

# THE HELLER SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

## HS 324A: Social Experimentation in Child, Youth and Family Policymaking

Fall 2018

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, PhD, MPA-URP    Day(s) of Class, time: Mondays, 9:00-11:50am  
Office Number: Heller 364                      Location of Class: G54  
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Office Hours: Mondays, 4:00-5:30pm  
(or by appointment)

**Course Description:** The goal of the course is to build the skills necessary to critically assess the policy content, design, results and recommendations of (quasi) experimental research that examines the effects of social policies aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable children, youth and families. The focus is on providing a graduate-level introduction to the use of social experimentation methods in policy research. We examine four substantive policy areas as case studies: (1) early childhood education; (2) income incentives and supplements; (3) home visitation programs; and (4) housing mobility. While we will cover the five basic elements of social experiments (see below under course objectives) in all the case studies, we will have a special emphasis for each of them, for example, policy relevance of control and treatment groups, implementation issues (e.g. how to make random assignment work), actual policy impact etc. The special topic for each class is noted in the class schedule. We will examine social experiments from the United States as well as from other (developed and developing) countries.

There are no pre-requisites for this course. The content and format are geared towards students interested in academic and non-academic social policy research. Both doctoral and master's students are welcome.

### Course Objectives:

At the completion of the course, you will be able to:

- 1) Demonstrate a basic understanding of five basic elements of social experiments: research questions, experimental design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results.
- 2) Describe how to design experimental studies to assess the effects of social policies, carry them out, and analyze the data they yield.
- 3) Apply your understanding of the subject to real examples from social policy experiments and social science research.

4) Discuss the possibilities for and barriers to translating social experimentation research into actual policies (e.g. political factors, scaling, cost).

## **Course Requirements:**

### **Class Participation**

It is essential that you complete the required reading and any additional class preparation activities before class so that we can have an informed class discussion. Active learning through class participation and discussion are an essential component of the course. Students are expected to attend and participate in all classes. **Class participation should be informed by the required readings for each session.**

**Attendance policy:** You should attend at least eleven of the thirteen sessions. Please let me know via e-mail if you will be missing class.

### **Written Assignments**

Mid-term: in-class, critical review of the methods and policy recommendations of a policy research paper or policy report (**October 22**).

A non-comprehensive systematic review of the research evidence in a policy area of your choice comparing the non-experimental (3-5 studies) and experimental evidence (3-5 studies) due on **November 12**.

A non-comprehensive review of evidence reviews (e.g., meta analyses or comprehensive systematic reviews) in a policy area of your choice due on **December 10**.

### **Class preparation activities**

Many of the sessions will require a class preparation activity (e.g., watching a video, exploring online tools such as evidence databases) and reflecting on that activity either in a written form (short format, e.g., 1-2 pages) or making a short presentation to the class.

I will provide a short memo with instructions for the respective activity at least five days prior to the class when we will use it.

Your participation grade will reflect how carefully and thoughtfully you have engaged in class preparation.

### **Grading Criteria**

Your final grade will be based on:

Regular class participation including engaged attendance, participation in class discussions informed by the assigned readings, and active class preparation and class exercises (Note: often these exercises will be started or completed prior to class): 25%

In-class policy review (mid-term): 25%

Non-comprehensive systematic review: 25%

Non-comprehensive review of reviews: 25%

**Late assignments:** The grade on any assignment will be reduced by five points for each day the assignment is late, unless an extension based on a well justified need for additional time has been agreed upon between the student and the instructor.

**Attendance:** The final grade will be reduced by five points for each unjustified absence.

### **Additional Information**

Please note that there is a minimum attendance requirement (11/13 sessions). Please limit in-class use of laptops to note taking and class activities, and use of cell phones to class breaks.

### **Course Evaluations**

Please complete the course evaluation. Your feedback is very important.

### **Course format**

Class sessions will include both lectures by the instructor, and in-class, seminar-like discussions. Please do the required readings so that we can have informed and lively class discussions. The instructor will provide questions/discussion topics to guide the reading and discussion.

**Course Reading:** Course materials will be available on the course website.

**Provisions for Feedback:** Written feedback will be provided after each major assignment including the in-class policy review and the two reviews. The feedback will follow a grading rubric provided for each assignment and will also include comments regarding whether the student is making progress towards a solid understanding of social experimentation. Students are welcome to see the instructor during office hours to clarify written feedback or request additional feedback.

**Academic Integrity:** Violations of University policies on academic integrity, described in Section 3 of *Rights and Responsibilities*, may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, and could end in suspension from the University. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, you must ask for clarification.

**Notice:** If you have a documented disability and require any accommodations, please bring them to my attention prior to the second meeting of the class. If you have any questions about learning or other disabilities, contact Mary Brooks, Disabilities Coordinator for The Heller School at [maryeliz@brandeis.edu](mailto:maryeliz@brandeis.edu), room 106 or at x62816.

## Course Schedule

**Thursday  
September 6 -  
Brandeis  
Monday**

### **Session 1: Use of evidence in social policymaking**

Objectives: To discuss the use of research evidence in social policy making and the place of social experiments in the hierarchy of research evidence.

We will tackle this topic by focusing on the question “What works to reduce police misconduct?”

- Is this an answerable question?
- Is there an answer to it?
- How good is the answer?

Before class: Do required reading  
Read additional information about the Rialto body-worn camera study [here](#)  
Read additional information about the DOJ study [here](#)

**Special topic:** **What is a hierarchy of evidence? What are the main elements of a hierarchy of evidence?**

Required reading: (Ripley and Williams 2017)  
(Ariel, Farrar et al. 2014)  
(United States Department of Justice and Civil Rights Division 2015) (read Report Summary (pp. 1-6) and skim any other section you are interested in)  
(Puddy and Wilkins 2011)

**September 10**

**\*\*\*\*\* No class - Rosh Hashanah \*\*\*\*\***

**September 17**      **Session 2: Social experiments and social policymaking**

Objectives:      To describe the purpose of experimentation in social policy making, as well as the power and limitations of social experiments.

We will contrast Chapin's views in 1938 with Esther Duflo's circa 2010.

Before class:      Do required reading  
Watch Esther Duflo's TED Talk on [Social Experiments to Fight Poverty](#)

**Special topic:**      **What are social experiments good for? What types of policy questions can they help answer?**

Required reading:      Read:  
(Chapin 1938)  
Read carefully one of the following articles and skim the others:  
(Cook 2011)  
(Schanzenbach 2012)

**September 24**

**\*\*\*\*\* No class - Sukkot \*\*\*\*\***

**Tuesday  
September 25-  
Brandeis  
Monday**

**Session 3: The design of a social experiment I**

Objectives:      To describe the basic research design in social experimentation

Before class:      Do required reading  
  
Review online **J-PAL's Lecture 3: Why randomize?** (you can download/review the lecture [video](#), the ppt or transcript; do the exercises embedded in the lecture) and **Case Study 2: Learn to Read Evaluations** (**Case Study 2 is in the J-PAL course packet posted on Latte, pp. 23-30**) (do the exercises embedded in the case study).

**Special topic:**      **What are the main elements of a randomized evaluation design?**

Required reading: (Orr 1999) – skim Chapter 1; read Chapter 2

**October 1**

**\*\*\*\*\* No class - Shmini Atzeret \*\*\*\*\***

**October 8**

**Session 4: Implementation and ethical questions in social experiments**

Objectives: To describe the main elements and challenges in the implementation of social experiments

Before class: Do required reading  
**Review online J-PAL's Lecture 4: How to randomize? (you can download/review the lecture [video](#), the ppt or transcript; do the exercises embedded in the lecture)**

**Special topic: What are the requirements for implementing a randomized evaluation of a social policy/program? (logistical, legal and ethical issues)**

Required reading: (Gueron 2002)  
Skim (Schulz and Hanusa 1978)  
(Rivlin and Timpone 1975)

**October 15**

**Session 5: The policy, political and research context of social experiments**

Objectives: To describe the context of social experiments

Before class Do required reading

**Special topic How does the context of social experiments influence their design, implementation and application of their findings?**

Required reading: (Gueron and Rolston 2013) (Chapter 1)  
(Oakley, Strange et al. 2003)

**October 22**

**Session 6: Mid-term student assessment: In-class policy review**

Objectives: We will use the first half of the class for the assessment and the second half for a class discussion about it (discussion topics will be provided by the instructor; both the written assessment and the class discussion will count towards the grade).

