

# SOCIOLOGY 097 DEATH AND DYING

Prof. John B. Williamson  
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Fall 2005: Tu & Th 3:00 to 4:15

Class Room: Gasson 306

**TA: Deborah (Deb) Piatelli**

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Office Hours for Deb: Tu, Th 4:30-6:00

Office Hours (JBW)

Tu: 4:30-5:15

Wed: 4:30-5:55

Th: 4:30-5:30

This course presents an overview of the major issues, themes, and controversies in the death and dying literature. Historical, cultural, ethical, and psychological aspects are considered, but the emphasis is on sociological dimensions and perspectives. As this is a core course, it has been designed to introduce you to sociology by emphasizing the sociological approach to these issues and by contrasting the sociological approach to that reflected in several other approaches including the historical approach, the psychological approach, the philosophical approach, and the like. One goal of this course is to introduce you to the history and methodology of the discipline of sociology. Toward that end you will be reading and I will give a number of lectures that put these issues in historical context. Where appropriate we will link discussion of these issues to classical studies in sociology. One such example, will be our discussion of Durkheim's very important work on suicide. The course will also expose students to a range of different methodological approaches used in sociological research including historical analysis, cross-cultural analysis, qualitative field studies, the analysis of aggregate data, and survey research.

There are a number of other goals we seek to achieve in a core course such as this. One is to integrate material from culturally diverse perspectives. Toward this end we will be discussing how death related beliefs and practices in the United States differ from those in other countries around the world. We will draw on anthropological resources for similar reasons. Where appropriate we will highlight gender and race differences.

The course will offer an opportunity to formulate, analyze, and deepen your own opinions on a number of issues. This will be particularly true with respect to our discussions of suicide, euthanasia, and medical ethics. The goal is to help you work out your own personal philosophy with respect to many death-related practices and ethical issues. My hope is to get you to rethink some of your taken for granted views on such issues. You may end up rethinking some of your views about American funerals when you find out how people in Borneo react when told about American practices. You may end up rethinking your views about how to deal with grief after an analysis of the consequences of some of the alternatives. You will be given the opportunity to work on your personal philosophy with respect to doctor assisted suicide and euthanasia for the terminally ill. You will be asked to work out your personal philosophy with respect to a number of ethical issues we as a society are confronted with such as whether or not to keep those who have been declared brain dead biologically alive so that parts can be transplanted over subsequent days, weeks, months, or years. You will also be asked to evaluate the evidence with respect to near death experiences and assess what impact, if any, this evidence has on your own thinking about afterlife.

In this course we deal with a number of what can be called perennial questions. The topic of death itself is one of these issues. In our analysis of death related issues and ethical questions we will touch on many death related perennial questions as: To what extent are our beliefs about death social

constructions and the product of our culture? Is there a best way to die or will what is an appropriate way to die vary a great deal from one person to another? To what extent are our lives driven by our need to deny the reality that each of us will one day die? Is it preferable to die at home or in a hospital or in a hospice? How extreme can the reaction to the death of a loved one be and still be considered within the realm of normal? How do children form their conceptions of death and how do those conceptions change over time? Is suicide ever justified? Is euthanasia ever justified? Is the death penalty ever justified? Do we survive death?

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. **Mid-Term Exam** (required, 0-40 points) (**Thursday October 27**) (essay & objective exam on Topics 1, 2, & 3)
2. **Final Exam** (required, 0-40 points) (**Sat Dec. 17 @ 9 am**) (essay & objective exam on Topics 4, 5, 6 & 7)
3. **Term Paper** (optional, 0-8 points) (**Due Thursday Dec. 1 in class**). If you select this option you are responsible for reading the material on pages 5 and 6 of this syllabus about the term paper.
4. **In-class essays** (required, 0-20 points). Periodically brief essays will be assigned. Typically they will be in-class essays. There will be 13 such essays during the term and they will generally not be announced in advance. Each will be scored 0 or 2. Some will require that you have done the assigned reading for the day; some will not. If you are sick or for some other reason miss an in-class essay (or you are unable to answer the question because you did not have time to do the reading for that class), you will **NOT** be able to make it up. However, I realize that there will be times when you cannot make it to class or when you will not have had time to do the reading assigned for that class due to illness, a physician's appointment, etc. For this reason I will drop 3 of these essays for everyone. If you miss 3 or fewer essays (this also includes classes when you are present, but find yourself unable to write the essay because you have not done the reading), there will be no loss of credit. Thus you will be able to miss up to 3 of these essays (or get score of 0 on up to 3 essays) without losing any credit. The first two essays we do will (PEA and PEB) be practice essays. They will be graded and returned, but not be recorded and they will not count. What happens if you have been absent three times when we had graded essays in class and then you get seriously ill? If you miss a fourth or fifth essay because you are in the hospital (or in the BC infirmary) and bring a note from the relevant doctor, you will be allowed to make up the missed essay.

**WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU ARE NOT PRESENT FOR AN EXAM?** If you remember there is an exam while the exam is still in progress, come directly to class and speak to me. Under most circumstances it will be possible to work something out with no loss of credit. If you are unable to do that, as soon as you are aware that you have missed the exam or are going to miss the exam, **immediately** contact me. You should **ALSO immediately** contact the course TA to schedule your make-up exam. There will generally be a penalty for missing an exam with the size of the penalty a function of the reason for missing the exam. I do not give permission to take an exam early or to take it late even when you have several exams on the same day, have purchased a non refundable air ticket, etc. If the reason you miss the class is a medical emergency, bring a note from the appropriate medical person with a name and a phone number for me to call. If the reason is a funeral, please provide an explanation of the relationship (e.g. my grandmother), the name and phone number of one of your parents, and a copy of the obituary. Exceptions will be made for athletes who must be away for games so long as they have letters from their coaches, have come to see me in advance, and we have agreed to a time and date for the make-up exam.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:** (All three books will be in BC bookstore.)

1. *Death: Current Perspectives* (4th edition, Mayfield, 1995) edited by John B. Williamson and Edwin S. Shneidman
2. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Bantam Books edition 1981) by Leo Tolstoy
3. *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Doubleday, 1997) by Mitch Albom

### TOPIC 1: Sept. 6 to Sept. 20

#### INTRODUCTION: DIMENSIONS OF DEATH HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AIDS

- \* 1. "The Personification of Death" (Ch. 1)  
by Robert Kastenbaum
- \* 2. "The Pornography of Death"(Ch. 3)

- by Geoffrey Gorer
- \* 3. "Death in Popular Culture" (Ch. 4)  
by Michael C. Kearl

\*Readings marked with an asterisk can be found in *Death: Current Perspectives*.

\*\*These items are on reserve O'Neill Library. In most cases if it is an article, it can be downloaded. If it is not listed for downloading, check with the reserve desk at O'Neill about how to do it. Refer to the handout that I will distribute to the class by e-mail about how to do it.

- \* 4. "The Terror of Death" (Ch. 5)  
by Ernest Becker
- \* 5. "Western Attitudes toward Death" (Ch. 6)  
by Philippe Ariès
- \* 6. "The Black Death as a Major Event in World History" (Ch. 7)  
by Yves Renouard
- \*\* 7. "Transforming AIDS Prevention to Meet Women's Needs: A Focus on Developing Countries"  
by Lori L. Heise and Christopher Elias

## TOPIC 2: Sept. 22 to Oct. 6

### THE TERMINAL PHASE OF LIFE DYING IN VARIOUS SETTINGS

8. *Tuesdays with Morrie* (entire book)  
by Mitch Albom
- \*\* 9. *On Death and Dying*, Chapters III and IV (On reserve at O'Neill)  
by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
- \* 10. "The Ritual Drama of Mutual Pretense" (Ch. 13)  
by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss
- \* 11. "Death, Uses of a Corpse, and Social Worth" (Ch. 14)  
by David Sudnow
- \*\* 12. "Dying in a Total Institution: The Case of Death in Prison"  
by Francis D. Glaser and Donald A. Cabana
- \* 13. "Hospice Care for the 1990s: A Concept Coming of Age" (Ch 16)  
by Marian Gentile and Maryanne Fello

## TOPIC 3: Oct. 11 to Oct. 20

### FUNERAL PRACTICES AND MORTUARY RITUALS

14. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (entire story, skip the introduction by Blythe )  
by Leo Tolstoy
- \* 15. "The American Way of Death" (Ch. 17)  
by Jessica Mitford
- \* 16. "Public Behavior in the Funeral Home" (Ch. 18)  
by Vanderlyn Pine
- \* 17. "Death Be Not Strange" (Ch. 10)  
by Peter Metcalf
- \*\* 18. "How Different Religions Pay Their Final Respects" (Ch. 32 in *Dying, Death, and Bereavement 98/99*) (Ask for Call # HQ1073.5.U6 D95)  
by William J. Whalen

## TOPIC 4: Oct. 25 to Nov. 8

### GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT CHILDREN AND DEATH

- \* 19. "Symptomatology and the Management of Acute Grief" (Ch. 19)  
by Erich Lindemann
- \* 20. "A Grief Observed" (Ch. 20)

- by C. S. Lewis
- \* 21. “Disenfranchised Grief” (Ch. 22)  
by Kenneth J. Doka
  - \* 22. “Worlds of Dying Children and Their Well Siblings” (Ch. 24)  
by Myra Bluebond-Langner
  - \* 23. “The Death of a Child” (Ch. 26)  
by Beverly Raphael

\*Readings marked with an asterisk can be found in *Death: Current Perspectives*.

\*\*These items are on reserve O’Neill Library. See note at bottom of page 2.

#### **TOPIC 5: Nov. 10 to Nov. 22**

##### **MEDICAL ETHICS, EUTHANASIA, and SUICIDE**

- \*\* 24. “Doctor, I Want to Die. Will You Help Me?” (also read Commentary by Pellegrino)  
by Timothy E. Quill
- \* 25. “When Self-Determination Runs Amok” (Ch. 28)  
by Daniel Callahan
- \* 26. “The Nazi ‘Euthanasia’ Program” (Ch. 29)  
by Robert Jay Lifton
- \* 27. “Harvesting the Dead” (Ch. 30)  
by Willard Gaylin
- \*\* 28. “Body Recycling”  
by Kelly Joyce and John B. Williamson
- \*\* 29. “The Abortion Issue in the United States”  
by Michael C. Kearl
- \* 30. “Egoistic Suicide” (Ch. 31)  
by Emile Durkheim
- \*\*31. “The Truth about Jonestown”  
by Keith Harray
- \*\*32. “The First Official Human Bomb”  
by Albert Axell and Hideaki Kase

#### **TOPIC 6: Nov. 29 to Dec. 1**

##### **VIOLENT DEATH**

- \*\* 33. “To Die, By Mistake: Accidental Deaths”  
by Lee Garth Vigilant and John B. Williamson
- \*\* 34. “On the Role and Meaning of Death in Terrorism”  
by Lee Garth Vigilant and John B. Williamson
- \*\* 35. “Capital Punishment in the United States”  
by Stephanie Picolo Manzi

#### **TOPIC 7: Dec. 6 to Dec. 8**

##### **BEYOND DEATH & TOPICS TO BE ANNOUNCED**

- \* 36. “Near-Death Experiences: New Evidence for Survival?” (Ch. 41)  
by Robert Kastenbaum
- \* 37. “The Postself” (Ch. 43)  
by Edwin S. Shneidman
- \*\* 38. “Symbolic Immortality and Social Theory: The Relevance of  
an Underutilized Concept”  
by Lee Garth Vigilant and John B. Williamson
- \*\* 39. “The Iceman Cometh: The Cryonics Movement and Frozen Immortality”  
by Clifton D. Bryant and William E. Snizek

It is likely that we will add two or three more readings during the semester. We have not as yet selected those readings. You will be informed as soon as they are selected. They will be distributed by e-mail or put on reserve in the library.

\*Readings marked with an asterisk can be found in *Death: Current Perspectives*.

\*\*These items are on reserve O'Neill Library. See note at bottom of page 2.

## SC097 TERM PAPER GUIDELINES

The following are my suggestions about how to go about doing your term paper for this course.

Length: 3,000 to 4,000 words. Use your word processor to do the counting.

