

Assignment 2: Critical Synthesis

Objective: After completing this assignment, you will be able to

- Describe how at least two different theoretical approaches would explain the development, persistence, and severity of the problem, issue or need you have identified
- Analyze the commonalities and differences in the two (or more) explanations
- Identify the key components of programs and/or policies that each approach would use to address the problem, issue or need
- Evaluate which of the two (or more) theoretical bases you conclude is the most useful for addressing the problem, issue or need

Purpose of the Assignment

I am not trying to get you to adopt or argue for any specific theoretical perspective. On the contrary, I want you to critically (in the sense of critical thinking, not criticizing) assess *different* approaches to understanding and ultimately solving the PIN you have identified. You will do best on the assignment if you reflect critically on your own ideas rather than adopting an argumentative state of mind in which you *start with a preferred solution and therefore a preferred theoretical approach*. Start with trying to lay aside what you already think about what constitutes a “good” theory and a good solution to the problem and do your best to seriously consider alternative explanations and hence alternative solutions. You will do worst on the assignment if you treat this as an argument for what I call “your favorite idea” about how to address the PIN. Science and scientific thinking consist of discarding inadequate explanations because they lead to poor solutions to any PIN. We conduct research not to prove our ideas correct, but rather to prove our own very best and “most favorite” ideas **wrong**. This is how science advances, by reducing a very large body of poor ideas down to a very small body of “better” ideas. Theories are our explanations in science. Therefore, being able to think clearly and fairly assess different explanations is critical to scientific thinking. The assignment will, I hope, help you adopt a healthy *suspicion* of your own pre-existing ideas and use theory to expand and deepen your understanding of the many problems, issues and needs that affect communities and how we might be able to solve them.

This assignment focuses on using theory to understand the PIN you have identified. Use the required readings, other course materials, and materials that you find on your own to explore different theoretical approaches that others have applied to understand why the PIN of interest to you occurs, persists, and *differs from one community to another based on community traits and characteristics*. That is, this is not a simple restatement of generalities about the theories – it is your first attempt to apply theory to your PIN. Focus on using theory to understand your PIN and use the theoretical and research literature to develop your ideas. **You may submit this as an individual assignment or as a group of assignment. If you submit as a group, please limit group size to no more than three people. Submit only one version of the copy. Submit as a Word file (other file types will be disabled on Canvas). Single space the document. Label the assignment with the last name of each member of your team in alphabetical order, followed by _Synthesis_FYC6330. If you submit as an individual assignment, include only your last name on the label.**

Components in the Assignment

Part 1: Select **two highly contrasting** theoretical approaches or perspectives we have studied (through Week 9 community as culture)

1. Provide a graphic presentation of the key concepts in each perspective based on the summary presentation of key elements that Turner presents at the end of each chapter (earlier in Chapter 2). Note that Turner distinguishes clearly between “early” and “contemporary” versions of several of the major theoretical perspectives. In some cases (exchange theory, functionalism, for example) he distinguishes the core concepts of early and late theorists. If you choose a theory with early and late versions, select one or the other because the early and later versions do differ significantly. The graphic presentation should look like those that Turner presents for most perspectives (see, for example, Figure 3.2 Turner’s Synthetic Model of Conflict Processes). Do **not just copy and paste Turner’s graphics**. Create your own graphic presentations and highlight the constructs (concepts in the boxes) and connections (lines that link two or more concepts) that are most important, in your view, to being able to understand and explain the origin, persistence, and severity of the PIN you address. You need detailed diagrams, perhaps more detailed in many cases than what Turner offers. You cannot respond to Part 3 of the assignment if you have a simplistic presentation of the key concepts and linkages in the theory.
2. Define *in your own words* the key concepts represented by each “box” in your diagram. This can be in the form of a table or bullet points. It should *not be lengthy paragraphs*.
3. Specifically *identify the assumptions* that underlie each theoretical perspective. List them.
4. There are commonalities between most social scientific theories and of course there are major differences. Conclude with a brief (1-page maximum) summary of the basic *commonalities* between the perspectives, based on your diagrammatic presentations.
5. Follow this with a brief (1-page maximum) summary of the key *differences* between the two perspectives. Draw on and refer to your diagrams to do this.

Part 2: Explain how each perspective would explain the origin, severity (prevalence) and persistence of the PIN you have selected *in the context of community* – Maximum two pages per theory. This is not a repetition of what you have in Part 1. Focus on two things.

