Sociology 476:
“Sociology of Health, Illness, and Biomedicine”
Spring 2020

Tuesdays, 2:00-4:50 pm, in Parkes 222 or online via Zoom

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Office hours this quarter:
By appointment, generally Thursdays, 2-4 pm
For availability and to sign up for a slot in advance:
https://calendly.com/professor-epstein/office-hours

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

Direct link: https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/111773
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 has been 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, with their tools, 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.

NOTE: Supplemental information reflecting the switch to online teaching appears in this color below. In theory, we may return to in-person classes as of our May 5 meeting.

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.

In addition to the list of recommended readings, you may also be interested in the crowdsourced #coronavirussyllabus.

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 quarter we will make do as best we can. None of us anticipated that the course would be conducted online, and the move to online instruction has necessarily been hasty. Needless to say, things may not go entirely smoothly, and, meanwhile, our lives may be impinged upon in ways we cannot predict. I want to be mindful of the stress that many of us may be under, as well as the practical constraints that may interfere with distance learning. I urge you to keep me posted on anything that may result in problems for you related to your attendance in, or work for, this course.
At the same time, I call on you to do your best to help make this work. When it’s time for class, close your email, silence your phones, attempt to minimize distractions in your homes, and resist the urge to multi-task. Let’s try to be present for one another.

- This course will make use of the “Canvas” course management system. The direct link for this course is https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/111773. Students are responsible for logging in, checking regularly for posted announcements, and obtaining readings and assignments from the site.

- Because this is a discussion seminar, all online sessions will be conducted synchronously at the scheduled time (Central time) using Zoom. If you have not used Zoom before, I encourage you to follow these steps before the first seminar meeting to get started.

  The simplest way to join a Zoom class session is from within Canvas. Click on the Zoom tab, and you should find the class session under “Upcoming Meetings.” Then click on “Join.” (If you want to create an entry in advance in your calendar, you can click on “Invitation.” Doing so will display text that you can copy, including a URL for the Zoom session.)

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

- My office hours are by appointment and generally will be on Thursdays, 2-4 pm. Please sign up to see me using this link: https://calendly.com/professor-epstein/office-hours. 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 for whom stairs pose difficulties may email me to make an appointment to meet elsewhere.

  During the online instruction period, my office hours will be conducted via Zoom. You must sign up at the above link at least 4 hours in advance, to give me time to send you a Zoom invitation by email.

- This syllabus and schedule are subject to change in the event of unforeseen circumstances. (Honestly, I didn’t have pandemics in mind when I wrote that boilerplate text years ago!) 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).

  During class, you’ll want to be able to access the readings as well as watch what’s happening on Zoom. That may be challenging with a laptop. If you have access to a printer, it may be best to print the PDFs. Or, if you have a large monitor (and clip-on webcam), then it may work well to keep Zoom and the readings open in separate windows. Alternatively, maybe you have access to a second computer or tablet, so that
you can display Zoom on one device and the readings on another. Yet another option is to use Zoom on your phone, though I don’t recommend it because your image on everyone else’s screens will be half-size and low-resolution.

♦ **Attendance is required**, and we will use a discussion format. Typically, I will make an 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.

For online classes, I will use the “share my screen” feature in Zoom during my opening presentations so that all of you can see my PowerPoints.

For our online discussions, here are my provisional thoughts about procedures:

- To limit background noise that may be distracting to others, please use the “Mute” function in Zoom and then “Unmute” yourself whenever it’s your turn to speak. Note that you can use the space bar to toggle between the two states.

- To signal that you would like to speak, please click on the “Participants” tab and then click on “Raise hand.” I will maintain a queue just as I normally would, and I will call on you to speak.

- Please use the “Chat” function only if you have a reason to interrupt the normal flow—for example, if you’re having a technical difficulty. It would be too hard for me, as moderator, to regularly monitor both the chat and the raised hands icons. Also, please do not use the chat for side conversations as it’s distracting to all. (However, the chat can be used to circulate references or URLs that come up in our conversation.)