Required reading: No reading assigned

**October 29**                    **Session 7: Early Childhood Education: Head Start (USA)**

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of this social experiment

Guest lecturer: Dr. Pamela K. Joshi

Before class                    Do required reading

**Special topic**                    **The challenge of defining “the intervention” in a social experiment: the “average program” versus variation in implementation**

Required reading: (Yoshikawa, Weiland et al. 2013)  
(Sawhill and Baron 2010)

AND read one of the following:

- (1) (National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs 2010)
- (2) (Ludwig and Phillips 2007)

AND read one of the following:

- (1) (Nathan 2007)
- (2) (Durlak 2010)
- (3) (Domitrovich, Gest et al. 2010)

**October 31**                    **Session 8: Income Incentives and Supplements I: New Hope (USA)**

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of this social experiment

Before class                    Do required reading

Read information about the Poverty Reduction and the Developing Brain study [here](#)

We will do an in-class activity using the National Center for Children in Poverty’s (NCCP) Basic Needs Budget Calculator and the Family Resource Simulator using Ohio 2015 as an example. If you have time, please start exploring these tools on

the [NCCP website](#) (under the Data Tools tab).

**Special topic**      **How to supplement a social experiment with qualitative research?**

Required reading: (Miller, Huston et al. 2008) (pick and read 2-3 sections you are interested in and skim the rest of this report)  
(Gibson and Duncan 2005)  
(Magnuson, Noble et al. 2013)

The following readings are optional:  
(Morris, Gennetian et al. 2005)  
Chapters in the 2007 Duncan, Huston and Weisner book on New Hope

**November 5**      **Session 9: Income Incentives and Supplements II: Progresa (Mexico) and Opportunity NYC–Family Rewards Demonstration (NYC)**

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of these social experiments

Before class      Do required reading

**Special topic**      **The transfer and diffusion of knowledge from social experiments**

Required reading: (Arnold, Conway et al. 2011)  
(Pena 2014)  
(Sugiyama 2011) (To be posted on Latte by September 15)  
(Riccio, Dechausay et al. 2013)  
(Parker and Teruel 2005)  
(Behrman and Skoufias 2006)  
(Skoufias 2005) (selected chapters from this report)

**November 12**      **Session 10: Home visiting programs (USA)**

**\*\*systematic review due\*\***

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of this social experiment

Before class      Do required reading



**Special topic**      **Packaging, branding and commercialization of social experiments**

Required reading: (Nurse Family Partnership n.d.)  
(Paulsell, Avellar et al. 2011)  
(Coalition for Evidence-based Policy 2009)  
(Promising Practices Network 2009)  
(Barnes 2010)

**November 19**      **Session 11: Housing mobility programs (USA) I**

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of this social experiment

Before class      Do required reading

**Special topic**      **Assessing differential effects in a social experiment: gender and length of exposure effects in MTO**

Required reading: (Briggs, Popkin et al. 2010) (selected chapters posted on Latte)  
(Kessler, Duncan et al. 2014)  
(Osypuk, Tchetgen et al. 2012)  
(Popkin, Leventhal et al. 2008)  
(Chetty, Hendren et al. 2015)

**November 26**      **Session 12: Housing mobility programs (USA) II**

Objectives: To critically review the policy framework, research questions, design, measurement methods, implementation, and interpretation of results of this social experiment

Before class      Do required reading

**Special topic**      **Placing the results from a social experiment within a policy debate**

Required reading: (Goering, Feins et al. 2003, Goering, Feins et al. 2003)  
(DeLuca 2012)  
(Turner, Comey et al. 2012)  
(Ludwig, Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011)

**December 3**      **Session 13: Using quasi experimentation to evaluate U.S. anti-poverty programs**

Objectives      We will review the use of quasi experimental approaches to

assess the effectiveness of some of the main U.S. programs to reduce child poverty, e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Before class Do required reading

**Special topic** **Quasi experimental alternatives to social experimentation**

Required reading: (Hoynes and Patel 2016)

**December 10** **Session 14: Realist reviews**

**\*\*review of reviews due\*\***

Objectives: To review the importance of considering implementation and context issues when assessing evidence from social experiments. We will use “realist reviews” as an example of a synthesis approach.

Before class Do required reading

**Special topic** **Can social experiments inform theory and practice?**

Required reading: (Pawson, Greenhalgh et al. 2005)  
(Greenhalgh, Kristjansson et al. 2007)

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