

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.

Designs Must Be Theory-Based

The design in all assignments, including 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 a limited scope, independent, original research project -- but **not to try to design their dissertation research**. That is a far more intensive undertaking than what you need to do in this class. In my experience, students who focus on designing the doctoral research cannot do so within the constraints of this class. It is **too much work for a class assignment**. Master's students may be able to create a design that would be appropriate for a thesis, but this is not a requirement. Just as in the case of the doctoral students, it is better to do a small project well than try to develop a larger project and do it poorly.

You *can* design an intervention or program evaluation. I do not encourage you to do so for the same kind of reasons – they become very onerous in the context of a class in which this is one of five assignments. Further, many interventions and programs 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 for an existing program, 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 try to use their program for your project.*** It will just be a frustrating experience for you. It would be better to develop your own ideas for a theory-based intervention would look like in a program designed to address a need, problem or issue of interest to you. In either case, **the design must be theory-based**.

Finding a Mid-Range Theory

Researchers and practitioners usually work with mid-range theories rather than the broader theoretical frameworks provided in the reading by Reed. Mid-range theories are more specific than 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 search to find a theory that actually interests you and that you understand well. Finding a theory (or theories) that interests you now will save you a lot of time later, at the end of the semester. The [List of Mid-Range Theories and Variables Commonly Used in Social Science](#), compiled by Dr. Kelly Moore (link on week one web page and on home page at course website) 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. The theories in the articles that you examined from the topical lists would also work well. Make sure that you do **not** confuse a concept or construct like social capital or personality type with a theory. For example, social capital is a **construct** in several theories, **but it is not a theory in and of itself**.

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 Important Course Documents at the course home page). 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,” but there are several mid-range theories that explain risk taking behaviors. Make sure you pick a mid-range theory, not a grand theory.

Evaluation Criteria for Assignment 1

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, making sure that your definition is not so broad that it is impossible to approach as a subject of research. **500 word maximum** – I will deduct points for longer submissions.
2. Identify and **LIST (literally write down the name, e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior)** at **least two theories based on distinct 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.** This is a list. Do NOT include anything but the names.

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. Make a table and define the **key concepts or constructs of each theory in your own words**. The table should be like the example below of the theory of planned behavior.
4. Draw a **detailed 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 three research reports** about studies that used the theory as the basis for the research. All of the reports must be from the peer-reviewed literature. Provide a summary of the **key theoretical constructs and linkages between them explored in each study – 500 word 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? I also encourage you to look for research reviews and literature reviews because they will give you a lot of information about the theory and/or topic in one publication, but do **not include** those in this assignment.

In summary – this assignment should include

500 word statement (with references) of the problem, issue or need you will address in your proposed research

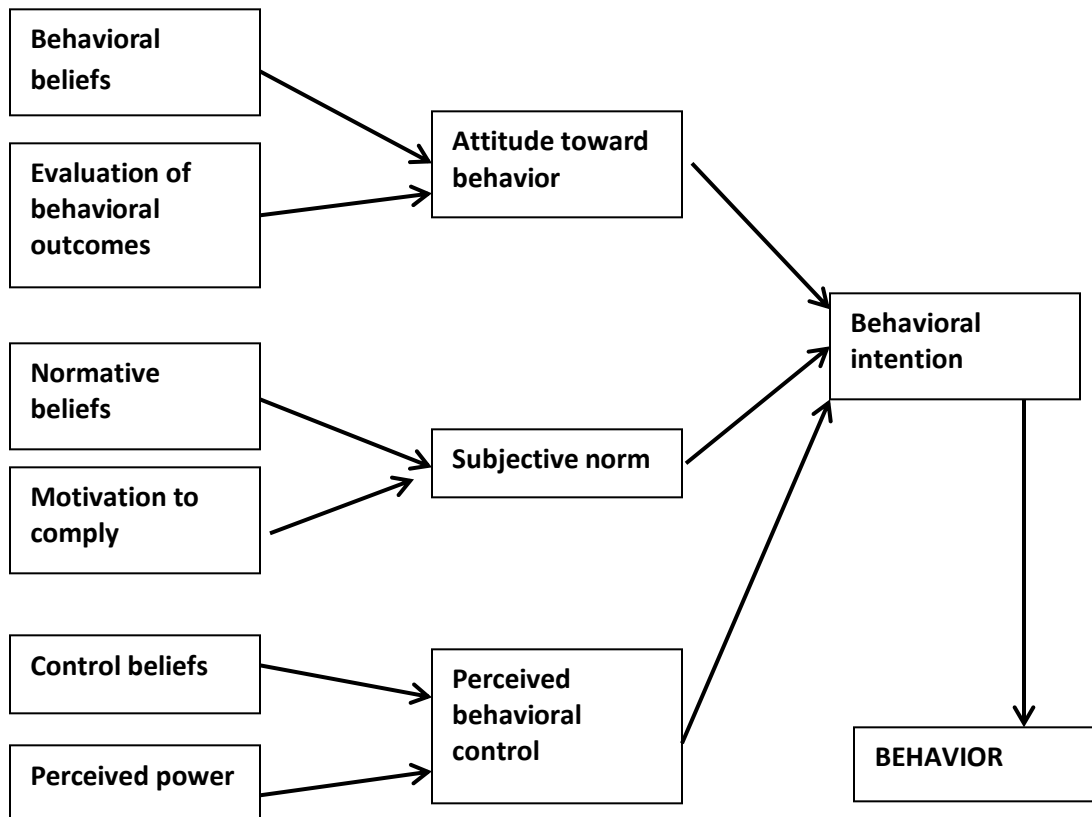
A list of two mid-range theories, by name, that others have used to try to understand the problem, issue or need

A **detailed diagram** of the constructs in the theory and the relationships between them for each theory.

A table listing the constructs in each theory and defining the constructs.

For each theory listed, list three research reports, the full APA citation that used the theory as the basis for research. For each report listed (6 total), provide a 500 word maximum statement that explains: (1) The constructs the author used as the basis for the study and (2) the proposed causal or explanatory relationships between constructs s/he proposed and/or tested.

Theory of Planned Behavior



Summative Constructs	Dimensions or Components of the Summary Construct	Definition
Attitude toward behavior		Overall evaluation of the behavior
	Behavioral belief	Belief that behavioral performance is associated with certain attributes or outcomes
	Evaluation	Value attached to a behavioral outcome or attribute
Subjective norm		Belief about whether most people approve or disapprove of the behavior
	Normative belief	Belief about whether each referent approves or disapproves of the behavior
	Motivation to comply	Motivation to do what each referent thinks
Perceived behavioral control		Overall measure of perceived control over the behavior
	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

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