1. What constructs or linkages in the theory are specifically useful in for understanding your PIN? For example, one might argue that the concept of “requisite needs” in functionalism is particularly useful in understanding why food insecurity tends to become multi-generational (e.g., be “passed on” from one generation to the next).
2. How does each perspective explain (or fail to explain) why your specific PIN *varies* from community to community? You need to provide a robust explanation that reflects the differences among communities that you identified in Assignment 1. What specific causal linkages in the perspective would be useful in understanding why food insecurity is high in one community and not in another? Understanding how to use a theoretical perspective to explain larger scale phenomena is often easier than applying the explanation to specific settings like communities. Using theory to understand the nature and persistence of a PIN for a community usually requires more careful thought than focusing on the problem at a national level. Put simply, “one size does NOT fit all at the community level.” Take the

example of violence in communities. Marxist or neo-Marxist theory may explain why working-class communities or communities with many immigrant residents are poorer than upper class communities. However, can you say that low wages, poverty, or exploitation create violence? Does being poor mean engaging in violent behavior? Simple co-variance is not explanation. You need to identify the specific mechanisms (linkages, connections) in the theory that would show *why some communities experience more violence than other communities*. For example, the community where I lived most of my years in Detroit was a working-class community and some working-class communities in Detroit experienced a great deal of violence. Mine did not. Be specific. Give examples. In my example of Detroit, I might point to the relatively high percentage of autoworkers in my community who were skilled tradesmen – e.g., did not work on an assembly line job, but rather in things like keeping machines running, or creating the dies (molds) for stamping out parts, or inspecting the work of others on the line rather than “turning bolts” themselves. This is an elite within the general autoworker population – they earn more, they have higher prestige, their work is not nearly as mind-numbing as assembly line work, they are not as continuously supervised and can do things like go to the bathroom when they need without permission, etc. I could argue that their less “brutalizing” work, combined with more job security and better income, removed some of the drivers of violence prevalent in other working-class communities in Detroit (stress, insecurity, anger) and perhaps reduced the incidence of violence in the communities where they lived. I could use Wright’s approach to understand this, seeing these elite skilled tradesmen as a class within a class – an elite that shares an identity both with the assembly line workers *and* with the managers, particularly managers at the plant (versus corporate) level. E.g., less purely working-class consciousness.

Part 3: Identify the key **components** of public (local government) policy that would be important for addressing the PIN at the community level for each theoretical perspective. I am not asking you to create a program or policy, but rather to think about the necessary key components that each would need to have to succeed – based on theoretical perspectives. Differences between individual theorists become important at this point. For example, a classical Marxist approach to eliminating poverty would call for creating class consciousness and getting workers to organize to protect their own interests, primarily at their workplaces because for Marx *class is your identity and your class position defines how you see the world and will lead workers to organize as groups to take control of the means of production*. Wright (neo-Marxist) has a quite different perspective and argues that individuals can belong to more than one class. For example, many workers today do not go to a factory to work and may own stock in the corporation or may have a semi-autonomous kind of work like driving for Uber that greatly reduces the shared conditions that Marx thought would clearly create class consciousness. Wright’s approach would not focus on organizing workers to achieve change. In fact, Wright sees little evidence that this would ever occur. Marx argues that class consciousness emerges as workers share a workspace and become aware of their mutually shared conditions and class position. If I want to use a classical Marxist approach to eliminating poverty, some way of re-establishing this kind of close interaction between workers both on and off the job would be a prerequisite. In fact, one could argue that as more and more people hold jobs like driving for Uber, contracting out their labor, or telecommuting, the potential for classical Marxist evolution into a socialist form of economic organization decreases and probably becomes impossible. Describe the key factors you identify for each approach. Focus on your PIN and the factors that

would be important in addressing it – not just differences between communities in general. Two page maximum.

Part 4: Provide a succinct (one page maximum) of what you learned about thinking theoretically in this assignment. Overall, what did you learn about theory as a tool – about using theory to understand “how the world works”? How did your own explanations of the PIN – why it occurs, what causes it to persist, why it differs from community to community – expand and change from the assignment? Give examples of your previous ideas that you came to question, if any. Also give examples of new ideas that you developed – new ways of thinking about the PIN and its expression in different communities.

