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## **The Sociology of Mental Health and Illness**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this seminar is to consider what a sociological perspective brings to our understanding of mental health and illness. The goal throughout will be to critically examine how our conceptions of mental illness and the mentally ill are shaped by history, institutions, and culture. In particular, we will examine the ways in which a medical model has triumphed in defining the causes and cures for mental illness. Along with a critical examination of the medicalization of mental illness, we will consider the variety of social factors that contribute to the rates and to the experiences of mental illness. Although we will consider mental illness from multiple viewpoints (social scientists, families, medicine, communities, government) a focus throughout the semester will be on the way that ill persons themselves talk about their experiences. Patients' perspectives have been slighted in the professional literature. Since one critical mandate of sociology is to give voice to the experiences of those whose voices and experiences have been too often marginalized, the reading will be tilted towards first-person accounts of illness careers. Students will be expected to participate in weekly discussions, to offer written critiques of the readings, to carry out research on a topic of their own interest, and to present their findings towards the end of the semester.

### **Readings:**

Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*  
Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*  
David Karp, *The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness*  
Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*  
Suzanna Kayson, *Girl, Interrupted*  
Lauren Slater, *Prozac Diary*  
Otto Wohl, *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*  
*Course Packet of Articles*

### **Grading:**

1. Term paper (15 pages) 40%
2. Two short (5 pages each) point of view papers 30%
3. Participation throughout the semester, including discussion questions 10%
4. Participation as discussion leader for a week's reading 10%
5. Presentation of final projects 10%

## **Term Paper**

The term paper is meant to complement the materials read and issues discussed in class and will be in the vicinity of 15 pages. Choose a topic or issue of interest to you that relates to the sociology of mental illness. The paper must use a minimum of 12 scholarly references. While you are free to use materials from popular magazines, movies, newspapers, TV shows, interviews, or observation, the core of the paper should be based on the references. Scholarly references may be either books written by social scientists or articles appearing in professional journals. The purpose of a literature review paper is to summarize and analyze existing facts, theories, concepts, or controversies surrounding the topic of your choice. Below are a few plausible topics for the library research paper:

Epidemiology of depression, manic-depression or schizophrenia

The meaning of psychiatric diagnoses

The development of the DSM

The history of different treatment modes for mental illness

Causes and consequences of deinstitutionalization

Involuntary commitment

The history of a state's mental health system

The place of the mentally ill in the community

Pharmaceutical companies and the treatment of mental illness

The marketing of medications

The evolution of biological psychiatry

Stress and college students

Gender and mental illness

Mental illness and the elderly

The economics of mental health treatment

Mental illness and adolescence

Homelessness, mental illness, and deinstitutionalization

Family care giving to the mentally ill

Critical analysis of the anti-psychiatry movement

Mental illness and stigma

The role of support groups in managing mental illness

Students will be expected to present the findings of their research during the last two to three classes of the semester.

## **Point of View Papers**

In addition to the term paper students will be obligated to write two 5 page essays on the reading assigned for one of the sections on the syllabus. The purpose of this paper will be to think critically about the themes and questions raised by the reading. Students should consider what they learned from the reading materials, the issues that most intrigued them in the writing(s), questions left unattended to in the book or articles read, and plausible issues for class discussion. During the first class of the semester students will be expected to commit themselves to writing on the materials for two sections of the syllabus. The goal will be to get a reasonably even distribution of choices so that at least one or two

students will be writing on each section of the syllabus. In the spirit of seminar discussion, students will be expected to briefly outline their thoughts in the point of view papers at the outset of the appropriate class and to raise questions for collective conversation.

## **Course Outline**

### **I. Introduction: Sociological Perspectives on Mental Health and Illness**

- course goals
- requirements
- the perspective of the course
- An overview of the readings
- the idea of mental illness
- sociological, psychological, anthropological, biological perspectives
- class discussion on the ideas of deviance, mental illness, and insanity

Reading: view debate between Szasz and Ellis at the library before the second class.

### **II. The Medical Model and Its Critics**

- the making of the DSM
- the triumph of biological psychiatry
- the anti-psychiatry movement
- labeling theory of mental illness
- myth of mental illness?
- Discussion of the Szasz/Ellis debate

Reading: Fadiman, first half; Course packet, 1-3

### **III. Culture, Illness, and Medicine**

- the idea of cultural relativism
- the value of an anthropological approach
- illness in cross cultural perspective
- a crime of insanity: Frontline video
- discussion of Fadiman and video

Reading: Fadiman, second half; 3 references for your term paper

#### **IV. Discussion of Students' Research Proposals**

Reading: total of six references pertaining to your research paper

#### **V. The Experience of Mental Illness**

- manic-depression
- borderline personality disorder
- eating disorders
- discussion of Hornbacher, Jamison, and Kayson

Reading: Course packet, 4-6 and one of the following three memoirs: Hornbacher, *Wasted*; Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind*; Kaysen, *Girlhood, Interrupted*

#### **VI. The Meanings of Medication**

- medication and the self
- drugs and cultural identity
- discussion of "Is It Me or My Meds?"
- medicating kids: Frontline video
- discussion of Slater and video

Reading: Lauren Slater, *Prozac Diary*; Course packet, 7-9; front row video at <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/karp/>

#### **VII. Suicide**

- the epidemiology of suicide
- cults and suicide
- culture and suicide
- silent epidemic: PBS video
- discussion of teen suicide

Reading: Wohl, *Media Madness*, first half; Course packet, 10-14

#### **VIII. Stigma**

- Goffman's on stigma
- the effects of stigma
- the stigma of mental illness
- media and stigma
- discussion of Wahl

Reading: Wohl, second half; Course packet, 15-18

## **IX. The Mental Health System**

- the idea of total institutions
- Goffman's Asylums
- effects of institutionalization
- deinstitutionalization
- community services?

Reading: Karp, *The Burden of Sympathy*, first half; Course packet 19-20

## **X. Caregiving**

- the care giving conundrum
- questions of obligation
- managing emotions
- parent, child, sibling, spouse
- caring in America
- discussion of Karp

Reading: Karp, second half

## **XI. Student Reports**

- presentation of student research
- class discussion of research
- policy implications of research completed

## **COURSE PACKET REFERENCES**

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12. Harrary, K. "Jonestown 13 years later." *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* (March/April, 1992): 62-66, 87-88.
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16. Goffman, E. *STIGMA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), Chapter 1, "Stigma and Social Identity," pp. 1-40.
17. Bogdan, R. and S. Taylor. "Toward a sociology of acceptance: The other side of the sociology of deviance." *SOCIAL POLICY* (1987): 34-39.
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20. Rosenhan, D. "On being sane in insane places." *SCIENCE* 179 (1973): 250-258.