COURSE PERSPECTIVE

In the quote from Albert Einstein above, we are challenged to think better. Theory is the tool we have for thinking better not just insightfully, but foremost systematically. In its best uses, theory is creative, scientific, and productive in generating empirical evidence. In applied social science use of theory in research also informs policy and practice.

In the quest for better thinking, Einstein also said, “Imagination is superior to knowledge.” But he was not talking about uninformed or undisciplined imagination. In order to harness imagination in scientific inquiry, whether natural science or social science, whether basic or applied, it is necessary to specify ideas in theoretical statements with clear hypotheses that are subject to rigorous testing.

Another way of saying this is that data by themselves are only information, but data in the context of a productive question and well-specified theory have the potential to increase our understanding. Indeed, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that we do not achieve knowledge, in a scientific sense, by any other pathway.
Moreover, in the applied social sciences we are looking not only for what is true, but for what is both true and useful. In this regard, some types of research questions are likely to be more productive than others, and a key part of our job is to identify and specify these questions. This task is essentially theoretical. In the best applied social research, theoretical statements guide research design, data collection, and analytical strategies. In this sense, theory is an integral part of research methods.

This course is based on the following viewpoints and assumptions:

- Social scientific inquiry is usually costly in time and resources.
- A good scholar will be able to undertake only a limited number of productive studies in her or his lifetime.
- All research questions are not equal; some are more productive, intellectually and/or practically, than others.
- The most important challenge facing a research scholar is to ask a productive question.
- In order to do so, it is necessary to (1) think clearly about the issues of concern, and (2) formulate these as theoretical statements that can be tested, the answers to which (3) have meaningful and sustainable implications, and (4) people who want to use this knowledge, ideally in serious applications on a large scale.

All of this represents a very high bar for applied social research. The applied research agenda is much more demanding than the basic research agenda by including the imperative of application in the real world, yet requiring the same high standards of intellectual and methodological integrity. This course will emphasize the application of theory and knowledge in a real world.

**ROLE IN THE PROGRAM OF DOCTORAL STUDIES**

This course is related to and ideally would precede the research design course, though the courses are usually taken simultaneously.

The course can contribute a great deal to preparation for the area statement. If the student’s area of interest stays substantially the same (sometimes it does not), then the primary assignment for this course can serve as a major step toward the area statement.

**DOMAIN AND BOUNDARIES**

The course addresses primarily the role and use of theory in social inquiry. Theory is viewed as an integral part of the research process in the social sciences, including the applied social sciences. Consistent with other research-oriented courses in the doctoral program, we assume that the basic requirements for using theory are not unique in social work, although substantive applications might be.

Although paradigms, frameworks, typologies, and other conceptual devices are discussed, the term "theory" is reserved for explicit expressions of logically interrelated constructs. This is positivist theory in a scientific sense. The orientation in this course is toward deduction, with particular emphasis on the role of testable hypotheses.
This is not to say that positivism is the only "way of knowing"—far from it—but only that positivism is the method of scientific research, and the method for which you will be primarily trained in this doctoral program.

Neither is this to say that all inquiry must be deductive, but only that deduction is the fundamental logic of science. Deduction is the only logic that enables empirical tests of clearly stated hypotheses and replication of results. As such, it is a powerful tool for knowledge building, and the viewpoint of the instructor is that it is essential to learn this fundamental tool, as one would learn the basics of any craft, before making decisions to deviate from it.

In this course, attention is given to:
• The role and uses of theory in social science.
• Desirable qualities of theories.
• Appreciation of existing theory, and ability to recognize strengths and weaknesses.
• Techniques and exercises in concept formation, relationships, and theory construction.
• Application and specification of theory to questions in the student’s area of interest.

OBJECTIVES AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES
The objectives of this course are to develop the following intellectual capacities:
• To understand the essential role of theory as an integral aspect of scientific inquiry.
• To draw together a variety of theoretical approaches in the student's area of interest, compare and contrast them, and incorporate them into a broad understanding of the area.
• To reorganize and manipulate theory as a tool for gaining insight and raising new questions.
• Based on the above, to specify a logical and coherent theory (comprised of two or more constructs) that is thought, for the moment, to be the best possible explanation of the phenomena or issue under consideration.
• To identify clear proposition(s) derived from the theory.
• To specify the proposition(s) as hypotheses (each comprised of two variables and a stated relationship between them) that can serve as partial tests of the theory's explanatory value.

ORGANIZATION AND REQUIREMENTS
The course is a seminar that emphasizes student participation. Readings and/or exercises are assigned each week and are the basis for discussion in class. Exercises are to be typewritten and handed in on the day they are due. In addition, there is a primary assignment.

Readings will be assigned for most class sessions, at least one week in advance. Students should also read more broadly on specific topics in the course, whenever possible.
Useful Texts

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

**SHORT WRITTEN EXERCISES** will be assigned for some class sessions, at least one week in advance. These must be submitted electronically before the beginning of class and brought to the class in hard copy. On occasion, the instructor may ask that hard copies to be brought for each class participant, in order to facilitate discussion.

**PRIMARY ASSIGNMENT**
As the major project in the course, students select a substantive area and address a significant theoretical issue within that area, as follows:

- Development of theory within the area should be thoroughly reviewed.
- Existing theory and models should be reviewed and critiqued.
- Whenever possible, an effort should be made to discuss existing models within a comparative framework.
- Possible specifications, elaborations, or revisions of existing theory, syntheses of existing theory, or new conceptualizations should be offered.
- The paper should close with a discussion of major research questions and challenges that follow directly from theoretical specification.

