LAB RESEARCH PROJECT

INSTALLMENT 1: TOPIC AND DATA IDEAS

Your ultimate goal in this installment is to find one good topic and a good source or sources of data to use to investigate the topic. In this preliminary statement, you should suggest several possible topics so that I can give you suggestions about which topics and/or data sets might be most appropriate for your project.

For each possible topic you propose, you should provide:

1) A statement of the topic;

2) A discussion of two or three previous publications related to your topic; and

3) Citations for and descriptions of one or more sources of relevant data.

Statement of the topic. Your statement of the topic should begin with a description of the general subject or set of questions you would like to investigate. You should then explain what the particular focus or "hook" will be: what specific aspects of the general subject or what variations on the general questions will motivate your study and make it compelling?

Previous publications. You should find several previous publications that address some aspect of the topic you are considering, or that shed light on it in some way. Discuss what you can learn from these publications that is relevant to your study, and/or how your study might build upon them.

You should not refer to a study without saying something substantive about it. Usually this means, at a minimum, describing the most important question or questions the study addressed, the nature of the evidence or arguments presented in the publication, and the main conclusions of the study. Just referring to a study and saying that it was about a topic that in some broad way seems to be related to the topic you are considering is not sufficient; you need to say something concrete and substantive about the content of the study, and you need to say something specific about how your project would be related to the study.

For this first installment, you may cite any kinds of previous publications you like— including magazine articles, blogs and web pages, newspaper stories, etc. But for the final paper, and in fact in all the subsequent installments for this project, the sources you cite should be publications based on professional or academic research. Sources of this nature are usually articles in scholarly journals or books put out by reputable publishers. Some on-line sources may also meet the standard of credible professional or academic research, but you need to exercise careful judgment is assessing the reliability and validity of any studies that have not undergone peer review. Since most of the sources you rely on in all future installments of this project will have to be credible scholarly publications, you should either include some credible scholarly

publications in the sources you cite in this first installment, or at least give some thought to whether you will be able to find sources of this nature related to your topic.

Data sources. You should find one or more sources of data that you think you could use to investigate the topic or questions you are proposing to study. You may find one source of data that appears to contain all the information you would need, or you may have to find data from two or more sources.

To the greatest extent possible, you should use data obtained from "primary sources." That is, you should obtain your data from the source or sources that originally collected them, in the format in which they were originally stored. For instance, you might find that a certain think-tank has used data collected by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics to create an Excel file with data on rates of violent and non-violent crimes in the 50 states of the US and Washington, DC, from 1984 through 2009. Even if this Excel file is conveniently posted on the think-tank's website, you should not use that version of the data. Instead, track down the original data in the format in which they were first reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and then extract the parts of the original data files that you will need for your project. (We will be seeing how to do this during lab over the next few weeks.)

For each source of data you identify, you should:
--give a citation in the style you would use in the reference list or bibliography of a paper. The style manual we will follow in this course is the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, commonly referred to as the APA style manual. This link takes you to information on how to cite statistical data using APA style: http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e_ch09_s1-0002.html#RES5e_ch09_p0323.

--explain where the data you are referencing can be obtained. Explain this in enough detail that someone else, on the basis of what you have written, would be able to find and access exactly the data you are talking about.

--identify the specific variable or variables found in the data set that you believe would be useful for your study.

--describe the documentation that is available for each of the data sources you cite: e.g., a pdf codebook or users'; an online html codebook or users' guide; a searchable database of variable, variable definitions, etc.

You should not try to open any data files that you come across. In some cases, the data will be in a format that you won't be able to open with standard software—we'll be learning how to deal with that kind of situation as the semester goes on. In other cases it would be easy to open up the data and take a look at it—for instance, if the data are available in an Excel spreadsheet that you can just click on to open. But even in that case, it is not necessary for the purposes of this installment to do so. Instead, *you should find out what data are available from the source by reading the documentation* for the data set or study.

What to turn in

Your group should turn in one collectively-produced paper, containing one section for each topic you are considering, with each section containing the information described above. The formatting of the document should be consistent throughout (e.g., pages should be numbered consecutively throughout the paper; the font style and size should be consistent).

The paper should be written in complete and grammatically correct sentences; in most cases, bullet points or other kinds of lists will not be a good way to express your ideas. The sentences should be organized into coherent paragraphs that in turn constitute a coherent and well-organized essay.

You should turn in a printed copy of the assignment at the beginning of class on Friday, February 13.