Sociology 476:

“Sociology of Health, Illness, and Biomedicine”

Spring 2018

Mondays, 9:00-11:50 am, in University Hall 318
*First course meeting on Tuesday, April 3*

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Office hours this quarter (by appointment):
Generally, Mondays, 3:00-4:00 pm, and Thursdays, 2:00-3:00 pm
1808 Chicago Ave, Rm 206
For exact availability and to sign up for a slot in advance: http://signup.com/go/jQgwLox

A copy of this syllabus can be found on the Canvas site for the course.
Summary:

This course will provide an introduction to central topics in the sociology of health, illness, and biomedicine. At the same time, it will show how that field is being redefined and reinvigorated by science and technology studies. We will seek to understand health, health care, and biomedicine by exploring multiple domains: the work sites in which health professionals interact with one another and with their clients; the research settings where medical knowledge and technologies are generated; the cultural arenas within which ideas of health and disease circulate; the market relations that produce health care as a commodity; the institutions and practices that transform social inequalities into health disparities; the social movements that challenge the authority of experts; and the bodies and selves that experience and are remade by illness.

Needless to say, in a course with nine sessions, the assigned reading is a small subset of relevant literature, and we will be leaving out many classics as well as many important recent works. The selected readings are intended to introduce key themes as well as to provide instructive examples of different theoretical perspectives and methodologies. I will be posting on Canvas a separate list of recommendations for further reading. This list should be helpful to you as you work on your papers for the course; it should also provide resources for students who seek to develop a more thoroughgoing expertise in the sociology of health, illness, and biomedicine. The list will also contain recommendations about relevant journals in the field.

Although many of the themes we will address have a long history, the emphasis will be on developments of the last several decades. The course focuses largely (but not completely) on the United States, though we will try along the way to consider global and transnational contexts. While the majority of the scholarship we will consider is sociological (broadly construed), some of it is drawn from other fields. Students from other disciplines are very welcome.

Course Mechanics:

♦ This course will make use of the “Canvas” course management system. The direct link for this course is https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/73314. Students are responsible for logging in, checking regularly for posted announcements, and obtaining readings and assignments from the site.

♦ Important course announcements may also be sent to students’ registered campus email addresses. You are responsible for monitoring those email accounts.

♦ You are welcome to sign up to see me during my office hours using this link: http://signup.com/go/jQgwLox. Please do sign up in advance, because if no one has signed up for a slot I may be elsewhere. Also, please note that my office is on the second floor of a building without an elevator. Any student who cannot negotiate the stairs may email me to make an appointment to meet elsewhere.
This syllabus and schedule are subject to change in the event of unforeseen circumstances. Announcements of changes will be posted on Canvas and emailed to students.

All required course readings are available as PDF downloads from Canvas. Please always bring readings with you to class (either as printouts or in electronic form).

We will use a discussion format. Typically I will make a short introductory presentation at the beginning of class. (I will post the PowerPoint afterward on Canvas. However, these PowerPoints are not meant to stand alone and may not be comprehensible to anyone who was not in class.) The discussion that follows should be grounded in the reading, and it’s taken for granted that everyone had done the reading carefully. We will also be guided by the discussion questions that students have prepared and distributed in advance (see below). To make discussions as participatory as possible (and welcoming to students coming from multiple disciplines), I discourage “name-dropping” and “-ism-dropping,” unless you take the time to explain the reference to the thinker or school.

Your grade for the quarter will be based on the following course requirements:

1) Students (including auditors) are expected to attend the seminar regularly and participate actively in discussions.

2) In addition, each student will be asked to circulate discussion questions in advance of two class meetings during the quarter. (Auditors are asked to do this once.) These questions must be distributed to all participants in the seminar by 5:00 pm on the day before class. Students will sign up for specific weeks at the first meeting of the seminar. Ideally, the questions should help frame the seminar discussion by asking about key arguments and concepts, juxtaposing and comparing readings, raising concerns, and beginning the process of articulating critiques. Please come up with two or three questions per reading, for at least three of the readings for the week. Please number your questions in a single sequence (to make it easier to refer to them in class), and please take the time to spell authors’ names and terms correctly.

Everyone should read and think about the distributed discussion questions before class. I will try to make sure we address as many of them as possible during the seminar meeting. In addition, the students who prepare questions for the week should take responsibility to help bring us back to those questions during the discussion.

