SW951 Social Determinants of Health – Theory
January 2013 (1/13/13 version)

Instructor: Stephanie Robert, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Wednesdays 9:30-12:00, Room 114 Social Work
Office hours and meetings by appointment
sarobert@wisc.edu; 263-6336

Course Description

This interactive seminar is designed to foster critical thinking about the application of theory to research. The topic of this course is theories related to the “social determinants of health” – the broad social factors that affect the health of individuals and families over the life course. I will emphasize theories that contribute to understanding racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in physical and mental health. Students will learn about and critique specific theories related to the “social determinants of health” from a variety of disciplines and approaches. However, this topic is also meant to be used as an example of a substantive area that applies a variety of types of theories. Over the course of the semester, students will be encouraged to apply their skills evaluating and applying theory to their own areas of expertise.

Course Objectives

1. To understand contemporary issues related to the social determinants of health.
2. To understand the range of theories used in understanding the social determinants of health, and to critique their applications and implications.
3. To deepen understanding about what constitutes a good scientific theory, and understand the difference between frameworks, theories, conceptual models, and their functions.
4. To enhance understanding about how one’s stated or unstated theoretical perspective on social problems influences what one is drawn to investigate and the research question one asks, and how the choice and use of theory influences the potential implications of one’s research.
5. To help students become critical consumers of theory through examination of the strengths and limitations in the range of a sampling of micro, mezzo and macro theories employed in health research and their potential implications (e.g., for policy and practice).
6. To provide students with experience in critically evaluating other scholars’ use of and application of theory and congruence with research methods.
7. To help students identify and think critically about the application of theory to their own areas of research.
Grading

10% Class participation
25% Paper and co-facilitation 1
25% Paper and co-facilitation 2
40% Final Paper and presentation (or alternate assignment)

Assignments

Class participation: This is a seminar, which means your active participation is required. When you are not a class facilitator for the week, you are still expected to have done the readings and be prepared to engage in critical discourse. Seminars only work if people are prepared and can learn from each other. Doing the reading is only a start – grappling critically with the reading and comparing one’s own interpretations with others’ interpretations is where the real learning comes from.

Attendance: Attendance is necessary for a successful seminar. Of course, sometimes people need to miss seminar for illness, family, or professional reasons. You may miss one class without having to do a make-up assignment. If you miss more than one seminar session, you will have to write a short paper for each week you miss. I will make this assignment at the time I’m notified of your absence. If you know in advance you will be missing the class, let me know, else check with me after the missed class about how you need to make it up.

Weekly readings: There are weekly readings. Starting in the 4th week, you will need to read not only the readings in the syllabus, but one additional reading for each presenter that week. Presenters will assign these extra readings at least one week in advance.

Co-facilitating two classes (in conjunction with Papers 1 and 2): Each student will co-facilitate two sessions with other students. This will involve planning the class with the other students presenting and facilitating that week. Each facilitator that week will need to choose one empirical article (either take one I have suggested in the syllabus, or find your own) that employs theory on the topic of the week (make sure all presenters in a given week choose different empirical pieces). During seminar, you will present a summary of the theory involved (including providing a handout), highlighting its main ideas and concepts. You will also present a critique of the empirical article that applied that theory (or multiple theories). You will work with the other students presenting that week to determine how best to facilitate the class that week – involving presentations and discussion of theory, and critique of application of the theory.

Papers 1 and 2 – Summary of theory and analysis of an empirical paper: For each of the two weeks that you are a co-facilitator, you will choose an empirical piece to assign to the class to read. This must be sent to the students or put up on Learn@UW at least one week in advance. You will write a paper that first summarizes the theory applied in the article, and then critiques the article’s use of theory. This paper is due to Steph by midnight the night before the class in which you present. The theory summary, or an
Weekly reading assignments

January 23
What is a framework? A theory? A perspective?

Go to:
See the left-hand tab for “Setting the Scene”
Read/do the workbook for both:
  1) ‘Science’ in the Social Sciences
  2) Theory Development


January 30
What are the Social Determinants of Health?


Peruse the WHO Social Determinants of Health web site (peruse longer if this material is all new to you; shorter if it’s not):
http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/

February 6
Health Behavior Theory – Psychological, Sociological, and Public Health Approaches


Also required: Empirical pieces assigned by seminar leader – provided access at least one week in advance.

**Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:**


**February 27**

**Stress, coping, and resilience theories – Social and Psychological**


Also required: Empirical pieces assigned by seminar leader – provided access at least one week in advance.

**Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:**

Also required: Empirical pieces assigned by seminar leader – provided access at least one week in advance.

**Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:**

There are good articles in the entire 2012 Vol. 109, Supplement 2 of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Toward a biology of social adversity.


**March 13**

**Life course theory and frameworks**


Also required: Empirical pieces assigned by seminar leader – provided access at least one week in advance.

**Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:**

April 3
Challenges to Mainstream Approaches


Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:

Other readings may be empirical pieces or other essays/critiques of theory/research in this area.


April 10
Challenges to Mainstream Approaches
CBPR and Grounded theory

