SW951 Theories to inform intervention
January 2017 (1/12/17 version)

Instructor: Stephanie Robert, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Mondays 12:30-3:30, Room 114 Social Work
Office hours and meetings by appointment
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Course Description

This interactive seminar is designed to foster critical thinking about the application of theory to research. In order to provide a consistent theme, the main 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 provide examples of 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 only 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 (by tailoring many of the assignments to their own interests).

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.
## Summary of Weekly Topics

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* Pay attention to change in time or replacement of class time
Grading

15% Class participation (Includes social and economic justice assignment)
5% Faculty theory in your area Assignment
20% Paper and co-facilitation 1
20% Paper and co-facilitation 2
40% Final Paper and presentation (or alternate assignment)

Assignments

Class participation: This is a doctoral seminar, which means your active participation and leadership is required. When you are not a class facilitator for the week, you are still expected to have done the readings, thought about them, 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 doctoral 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 do an assignment (content at my discretion) each week you miss. 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 5th week, you will need to read not only the readings in the syllabus, but also one additional reading for each presenter that week. Presenters will assign these extra readings at least one week in advance. They will be posted on Learn@UW.

We will be reading one book - Thomas Kuhn's "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". Read/skim it all by the third week. Note: When reading this book, do NOT get caught up in the science of it. There are some parts that you can skim. I do NOT expect you to understand and/or care about the nuance of his examples. I want you to understand his basic arguments and ideas. So, if you are reading this book and think you are getting in over your head, you are not. Trust me. This reading is different from everything else we are doing in the class, but this is a classic that we must discuss and that you'll eventually be glad you read it (if you haven't already).

Social and economic justice assignment: Attend the SSW Racial Injustice Conference or attend another talk/training/event that discusses addressing some sort of social and economic justice. Be prepared to use this as an example throughout the semester of how theory is (or is not) used implicitly or explicitly in discussion around social and economic justice.
Faculty use of theory: Interview a faculty member about how they think about and use theory – preferably a faculty member in your area. Be prepared to discuss this in class on March 13th. We will talk as a group in advance about the sorts of questions you might ask.

Co-facilitating two classes (in conjunction with Papers 1 and 2): Each student will co-facilitate two sessions with another student or students (in consultation with me). 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 lead a discussion about the article, highlighting your and others’ 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. Creative exercises that get us all to apply and critique the material are encouraged!

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 Prof. Robert in time for her to approve it and upload it to 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 (upload to the Learn@UW site for the appropriate week) by noon on Sunday before the Monday class in which you present/facilitate. The theory summary, or an alternate handout about the theory, should be shared with the class during the time you facilitate. Often you will need to do additional reading about the theory, beyond the readings assigned in class, to come up with a full summary of the theory. (I’m envisioning approximately 7 pages double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins; shorter on summarizing the theory, longer on critique of its use in the empirical piece).

Final paper – lots of options (General topic due to me by March 13 – don’t hesitate to meet with me about this!)

Assignment choice 1: Instead of doing a final paper, write weekly papers for an additional 3 weeks (beyond the 2 that you are leading), but you don’t need to help lead the session. (In other words, you will do 5 papers, but help lead sessions for only 2 of the weeks). With this option, you also don’t need to do a final presentation. With this option, you hand in your paper to me along with a copy of the empirical piece that you critique (by the beginning of the class that covers that theory).

Assignment choice 2: Write a final paper that takes your area of interest and discusses how it could be addressed theoretically using theories discussed in this class. (I’m envisioning 15-20 pages double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins).
Assignment choice 3: 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 combining other theories (what would that look like?). (I’m envisioning 10-20 pages double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins).

Assignment choice 4: 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 their 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?
   o Did it build on previous knowledge and extend in appropriate ways?
   o 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?
   o 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?
   - 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?
Weekly reading assignments (may be updated on Learn@UW a week in advance)

January 23
Topic: What is theory and why do we care?
Leader: Steph

First:
For the first day of class, BEFORE you do any readings, write down answers to the following questions. I know you may not have good answers for all of them – that is why you are taking this class!
1) What is a theory?
2) How do you judge a good theory?
3) Why would we want to use theory in social work research?
4) What are the major theories used in your area of research interest?

Hopefully, after writing down the top-of-your-head answers, the readings and class will be more meaningful in helping you come up with more comprehensive answers over time – or more questions that we can grapple with in class. When you look back at your answers at the end of the semester, hopefully you will find that you have more or better answers!

Second:
Go to Wikipedia and read/skim “social theory” and “sociological theory”. Think about and jot down notes on the ways in which these sites help or hinder your understanding of what theory is.

Third:
Start reading Thomas Kuhn’s book so you are done reading it and ready to talk about it on Feb 6

January 30
Topic: Social and economic justice assignment – on own

February 6 (starting at 1:15)
Topic 1: What are the Social Determinants of Health?
Topic 2: Discussing Kuhn
Leader: Steph

Read all of the following. They are mostly shorter pieces. Think about the following: Is there a role for social work in addressing 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/

Finish reading Thomas Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (get either the 3rd or 4th editions)

**February 13**  
**Topic 1: Health Behavior Theory – Psychological, Sociological, and Public Health Approaches**  
**Topic 2: Discussing Kuhn, continued**  
**Leader:** Steph

Go here:  
And then enter the site  
Choose “Social and Behavioral Theories” from the menu at left  
“Do” the chapter


When you read the Wang et al. article and the Lubans et al. articles below, keep in mind the questions in: “Evaluating the use of a theory in a research paper”. Come prepared to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of their application of theory.


February 20
Health Behavior Theory – More applications


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

Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:

Look in the *Journal of Heath and Social Behavior* for sociological pieces, *Journal of Health Promotion, American Journal of Public Health, Health Education Research*, *Journal of Community Health* for public health articles and *Health Psychology* for others. Here are some examples below that you may choose from or that give you ideas.


February 27
Economic Approaches to Health Behaviors


@Article on behavioral economics, TBD

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

Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:


March 6
**Faculty use of theory in your area**

March 13
**Stress, coping, and resilience theories**
(Hand in to me a brief proposal for what your final project/paper will be. Doing this BEFORE this date is even better!)


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

Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:


women’s physical and emotional health.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43: 18-33.


**March 20 – Spring Break!!!!**

**March 27**  
**Lifecourse theory and frameworks**


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

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


**April 3 – Work on papers**

**April 10**

**Approaches that are more macro**


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


### April 17

#### Challenges to Mainstream Approaches I


Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:

Other readings may be empirical pieces or other essays/critiques of mainstream theory/research. In particular, something using critical race theory, intersectionality,

### April 24

#### Challenges to Mainstream Approaches II


Feminist epistemology

Go to: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/#pagetopright

Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:

Any piece on a gender-related topic – explain which feminist epistemology is used, as part of your presentation/analysis/facilitation


**May 1**

**Presentations**

**May X????**

**Presentations**