COURSE SYLLABUS

LESSONS OF COMMUNITY AND COMPASSION:

OVERCOMING SOCIAL ISOLATION AND BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS THROUGH POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Instructor

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.; Wednesdays 2 p.m. – 4 p.m.

Class Times & Location

Wednesdays, 8:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.
September 7 – November 30, 2016
Arts Building, 853 rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Room 230

Official Disclaimers:

1. Language

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.

2. Academic Integrity statement [approved by Senate on 29 January 2003]:

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 <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity/> for more information).
Course Description

Now if you listen closely
I’ll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
‘Cause nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.
– Maya Angelou

Social isolation—the deprivation of social connectedness—can be formally defined as “the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community, and the larger social environment).”

Yet, around this technical definition lies a range of interconnected issues. Issues of identity, dignity, and belonging. Issues of agency and voice. Issues that affect people’s experience of life and their ability to reach their true potential.

Why do isolation and social connectedness matter at a community, national, and global level? How does the isolation of vulnerable groups hinder progress and development? What is the impact of considering—or neglecting—these issues when developing and implementing policies and programs? What is their relevance to key Sustainable Development Goals such as ending poverty, ensuring healthy lives, and making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable? And, finally, what role can each of us play in promoting community and compassion?

Through real-life examples, the course will examine the causes and consequences of social isolation for vulnerable populations such as people living in poverty; refugees and immigrants; Indigenous peoples; people with disabilities; and the elderly—and will explore the results that can be achieved when the voices of vulnerable populations are included as policy and programming decisions are made.

Along the way, we’ll hear from experts who are incorporating a commitment to connectedness into their work on behalf of social progress, and we’ll learn about varied platforms and professions for influencing change.

The class will be an interdisciplinary seminar; student attendance and participation in classroom discussions and interactive exercises will be essential. In addition, students will take part in the 2016 Symposium on Overcoming Social Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness, to be held at McGill from October 25-27. The research assistant will take attendance on the morning of October 26. Students are encouraged to attend as much of the Symposium as their schedules will allow.
Learning Goals and Outcomes

- Understand what social isolation means; how it manifests itself; and why it is so detrimental—for individuals, for communities, and ultimately for society as a whole;
- Increase understanding of communities and groups historically facing barriers to development, informed directly by the experience of leading thinkers and organizations that work with these communities;
- Identify and evaluate programs and policies designed to foster connectedness;
- Deepen skills for raising awareness of social isolation and influencing positive change.

Assignments and Evaluation

- Participation – 20%
  - This will include participation in all course-related discussions and exercises, including attendance at and participation in the 2016 Symposium on Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness, to be held October 25-27 at McGill. The research assistant will take attendance on the morning of October 26. Students are encouraged to attend as much of the Symposium as their schedules will allow.

- Class online discussion, due 8:30 AM every Tuesday – 20%
  - Students are expected to share short reactions to the weekly readings and videos as part of the class online discussion board, to be posted by 8:30 a.m. on Tuesday before class. These comments and reflections can be a short paragraph and should not exceed 250 words; the aim is to show thoughtful engagement with each week’s background material.

- Narrative interview assignment (roughly 750 words), due 8:30 AM on October 5 – 15%

- Course-related column (650-800 words), due 5:00 PM on November 29 – 20%
  - Over the course of the class, each student will write an op-ed-length column inspired by the themes and topics we cover.

- “Research to Practice” Final paper (1,500 – 2,000 words), due 8:30 AM November 30 – 25%
  - For the final assignment, students will write a 6-8 page paper advocating for new evidence-based policies or programs that can reduce social isolation and increase
connectedness. Successful papers will combine ideas derived from class readings and students’ own research to make arguments for the policies or programs they recommend.

Required Texts

For purchase:


To be provided:


Course Content

Week 1 – Introduction to Social Isolation and Social Connectedness
September 7, 2016

What is social isolation? Why does it matter, and why should we care—as individuals, as communities, and as global citizens? How can policy help promote inclusion and belonging? In this course overview, we’ll explore the key themes to which we will return over the semester.
Required readings:


Want to know more?:


**Week 2 – Refugees: The Other Is Us**  
September 14, 2016

Last year, the global population of the forcibly displaced reached an all-time high. Roughly one in every 113 people on Earth has been forced from their home by crises such as conflict and natural disasters, millions of them seeking sanctuary in foreign lands. In this lesson, we’ll discuss the meaning of home, explore how isolation manifests within the refugee experience, and consider the media’s role in raising awareness and building connection.

