Foundations of Social Science Research: CPT898

Introduction to the module

Module Leaders

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Foundations

Module description

- This module considers the relationship between the dominant philosophical perspectives which inform social science research and the practice of doing social science research.

- It provides the foundations for learning about social science research by enabling students to justify and explain their own epistemological choices. The module highlights how these choices impact upon questions of research design and method.

- The module introduces philosophical/theoretical concepts alongside practical issues of research method choice and design.

Context of the module

- Introduction to philosophical background for research in the social sciences and the practicalities of doing different types of research

- Reflect upon epistemological choices and constraints and methodological consequences

- Encourage smart working; cross-curricular learning, read and write efficiently; teaching and learning driven by assessment

Organisation of module

Part 1: weeks 1-5

- Lectures + seminars: Philosophical contexts (CG)
    - Big ideas, big debates
    - Objectivity and subjectivity
    - Structure, causation and agency

Organisation of module (cont. 1)

Part 2: weeks 6-11

- Lectures + seminars: Methodological consequences (NB)

  - Getting started
  - Research Designs
  - Ethics & Politics in Research

Organisation of module (cont. 2)

Week 6

- Students are required to engage in a formative exercise submitting a completed draft pro-forma and giving and receiving peer feedback.

Supporting Seminars

- Will take place in weeks three, four, nine and ten.
- Students will be divided into four groups.
- More details will be provided in week 2.

Assessment

Formative Activity
- In-class peer review exercise (03/11/16)
- Drop in session with tutors (05/01/17)

Summative Assessment
- Pro-forma (09/11/16) (30%)
- Essay (11/01/17) (70%)

Summative Assessment 1: Practicalities

- Complete Pro-forma with text boxes
- Submission date: 09/11/16
- Word length: 1000 words maximum (excluding references)
- Weighting: 30%
- Submit via Learning Central

Summative Assessment 1: Task

- Identify a research question (100 words)
- Locate that research within a field of study (150 words)
- Identify and explain an epistemological perspective used in the social sciences (1) (150 words)
- Identify and explain an epistemological perspective used in the social sciences (2) (150 words)
- Demonstrate how perspective (1) has been used in your field (150 words)
- Demonstrate how perspective (2) has been used in your field (150 words)
- Select and justify an epistemological framework for your research question (150 words)

CPT 898: Summative Assessment 1.

1   Identify a research question (50 WORDS MAXIMUM)

`1`

- In what ways do migrants as both local and transnational actors participate in the (re)production of Cardiff as a cosmopolitan city?
- How do their everyday practices contribute to the material/immaterial constitution and transformation of urban places/public space in Cardiff?

`Good`

2   Locate the research within a field of study (100 WORDS MAXIMUM)

`Good`

Inspired by emerging research agenda in migration studies which aims at overcoming methodological nationalism and assimilationist perspective of mainstream migration research by drawing on:

- sociological/anthropological research on migration and transnationalism &
- human geography/urban studies research on urban transformations and spatialities.
  (most notably Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009; Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2011)

`Good`

Based on idea that 'ethnic/cultural diversity' has become a desirable and marketable asset of cities in global competition for investments in new economies

- → relationship between migrants and globalising cities vital but often overlooked, undertheorised

`Support`

- → gap in research: How do places become 'cosmopolitan' and in what ways do migrants participate in such urban transformations?

3   Identify and explain an epistemological perspective used in the social sciences (1) (125 WORDS MAXIMUM)

Positivism

No unified position in social theory and philosophy but generally accepted characteristics:

- modelled on natural sciences: social sciences aim at 'discovering' universal laws, cause-and-effect relationships (explanations, predictions) `Excellent`
- based on fundamental idea that (one) reality exists 'out there', independently of subjects' interpretations and value systems `Excellent`
- knowledge can be obtained about social world via our senses and by using instruments to test hypotheses through observations, measurements `Good`
- 'objectivity' serves as main standard of knowing: use of standardised methods of data 'collection' and analysis by detached researcher

⇔ widely criticized by various schools of thought (e.g. feminist, postmodern, postcolonial theorists, critical theory): (implicit) embeddedness and role of (positivist) social science in wider political and moral projects, thus questioning its absolute truth claim `Excellent`

(May 2001, pp. 9-10; Hunter 2002, pp.121-123 ; Guba and Lincoln 2005; Flick 2009, pp. 13-14) `Excellent`

