SW 500 Human Differences, Social Relationships, Well-Being, and Change through the Life Course
TUESDAYS 2-5
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General Overview (for all SW 500 classes): 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.

General perspective: This is a foundation course, which means that the knowledge learned is meant to be building blocks for more advanced coursework later in your MSW career. My goal is that you will learn things that stick with you in your professional life after school as well. Core constructs focus on the interface between the PODS constructs; well-being and happiness; inclusion, belonging and identity; social structure; culture, cognition, memory and mental processes. Biological bases will be discussed as relevant, particularly to highlight interface between each of these basic social constructs and impact on the body.

Core competencies: Knowing and critically applying social science theories to a continuum from prevention to rehabilitation, using research-based knowledge (social science theories) in developing and evaluating practice, taking on a professional identity as a social worker, including using your “self” appropriately and communicating clearly.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENTS

Participation
DUE: Weekly. Attendance is necessary for participation to occur.
Typically each week we’ll have some combination of lecture, 5-person small group discussion and full-class discussion. Lectures will be posted on the class web page. Each week there will be core readings, and for those with particular interest in the area, further suggested readings. Each week, in discussion you will be asked about the core concepts and relevant implications of these concepts. Core concepts should link from one week to the next in the sense that you should be asking yourself (and me) how current week’s content relates to what we already learned. The goal of the discussions is to create an active learning context in which each week’s content is actively linked to prior content so that by the end of the semester, students will have a linked memory structure, facilitating later recall and use of the material in class and in the field. To facilitate this process, have a look at the list of core competencies (above). This is what we are working on each week.

You will get credit for participating because active participation facilitates both learning and memory. You should consider yourself not only learning but also earning credit for learning each week.

As a wrap up, near the end of the semester you’ll be asked to think about how you are doing in terms of the class core competencies in this class and in connecting across classes. This reflection has two main audiences (1) you -- to help you organize your thinking as you move quickly through the MSW, (2) our School, we want to be as creative as possible in making links from CSWE requirements (like taking this class) to the competencies you need, to your own professional goals. This is not a course evaluation but your own reflection on your own process. The product is not graded, just your thoughts (a page or less). You can save this reflection for your own future use. This is the first year the School is trying this, Urmila Venkatesh (urmila@umich.edu), is organizing the process. She is the Curriculum and Instructional Technical Coordinator hired to help organize the process of portfolio development for students who would like to have a portfolio at the end of their MSW. She will read the reflections from all classes to get a feel.

**Brief paper**

DUE: Tuesday Oct 4 -- load onto Ctools before class

Paper Topic: Using the readings to make sense and make meaning

In the first four weeks you have read, heard, and thought about social context effects on self, identity, health and well-being. In this assignment, you will write a 4-page paper in which you first describe a meaningful experience you or someone close to you had and then (re)interpret it in light of the readings until this point on social context effects. A successful paper contains three elements: a brief sketch of the experience, a summary of the relevant points from the readings you chose, and your interpretation of the experience in light of these readings. Use APA format for your references.

Any meaningful social experience (e.g., school, family, neighborhood friendships or close relationships) is fine. I am asking for you to choose something with which you have personal
experience so that you can get a sense of the difference between your initial interpretation when you had the experience and your (re-)interpretation in light of the readings.

This paper applies to the core competencies of knowing and critically applying social science theories (so that you can later use these to guide assessment, intervention and evaluation of your efforts anywhere on the continuum from prevention to rehabilitation) and of being able to take on a professional identity as a social worker by both using yourself as a lens and by writing clearly to communicate. By showing me that you read and understood and can apply social science theories we are learning and can (re)interpret your own experiences in light of these lenses, you begin to consider how you can use yourself and your experiences as a professional.

The brief paper gives you a chance to use the readings (not simply to summarize them) to make sense of real world experiences. The paper is meant to be brief. The 4-page limit means you may need to edit your writing so that you cover both the personal experience and the core points in the readings that provide a lens to make sense of why the experience was meaningful. It can happen that your initial attempt is not yet ‘A’ quality work. You can rewrite this paper. The goal is that you and I both see your ‘A’ quality work.