Guest speaker: Kevin Sullivan, Senior Correspondent, *The Washington Post*  
Linda Davidson, Photojournalist, *The Washington Post*

Required readings:

- Watch: John Cacioppo on Loneliness, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgqTlksk4GA (6 minutes)
Want to know more?:


**Week 3 – The Human Right to Belong**

September 21, 2016

*Do human rights offer protection from isolation? This lesson will investigate the connection between the two. We’ll also learn how organizations like Human Rights Watch help safeguard rights through research, investigation, documentation, and advocacy.*

Guest speaker: Emina Ćerimović, Researcher, Human Rights Watch

**Required readings:**


Want to know more?:

- “‘Like a Death Sentence’: Abuses against Persons with Mental Disabilities in Ghana,” Medi Ssengooba, *Human Rights Watch*, 2012,
• “Chained Like Prisoners’: Abuses Against People with Psychosocial Disabilities in Somaliland,” Laetitia Bader, Human Rights Watch, 2015,
• “Leave No One Behind: Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Emergencies,” Human Rights Watch, 2016,
https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/19/leave-no-one-behind

(Note: Professor Samuel will provide all students with hard copies of the Human Rights Watch reports)

Week 4 – Connected Youth, Contemporary Challenges, Creative Solutions
September 28, 2016

Young people are masters of new technologies that are connecting the world as never before. But just how deep are those connections, and how can we make them more meaningful? This session will consider the positive and negative uses of digital technology, and explore the ways that a wired generation can lead in building belonging.

Guest speakers: Jennifer Corriero, Co-Founder and Executive Director, TakingITGlobal, and Lindsay DuPré, Indigenous Youth Engagement Coordinator, TakingITGlobal

Required readings:
• “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” Stephen Marche, The Atlantic, 2012,
http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/#article-comments
• Watch: John Cacioppo, Loneliness and Technology,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aDZx5Us5kQ (5 minutes)
• “13, right now,” Jessica Contrera, The Washington Post, 2016,
• “Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults,” Ethan Kross et al., PLOS One, 2013,
http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0069841#s2
• “Cyberbullying victim speaks out: 'It was the darkest time of my life',” Kelly Noseworthy, CBC News, 2016,
• “Youth Index 2015,” The Prince’s Trust, 2015, PDF file,

Want to know more?:

- Read about Beyond Differences, A program to train middle school students to become agents of connectedness and inclusion
  http://www.beyonddifferences.org/social-isolation/
- “The Health Consequences of Social Isolation: It Hurts More than You Think,” Executive Summary Issued by Beyond Differences (focused on adolescent youth), 2015,
- “Kids don’t have to be lonely at recess anymore thanks to this little boy and his ‘buddy bench’,” Colby Itkowitz, The Washington Post, 2016,
- “Insurance company bringing cyberbullying coverage to Canada for first time,” Erica Vella, Global News, 2016,
- “Cyberbullying programs to be evaluated by the federal government,” Brett Ruskin, CBC News, 2016,

Week 5 – Who Cares? Social Isolation and the Global Agenda
October 5, 2016

In January 2016, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) officially came into force, setting ambitious targets for ending poverty, combating inequality, and alleviating climate change, while leaving no one behind. In this class, we’ll explore how the SDGs relate to isolation and belonging, and we’ll look at the challenge of linking global goals to grassroots change.

Guest speaker: Kathy Calvin, President and CEO, UN Foundation

Required readings:

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/07/business/economy/at-the-un-a-free-for-all-on-setting-global-goals.html?_r=0


Want to know more?:


(Note: the narrative interview assignment is due by the start of this lesson)

Week 6 – Different Abilities: The Journey from Exclusion to Inclusion
October 12, 2016

For the millions of people with intellectual disabilities, marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion have been the norm rather than the exception. The Special Olympics movement offers a powerful alternative vision—one where the world is safe for difference, and where the contributions of people with intellectual disabilities can lift the lives of us all. In this session, we’ll explore isolation and belonging through the lens of intellectual disability, with an emphasis on the power of play to build respect, recognition, and reciprocity.

Guest speakers: Dr. Timothy Shriver, Chairman, Special Olympics, and Loretta Claiborne, Special Olympics Athlete and Board Member

Required readings:

- “Let’s Talk about Intellectual Disabilities,” Loretta Claiborne, TEDxMidAtlantic, 2012, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XXqr_ZSsMg (Approx. 12 minutes)
- “Inclusion of Canadians with Intellectual Disabilities: A National Report Card,” Canadian Association for Community Living, 2013,
Want to know more?:


**Week 7 – Truth and Reconciliation: Learning to Truly See One Another**
October 19, 2016

What has been the result of Canada’s Aboriginal policy of the past, and what is being done today to remedy that disastrous legacy? How are Indigenous communities themselves reclaiming their voice, dignity, and strength? What role does culture play in deepening the bonds of belonging?

