

## **SOCI 335: Sociology of Aging and the Life Course**

**Fall 2014**

**Tue, Thu, Fri**

**4:35 p.m. – 5:25 p.m.**

**Macdonald Engineering Building 279**

Prof. Aniruddha (Bobby) Das

E-mail: Please see communication policy below

Office Hours: Wednesday 10:30 – Noon.

Office Address: Room 730 Leacock Building

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### **Communication policy**

Please use MyCourses for all e-mail communications. E-mails sent to the McGill general e-mail address will not be answered. We will make every attempt to answer e-mail in a timely fashion within 36 hours of receipt. Please see professor during office hours for urgent issues.

### **Overview**

This is a class on life trajectories and the aging process, and their linkage with health. The central premise is that social factors strongly affect one's chances of a healthy and productive old age. In both developed and developing countries, recent decades have seen dramatic enhancements in longevity, and a shift from acute illness followed by death to survival with chronic conditions. Accordingly, the focus in healthcare is turning from treatment to prevention, with increased attention to the social resources that constrain negative behaviors and maintain functionality in the face of health-challenges. In other words, individuals live their lives—and grow old—in social contexts. And events and processes in this “life ecology” affect mental and physical health in late life. As we shall see, they may even affect biological aging.

The most obvious of these contexts is socioeconomic “stratification”—race, class, gender. These broad social positions can affect resources and constraints right through the life trajectory, in turn affecting well being in late life, responses to health-challenges (such as the onset of disease), and perhaps even rates of biological aging. Moreover, these broad categories are also cultural markers for attitudes and behaviors toward health. Similarly, regions and nation-states tend to have their own social, economic and cultural patterns, family structures, as well as sets of policies—all of which influence individual health trajectories. Moving to the “micro” level, we have the family—especially the marital partnership. As we shall see, factors in this “proximal” system—such as spousal loss, caregiving, a spouse's health-related attitudes and behaviors—have perhaps the strongest impact on older adults' health and well being. Between the two, we have a broad range of social settings—from one's larger network of friends and relatives, to neighborhoods, to larger urban environments.

We will begin with some existing theories of aging and the life course. Historical patterns will come next, with an emphasis on key demographic transitions in health and longevity. Then we will move progressively “inward” from the broadest social contexts—i.e., social stratification and national societies—down to marriage and the family. We will conclude with an overview of future directions in the sociology and demography of aging, especially those incorporating biological knowledge and measures.

### **Note on quantitative content**

Many of the readings rely on statistical evidence. These may be hard to decipher. However, no knowledge of statistics, whatsoever, is required for this class. When reading on your own, please focus on the substantive arguments and interpretations contained in the Introduction and Discussion sections of an article. Not on Methods and Results, which will be the quantitatively-dense sections.

All readings will be thoroughly discussed in class, and this discussion-content will be on lecture powerpoints posted on MyCourses. You are expected to read all the assigned material **before** class. You will be called on to demonstrate that you have read this material during class discussion. For the midterm and the final, you will be responsible for the material contained in these readings as well as all information presented in class.

### **Learning outcomes**

1. Basic concepts:
  - a. Major theories of aging and the life trajectory developed in sociology and associated disciplines.
  - b. The difference between age, period, and cohort effects.
2. Historical and cross-national patterns:
  - a. Major historical transitions in life patterns, health, and longevity -
  - b. And potential future patterns, as presented in the literature.
  - c. Cross-national variations in these patterns, historical and current.
3. Social causes of health and aging:
  - a. Basic variations by major socioeconomic groups
  - b. Mechanisms/proximal causes for these variations
  - c. The role of neighborhoods
  - d. Social networks
  - e. Family and marriage
4. Biosociology and biodemography
  - a. Major theories and possible bio-social pathways
  - b. Empirical findings (so far)

### **Readings**

*All assigned readings are hyperlinked in this course outline.* If you are on campus, or otherwise connected to the campus VPN, clicking on a link will take you directly to the reading. When off

campus, you will be redirected to the library website, where you'd have to log in to access the article in question.

## Course requirements

Again, all assigned readings must be completed before class. Apart from assignments and exams, participation in classroom discussions will be monitored, and will count toward the final grade.

The second component of participation is weekly posting of thoughts, comments, and/or debates bearing either on the previous week's lecture or the upcoming week's readings. This assignment is meant to ensure that you come to class prepared, and that you have thought about the readings enough to have opinions about them. It is also intended to avoid the need for last-minute pre-exam catch up. Comments are to be posted on a designated forum on MyCourses (Week 3, Week 4, etc.), by **Sunday 11:59PM, every week starting after drop-add. The first post is due Sunday, September 21.** We encourage you to respond to each other's comments. (Friday conferences are intended in part to hash through debates.) There are no hard rules for post-length—it is more important that posts be substantively relevant than long.

Third, Friday conferences will begin on September 19. No sign-up for conferences is necessary. You must attend at least six conferences, of your choosing, in order to receive credit (i.e., 5% of your final grade). Should you attend *any less than six* you will receive **no** credit.

There will be two exams: a mid-term, and a final. In addition, each student will be assigned to a group that will write a grant proposal to the U.S. National Institute on Aging, requesting funding for a research project on aging and health. (Volunteering for a group is acceptable and encouraged.) The final group decision on topics is due by Tuesday, October 21<sup>st</sup>, at the latest. Group representative(s) should either meet with the instructor during office hours \*before\* Oct 21<sup>st</sup>, to discuss their topic—or do so by e-mail (through MyCourses). Tentative bibliography (not annotated) due Thursday, Oct 30<sup>th</sup>. **Specifics for this assignment, including sections and format, will be discussed in class.**

## Evaluation

Participation	15%	
• In-class	5%	
• Weekly MyCourses postings (starting September 21)	5%	
• Conferences	5%	
Mid-term	25%	Tue., October 21
Grant proposal	30%	Thur., November 27
Final exam	30%	During exam period in December

## Policy on late submissions

Late submissions of the grant proposal will incur a penalty of 20% of the assignment's grade. Each additional 24-hour delay (including over the week-end) will incur an extra 20%. Please e-mail any late submissions through MyCourses to the professor as soon as possible.

Please advise the professor two weeks before the midterm if you are unable to attend, so that we may make alternative arrangements.

## *“Students’ rights and responsibilities”*

### Attendance and participation in class discussions.

You are responsible for all announcements made in class and on MyCourses, as well as for all course materials given out in class. You should also check for new announcements or material on MyCourses at least weekly.

### Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability please contact the instructor to arrange a time to discuss your situation. It would be helpful if you contact the Office for Students with Disabilities at 398-6009 before you do this.

### Remise des travaux en français

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).

Les étudiants de ce cours peuvent rédiger tous leurs travaux (incluant les examens) en français, mais doivent pour ce faire obtenir la **permission préalable** de la professeure. **Aucune permission rétroactive ne sera accordée.**

### Policy for the Accommodation of Religious Holy Days

1. Students will not be penalized if they cannot write examinations or be otherwise evaluated on their religious holy days where such activities conflict with their religious observances.
2. Students who because of religious commitment cannot meet academic obligations, other than final examinations, on certain holy days are **responsible for informing their instructor, with two weeks’ notice of each conflict.**
3. When the requested accommodation concerns a **final examination, students are responsible for advising their faculty office as soon as possible and not later than the deadline for reporting conflicts.** Additional documentation confirming their religious affiliation may be requested.

### Statement on academic integrity at McGill

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).”

“L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity)).”

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***“In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.”***

**READING LIST TBA**