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 in which health and illness are produced and understood. 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

• Acquire broad understanding of the major theoretical debates and areas of substantive concern within 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.

The acquisition of learning goals will be assessed using weekly memos, active participation in class, and the completion of a course paper.

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 by 10am on Monday morning, so that everyone has time to read each other’s comments by Monday evening’s class. 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 three exemptions from writing these memos. If you choose to take an exemption, please let me know by email.** Also, I do not normally accept memos if you don’t also come to class that day.

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 32% (each memo=4%) of your grade.

2) Participate in class! This is a seminar and each of you is expected to contribute to the discussion. Part of participation includes helping me lead at least one weekly class discussion for a single article or a book assigned that week. Sign-up sheets will be passed around during the first week of class. As a co-discussant, your job is to introduce 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.

*It should go without saying, but attendance is mandatory. (Of course, stay home if you must -- but, attendance is expected.)*

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 Feb 27th, 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 May 4th.** Late papers are strongly discouraged.

The memo is worth 5% of your grade. The paper is worth 35% of your grade.
4) Students will present their paper in progress in class on the last day of class.

The presentation is worth 8% of your grade.

**Required Texts**


Books are available at the Barnes and Noble bookstore on campus, on Amazon, or on reserve at the Douglass Library.

**Course Schedule**

**Week 1 – Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Illness**

January 23rd

**Week 2 – How is medicine social? Political? Cultural?**

January 30th


**Week 3 -- Health inequalities: Theoretical frameworks**

February 6th


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


**Class canceled Feb 13th**

**Week 4**  
**Biosocial approaches to health**

February 20th

Guest speaker: Allan Horwitz

Horwitz, Allan. Forthcoming. Reeder Address.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. The Bare Bones of Race. Social Studies of Science.

Springer, Kristen W. Hankivsky, Olena, Bates, Lisa M. Gender and Health: Relational, Intersectional, and Biosocial Approaches. *Social Science and Medicine*.

**Week 5**  
**Biomedical dominance**

February 27th


**Week 6**  
**Theories of (Bio)medicalization**

March 6th


**March 9th:**
Institute for Health Forum: Future of Health Care Reform
Health institute, 12-1:30

Attendance isn’t mandatory, but it is strongly, strongly encouraged.

**March 13th** Spring Break – woo hoo!!!

**Week 7** Healthcare Access and the Affordable Care Act?
March 20th
Readings to be announced.

**Week 8** Environmental Health
March 27th
Guest speaker: Sara Shostak


*To skim:*

**Week 9** Experiencing Illness
April 3rd


*To skim:*

**Week 10** Social and cultural meanings of diagnosis
April 10th

Kempner, Joanna. *Not Tonight: A Cultural Analysis of Headache Medicine*. (Intro, Chapters 2 and 3)

Buchbinder, Mara. All in Your Head: Making Sense of Pediatric Pain. (Intro, Chapters 1, 2, and 3)

**Week 11**  
**Constructing risk**  
April 17th


**Week 12**  
**Health Social Movements**  
April 24th


Kempner, Joanna and Bailey, John. Under review. Title TBD.

**Week 13**  
**Presentations**  
May 1st

**Final Papers Due: May 5th, 2017**