SEMIMAR IN HEALTH: THEORY & RESEARCH IN MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY
University of Nebraska – Lincoln
Course Syllabus

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Reading Materials
• Article PDFs as posted on Blackboard

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The ASA Medical Sociology section describes the field thusly: Medical sociology provides an analytical framework for understanding the social contexts of health, illness, and health care. Central topics include the subjective experience of health and illness; political, economic, and environmental circumstances fostering ill health; and societal forces constraining the medical care system and individuals' responses to illness. This field draws on traditional sociological issues and contributes to them through reformulations of such basic concepts as social systems and institutions, professionalism, social movements and social change, and social interaction and negotiation. Drawing from pluralistic perspectives, the field is concerned with basic sociological research and its implications for public policy and practice. (www.asanet.org/medicalsociology/)

In this course, health is broadly defined to include physical health, mental health, disabilities, and health-risk behaviors (e.g., sexual behavior, substance use). Likewise, health care and health care systems are pluralistically defined to include home care, professional care, and traditional and alternative medicine, as well as associated professions (e.g., physicians, nurses) and industries (e.g., pharmaceuticals; insurance; hospitals).

As you can see, the field of medical sociology (sometimes referred to the sociology of health and illness) is extensive. The objective of this course is to provide an overview of the key paradigms in the study of health, illness, and health care. Weekly reading assignments offer theoretical and empirical articles. If you are pursuing a concentration in health or mental health, the readings serve as a springboard to deeper study.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation and Attendance. As a graduate seminar, your attendance is expected. (At this stage of the game, “skipping” is unacceptable.) Your participation in class discussion is required. In order to participate fully, you must be prepared. Simply reading/skimming the assignment is not sufficient. Rather, you should be attentive and critical, which will prepare you to contribute relevant ideas, reactions, and questions to the conversation. Your participation grade, assigned at the end of the semester, will be based on: demonstrated familiarity with the readings, contribution to the conversation, and weekly attendance.
**Homework Assignments.** In addition to reading all assigned material, you will be responsible for preparing a summary outline. The purpose of homework assignment is to: (1) help you process the readings; (2) prepare you to contribute fully to class discussions; (3) help you improve your writing skills. See Appendix 1 for details.

**Course Project.** You are responsible for preparing a critical literature review or empirical research paper. You will also present your results to the class. See Appendix 2 for details.

**Paper Discussant.** Each student will serve as a discussant for another student’s paper. The discussant will provide a written (1-2 pages) and an oral review of a paper on the day that paper is presented. The written portion should be similar to a review that one might receive from a journal reviewer (see examples on Blackboard). A copy of the written portion should be given to the student and me on the day the paper is presented.

**GRADING**

Standard graduate course grading is on an “A-B-C” scale (above average – average – below average). Lower grades can and will be assigned if the student fails to submit an assignment or fails to meet the requirements of the course/assignment. I reserve pluses for either exceptional work (A+) or for work that is somewhere in the middle (B+, C+) but needs improvement to get over the hump.

In general, my interpretation of the letter grades is:

A. Main ideas from the literature/research are described correctly, and the discussion is accurate, appropriate, and thoroughly explained and illustrated.

B. Basic understanding of the material shown through an accurate description and appropriate discussion

C. Some appropriate discussion, but limited understanding of the material exhibited (i.e., inaccurate description of point and/or inappropriate discussion; lack of focus)

Numerically, these grades are: A+ = 100, A = 95, B+ = 89, B = 85, C+ = 79, C = 75

Each of the items below will be assigned one of these grades. Final grades are based on percentages:

- Class Participation 10%
- Homework Assignments 35%
- Prospectus & Outline 5%
- Final Paper 35%
- Presentation 10%
- Paper Discussant 5%
$\textbf{SCHEDULE}$

$\textit{Abbreviation Code}$

HMS = Handbook of Medical Sociology  
JHSB = Journal of Health and Social Behavior  
SHI = Sociology of Health and Illness  
SSM = Social Science & Medicine

August 26 – Introduction & the Essentials


September 2 – Social Construction of Health & Illness

- Barker, K. The social construction of illness: medicalization and contested illness. *HMS* Ch. 9

Recommended:


September 9 – Fundamental Causes Theory

- Link, B., & Phelan, J. Social conditions as fundamental causes of health inequalities. *HMS* Ch. 1


September 16 – The Stress Paradigm


Recommended:


September 23 – Health Disparities


Recommended:

September 30 – Social Relationships, Networks, & Health

- Lovasi, G. S., Adams, J., & Bearman, P. S. Social support, sex, and food: social networks and health. *HMS* Ch. 5

October 7 – Labeling & Stigma

- Olafsdottir, S., & Pescosolido, B. A. (2011). Constructing illness: how the public in eight Western nations respond to a clinical description of schizophrenia. *SSM, 73*, 929-938
- More to come...

