I. Course Description

Proseminar: Applied Theory Seminars

Attributes and designations: This course counts toward the 50% graduate coursework requirement.

Requisites: Social welfare doctoral student or permission of instructor.

How credit hour is met: This class meets for one 3 hour class period each week over the spring semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, problem sets, studying, etc) for about 6 hours out of classroom for every class period. The syllabus includes additional information about meeting times and expectations for student work.

II. Course Overview

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).

III. Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Discuss contemporary issues related to the social determinants of health.
2. Describe the range of theories used in understanding the social determinants of health, and to critique their applications and implications.
3. Describe what constitutes a good scientific theory, including the difference between frameworks, theories, conceptual models, and their functions.
4. Describe 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. Critically assess theory through examination of the strengths and limitations in the range of a sampling of micro, mezzo and macro theories employed in research and their potential implications (e.g., for policy and practice).
6. Critically evaluate other scholars’ use of and application of theory and congruence with research methods.
7. Identify and think critically about the application of theory to their own areas of research.

IV Course Content

Summary of Weekly Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<td>Jan 23</td>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>What is theory and why do we use it?</td>
<td>Steph</td>
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| Jan 30 | Week 2 | - What are the Social Determinants of Health?  
- Discussing Kuhn (The structure of scientific revolutions) | Steph           |
| Feb 6  | Week 3 | - Health Behavior Theory – Public Health Approaches  
- Discussing Kuhn (continued) | Steph           |
| Feb 13 | Week 4 | Health Behavior Theory – More applications               | Jaime and Leah  |
| Feb 20 | Week 5 | Economic Approaches to Behaviors                         | Aaron and Steph |
| Feb 27 | Week 6 | Stress theories                                          | Rachel, Kerrie, and Yoona |
| March 6| Week 7 | Life Course Approaches & Discuss Faculty Interview       | Jaime, Yoona, Kerrie, Midori |
| March 13| Week 8 | More macro approaches  
Submit ideas for your final paper/project | Seungmi, Aaron, Kiley, Leslie |
| March 20| Week 9 | No Class: SPRING BREAK!!! Woohoo!                        |                 |
| March 27| Week 10| Challenges to Mainstream                                 | Seungmi, Leslie, Kiley |
| April 3 | Week 11| Challenges to Mainstream                                 | Rachel, Leah, Midori |
| April 10| Week 12| No Class: Work on papers and presentations               | Steph           |
| April 17| Week 13| Intersectionality                                         |                 |
| April 24| Week 14| Presentations                                             | Students        |
| May 1  | Week 15| Presentations                                             | Students        |
Weekly reading assignments (may be updated on Canvas a week in advance)

January 23

**Topic: What is theory and why do we care?**

**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 January 30. See my comments about this book above under “Weekly Readings”

January 30

**Topic 1: What are the Social Determinants of Health?**
**Topic 2: Discussing Kuhn**
**Leader: Steph**

Read all of the readings below. 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/](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/)

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

**February 6**

**Topic 1: Health Behavior Theory – Psychological, Sociological, and Public Health Approaches**

**Topic 2: Discussing Kuhn, continued**

**Leader: Steph**

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 13**

**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 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 others. Here are some examples below that you may choose from or that give you ideas.


**February 20**

**Economic Approaches to Health Behaviors**


@Potential 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:


**February 27**

**Stress, coping, and resilience theories**


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**

**Life course theory and frameworks**

**Discuss faculty interview**


Added from original syllabus:

Suggested:

Deleted from original syllabus:

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 13
Approaches that are more macro


Examples of types of articles appropriate for empirical pieces:


March 20 – Spring Break!

March 27
Challenges to Mainstream Approaches I
Criticial race theory, grounded theory


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, or creating new theory with grounded theory

Gram, L., J. Skordis-Worrall, N. Saville, D. S. Manandhar, N. Sharma, and J. Morrison. 2019. “‘There is no point giving cash to women who don’t spend it the way they are told to spend it’ – Exploring women’s agency over cash in a combined participatory women’s groups and cash transfer programme to improve low birthweight in rural Nepal.” Social Science & Medicine, 221, 9-18.

April 3

Challenges to Mainstream Approaches II
Feminist approaches and participatory approaches


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; pieces using community-based participatory research.


**April 10**

**Work on papers and presentations**

**April 17**

**Emerging topics - Intersectionality**


April 24

Presentations

May 1

Presentations

Final papers due: May 6th 11:59 p.m.
V. Texts and Reading Materials for the course


Get either the 3rd or 4th editions

All other required readings will be found on Canvas

VI. Evaluation: Assignments, Grading and Methods

Grading

15% Class participation
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)

Grading Scale

A 94-100 outstanding; surpasses expectations in all areas
AB 88-93 surpasses expectations in many areas
B 82-87 meets expectations in all areas
BC 76-81 meets expectations in some areas; below in others
C 70-75 below expectations in most areas, not acceptable graduate work
D 64-69 below expectations in all areas
F <64 fails to meet minimal expectations in all areas, not acceptable work

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.

