Assignment 1: Theoretical Basis for Your Research

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

- Identify the published research and other academic literature that describes and explains theoretical frameworks used to understand the causes and potential solutions to social problems, issues and need
- Identify, explain and illustrate the constructs and proposed linkages in a theory

This assignment prepares you for Assignment 5 in this class when you create a research design of your own. This assignment is due early in the course so that you have time to find new theories if what you submit is, in my opinion, going to cause you problems with Assignment 5. I want to prevent problems based on your theoretical choice. It is also due early to give you time to conduct a sufficient literature review to use the theory to design a study.

Basic Requirements of Assignment 5

The design in Assignment 5 must have a basis in theory – purely descriptive designs are not acceptable. Designs that rely solely on demographic data are not acceptable. I strongly encourage doctoral students to develop a design that would be appropriate for independent, original research. I prefer that master’s students develop a design that would be appropriate for a thesis.

If you select program evaluation, you can base the assignment on an existing program or intervention. However, it may be difficult to tailor your assignments to an existing program or intervention because many are not theory-based, or at least do not have a clearly articulated theoretical basis. One of my objectives in this course is to make sure that you understand the relationship between theory and research. Therefore, if you develop an evaluation design, you need to make sure that the program you evaluate has a theoretical basis. Review the literature and information available about the program and talk to the people involved. If they cannot give you a good explanation of the theoretical approach for the program, do not move forward. It will just be a frustrating experience for you. Dr. David Diehl in the FYC Department, an evaluation specialist, has also indicated that he would be willing to try to help you find some programs that would be good candidates for completing these assignments. You can also simply develop your own ideas for what a theory-based intervention would look like in a program designed to address the need, problem or issue of interest to you. In either case, the design must be theory-based.

Finding a Theory

The development of most contemporary social theory grows directly or indirectly from the work of some early, seminal thinkers – sometimes called the classical social theorists. The reading from Living Theory provides an overview of the work of four of these theorists and the reading from Allan provides an overview of two other key contributors, Gilman & DuBois. The key ideas of these people form the cornerstones of many, if not most, contemporary theories. Knowing a little about their basic ideas may help you narrow your search for an appropriate theory, but these readings (available on e-reserve) are not required.

Researchers and practitioners usually work with mid-range theories rather than the broader theoretical frameworks. Mid-range theories are more concrete or specific than the broad theoretical frameworks. For example, social learning theory deals with a specific kind of
behavior – how people learn – and has its roots in the general framework of exchange theory. This is a typical example of the relationships between a mid-range theory and a broad theoretical framework or group of theories. Exchange theory provides an explanation of the role of social exchange in society in general. Social learning theory applies this theory to a specific aspect of human behavior – learning. In this assignment, you must identify at least two mid-range theories that other researchers have used to explore the topic or intervention of interest to you. Select contrasting theories. You will select one of these theories as the basis for Assignment 5 when you develop your own research design. Spend enough time on this assignment to find a theory that actually interests you and that you understand well. Finding a theory (or theories) that interests you now will permit you to complete future assignments more easily and save you a lot of time later, especially at the end of the semester. The List of Mid-Range Theories and Variables Commonly Used in Social Science, compiled by Dr. Kelly Moore, provides a very brief description of 22 theories, some key references for each, and a list of examples of variables commonly used in these theories in social science research. Any of those theories is acceptable for Assignment 5 except the Theory of Planned Behavior. Make sure that you do not confuse a concept or construct like social capital or personality type with a theory. See pages 69-74 of Crix, for example, for a discussion of social capital. It is a construct in several theories, but it is not a theory.

Use published research reports, “think” pieces, research reviews, textbooks, and other academic sources to learn about mid-range social theories. Research reviews will be especially useful. I have included a Summary of Key Points in a Research Review (see Documents by M.E. Swisher – forms). I strongly encourage you to use this guide, which is similar to those for reading research reports, as you complete this assignment.

Guidance for Completing this Assignment

Do not pick a topic (like child abuse or community-based conservation). Theories are not about topics. They are about human behaviors, social processes and social structures, and the same theory will provide a basis for understanding behaviors, structures and processes in many different settings, with reference to many different topics, or with regard to many different situations. For example, the theory of planned behavior is equally useful for understanding women’s decisions about breast-feeding, youths’ decisions about joining gangs, and college students’ decisions about what major to select. There is no theory of “deciding to smoke.” There are several theories of decision making that can help us understand the decision-making process in general, including the decision to smoke.