Quiz
DUE: Nov 1 This is an in class assignment, you will not have a chance to redo.

The point of the quiz is to demonstrate that you have read and can apply the readings to social situations. You will be presented with a scenario. You will (1) make a prediction based in the reading (2) explain your reasoning, using the relevant core readings. You will have some choice as to which scenarios to write about and your goal is to show that you have read and can use the core readings from the first 7 sessions. The quiz applies to the core competencies of knowing and critically applying social science theories, using research-based knowledge in developing and evaluating practice, and communicating clearly as a professional social worker.

Resource Guide
DUE: Dec 15 As a hard copy to my office and loaded onto Ctools

Translate core ideas into pointers to improve health and well-being by creating contexts that reduce chances that people will fail to work on their goals, procrastinate, or make well-being risky rather than well-being promoting choices. The core competencies reflected here are using social science theories critically as a basis for evidence-based practice, considering the continuum from prevention to rehabilitation, and taking on a professional identity as a social worker to communicate clearly. In the past, student groups have focused their handbooks on needs of students; needs of social workers or needs of particular client populations (applying PODS). This is a group assignment (groups of 4 or 5). Use APA format for your bibliography.

Your goal is to show me that you understand and can apply the readings to novel situations that may arise in your professional career. Since this is a class assignment, concentrate on
readings from the second half of the semester after the quiz. Since this will be a product you can use in your professional portfolio, include any readings from the first half of the semester that you find useful. The format of the Resource Guide can be in the form of pointers, frequently asked questions, an outline for planning, or whatever appeals to you.
CLASS OUTLINE

Week 1  Sept 6    Well-being and happiness: In the mind and in the world

We will get to know one another, go over the syllabus, class structure and assignments, noting the core competencies and our mutual goals for the class.

The first three weeks focus on effects of contexts, including relationship (dyadic, group and inter-group) on well-being and happiness, identity and motivation, and meaning making more generally.

This week, we focus on well-being and happiness. The smiles and longevity piece suggests that being happy, well-being and longevity are all connected. The peer reviewed evolving definitions piece reminds us that well-being is not simply lack of mental illness. The dynamic spread of happiness piece shows that it is unlikely that happiness is simply a personal trait. The Gallop Poll piece links everything into larger context. Please come prepared to discuss this work. We will break up into groups and each group will present to the class what it sees as the core points and their implications for social work.

A brief video shows the correlation between wealth and longevity for the past 200 years worldwide

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo

A brief video describes the relationship between wealth inequality and health


Core reading:

Week 2  Sept 13  Self-esteem, self-concept and identity

Last week, we focused on well-being and happiness, asking whether they correlate with health and income, and how they may spread. This week we focus in on the self, asking what self-concept is and what it does. You have a long chapter on self-concept and two brief readings on self-esteem and reasoning about the future which are not covered in the chapter. Self-concepts are described as influenced by social contexts, as influencing motivation and action, but also as feeling more stable than they really are, making intervention possible. Mark Leary emphasizes that self-esteem is a gauge of social acceptance – underscoring again the importance of social context. Cristina Atance provides a quick overview that even young children can imagine the future, important if self-concept influence motivation and action over time.


Week 3  Sept 20  Perceiving people, stereotypes & stereotype malleability

We are a country that is becoming increasingly diverse (see graph of American demographics in the suggested reading sections). Yet we are still grappling with how to get along and how we make sense of others.

This week we consider social psychological theorizing on intergroup processes (Brewer and Pettigrew readings), show that people are surprisingly attuned to context and shift easily in expression of stereotypes (Sinclear & Lun), which may result in stereotypical behavior (Pager & Quillian) and Susan Fiske's synthesis of the person and group perception literature which shows that inferences focus on two axes warmth-morality and competence-ability.


(Optional)
Week 4  Sept 27  Fitting in and belonging

Last week we focused on how people judge and perceive others and other groups. This week’s readings focus on the interface between identity development and motivation to fit and feel connected. Marjorie Rhodes and Dan Brickman show that even young children notice the successes and failures of in-group others, Becky Bigler focuses on development of prejudice and stereotyping and how teachers and classrooms can inadvertently foster it but can also reduce it, Geoffrey Cohen and Maria Garcia and Daphna Oyserman and her colleagues each use different aspects of identity to intervene to promote academic attainment. Discussion questions seek to provide you with a set of issues and implications to consider after reading the readings – as social workers, the question is what does it mean for intervention?

