



Experiments in the Social Sciences

Seminar 2026/27
Wednesday 12:15 - 13:45
Seminarhaus SH - SH 2.108

Tobias Rüttenauer
ruettenauer@c3s.uni-frankfurt.de

Nr.	Date	Topic
0	14.10.	Introduction
Methodological Aspects		
1	21.10.	Introduction Counterfactuals
2	28.10.	Experimental Designs & Randomisation
3	04.11	Types of Experiments: Lab, Field, Natural
4	11.11.	Types of Experiments: Survey / Conjoint
Social Behaviour		
5	18.11.	Fairness and Reciprocity
6	25.11.	Neighbourhood Effects
7	02.12.	Peer-Group Effects
8	09.12.	Broken Windows
9	16.12.	Discrimination
Political Behaviour		
10	13.01.	Elections
11	20.01.	Support for Redistribution
	27.01.	no seminar
12	03.02.	Climate Politics
13	10.02.	Conclusions

Description:

Experiments are among the most powerful methods in empirical social research – they make it possible to draw causal conclusions about human behavior, social processes, and political dynamics. But how do experimental designs work, what are their strengths and limitations, and how can ethical and practical challenges be addressed?

This seminar offers an in-depth introduction to experimental research designs across the disciplinary boundaries of the social sciences. The course focuses on four central experimental approaches: laboratory experiments (controlled conditions, internal validity), field experiments (external validity, real-world contexts), natural experiments (leveraging natural randomization), and survey experiments (experimental manipulations in surveys).

Using landmark studies from sociology, psychology, political science, and economics, we analyze how experiments have been used to study topics such as empathy, discrimination, neighborhood effects, and political preferences and voting behavior in order to better understand social dynamics and mechanisms. At the same time, we discuss critical issues: What ethical dilemmas does the manipulation of social contexts raise? How can the external validity of experimental findings be secured? And what role do experiments play in the tension between basic research and policy-relevant work?

The seminar combines theoretical foundations with practical application. In the first sessions we develop the methodological basics of experimental research. In subsequent sessions we analyze and discuss current studies from various social science fields – from classical laboratory experiments to innovative field studies. By the end of the seminar, participants will be able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of different experimental designs, methodologically classify and critique empirical studies from the social sciences, and design their own experimental research project (e.g., as a term paper) – from the research question through operationalization to a discussion of ethical implications.

Course materials:

The course materials are provided on moodle: <https://moodle.studiumdigitale.uni-frankfurt.de/moodle/course/view.php?id=9803>

Course requirements:

Participation requirements:

- Regular and active participation
- Preparation of the seminar literature
- Presentation of a course topic

Examination requirements (assessment):

- Regular and active participation
- Preparation of the seminar literature
- Presentation of a course topic
- Submission of a term paper (approx. 15 pages)

Literature:

1 Introduction Counterfactuals

Angrist, J. D. and Pischke, J.-S. (2015). *Mastering 'Metrics: The Path from Cause to Effect*. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, Chapter 1: Randomized Trials.

Glennster, R. and Takavarasha, K. (2013). *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, Chapter 2: Why Randomize?

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 4: Experiments and Causality.

Huntington-Klein, N. (2021). *The Effect: An Introduction to Research Design and Causality*. Chapman & Hall/CRC, Boca Raton, Chapter 6: Causal Diagrams.

2 Experimental Designs & Randomisation

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 5: Experimental Designs and Typologies.

Glennster, R. and Takavarasha, K. (2013). *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, Chapter 4: Randomization?

Validity and Generalisation:

Levitt, S. D. and List, J. A. (2007). What Do Laboratory Experiments Measuring Social Preferences Reveal About the Real World? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(2):153–174.

Franzen, A. and Pointner, S. (2013). The External Validity of Giving in the Dictator Game. *Experimental Economics*, 16(2):155–169.

3 Types of Experiments: Lab, Field, Natural

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 6: Laboratory Experiments.

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 7: Field Experiments.

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 9: Natural Experiments and Quasi-experiments.

Baldassarri, D. and Abascal, M. (2017). Field Experiments Across the Social Sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 43(1):41–73.

