UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

New Challanges for Social Research

2324-1-F8803N002

Learning objectives

The course aims to convey, on the one hand, some basic concepts of quantitative and qualitative social research and in particular, how to turn social problems into research questions, and on the other hand, how to deal in research with the challenges, the puzzles that contemporary society poses to researchers. The complexity of global society is a very special complexity because, besides being perpetually unstable and dynamic, it cannot be traced or interpreted on the basis of linear (cause-and-effect) models. Social phenomena evolve/transform through multiple connections and levels of interdependence. This leads us to rethink the concepts-basics, methods, techniques-of empirical research. Challenges include objects of study, methods, data collection techniques.
At the end of the course, students will have acquired the skills of doing research in new areas of study, to use data from new digital technologies such as cameras, smartphones, search engines, social networks, and to experiment with new research methodologies and techniques.

Contents

The central theme of the course is the methodology of social research in an area of digital revolution that is characterized by technological innovation in the production, communication and analysis of data used for research purposes. Thanks to digital technologies, researchers have at their disposal enormous amounts of data that open up a radical change in the way research is done and how scientific knowledge is produced. With reference to scientific research in all scientific disciplines, a data-centric approach is emerging, which, while making it possible to address problems that in the past have been considered difficult or impossible to analyze, raises other questions related to data quality and ethics such as the right to privacy, transparency in access to public data, and fair treatment of predictive techniques. An additional theme under consideration will be the overcoming of some key notions that in the methodology discipline are often given in opposition such as nature/culture and subject/object.

Detailed program

The course aims to provide students with knowledge and skills to conduct empirical investigations in light of recent methodological innovations. The course is divided into three parts.
The first part will take up some notions of the logic of social research and methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis with a focus on the study of complex phenomena such as security, deviant behavior, rare and elusive populations. The central themes of the second part of the course will cover digital technologies and in particular, Big Data. The availability of Big Data and the ease with which it is produced represents a major challenge and opportunity for social research. Finally, in the third part, reflection will focus on various issues such as the traditional nature/culture dichotomy deeply rooted in Western thought and specific to our modernity, which is increasingly being challenged by a series of phenomena that present a complex mixture of natural and social such as, for example, pandemic and climate crises. The last part of the course will also explore the problem of how to use sensitive data. This is both an epistemic and ethical problem in which it is not possible to distinguish the criteria used to produce reliable knowledge from those used to ensure that the methods used do not reinforce social discrimination. A further issue that is a challenge for researchers is how to resolve the continuing tension between involvement and detachment in research practice. The suggestion to rely on a method similar to that developed in the physical sciences apparently can give researchers the appearance of a high degree of detachment and objectivity that, in reality is instead absent in most researchers when using this method.

Prerequisites

No prerequisites.

Teaching methods

Lectures. During the course, active student participation in the teaching activity will be encouraged through discussions and the assignment of short assignments to be done individually or in groups, on the topics covered in the course. These assignments will be discussed during the course.

Assessment methods

Attending and nonattending students will be assessed through an individual oral test based on the examination reference texts.
The evaluation criteria (for attending and nonattending students) are:

1. ownership of language - appropriate use of terms;
2. accuracy in logical exposition of topics;
3. ability to build connections between topics;
4. completeness of exposition.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

The lecturer will collect the main articles and part of texts on the topics covered in the course in a handout that

he/she will make available to students.

Sustainable Development Goals