Core Readings:

Suggested Readings:

Week 5  Oct 4  Culture in the mind and in the world: What happiness means, what is important, how we think, what we see and do

4 PAGE PERSONAL REFLECTION DUE load onto CTOOLS before class
What is “culture”? Culture can be operationalized as a set of structures and institutions, values, traditions and ways of engaging with the social and nonsocial world used in a certain time and place and transmitted across generations. Culture can be thought of as a set of societal-level processes (e.g., legal systems, languages, religions) with societal-level outcomes (e.g., suicide rates, divorce rates, fertility rates). These societal-level processes can produce average effects at the individual-level. In today’s we focus on culture-relevant contents, procedures, and motivations at the individual-level. This narrows our working definition of culture to culturally-characteristic content (what is relevant, moral, central, of consequence), culturally-characteristic ways of thinking and making sense of oneself, others and the world, and culturally-characteristic motivations (e.g., to self-enhance or self-improve, to assert confidence and leadership or not to offend). These elements together constitute that which “goes without saying”, that which feels transparent, right, and logical in context. This feeling of fluency is a telltale marker that culture is at work, but also makes it difficult to systematically model all that ‘culture’ is and reduces social scientists’ ability to make predictions about when and how culture matters and reduces what is meant by a culturally sensitive approach to something that looks like simply being empathetic. To reduce the risk that the term culture would become so broad as to become essentially meaningless, cultural psychologists have developed a number of potentially useful basic organizing constructs to describe and distinguish cultural ‘syndromes’. These simplifying models are not meant to provide detailed descriptions of any particular culture, but rather to highlight systematic patterns that characterize clusters of cultures. Such models are useful to the extent that they set the stage for specific and testable predictions about culture’s consequences.

Core readings:

Suggested:

**Week 6 Oct 11 Poverty, stress, discrimination and unfair treatment:**
**Effects on health and well-being**

Poverty is associated with stressful life conditions including exposure to violence. Minority status is associated with additional stress of exposure to discrimination. Stress, unfair treatment and discrimination all occur over the lifespan, beginning in early years of life. There is evidence that taken together, these events increase allostatic load, or psychophysiological hyperactivity – the extent that the body is chronically in a state of preparedness, and that this chronic state can have negative effects on health and well-being, including capacity to focus and concentrate.

Core readings:
- Quick up-look summary of the brain
- Neuroscience and the brain. I am just a poor boy though my story's seldom told Apr 2nd 2009 From The Economist print edition

Suggested reading:

OCT 17-18 STUDY BREAK

Week 7 Oct 25 Family and neighborhood poverty: Effects on health and well-being

Dr. Donald Warne talks about how cultural loss impacts the health of Native American tribes in Arizona.

This week we continue to look at the ways that contexts, including social networks, family and neighborhood poverty can produce adverse effects on health, mental health and well-being. People typically view and interpret health outcomes and social inequities through three dominant message frames that ultimately reinforce the status quo:

1. **Personal Responsibility.** Poor health stems from individuals making unhealthy choices. We can encourage people to exercise and eat right, but it’s up to them.

2. **Unfortunate but not unjust.** Hierarchies are everywhere. Life isn’t fair, and differences in group health, like wealth disparities, will always be with us.

3. **Nothing can be done.** If health inequities do in fact arise from structural inequities in the rest of society, then what can be done short of a revolution?

These message frames are compelling because they speak to people’s deeper, often unconscious investment in certain ideas about society. Overcoming resistance is not simply a matter of presenting new information, but of creating opportunities for people to interrogate their own assumptions. Offering positive examples of how things might be different, linking the issues to other core values and engaging people in creative problem-solving can be very effective. Rather than blame and victimization, focus is on larger structural conditions, collective problem solving and policy change. Other useful questions might include: who benefits from particular actions and decisions, who bears the cost, and who has the power to make decisions about how resources are allocated?