4 Types of Experiments: Survey / Conjoint

Barrera, D., Gërxhani, K., Kittel, B., Miller, L., and Wolbring, T. (2024). *Experimental Sociology: Outline of a Scientific Field*. Cambridge University Press, 1 edition, Chapter 8: Vignette Experiments.

Schachter, A. and Weisshaar, K. (2025). Survey Experiments in Sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 51(1):149–169.

Hainmueller, J., Hangartner, D., and Yamamoto, T. (2015). Validating vignette and conjoint survey experiments against real-world behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(8):2395–2400.

5 Fairness and Reciprocity

Fehr, E. and Gintis, H. (2007). Human Motivation and Social Cooperation: Experimental and Analytical Foundations. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33(1):43–64.

Baldassarri, D. (2015). Cooperative Networks: Altruism, Group Solidarity, Reciprocity, and Sanctioning in Ugandan Producer Organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(2):355–395.

See also:

Fehr, E. and Gächter, S. (2002). Altruistic Punishment in Humans. *Nature*, 415:137–140.

Gneezy, U. (2005). Deception: The Role of Consequences. *American Economic Review*, 95(1):384–394.

Baldassarri, D. (2020). Market integration accounts for local variation in generalized altruism in a nationwide lost-letter experiment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(6):2858–2863.

6 Neighbourhood Effects

Chetty, R., Hendren, N., and Katz, L. F. (2016). The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review*, 106(4):855–902.

Ludwig, J., Liebman, J. B., Kling, J. R., Duncan, G. J., Katz, L. F., Kessler, R. C., and Sanbonmatsu, L. (2008). What Can We Learn about Neighborhood Effects from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment? *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(1):144–188.

See also:

Clampet–Lundquist, S. and Massey, D. S. (2008). Neighborhood Effects on Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Reconsideration of the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(1):107–143.

Kling, J. R., Liebman, J. B., and Katz, L. F. (2007). Experimental Analysis of Neighborhood Effects. *Econometrica*, 75(1):83–119.

Ludwig, J., Duncan, G. J., Gennetian, L. A., Katz, L. F., Kessler, R. C., Kling, J. R., and Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). Neighborhood effects on the long-term well-being of low-income adults. *Science*, 337(6101):1505–1510.

7 Peer-Group Effects

Carrell, S. E., Sacerdote, B. I., and West, J. I. (2013). From Natural Variation to Optimal Policy? The Importance of Endogenous Peer Group Formation. *Econometrica*, 81(3):855–882.

Martén, L., Hainmueller, J., and Hangartner, D. (2019). Ethnic Networks Can Foster the Economic Integration of Refugees. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 116(33):16280–16285.

See also:

Kirk, D. S. (2009). A Natural Experiment on Residential Change and Recidivism: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina. *American Sociological Review*, 74(3):484–505.

Legewie, J. and DiPrete, T. A. (2012). School Context and the Gender Gap in Educational Achievement. *American Sociological Review*, 77(3):463–485.

Sacerdote, B. I. (2001). Peer Effects with Random Assignment: Results for Dartmouth Roommates. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 116(2):681–704.

Porter, C. and Serra, D. (2020). Gender Differences in the Choice of Major: The Importance of Female Role Models. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 12(3):226–254.

8 Broken Windows

Keizer, K., Lindenberg, S., and Steg, L. (2008). The Spreading of Disorder. *Science*, 322(5908):1681–1685.

Keuschnigg, M. and Wolbring, T. (2015). Disorder, Social Capital, and Norm Violation: Three Field Experiments on the Broken Windows Thesis. *Rationality and Society*, 27(1):96–126.

See also:

Diekmann, A., Przepiorka, W., and Rauhut, H. (2015). Lifting the Veil of Ignorance: An Experiment on the Contagiousness of Norm Violations. *Rationality and Society*, 27(3):309–333.

Berger, J. and Hevenstone, D. (2016). Norm Enforcement in the City Revisited: An International Field Experiment of Altruistic Punishment, Norm Maintenance, and Broken Windows. *Rationality and Society*, 28(3):299–319.

Sampson, R. J. and Raudenbush, S. W. (2004). Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of “Broken Windows”. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 67(4):319–342.

