Introduction

More than 150 years ago, Rudolf Virchow founded the journal *Medical Reform* in Germany and proclaimed that preserving health and preventing disease required “full and unlimited democracy” rather than “mere palliatives.” Echoing this sentiment, physician and demographic historian Thomas McKeown proposed that pronounced mortality declines observed since the 18th century were largely the result of broad economic and social changes, rather than targeted public health or medical interventions. While portions of the McKeown thesis remain contested, contemporary researchers maintain that *social conditions are fundamental causes of disease*. Underlying this claim are the observations that social conditions are related to health, independent of both the actual health outcomes under examination and the mechanisms through which social conditions are related to health. That is, even as epidemiological profiles of the leading causes of death and the intermediary processes related to death and disease change across time and across populations, the larger *social causes of health disparities* remain virtually unchanged. Social conditions such as poverty, social isolation, and segregation as well as ascribed characteristics of gender and race are predictive of a battery of contemporary chronic diseases and causes of premature death.¹

This course will analyze studies of health outcomes, the social conditions that are related to the health of populations, and some of the mechanisms through which these patterns are produced. These research topics are not constrained to a single discipline but represent a confluence of interdisciplinary research streams covering the diverse fields of public health, social demography, medical sociology, public policy, health economics, and anthropology. We will read both qualitative and quantitative research, with the goals both of understanding key findings and considering the strengths and weaknesses of these different ways of studying inequality and health.

Learning Goals

Students in this course will

1) Develop understanding of key theories, debates, and knowledge gaps regarding social determinants of health and the production (and maintenance) of health inequalities in the U.S.;
2) Critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative approaches for theorizing, measuring, and crafting policy to address inequality and health;
3) Develop their own research agenda on the social causes of inequalities in health and illness.

¹ Many thanks to Michelle Frisco (Penn State), from whose syllabus “Health Disparities” I’ve borrowed both inspiration and resources.
Course Requirements

Your course grade will be based on four requirements:
(1) Summaries of assigned readings (due every other week)
(2) Leadership of class discussion -- 1 time during the course of the semester
(3) Attendance and class participation
(4) Completion of a research paper or grant proposal on inequality and health

Weekly readings and Response Papers: Required readings for each week are listed in the course outline below. You are expected to complete the required readings and be prepared to discuss them before the class. It may help guide your reading to consider the following questions:

- What are the main questions the author(s) is posing?
- What is the methodology? (data source, analytic approach)
- What are their underlying assumptions?
- What are the main conclusions?
- What are the major contributions of this work to the literature?
- In what ways is this work unsatisfying, inconsistent, incomplete?
- What additional questions does this work raise?

Every other week, one half of the class will write response papers on the week’s readings. We will divide responsibilities for response papers on the first day of class. **Response papers should be posted to LATTE at least 24 hours prior to our class meeting**, as they will become the basis for our class discussion (note: late papers will not receive comments). Your response paper should synthesize and critically evaluate key theoretical, methodological and/or substantive contributions of the readings. This may consist of identifying questions that the readings provoke; critiquing problematic assumptions, logic, and measurement; discussing theoretical and empirical advances; and considering ideas for future directions (see suggested foci above). Response papers should generally be no longer than one single spaced typed page. To facilitate class discussion, prior to the beginning of class, all students should review the response papers submitted by other seminar participants, which will be available in a designated “forum” on LATTE.

**Attendance and class participation.** Students are expected to attend class and to have completed the reading before the course begins so that we can engage in an intellectual discussion about the current topic area. Although some students will be assigned to lead the discussion each week, all students are expected to carefully read and evaluate all required chapters/articles. The success of the course in providing stimulating ideas and advances for your graduate work and for the class as a whole depends on your careful reading of materials and thoughtful contributions to discussion each week.

**Leading Discussion.** Each student is expected to lead the discussion once during the semester. This involves preparing an overview of the topic, drawing on required readings, supplemental materials & classmates’ response papers. You will create a list of at least five discussion questions for the group based in this information. Successful formats in the past have included a 20-30 minute presentation/overview of the suggested supplemental readings and their relevance to the topic, followed by leading the rest of the class discussion based on both the required readings and the issues introduced by the suggested readings. Dates/topics will be assigned after receiving preferences during the first class meeting. Depending on the class size, you may have co-leaders.
Research proposal or paper. Each student must complete a research proposal or empirical research paper related to the topic of health disparities. Research proposals should be no longer than 15 pages; papers should be no longer than 20 pages (references excluded).

