SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Course Description
The sociology of health and illness (also known as medical sociology) is a broad field examining the social production of health, wellness, illness and mortality. We cannot understand the topics of health and illness simply by looking at biological phenomena and medical knowledge, but, instead, we must also consider a variety of social, political, economic, and cultural forces. We will survey the central topics in the field, with an emphasis on understanding the way that the following themes: the structural and cultural dimensions of health; health inequalities; the profession of medicine; the experience of illness; and attempts to reform healthcare. Throughout the course, we will apply sociological theory and the recent scholarship of anthropology, history and social and cultural studies of science to make sense of contemporary issues in medicine. Although the course focuses on the United States, we will try whenever possible to place issues in a global context and students are welcome to explore these topics in their course papers.

Learning Goals
Students will

• Be versed in a wide range of theory and research in the sociology of health and illness
• Understand the history and trajectory of the field of medical sociology, including its recent turn towards the sociology of science.
• Be able to use concepts developed across disciplines to analyze biomedical research on health and illness
• Critically assess how health is produced through social, political, economic and cultural forces on a macro, meso and micro level.

Course Logistics
This is a seminar course. The quality of our discussions depends on your full participation. Typically, I will begin with a short presentation to provide background and history for understanding the readings. The discussion that follows will be grounded in the reading and based on your comments submitted for the week. Students must fulfill the following requirements:

1) Over the course of the semester, each student will be expected to write a 1-2 page memo responding to each week’s readings. (single-space is fine.) These comments will be pasted into the discussion section on sakai the day before class (Sunday) by 7pm, so that everyone has time to read each other’s comments by Monday morning. Comments may be informal, but they must be a critical response. Memos will be graded as ‘check,’ ‘check plus,’ or ‘check minus.’ You can take four exemptions from writing these memos. If you choose to take an exemption, please let me know by email.
These memos should help you focus your ideas in a way that can contribute to our collective conversation during class time. In general, each memo should include both a synthetic analysis of some dimension of the course readings that you found compelling and warrants further discussion and two to three well-crafted questions for the class to consider as a group. These memos ought to address readings within that particular week, but you may also compare that week’s readings to themes and theories discussed earlier in the semester. This is also a good opportunity to raise questions and concerns about the substance of the readings. Finally, these memos are a great opportunity to develop a killer set of notes.

These memos are worth 20% of your grade.

2) Participate in class! This is a seminar and each of you are expected to contribute to the discussion. Part of participation includes helping me lead at least one weekly class discussion for a single article assigned that week. Sign-up sheets will be passed around during the first week of class. As a codiscussant, your job is to introduce critically the material and to come up with a few (3-5) substantive questions in the form of a one-page handout (to be electronically distributed to the rest of the group by 9 pm on the day before class) to get the discussion rolling. Such questions may target what you consider the key issue/problematic raised by the author(s) in question, a shortcoming in the argument/evidence, a puzzling claim, broader implications, exciting/provocative comparisons, and so forth. You will meet with me 15 minutes before class to go over our approach to discussion for the day.

Class participation is worth 20% of your grade.

3) Students taking the course for credit are expected to submit a 17-20 page paper on a topic related to this course. The paper can be analytical, critically reflecting on a substantive issue related to the sociology of health and illness or you may choose to write a research proposal, drawing on theoretical perspectives and existing empirical work to identify an interesting and until now unsolved empirical question.

In order to get approval for your topic, you must submit a 2-3 page memo describing your project, complete with a brief bibliography by October 19th, after which you are expected to make an appointment to discuss this paper with me further. Of course, I’m happy to discuss this with you in advance. Final paper is due on December 16th. Late papers are strongly discouraged.

The memo is worth 5% of your grade. The paper is worth 45% of your grade.

4) Students will present their research in progress in class on the last day of class.

The presentation is worth 10% of your grade.
Required Texts

Course Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Illness
September 10, 2012

Week 2       Cultures of Medicine
September 17, 2012


Week 3       Health inequalities: Theoretical frameworks
September 17, 2012


   Link, Bruce and Jo Phelan. “McKeown and the idea that social conditions are fundamental causes of disease.” pp 730-2.


Week 4     Sickening social worlds
October 1, 2012


Week 5     Biomedical dominance, expertise, and transformation
October 8, 2012


Week 6     Theories of (Bio)medicalization
October 15, 2012


**Week 7  Medical Practice**  
October 22, 2012


**Week 8  Experiencing Illness**  
October 29, 2012


**Week 9  Neurochemical selves/Social and cultural meanings of illness**  
November 5, 2012


Kempner, Joanna. In progress. *Not Tonight: A Cultural Analysis of Headache Medicine*. (“All in Her Brain” and “Embracing the Migraine Brain” Chapters 2 and 3)
**Week 10  Constructing medical objects and subjects**
November 12, 2012


**Week 11  Creating Consensus: The Autism Epidemic**
November 19, 2012


**Week 12  The Political Economy of Health Care**
November 26, 2012


**Week 13  Health social movements**
December 3, 2012


**Week 14 Presentations**
December 10, 2012

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