METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

with

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Course Description and Overview

Social statistics were developed - in large part - to measure and study race and racialized population groups. Amidst the great eugenics debates of the early 20th century, interest in social statistics grew exponentially as social scientists sought to demarcate racial groups and to assess differences between human population groups so specified. Although interest in social statistics was initially closely tethered to the study of race and social stratification; today, most social scientists study these topics separately. As a result, best practices in social statistics are often blind to race and ethnicity and students of race and ethnicity are often uninterested in statistics. This course will develop quantitative researchers that give greater, more careful and keen consideration to how race and ethnicity fit in their statistical models and race and ethnicity scholars with a greater ability to understand, critique and use quantitative methods. In order to achieve these goals, the course is mostly conceptual and participants are strongly recommended to have had one of each of the following courses prior to attendance: a basic course in race and ethnicity, a graduate level course in research methods and a graduate level course in social statistics. For those interested in a more focused study of quantitative methodologies, participants are encouraged to dual enroll in one of the many training courses offered at the ICPSR Summer Program (http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/sumprog/).

Over the course of four weeks, the course will cover four broad topic areas of particular interest to social scientists, interested in race, ethnicity and statistics. The first week focuses on key concepts and includes a special session on race, ethnicity and research ethics. The first day focuses on debates concerning the conceptualization of race and ethnicity. Are these concepts the same? If not, how and why might they be different? Does it really matter? The second day focuses on developing an understanding of ethnogenesis, racialization and race making as key concepts for those interested in the study of race and ethnicity. How and why are racial and/or ethnic groups created? What is their function in Western societies? The third day focuses on parsing different conceptualizations of prejudice and discrimination. There is a long history of studying prejudice in the social sciences. We review arguments concerning the primary motivation for inter-group ‘ethno-racial’ prejudice? Although there is also a long history of concern with discrimination in the social sciences, best practices for the empirical investigation of discrimination, from the perspective of those who are targeted, are still forthcoming. How is discrimination experienced and best conceptualized? The fourth day focuses on understanding inequality and stratification. How are these concepts related and different? Finally, we consider different theoretical models for conceptualizing racial orders. What groups exist and how are they...
arranged relative to one another? How does this vary over time and various levels of geopolitical space?

The second week moves from conceptualization to operationalization. It begins with a conversation on the different ways in which social scientists measure race. The first day will review various methods for measuring race, ranging from self-reports of racial identity to measures of genetic ancestry. The next day focuses on how social scientists operationalize race and ethnicity in multivariate statistical models. How are race and/or ethnicity operating in our investigations? Are they present? Should they be present? Are they an independent variable or an outcome? Are they moderating or mediating a particular statistical relationship? We then shift our attention to the various measures of social inequality. How do we know when disparity is present? We will review the strengths and limitations of a range of such measures, from mean differences to more complex measures of segregation and social network distance. There is a great debate concerning how we might best measure prejudice. Given our course debates concerning the nature of prejudice, how do we measure it using quantitative methodologies? The course devotes an entire day to reviewing and debating the most prominent measures and best practices in the study of prejudice. After gaining greater clarity on the measure of prejudice, we then consider the other side: best practices in the measurement of discrimination in the social sciences. Surprisingly, this is a topic that remains in its infancy, especially when compared to the study of prejudice.

After exploring these core issues, participants will be guided through their implications for research design and data collection. The third week is ideal for participants at the early stages of a new study but is also useful for those already analyzing previously collected data. How do we take race and ethnicity into account when planning our studies? Were these issues adequately and appropriately considered during the creation of our secondary datasets? This week will review strategies associated with both traditional and emerging methods for collecting quantitative data. Although it reviews methods, it is largely focused on ideas and moves the student toward an expanded perspective on what is both important and possible in the areas of design and collection. It begins with a review of strategies to optimize (and maybe achieve) questionnaires and scales with construct invariance between racial and ethnic groups. Are the same questions always the same? Should we expect universal social constructs? We then transition to unique issues facing researchers conducting social surveys and experiments. Are all sampling frames created equal? How important is complex survey design? Does population representation matter in our social experiments? There are also new and emerging quantitative data sources and methods. How might quantitative researchers interested in race and ethnicity employ and/or incorporate big data and agent-based modeling in their study design and statistical method? Let’s think outside the box!

The final week focuses on statistical analysis and inference. Although this course is designed to challenge participants’ current thinking in these areas, it also seeks to provide practical guidance in best practices. Therefore, we begin the final week reviewing the history and limitations associated with using social statistics to study racial and ethnic groups. Although many of these issues will have been touched upon prior, these discussions will consolidate our understanding and focus on pragmatic solutions that are mindful of limitations, specific to the study of race and ethnicity. The course dedicates three days to a largely conceptual review of a wide range of statistical techniques – e.g., interactions, multivariate decomposition, propensity score analysis and structural equation modeling. We will also review the availability of various datasets – housed at ICPSR – that reflect best practices in data collection and design and that are best suited for studying various issues related to race and ethnicity.