SOCY109701  DEATH AND DYING

Prof. John B. Williamson  
McGuinn 424  
617 552 8530  
E-mail: JBW@bc.edu

Fall 2015: Tues & Thurs  
10:30-11:45  
Campion 300  
Office Hours (JBW)  
Monday: 4:00-5:50  
Thursday: 2:00-2:45  
or by appointment

TA: Ms. Orla Kelly Email: kellyo@bc.edu 
Office (McGuinn 410C) Office Hours: Tues, Thurs 9:45-10:15 or by appointment

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 those reflected in several other approaches, including: the historical approach, the psychological approach, the anthropological approach, and the like. One goal of this course is to introduce you to the history and methodologies 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 example will be our discussion of Durkheim’s very important work on suicide. The course will also expose you 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, race and class 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 central goal here 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 those who have been declared brain dead biologically should be kept alive for the primary purpose of their parts being utilized through transplantation, (i.e. as organ donors) for others, 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, such as: To what extent are our beliefs about death largely social constructions, i.e. products 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?

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, dugganka@bc.edu, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities and ADHD, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, paulette.durrett@bc.edu, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities, including temporary disabilities. Such students will be given all the time they need to complete the exam, but the exam will be proctored by me or the course TA. Students with disabilities will be expected to plan ahead and to turn in all written assignments on time to avoid the late paper penalties that apply to all students.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

For details about each of the 4 course requirements listed below, see the course webpage: https://www2.bc.edu/~jbw/SC097A.htm. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT YOU GO TO THE WEBPAGE FOR THE DETAILS WITH RESPECT TO THE VARIOUS REQUIREMENTS, PARTICULARLY IN CONNECTION WITH REQUIREMENTS 1, 2, AND 3. IT IS ALSO VERY IMPORTANT THAT YOU READ THE MEMO ON THE OPTIONAL TERM PAPER IF YOU ELECT TO DO THAT PAPER FOR THIS COURSE. THERE IS ALSO A MEMO ON GRADING THAT YOU WILL WANT TO REVIEW WITH CARE AND TO ASK ME OR THE TA ABOUT IF YOU ARE NOT SURE YOU UNDERSTAND HOW IT WILL WORK.

1. Mid-Term 1, 500 word Essay (20 points): Due October 1 (before midnight) to TA as an email attachment and in addition turn a hard copy in class on the SAME DAY.
2. Mid-Term Exam (20 points): OCTOBER 13 (Topics 1, 2, and 3)
3. Final Exam (40 points): DECEMBER 12 12:30-2:30 (Topics 4, 5, 6, 7)
4. In-class essays (20 points) (rarely announced in advance; no make-up essays are permitted; see below)
5. In addition if you elect to write an optional 3,000 word extra credit Term Paper (for up to 5 extra points), it will be due THURSDAY DEC 3 (electronic copy before midnight to me (jbw@bc.edu) and in addition on the same day turn in a hard copy in class). IF YOU ELECT TO WRITE THIS OPTIONAL TERM PAPER, BE SURE TO READ THE MEMO ON THE COURSE WEBSITE THAT OUTLINES YOUR OPTIONS FOR TOPICS AND OTHER RELEVANT DETAILS ABOUT WHAT IS CALLED FOR.

There will be assigned readings for most classes. See the due dates listed in syllabus. From time to time the date we discuss an article may be put off to the following class. Generally the article will be mentioned in the specified class, sometimes it will be the focus of much of the discussion, but sometimes it will not be explicitly mentioned. From time to time short articles may be added. When this happens, I will mention this in class and send out an email to the class listserv. If you have missed a class, it is your responsibility and essential to get good notes for that class including anything I said about changes in reading or the like for the next class.

There will be frequent and generally unannounced, brief in-class essays that will often require having read one or more articles assigned for that class or may require having done a brief web search on a topic assigned at the prior class. Sometimes (but rarely) the essay topics will be announced in advance. There will be 13 such essays during the term. Your grade will be based on the best 10 of the essays that you do. Each essay will be graded 0 or 2 (there will never be partial credit). That means that you will be able to miss (or get zero credit) for up to three of the essays without any loss of credit for this component of the course. The reason that I allow people to drop up to 3 essays is to save the time involved in getting permission, providing documentation, for medical appointments, attending funerals, being out of town linked to being on an athletic team, etc. But what if you have missed 4 or 5 and believe you have what I will consider a legitimate excuse for not being in class? You can compensate for the missed in-class essays by writing the optional extra credit Term Paper. If you know in advance that you are prone to missing classes, it will be a big mistake to register for this class. To do well in this course you need to be in class on a very regular basis, you will need to take very thorough notes, and you will need to do all of the reading with care a couple of times. When you do miss a class you do not need to write to tell me that as I assume that everyone will miss up to three or so classes for various reasons. If you are in the hospital for say three weeks, I will need documentation and special provisions will be made for you. The maximum credit you can get from these essays is 20 points. The number of points for this component of the course drops by 2 points for each essay under 10. So if you have credit for 9 essays, you get 18 points; if 8 essays, it will be 16 points, etc. If you come to each class after having done the reading with care (it is not enough to skim an article for the big picture or to ask a classmate to summarize the major points made in the reading for the day), you should end up with 20 points for the in-class essay portion of your grade.

