

Sociology of Health, Illness & Medicine (SOCI 173)

Winter 2025. MWF, 1-1:50pm, Franklin Antonio Hall 1101.

Professor Daniel Navon (dnavon@ucsd.edu)

Office hours: Wednesday 10-11am and Friday 11am-12pm in SSB 492. [Schedule here](#).

TA: Yilin Zhu (yiz247@ucsd.edu)

Office hours: Wednesday 9-10am [on Zoom](#) and Friday 2-3pm in SSB 426. [Schedule here](#).

This course will explore the social forces that shape our health, our healthcare, and the way we understand illness. Themes will include the history of American healthcare policy and current debates around the Affordable Care Act; the intersection of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequalities with health, illness and healthcare; the uneven impact of environmental health; the medical profession and public health; contested ideas about illness and patient advocacy movements; the pharmaceutical industry, illicit drugs and the opioid epidemic; mental health and shifting diagnostic practices. We will also delve into special topics like lead poisoning, autism, obesity, and HIV/AIDS. Throughout the quarter we will explore and discuss how the sociology of health and illness can help us better understand the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. By the end of the course, students should be able to think critically about the practice of medicine, the shifting ways in which we think about health and illness, and how power and inequality continue to shape health outcomes in the US.

Assessment

Assessment for the class will consist of several reading response memos, class participation, a midterm exam, and a final paper *or* exam. The breakdown of final grades will be as follows:

Reading response memos: 20% of your grade. Each week, you may submit a 300-500 word memo via the 'Reading response' entries in the Assignments section of Canvas. They will be worth 2.5 points and graded pass/fail. Only your highest *eight* memos will be counted. You must submit your memos by 11:59pm each Thursday. All memos must summarize at least one starred reading—i.e. *marked with an asterisk* (*)—from the syllabus for that week and present a question, criticism, or comment for further discussion. You may also engage other readings.

Midterm exam: 30% of your grade. This exam will be held in class on Friday of Week 5. It will consist of multiple-choice questions, short answer questions, and one short essay. The exam will cover both readings and lecture materials that are *not* taken directly from the readings. You may bring one double-sided page of notes.

Final exam *or* paper: 50% of your grade. The final exam will take a similar form to the midterm, but with more emphasis placed on essay questions. It will be held during our scheduled time of 11:30am on the Friday of exam week (3.21.25). You may bring one double-sided page of notes.

Students wishing to write a research paper on a relevant topic instead of the exam should consult me via email and/or office hours by the end of Week 6. If your topic is approved, you may write a final paper of around 10 double-spaced pages. Final papers will be due via Canvas at 11:59pm on the Thursday of exam week (3.20.25).

Extra credit for participation: A couple of extra credit points will be awarded to students who regularly participate in class discussions.

Readings

All texts are available via the relevant module on Canvas. Many of them are very short, especially when there are several readings listed for a single class. Only readings marked with an asterisk (*) are eligible for reading response memos. I highly recommend setting up a VPN to access online readings off campus (see: <https://library.ucsd.edu/computing-and-technology/connect-from-off-campus/>). Please let me know if you have trouble accessing the readings.

Course policies

Cheating and plagiarism:

Students are expected to do their own work and to cite sources according to established norms as outlined in the UCSD Policy on Academic Integrity. The policy can be found [here](#). A FAQs page on what counts as cheating can be found [here](#).

Plagiarism, use of generative AI, and other forms of cheating on any assignment (including memos) will result in significant penalties, including the risk of failing the entire course and being referred for additional disciplinary action elsewhere at UCSD. If you are unsure about what is considered either plagiarism or cheating, please ask me so I can clarify for you.

Missing/late exams and assignments:

Failure to turn in your take-home exams or final paper on time without a valid excuse will result the deduction of one letter grade for every day (or part thereof) after the deadline. Excuses communicated after the deadline will only be accepted in exceptional circumstances.

Contesting grades:

You may contest any grades via email or during office hours with the course TA or professor. However, please be aware that this may result in a lower grade than the one given initially.

Struggles with the class:

If you are having trouble with any aspect of the class, including deadlines, it is always best to email or see me as soon as possible. That way we can address the problem before you have fallen too far behind or lost too many points from your final grade.

Disability accommodations

Students requesting accommodations for this course due to a disability must provide a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter issued by the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). Students are required to present their AFA letters to Faculty (please make arrangements to contact me privately) and to the OSD Liaisons in the Sociology Department in advance so that accommodations may be arranged. For students needing extra time, equipment, or separate space for exams may make arrangements at the Triton Testing Center.

Food Support for Students:

If you are skipping and stretching meals, or having difficulties affording or accessing food, you may be eligible for CalFresh, California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, that can provide up to \$292 a month in free money on a debit card to buy food. Students can apply at benefitscal.com/r/ucsandiegocalfresh. The Hub Basic Needs Center empowers all students by connecting them to resources for food, stable housing and financial literacy. Visit their site at basicneeds.ucsd.edu.

Weekly Course Themes and Readings (* indicates readings suitable for response memos)

Week 1: Introduction—thinking through illness and disease, race and medicine

Monday 1.6.25: Introduction and overview

Wednesday 1.8.25: How diseases are made visible

- *Wailoo, Keith. 2001. *Dying in the City of the Blues: Sickle Cell Anemia and the Politics of Race and Health*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. Pp. 1-20, 55-83.
- Maxmen, Amy. 2020. "[The Race to Unravel the Biggest Coronavirus Outbreak in the United States](#)." *Nature* 579(7798):181–82.

Friday 1.10.25: Illness, disease, and medicine

- *Aronowitz, Robert A. 2001. "[When Do Symptoms Become a Disease?](#)" *Annals of Internal Medicine* 134(9_Part_2):803-808.
- *Jones, D. S., S. H. Podolsky, and J. A. Greene. 2012. "[The Burden of Disease and the Changing Task of Medicine](#)." *New England Journal of Medicine* 366(25):2533–38.
 - Recommended: Healy, Melissa. 2022. "[Declining U.S. Life Expectancy Fell Further in 2021 Due to COVID and Drug Overdoses](#)." *Los Angeles Times*, December 22.

Week 2. Histories of the medical profession, public health, and health policy in the US

Monday 1.13.25: A (very brief!) history of the American medical profession

- *Starr, Paul. 2008. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise Of A Sovereign Profession And The Making Of A Vast Industry*. Basic Books. Pp. 79-144.
- *Timmermans, Stefan and Hyeyoung Oh. 2010. "[The Continued Social Transformation of the Medical Profession](#)." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51:S94–106.

Wednesday 1.15.25: A (very brief!) history of public health

- *Brandt, A. M. and M. Gardner. 2000. "[Antagonism and Accommodation: Interpreting the Relationship between Public Health and Medicine in the United States during the 20th Century](#)." *American Journal of Public Health* 90(5):707–15.
- Maxmen, Amy. 2020. "[Why the United States Is Having a Coronavirus Data Crisis](#)." *Nature* 585(7825):13–14.

Friday 1.17.25: Health care politics in the 20th Century US

- *Starr, Paul. 2008. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise Of A Sovereign Profession And The Making Of A Vast Industry*. Basic Books. Pp. 255-289.
- *Quadagno, Jill. 2004. "[Why the United States Has No National Health Insurance: Stakeholder Mobilization against the Welfare State, 1945-1996](#)." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 45:25–44.

Week 3. The American health care system today

Monday 1.20.25: MLK Day – no class!

Reading: “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman because it often results in physical death.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1966.

Wednesday 1.22.25: The Affordable Care Act and US health care law today

- *Quadagno, Jill. 2014. “[Right-Wing Conspiracy? Socialist Plot? The Origins of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.](#)” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 39(1):35–56.
- *Gaffney, Adam and Danny McCormick. 2017. “[The Affordable Care Act: Implications for Health-Care Equity.](#)” *The Lancet* 389(10077):1442–52.

Friday 1.24.25: US health care and public health today – a discussion

- *Blumenthal, David, Elizabeth J. Fowler, Melinda Abrams, and Sara R. Collins. 2020. “[Covid-19 — Implications for the Health Care System.](#)” *New England Journal of Medicine* 383(15):1483–88.s
- Gutierrez, Meoldy. 2022. “[Single-Payer Healthcare Proposal Fizzles in California Assembly.](#)” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31.

Week 4. Inequality, race, and American medicine

Monday 1.27.25: Fundamental causes of health and illness

- *Link, Bruce G. and Jo Phelan. 1995. “[Social Conditions As Fundamental Causes of Disease.](#)” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 80–94.
- Keating, Dan, Ariana Eunjung Cha, and Gabriel Florit. 2020. “[‘I Just Pray God Will Help Me’: Racial, Ethnic Minorities Reel from Higher Covid-19 Death Rates.](#)” *Washington Post*, November 20.

Wednesday 1.29.25: The ER in American health care

(*Asynchronous*, please watch [The Waiting Room](#))

- *Abraham, Laurie Kaye. 1994. *Mama Might Be Better Off Dead: The Failure of Health Care in Urban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 6, pp. 93-110.

Friday 1.31.25: Caring for the poor

- *Abraham, Laurie Kaye. 1994. *Mama Might Be Better Off Dead: The Failure of Health Care in Urban America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Introduction and Chapter 3, pp. 1-8 and 44-59.
- Laughland, Oliver. 2020. “[‘Death by Structural Poverty’: US South Struggles against Covid-19.](#)” *The Guardian*, August 5.

Week 5. Environmental health, lead, and review

Monday 2.3.25: Environmental health and the many-sided riddle of lead

- *Brown, Phil et al. 2003. "[The Health Politics of Asthma: Environmental Justice and Collective Illness Experience in the United States.](#)" *Social Science & Medicine* 57(3):453–64.
- *Fears, Darryl, and Brady Dennis. 2021. "'This Is Environmental Racism': How a Protest in a North Carolina Farming Town Sparked a National Movement." *Washington Post*, April 6.
- Eligon, John. 2016. "[A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint.](#)" *The New York Times*, January 22.
 - *Recommended:* *Drum, Kevin. 2016. "[Sick Kids Are Just the Beginning of America's Lead Crisis.](#)" *Mother Jones*, February 11.
 - [Compounding Crises of Our Time During Hurricane Laura Climate Change, COVID-19, and Environmental Injustice](#) – *Lancet Briefs*

Wednesday 2.5.25: Midterm review

- We will go over the exam structure. However, I will *not* prepare a review of the course materials. It will be up to you to bring questions for us to review and discuss.

Friday 2.7.25: Midterm exam

Week 6. Classification, contested illnesses, and patient advocacy

Monday 2.10.25: Disease classification and 'medicalization'

- *Conrad, Peter and Kristin K. Barker. 2010. "[The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications.](#)" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51(1):S67–79.
 - *Recommended:* *Barker, K. K. 1998. "[A Ship upon a Stormy Sea: The Medicalization of Pregnancy.](#)" *Social Science & Medicine* 47(8):1067–76.

Wednesday 2.12.25: Patient advocacy movements from Polio to HIV/Aids

- *Oshinsky, David M. 2006. *Polio: An American Story*. 1 edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press. Pp.1-7, 79-91, 188-213.
- *Epstein, Steven. 2000. "Democracy, Expertise, and AIDS Treatment Activism." Pp. 15–32 in *Science, Technology and Democracy*, D. L Kleinman (Ed.). Albany, NY: SUNY.

Friday 2.14.25: Contested illnesses

- Please watch: Brea, Jennifer. 2016. "[What Happens When You Have a Disease Doctors Can't Diagnose.](#)" *TED Talks*.
- *Aronowitz, Robert A. 1999. *Making Sense of Illness: Science, Society and Disease*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 19-38.

Week 7. Fights over medical and public health evidence

Monday 2.17.25: Presidents' Day – no class!

Wednesday 2.19.25: Battles over medical evidence from tobacco to sugar to vaccines

- *Oreskes, Naomi and Erik M. Conway. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. Reprint edition. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press. Chapter 5.
- Sun, Lena H. 2017. “[Anti-Vaccine Activists Spark a State’s Worst Measles Outbreak in Decades](#).” *Washington Post*, May 5.

Friday 2.21.25: Open discussion of medical evidence in the post-COVID age

- Lowenstein, Fiona, and Ryan Prior. 2023. “[The Long Covid Revolution](#).” April 11.
- Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. 2024. “[Despite Covid ‘Amnesia,’ the Pandemic Simmers Beneath the 2024 Race](#).” *The New York Times*, October 29.
 - Recommended: Douthat, Ross. 2020. “[Opinion | When You Can’t Just ‘Trust the Science’](#).” *The New York Times*, December 19.
 - Kum, Dezimey. 2020. “[Fueled by a History of Mistreatment, Black Americans Distrust the New COVID-19 Vaccines](#).” *Time*, December 28.