1. **September 11.** A preliminary one-page description of the project is due, with enough copies for each student in class.

2. **October 9.** A revised project description and full annotated bibliography are due.

3. **November 13:** A preliminary version of the course project to be presented in class. This will facilitate review, questions, critique, and suggestions from classmates, instructor, and TA.

4. **December 4** (extended class): is reserved for presentation and discussion of course projects. Each student will orally present and lead discussion on her/his project. Each presenter should prepare diagrammatic illustration(s) clearly identifying constructs and relationships, along with a list of propositions (and, insofar as possible, specific hypotheses), with enough copies for all class members. Following presentations, students will critique and advise on each other’s theoretical work. This feedback will be useful in final revisions of the paper.
5. **December 11 at 9:00 am:** The final paper is due. There is no required length for the paper, but it should reflect a thorough handling of the theoretical issues and promising directions in the area of inquiry the student has identified.

**ROLE OF STUDENT**
High levels of effort, independent scholarship, and active participation are expected.

**GRADING CRITERIA**
The grade for the course is based on:
- the primary written assignment (50%)
- oral presentation and discussion of the primary assignment (10%)
- other written exercises (20%)
- engagement and contributions to class discussion (20%).

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

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<th>SESSION</th>
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<th>TOPICS</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Aug 27</td>
<td>Introductions and overview of course purpose and content; theory as a productive tool of inquiry; course potential and navigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Sept 3</td>
<td>Theory and applied social science: Uses of theory and example(s)</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Sept 10</td>
<td>Potential of theory in purposeful social change</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Sept 17</td>
<td>Theory specification and testing</td>
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<td>5.</td>
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<td>Constructs, variables, and relationships</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Oct 1</td>
<td>Guest Speaker:</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Oct 8</td>
<td>Causality in applied social science</td>
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<td>No class on October 15</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Oct 22</td>
<td>Example:</td>
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<td>Example:</td>
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<td><strong>Part II – Using theory in research: Special topics</strong></td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Nov 5</td>
<td><strong>Guest Speaker: Dynamic Theory</strong></td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Nov 12</td>
<td>Preliminary project presentations: Review, critique, discussion</td>
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### TOPICS AND READINGS
Below is a useful range of topics and readings. Some but not all of these topics will be addressed during the semester. Time will not permit addressing all of these topics, but they are listed here along with selected readings so that students have a guide to additional study if they wish to pursue it. Both “classic” sources and more recent publications are included. Regarding the role and use of theory in applied social science, some of the older readings are still the best.

#### 1. Theory as a productive tool of inquiry

#### 2. Theory and applied social science: Using of Theory
- Application of Theory and Evidence to Policy and Practice


3. **Potential of theory in purposeful social change:**

   a) **Identifying and Defining Social Issues**


   b) **Approaches to Inquiry in the Applied Social Sciences**


c) Are Social Work Theory and Knowledge Special?

d) The Merits and Use of Deduction

e) Induction in Applied Social Research

4. Theory specification and testing: General Guidelines

5. Theory Construction and Testing: Constructs and Variables


7. Constructs, variables, and relationships: Causality and Inference

8. Questions, Modifications, and Alternatives to Positivism


10. What is the Potential of Dynamic Theory?


11. Toward Mathematical Models


WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC SUPPORT POLICIES
Washington University seeks to create the best learning environment possible. Specific policies and resources have been put in place to support this mission, including:

**Accommodations based upon sexual assault**
The University is committed to offering reasonable academic accommodations to students who are victims of sexual assault. Students are eligible for accommodation regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. Depending on the specific nature of the allegation, such measures may include but are not limited to: implementation of a no-contact order, course/classroom assignment changes, and other academic support services and accommodations. If you need to request such accommodations, please direct your request to Kim Webb (kim_webb@wustl.edu), Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center. Ms. Webb is a confidential resource; however, requests for accommodations will be shared with the appropriate University administration and faculty. The University will maintain as confidential any accommodations or protective measures provided to an individual student so long as it does not impair the ability to provide such measures.

If a student comes to me to discuss or disclose an instance of sexual assault, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking, or if I otherwise observe or become aware of such an allegation, I will keep the information as private as I can, but as a faculty member of Washington University, I am required to immediately report it to my Department Chair or Dean or directly to Ms. Jessica Kennedy, the University’s Title IX Coordinator. If you would like to speak with the Title IX Coordinator directly, Ms. Kennedy can be reached at (314) 935-3118, jwkennedy@wustl.edu, or by visiting her office in the Women’s Building. Additionally, you can report incidents or complaints to Tamara King, Associate Dean for Students and Director of Student Conduct, or by contacting WUPD at (314) 935-5555 or your local law enforcement agency. You can also speak confidentially and learn more about available resources at the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center by calling (314) 935-8761 or visiting the 4th floor of Seigle Hall.

**Bias reporting**
The University has a process through which students, faculty, staff and community members who have experienced or witnessed incidents of bias, prejudice or discrimination against a student can report their experiences to the University’s Bias Report and Support System (BRSS) team (see: brss.wustl.edu).

**Mental health**
Mental Health Services’ professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression (see: shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth).