SW 611: Social Change Theories

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Thursday 9 a.m. – noon
2302 School of Education

Note: This course is one of those designated by the Governing Faculty to Intensively Focus on Privilege, Oppression, Diversity and Social Justice. Attention to these four dimensions is to occur across the three courses within each Practice Area Concentration and the Program Evaluation course. Note that these IF dimensions are related to the themes that are mandated to be included through all courses, but they are to be foregrounded even more in the Practice Area Concentration courses. As an HBSE course, our emphasis in 611 will be on knowledge and theory, and the application of that knowledge and theory to various areas of practice within the arenas of CSS. Although this is not a practice methods course, we can develop and practice skills in the critique and application of knowledge and theory in ways relevant to practice (e.g., assessment, analysis, planning, design and evaluation of interventions and change strategies and tactics).

We will be emphasizing the social justice dimension—as a desired goal of all planned change. This includes articulating what social justice is, forces for and against social justice goals, and factors that must be incorporated in applying theories of change if social justice is always to be a goal. Factors necessary to examine in social change for social justice include 1) forces that create and perpetuate unearned privilege and oppression and discrimination related to group membership; 2) dimensions of diversity and how they interact/intersect with each other; and 3) power, various ways of understanding power, and how power is relevant in all of the above.

What follows is the course description approved by the faculty several years ago, revised somewhat from the one approved by the faculty to include more attention to organization level theory and approaches. **This course description has not yet been revised to include language and goals that emphasize the Intensive Focus (IF) goals.** We are working on changing the courses simultaneously with rewriting the course descriptions, so will be working on the language in this course description during the Spring/Summer and fall. The revised course descriptions will be submitted to the governing faculty for their approval in winter, 2003.

The School is also conducting an evaluation of the IF change process in order to provide us information to inform our on-going planning. Eventually, we will be identifying and evaluating desired outcomes—for student learning overall and within particular courses, for each course, for each set of courses, for the curriculum as a whole, and the School as an organization. It is likely that we will be asked to participate in evaluation-related activities over the course of the term, but we don’t know yet exactly what these might be. We are very interested in your advice about relevant language and goals for this course in relation to the IF initiative.
Course Description

This course will review theories and research on organizational, community and societal change, and the roles of individual and group change within larger systems. Theories from many disciplines will be covered, including social conflict, interest groups, and social movements, and such processes as consciousness-raising. Dynamics of the diffusion of innovations in society will also be addressed. Examples will be drawn from a variety of areas of practice in which social workers are involved.

Course Content

The main goal of this course is to address the questions of why and how change occurs in different types of macro systems. Students will compare and contrast different theoretical approaches to the understanding of organizational, community and societal change. Students will learn about how theories have explained stability and change, and approaches to planned change. Comparative dimensions will include the theory’s scope, historical origins, and cultural contexts; the societal arenas and problem areas from which the theory was developed and in which it has been applied; and the assumptions of a theory about humankind, society and how change occurs.

Although the primarily emphasis will be on societal level change, this course will also consider theories of change at the individual, group, community, and organizational levels, and in particular how changes at different system levels affect each other. Students will consider the extent to which different theories are, or are not, compatible with each other and the implications of these relationships for the usefulness of particular theories for particular purposes. Change theories will be included from multiple disciplines and traditions, and students will consider how scholars and activists from different disciplinary perspectives and fields have used and critiqued each other’s work. Emphasis will be given to the types of evidence and knowledge available about each theoretical approach and the types of inquiry used to develop and critique different theories.

Different bodies of thought about change will be critiqued for their relevance to the issues facing privileged, marginalized and oppressed groups within U.S. society and for their usefulness cross-culturally and cross-identity group boundaries. Students will consider how different theories have been applied or could be applied for different purposes, and critique existing types of practice from particular theoretical perspectives. In particular, students will explore the theories that have been important within human service goal and problem areas of interest to them.

Course Objectives

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Describe, compare, and contrast several types of theories about organizational, community, and societal change, and the roles that individual and group change play within these changes.
2. Identify theories relevant to particular goal and problem areas, and critique their strengths and limitations.

3. Critique different theories as to their assumptions, origins, implications for different social problems, and relevance for social justice, diversity, oppression, privilege, marginalized and oppressed groups.

