About the course

The course is a seminar designed primarily for graduate students. The seminar will focus on the sociology of biomedical (clinical and laboratory) practices and, in particular, including recent developments at the interface of medicine and genomics. Its main objective is to examine how biomedicine shapes and is shaped by societal developments. Biomedicine is a very diverse field and sociologists of biomedicine have investigated a motley of different topics, ranging from the production of visual inscriptions, to the dynamics of medical discourse, the structure of medical texts, the development of diagnosis and classification, the role of biomedical instruments and devices, the evolution of different styles of research, the rise of patient activism, the emergence of biosocial identities, the commercialization of medical research, and so on. Because the field is so large, no single course could possibly cover its entire breadth. I have selected a number of topics corresponding to several key activities of contemporary biomedicine, such as diagnosis, screening, etc., as well as some recent developments, such as evidence-based medicine and genomics.

Course requirements

The course will follow a seminar format. Students are expected to contribute to each session in the form of preparation, participation, and focused questions for discussion. I have selected three required readings for each session. I can provide a list of additional readings to students who would like to explore a given topic more extensively.

Students must fulfill the following three requirements:

• First, each student will be expected to write a brief (1-2 pages) comparative summary of each week’s required readings. The adjective “comparative”
refers to the assessment of how readings relate or do not relate to each other: What do they have in common? How do their approaches and arguments differ? Are they compatible or incompatible with one another in terms of their assumptions? What are the comparative strengths and weaknesses of each article? The summaries should be e-mailed to all course participants (myself included) no later than the Friday preceding the Monday class during which we will discuss the readings, in order to allow discussion leaders (see next point) to prepare their comments. Students are expected to read each other’s comments prior to class.

• Second, each student will participate in leading the discussion of required readings during one class period, as part of a team of two or three students. At the beginning of the semester, each student should sign up for one or more sessions for which s/he agrees to act as the seminar facilitator, with the responsibility for introducing the discussion, keeping it moving and making sure pertinent points are covered. Discussion leaders should act as a team and present an integrated overview of each week’s readings and of the issues and questions they raise (as contrasted with discussing each reading in turn). Their overview should be based on their own critical analysis of the readings and include a summary of the comments emailed by the other students. A printed outline of the overview should be distributed at the beginning of the each class.

• Finally, students will submit a seminar paper at the end of the course (4000-6000 words). The paper will analyze a topic of their choice in the sociology of medicine. Any topic will do as long as it deals with biomedicine (broadly defined) and as long as it implements the methodological and theoretical tools discussed in the course. The paper is not to be conceived of as an essay review of secondary sources. Rather, it should be based on the analysis of primary sources (medical literature, interviews, etc.). The paper, however, must include a section in which the topic is discussed theoretically or conceptually, and references to the literature from class readings and/or other relevant analytical material that you have found. Students are therefore strongly advised to choose a topic as soon as possible: term paper proposals and outlines are due on October 20. Papers are due in principle on the last day of classes (December 4) but an extension can be granted until December 15.

The grade will be determined by:

a) Written summaries of readings: 30% of final grade
b) Class participation (esp. as discussion leader): 20% of final grade
c) Seminar paper: 50% of final grade
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.

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STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
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 for more information).

COURSE SCHEDULE AND REQUIRED READINGS

NOTE: While the seminar focuses on readings that are directly related to biomedicine, most of the readings explicitly refer to the field of Science & Technology Studies (S&TS). Ideally, students should have already taken an introductory course to S&TS, although this is not a requirement. For students with no prior exposure to S&TS, the following textbook provides a useful introduction:


Additional recommended readings:


DETAILED SCHEDULE

1/ September 8: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

2/ September 15: 20th century (bio)medicine

3/ September 22: Analyzing clinical work

4/ September 29: Inscriptions

5/ October 6: Diagnosis

NO CLASS on October 13: Thanksgiving

6/ October 20: Diagnosis meets genomics

7/ October 27: Screening

8/ November 3: Coordinating biomedical activities

9/ November 10: RCTs Clinical research

10/ November 17: Regulating biomedicine

11/ November 24: Evidence-based medicine

12/ December 1: Calculating risks

13/ December 4 (Thursday): SUMMING-UP /STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
General discussion of the topics examined during the previous weeks and of the students’ projects: please come prepared to talk for five-ten minutes about your term paper.