

CONF 301
Research and Inquiry in Conflict Resolution

Spring 2008

Dr. Daniel Rothbart

Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution

And

Professor of Philosophy

Office: Robinson B Room 461

Email: drothbar@gmu.edu

Office Hours: Thursdays 3:00-4:30 or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The goal of conflict research is to answer certain questions about protracted conflicts. Why do conflicts occur? How do they evolve? What are the social and/or political forces that caused them? Who is affected by the resulting violence? And, how can conflicts be prevented, or, if not prevented then reduced in severity? Of course, the nature of protracted conflicts makes these questions very difficult to answer. Protracted conflicts are extremely complex, difficult to understand fully, and virtually impossible to predict. The complexity associated with the standards for describing and explaining create special challenges for researchers. Brief descriptions are always inadequate, and explanations that rely on single causes seem shallow. Yet, the importance for answering the questions above cannot be overstressed. So, how is this done?

This course examines the kinds of activities, procedures, tasks, and goals that are needed for sound research in conflict resolution. This course centers on certain skills of research that can be used for analysis of many kinds of conflict. These skills will be applied to specific cases of conflict. In particular, the study of suicide terrorism will provide examples of the research skills to be examined. In our field, the product such research will be genuine knowledge of the nature and evolution of conflict, knowledge that, ideally, offers answers to the questions above.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Engage in critical reflection of the goals of research and inquiry
- Integrate reflection on goals with a critical study of research methods in conflict research.
- Apply the methods of quantitative research to cases of protracted conflict.
- Examine the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative research.
- Apply the methods of qualitative research to cases of protracted conflict.
- Examine the strengths and weaknesses of methods of qualitative research.
- Examine the normative underpinnings of both qualitative research and quantitative research.

TEXTS

Charles C. Ragin, Constructing Social Research. Pine Forge Press. 1994. ISBN: 0-8039-9021-9 (paper) [CSR]

Robert A. Pape, Dying to Win: the Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. New York: Random House, 2005. ISBN 1-40000-6317-5.

Keith F. Punch, 1998. Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. Sage Publications. ISBN 0-76-9 5813 4 (paper) [ISR]

Articles/book chapters:

1. Rambotham, et. al., "Statistics of Deadly Quarrels" in Contemporary Conflict Resolution, Chapter 3 [e-reserve]

Dear Professor Rothbart
Electronic Reserve for: CONF 301
Your password is: known
Do not use spaces or caps for passwords.

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS

Unit I. What is inquiry and research?

Session 1 (January 24): What is an analysis of global violence?

Ragin, "What is Social Research?" Chapter 1 in CSR.

Session 2 (Jan. 31): The "New Terrorism"

- a. Pape, "Explaining Suicide Terrorism" Chapter 2 in DTW.
- b. Rambotham, et. al., "Statistics of Deadly Quarrels" in Contemporary Conflict Resolution, Chapter 3 [e-reserve]
- c. Pape, "The Growing Threat" Chapter 1 in DTW.

Unit 2: Questions and Evidence

Session 3 (February 7): What is your Question?

- a. Pape, "A Strategy for Weak Actors" Chapter 3 in DTW.
- b. Ragin, "The Goal of Social Research" Chapter 2 in CSR.
- c. Punch, "Some Central Issues" Chapter 2 in ISR.
- d. Punch, "Research Questions" Chapter 3 ISR.

Session 4 (Feb. 14): Finding evidence

- a. Ragin, "The Process of Social Research: Ideas and Evidence" Chapter 3 in CSR.
- b. Punch, "From Research Questions to Data," Chapter 4 in ISR.

Unit 3: Quantitative Methods

Session 5 (Feb. 21): Developing a Plan

- a. Ragin, "Using Quantitative Methods to Study Covariation," Chapter 6 in CSR.
- b. Punch, "Quantitative Research Design," Chapter 5 in ISR.
- c. Pape, "Targeting Democracies" Chapter 4 in DTW.

Exam #1

Session 6 (Feb. 28): Collecting Data

- a. Punch, "Collecting quantitative Data," Chapter 6 in ISR.

Session 7 (March 6): Analyzing Data

- a. Pape, "The Demographic Profile of Suicide Terrorists" Chapter 10 in DTW.
- b. Punch, "The Analysis of Quantitative Data," Chapter 7 in ISR.

Unit 4: Qualitative Methods

Session 8 (March 20): Developing a Plan

- a. Pape, "Occupation and Religious Difference" Chapter 6 in DTW.
- b. Ragin, "Using Qualitative Methods to Study Commonalities," Chapter 4 in CSR.
- c. Punch, "Qualitative Research: Overview, Design and Grounded Theory," Chapter 8 in ISR.

Session 9 (March 27): Collecting Data

- a. Pape, "Demystifying al-Qaeda" Chapter 7 in DTW
- b. Punch, "Collecting Qualitative Data," Chapter 9 in ISR.

Session 10 (April 3): Analyzing Data

- a. Pape, "Altruism and Terrorism" Chapter 9 in DTW.
- b. Punch, "The Analysis of Qualitative Data" Chapter 10 of ISR.

Unit 5: Mixing Methods And Evaluation

Session 11 (April 10): Mixed Methods

- a. Ragin, "Using Comparative Methods to Study Diversity," Chapter 5 of CSR.
- b. Punch, "Mixed Methods and Evaluative Criteria," Chapter 11 of ISR, pp. 239 - 250.

Exam #2

Session 12 (April 17): Evaluation of Research

- Punch, "Mixed Methods and Evaluative Criteria," Chapter 11 of ISR, pp. 250-263.

Session 13 (April 24): Research Writing

Punch, "Research Writing," Chapter 12 of ISR.

Session 14 (May 1): Summary

Final Exam. Thursday, May 8, 10:30 to 1:15.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. First exam covering Units I and II of the course: Session 5 (Feb. 21). 20% of course grade. This exam cannot be rescheduled, except under conditions of emergency.
2. Second exam covering Units III and IV of the course: Session 10 (April 3). 20% of course grade. This exam cannot be rescheduled, except under conditions of emergency.
3. Final exam. 20% of course grade. (Thursday, May 8, 10:30 to 1:15).
4. Critical Reflection Paper.

For this assignment students will examine, critically, one discussion-topic that is introduced during the class sessions. Again, each discussion-topic highlights one important segment of research in conflict analysis. As an exercise in critical thinking, your paper will reveal the presuppositions of the particular research topic, and render an assessment with respect to the goals and methods of research. For example, if you select as your paper topic a discussion-topic related to a method of qualitative research (from sessions 5, 6, or 7), then you would be expected to examine critically the assumptions that underpin such a method, and to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Of course, the same kind of reflection can be pursued for a discussion-topic related to quantitative research.

The paper is due Session 12, April 17. 20% of course grade.

5. Journals. A journal includes summaries of each assigned reading, approximately one page for each assigned chapter. They will be submitted in two installments during the semester. The grades for both sets of journal combined will count for 20% of course grade.

CRITICAL THINKING COMPONENTS

A primary objective of this course is to engage students in critical reflection of the goals, presuppositions, and implications of conflict research. Such reflection draws attention to certain commitments that lie just below the surface of research activities, yet are pivotal to why and how conflict analysts do research. The following elements of this course comprise the critical thinking components, and are "organically" integrated into the course:

A. Critical Thinking objectives in this course:

1. Engage in critical reflection of the goals of research and inquiry
2. Integrate this reflection on goals with a critical study of research methods in conflict research.
3. Examine the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative research.

4. Examine the strengths and weaknesses of methods of qualitative research.
5. Examine the normative underpinnings of both qualitative research and quantitative research.

B. Course topics in which critical thinking skills are developed and tested:

1. Session 1 (January 24): What is an analysis of global violence?
2. Session 5 (Feb. 21): Developing a Plan (for qualitative research)
3. Session 7 (March 6): Analyzing Data (of qualitative research)
4. Session 8 (March 20): Developing a Plan (for quantitative research)
5. Session 10 (April 3): Analyzing Data (of quantitative research)
6. Session 11 (April 10): Mixed Methods
7. Session 12 (April 17): Evaluation of Research

C. Course assignments that require critical thinking skills:

1. In-class assignments for sessions listed above.
2. Term paper that has, as its primary objective, critical reflection on one of the discussion questions introduced in class.
3. Final exam that includes CT questions.

HONOR POLICY

All students are expected to abide by the Honor Code:

Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.

Failure to comply with this code may result in academic penalty in accordance with the procedures of the Honor Committee.