Winter 2014

Sociology 319: Sociology of Science
Expert Knowledge and Social Life

Mondays and Wednesdays
12:30 – 1:50
University Hall 218

Professor: Mariana Craciun
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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2 – 4PM.
Location: 1812 Chicago Ave, Room 109

Course Description

Experts are a dominant force in our society, but the ubiquity of their advice makes their power seem natural and inevitable. In this course, we will read about experts, their knowledge and influence, and seek answers to questions such as, what is expertise and who counts as an expert? How do experts distinguish themselves from non-experts? How is expertise created, and what happens when different kinds of expertise collide? How do experts participate in democratic decision-making? The course will draw on key works from sociology, history, anthropology, and science and technology studies, and will focus on expertise inside and outside the ‘hard’ sciences. We will peer inside laboratories, but also look at the worlds of medical examiners, professors, and financial advisers, in an attempt to understand what (if anything) these expert practices have in common. We will learn about these different ‘epistemic cultures’ through the lens of social science, focusing on the ‘social construction’ of expert knowledge, and the organization of expert professions. This course invites questions about the authority of experts, and to that end, a social scientific perspective (its own kind of expertise) can help us understand the structural and practical ways in which this authority is maintained and contested.

Requirements and Grading

Your grade for this course will draw on four components: attendance, participation, short written assignments, and a final exam.

- **Attendance and participation** in course discussions counts for 10% of your final grade. I will take attendance every class meeting. You may miss one class without penalty, but all others will be counted against you. Moreover, you must come to class having done the readings in advance, and being prepared to actively participate in debates and conversations. You are encouraged to ask questions or advance criticisms.

- **“On-call” days** will make up 30% of your final grade. Your “on-call” duties will consist of (1) submitting two to three questions for discussion based on the week’s readings, (2) identifying a news article that is relevant to the course topic and posting it on the discussion board, and (3) delivering a brief synopsis of (a) the main ideas in the day’s assigned readings, (b) the article you found and (c) the connection between them,
during class. In the first week of class, I will circulate a sign-up sheet, and you can enter your name for three dates. On the days that you are “on-call” you must submit your questions and the news article to the Blackboard site no later than 24 hours before the start of the class (that is, no later than 12:30PM on Sundays for Monday meetings, and no later than 12:30PM on Tuesdays for Wednesday meetings). Please note that, depending on the dynamic of a given class, we may not always have a chance to get to all your questions, or we may need to continue discussing them during our next meeting.

- There will be one written assignment (6-8 pages) that you are required to complete, and that will contribute up to 30% of your grade. You will need to submit both a hard copy, and an electronic copy of your paper which you will upload onto the Blackboard site. In the paper, I will ask you to link the ideas we’re discussing in class with either personal experiences, or with ongoing debates you may be familiar with from the media (here, the articles you used for the “on-call” days can serve as a starting point). The paper is due on March 3rd, in the beginning of class. Late papers will be penalized unless you provide a documented excuse (we need an expert to testify to your trustworthiness!).

- The final exam counts for 30% of your final grade and it will be in-class, and cumulative. It will consist of short-answer and essay questions. The exam will be on Wednesday, March 19, 2014 from 3PM to 5PM.

**Academic Integrity**

I strictly enforce Northwestern University’s rules on academic dishonesty. Under such rules, I am obligated to report any suspected instances of plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, abetting dishonesty, obtaining an unfair advantage, or others to the Assistant Dean for Academic Integrity. Please familiarize yourself with the university’s policy on academic integrity: [http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html). Should you be found responsible for having committed an academic integrity violation, there are both administrative and academic penalties. University officials decide the former, while I decide the latter. In this course you will receive a “0” on any assignment resulting from dishonesty.

**Accommodations**

Please notify me in the beginning of the quarter should you need special accommodations. You should also contact the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD; 847-467-5530).

**Readings**

Some reading assignments (indicated below) will be posted on our Blackboard site. Please print them and bring them to class. Others will draw from the following books, available at a book seller of your choice. All books will be available on reserve at the library.


*Course Schedule*

**WEEK 1**  
*Experts, expertise, and social life*

*Jan 6* 
Introduction

*Jan 8* 
*(Blackboard)*


**WEEK 2**  
*The social organization of expertise*

*Jan 13* 
*(Blackboard)*

*(Blackboard)*
Jan 15  Merton, Robert K. “The normative structure of science.” (Blackboard)

American Sociological Review 48:781-795. (Blackboard)

**Expertise and the construction of facts**

**WEEK 3**  The social scientific study of science

Jan 20  No class, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day


**Optional:** Eyal, Gil. 2013. “For a sociology of expertise: The social origins of the autism epidemic.” American Journal of Sociology 118:863-907. (Blackboard)

**WEEK 4**  Epistemic cultures and the laboratory


**WEEK 5**  Making knowledge outside the lab

Feb 3  Timmermans, Stefan. 2006.  *Postmortem: How medical examiners explain suspicious deaths*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.  (35-113; Chapters 1 and 2)


WEEK 6  The social sciences


WEEK 7  Writing and making facts


Expertise and credibility

WEEK 8

Feb 24  Quantification and objectivity


Feb 26  Classifying expertise


WEEK 9  The politics of engagement

Paper assignment due at beginning of class on March 3rd.

March 3  Shapin, Steven. 1995. “Cordelia’s love: Credibility and the social studies of science.” Perspectives on Science 3:255-275. (Blackboard)


WEEK 10  Experts and the law

March 10  Timmermans, Stefan. 2006. Postmortem: How medical examiners explain suspicious deaths. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (113-156; Chapter 3)

Sheila Jasanoff. 1995. Science at the Bar: Law, Science and Technology in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (1-68; 161-182; 204-226; Chapters 1 through 3; Chapter 8 and 10)

March 12  Reading period begins

March 19  In-class final exam; 3-5PM.