SOCI 335: Sociology of Aging and the Life Course

Fall 2019
Mon, Wed, Fri
8:35 p.m. – 9:25 p.m.
Rutherford Physics Building 118

Prof. Aniruddha (Bobby) Das
E-mail: Please see communication policy below
Office Hours: Mondays 4-6
Office Address: Room 730 Leacock Building

TA: Kayla McCarney
E-mail: kaylamccarney@gmail.com

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 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 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

This course is discussion-based. All assigned readings must be completed before class. Apart from assignments and exams, participation in classroom and/or online discussions will be monitored, and will count toward the final grade.

Friday conferences will begin on September 20. 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 (held in class during regular class time), and a take-home 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 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 in class.

Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-class and/or online</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conferences</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant proposal</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 for more information).”

“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

Course overview, expectations
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4

Sociological theories of aging, the life course, and health
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 6-11

SEPTEMBER 13: Movies: Global Aging

Age, period, or cohort?
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 16-18

SEPTEMBER 20: Conferences begin

Historical trends – key transitions in health and longevity.
Readings:
SEPTEMBER 23 – OCTOBER 2

OCTOBER 7: PROPOSAL FORMAT

Stratification: race, class, gender
Readings:
OCTOBER 9, 16


**MID-TERM REVIEW: OCTOBER 21: REGULAR CLASS TIME**

**MID-TERM EXAM: OCTOBER 23: IN-CLASS, REGULAR CLASS TIME**

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

Readings:

**OCTOBER 28-NOVEMBER 6**


**Local context: neighborhoods**

Readings:

**NOVEMBER 11-13**


**Networks and dyads**

Readings:

**NOVEMBER 18-20**


Future directions: biodemography and biosociology

Readings:
NOVEMBER 25-DECEMBER 2

DECEMBER 3:
• REVIEW SESSION FOR FINAL.
• GRANT PROPOSAL DUE.

FINAL EXAM: Take home