



DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH

K9F6090, Integrating Theory in Health Research, 1.5 credits (hec)

Integrera teori i hälsoforskning, 1,5 högskolepoäng

Third-cycle level / Forskarnivå

Approval

This syllabus was approved by The Committee for Doctoral Education on 2025-09-03, and is valid from spring semester 2026.

Responsible department

Department of Global Public Health, Faculty of Medicine

Prerequisite courses, or equivalent

No prerequisite courses, or equivalent, demanded for this course.

Purpose & Intended learning outcomes

Purpose

Understanding theory is essential to conducting rigorous and reflective health research. Theoretical and epistemological considerations help researchers conceptualize research questions, develop a study design, interpret findings, and situate their work within the broader scientific field. This course offers perspectives to critically engage with theory in empirical research, emphasizing the link between theory and method, for both quantitative and qualitative research. The conceptual and practical tools presented will support students in thinking theoretically and interrogating their own projects, thereby enhancing the quality, depth, and methodological rigor of their work.

For students who are at the beginning of their doctoral training, this course will provide tools to develop a theoretical foundation and clarify the conceptual underpinnings of their research. For students in later stages, it will support deepening their theoretical understanding and coherence.

Intended learning outcomes

After completing this course, the participant is expected to be able to:

Knowledge and understanding

- Describe what theory is.
- Discuss epistemological and ontological positions in health research.
- Compare theories of knowledge, macro theories, and middle-range theories.

Competence and skills

- Identify and critically discuss students' epistemological assumptions.
- Analyse the use of theory on specific examples.

Judgement and approach

- Evaluate the appropriateness of theoretical perspectives for students' doctoral project/research.
- Critically discuss and select potential theories and frameworks to interpret findings.

Course content

- Definition(s) of theory
- Different roles of theory in health research
- Epistemological and ontological assumptions
- Theoretical perspective, theoretical framework, conceptual framework
- Theories of knowledge, macro theories, middle-range theories
- Practical tools for conceptualization
- Theories, frameworks, and models to interpret research findings
- Example of specific theories commonly used in health research

Forms of teaching and learning

The course employs a blended learning approach, integrating self-directed study with in-person sessions. Classroom activities include theoretical lectures, case discussions, and collaborative development and peer reviewing of students' theoretical frameworks in relation to their doctoral projects. Self-study components focus on critical engagement with the course literature and practical exercises to enhance theoretical awareness.

Language of instruction

The course is given in English

Grading scale

Pass (G) /Fail (U)

Compulsory components & forms of assessment

Compulsory components

Participation in face-to-face sessions and group work are mandatory. Absence can be compensated in agreement with the course director.

Forms of assessment

Students are required to complete an individual assignment, which consists in presenting to the class the epistemological assumptions, theoretical perspective and conceptual framework of their own doctoral project/research and providing feedback to other students' presentations.

The final examination will be a take-home exam, which will consist of a revision of the individual assignment. Students are expected to incorporate the feedback received during their in-class presentation, both from peers and the teachers, and narratively articulate the epistemological assumptions, theoretical perspective, and conceptual framework underpinning their doctoral project in a final document that they will send to the teacher.

In order to obtain a pass for the whole course, students must obtain a pass in the assignment and in the final examination.

Course literature

Recommended literature:

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE.

Green & Thorogood. (2018) 4th ed. Qualitative methods for health research, Los Angeles: SAGE.

Hathcoat, John D.; Meixner, Cara & Nicholas, Mark C. (2019). Ontology and Epistemology. In Pranee Liamputtong, Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences. Springer Singapore. pp. 99-116.

Hoeyer K. What is theory, and how does theory relate to methods? & Bjerg O. Methods and epistemology. In Vallgård & Koch (2008). Research methods in public health. Gyldendal Akademisk.

Nilsen, P. Making sense of implementation theories, models and frameworks (2015). Implementation Sci 10, 53. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-015-0242-0>

Rocco, T. S.; Plakhotnik, M. S. (2009). Literature Reviews, Conceptual Frameworks, and Theoretical Frameworks: Terms, Functions, and Distinctions. Human Resource Development Review, 8(1), 120–130. doi:10.1177/1534484309332617