SOCI 335: Sociology of Aging and the Life Course

Fall 2019
Mon, Wed, Fri
8:35 a.m. – 9:25 a.m.
Macdonald Engineering Building 279

Zoom course site: https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/91403667329

Prof. Aniruddha (Bobby) Das
E-mail: Please see communication policy below
Office Hours: Wednesdays 4-5:30 pm
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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 Zoom 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 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.

You are expected to read all the assigned material before 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 and dyads
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

All assigned readings must be completed before class. Apart from assignments and exams, participation during Zoom sessions and/or on MyCourses discussion forums (especially for those unable to attend Zoom sessions) will be monitored, and will count toward the final grade.
Friday conferences will begin on Zoom on September 18. No sign-up for conferences is necessary. Attendance is not mandatory, but is strongly recommended.

There will be two 72-hour take-home exams: a mid-term and a final. In addition, each student will be assigned to a group that will write a grant proposal for the CIHR Institute of Aging (http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/8671.html) or the U.S. National Institute on Aging (https://www.nia.nih.gov/), requesting funding for a research project on aging. (Volunteering for a group is acceptable and encouraged.) The final group decision on topics is due by October 30 at the latest. Group representative(s) should either meet with the instructor during Zoom office hours *before* October 30, to discuss their topic—or do so by e-mail (through MyCourses). Specifics for this assignment, including sections and format, will be discussed during Zoom course sessions.

Evaluation

Participation 10%

- Format: Zoom sessions and/or MyCourses discussion forums

Mid-term (take home) 25% October 23 (start date)
Grant proposal 35% December 3 (due date)
Final exam (take home) 30% December 3 (start date)

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 take it, so that we may make alternative arrangements.
“Students’ rights and responsibilities”

Attendance and participation in class discussions.
You are responsible for all announcements made during Zoom course sessions and on MyCourses. 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

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 - see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.)

"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)."

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/students/srr/honest/ for more information). (approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

"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/students/srr/honest/)."

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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."
SCHEDULE AND REMOTE DELIVERY FRAMEWORK

Note: Dates highlighted in red denote those on which Zoom course sessions will be held during regular class times. Attendance is not mandatory but is strongly recommended. For all other days, recorded lectures will be posted on MyCourses.

Conferences will be held over Zoom. As with lecture sessions, attendance is not mandatory but is strongly recommended.

Per Faculty of Arts guidelines, students must consent to being recorded if they are attending a lecture or participating in a component of a course that is being recorded. Students will be notified through a ‘pop-up’ box in Zoom if a lecture or portion of a class is being recorded. If a student is not comfortable being in a class that is recorded, that student may decide not to take part by logging off Zoom.

Students are not required to have their video on during Zoom sessions.

September
Wed 2
Fri 4

9
11

14
16
18 (Conference)

21
23
25 (Conference)

28
30

October
Friday 2 (Conference)

5
7
9 (Conference)

14
16 (Conference)

19
21 Review session.
23 (Conference) Mid term posted online (due in 72 hours)
26
30  (Conference)

**November**
2  
6  (Conference)

8  
13  (Conference)

16
18
20  (Conference)

23
25
27  (Conference)

30

**December**
2  
**Thursday 2**  Review session. Final exam posted online (due in 72 hours)
DETAILED SCHEDULE:

Course overview, expectations
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

Sociological theories of aging, the life course, and health
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 4-11

Age, period, or cohort?
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 14-16

SEPTEMBER 18: Conferences begin

Historical trends – key transitions in health and longevity.
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 21 – OCTOBER 5

Stratification: race, class, gender
Readings:
OCTOBER 7-19

**MID-TERM REVIEW: OCTOBER 21: ZOOM SESSION DURING REGULAR CLASS TIME**

**MID-TERM EXAM: OCTOBER 23: POSTED ON MY COURSES, DUE IN 72 HOURS**

Mechanisms and triggers: Childhood adversities, cumulative disadvantage, stressful events

**Readings:**

**OCTOBER 26-NOVEMBER 4**


**Local context: neighborhoods**

**Readings:**

**NOVEMBER 9-18**


**Networks**

**Readings:**

**NOVEMBER 23-25**


**Future directions: biodemography and biosociology**

**Readings:**

**NOVEMBER 30-DECEMBER 2**

DECEMBER 3:
- ZOOM REVIEW SESSION FOR FINAL.
- GRANT PROPOSAL DUE.
- FINAL EXAM: POSTED ON MY COURSES, DUE IN 72 HOURS