**Core readings:**


Also skim:


**Discussion Cues:**
New England Journal of Medicine has a series on the spread of obesity and of smoking cessation. Have a look at these on our CourseTools site and use these as cues for discussing the effect of context on health.

Suggested readings:

Week 8  Nov 1  Money: Effects on health and happiness

**IN CLASS QUIZ 1 (covers core concepts from sessions 1-7)**

Last week we focused on poverty and stressors, today we focus on health and money. We all know the saying “money cannot buy happiness” but is that really true? What about the reverse, for example, is there a relationship between low income and happiness? Are people with health problems or disabilities as happy as people without them? What may this mean for social work practice? Good decision making often requires accurate predictions about how potential outcomes will make one feel. Session eight focuses on explicitly on happiness: what it is and how we measure it, what it is and is not related to. Discussion focus is on how this applies both to our clients and to our own thinking.

Core readings:

Week 9  Nov 8  Optimism and positive thinking

Americans believe in the power of positive thinking. But we also believe “a stitch in time saves nine”. Which is true? Should we be focusing our selves and our clients on the positive? Is there any evidence that optimism helps? What about the reverse, is there evidence that pessimism hurts? This week we focus on optimism and the impact of the positive.
Taken together the topics covered to this point in the semester suggest ways that social isolation, inclusion and exclusion, unfair treatment, poverty and social contexts influence well-being and health and that how we share our experiences with others matters.

In the next three sessions, we focus on thinking and memory. As a social worker, can you help yourself and your clients to improve well-being, physical and mental health by how you think about your experiences? Clearly we act on the basis of our predictions about the environment (e.g., is it safe, how much control do I have). These predictions are based in prior experience; this means that it is critical to have some understanding of how we make sense of our world (memory and cognitive processes) and how these are influenced by development, social context, and biology. Sessions 8-10 focus on these issues.

Core readings:

Suggested readings:

Week 10 Nov 15    Happiness and Unhappiness: Rumination vs. Reflection

When bad things happen, some people keep it to themselves, some ruminate, some share. Today’s guest speaker, Prof Ethan Kross, will describe his work on what often happens when people try to figure out why things went badly by asking themselves “why”?

Two readings focus on his work.

The third reading focuses on the reverse: When good things happen, some people savor them and relive them; others focus on how things could have turned out differently. Some people write about their experiences in a journal; others talk about their happy times and their concerns with friends or family; still others prefer to think about their situation privately or
not do anything at all. Whether the significant experience is negative (e.g., an injury, death of a friend, loss of salary, divorce) or positive (e.g., marriage, birth of a child, promotion, graduation), the way that one responds to the experience may differentially affect the outcome for one's well-being and health.

Our focus today is on examining which ways of processing negative and positive experiences are most beneficial and examining why this might be the case.

Experiencing unpleasant or traumatic circumstances can affect an individual's sense of meaning and order in the world. Consequently, seeking to restore meaning and order is a common and adaptive way of coping with negative events. However not all ways of seeking meaning are created equal. It turns out that the ways people process their thoughts under adverse circumstances (whether they thinking privately versus journal or talk about their experiences) can influence whether the outcome for mental and physical health is favorable or unfavorable. Ruminating about negative events is bad for health and well-being but writing or talking to someone else has beneficial effects.

An emerging body of evidence suggests that how we process positive experiences is also extremely important for health and well-being. Analyzing happy times mutes their positive effects but simply reliving them, re-experiencing the joys, sharing them with others, is helpful.

Note that social contexts, cultures and cultural groups that emphasize sharing may improve health and well-being in spite of stresses and negative life events.

Core reading:


**Week 11 Nov 22 How we think influences the choices we make: framing and decision making**

Last week we focused on positive thinking. Of course, positive thinking is only helpful to the extent that it also produces action in pursuit of self-relevant and self-enhancing life goals. But we are all procrastinators – and have a bias toward doing nothing. Indeed, procrastination is such an in-grained human trait that economists have named the predictable results of our inability to act today the “I’ll save more tomorrow” effect.
Rather than berate ourselves for procrastinating, this week’s session focuses on understanding how to frame choices in order to reduce the negative consequences of procrastination on consequential choices that social workers and their clients make. Given the pull of inertia, “default” options – what happens if one takes no action, can have an enormous impact on wellbeing.

Defaults matter for three key reasons: First, it is easier not to act. Second, not acting can be costly. Third, the cost of inaction now can become increasingly costly over time. These three effects imply that the choice of defaults can have significant consequences for social workers, clients and social welfare policy more generally. As shown in today’s readings, setting things up so that the default produces progress towards one’s goals has enormous positive consequences.

Another important feature of our thought processes is how we make sense of potential losses and gains. On average, across types of decisions and across people, losses feel more psychologically painful than gains feel pleasant. It hurts more to lose the rent money than it feels good to gain it. Given this, another important tactic for social workers is to make sure to frame decisions in terms of avoiding losses.

Whether choice is framed as leaving things (vs. acting to opt out) as is or as needing to take action (to opt in) matters for the choices we end up making. This is called “framing.” Framing has a long history in decision research and has been shown to have sizable effects (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Tversky and Kahneman 1987). The major cause of framing differences is (1) the fact that decisions can be framed as the loss of an option or as something to be gained and (2) that the cost of the loss looms larger than the pleasure of the equivalent gain. Although both options describe exactly the same transaction, these differences cause marked reversals in what people pick to do.

This session focuses on how the way we think about a choice influences the choice we make.

Core readings:

Suggested Readings:


**Week 12 Nov 29  Thinking about your life: healthy lessons from social cognition**

Work with clients can be difficult. A topic of interest for social workers is burn out and how to deal with negative feelings about the meaning of one’s life and work in the face of stress and difficulty. Today’s session focuses on what the field has learned about thinking as it relates to promoting a sense of meaning and well-being. A goal is to apply these healthy lessons both in one’s own life and in one’s interface with other professionals and with one’s clients.

*Core readings:*


**Week 13 Dec 6  How we think influences the choices we make: The psychology of scarcity and the subjective experience of ease**

Decades of psychological research documented that human judgment often falls short of normative ideals. Social and cognitive psychologists discovered an ever increasing number of systematic biases and illustrated their pervasive role in judgment and decision making. Similarly, researchers in applied fields like health psychology have identified numerous erroneous beliefs that impair good decisions and prevent people from doing what would be in their best interest. In both cases, the remedy seems obvious: If people only thought enough about the issues at hand, considered all the relevant information and employed proper reasoning strategies, their decision making would surely improve. This assumption is at the heart of numerous strategies that attempt to debias human judgment; it is likewise central to public information campaigns designed to dispel erroneous beliefs and to replace them with more accurate information. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by Norbert Schwarz and his colleagues, these attempts to improve decision making often fail to achieve their goals, even under conditions assumed to foster rational judgment.

Models of rational choice assume that people will expend more time and effort on getting it right when the stakes are high; hence, providing proper incentives should improve judgment. Many studies have attempted to show that either increasing incentives for getting the answer right or increasing accountability for a poor judgment results in better decision making. However, these studies have failed to show the desired results. One possible reason is that
increased effort improves performance only when people already possess strategies that are appropriate for the task at hand; in the absence of such strategies, raising the stakes simply cannot produce better results. But even when no particularly sophisticated strategy is required, trying harder does not necessarily result in any improvement—in fact, it may often backfire. This is the case for one of the most widely recommended debiasing strategies: encouraging people to “consider the opposite,” or to counterargue their initial response, by asking themselves, “What are some reasons that my initial judgment might be wrong?” Ironically, the more people try to consider the opposite, the more they often convince themselves that their initial judgment was right on target. The strategy of consider the opposite produces this unintended effect because it ignores the second piece of the puzzle: the metacognitive experiences that accompany the reasoning process. Similar surprises arise in the domain of public information campaigns. Presumably, erroneous beliefs can be dispelled by confronting them with contradictory evidence. Yet attempts to do so often increase later acceptance of the erroneous beliefs. The unintended effect arises because the educational strategy focuses solely on information content and ignores the metacognitive experiences that are part and parcel of the reasoning process. Today’s session focuses on the role of metacognitive experiences in judgment and decision making and explores their implications for debiasing strategies and public information campaigns.

Core readings:


Suggested readings (Other influences on judgments):


Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.