SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

SOC 719R
Fall 2016

Ellen L. Idler, Ph.D.
Tarbutton Hall 209
Office phone: 404 727-9148
e-mail: eidler@emory.edu

Course Description

This course will provide graduate students with a survey of research on the social origins of the health and illness of individuals and populations. Students will be introduced to the process of formulating important social research questions in health and illness, including attention to major theoretical perspectives, measurement of concepts, the merits of various study designs, and both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis. The sociology of health and illness is a large and historically important subdiscipline within the field, distinctively sociological, but with important links to public health, social epidemiology, and health psychology. To quote from a newsletter of the Medical Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association:

In its early decades medical sociology was often construed as an applied field. Now we are known for our many and wide-ranging contributions, including sophisticated applications. Medical sociologists explore every type of question found in the larger discipline and sometimes stretch its borders to include new frontiers. We bring the body back into sociological theorizing and empirical research. We reveal the rhythms of cultural rituals in ordinary routines. We chart the development of biomedicine and map its consequences. We challenge preconceptions as we study institutional and interactional practices. We develop ever more exacting instruments and analytic tools to conduct our demographic studies and survey research. Whether we examine large data bases or study micro interactions, we raise innovative questions that generate new understandings.

Kathy Charmaz, 2004 Section Chair

Regular class sessions will include: an introductory lecture on background concepts, theory, or methods; discussion of assigned chapters or articles that have been read by the class and are critiqued by individual students; a “Minute for Books” with a focus on nonfiction accounts of illness; and a “Minute for Media”, with a focus on recent health news. The final week of the semester will be devoted to the presentation of student projects.

Course Requirements and Grading

The final grade will be based on class participation (10%), completion of weekly article extracts (20%), presentation of “Minutes” for media and books (one each) (10%), completion of written peer review (10%), class presentation of project (20%), and a final paper (30%).

Course Objectives

• To understand the social determinants of health perspective within an aging and life course framework
• To gain knowledge of indicators and trends in population health over time
• To become familiar with the intellectual history and development of the field
• To become familiar with current social theories of health-related perceptions and behaviors of individuals
• To become familiar with the requirements and advantages of common study designs and types of analysis
• To think critically about social and institutional arrangements related to health and medicine
• To recognize applications of social scientific thinking in health science writing in the mass media
**SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS**

**Session 1 – August 30**
Introductions  
Course overview  
A (somewhat but not entirely personal) history of the sociology of medicine, health, and illness

*Required reading:*  
None

**Session 2 – September 6**
The backdrop to the study of the sociology of health and illness:  
the demographic transition  
the shift from infectious to chronic disease as cause of morbidity and mortality  
aging populations  
trends in disability  
the questionable contribution of medicine

What are the radical changes that have taken place in the health of populations in the past two centuries?  
How have those changes shifted the age structure of populations?  
What are the prospects for the improvement of the health of populations in the coming decades?  
To what extent has medicine been responsible for these large-scale changes?

*Required reading:*  

*Recommended reading:*  

*Readings marked with an asterisk are empirical research articles. There are a varying number of these each week. On the Blackboard site you will find a blank Article Extract form to be used for summarizing and critiquing these papers. Do one per week – you choose which one, if there is more than one listed. I will collect these forms at the end of each class.*
Session 3 – September 13
The history of social causation: the stress process and the social environment

How does the social environment “get under the skin”?
How did the story of the effect of the social environment on health begin, and then evolve?
What is the relationship between acute and chronic stress, and which is more important for health research?
Are the effects of the social environment primarily negative?

Required reading:

Recommended reading:

Session 4 – September 20
Health consequences of social inequality: socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity

Is health determined by relative inequality, or absolute vulnerability?
Does social inequality research require the stress paradigm?
What is the relationship between SES inequality and race inequality?

Required reading:

Recommended reading:
Session 5 – September 27
Health consequences of social networks and social capital: ties to family, friends, religious and community groups

Should we treat all components of social networks alike when it comes to health? Should network ties all have equal values?
How does the social capital approach modify the individual-choice presumption of Berkman and Syme’s idea of substitutability?
For your own research, do you see more utility in the “network-based or embedded approach” of Lin and Bourdieu or the “normative approach” of Putnam and Coleman?
How does the influence of the social environment on health in the social network / social capital approach differ from the effects seen in the stress / social determinants approach?

