Student Review: Kyle Chan

Empirical Seminar, Spring 2016

Princeton University, Department of Sociology

The Empirical Seminar is a year-long course during which students are expected to conceive of a quantitative research study and execute all phases of that study; at the end of the year, they are expected to have completed a near-publishable paper that uses statistical methods to answer a question of significant sociological importance. By the beginning of the Spring semester, students were expected to have submitted an NIH style proposal on which we performed peer reviews. Most of the Spring was spent workshopping analysis as students dug into their data analysis. We spend the entire semester refining statistical models and talking about how to frame the analysis in an iterative manner (while keeping in mind that we want to keep track of our hypotheses so we are not accused of just data mining). We then paired up to perform replication of each other’s code/analysis. Next we practiced presenting our findings, receiving feedback for revision of models and learning nuts and bolts issues like how to treat missing data, which kind of sensitivity analyses to run and so on. The class ended with a final round of feedback leading to the lightning talks in May. We had intended to have a workshop devoted to writing up a press release for our papers / opeds, but we ran out of time and will try to get back to that in a workshop in the beginning of September. Unlike in prior iterations of the Empirical Seminar, paper drafts were left to the very end, once the final models and results were settled.

Kyle, in the context of these expectations, you performed very well. You imported a statistical technique from biology/genetics into sociology, which itself is very innovative. The approach you take to studying country-level economic development patterns was also very creative. Once you let go of the “distance from hegemon” approach (and traditional regression framework), everything seemed to fall into place. Your paper is very close to submission quality. I was super impressed. Along with this document I am attaching your paper, marked up with some minor suggestions for improvement. If reviewers buy your basic approach, I think you can then move on to testing other factors (like genetic distance) using the same basic approach. I would urge you to share it with a couple of folks whom you cite and aim for submitting it to a top journal by the end of the summer. I am happy to talk about who might give you go feedback and use my social capital to try to help make that happen. Bravo.

