Sociology 476:
“Sociology of Health, Illness, and Biomedicine”
Spring 2023

Mondays, 9:30-12:20, in Parkes 222

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Office hours this quarter (by appointment)
For exact availability (both in-person and via Zoom) and to sign up for a slot in advance:
https://calendly.com/professor-epstein

A copy of this syllabus can be found on the Canvas site for the course.
Direct link: https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/189529
Summary:

This course will introduce and explore 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 through attention to 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.

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 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 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 noon 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, thinking about the theoretical perspectives as well as the methods employed, raising concerns, and beginning the process of articulating critiques. Keep in mind that the goal is to facilitate discussion (not to stump the audience).

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 **10 am on Monday, June 5**. 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, April 21 (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 during the weeks of April 17 and April 24 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.

**Course Mechanics:**

- I encourage you to keep me posted about any issues you may be experiencing that might impact your attendance at, participation in, or work for the seminar. 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.

- We will follow all announced health and safety guidelines with regard to Covid. Masks are not currently required. Those who wish to wear masks are very welcome to do so. (I continue to wear a mask indoors.)

- This course will make use of the “Canvas“ course management system. The direct link for this course is https://canvas.northwestern.edu/courses/189529. Students are responsible for logging in, checking regularly for posted announcements, and obtaining readings and assignments from the site.

- 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.

- Important course announcements may also be sent to students’ registered campus email addresses. You are responsible for monitoring those email accounts.
♦ Students who wish to count this course toward the Gender & Sexuality Studies graduate certificate should meet with me at the beginning of the quarter to discuss how they intend to emphasize themes related to gender and sexuality. We will need to document the plan and send it to the Director of Graduate Studies in GSS.

♦ My office hours are by appointment, and I will offer both in-person and Zoom options. Please sign up to see me using this link: https://calendly.com/professor-epstein (being sure to select the correct set of options, depending on whether you want to meet in-person or via Zoom). Please sign up at least one hour in advance. For Zoom meetings, I will follow up with a link.

♦ 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).

♦ 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 above). 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.

♦ I discourage incompletes, because in my experience they are rarely in students’ long-term best interests (and often just the opposite). That said, please be in touch with me promptly to discuss unanticipated circumstances as they arise.

♦ 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. 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/) as well as The Graduate School’s policy and procedures (https://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/academic-policies-procedures/policies/academic-integrity.html), and I urge you to speak with me if you have any questions.

♦ This syllabus and all PowerPoint presentations for this course are copyright 2023 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.
Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

**TUE, MARCH 28 (SESSION 1): SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH, ILLNESS, AND BIOMEDICINE: POSSIBLE GOALS, AGENDAS, BOUNDARIES, AND DEFINITIONS**


**MON, APRIL 3 (SESSION 2): SOCIAL CONDITIONS, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AND THE FRAMING OF ILLNESS**


Farber, Reya. 2023. “‘Don't Think that We Die from AIDS’: Invisibilised Uncertainty and Global Transgender Health.” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 45: 196-212.


**MON, APRIL 10 (SESSION 3): THE CHANGING TERRAIN OF THE MEDICAL**


**MON, APRIL 17 (SESSION 4): CONSTRUCTING MEDICAL OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS**


**REMINDER: PAPER TOPICS DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 21**

**MON, APRIL 24 (SESSION 5): RISK, PREPAREDNESS, AND RESPONSIBILITY**


Mamo, Laura, Amber Nelson, and Aleia Clark. 2010. “Producing and Protecting Risky Girlhoods.” In Three Shots at Prevention: The HPV Vaccine and the Politics of Medicine’s Simple Solutions, edited by Keith Wailoo, Julie Livingston, Steven


MON, MAY 1 (SESSION 6): PROFESSIONAL AUTHORITY, MEDICAL ENCOUNTERS, AND ILLNESS IDENTITIES


MON, MAY 8 (SESSION 7): EVIDENCE, CLASSIFICATION, AND STANDARDIZATION IN MEDICINE


**MON, MAY 15 (SESSION 8): HEALTH ACTIVISM: BODIES, EXPERTISE, AND BIOCITIZENSHIP**


**MON, MAY 22 (SESSION 9): POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE**


**REMINDER:** PAPERS DUE BY 10 AM ON MONDAY, JUNE 5 (BY EMAIL ATTACHMENT).