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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:**

Arthur Kleinman, *Rethinking Psychiatry: From Cultural Category to Personal Experience*

David Karp, *The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness*

David Karp and Gretchen Sisson, *Voices From the Inside: Readings on the Experiences of Mental Illness*

Otto Wahl, *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 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 readings assigned for one of the sections on the syllabus. The purpose of these papers is to think critically about the themes and questions suggested by the readings. Students should consider what they learned from the reading materials, the issues that most intrigued them in the writing(s), and the questions left unattended to in the books or articles read.

## **Class Discussions**

After the first class of the semester each student will be assigned to be a discussion leader for one of the week's set of readings. Discussion leaders will present a short description of the contents and central themes of the readings (10-15 minutes). The most fundamental goal of these presentations is to raise questions for subsequent class discussion. In addition, all students will be expected to construct at least five discussion questions for each week's readings. These questions will also be used to push along that week's conversation. Students will submit their weekly questions to the professor for evaluation.

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

### **I. Introduction: Sociological Perspectives on Mental Health and Illness [week 1]**

- course goals and requirements
- giving voice to the mentally ill
- An overview of the readings
- the idea of mental illness
- class discussion on conceptions of mental illness

Reading: No reading for the first week.

### **II. The Medical Model and Its Critics [week 2]**

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

Reading: Kleinman, first half; Course packet, 1-4; view the Szasz/Ellis debate at the library.

### **III. Culture, Illness, and Medicine [week 3]**

- A brief history of psychiatry
- the idea of cultural relativism
- illness in cross cultural perspective
- discussion of Kleinman
- a crime of insanity: Frontline video

Reading: complete Kleinman

#### **IV. The Experience of Mental Illness [week 4]**

- depression
- manic-depression
- obsessive-compulsive disorder
- alcohol addiction

Reading: Course packet, 5-7; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part I

#### **V. Discussion of Students' Research Topics [week 5]**

Reading: total of six references pertaining to your research paper; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part VIII

#### **VI. The Meanings of Medication (week 6)**

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

Reading: Course packet, 8; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part IV

#### **VII. Movie and Pizza Night (week 7)**

- This week's class will be a gathering at the professors home to watch a movie on mental illness, eat pizza, and have casual conversation
- Reading: *The Burden of Sympathy*, first half.

#### **VIII. Caregiving (week 8)**

- the care giving conundrum
- questions of obligation
- managing emotions
- parent, child, sibling, spouse
- caring in America
- discussion of *The Burden of Sympathy*

Reading: Complete *The Burden of Sympathy*; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part II

## **IX. Suicide (week 9)**

- the epidemiology of suicide
- Durkheim on suicide
- culture and suicide
- teen suicide

Reading: Course packet, 9-12; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part V; Wahl, first half.

## **X. Stigma (week 10)**

- Goffman on stigma
- the effects of stigma
- the stigma of mental illness
- media and stigma
- discussion of *Media Madness*

Reading: Complete Wahl; Course packet, 13-14; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Part VI.

## **XI. The Mental Health System (week 11)**

- the idea of total institutions
- Goffman's Asylums
- effects of institutionalization
- deinstitutionalization
- the mentally ill in the community
- presentation by a mental health consumer

Reading: Course packet 15-16; Karp, *Voices from the Inside*, Parts III and VII.

## **XII. Student Reports (weeks 12 and 13)**

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

## Course Packet References

1. Szasz, T. "The myth of mental illness." *THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST* 15 (1960): 133-138.
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3. Brown, P. "Diagnostic conflict and contradiction in psychiatry." *JOURNAL OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR* 28 (1987): 37-50.
4. Barber, C. "The Brain: A Mindless Obsession." *THE WILSON QUARTERLY* (Winter, 2008).
5. Karp, D. "The dialectics of depression." *SYMBOLIC INTERACTION* 17 (1994): 341-366.
6. Kramer, P. *AGAINST DEPRESSION* (New York: Viking, 2005), Chapter 3 entitled "What if?" pp. 30-41.
7. Shenk, J. "Lincoln's Great Depression." *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY* (October, 2005): 52-68.
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9. McIntosh, J. "Epidemiology of suicide in the United States." In A. Leenaars (ed.), *LIFE-SPAN PERSPECTIVES ON SUICIDE* (Plenum Publishing Corp., 1991), pp. 55-69.
10. Harray, K. "Jonestown 13 years later." *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* (March/April, 1992): 62-66, 87-88.
11. Axell, A. and H. Kase, *KAMIKAZE: JAPAN'S SUICIDE GODS* (London: Longman, 2002), ch. 3 entitled "The first official human bomb." Pp. 46-54.
12. Schneidman, E. "Suicide as psyche-ache." *JOURNAL OF NERVOUS AND MENTAL DISEASES* 181 (1993): 147-149.
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16. Rosenhan, D. "On being sane in insane places." *SCIENCE* 179 (1973): 250-258.