

Special Topics Groups 2023-2024

Special Topic Title: Using Quantitative Longitudinal Data Analysis to Research Childhood and Young Adulthood in Ireland - Dr Delma Byrne Monday at 11am in TSI043

Experiences in childhood and young adulthood are viewed to be the expression of the social, economic, political and cultural forces that structure societies. A key role of the sociologist is to explain how these processes influence and shape the lives and experiences of children and young adults in Irish society and to understand how inequalities among children and young adults come about or how structural conditions shape children and young people's lives.

In this special topic research group, Irish society will be examined through the lens of childhood and youth, and students will have the freedom to decide which aspect to explore. Key institutions such as the family, the education system, the economy, the health system, the welfare state and their influences will be explored. We will examine how childhood and young adulthood in contemporary Irish society is structured along the lines of sex/gender, social class, poverty, household income, disability/special educational need, ethnicity or recent migrant history and their intersections. This special topic research group will also be of interest to students interested in policy areas such as education, housing and welfare, health and well-being and digital society.

It is important to note that in this special topic research group, over two semesters students will engage in quantitative analyses of an existing large scale, nationally representative, longitudinal study of childhood: The Growing Up in Ireland study. Guided by the craft and logic of social inquiry, we will use sociological theory to frame interesting and innovative research questions and hypotheses about Irish society and test these through analyses of the Growing Up in Ireland Study data which follows the same children and families over several waves of data collection.

Lived experience of social inequality – Professor Laurence Cox Thursday at 3pm in TSI041

This special topic invites you to use family history, life history or autoethnographic methods to explore your own or your family's experience of inequality (social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, dis/ability etc.) You will look at one or more dimension of inequality on the basis of interviews with your family members or others or systematic reflection on your own life experience. This can be from the point of view of being disadvantaged, exploited, oppressed, stigmatised etc. or being powerful, privileged etc. – or in contradictory situations. In your dissertation you will analyse this data and relate your (or your family's) experience to more general understandings of the inequality in question (e.g. statistics; studying how corporations, families, states etc. work; theories of structure etc.) This may lead you to critique existing ideas of the inequality or to see your experience differently, or both. The small-group setting will provide a safe space for discussing difficult experiences.

The Sociology of the Body - Dr Paul Ryan & Akangshya Bordoloi Tuesday at 11am in TSI041

In this group we explore the varied social meanings attached to the body in late modern societies. We look at the regulation of the body (e.g., reproductive health; dieting, grooming, gym culture, body shaming) and how the body has become a vehicle to transmit meaning and identity at both an individual and group level (e.g., tattooing, piercing). We also explore those involved both in the care and treatment

of the body (e.g., medicalisation, care work, disability, ageing, dying) and its commodification (e.g., sexualisation). We explore these developments through the work of key theorists of the body including Foucault, Goffman, Butler, and Shilling. The special topic group can be investigated through a variety of methods including qualitative and wider content analysis methodologies.

Religion and Society – Dr Brian Conway
Monday at 4pm in TSI240

Are we more or less religious now than before? Why do women tend to be more religious than men? Why are strict churches strong? Why are some societies more religious than others? These are some of the core questions taken up by sociologists concerned with the relationship between religion and society. In the first semester students learn about the major theoretical, methodological and empirical debates in the sociology of religion literature. This provides a foundation for the second semester, in which the focus turns to carrying out a research project about a research question derived from the literature examined in the first semester, as well as becoming acquainted with literature about data collection, data analysis and social scientific writing. The module closes out with a learning community celebration, where students present their ongoing research project. This module supports most research methods, except the analysis of online data.

Knowledge in the Digital Age: Approaches to Analysis – Dr Clark Powers
Tuesday at 2pm in TSI043

This special topic looks at what it means to ‘know’ a thing, and how the ways we go about knowing things shape both us and the world. Starting with the not-so-simple question ‘what is knowledge?’, we consider how various kinds of knowledge characterise us as individuals and as members of communities. We then go looking for the sources of knowledge—in the mind and body, in families and communities, in social institutions and governments, in libraries and online. Wherever we find it, we will consider knowledge in philosophical and practical terms, and from the personal level of “I think, therefore I am” to the global level of the Internet. We will see how knowledge is a driving force of language, organisations, and politics, and how specific ideas about knowledge—such as in the ongoing furor over ‘artificial intelligence’—influence technology, business, and government. Our goal is to think about knowledge in ways that help us to understand society better. In Semester 1 we survey a range of ‘analytical frameworks’, that is, orderly approaches for thinking about knowledge and society, and thus for making sense of empirical data. In Semester 2 we consider which data-collection methods best suit which analytical frameworks, and practice how to apply these frameworks for data analysis. The frameworks and methods discussed can be used for both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research.

