I. Course Description

This is the first half of two required sequential courses within the doctoral program. It provides the basic knowledge and skills to prepare students to understand the relative place and contribution of theoretical conceptualization and practice wisdom to the development of social work practice (including direct, indirect, and policy practice) knowledge. Using concepts from the philosophy of science, students will consider how social work practice knowledge evolves and transforms, and how practice theories may be empirically tested to generate alternative theories. The differential contributions of developing and testing of human behavior theory for practice knowledge, and developing and testing intervention theories for client system change are discussed. The roles of descriptive and prescriptive research in theory development are addressed.

II. Course Objectives

1. To understand the concept of a practice theory;

2. To understand concepts in the philosophy of science as these shape and inform social work practice theories;

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

4. To develop skills to think critically about practice theories;

5. To develop skills in conceptual analysis;

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

A seminar format will be used with occasional lectures. A high level of class participation is expected and students are asked to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, and to participate in presentations by other students. (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)

**Theory Formulation Memos (1-2 pages, single-spaced, see exception on final memo, 5 total) (100% 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 practice-related 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.

**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 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 ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments (i.e., positivism, empiricism, rationalism, critical realism, interpretivism) and choices these theories entail and address their potential and limitation in the research you might conduct. You must circulate the memo to your colleagues (and to me) before the class meets on Wednesday--email no later than midnight on Monday before class.

**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 about the theories identified, consider ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments and choices these theories entail and address their potential and limitation in the research you might conduct. You must circulate the memo to your colleagues (and to me) before the class meets on Wednesday---email no later than midnight on Monday before class.

**Memo 3:** 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 perspective of either **political science, economics, or history**. 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, historians, or economists. How might this discipline require you to rethink or reformulate your question? Describe and explain. In thinking about the theories identified, consider ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments and choices these theories entail and address their potential and limitation in the research you might conduct. You must circulate the memo to your colleagues (and to me) before the class meets on Wednesday---email no later than midnight on Monday before class.

**Memo 4:** 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 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 about the theories identified, consider ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments and choices these theories entail and address their potential and limitation in the research you might conduct. You must circulate the memo to your colleagues (and to me) before the class meets on Wednesday---email no later than midnight on Monday before class.

**Memo 5:** (note: this memo should now reflect a thorough integration of the ideas discussed in all of the memos, limited and refined, 4-5 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 about the theories identified, consider ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments and choices
these theories entail and address their potential and limitation in the research you might conduct. In this memo, you should also begin to think about your own theoretical 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 on the last class of the semester, 12/11.

Prior to each class in which a memo is due, review the memos of your colleagues, and be prepared to discuss your own process of exploration and discovery as part of our discussion of each discipline’s perspective and approach to social problems.
Course Schedule and Readings (which will be made available on sakai)

Session 1 (9/11). Introduction
The Science Crisis in Social Work


Session 2 (9/18). Philosophy of Social Science


Session 3 (9/25): What is theory/why is it needed?


Pulerwitz, J., Amaro, H., DeJong, W., Gortmaker, S.L., & Rudd, R. (2002). Relationship power, condom use, and HIV risk among women in the USA. *AIDS Care, 14*(6), 789-800.

**Session 4 (10/2). Explanatory/Positivist Approaches**


**Session 5 (10/9). Interpretive Approaches**

*Required Readings:*


Session 6 (10/16). Critical/Historical Approaches


Session 7 (10/23). Comparative Approaches Applied to a Common Problem (suicide)


Session 8 (10/30). Anthropological and Sociological Tradition


**Memo 1 Due on the Monday preceding class**

**Session 9 (11/6): Psychological Tradition**


**Memo 2 Due on the Monday preceding class**
Session 10 (11/13): Political Science, Economic, and Historical Traditions


**Memo 3 Due Monday preceding class**


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

**Memo 4 Due Monday preceding class**

Session 12 (11/4): Implications of Theory for Strategies of Inquiry

statistical tests.


**Session 13 (12/11): Wrap up/catch up/topic TBD**

**Memo 5 due in final class**