I. Course Description

This course focuses on the fundamental relationship between theory and research, with attention to how theories are developed, how they evolve, and how they may most appropriately guide social science research and be applied to different types of research questions and designs in social work. Students will be introduced to a variety of research traditions and will engage with theories used across social science disciplines as well as applied fields which, like social work, take an interdisciplinary approach to theoretical conceptualization. Students will also gain experience evaluating the application of theories to their own areas of study, developing the critical skills necessary to draw upon and use theory in their own work.

II. Course Objectives

1. To understand the concept of a social science theory;

2. To understand concepts in the philosophy of science as these shape and inform the use of theory;

3. To understand theory development and social work research as these relate to current debates about knowledge-building for social work;

4. To develop skills to think critically about theory;

5. To develop skills in conceptual analysis;

6. To develop awareness of how personal perspectives influence theory selection, development, and testing.
III. Course Format and Requirements

While each seminar session may differ somewhat in discussion methods employed, most sessions will begin with a more general discussion of the topic or theory, followed by critique of the assigned empirical articles through group discussion. Students are expected to take an active role in class discussion, including taking responsibility for leading discussions about selected articles and contributing to discussion when other students are taking the lead. (please note that the list of scheduled readings is tentative and may be modified; I will notify you in the event that I make substitutions or additions)

1. Participation in and Leadership of Class Discussions (20% of grade)

Participation grade will include mandatory submission of a weekly reading reflection (all weeks) and leadership of the class discussion of one article per week in Weeks 7-12.

The weekly reflection memo (half of a single spaced page) is designed to help you prepare to be an active participant in class discussion. This brief response should capture items that stood out to you as important in an argument; and could also contain a personal reaction, a discussion of how the reading is relevant to your own substantive area of interest, or application of the reading to some aspect of social work research, practice, or policy. In addition, your memo should involve generating 2-3 questions for class discussion. These questions could be about things that puzzle you; things you think are missing or absent from an author’s presentation; could compare or contrast ideas from previous class discussions with the current reading; or could query the authors’ intent, assumptions, or interpretations. A copy of these reflections should be emailed to me the night before our class (Tuesday nights) and brought with you to class to enrich discussion.

On weeks 7-12, each student will be assigned to facilitate discussion of one of the assigned empirical research articles. As part of this leadership role, please be prepared to begin discussion by summarizing the primary problem or question posed by the study; theoretical assumptions; key concepts; and methodological approach. Subsequently, lead the class in a discussion of to what extent the authors were successful in applying the theoretical approach to the problem and delineation of the approach’s strengths and limitations.

2. Theory Formulation Memos (1-2 pages, single-spaced, see exception on final memo, 5 total) (80% of grade)

With these memos, you are expected to select a research problem or question and analyze how theory is used to explore that problem, in the context of a specific discipline or literature. The problem you select should remain consistent across memos. If, for example, you are proposing to do a study of youth violence in schools, you will analyze how different theoretical and disciplinary literatures theorize the problem and how the research strategy links to the theory proposed to account for it.
The memos must situate the problem within a theory(s). Here, it is important to note that it is ‘theoretical’ precisely because it leads us to some expectable outcome, even though the theory may in the end fail to offer an adequate explanatory account. It is theoretical because it is useful and can persuade the reader to understand something about what is going on within a practice or policy domain.

Many if not most social work students conduct research across disciplines or areas of knowledge. When you do this it is a good idea to examine the areas of overlap among theories or differing literatures. In the final memo, you are asked to discuss your own approach to your identified problem and to discuss rival theoretical claims that can be resolved by additional or different kinds of empirical work.

Memos 1-4 are due by the end of the day (5:00) on the Friday following our Wednesday seminar (submit to Professor Angell by email). Memo 5 is to be presented informally in class on 12/7 and is due in final form on 12/14.

Memo 1: In this memo, you must identify an object of study (i.e., your question, problem, what you want to explain/understand) and identify one empirical study of this problem situated within the disciplines of anthropology or sociology. Consider using the Annual Reviews of Sociology and Anthropology to begin your search. Here, your objective is to explore how the study you have identified uses a theory or theories from one or more of these disciplines. In thinking and writing about the theories identified, consider to what extent was theory stated explicitly or implicitly and applied appropriately. How appropriate did the theory seem to be in relationship to the issue, problem or concept addressed in the article? If theory was absent or stated implicitly, how and which theory (if appropriate) might have enhanced the study? What is your rationale? To what extent were the methods consistent with or appropriate for testing the theory? Provide examples to support your comments (e.g., to illustrate the ways in which the authors did or did not demonstrate theoretical and methodological congruence).

