Department of Sociology

Sociology of Health and Illness
Sociology Honours
Term 3, 2019

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Course Description
The sociology of health, illness and healthcare has changed drastically over the past few decades. It was developed mainly by sociologists who worked closely with doctors, and who took for granted doctors’ assumptions about health and healthcare. Thus, early medical sociologists, such as Talcott Parsons, primarily asked questions that doctors deemed important. However, by the 1970s, the field had begun shifting toward a very different set of questions. Some of these questions challenged the doctors’ assumptions and others focused on the issues that were beyond most doctors’ areas of interest or expertise, such as the effects of poverty on health or how individuals develop meaningful lives despite chronic illness. Therefore, the field of sociology of illness and health covers a wide range of topics such as:

- The analysis of medical knowledge;
- Lay perceptions of health and illness;
- The experience of health and illness;
- Social and cultural aspects of the body;
- The analysis of the interactions between patients and medical professionals;
- The patterned nature of health and illness in relation to the wider social structure; and
- The social organization of both informal and formal health care.

Sociological explanations of health and illness move beyond individual and medical explanations, towards a social analysis of these phenomena including a critique of healthcare. However, a sociological focus in this module does not deny the many advantages and successes of biomedicine.

Learning outcomes:

- Develop an understanding of different sociological perspectives and be able to evaluate the strengths and weakness of different theories.

- Be able to examine key concepts and approaches in public health from a critical sociological perspective, developing your awareness of issues regarding the production and distribution of medical knowledge and power.

- Learn to link individual experiences of health and illness with social forces, group dynamics, and understand the political economy of health care in South Africa.

- Understand the running theme of the course that ideas about the body and the body itself are socially constructed, and that in this process, power and control play an important role.

Course Requirements & Assignments
1. Attendance of all seminars is compulsory (two seminars a week: Monday and Wednesday from 0930am to 1300pm in the Steve Biko Seminar Room);
2. Reading prescribed articles before every seminar is a must as you are expected to participate in class (class participation counts 10% of the term mark);
3. You will write two essays (2000-2500 words), and the due dates are 9th & 23rd August (class assignments count 70% of the term mark):
   - 9th August Essay question
     Sociology and other social science researchers demonstrate how the interactions of class, of professional interests, of power, ethnicity, sex and gender enter into the
formation of knowledge about and treatment of disease. Critically examine why a sociological perspective on health, disease and healthcare is important, and yet is marginalised in society and in modern medicine.

- **23rd August Essay question**
  Health and illness affect everyone, as these phenomena are at the centre of human existence. Pain, suffering and death are human conditions. Critically explain why there are few studies on South African white experiences of illness, and a deluge of studies on black illness experiences, especially AIDS.

4. Individual or group (maximum three) class presentations will count 20% of the term mark. Presentation topics: experience of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, mental illness, medicalisation of pregnancy or any other natural condition/process, all examples must be drawn from South Africa and southern African countries;
5. You will write a four-hour exam in November, which counts 60% of the course mark, and the class assignments count 40% of the course mark.

Success in this course, like others, is dependent on your active engagement with the course, and reading beyond prescribed material. Given that health, illness and healthcare are issues that you can all relate to, you are encouraged to reflect on and incorporate your understanding and experience of these phenomena in your assignments. You should include media and internet accounts on health and illness, especially on South African health policy and healthcare.

**SEMINARS**

**Week 1: The biomedical model & the social construction of medical knowledge**

Questions
1. What is the biomedical model of health?
2. Why is medical knowledge and practice privileged above other healing systems (e.g. African traditional medicine)?

Readings

**Week 2: Sociological perspectives on health, illness and healthcare**

Question
1. Why is a sociological perspective on health important, and what are its limitations?

Readings


**Week 3: Medical profession**

**Questions**

1. Why are medical doctors privileged in society and in medical practice?
2. What is the source of this privilege?
3. What are the factors that are eroding medical professional power?

**Readings:**


**Weeks 4 & 5: Health, illness, health policy, and healthcare in South Africa**

**Question:**

1. Why is public healthcare in South Africa not just about health?

**Readings:**


Week 6: Illness experience

Questions
1. What is the difference between disease and illness, and why is it important to understand this difference?
2. What factors affect the way individuals experience illness?
3. Is illness just about suffering?

Readings: