Sociology 250: Sociology of Health, Illness, and Disease

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This course examines the notion that we cannot understand the topics of health and illness by looking only at biological phenomena, but, instead, we must also consider a variety of social, political, economic, and cultural forces. Sociologists of health and illness use sociological perspectives and methods to understand topics such as: social meanings of illness; patterns in the distribution of health and illness; the ways people make sense of, seek help for, and manage their illnesses; the ways doctors, nurses, and patients interact with each other, including the changing nature of health-related professions; the cultural, organizational, and economic functioning of various healthcare institutions; social movements surrounding health, including the ways some deviant behaviors are “medicalized” while others are not; and the sociological effects of public policy on health outcomes. This course is designed to provide a broad overview of the field of medical sociology. Of course, the course is necessarily selective and will miss some classics and relevant contemporary works.

Course Requirements:

1. Participation and Discussion Questions: This course is designed as a graduate seminar in which participation from all students is necessary if everyone is to profit. Therefore, a portion of the final grade will be based on the quality and frequency of participation, which will be based on careful reading of all assigned materials. I have a policy of not giving everyone a passing grade just for having a pulse and showing up.

2. Critical Reviews: All students in the course will share responsibility for preparing critical reviews for each of the required readings. These critiques are intended to help you help each other grasp the ideas and implications of the readings.

Components of these reviews must include: (a) a summary of the theoretical position of the author and her/his core points and arguments; (b) brief reflections on its relationship to the other material assigned for that session, and how it relates to readings encountered earlier in the course (e.g., theoretically consonant—if so, how; in disagreement—if so, how; elaboration of another’s argument; etc.); and (c) answers, based on the reading, to all those discussion questions for that session that are applicable to that reading. Depending upon the length of the reading, reviews should be 1-2 pages.

At the first class of the quarter, each of you will sign up for the readings you will review. The critical reviews must be e-mailed to all other enrolled students and
the instructor by 2PM the Thursday before the class. During class you may be asked to briefly and concisely present your review in the course of discussion.

3. **Prospectus/Outline for Final Paper:** A one-page prospectus or outline of your topic for the final paper (see below) will be due in class at week 6.

4. **Final Paper:** Length of 20 double-spaced pages, excluding title page, references, and the like. This paper should focus on a theoretical question related to the course or a substantive topic/health issue of interest to you. In either case, the paper must articulate a central question (or set of questions) that will serve to orient and focus the paper, as opposed to simply doing a wide-ranging literature review on a health topic or theoretical discussion of a general theme. The paper must include: (a) an introduction which frames the central question(s) for the paper and why it is significant; (b) a section in which the question(s) is/are addressed theoretically or conceptually; and (c) literature from class readings and additional relevant sociological or social scientific material which you have found.

The paper is due on December 15, 5 pm. I only accept paper copies.

**Schedule (by week)**

1. The three major issues of U.S. health care and the importance of health care

   a. *Lack of access: the uninsured*
   Also, check articles on Affordable Care Act, policies and barriers.
   b. *The high cost of health care in the US*: international and historical comparison
   Check various websites: Kaiser family, institute of medicine, WHO, etc.
   c. *Quality of care* [http://www.dartmouthatlas.org](http://www.dartmouthatlas.org), look around on the website. Also, look at:
   d. *Role of health care in population health*


2. Social Nature of disease
   a. Parsons, Talcott, The Social System, chapter x

3. Social Distribution of Disease

   Also recommended: Stefan Timmermans and Steven Haas, 2008, Towards A Sociology of Disease, Sociology of Health and Illness,

4. Medical Profession-Professionalization
   b. Fox, Renee, 1957, Training for uncertainty, in The Student Physician


5. Illness experience and patient-doctor interaction


6. Medicalization, biomedicalization, and genetization


7. Patient health movements and social networks

8. Health Policy: national and international

9. Medical Knowledge production

10. TBD
Journals you should read regularly

Big three medical sociology:
*Social Science and Medicine*
*Journal of Health and Social Behavior*
*Sociology of Health and Illness*

Also bookmark:
*JAMA*
*New England Journal of Medicine*
*Health Affairs*

Occasionally good articles in:
*Health; Milbank Quarterly; Social Theory and Health; Qualitative Health Research; ASR; AJS; SSS; STHV; Demography; Medical Anthropology; Medical Anthropology Quarterly; Perspectives on Biology and Medicine; Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry; Medical History*

Organizations to join
Medical sociology section of ASA, also look for the occasional US-UK medical sociology conferences (next year in Iceland)
Join Medsoc mailing list (US): listserv@listserv.brown.edu
Join Medsocnews mailing list (UK): To join or subscribe to MedSocNews, send an email to jiscmail@jiscmail.ac.uk with the message (leave the subject line blank and do not include a signature): SUBSCRIBE medsocnews firstname lastname