PPOL 5160 Evidence in Public Policy  
Spring 2024  

SYLLABUS

Time and Venue
Section 1: Monday 10:30AM-1:20PM LSK1032  
Section 2: Tuesday 10:30AM-1:20PM 2032

Instructor Raul P. Lejano, Division of Public Policy  lejano@ust.hk  
Office hours Monday, Tuesday 9-10:15 am (Room 4350, lift 17/18 or, alternatively, by Zoom)

Teaching Assistant  
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Course Description  
Policy analysis and formulation can involve some degree of applied research, in order to answer questions or solve problems encountered in the policy arena. This course introduces students to the basic concepts and methodologies of social science research and their applications to public policy research. The course focuses on the development of students’ professional skills in research design, data collection techniques, data analysis, and presentation of research findings. Another benefit of the instruction is that of enhancing the student's ability to read, comprehend, and utilize relevant research literature. Along with basic readings on research design and implementation, a number of public policy articles will be taken up, each illustrating the application of concepts and approaches taken up in class. In-class exercises in real time policy analysis will be conducted each week.

Course Objectives
This core course seeks to  
1) familiarize students with key research methodologies commonly used in public policy research;  
2) enable students to formulate a general research strategy for a given policy problem;  
3) enable students to design and implement field work or program evaluation for policy research;  
4) improve students’ ability to comprehend and utilize research literature relevant to their field(s) of interest.  
5) deepen students’ understanding of the role of evidence in policymaking.  
6) instil skills in critical thinking and dispel notions of policy analysis as simply a methodological exercise.

Textbooks

Additional Texts

Plus: select journal articles.  

Important note: Readings assigned for a certain class meeting are meant to be read before the meeting. So being, it is important to come to class already having done the readings for that day.
Assessment

Assignments (2)  25%
Group Project (due May 17)  25%
Final Exam (May 25)  30%
Attendance/Professionalism/Participation  20%

Specs on the assignments, group project, and final will be handed out in class. At some points in the class, we will refer to public data sources. An example of open data can be found at https://data.gov.hk/en/

Schedule and Readings

Week 1.  Introduction (Policy questions, empiricism in policy, cases) 
Feb. 5, 6
What types of questions arise in policy work? How do these questions translate into research projects? What examples of policy questions can we generate around topics of interest to us?

Readings: Lejano, Section 1 (Introduction)
Rassel et al., Ch. 1 (Beginning a Research Project)

Week 2.  Lunar New Year Break  Week of Feb. 12

Week 3.  Structuring the Investigation (Quantitative/Qualitative approaches, program evaluation) 
Feb. 19, 20
What are the differences between quantitative and qualitative research approaches (in terms of data and methodology)? Why and in what situations would we turn to one or the other (or both)? In taking up these questions, we also discuss the turn towards empiricism and evidence in policy (versus the purely ideological).

Readings: Lejano, Ch. 1 (Origins of the Classical Model)
Rassel et al., Ch. 2 (Research Designs for Description)
Rassel et al., Ch. 3 (Research Designs for Explanation)
Lejano, Ch. 9 (Experience)

Week 4.  Study Design and Quantitative Data-Gathering (Survey design, experimental design, data collection) 
Feb. 26, 27
We discuss how to design data collection, with specific attention to designing (and testing) a quantitative survey. Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and other designs are discussed (e.g., case-control versus pre-post comparisons). We also discuss relevant issues around sample size, the ethics of human (and nonhuman) subjects research, and community engagement.

Readings: Rassel et al., Ch. 5 (Sampling)
Rassel et al., Ch. 7 (Collecting Data with Questions and Questionnaires)
Having collected the data, how do we go about analyzing it? What use are tests of significance and how do we conduct them? We will, in small groups, gain experience with some of these analytical methods, using Excel (alternatively, STATA) using data from the in-class survey conducted last week (online). We will also discuss a research article that utilizes some of these methods.

Readings: Rassel et al., Ch. 12 (Examining Relationships Between Variables)

Week 6. Quantitative Data Analysis: Correlating Variables, Model Generation March 11, 12 (regression analysis)
Why and when would we use regression analysis, instead of the methods discussed previously? How do we conduct and interpret regression analyses? How can we use regression equations to build simply policy models? We will, in small groups, gain experience with regression analysis using the in-class survey data. We will also discuss a research article that revolves around linear regression (and its variants).

Readings: Rassel et al., Ch. 14 (Regression and Correlation)

Week 7. Quantitative Program Evaluation March 18, 19
Another common type of policy research involves program evaluation --i.e., determining the effectiveness and other effects of a policy or program. We discuss how program evaluation is often designed, how to use program theories in research design, and how some data analyses are conducted. We discuss a research article that illustrates program evaluation in practice.

Readings: Weiss, Ch. 3 (Understanding the Program)
          Lejano, Ch. 6 (Critique)
          Leung, S. et al. (2003). Process and Outcome Evaluation of the Positive Parenting Programme in Hong Kong, HK SAR Govt.

Week 8. Qualitative Data Gathering March 25, 26
There is a problem with solely relying on positivistic evidence. Consequently, we take a turn toward the qualitative, with some focus on interpretive analysis. What policy questions demand a qualitative approach, and how does study design differ (compared to the quantitative approach)? We pay particular attention to designing and conducting interviews. In small groups, we will design and implement short interviews (with some group members interviewing others in the group). Transcripts of the interviews will be analyzed in class the following week.

Readings: Lejano, Ch. 4 (Postpositivism)
          Kvale, Ch. 6 (Thematizing and designing an interview study)
          Kvale, Ch. 7 (Conducting an interview)

Week 9. Mid-Term Break Week of April 1
Week 10. Qualitative Data Analysis (April 8, 9)
(Thematic analysis, textual and narrative analysis)
Having collected the data (which often consists of text), how do we go about analyzing it? We pay special attention to the use of thematic analysis and, parallel to this, narrative analysis. We also discuss a research article revolving around interview data. In small groups, we will analyze interview transcripts from the in-class interview exercise done previously.

Readings:
- Lejano and Kan (2024). Ch. 1 (Why interpret?)
- Lejano and Kan (2024). Ch. 3 (How to interpret)
- Saldaña, Ch. 3 (First cycle coding methods)

Week 11. Qualitative Analysis: Building Theory with Data (April 15, 16)
Another important function of the policy researcher is to theorize about a policy phenomenon with the aim of better explaining what is going right, wrong, or otherwise with a certain policy, and to simply understand policy situations in a deeper way. This week, we apply ideas from critical theory, dialectics, and phenomenology to interpret a policy situation (especially in cases where we have evidence to support our interpretation). One mode of theorizing involves applying social theory to explain policy phenomena, and another is to use policy observations to build a working theory-in-practice of what is going on.

Readings:
- Lejano and Kan (2022), excerpt.

Week 12. Mixed-Methods Analysis (April 22, 23)
(Case study research)
Some research endeavours naturally bring both qualitative and quantitative data to the fore. This is often the case in case study research. How do we integrate different types of evidence in case study analysis, how do we use them to triangulate toward policy findings? We discuss a research article based on case study analysis.

Readings:
- Yin, Ch. 4 (Conducting Case Studies: Collecting the Evidence)
- Yin, Ch. 5 (Analyzing Case Study Evidence)

Week 13. Advanced Topics

Difference-in-difference Testing (guest speaker: Xiatong Li) (April 29)

Reading: Hiro Ishise et al., Empirical Research Design for Public Policy School Students: How to Conduct Policy Evaluations with Difference-in-differences Estimation

Grounded Theory (guest speaker: Wichanon Jamwutthipreecha) (April 20)

Readings:
Week 14.  Group Presentations        May 6, 7

Group Reports Due (by email)        May 17

Finals       (Location: LTC, 12:30-2 pm)        May 25