Memo 2: In this memo, you will continue to work with the object of study identified (and now refined) in memo 1 and locate the identified problem within the discipline of psychology. Identify a good example of a psychological study of your topic; consider using the Annual Reviews (psychology and clinical psychology) to begin your search. Here, your objective is to describe how your problem has been (or might be) considered theoretically by yet another human science. How might this discipline require you to rethink or reformulate your question? Describe and explain. In thinking and writing about the theories identified, consider to what extent was theory stated explicitly or implicitly and applied appropriately. How appropriate did the theory seem to be in relationship to the issue, problem or concept addressed in the article? If theory was absent or stated implicitly, how and which theory (if appropriate) might have enhanced the study? What is your rationale? To what extent were the methods consistent with or appropriate for testing the theory? Provide examples to support your comments (e.g., to illustrate the ways in which the authors did or did not demonstrate theoretical and methodological congruence).
Memo 3: In this memo, you will continue to work with the object of study identified (and now refined) in memos 1 and 2 and locate the identified problem within the perspective of either political science or economics. Identify a good example of a study of your topic. Here, your objective is to describe how your problem has been (or might be) considered theoretically by political scientists or economists. How might this discipline require you to rethink or reformulate your question? Describe and explain. In thinking and writing about the theories identified, consider to what extent was theory stated explicitly or implicitly and applied appropriately. How appropriate did the theory seem to be in relationship to the issue, problem or concept addressed in the article? If theory was absent or stated implicitly, how and which theory (if appropriate) might have enhanced the study? What is your rationale? To what extent were the methods consistent with or appropriate for testing the theory? Provide examples to support your comments (e.g., to illustrate the ways in which the authors did or did not demonstrate theoretical and methodological congruence).

Memo 4: In this memo, you will continue to work with the object of study identified (and now refined) in memos 1-3 and locate the identified problem within the perspective of an applied discipline – such as public policy or public health. Identify a good example of a study of your topic. Here, your objective is to describe how your problem has been (or might be) considered theoretically by applied social scientists. How do they approach the problem differently from the more basic social sciences? How might this perspective require you to rethink or reformulate your question? Describe and explain. In thinking and writing about the theories identified, consider to what extent was theory stated explicitly or implicitly and applied appropriately. How appropriate did the theory seem to be in relationship to the issue, problem or concept addressed in the article? If theory was absent or stated implicitly, how and which theory (if appropriate) might have enhanced the study? What is your rationale? To what extent were the methods consistent with or appropriate for testing the theory? Provide examples to support your comments (e.g., to illustrate the ways in which the authors did or did not demonstrate theoretical and methodological congruence).

Memo 5: (note: this memo should now reflect a thorough integration of the ideas discussed in all of the memos, limited and refined, 5-7 pages, single-spaced). In this final memo, you will continue to work with the object of study identified in memo 1 (and their further refinements) and situate the problem within a theoretical literature in social work. Here, your objective is to use the social work literature to further explore how your object of study might be explained or differently understood. In this final memo, you must carefully address the following question: how have social work researchers contributed (or not) to the broader understanding of the problem identified in the above memos? Are there ways in which the perspectives converge or diverge? Describe and explain. As in the first five memos, you must briefly describe how your problem has been (or might be) considered in social work. In thinking and writing about the theories identified, consider to what extent was theory stated explicitly or implicitly and applied appropriately. How appropriate did the theory seem to be in relationship to the issue, problem or concept addressed in the article? If theory was absent or stated implicitly,
how and which theory (if appropriate) might have enhanced the study? What is your rationale? To what extent were the methods consistent with or appropriate for testing the theory? Provide examples to support your comments (e.g., to illustrate the ways in which the authors did or did not demonstrate theoretical and methodological congruence).

In this memo, you should also begin to think about your own theoretical and methodological commitments; that is, how best to study this problem. This final memo should result in a more complex understanding of the problem and move you toward actual research. This memo is due in final form on 12/14.
Course Schedule and Readings (which will be made available on sakai)

Session 1 (9/7). Introduction
The ‘Science Crisis’ in Social Work


**Note: class will not be held on 9/14**

Session 2 (9/21). Philosophy of Social Science (meet early – 1:00-3:30)


Session 3 (9/28): Meet early

What is theory/why is it needed?


**Session 4 (10/5). Explanatory/Positivist Approaches**


Empirical examples: choose one and be prepared to discuss


Recommended:


**Session 5 (10/12). Interpretive Approaches**

*Required Readings:*


**Session 6 (10/19: meet early – 1:00-3:30). Critical/Historical Approaches**


**Session 7 (10/26)**

Comparative Approaches Applied to a Common Problem (suicide)


Empirical articles on which students will lead discussion:


**Session 8 (11/2). Anthropological and Sociological Traditions**


**Memo 1 due on the Friday following class**

**Session 9 (11/9; meet early 1-3:30)**

**Psychological Tradition**


**Memo 2 Due on the Friday following class**

**Session 10 (11/16): Political Science and Economics**


Recommended only - for background:


**Memo 3 Due on the Friday following class**

**Session 11 (11/23)**

**Applied Disciplines: Public Policy and Public Health**


Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration Program, Final Impacts Evaluation (read Chapter 1 and Chapter 8).

Recommended for background:


**Memo 4 due on the Friday following class**

**Session 12 (11/30): Applied Disciplines: Social Work**


**Session 13 (12/7): Implications of Theory for Strategies of Inquiry**


**Session 14 (12/14):** Students will make informal presentations of their final memos to one another (15-20 minutes per student). Final memos are due in class (please also send me a copy by email).