Lanfer, C. C., Matsueda, R. L., and Beach, L. R. (2020). Broken Windows, Informal Social Control, and Crime: Assessing Causality in Empirical Studies. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 3(1):97–120.

9 Discrimination

Fernández-Reino, M., Di Stasio, V., and Veit, S. (2023). Discrimination unveiled: A field experiment on the barriers faced by Muslim women in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. *European Sociological Review*, 39(3):479–497.

Auspurg, K., Hinz, T., and Schmid, L. (2017). Contexts and Conditions of Ethnic Discrimination: Evidence from a Field Experiment in a German Housing Market. *Journal of Housing Economics*, 35:26–36.

See also:

Quillian, L., Heath, A., Pager, D., Midtbøen, A., Fleischmann, F., and Hexel, O. (2019). Do Some Countries Discriminate More than Others? Evidence from 97 Field Experiments of Racial Discrimination in Hiring. *Sociological Science*, 6:467–496.

Hainmueller, J. and Hangartner, D. (2013). Who Gets a Swiss Passport? A Natural Experiment in Immigrant Discrimination. *American Political Science Review*, 107(1):159–187.

Pager, D. and Quillian, L. (2005). Walking the Talk? What Employers Say Versus What They Do. *American Sociological Review*, 70(3):355–380.

Wagner, S. and Petev, I. D. (2024). The Economic Penalty of Terrorism: Increase in Discrimination against Arabs and Muslims after Paris Attacks. *Socius*, 10:1–17.

10 Elections

Graham, M. H. and Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2):392–409.

Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P., and Larimer, C. W. (2008). Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment. *American Political Science Review*, 102(1):33–48.

See also:

Bechtel, M. M. and Hainmueller, J. (2011). How Lasting Is Voter Gratitude? An Analysis of the Short- and Long-Term Electoral Returns to Beneficial Policy. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(4):852–868.

Bond, R. M., Fariss, C. J., Jones, J. J., Kramer, A. D. I., Marlow, C., Settle, J. E., and Fowler, J. H. (2012). A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization. *Nature*, 489(7415):295–298.

Minkus, L., Deutschmann, E., and Delhey, J. (2019). A Trump Effect on the EU's Popularity? The U.S. Presidential Election as a Natural Experiment. *Perspectives on Politics*, 17(02):399–416.

Eggers, A. C. and Hainmueller, J. (2009). MPs for Sale? Returns to Office in Postwar British Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 103(4):513–533.

11 Support for Redistribution

Kalleitner, F. and Bobzien, L. (2024). Taxed fairly? How differences in perception shape attitudes towards progressive taxation. *European Sociological Review*, 40(3):535–548.

Petersen, M. B. (2012). Social Welfare as Small-Scale Help: Evolutionary Psychology and the Deservingness Heuristic. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(1):1–16.

See also:

Alesina, A., Stantcheva, S., and Teso, E. (2018). Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution. *American Economic Review*, 108(2):521–554.

Dwyer, R. J. and Dunn, E. W. (2022). Wealth redistribution promotes happiness. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(46):e2211123119.

Schechtl, M. and Tisch, D. (2024). Tax principles, policy feedback and self-interest: Cross-national experimental evidence on wealth tax preferences. *Socio-Economic Review*, 22(1):279–300.

Becker, B. and Waitkus, N. (2025). Undeserving heirs: How the origins of wealth shape attitudes towards redistribution. *European Societies*, 27(5):889–914.

12 Climate Politics

Beiser-McGrath, L. F. and Bernauer, T. (2019). Could revenue recycling make effective carbon taxation politically feasible? *Science Advances*, 5(9):eaax3323.

Simpson, B., Willer, R., and Feinberg, M. (2022). Radical flanks of social movements can increase support for moderate factions. *PNAS Nexus*, 1(3):pgac110.

See also:

Baccini, L. and Leemann, L. (2021). Do natural disasters help the environment? How voters respond and what that means. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 9(3):468–484.

Wappenhans, T., Valentim, A., Klüver, H., and Stoetzer, L. F. (2024). Extreme weather events do not increase political parties' environmental attention. *Nature Climate Change*, 14(7):696–699.

De Kleer, D., De Vries, C. E., and Van Teutem, S. (2025). Public Support for Pro-environment and Environment-Critical Movements. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55:e161.