University of Wisconsin-Madison  
School of Social Work  

Syllabus DRAFT: Spring 2018  

Social Work 951 Determinants in Mental Illness and Wellness: An Applied Theory Course  

Instructor: Tally Moses, Associate Professor  
Class meets: Wednesday, 8:30-11:30 AM  
Office: SSW 313  
Office phone: (608) 263-3674 (email preferred)  
Cell phone: (608) 234-1722  
Office hours: By appointment  
Classroom: SW 114  
E-mail: moses@wisc.edu  

Course Description: 
This interactive seminar is designed to foster critical thinking about the application of theory to research. The particular theme of this course relates to the “determinant of mental illness and wellness” and we will explore a range of micro, meso, and macro theoretical perspectives from a variety of disciplines and perspectives of social inquiry. The perspectives, and the theories covered within, will be focused on understanding: the nature of mental illness/wellness, various bio/psycho/social factors that affect mental health over the life course, understanding racial/ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic disparities mental health, and approaches to the study of mental illness.

Course Objectives:  
- To understand how mental illness is defined constructed from the perspective of different disciplines and theoretical lenses;  
- To consider the relative merits of various operational definitions of mental health and illness used in research;  
- To understand how/why mental illness occurs and identify multiple biopsychosocial factors that are involved;  
- To gain insight about how race and ethnicity, culture, class, sex, gender, and sexual orientation are dealt with in theories that are commonly applied to the study of mental illness;  
- To understand the implications of theory for programs, interventions, and system reforms that address the causes and/or consequences of mental illness;  
- To consider and address methodological issues in the application of theory to mental health/illness research;  
- To discuss how course content related to mental health and illness applies to or has relevance for other social phenomena of interest to students.

At the same time, the learning goals of the course are broader than the study of mental illness such that the experiences and skills students gain will serve their research program, which will likely be focused on other substantive areas. This topic is used as an example of a substantive area that applies a variety of types of theories. Exploration of the various theories will be used to understand: (1) how to describe an outcome of interest and its contributing factors; (2) how to measure this outcome and its contributing factors; (3) how to formulate key research questions in
ways that promote knowledge in the field; (4) how to identify the most relevant theory/theories
to inform research questions; (5) how to critique and apply these theories in the form of a
theoretical model specific to your research question(s); (6) how to test your research question(s)
in a way that informs theory, and (7) how to think about the implications of theory for designing
interventions that address the outcome of interest. For the final assignment, students will have
the option of applying their skills in evaluating and applying theory to their own areas of
expertise/interest.

**Required Readings:**

Readings and resources will be posted to the CANVAS course site. Additional required readings
selected by students will be posted throughout the class.

**Week 1: Jan 24—Course and participant introductions: What is theory and why should we
care?**

**Week 2: Jan 31—What is mental illness? Current dominant conceptualizations.**

Bruce, M. & Raue, P. (2013). Mental illness as psychiatric disorder. In C. Aneshensel, J.,
Phelan, & A. Bierman (Eds), *Handbook of the sociology of mental health*, 2nd Ed. (pp. 41-59).
New York: Springer.

APA (2013). From planning to publication: Developing DSM-5 Accessed at:


*Former NIMH director announcing that distancing of NIH/NIMH is distancing itself from the DSM-5 categorical system:*


Recommended:
Wikipedia entry on NIMH’s “Research Domain Criteria” (Skimming is fine).

Friedman, M. (2013). Finalizing PTSD in *DSM-5*: Getting Here From There and Where to Go
Week 3: Feb 7—How do we measure and study mental illness?


Recommended:


Week 4: Feb 14—Alternative conceptualizations of mental illness: social constructivism


Recommended:

**Week 5: Feb 21— Structural determinants of mental illness and wellness**


**Recommended:**


**Week 6: Feb 28-- Critical theories pertaining to mental illness: Feminism, Marxism**


*Ch. 1: Introduction: Thinking critically about mental illness (pp. 1-26)*

*Ch. 2: Marxist theory and mental illness: A critique of political economy (pp 27-67)*


**Recommended:**


**Week 7: March 7-- Stress and coping theory & Life course Perspectives**


**Week 8: March 14—Cognitive and behavioral theories**


**Recommended:**

**Week 9: March 21—Attachment theory & Psychodynamic Conceptualizations**


OR


Week 10: March 28—Spring Break. ENJOY!!

Week 11: April 4—Biological theories (Neurochemistry)


Week 12: April 11—Epigenetic research

Guest presenter: Anthony Auger, Professor, Department of Psychology at UW Madison

Readings TBD

Week 13: April 18—Developmental Psychopathology

Guest presenter: James Li, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology at UW Madison


Week 14: April 25—Mental illness through (cross) cultural lenses

Guest presenter: Earlise Ward, Associate Professor, UW Madison School of Nursing (9:30-10:45)
Readings TBD

Week 15: May 2-- Phenomenological accounts of mental illness


Assignments

20% Class participation
20% Paper and co-facilitation 1
20% Paper and co-facilitation 2
40% Final Paper (or alternate assignment)

Grading Scale for scoring assignments:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>100 point scale</th>
<th>Final Grade</th>
<th>Criteria of Work Quality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>94-100</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-93</td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84-89</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Good</td>
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<tr>
<td>80-83</td>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>74-79</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73 or below</td>
<td>D/F</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
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1. Class Attendance and Participation (15%)
Attendance and active participation in class discussions and exercises are expected. This is a graduate-level seminar in which your ability to critically think about and discuss readings and course material is central. You should also actively demonstrate how course content applies to your personal research interests, and be prepared to engage in analytical discussions with classmates about their research interests. 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.

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 do an assignment (content at my discretion) each week you miss. If you know in advance you will be missing the class, please let me know, otherwise check with me after the missed class about how you need to make it up.
2. Class Facilitation—x2 (in conjunction with two short theory application papers) (10% each for each student): Each student will co-facilitate two class sessions with another student. This will involve planning the class with the other student presenting and facilitating for that week.

- You will work with the other student presenting that week to determine how best to facilitate the class that week – involving the presentations and discussion of theory, and critique of application of the theory. Creative exercises that get us all to apply and critique the material are encouraged!
- As a pair, present a summary of the theory involved in a handout (no more than 2 pages) that highlights the theory’s main ideas and concepts. Often you will need to do additional reading about the theory, beyond the readings assigned in class, to come up with a summary of the theory.

Preparing the handout will assist you on organizing and sharing your thoughts about the following:

- Primary problems or questions addressed by the theory or model
- Core assumptions (consider assumptions about the world, e.g. time: linear vs. circular; relationship to nature: dominance over nature vs. harmony with nature; land as commodity vs. land as sacred; relationship to others: individualistic vs. collective; nature of individual: good vs. evil; structure of relationships: hierarchical vs. collateral; free will: masters of fate vs. fatalism/determinism, or other assumptions that you find to be relevant)
- Key concepts (conceptual definitions and typical operationalization of major concepts)
- A visual diagram or description of how the key concepts are linked to one another
- Reference any additional resources.
- Email the handout to Tally by 10pm on Monday night before the class (Tally will bring copies for everyone).

This part of the class facilitation is expected to take 30-45 minutes.

Please note that it is not expected that these handouts will provide flawless or entirely comprehensive descriptions of the theory and sometimes it will not be possible to draft a comprehensive or totally complete description. Rather this assignment is an opportunity for skill development and the handout itself will provide a springboard for our discussion about the core ideas of the theory. Everyone in the class will be invited to contribute additional insights to essential aspects of the theory.

- Brief written and oral critique of an empirical paper (15% each time): For each of the two weeks that you are a co-facilitator, you will choose an empirical article that employs theory covered that week to assign to the class to read. This article must be sent to Tally in time for her to review it and upload it to CANVAS one week in advance (by Weds—the week before—at 10:00pm).
The written critique you prepare could be 3-5 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins). At least half of the narrative should focus on critiquing the use of this theory in the empirical piece. The narrative should include:
(a) a concise articulation of the purpose and methods;
(b) a critique of the strengths and limitations of the use of theory in this paper with attention to the sort of questions addressed in the “Evaluating the use of a theory in a research paper” section of the syllabus;
(c) your overall assessment of the quality and contributions of the study or any other insights you’d like to share; and
(d) two or three discussion questions stemming from your critique.

Please email the written critique to Tally by **10pm on Monday night prior to class** (along with the handout you have prepared with your partner).

The oral critique is expected to take about 15 min., with approximately 15-25 min. for discussion (for each student).

4. **Final Paper/Alternate assignment (35%)** – Choice of assignment is due on 5th week of class: Feb 21; outline/thesis of paper due by March 21st; final paper is due May 9th.
All paper options are expected to be ~ 15-20 pages double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. Feel free to meet with me about this.

**Assignment choice 1:** Write a final paper that applies one or more theory(ies) or approach(es) covered in class to your area of interest. This paper would explore how your substantive area could benefit from integration of theories covered in class.

**Assignment choice 2:** Write a final paper that takes your area of interest and critiques the use of theory in this area. You would summarize the primary theories used, critique their use, and discuss how research could move forward in your field either applying these theories better (what would that look like?) or using or integrating other theories (what would that look like?).

**Assignment choice 3:** Propose a final assignment to me that would help you learn to critique and apply theory.

**Evaluating the use of a theory in a research paper**

**The application of the theory**

1) When describing the theory in the introduction of the paper, did the authors correctly summarize the theory?
2) Did they highlight all the most important parts of the theory or were they selective in what they highlighted?
3) If the latter, what did they leave out, and how does that affect how they motivate or answer their question in this paper?
4) Was this paper about testing and extending a theory, or using the theory to motivate a question? (If the latter, particularly consider meta questions below)
5) If the paper was about testing a theory, did they set up a test that would allow them to be wrong (did they allow for falsification)?
6) How true is their conceptual model (the conceptual model they actual model or test) to the theory?
7) If they have a conceptual model (either an explicit or implicit one) did they include all variables suggested by the theory? If not, how might this affect their findings and implications?
8) In their empirical tests, did they measure each of the constructs appropriately? (Do the measures have face validity? Have they been used by others and were they validated? Do the measures seem better or worse than the ones used by others? Are there major limitations in how the constructs were measured?) How might this affect their findings and implications?
9) If they included concepts and variables that are not part of the theory, did they give adequate justification, and how does this help or hinder their analysis, results, and implications?
10) In their discussion of the findings, do they use language appropriate to their analysis… do they talk about testing or proving? Do they weigh their own results impartially so that they don’t suggest supporting their theory when the evidence they present doesn’t suggest it?
11) In their discussion of the findings, if they find evidence contrary to expectation, do they discuss limitations of their test, the possibility that their expectations were faulty (competing hypotheses), or both?

Meta questions

1) How did the choice of this theory extend knowledge in new ways?
   a) Did it build on previous knowledge and extend in appropriate ways?
   b) Did it question previous knowledge?
2) What are the known limitations of this theory and/or what do you think its limitations are in investigating this domain, question, or with this population?
3) How did the choice of this theory limit the type of question that was asked?
   a) e.g., Is the theory limited in the level of analysis it considers (individual, family, community, societal)?
4) How did the choice of this theory limit the types of answers to the question that could be tested?
   a) e.g., Did use of this theory leave out competing answers to the question asked? How are policy and practice suggestions limited by the type of theory used and the questions asked?