1. Pick a topic that will provide an opportunity for you to demonstrate your ability to do sociological analysis. This means using sociological concepts, asking sociological questions, using sociological sources, etc. For those with limited background in sociology I would urge you to take a look at one of the basic textbooks in introductory sociology that I have placed on reserve for this course such as: *Sociology* by Calhoun, Light, & Keller (HM 51. C282 1997), *Sociology* by Robertson (HM51.R68 1987) or *Sociology* by Macionis (HM 586.M33 2001).
2. Select a chapter in the *Handbook of Death and Dying* edited by Clifton Bryant (HQ1073.H36 2003) that deals with a topic of interest to you. It should be on reserve. Read ten or more items listed in the references at the end of that article. Base your paper primarily on those sources. Be sure in your paper to make it clear which article in that handbook you used to get the books and articles read for your paper. Be sure to use and cite all 10 sources. If you elect to work with more than ten citations, feel free to supplement with material from other sources.
3. Decide who you are going to meet with to discuss your paper, me or the TA for the course. See the same person each time you come in to discuss your paper so you do not end up with conflicting advice.
4. We will not count or even grade a paper that is turned in without the extensive consultation outlined below. If your paper is to be graded, it must meet the following conditions: (1) You will have to come in once to get your proposed topic approved. However, this first visit is not enough. (2) You will have to come in a second time after you have done all your reading for the paper to convince us that you have an adequate mastery of the books and articles your paper will be based on and you will be citing. Feel free to bring the books, articles, or notes to the second meeting (it will be open book). This is just a check to make sure you did do the reading your paper will be based on. We do not expect you to remember all the details in those readings. When you turn in the final paper specify who you met with for both of these two meetings.
5. If you would like to do an empirical paper based on qualitative interviews or some other sort of data, that will be acceptable as well. Again you will need to get your topic cleared when you come in to see us. In this case at the required second visit you will bring your raw empirical data to show us. This could be transcribed interviews, etc. This may not be a good option if you have not had a course on empirical research methods such as Sc210 or the equivalent, but you can select this option even if you have not had such a course (with the understanding that you will do the necessary reading related to the technique you will be using). An empirical paper will also draw on some relevant books and articles. See No. 2 above and find an article relevant to your topic and include at least 5 of those readings as well as at least one research methods reading suggested by me or the TA.
6. Review the checklist that I have provided below before you start and then again after you have prepared your first draft. You may want to ask a friend to use this checklist to give you some honest feedback on your paper. You will note many of the points in the checklist apply to both library research papers or to empirical papers, but some are primarily relevant to a library research paper.
7. There are many ways to write a sociological paper. It is possible to bring sociological concepts, theories, ideas, questions, and issues to the analysis of a set of articles that are not themselves sociological.
8. Use the ASA (American Sociological Association) citation style For help see the following website: [www.buffalostate.edu/library/research/asa.pdf](http://www.buffalostate.edu/library/research/asa.pdf) . If, as I believe will be the case, ASA style is used in the article you selected in the *Handbook of Death and Dying*, you can take your citation style directly from that article.
9. How much credit for what grade? (A = 8 points, A- = 7, B+ = 6, B = 5, etc.) Why bother to do a paper? (1) It is a good learning experience. (2) As an insurance policy in the event you do not do as well on the final exam as you did on the mid-term. (3) It will improve your grade for the course if you do a good job.
10. Be sure to submit both an electronic copy and a hard copy of your paper. The electronic copy can be submitted as an e-mail attachment or on a CD.

## CHECKLIST FOR SC097 TERM PAPERS

The following are some of the criteria that we will be using when we evaluate your term papers for Sc097. Please ask about any of these criteria that you do not understand.

1. Is this an interesting paper?
2. Does the author demonstrate an ability to think about this issue sociologically?
3. Does the author demonstrate a capacity for analytical thinking? (Analytic thinking refers to your ability to go beyond mere synthesis of what others have to say on the topic. It refers to the ability to see the major issues, see flaws in an author's reasoning, to combine the ideas and evidence in such a way as to bring new insights.)
4. Is the paper well organized?
5. Does the paper have a strong introduction?
6. Does the paper have a strong conclusion?
7. Does the author correctly cite sources? Are each of the items mentioned in the references at the end of the paper also cited in the body of the paper? Is the standard citation and reference format of ASA (American Sociological Association) used consistently and accurately?
8. Does the author tend to use impressive sources? Where academic sources are called for are strong sources used (e.g. a professional monograph is more impressive than a basic textbook for undergraduates, a journal article is more impressive than a magazine article, etc.)?
9. Does the author make good use of sources? Are the sources used as a source of data or evidence to support arguments?
10. Are there few if any spelling errors in the paper?
11. Are there few if any grammar errors?
12. Is the writing clear?
13. Does the paper flow well? As the reader moves from paragraph to paragraph is there a logical progression?
14. Are paragraphs about one topic or does the author end up discussing several quite different topics in the same paragraph?
15. Be sure to submit both a hard copy and an electronic copy of your paper (as an e-mail attachment or on a CD).