Weekly readings: There are weekly readings. Starting in the 4th 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 Canvas.
We will be reading one book - Thomas Kuhn's "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". Read/skim it all by the second 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 (if you haven't already)!

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 6th. 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 other 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 research paper 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 Canvas 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 Canvas site for the appropriate week) by noon on Tuesday before the Wednesday 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!) Choices 2 and 3 are particularly designed to help you prepare for the theory portion of your preliminary exam in social work, for those of you in the social welfare doctoral program. Due May 6 11:59 p.m.
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). The three paper grades are averaged to contribute to the 40% of your final assignment grade.

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 unique final assignment to me that would help you learn to critique and apply theory.

VII. Course Policies and Additional Information

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.

Paper format

All papers should be submitted as a Word document (except with prior permission for a different format) using 1 inch margins, double spacing, and 12 point font. Please number the pages and make sure your name and assignment title is indicated on the first page or on headers.

Religious Observance

If you have a religious observance that conflicts with a due date, please let me know no later than the third class period so that we can plan an alternate due date or assignment.

Disability Accommodation
McBurney Disability Resource Center syllabus statement: “The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty [me] of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. Faculty [I], will work either directly with the student [you] or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student’s educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.” [http://mcburney.wisc.edu/facstaffother/faculty/syllabus.php](http://mcburney.wisc.edu/facstaffother/faculty/syllabus.php)

**Inclement weather policy**

If there is inclement weather, students will be expected to check their email prior to leaving for class to confirm whether classes are cancelled. Class will typically only be cancelled if the university closes.

- If classes are cancelled due to inclement weather, students should check their email for instructions for how to engage in class material for that day
- If classes are not cancelled, but an individual student concludes that s/he cannot safely travel to reach her/his class site, the student must contact her/his instructor(s) regarding her/his plan to not travel. This absence will be considered excused and make up work will be assigned.

**Student Wellness**

As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning. These might include strained relationships, anxiety, high levels of stress, alcohol/drug problems, racism, feeling down, and/or loss of motivation. University Health Services (UHS) can help with these or other issues you may be experiencing. You can learn about the free, confidential mental health services available on campus by calling (608-265-5600) or visiting www.uhs.wisc.edu. Help is always available.

Other student support services and programs include:

- Multicultural Student Center [https://msc.wisc.edu/](https://msc.wisc.edu/)
- Gender and Sexuality Campus Center [https://lgbt.wisc.edu/](https://lgbt.wisc.edu/)
- Dean of Students Office [https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/](https://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/)

Below are resources for reporting and responding to incidences of bias and hate on campus.

- [https://students.wisc.edu/doso/services/bias-reporting-process](https://students.wisc.edu/doso/services/bias-reporting-process) Report:
- Bias Response and Advocacy Coordinator email: [reportbias@wisc.edu](mailto:reportbias@wisc.edu)
• uwpd.wisc.edu UW-Madison Police Department:
• Office of Equity and Diversity: www.oed.wisc.edu/

You may also report incidents in-person to the Dean of Students Office, 70 Bascom Hall, during normal business hours. Reportable incidents include crimes such as vandalism or physical assault, as well as non-academic misconduct, slurs, and intimidation. Anyone who files a report will have the opportunity to meet with the Bias Response and Advocacy Coordinator, so that we can meet their needs and ensure their safety.

Academic Integrity and Misconduct

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UW-Madison’s community of scholars in which everyone’s academic work and behavior are held to the highest academic integrity standards. Academic misconduct compromises the integrity of the university. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these acts are examples of academic misconduct, which can result in disciplinary action. This includes but is not limited to failure on the assignment/course, disciplinary probation, or suspension. Substantial or repeated cases of misconduct will be forwarded to the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards for additional review. For more information, refer to studentconduct.wiscweb.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/.

Institutional statement on diversity

“Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.” https://diversity.wisc.edu/

Please help me to ensure that our classroom environment is welcoming and inclusive, and upholds the goal of critically grappling with difficult issues while being respectful as we learn from each other across our different experience and perspectives.
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?
   ○ Did it build on previous knowledge and extend in appropriate ways?
   ○ 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?
   ○ 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?
   o E.g., Did use of this theory leave out competing answers to the question asked?
   o How are policy and practice suggestions limited by the type of theory used and the questions asked?