Human Differences, Social Relationships, Well-Being and Change
Through the Life Course

Fall 2011

1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will employ multicultural and critical perspectives to understand individuals, families, and their interpersonal and group relationships, life span development, and theories of well-being, stress, coping, and adaptation. This course will emphasize knowledge about individuals and small social systems and the implications of this knowledge for all domains of social work practice. Students will be introduced to the concepts of risk and protective factors, with relevant examples at the individual and small system levels. Students will also consider the implications of this knowledge for intervening in social problems and supporting rehabilitation once problems have developed. Major components of the course will be concerned with the processes of oppression, privilege, and discrimination and factors that help people and small social systems to change. The knowledge presented will include the interrelationships between smaller and larger social systems, and in particular, how biological factors and the larger social and physical environments shape and influence individual and family well-being.

2. COURSE CONTENT

Content will include selected theories of human behavior, human development, families and small groups, and individual and small system change. Students will consider the processes through which relevant concepts have been developed, the types of knowledge and data that inform different theories, and the current gaps and controversies in biological, behavioral, and social science knowledge and theory. Emphasis will be placed on similarities and differences related to human diversity and dynamics of oppression and privilege, including ability, age, class, color, culture, ethnicity, family structure, gender (including gender identity and gender expression), marital status, national origin, race, religion or spirituality, sex, and sexual orientation. In addition, this course will focus on how individual-level and small system-level factors and processes can facilitate attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, family characteristics, and group processes that either promote multicultural human well-being and social justice or help to recreate inequities and problems.
3. COURSE OBJECTIVES

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

1. Demonstrate knowledge about and be able to critically analyze relevant theories of human behavior, human development, families and small groups, and individual and small system change through the life course emphasizing similarities and differences and the effects of oppression and privilege.

2. Articulate the concepts of risk and protective factors and give examples at the individual, group, and family levels.

3. Describe the impact of diverse dimensions such as ability, age, class, color, culture, ethnicity, family structure, gender (including gender identity and gender expression), marital status, national origin, race, religion or spirituality, sex, and sexual orientation on risk and protective factors, human development, human interactions, and the structures of small social systems.

4. Identify the interrelations among smaller and larger social systems and describe how biological factors and larger social and physical environments interact to influence individual and family well-being.

5. Describe how relevant concepts have been socially constructed, what knowledge and empirical evidence support selected theories, some current gaps in knowledge, and key controversies about these theories and related knowledge.

6. Conceptualize how individual and small system factors and processes can either promote multicultural human well-being or recreate inequities and problems.

7. Examine theories of individual, family, and group change and their relevance for all types of social work practice towards a multicultural and socially just world.

8. Discuss typical ethical concerns related to human differences, social relationships, well-being, and change through the life course.

4. COURSE DESIGN

The instructor for this course will select required and recommended readings. In addition, the instructor will include a range of pedagogical methods, such as participatory discussions, films, written assignments, and experiential exercises related to course materials.

5. RELATIONSHIP OF THE COURSE TO CURRICULAR THEMES

Multiculturalism & Diversity:
Students will examine the ways in which the diverse dimensions affect individuals and small social systems. Emphasis will also be placed on the processes of oppression, privilege, and discrimination, as well as the factors that help people and small social systems to change.

Social Justice and Social Change:
Students will analyze selected theories in terms of the factors and processes that either promote social justice and change or help to perpetuate inequities and problems.

Promotion, Prevention, Treatment & Rehabilitation:
Students will learn about social problems, as well as the spectrum of interventions and supportive rehabilitation currently used to alleviate these problems.

**Behavioral and Social Science Research:**
Students will critically analyze relevant theories of human behavior, human development, families and small groups, and individual and small system change through the life course. The research supporting these theories will provide a foundation for the content in this course.

**6. RELATIONSHIP OF THE COURSE TO SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AND VALUES**

As human development throughout the life course is so profoundly impacted by environmental and social conditions, this course will emphasize the critique and evaluation of various developmental theories from a multicultural perspective and a social justice perspective. This course will also consider potential ethical dilemmas that may arise for social workers working with individuals, families, and small groups. The impact of social conditions and social policy and the need for macro and micro intervention to improve the lives of clients will also be addressed.

**7. COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

**A. Academic Conduct and Integrity**

Please see the Student Code of Academic and Professional Conduct in the *Student Guide to the Master's in Social Work Degree Program* (http://www.ssw.umich.edu/studentGuide/2010/) for a discussion of student responsibilities for academic conduct and integrity. In particular, please pay attention to issues related to plagiarism. Students who are found responsible for academic misconduct are subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from the School of Social Work, revocation of degree, or any other sanction deemed appropriate to address the violation.

**B. Attendance, Participation & Support your Buddy (5% of your course grade)**

Three parts constitute 5% of your course grade:
(1) Attendance. Arriving on time and staying throughout the entire class time are required. If you have to miss a class, please notify your instructor at your earliest convenience. Missing more than one class session may result in points deducted from your final grade. In consideration of your classmates, please turn off cell phones, pagers, and all other potentially distracting devices during class. If you are on call, please set your pager to vibrate. Likewise, use of laptop computers should be kept to the minimum so that we can all focus on what’s happening in the classroom.
(2) Participation. You are expected to read the assigned readings prior to class and actively participate in all class discussion and activities.
(3) Buddy system. Each of you should be a buddy of another student. In general, buddies help and support each other to learn and succeed. Specific tasks of the buddy include: (a) listen and provide feedback to ideas about the assignments, (b) review and give comments before the work is submitted to the instructor, and (c) provide emotional support throughout the semester. You should give a copy of your pre-submitted work to your buddy for review. At the end of the semester, I will ask each of you about your experience with your buddy.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

If you need accommodation for a disability or other special need, please let the instructor know as early as possible so that we can work out the necessary arrangements. Also note that Office of Student
Services at the SSW offers support to students with disabilities, as well as students with other issues such as emotional, health, family, and financial problems.

Religious Observances
Please notify me if religious observances conflict with class or due dates for assignments so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

C. Assignments (All written assignments should be loaded to your Drop Box in the course Ctools site by the due date. They should be typed, double-spaced, 12-point font, and proofread before submission. APA style is preferred but you can use other styles.)

(1) Interpretation of an experience or behavior using concepts form readings (15%; Due Oct. 4)—In the first four weeks, you would have read, discussed and thought about the biophysical, psychological and social dimension of human behavior and their interconnectedness. In this assignment, you are asked to interpret an experience or behavior of yourself or someone you know well using concepts from the readings. This 4-page paper should contain 3 components: (a) a description of the experience or behavior, (b) relevant points/concepts your draw from the readings, and (c) an interpretation of the experience or behavior. Students who demonstrate an ability to integrate multiple readings with their experience will be graded more positively.

(2) Discussion leader of an article (10%) and reflection essay (10%) (total 20%)—Two students work together to lead a discussion of one of the articles [excluding those from the textbook and marked as not for article presentation] assigned for the weeks between Oct. 4 (Preconception, pregnancy, birth and newborn) and Dec. 6 (Near the end-of-life). Each of these articles should be about (a) risk/ protective factors or (b) intervention strategies particularly relevant to a specific life stage. Your job is to (a) stimulate interest in the topic, (b) present a summary and critique of the article, (c) share your insights and learning points, and (d) provide two questions for class discussion. Previous students have used a variety of audio-visual aids (e.g., power point slides, short videos, cartoons) and exercises (e.g., role play, opinion survey) to assist their presentations. If you use power point slides, please get it ready to open before the class begins (e.g., save it in the desktop of the classroom computer). You have a maximum of 25 minutes to lead this discussion.

The reflection essay is an individual assignment (due one week after your presentation). It should be about 3 pages on which you write about: (a) what you have learned from this assignment (including from the reading, analysis, and presentation) that your didn’t know or haven’t done before, and (b) what might you use from this experience in your future social work practice.

(3) Two brief exams (24%)—You will have two brief essay exams scheduled on Nov. 8 and Dec. 13, respectively. The first will consist of questions based on course content from Oct. 4 to Nov. 1, and the second from Nov. 8 to Dec. 6. The questions will require you to apply course content to written case materials or scenarios.

(4) Multidimensional assessment paper (36%)—Write a paper in which you apply a multidimensional framework to evaluate the social functioning of a current or former client. A proposal for your assessment is due on October 25. The final paper is due on December 6. (Detailed instruction in a separate handout.)
D. Grading

Points you earn from each assignment are summed to form the basis of final grade which ranges from "A" to "E." "A" grades are given for exceptional individual performance and mastery of the material. The use of "A+", "A", and "A-" distinguish the degree of superiority. "B" grades are given to students who demonstrate mastery of the material. "B+" is used for students who perform just above the mastery level but not in an exceptional manner. "B-" is used for students just below the mastery level. "C" grades are given when mastery of the material is minimal. A "C-" is the lowest grade which carries credit. "D" grades indicate deficiency and carry no credit. "E" grades indicate failure and carry no credit.

8. REQUIRED TEXT AND ARTICLES


Required articles are available on our course website in CTools. Other readings, in addition to those listed in this syllabus, may be assigned. They will be announced and posted on CTools prior to the corresponding class session.
9. COURSE CALENDAR AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

This schedule is preliminary; any changes will be announced in class and on CTools.

September 6: Introduction and Overview; A Multidimensional Framework


September 13: The Biophysical Dimension


September 20: Psychological Development and Functioning


**September 27: Social Systems and Human Development**


**October 4: Preconception, Pregnancy, Birth, and the Newborn** *(Due: Essay integrating readings of previous weeks and experience)*


Life’s Greatest Miracle (PBS online program. Find the link from Ctools.) *[not for article presentation]*


**October 11: Infancy & Early Childhood**


**October 18 FALL STUDY BREAK**
**October 25: Middle Childhood** *(Due: Multidimensional assessment proposal)*


**November 1: Adolescence**


Inside the teenage brain (PBS online program.) *[not for article presentation]*
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/view/


**November 8: Young Adulthood** *(1st exam)*


November 15: Middle Adulthood


November 22: No Class (Prof. Li out of town for a conference)

November 29: Late Adulthood


December 6: Near the End-of-Life (Due: Multidimensional assessment final paper)


December 13 (2nd exam)