Technologies of Communication: From the Pyramids to ChatGPT – Dr Clark Powers
Tuesday at 3pm in TSI043

This special topic looks at how society is shaped by the ways we communicate. Technologies and societies are deeply linked—change in one makes change in the other—so thinking about how we communicate can help us to understand ourselves better. We begin by looking at language as one of the oldest and most powerful technologies of communication, and thus of coordination and action. From there, we survey the ‘media’ that have enabled us to think and live in new ways—not just TV and radio, but also stone, paper, electricity, all the way to digital data. In a sense, it is only through these media that we can know the world beyond our own direct experience. From a labourer’s mark scratched on a block

of the Pyramids, to traces of 'artificial intelligence' in the global Internet, we understand our world by how we talk. In Semester 1 we survey how technologies of communication shape 'social realities' and vice versa. A historical view of societies and their communications evolving side by side offers a firm foundation for making better sense of today's world of constant interconnection. In Semester 2 we look at how technologies of communication are the cornerstone of learning and study, and specifically how research itself is such a technology. We will focus on empirical methods that rely on techniques of 'compressing' or 'coding' human communication—for example, content analysis and surveying—and which can be used for both qualitative and quantitative research.

**Heat Waves: Exploring the discourse on climate change - Dr Anne Fitzgerald
Friday at 1pm in TSI035**

Climate change has become a major political issue on all continents as warming temperatures, frequent extreme weather events and melting of ice caps bring the predictions of climate science closer to home. Citizens have formed social movements to lobby their governments to stop activities which contribute to global warming. Youth movements such as Fridays for Future strikes have turned the focus onto the official response to climate change and have galvanised support for recognition of the urgent need for action. At the same time, a growing backlash towards 'green policies' has been developing as corporations involved in fossil fuel industries kick against calls for their demise and farmers protest against the drastic changes expected from their sector. In this special topic we will explore the official discourse on climate change at international and national level and the unofficial one from those who deny climate change exists. A sociological perspective can throw light on the factors affecting society's diverging response to the climate change, the framing of the narrative and the intersection of power and privilege, gender, race and class.

**Outsourcing Care - Dr Anne Fitzgerald
Thursday 3pm in TSI043**

Economic development and the processes of globalisation have created new forms of informal work for 'mainly' but not exclusively female workers in the 'care industry'. As the rate of women working rises in higher income countries, services which were usually provided for free by females in the family are now provided through paid employment. The demand for care workers has rapidly increased and migrant women are a captive market for positions as nannies, child minders, cleaners and care staff in elderly care facilities. At the same time working women generally perform the majority of domestic tasks in the home, despite the changes in gender roles in the last decades. The first semester will introduce the major debates and theoretical positions on gender and care, including questions such as why has care work remained so stubbornly gendered? How does race and ethnicity intersect with gender in the delivery of care? What effect has the precarity of their situation on the givers of care in private domestic and congregated settings? The first semester will also cover methodologies used to collect and analyse data. The second semester will focus on the research process, choosing a research question and methodology and completing the thesis.

**Haunting, Horror, and Alternative Subcultures – Dr Eoin Flaherty
Tuesday 10am in JHT6**

Why do so many continue to believe in ghosts and hauntings in an age of scientific reason? Why are we so fascinated with horror movies, TV shows, and violent videogames? Why do many claim to find comfort and community in a genre of music that was once believed to carry subliminal satanic messages? Why have supposedly 'deviant' acts such as tattooing become more publicly acceptable? This group deals with a range

of topics historically considered as examples of 'deviant' subcultures, a concept with a contentious history, and questionable modern relevance. We will examine these topics from a subcultural/deviance perspective, questioning their origin, context, and role in today's society. We will pay specific attention to the ways in which beliefs and practices are organised, sustained, and networked, and the social contexts in which they emerge and exist. You will work on a project on one of these topics collecting data either alone, or by collaborating with others in the group. Some questions you might explore include: what is a subculture, how does it emerge, who participates, and why? What is the relation between deviant and mainstream beliefs or practices? How does society react to different subcultural beliefs or practices? How has global media and social networking influenced the development of subcultures? Ultimately, we will question whether the mainstreaming of many of these practices means that their labelling as 'deviant' or 'subcultural' is no longer valid.