Research proposals should consist of a statement of the research question and rationale for posing the question, a description of the guiding theoretical or conceptual framework, a review of the relevant literature, and a description of the data and methods that you propose to use to study the question posed. I am happy to talk with you about which NIH or NSF requests for proposals might be best suited to your research interests, so that you can use this assignment to draft a proposal that you could turn in to a funding agency.

Empirical research papers should be written as you would write a journal article. Each paper should include the following sections: introduction, literature review/background, methods, results, discussion/conclusion. You can choose either to 1) work toward a paper that you could submit for presentation at a professional association meeting (ASA, ESS, or another meeting) and eventually for publication, or; 2) develop a thesis or dissertation proposal.

Note: If you are currently working with a local community based organization, you may use this assignment to develop a research or policy proposal that addresses a social determinant of health that has been identified as important by the community partner. Please talk with me within the first month of class (i.e., in advance of the October 10 paper assignment), should you wish to pursue this option.

Below are deadlines for the intermediate and final products required for the research proposal/paper.

a. One page project description that describes your research question and its significance.
   **Due October 10, in class**

b. Final research proposal/paper.
   **Due December 12, in class**

I encourage you to meet with me individually to discuss your research proposal/paper topic.

Course Policies

Policies for Written Work

All written papers are to be typed, double-spaced, using a 11-12-pt. Times New Roman font, 1 inch margins, and must include page numbers, proper use of citations, and bibliographies. I place a high premium on careful research and clear organization and writing.

Written assignments are due at the beginning of class. With the exception of the Response Papers that are due on LATTE 24 hours before each class meeting, all papers must be turned in as hard copies. If you have an emergency and are unable to complete an assignment, you must speak with me as soon as possible, so we can discuss how you will complete the assignment. Do not assume that you may hand in all of your assignments at the end of the course, or that you will be granted an extension.

**All written work must be completed to receive a passing grade in this class**
**Academic Integrity**
You are expected to be familiar with and to follow the University’s policies on academic integrity (see http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdje/ai/). I will refer any suspected instances of alleged dishonesty to the Office of Student Development and Conduct. Instances of academic dishonesty may result in sanctions including but not limited to failure in the course, failure on the assignment in question, suspension from the University and/or educational programs.

**Reasonable Accommodations**
If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and give me a copy of your letter of accommodation in the first two weeks of the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in the Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu).

The following books are available in the bookstore and on reserve in the library:


*All other readings will be posted on LATTE.*
Schedule of Sessions and Assigned Readings

September 12  Course Introduction and Overview


Film (in class): “Unnatural Causes” (Part 1)

September 19  Inequality: Introduction to Stratification Theory

Guest Lecture: Jason Beckfield, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University


***More TBA

September 26  Health Disparities: Theoretical Frameworks


Link, Bruce and Jo Phelan. “McKeown and the idea that social conditions are fundamental causes of disease.” pp 730-2.


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2 There is a review article assigned for many weeks, most often from the *Annual Review of Sociology*. I’ve marked the review articles with a (*) Please use them as a map/overview of each topic area. They are meant to help you orient to the empirical articles we read each week.


**October 3**

**Socioeconomic Status and Health**

Subramanian S.V. and Ichiro Kawachi. 2004. “Income Inequality and Health: What Have We Learned So Far?” *Epidemiologic Reviews* 26:78-91*


**October 10**

**Race and Racism**


**October 17**

NO CLASS (Brandeis Thursday)
October 24  Ethnicty: Nativity. Immigration, and (Beyond) Acculturation


October 31  Neighborhoods and Environmental Inequalities


Environmental Inequalities


November 7  Social Relationships (and Their Disruption)


November 14  Gender


November 21  Education


Introduction, Chapter 1, Chapter 3, Chapter 4 & Conclusion

November 28  Employment


December 5  Making Changes: Policy and Community Based Approaches


December 12  Wrapping Up, Looking Forward

**Term Papers Due**