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.
alternate handout about the theory, should be shared with the class during the time you facilitate. Sometimes 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 7-10 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

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 10-20 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 better.

HOW TO SUMMARIZE AND CRITIQUE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION

Starting with the first class session, we will build together a list of ideas on how to summarize and critique theory, and how to critique the application of theory in empirical pieces. We will build this list together and I will compile it and keep it updated on Learn@UW. This will be useful in doing your assignments.
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
Required:

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


**February 13**

**Health Behavior Theory – More applications**


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:

Look in the *Journal of Health 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 other

**February 20**

**Economic Approaches to Health Behaviors**

Required:


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:**


**March 6**

**Stress, coping and resilience theories -- Psychobiological**


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
Lifecourse 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:


March 20
**SPRING BREAK – Waaaaaao!!!**

March 27
**More Macro Approaches**


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


Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:


April 17
*Presentations (4)*

April 24
*Presentations (4)*

May 1
*Presentations (3)*

May 8 – No class