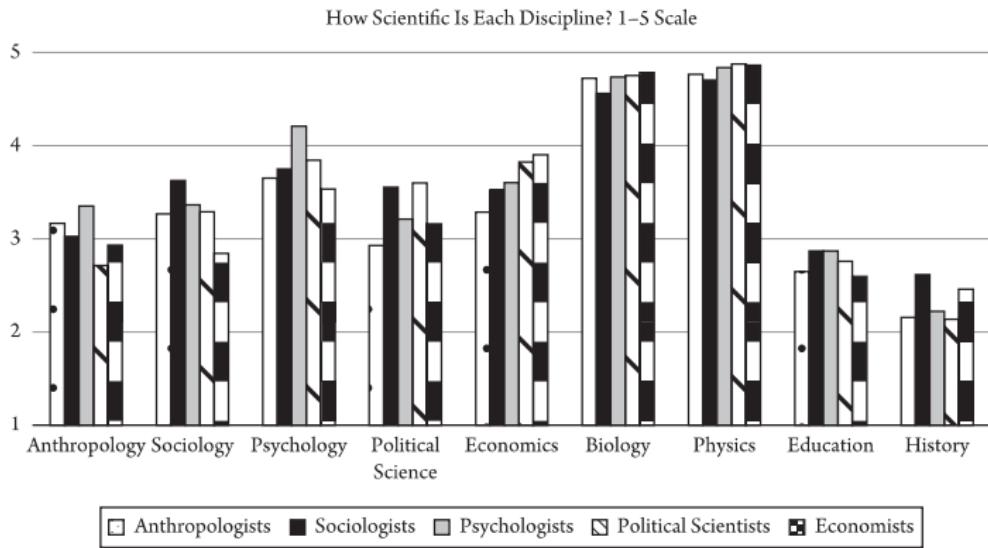


Figure 1.1 Social Scientists’ Ratings of Whether Disciplines Are Scientific. Data from the author’s 2020 survey of social scientists at major US research universities. n=1,141.



Table 1.1 A Catalog of Social Science Biases

		<i>Threat</i>	<i>Strategy to Address</i>	<i>Capacity to Address</i>
Individual Diversity	Demographic Biases	Limited topics and interpretations	Diversification and listening	Strong and increasing
	Geographic Biases	Limited generalization	Globalization, cross-cultural comparison	Increasing; differs by discipline
	Political Biases	Limited goals and interpretations	Empathetic recognition and sensitivity	Decreasing; recognition increasing
Scientific Practice	Methodological Biases	Incorrect findings and interpretations	Reproducibility reforms; empiricism	Strong and increasing
	Disciplinary Biases	Incomplete coverage; non-integration	Interdisciplinary research; team science	Strong and increasing
	Institutional Biases	Limited goals and topics; translation	Reform of evaluation and rewards	Strong
Innate Difficulties	Temporal Biases	Limited generalization	Long time horizons; historical data	Increasing, inherently limited
	Cognitive Biases	Confirmation bias; non-cumulation	Reproducibility reforms; meta-science studies	Increasing, inherently limited
	Application Biases	Limited goals and topics; translation	Learning from history; tracking basic science	Inherently limited



Concluding remarks (for now): Investigating the social world as a vocation

- ▶ ISW is a special module, reflecting on the production of "valid" knowledge about the social world
 - You need to know what you do and how to explain the objectives of your scholarly inquiry;
 - You need to know how to tell the differences between different objectives and engage other researchers' work constructively and effectively.
- ▶ Social research involves a series of careful thinking about ontology/epistemology, theory-building, and methodology
 - **Reveal nuances of the real world:** constructivism; theory as approach; interpretation; qualitative; inductive/abductive
 - **Search for the "ultimate" truth:** positivism; theory as paradigm; explanation; quantitative; deductive
- ▶ Paradigm shift and innovations: Boundaries are constantly being contested and redefined



The 2010s featured a lot of great social science. Here are my 12 favorite studies.

What economists, political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers taught me about the world in the 2010s.

by Dylan Matthews

Dec 23, 2019, 2:00 PM GMT



An artistic representation of diverse human minds of the kind studied in the social sciences. Getty Images



Discussion

- ▶ Which one of the 12 studies is your favorite, why?
- ▶ What makes a social science research important? What makes a "good" social research?
- ▶ We are now the fifth year into the 2020s, what are some of the topics that should (and can) be addressed by social researchers?



Next week: Theory comes to rescue

Simon Sinek: What Game Theory Teaches Us About War



- ▶ Have you taken any module with "theory" in the title?
- ▶ What is the most important/famous theory in your subject area? And what makes it important/famous?
- ▶ What is your main takeaway from the TED Talk by Simon Sinek? Do you "like" what you hear (and does this matter)? Is there really a "theory" in the talk?



Thank you!



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