Part 5: Include a bibliography of materials consulted for the assignment, including required readings from our class, any of the other materials at our course website and **materials that you have found on your own that have helped you understand these theoretical approaches. Make sure you use and cite materials from your think tanks!**

Guidance on how to write this

Do NOT simply repeat what Turner says about these theoretical perspectives. Such writing shows your ability to repeat what you have read. It does not show that you understand the key concepts of these theorists and theoretical perspectives. Explain theorists’ ideas *in our own words*. You need to convince me that you have successfully identified literature that based on each perspective and been able to find literature that will help you understand how to address your PIN **in a community context**. Think of yourself as arguing *for* (not merely repeating) each theorist’s ideas and logic, not just repeating what others have said. This approach will help you identify theorists’ underlying premises and be able to see the differences and similarities among them.

Relate the literature you review to your PIN and to community traits and characteristics that affect the PIN. Focus on aspects of articles and other materials that are relevant to your work. Your primary objective in this course should be to understand and analyze theories and how to use them. To do this you need to identify and understand the different assumptions that underlie the various theoretical approaches. Choose perspectives that have contradictory assumptions and make these assumptions (and thus their fundamental differences) explicit. All theorists begin from assumptions that may contradict the assumptions made by other theorists. Your primary objective should be to understand differences in assumptions, or premises, among theorists or among groups of theorists.

Use, cite and reference the materials that you use to complete this assignment. Use APA style for both in-text citations and for the full references. Include page numbers in the in-text citation *if you use the author’s words or closely paraphrase what the author said*. The point of a citation is to allow the reader to quickly find the exact part of any material where you got an idea or a fact. A citation should look like this: Ruiz, Amarat & Williams, 2017:123-124. Direct quotations (in modest numbers) should be between quotation marks. Avoid long quotations – I do not want you repeating what others have said. If you do have a quotation longer than a single sentence, it should be set apart and indented without quotation marks. Do NOT use numerous, lengthy quotations. You are free to paraphrase what others say – BUT you need to provide the full citation, including page numbers, when you do so.

In Part 3, your task is to synthesize what **you** have learned about these theories and how **you** think they can be applied to understand and address your PIN. You will NOT lose points in this assignment for making logical and theoretically based arguments about the key concepts if I happen to disagree with

Critical Synthesis

you *as long as your understanding of the theory is deep (even if you do not like the theory)*. You will lose points if you cannot clearly and accurately present the theorist's perspectives and if you cannot apply the ideas to understand how different traits and aspects of communities affect your PIN.

In Part 4, I explicitly ask you to evaluate what you learned in this exercise. I most strongly encourage you to step outside your own "comfort zone" in considering theorists and how they would understand and go about solving your PIN. Try thinking critically about the theory you liked the most and seeing what's wrong with it – and opening up your mind to think that a theory you did not like much could be the best. That is what all scientists should always do – and it is a critical component of becoming a "routinely critical thinker." We can only engage in truly meaningful critical thinking when we apply our critical thinking skills to *our own favorite ideas*. Most of the rest we do is "just criticism" of others' ideas.

These are SINGLE-SPACED pages. Do NOT feel called upon to wring long paragraphs. Use bullet points if you want. Do provide enough detail for me to assess your work, ***based on the criteria below***.

Assessment Criteria

Criteria	Possible Points	Your Points
Graphic presentations of the key concepts in the theory were original (not copy and paste) Included all key concepts in the graphic presentations and clearly showed the linkages between concepts Correctly defined each key concept and linkage <i>in your own words</i> Correctly identified and explained <i>in your own words</i> commonalities and differences among the theoretical perspectives chosen Explained <i>in your own words</i> the differences in <i>assumptions and logic</i> of each perspective	50	
Identified research literature, including materials from your think tanks, that employs the two perspectives you chose – showed that you can identify the theoretical perspectives when they are used Provided specific examples that show that you can identify the key concepts in each perspective that are critical to understanding and explaining your PIN Evaluated the two perspectives you chose with regard to their strengths and weakness in <i>understanding and explaining why the PIN of concern develops</i> – the social structures and processes that contribute to its development Identified and explain the strengths and weakness of each theory with regard to <i>explaining why the nature, severity and persistence of the PIN varies among communities</i> Drew and justified your own conclusions about the relative advantages and disadvantages of each theoretical perspective and specific theorist to guide understanding the PIN and develop public policy to address the PIN	60	
Provided evidence of an in-depth exploration of the research literature, drawing on a variety of resources Provided evidence that you used this learning opportunity to question your own thinking and develop new perspectives	60	
Followed all instructions including use of APA style Selected reliable sources of information about the theoretical perspectives selected (not Wikipedia, for example), including the Think Tanks	30	
Total	200	