4. Apply particular theories to different areas of practice.

5. Discuss typical ethical concerns related to theories or organizational, community and societal change.

*Multiculturalism and diversity* will be addressed in this course by identifying theories espoused by and compatible with different cultural traditions, by critiquing theories from different cultural perspectives, and through course examples about the usefulness of theories in different interest groups and cultural communities, and with regard to the intersections among these group boundaries.

*Social justice and social change* will be addressed within the goals and assumptions of each theoretical approach. Most of the course will focus how theories can illuminate and help to promote social justice goals, and disrupt the forces that perpetuate unearned privilege and oppression, by conceptualizing and operationalizing organizational, community, and societal change.

*Promotion, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation* will be addressed by examining theories about social change for their relevance and applicability in each of these areas. Students will compare and contrast theories that focus on a positive vision of the future with theories focusing on preventing, reducing, or eliminating existing problems.

*Behavioral and social science research* as well as knowledge from other disciplines will be included by examining the evidence and approaches used to build theory and apply theory through its applications in practice.

*Social work ethics and values*—Students will examine theories and explore the extent to which they aid social workers with their ethical responsibilities to the general welfare of society. In particular, theories and practice examples will be critiqued with respect to the following ethical principles: preventing and eliminating discrimination, ensuring access to resources and services, expanding choices for all persons, promoting conditions that encourage respect for diversity, advocating for changes in policy to improve social conditions and promote social justice, and encourage informed participation by citizens in shaping policies and institutions.

**Course Requirements**

If size permits, the course will be run primarily as a seminar. The amount of reading for this class is demanding, and you will need to come prepared to participate and provide leadership in the classroom. Readings come from two sources:
A large course pack will be available at Excel at 1117 S. University (upstairs) [734-996-1500] and on reserve in the SSW library.

The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell is available at Common Language Bookstore, 215 S. Fourth Street, downtown Ann Arbor, just off of Liberty. It is probably available at any bookstore, but I understand that they obtained remainder books for about $7.50 each, which is probably a better deal then you’ll find elsewhere.

In addition to completing readings and engaging in class activities, students will complete several assignments intended to assess interests, knowledge, and experience with social change, types and goals of desired change, analysis and critique of theories (engaging in theorizing), and the application of theories to a change effort – either completed or planned – from one or more theoretical perspectives. These will be assessed through:

- [Almost] weekly commentaries on the themes of the course, class activities, and content of the readings;
- Class participation [includes attendance & punctuality, active consultation with colleagues, discussion of key aspects of own project to the class]
- Final paper/project applying theories to change area of interest [a rough draft is required mid-semester]
- A short reflection on the semester – including major learnings, gaps and issues remaining

More details on assignments will be presented in the coming weeks.

**Classroom climate and processes, rights and responsibilities**

I hope that everyone will contribute to developing a climate in the classroom in which we can teach each other from our different perspectives and experiences. I believe that it’s important to have a flexible and empowering classroom if we are to explore approaches to change most productively. We will experiment with new knowledge and skills; explore the implications of own ethnic/gender/class competence and our backgrounds in thinking about and planning social change. Within class, we will consult with each other on the projects and assignments; and generate plans and strategies for future learning and development.

We will spend some time at the beginning considering how the class will operate, developing groundrules and norms for ourselves, and getting to know each other’s backgrounds and interests. We will revisit our procedures periodically, to be sure they are working well, and revised them if they aren’t. Theorizing can be scary and difficult, exciting and challenging. We are likely to differ in how we believe change should or does happen. We need to be able to challenge and assist each other if the learning experience is to be an optimal one. I need each of you to be “up front” about what is clear, uncomfortable, problematic. I will try and develop varied approaches to the use of class time, and will regularly solicit your ideas about how best to use the time.
Course Schedule

Sept 5  Introduction & Overview

Sept 12  Education as Social Change & The Tipping Point


Sept 19  Change through Consciousness & The Tipping Point


Sept 26  Social Justice & Social Work Theory & The Tipping Point


Oct 3 Sociological, Critical Social Theory & Planned Change


Oct 10 Feminist Theory & Planned Change


Oct 17 Social Movement Theory


Oct 24 Theories of organizational change


Oct 31 Theories for public policy work, interest groups


Nov 7 No readings Assigned; First Draft of Final Project Due

Nov 14 Postmodernism & Foucault


Foucault, M. Method. 92-102


Nov 21 Postmodernism continued


Nov 28 Happy Thanksgiving!

Dec 5 Non-linear Systems and Chaos Theories


Dec 12 Linking across levels & theories FINAL PROJECT DUE