♦ **Course requirements**: Your grade for the quarter will be based on participation (25%) and a final paper (75%). Participation has three components: attendance, engagement in class discussions, and preparation of discussion questions. More specifically:

1) Students (including auditors) are expected to **attend** the seminar regularly—this includes the online sessions—and **contribute** actively to our 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.) Students will sign up for specific weeks at the first meeting of the seminar. These questions must be distributed to all participants in the seminar by 5:00 pm on the day before class. Please use Canvas to email the questions as a Word file to all students in the class.
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 double-spaced pages in length, **not including** references) by 9 am on Monday, June 8. 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. If you have any questions about this, I advise you to talk to me about it.) In addition, the paper 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 double-space and use a standard font and margins.

You must get my **approval of your proposed topic** for the paper by emailing me a written description by no later than Friday, May 1 (1-2 paragraphs plus a short reference
list). Please send the proposal as an email attachment. 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 attend my office hours** at least once—either before or very soon after the submission of the topic—to discuss the paper. (I have scheduled some additional office hours in Weeks 4 and 5 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.

♦ This quarter, by decree of the Provost, faculty will compute grades as usual for graduate seminars and enter them into Caesar at the end of the quarter. Then, Caesar will automatically convert grades to “Pass” (A to C minus) or “Not Pass” (below C minus), **unless** you have opted out of P/NP grading and have chosen to receive a quality-letter grade instead. You may make that decision through Friday, May 29.

Just to be clear, my policy is that in order to pass the course, you need to pass both components: participation and the final paper. In other words, it would not be acceptable to skip all the class meetings and then just write a paper. (I assume this is obvious to graduate students, but figured I might as well spell it out!)

♦ **Incompletes** are heartily discouraged. However, if the current crisis poses obstacles to your timely completion of your work, then please be in touch with me about it.

♦ Any student requesting **accommodations related to a disability or other condition** is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain 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/](http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/)), and I urge you to speak with me if you have any questions.

♦ This syllabus and all PowerPoint presentations for this course are copyright 2020 by Steven Epstein. **Please do not post any materials related to the course on the internet without the permission of the instructor.** This includes sites such as “Course Hero.” Students are also prohibited from selling (or being paid for taking) notes during this course to or by any person or commercial firm without the express written permission of Professor Epstein. No **audio or video recordings** of class are permitted without the instructor’s permission.
 Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings—including distributing or posting them—is also prohibited. Under the University’s Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials—including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

Students can find useful resources for safety and security, academic support, and mental and physical health and wellbeing at the NUhelp website (https://www.northwestern.edu/nuhelp/) and on the NUhelp app (https://www.northwestern.edu/nuhelp/get-help/nuhelp-app-features.html). The following link for graduate students may also be helpful: https://www.northwestern.edu/hr/benefits/work-life/view-benefits-by-audience.html#Graduate-Students.
Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

TUE, APRIL 7 (SESSION 1): SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH, ILLNESS, AND BIOMEDICINE: POSSIBLE GOALS, AGENDAS, BOUNDARIES, AND DEFINITIONS


TUE, APRIL 14 (SESSION 2): SOCIAL CONDITIONS, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AND THE FRAMING OF ILLNESS


TUE, APRIL 21 (SESSION 3): THE CHANGING TERRAIN OF THE MEDICAL


**TUE, APRIL 28 (SESSION 4): CONSTRUCTING MEDICAL OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS**


**REMINDER: PAPER TOPICS DUE FRIDAY, MAY 1**

**TUE, MAY 5 (SESSION 5): RISK, PREPAREDNESS, AND RESPONSIBILITY**


**TUE, MAY 12 (SESSION 6): PROFESSIONAL AUTHORITY, MEDICAL ENCOUNTERS, AND ILLNESS IDENTITIES**


**TUE, MAY 19 (SESSION 7): EVIDENCE, CLASSIFICATION, AND STANDARDIZATION IN MEDICINE**


**TUE, MAY 26 (SESSION 8): HEALTH ACTIVISM: BODIES, EXPERTISE, AND BIOCITIZENSHIP**


**REMINDER:** PAPERS DUE BY 9 AM ON MONDAY, JUNE 8 (BY EMAIL ATTACHMENT).