3) Students taking the course for credit must submit a paper (around 20 pages in length, not including references) by 9 am on Monday, June 11. Please submit the paper as a Word file sent by email attachment to s-epstein@northeastern.edu. I will do all my grading on the email attachment and then email it back to you.

I am relatively open about directions in which you might take your paper, provided that you get my approval for your topic as described below. Your paper may be empirical with a theoretical framing, or it may take the form of a critical review of the literature. In
either case, the paper must draw explicitly on course materials but must also extend beyond course readings. (You may find the list of recommended readings helpful for the latter purpose.)

Although in practice your paper may be a “first stab” at something you will develop in greater detail later (for example, a second-year paper, special field paper, or dissertation prospectus), it should stand on its own and not read like a rough draft. The paper should articulate an identifiable argument. (That is, even a paper that is just outlining a future research project should still have a thesis statement up front.) It should be addressed to a general academic reader and should not assume a reader who attended the class. (It should not reference class discussions or refer informally to “the articles we read for this seminar”). Please proofread carefully and pay close attention to matters of style, grammar, syntax, and organization. (If your paper has a lot of careless errors and does not seem to have been proofread adequately, I will send it back to you.) The paper should include a title and should be broken into sections with headings. Use parenthetical citations for quotes and references to other texts. List all such texts in your bibliography. (You may use any standard bibliographic style, as long as you are consistent.) Please use a standard font and a ragged right margin (rather than right justification).

You must get my approval of your proposed topic for the paper by emailing me a written description by no later than Friday, April 20 (1-2 paragraphs plus a short reference list). If your paper will be thematically similar to, or will have any overlap in actual content with, any other paper you have written in the past or are writing this quarter, please also provide a clear description of the overlap as well as an explanation of how your paper for this class will differ. Such overlap is not necessarily a problem, but we need to come to a clear understanding about it in advance.

In addition, every student must come to my office hours at least once—either before or very soon after the submission of the topic—to discuss the paper. (I will schedule some additional office hours to facilitate these meetings.)

If you later want to change your topic, you must request my approval. Please send me a new description in that case.

♦ Incompletes are heartily discouraged.

♦ Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (http://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu/) and provide me with an accommodation notification from that office, preferably within the first two weeks of class. I keep all such information confidential.

♦ I am committed to very strict enforcement of university regulations concerning academic integrity. I report to campus authorities all suspected violations of the policy (including suspicion of cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, obtaining an unfair advantage, and aiding and abetting dishonesty). Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the university’s policy on academic integrity (http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/), and I urge you to speak with me if you have any questions.
**Schedule of Readings and Assignments:**

**TUE**, APRIL 3 (SESSION 1):

**SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH, ILLNESS, AND BIOMEDICINE: GOALS, BOUNDARIES, AND DEFINITIONS**


Note: As you read the following three articles, please think of each as a different sort of alternative to the agenda or vision of the field set forth by Bird, Conrad, and Fremont:


**MON, APRIL 9 (SESSION 2):**

**SOCIAL CONDITIONS, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AND THE EMBODIMENT OF INEQUALITIES**


**MON, APRIL 16 (SESSION 3):**

**MEANING-MAKING IN MEDICINE: FRAMING, MEDICALIZATION, AND HEALTHISM**


**REMINDER: PAPER TOPICS DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 20**

MON, APRIL 23 (SESSION 4): CONSTRUCTING MEDICAL OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS


MON, APRIL 30 (SESSION 5): CULTURES OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY


**MON, MAY 7 (SESSION 6):**
**PROFESSIONAL AUTHORITY, MEDICAL ENCOUNTERS, AND ILLNESS IDENTITIES**


**MON, MAY 14 (SESSION 7):**
**MAKING MEDICAL PRACTICE SCIENTIFIC: EVIDENCE, DECISION-MAKING, AND STANDARDIZATION**


**MON, MAY 21 (SESSION 8): HEALTH ACTIVISM: BODIES, EXPERTISE, AND BIOCITIZENSHIP**


**MON, MAY 28: MEMORIAL DAY (NORTHWESTERN HOLIDAY)**

**MON, JUNE 4 (SESSION 9): POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE**


**REMINDER:** Papers due by 9 AM on Monday, June 11 (by email attachment).