COURSE OUTLINE

Description

Currently the place of theory in social work is controversial. Some argue that because social work is a pragmatic profession charged with carrying out practical tasks, theory has little direct relevance. What really counts is experience, personal qualities, and the ability to make common sense judgments when confronted with the requirements of dealing with “the real world.” Conversely others argue that theory is not only inevitable but also pervasive. Hence the dominant propensity in social work to view theory as abstract and esoteric is a profound obstacle to social work's professional and scientific progress. Because this course is a seminar in theory development in applied arenas of study, most particularly social work, it addresses this debate directly. Indeed, the fact of proposing such a course reflects the belief that something is definitely wrong with how social work deals with theory and that it is important to try to right this wrong. Following from this, the course begins by exploring questions about the nature of theory -- what it is and what it is not -- and the rationale for studying theory development in the social work component of a program in social work and social science. Arguments concerning the irrelevance/inevitability of theory will be examined, along with conflicting claims about whether atheoretical/anti-theoretical tendencies in social work scholarship are profoundly ideological, or whether they define a specific but unexplicated philosophy of science. Subsequently, the focus will shift to examine the development of guidelines for the construction of theory that is likely to be applied to, or utilized in, “real-life” conditions and situations. In this regard, topics covered include the elements and logic of theory construction, forms of theories, approaches to theory development, as well as theory-testing/validation. In addition, because theory, in both its purpose and structure, is independent of the requirement of practical utility, there are some special problems associated with differences in the orientations and purposes of theorist-researchers and practitioners. The meaning and implications of these differences will be examined from a variety of perspectives. Literature used in the course will come from a variety of sources,
including the history of science, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of social science, social work, the sociology of knowledge, social research, and organization theory. In addition, participants will be encouraged to introduce literature and material relevant to their own particular substantive interests.

**Design**
The course has a seminar format. Consequently, the emphasis is on discussion and the exchange of ideas and information. Students will be expected to have read and given thought to the readings for the week, so that class time can be devoted to drawing out key ideas, raising issues, and developing critiques. Also, students will be expected to have completed one-page summaries of the readings, highlighting questions and issues for discussion. Further, students will be asked to take the lead in presenting assessments of readings, as well as outlining the nature of their own work.

**Text and other Reading Material**
There is required texts, plus additional readings to be made available in the library. Other readings may also be assigned as the course progresses. The text, available at Ulricks, is:


**Grading and Requirements**
The overall grade for the course will be based on class participation and a term paper. Their respective weightings are 25% and 75%. Although a thorough study of the assigned readings is necessary preparation, the central point is to think about them critically. This is the idea behind adopting a seminar format, and is the rationale for grading participation.

The term paper will be developed in two phases, with each phase involving a class presentation. The first phase will focus on the identification and critical assessment on a theory of your choosing. Results from this phase will be presented in class on March 14 and 21. The focus in the second phase will be on elaborating the theory to a context in which it has not been previously applied. This involves reformulating the theory in a manner that permits a substantive exploration of its validity when applied to other problems or units of analysis, or in other research domains. Results from this phase will be presented in class April 4 and 11. The term paper, due on April 22, will document both phases, and conclude with a discussion of the meaning and implications of the project for practitioners.

I suggest that you start thinking about what theory you will examine early in the term. Sometimes what's presented as a theory turns out, under closer examination, not to be one! Please feel free to come and discuss your selection and ideas with me. Glancing through the readings for our eighth class may help in getting an orientation to the
assignment. Following are the main criteria applied in the assessment of written assignments:

1. Definition and maintenance of a clear focus.
2. Systematic and logical presentation of arguments
3. Appropriate use of evidence.
4. Development of relevant and interesting insights.
5. Familiarity with, and appropriate use of relevant literature.
6. Clarity of presentation.
7. Conformity with the requirements of the assignment.

Other Considerations
Your term paper should be typed and double-spaced. Also, it must follow an established academic convention for organization, pagination, footnoting, table and figure presentation and bibliographic references. Overall, your orientation should be one of developing a good draft of a 20-25 page paper which you anticipate submitting for publication.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

1. Getting Acquainted and Getting Started.
   Introduction and purpose; rationale for the course; review of course assignments; class time and scheduling presentations.

2. No class

4. Thinking about What Theory Is Not.

5. Thinking about What Theory Is.
Laudan, “Prologue”, Chs. 1 and 2.

6. Different Forms of Theory

7. Connecting Theory to the Big Picture
Laudan, Chs. 3 and 4

SPRING BREAK

8. The History of a Theory and Its Elaboration: The Liabilities of Newness and of Adolescence
Carroll, G. R. "Dynamics of Publisher Succession in Newspaper Organizations."

9. **Class Presentations**
Each presenter will suggest one reading that provides a good overview of the theory to be elaborated at least one week prior to the presentation. An additional readings is:
Laudan, Ch. 6, particularly pp. 175-184.

10. **Class Presentations**
Each presenter will suggest one reading that provides a good overview of the theory to be elaborated at least one week prior to the presentation.

11. **Theory and Practice**

12. **Class Presentations**
Each presenter will suggest, at least one week prior to the presentation, one reading that provides substantive information relevant to the topic.

13. **Class Presentations**
Each presenter will suggest, at least one week prior to the presentation, one reading that provides substantive information relevant to the topic.

14. **Sum up and Evaluation**
Laudan, Ch. 7.