4   Identify and explain an epistemological perspective used in the social sciences (2) (125 WORDS MAXIMUM)

Social constructionism

Encompasses various perspectives but generally accepted characteristics:

- based on idea that social world is achieved by sense- and meaning-making activities and interactions of groups and individuals; `Excellent`
- conceives of reality as varied and situated in time, place and context `Good`
- social sciences aim at understanding and reconstructing perspectives of research subjects, practical logic of their actions, and processes by which reality/realities are being co-produced `Support` `Excellent`
- reflexivity serves as main standard of knowing: researcher always already immersed in social world(s) she studies, so necessary to make explicit and reflect on researcher's identities, values, presumptions, and on the limitations and effects of findings

⇔ critiqued as unscientific, relativist, subjectivist, avoiding questions of how to justify prioritising researcher's knowledge over that of those studied `Excellent`

(May 2001, pp. 13-15; Guba and Lincoln 2005; Baert et al. 2011, pp. 479-484)

5   Demonstrate how perspective 1 (Box 3) has been used in your field (150 WORDS MAXIMUM)

Note: epistemological foundations of migration research in/across different disciplines are rarely made explicit => some scholars identify this as a gap in research (Gans 2000; Morawska 2003; Bommes and Morawska 2005, p.4) `Excellent`

Positivist epistemology used in various strands of migration research, e.g.:

- studies of population movements such as Ravenstein's elaboration of 11 general "Laws of Migration", a study of 19th century migration in Britain based on statistical analysis of British censuses 1871 and 1881 (cited in King 2012, p. 138-139); or quantitative studies based on Lee's (1966) push- and pull-model aiming at explaining (international) migration patterns (e.g. Borjas' study (1999) which empirically tested the hypothesis whether differences in welfare benefits in various US states influenced migrants' location choice once in the USA) `Excellent`
- quantitative 'neo-assimilationist' research of migrants' integration in host country, e.g. Constant and Massey's (2003) study on migrant groups' earnings and occupational progress in German labour market over time, based on German socioeconomic panel data `Excellent`

6   Demonstrate how perspective 2 (Box 4) has been used in your field (150 WORDS MAXIMUM)

Social constructionism increasingly influential in migration research which places emphasis on migrants' perspectives and lived experience. e.g.:

- biographical studies such as Breckner's (2000) study on migration experiences of Romanian migrants in post-WWII Germany reconstructs from the life stories of her informants the meaning of national belonging and borders in the specific context of the ideological divide during the Cold War, while also critically reflecting on the limitations of her research; or Rosenthal and Koettig's (2009) biographical studies on migrants' constructions and transformations of collective belonging

  Excellent

  Excellent

- other kinds of interpretive, qualitative research such as Elliott and Gillie's (1998) analysis of Fijian migrant women's everyday life experiences of health and health services in Canada in order to understand links between perceived health status and migration experiences; also, the study inductively develops concepts as they emerge from the data

  Excellent

7   Select and justify an epistemological framework for your research question (100 WORDS MAXIMUM)

This research project adopts a social constructionist perspective because:

- the research questions do not aim at developing causal explanations involving independent/dependent variables nor at making predictions

  Good

- the project's main interest lies in exploring in-depth the complex processes by which a place is perceived, interpreted, and co-produced as cosmopolitan by various actors (migrants but also non-migrants, city planners etc.), their practices and imaginations of Cardiff

  Good

- the research aims at specifying the meaning(s) of 'cosmopolitanism' as it/they emerge/s from the perspectives of the research informants, rather than defining the term a priori and trying to operationalise it

  Good

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Summative Assessment 2: Practicalities

Essay

- Submission date: 11/01/17

- Word length: 3000 words

- Weighting: 70%
- Submit via Learning Central

Summative Assessment 2: Task

You are required to write an essay in which you:

- Identify a research question within a clearly defined field of research;

- Explain the epistemological approach to be taken in the research;

- Explain the design of your research and the impact of your epistemological approach in your choices;

- Explain how your research will address issues of reliability, validity and ethics.

Further information

- For aims and objectives, timetable, suggested further reading etc. please refer to Learning Central and to module descriptions handbook.

- Assessment guidance and additional supporting material including lecture slides will be added on a regular basis.