Guest speakers: Gabrielle Hughes, DPhil candidate, University of Oxford, and Kluane Adamek, Co-founder, Our Voices – Yukon First Nation Emerging Leaders

Required readings:

- “Attawapiskat: Suicide isn’t a ‘big mystery’- lessons from successful suicide prevention strategies,” Leslie Young, *Global News*, 2016,
Week 8 – 2016 Symposium on Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness
October 25-27, 2016

8-9 am, a discussion with Matthew Bishop, Senior Editor, The Economist, The Faculty Club

In lieu of class time this week, students will participate in the 2016 Symposium on Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness, to be held on the campus of McGill University at the Faculty Club. Information about the Symposium can be found here: http://www.socialconnectedness.org/2016-symposium/

Required readings:

Week 9 – Southern African Perspectives on Building Connectedness and Resilience for Children, Youth, and Communities
November 2, 2016

How do we bring indigenous knowledge into policy and program development, and why is it so important to do so? In this session, we’ll look at social isolation and social connectedness from the Southern African perspective, with a focus on examples of community-built, community-driven endeavours to build belonging.

Guest speaker: Marlene Ogawa, Program Manager, Synergos Institute in South Africa

Required readings:

- “Social connectedness and indigenous approaches to care and support: A research brief for policy-makers and practitioners working with children in southern Africa,” Synergos. (In course packet.)
- “Building social connectedness: A Brief Guide for Practitioners Working with Children and Youth,” Synergos. (In course packet.)

Want to know more?:


Week 10 – Hug your Grandparents: Isolation and Older People
November 9, 2016

The world is ageing: By 2050, almost 17 percent of the global population will be aged 65 or older. And yet, as Grey Panther activist Frances Zainoeddin has observed, “While we celebrate longevity as one of humanity’s greatest achievements, how many countries have effective policies and programmes that address the concerns of people who have actually made it beyond the age of 60?” In this class, we’ll talk about the looming risk of an isolation epidemic among older people; we’ll see how the challenge differs across countries and cultures; and we’ll explore innovative, intergenerational pathways to social connectedness.
Required readings:


Want to know more?:


(*Note: Professor Samuel will loan copies of The Social World of Older People to interested students)
Week 11 – Building for Belonging: Turning Our Cities into Communities
November 16, 2016

Urban design can bring people together or drive them apart. In this lesson, we’ll explore the connection between the built environment and social isolation, and identify best practices for promoting connectedness in an era of urbanization.

Required readings:

- “Jane Jacobs on urban design of Toronto and Montreal,” The Way It Is, CBC TV, 1969, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9833TPWSCY (Approx. 12 minutes)

Want to know more?:


(*Note: Professor Samuel will loan copies of The Economy of Cities, The Death and Life of Great American Cities and Millennium, Volumes 1 & 2, to interested students)
Week 12 – Measuring and Managing: The Environment and Isolation
November 23, 2016

Climate change—the greatest global challenge humanity faces—threatens to undermine the way people live in communities around the globe. In this class, we will explore why and how climate change and its various effects—from food shortages and water security to infrastructural damage—could exacerbate social isolation, especially among the growing populations residing within vulnerable urban centers. We’ll also explore the promise and shortcomings of a data-driven approach to policy change, and the lessons that environmental performance measurement might hold.

Guest speaker: Dr. Angel Hsu, Assistant Professor, Yale-NUS College and Yale School of Forestry; Principal Investigator, Environmental Performance Index

Required readings:

Week 13 – Community-Driven Development: Overcoming Poverty and Isolation Through Grassroots Empowerment  
November 30, 2016

For our final class discussion, we will hear from two young leaders who have become, to borrow Gandhi’s phrase, the change they want to see—creating a school for girls in Kibera, Nairobi’s biggest slum, so that education can become a pathway out of multidimensional poverty. We’ll talk about how isolation, shame, and stigma create a poverty of their own, and how fostering connection and belonging can generate reinforcing rewards. And we’ll reflect on the ways that people of all ages can get involved in the movement to combat social isolation, and what it takes to drive meaningful change.

Guest speakers: Kennedy Odede, Founder/CEO, and Jessica Posner, Co-Founder/COO, Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO)

Required readings:

- “The Girl Effect: The Clock is Ticking.” Watch. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e8xgF0JtVg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e8xgF0JtVg)

Want to know more?:


*(Note: the course-related column must be submitted by 5:00 PM on November 29, and the final paper is due by the start of this lesson)*