COURSE GRADING: To compute the final grade for the course, I compute the total score for: (1) the mid-term essay, (2) the mid-term exam, (3) the final-exam, (4) the in-class essays, and (5) the optional term paper. Then a course grade is assigned as follows: 95 and over (A), 90-94 (A-), 85-89 (B+), 80-84 (B), 75-79 (B-), 70-74 (C+), etc. The final course grade will, if necessary be curved to assure a class median in the B+ range. FOR MORE ABOUT THE COURSE GRADING, CONSULT THE RELEVANT MEMO ON THE COURSE WEBSITE

WHAT ABOUT EARY AND LATE EXAMS? Requests for taking an exam late and particularly requests to take exams early will be strongly discouraged. For athletes who will be out of town, they will be allowed, but must be taken at BC (and not on the road). Any early or late exam will be proctored by me or by the course TA.
REQUIRED TEXTS: (Both books will be in BC bookstore)
2. *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Doubleday, 1997) by Mitch Albom

- All of the readings listed below are available on reserve at O’Neill Library (or they can be found given the internet link provided). You should buy the two books, but you will be able to download the articles at no cost. Do not leave your reading to the last minute the library system for downloading copies sometimes fails to work for the better part of a day.
- In addition to the readings listed below it is likely that a few short articles will be distributed by email during the semester or put on reserve at O’Neill Library. When this happens I will send out an email to the class informing everyone about the need to read any the new items.

**TOPIC 1:**
**INTRODUCTION: ATTITUDES ABOUT DEATH**
**HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**
**AIDS AND PLAGUES**
1. 9/3 “Facing Life with a Lethal Gene”  
by Amy Harmon
2. 9/8 “Death in Popular Culture”  
by Michael C. Kearl
3. 9/10 “The Terror of Death”  
by Ernest Becker
4. 9/10 “Imagining the Downside of Immortality”  
by Stephen Cave
5. 9/15 “Preventing the Global Spread of AIDS”  
by Gregory E. Pence
6. 9/15 “HIV/AIDS Fact Sheet No. 360”  
by World Health Organization  
Go to: http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs360/en/

**TOPIC 2:**
**THE TERMINAL PHASE OF LIFE**
**DYING IN VARIOUS SETTINGS**
7. 9/17 “Mother Shall I Put You to Sleep?”  
by Shahina Kk
8. 9/17 “How Doctors Die: Showing Others the Way”  
by Dan Gorenstein
9. 9/17 *Tuesdays with Morrie* (read the entire book)  
by Mitch Albom
10. 9/22 *On Death and Dying, First Stage Denial and Isolation, Chapter 3*  
by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
11. 9/24 “Dying in a Total Institution: The Case of Death in Prison”  
by Francis D. Glamser and Donald A. Cabana
12. 9/29 *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (entire book, but you can skip the introduction by Blythe)  
by Leo Tolstoy
13. 10/6 “Hospice”  
by Wikipedia  
Go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospice
14. 10/6 “What’s Behind the Criticism of Hospice? Is It Fair?”  
by Howard Gleckman  

**TOPIC 3:**
**FUNERAL PRACTICES AND MORTUARY RITUALS**
15. 10/8 “The American Way of Death”  
by Jessica Mitford
16. 10/8 “Death Be Not Strange”  
by Peter Metcalf
17. 10/8 “How Different Religions Pay Their Final Respects”
    by William J. Whalen

**TOPIC 4: GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT**

18. 10/15 “Disenfranchised Grief”
    by Kenneth J. Doka
19. 10/20 “The Five Stages of Grief”
    by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler
20. 10/20 “The Death of a Child” (Ch. 26)
    by Beverly Raphael
21. 10/22 “Worlds of Dying Children and Their Well Siblings”
    by Myra Bluebond-Langner

**TOPIC 5: MEDICAL ETHICS, EUTHANASIA, and SUICIDE**

22. 10/27 “Comas: Karen Quinlan, Nancy Cruzan, and Terri Schiavo”
    (Read pp. 31-38, The Terri Schiavo Case”)
    by Gregory E. Pence
23. 10/29 “Is Anybody in There? Searching for Consciousness in an Injured Brain”
    by Greg Miller (This article is also available with color diagrams from:
    http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/02/searching-for-consciousness/all
24. 11/3 “Harvesting the Dead”
    by Willard Gaylin
25. 11/3 “The Body Snatchers: The Illegal Trade in Human Remains Is Bid Business and
    Little is Being Done to Stop It”
    by Russell Goldman
26. 11/3 “Man Accused of Illegally Harvesting Dead Bodies”
    by ABC News
27. 11/5 “Dutch Euthanasia: The Dream and the Nightmare”
    by Wesley J. Smith
28. 11/5 “Legal Euthanasia for Children in Belgium: Will It Trigger Death Tourism?”
    by Cecilia Rodriguez
29. 11/10 “The Nazi 'Euthanasia' Program”
    by Robert Jay Lifton
30. 11/12 “Death Becomes Him”
    by Bruce Falconer
31. 11/17 “The First Official Human Bomb”
    by Albert Axell and Hideaki Kase

**TOPIC 6: GENOCIDE, CAPITAL PUNISHMENT, ABORTION**

32. 12/1 “Rwanda—The Legacy of Inequality”
    by Neil Kressel
33. 12/3 “For Pregnant Women, Two Sets of Rights in One Body”
    by Ruth Graham
34. 12/3 “Mom, They are Going to Kill My Dad! A Personal Narrative on Capital
    Punishment From a Convict Criminology Perspective”
    by D. J. Williams, Debra Bischoff, Teresa Casey, and James Burnett
35. 12/3 “What Will Doom the Death Penalty: Capital Punishment, Another Failed
    Government Program? ”
    by Daniel LaChance

**TOPIC 7: BEYOND DEATH**

36. 12/8 “Vigor Quest”
    by Tom Dunkel
37. 12/8 “Living to 100 and Beyond”
    by Sonia Arrison