Do not pick one of the grand theories.

Evaluation Criteria for Assignment 1

I have provided three kinds of materials that may be of use in meeting the evaluation criteria (listed below) for this assignment. On the web page for this week you will find lists of: (1) appropriate articles that discuss the role of theory and epistemology in research, (2) examples of research reports that have a good theoretical basis, and (3) examples of articles that students in the past have found very useful in seeing how theory is used to guide research.

Answer the questions below. Number your response to each question. Include an explanation or justification for each answer. Be specific in your answers. Use the following as the file name for the Word document: YourLastName_6800_A1_Theory
1. Most research, including theory-based research, grows out of the researcher’s desire to solve a problem, issue or need or provide knowledge needed by practitioners. What problem or need for knowledge do you want to address? Define the problem, issue, or need carefully, making sure that your definition is not so broad that it is impossible to approach as a subject of research. (1/2 page maximum)

2. Identify and name (literally write down the name, e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior) at least two theories based on distinct broad theoretical perspectives that other researchers and practitioners have used to understand this problem, issue or need (PIN). For example, the theory of planned behavior and innovation diffusion theory are both rational choice theories. They offer very similar explanations and understandings of PINs. They would give you similar insights into why people smoke or why some people are poor and others rich. However, the theory of planned behavior and social learning theory would give you very different explanations of both of these phenomena. **YOU CANNOT USE THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR.**

Answer Questions 3-5 for EACH THEORY first for Theory A and then for Theory B: e.g. Theory A – Q3, Q4, and Q5 and then immediately after that Theory B – Q3, Q4 and Q5. Do NOT submit separate documents for each theory.

3. Summarize in your own words the key concepts or constructs of each theory in a table format like the example below of the theory of planned behavior.

4. Draw a conceptual map (diagram) of each theory. You can submit a scanned hand-drawn document if necessary. See the example of the theory of planned behavior. More detail is better than little detail.

5. For each theory, identify and list at least three research reports about studies that used the theory as the basis for the research. All of the publications must be scholarly – taken from the peer-reviewed literature. I also encourage you to look for research reviews and literature reviews because they will give you a lot of information in one publication. If you are lucky, you may find a good review. If you see those, read them and save them. They will be very helpful. Provide a summary of the key theoretical constructs and linkages between them explored in each study (one-half page maximum per study). I am not interested in detail about the results of the study, the protocol used, or other aspects of the study. Your task is to understand how the researchers used theory as the basis for their research. What constructs did they use as the basis for the study? What proposed causal or explanatory relationships between constructs did they proposed and/or test?
Theory of Planned Behavior

Summative Constructs | Dimensions or Components of the Summary Construct | Definition
---|---|---
Attitude toward behavior | Behavioral belief | Overall evaluation of the behavior
 | Evaluation | Value attached to a behavioral outcome or attribute
Subjective norm | Normative belief | Belief about whether most people approve or disapprove of the behavior
 | Motivation to comply | Motivation to do what each referent thinks
Perceived behavioral control | Control Beliefs | Perceived likelihood of occurrence of each facilitating or constraining condition
 | Perceived Power | Perceived effect of each condition in making behavioral performance difficult or easy
Behavioral intention | | Perceived likelihood of performing the behavior
Behavior | | Actual observed or reported behavior

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Criteria</th>
<th>Possible Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Followed instructions, including using APA style</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identified scholarly literature and was able to distinguish between research reports and other kinds of scholarly publications such as research reviews</td>
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<td>Identified high-quality scholarly materials (high impact journals, for example)</td>
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<td>Responded to all questions in <em>your own words</em> (did not just copy ideas or wording from article or resource materials)</td>
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<td>Was able to distinguish between and explain differences in the theoretical perspectives in the published literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Could explain and define the key concepts in each theory <em>in your own words</em></td>
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<td>Explained the logic of the theories <em>in your own words</em> – showed that you understand how the constructs are logically connected to provide a coherent explanation</td>
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<td>Demonstrated sufficient familiarity with the body of research associated with each theory to select one for Assignment 5</td>
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<td>The definitions in the table were sufficiently detailed and elaborated to serve as the basis for research, including adequate identification of dimensions (or components) of each major construct</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>Definitions were based on theory, not general public usage of terms</td>
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<td>The map or diagram of the theory was detailed and robust – not overly simplistic</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
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