October 14 – Patients

- Rier, D. A. The patient’s experience of illness. *HMS* Ch. 10
- Albrecht, G. L. The sociology of disability. *HMS* Ch. 12
- More to come...

October 21 – Professionals

• More to come...

**October 28 – Medicalization and its Discontents**


Recommended:

**November 4 – Health Care**

• More to come...

**November 11 – Health Care Reform**

• More to come on reform...

November 18 – TBD

November 25 – Thanksgiving break

December 2 & 9 – Class presentations

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ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

Class Decorum. In a graduate classroom, everyone should feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, and engaging fully in the conversation. My goal is to support an inconclusive environment, regardless of stage in the program, status characteristics, etc. I expect you to show respect for others. You should actively and thoughtfully listen to others, and then respond to their ideas not to them as individuals. This creates a positive learning environment for everyone. Thoughtful debate is welcomed and encouraged. Harassment and disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.

Written Submissions. Written assignments should reflect a scholarly writing style: coherent and well-reasoned, integrative, and no spelling/grammar errors. They should be polished, not rough drafts. All written work should follow standard procedure (i.e., 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins, spell- and grammar-checked, appropriate citations). I am not impressed by how much you can write, but how well you can write. All written work should be posted to Blackboard. I will not accept emailed or hard copy papers. I do NOT grant extensions, and I do NOT accept late assignments.

Academic Integrity. When you place your name on an assignment, I interpret this to mean that you have received no unauthorized assistance on the assignment. Unauthorized assistance includes but is not limited to: turning in assignments as your own work when it is not; plagiarism (presenting someone else’s published ideas as your own). These acts will not be tolerated. You will automatically fail the course, and I will report the incident to the graduate chair. For more information, visit http://www.unl.edu/ous/academic_tips/integrity.shtml.

Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact me for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office (http://www.unl.edu/ssd/), 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.
APPENDIX 1 – SUMMARY OUTLINES

Each week, prepare a summary outline that (1) integrates the assigned readings, (2) offers a critical analysis, and (3) lists “talking points” for further discussion. You should approach the outline as if you were drafting an entry for the Annual Review of Sociology. When complete, Annual Review articles integrate the literature to tell the reader something about the “state of the field,” identify common themes and findings across the literature, note contradictions between readings, attempt to resolve the source of such disagreements, and suggest new directions.

As you might imagine, writing such an article does not simply involve writing – a good deal of outlining and drafting happens prior to the finished product. Your outline should thus reflect that process. In your outline, following the appraisal and integration of the readings, be sure to identify unresolved issues, controversies, and directions for further research/theoretical development. At the end of your outline, add a few talking points/questions that are suitable for class discussion.

Outlines should not exceed 2 pages. Outlines should be posted to Bb each Wednesday PRIOR to class time.

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APPENDIX 2 – COURSE PROJECT

The course project should substantially expand on a topic covered by the course. Both types of papers should review relevant literature and theory. A critical review then presents hypotheses or directions for future research or theoretical development, similar to an Annual Review piece. An empirical paper then presents a methods section and qualitative or quantitative analysis, similar to a JHSB or SHI piece. A critical review may be more appropriate for an early career student or for a student preparing a thesis or dissertation proposal. An empirical study may be more appropriate for an advanced student who is working on a thesis or dissertation, or working on a paper for professional presentation or publication.

Deadlines:
- A 1-2 page prospectus for the paper is due on Fri. Sept. 25 (posted to Blackboard by 12 noon). A prospectus outlines the focus of your paper, identifies key references, and describes the data (if applicable).
- A revised prospectus, accompanied by an outline of the paper and a more complete reference list, is due on Fri. Oct. 23 (posted to Blackboard by 12 noon).
- A full draft of your paper should be emailed to your discussant and cc’d to me not later than Fri. Nov. 20.
- Presentations will be either Dec. 2 or 9. I will random select your presentation day, unless you want to volunteer for Dec. 2. The presentation should be similar to one given at a professional meeting and be no more than 10 minutes in length. After the presentation, you will revise your paper based on the input of the assigned discussant’s comments and comments raised during class discussion.
- A final paper is due Wed. Dec. 16 (posted to Blackboard by 12 noon). Your final paper should include a “response to reviewer” that describes how you addressed the discussant’s comments and any comments raised in class.
- I do not grade “recycled” papers – you must write something new and/or substantially different from a previous paper. If you are attempting to dovetail to your other course work or thesis/dissertation, you must confer with me first. I also want you to think outside of your box of comfort. Too often, people let their thesis/dissertation/disciplinary identity “define” them.