Required reading:


Recommended reading:


Session 6 – October 4
Measurement of health status, definitions and social constructions of health, functioning, quality of life

Of what use is the biomedical conception of health for psychosocial research?
Which types of health status measures are most subject to framing, or being socially constructed?
What are the components of a quality life? Who is in the best position to make judgments about this?

Required reading:


Recommended reading:

Fall Break - October 11

**Session 7 – October 18**

Health behaviors as mediators of the association of social networks with health

How much responsibility do/should individuals bear for their own health? (Especially the individual’s subjective perception of health is clearly so influential?) How do you interpret the direction of research, toward more blame, or less responsibility?

Which is the more powerful social force in affecting health behaviors – integration or regulation?

*Required reading:*


*Recommended reading:*


**Session 8 – October 25**

Social support and caregiving as mediators of the association of social networks with health

Is it social integration or social regulation that provides the glue that keeps these arrangements together?

Why is it harder, and does it take longer, to see the positive aspects of social relationships than the negative ones?

What are the differences between caring for a loved one with dementia and one with a physical illness?

*Required reading:*


*Recommended reading:*

Session 9 - November 1
The mind and the body in social context: Suffering, stigma, and placebos

Is the social context more important for understanding the impact of mental states on physical states, or the impact of physical states on mental states?

Required reading:

Recommended reading:

Session 10 – November 8
Physician – patient relationships: The sick role, medicalization, and healing

In what ways is Parsons’ view of the physician-patient relationship dated, specific to the postwar period? In what ways is it still relevant?
How can we reconcile the “superior” knowledge of the physician about the patient’s condition with the patient’s own strong prognostic ability that is shown in the studies of self-rated health and mortality?

Required reading:

Recommended reading:
Session 11 – November 15

The US Health Care System

Required reading:

Recommended reading:

Session 12 – November 22

The US and the World: Cost, Quality, Access, and Exceptionalism

Required reading:

Recommended reading:

Session 13 – November 29

Death, dying, and bereavement

Could there be anything harder to study than this?
Does culture become more or less important in influencing behavior at the end of life?
Should we see individual agency as heightened or lessened at the end of life?

Required reading:

Recommended reading:
Session 14 – December 6

Student paper presentations.

**DETAILS FOR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Due</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Minute for media</td>
<td>Students will take turns presenting a story from the print media (newspapers, magazines, internet), highlighting important social factors that are present or absent from the account. There is no writing necessary for this assignment, but you should bring handout copies of the piece or provide an online link to the story. A sign-up sheet will be distributed at the first class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Minute for books</td>
<td>Students will take turns doing a brief book review of a nonfiction illness account. There is a list of books to choose from at the end of this syllabus, but others may be used – please let me know of any additional books. Write a one-page summary of your &quot;Minute&quot;. In your review, note the social factors that appear to play a causal role in the illness and/or coping strategies that are used by the patient and family. Formulate a general research question from your single “case”. A sign-up sheet will be distributed at the first class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Journal article review</td>
<td>Each student will collaborate with me on a peer review. General instructions for peer reviewing will be covered in class. When an article becomes available for review, I will give you a copy and you will have two weeks to prepare a review. Then we will meet to discuss our reviews, prepare a merged version, and submit it online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each class</td>
<td>*Empirical paper extracts</td>
<td>Write an analytic summary for one assigned empirical paper for that day. These papers are marked with an asterisk(*) in the syllabus. The form is available as a Word file on Blackboard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Session 4 | Proposal for paper       | Prepare a one-page proposal for your paper for the course. Identify your primary literature sources. Choose from the following possible topics:  

1. Choose a disease, disorder, or health problem, identify the set of risk factors known or suspected to play a role in its causation, and write a synthetic review of the existing literature. Differentiate social/cultural determinants from psychological, behavioral, or physiological factors. Evaluate the evidence for their association with the disease, disorder, or health problem. Conclude with an agenda for future research.  

2. Choose a potential social or behavioral risk factor and write a synthetic review of the literature on its social antecedents, and health or social consequences. Cigarette smoking, for example, may have antecedents including opportunity |
variables such as association with people who smoke, social psychological variables such as elevated anxiety or need for approval, or economic variables such as the cost of smoking. Consequences may be disease outcomes related to smoking, selection into and out of marriage, weight gain or loss, etc. Conclude with an agenda for future research.

3. Propose a new study using primary or secondary data, as if for a grant.
   Background:
   Review the key research and relevant theoretical framework(s), and the gap in the research your study will address. Identify the important concepts you will use in your study.
   Research Question:
   State a research question that will provide new knowledge to address those gaps.
   Methods:
   Study population. If you will be using existing data, identify the data set and characteristics of the sample and how they were selected. If you will collect your own data, describe your sample selection and recruitment procedures.
   Measures. Describe the concepts you want to measure, and how you will measure these constructs. Identify the important independent and dependent variables, and any mediating, moderating, and/or confounding variables that will be included.
   Analysis. Describe the steps you would use to analyze your data. Prepare a blank table or chart to show how you would display your results.
   Significance of Study:
   Why it is important to fund your proposal? How would your findings add to existing knowledge? Would your findings have potential practical or public health implications?

Session 11  First drafts of papers due
Papers should be approximately 20 pages double-spaced, 11 point font. Citations and references should use ASA style. Attach appendices for data sets, scales, measures of key variables, as appropriate.

Session 14  Paper presentations
Prepare and deliver a 12-15 minute presentation of your paper as you might for ASA or a job interview. Speak from notes; do not read your paper. Use visual aids to organize the material and present findings. Be prepared for questions.

Exam period  Final versions of papers due
Texts with Assigned Reading


Recommended Nonfiction Illness Narratives


Coutts, Marion. 2016. The Iceberg. Black Cat. A wife’s account of her writer-husband’s two-year illness and eventual death from a brain tumor. From the NYT review: "Coutt's prose blinds and burns you, but it is also purifying."


An account of an 1822 gunshot accident and the long conflictual relationship between the victim and his physician.

Despite the title, this first-person account is more about the author’s Parkinson’s Disease and his middle age. From the NYT review: "If it's possible for a book about illness and death to be delightful, this one fills the bill."

A wife’s account of her physician-husband’s serious and eventually fatal heart disease.

Account of the author’s quintuple bypass surgery and his four physician-friends who helped him through it.

First person account of a Roman Catholic priest’s near-death experience during treatment for colon cancer.

First person account of a Duke literature professor/novelist’s diagnosis and treatment for spinal cancer.

Following her own illness with pneumonia, the author does a "forensic investigation" into the writings and documented experiences of six famous authors at the end of their lives: Sigmund Freud, Dylan Thomas, Susan Sontag, Maurice Sendak, John Updike, and James Salter.

Originally published in the New Yorker, a journalist’s account of an elderly woman’s multiple chronic, disabling, but not life-threatening illnesses. Highlights issues of family and professional caregiving for community-living elderly.

Story of an African-American woman’s death from cervical cancer in 1951 and the history of her family, interwoven with the history of the scientific and medical discoveries that came from tissue samples taken from her without her knowledge.

First-person account of a friendship between an infectious disease specialist physician (Verghese) and a resident physician with substance abuse problems.


**Recommended Reference Texts**

The first textbook in the field of social epidemiology, or the systematic study of the social determinants of health.

A history of the field by a first-hand observer.

Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
An American textbook, emphasizing power relationships in health.

Handbook-style review of important concepts and research areas. Offers a definition and summary of current...
controversies.

The new edition of a classic “look-up” book for brief definitions of methods, statistics, measurements, techniques, study designs, data presentations, biases, data sources, data collection

Extensive text on methods, measures, design, and analysis of social factors in disease causation.

Rates, ratios, and life tables.


Uses examples of specific health problems (e.g. maternal weight gain in multiple pregnancies, risk of Alzheimer’s disease, trends in Hodgkins’ Disease among African-Americans, etc.) and identifies appropriate study designs and statistical tests.

A classic exposition of the logic of health research, particularly strong on the conditions of observations, screening for extraneous variables, and establishing causal associations.

A readable new text on network methods for health, with excellent examples.

Integrates the concepts of epidemiology with the relevant social sciences: sociology, anthropology, demography.