Week 8. Drugs, licit and illicit

Monday 2.24.25: The pharmaceutical industry

- *Dumit, Joseph. 2012. *Drugs for Life: How Pharmaceutical Companies Define Our Health*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books. Introduction and Chapter 2.
 - Recommended: Grim, Ryan, Lee Fang, and Sara Sirota. 2021. “[Democrats Find Their Big Pharma Bag Is Making It Inconvenient to Take On Big Pharma](#).” *The Intercept*.

Wednesday 2.26.25: Illicit drugs

- *Acker, Caroline Jean. 2010. “[How Crack Found a Niche in the American Ghetto: The Historical Epidemiology of Drug-Related Harm](#).” *BioSocieties* 5(1):70–88.
- *Bourgois, Philippe and Jeffrey Schonberg. 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. 1st edition. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 1-21, 78-115.

Friday 2.28.25: The contemporary opioid epidemic

- *Keefe, Patrick R. 2017. “[The Family That Built an Empire of Pain](#).” *The New Yorker*, October 23.
- Seelye, Katharine Q. 2015. “[In Heroin Crisis, White Families Seek Gentler War on Drugs](#).” *The New York Times*, October 30.
- Jay, Mike. 2024. “Opinion | Is Everyone High?” *The New York Times*, December 23.
 - Recommended: Montgomery, Philip. 2017. “[Faces of an Epidemic](#).” *The New Yorker*, October 23.
 - Mann, Brian. 2024. “NPR Exclusive: U.S. Overdose Deaths Plummet, Saving Thousands of Lives.” *NPR*, September 18.

Week 9. Making sense of non-contagious “epidemics”

Monday 3.3.25: Psychiatry, advocacy, and the explosion of mental illness rates

- *Horwitz, Allan V. 2002. *Creating Mental Illness*. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-18.
- *Hacking, Ian. 2006. “Making Up People.” *London Review of Books*, August 17, 23–26.
- Gnautati, Enrico. 2014. “[1 in 68 Children Now Has a Diagnosis of Autism-Spectrum Disorder—Why?](#)” *The Atlantic*, April 11.
 - Recommended: Frances, Allen. 2013. *Saving Normal: An Insider’s Revolt against out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life*. New York, NY, US: William Morrow & Co.

Wednesday 3.5.25: The obesity epidemic

- *Fletcher, I. 2014. “[Defining an Epidemic: The Body Mass Index in British and US Obesity Research 1960–2000](#).” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 36:338–53.
 - Recommended: *Saguy, Abigail C. and Kjerstin Gruys. 2010. “[Morality and Health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders](#).” *Social Problems* 57(2):231–50.

Friday 3.7.25: Open discussion of mental health and obesity in the age of COVID-19

- Wallis, Claudia. 2020. “[The Surprising Mental Toll of COVID](#).” *Scientific American*, December 1.

Week 10. Social networks, isolation, and wrap-up

Monday 3.10.25: Social networks and health

- *Bearman, Peter S., James Moody, and Katherine Stovel. 2004. “[Chains of Affection: The Structure of Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Networks](#).” *American Journal of Sociology* 110(1):44–91.
 - Recommended: Christakis, Nicholas A. and James H. Fowler. 2007. “[The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years](#).” *New England Journal of Medicine* 357(4):370–79.

Wednesday 3.12.25: Final exam review

- We will go over the exam structure and I will take questions on course content.

Friday 3.14.25: Isolation and health, plus a final discussion

- Khullar, Dhruv. 2016. “[How Social Isolation Is Killing Us](#).” *The New York Times*, December 23.
- *Klinenberg, Eric. 2001. “[Dying Alone: The Social Production of Urban Isolation](#).” *Ethnography* 2(4):501–31.
- *Wailoo, Keith. 2021. “[Spectacles of Difference: The Racial Scripting of Epidemic Disparities](#).” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*.
 - Recommended: *Luo, Ye, et al. 2012. “[Loneliness, Health, and Mortality in Old Age: A National Longitudinal Study](#).” *Social Science & Medicine* 74(6):907–14.