Sociology 165a. Living and Dying in America:  
the Sociology of Birth and Death  
Brandeis University  
Spring 2012

Instructor: Wendy Cadge  
Office: Pearlman 109  
Office Hour: Friday 11:30-12:30pm and by appointment  
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Undergraduate Teaching Fellows: Natalie Giles-Klein, ngiles@brandeis.edu  
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Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Fridays, 12:30-1:50pm, Pearlman Lounge

Course Description

This course introduces you to the tools and concepts central to the sociological study of birth and death in the United States. We ask how people are born and die in America - not biologically, but by paying attention to the cultural norms, social institutions, and economic factors that influence the processes. We aim to understand how our ways of thinking about birth and death are shaped by our families, medical institutions, religious organizations, and our own life experiences.

By the end of the semester you will be able to:

• Describe how the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and death changed over time in the United States and point to some of the factors that influenced those shifts.
• Compare how medical institutions (and people) currently shape experiences of birth and death in the United States.
• Explain how less-medical alternatives like midwifery, home birth and hospice emerged in the last one hundred years and how they influence some people’s experiences.
• Speak in an informed way about ethical issues and decisions related to birth and death such as prenatal testing, assisted reproduction, physician assisted suicide, etc.
• Apply insights about birthing and dying to your own lives and perspectives.

Much about birth and death in the United States takes place privately. As such, some of what we discuss is likely to be new and may be difficult. The course will be interactive and discussion-based including guest speakers, fieldtrips, and assignments that require you to speak with people outside the classroom about birth and death. I will support you (and you will support each other) though the semester, but I ask that you please think carefully about whether this is the right time for you to take this course. If you are not certain, talk with me or speak honestly about the pros and cons of the class with one of the peer TAs, both of whom took it last year. If you lost a loved one in the past year, you should wait until a future semester to take the course.

Course Readings:

The following required book is available in the bookstore.

This book is also on reserve in the library. All other required course readings are available through Latte except for those listed with web addresses.

**Course Requirements:**

- **Attendance** is required. Please be on time out of respect for me and your fellow classmates. Your class attendance counts as 5 points towards your final grade. If you miss zero or one class, you will receive 5 points. If you miss 2 classes, you will receive 4 points. If you miss 3 classes, you will receive 3 points. If you miss 4 classes, you will receive 2 points. If you miss 5 classes, you will receive 1 point. If you miss more than 5 classes, you will receive 0 points. The only absences that will not influence your grade are those for religious holidays that you email me about at least one week in advance. Please make sure to sign the attendance sheet that will be passed around in class. We will have several discussion sections, as noted in the syllabus, and the TFs will also take attendance there. Signing in for someone else is a violation of University policies on academic integrity that I take very seriously.

- **Reading** is required. All course readings must be done for the Tuesday of each week unless otherwise noted in the syllabus. To facilitate your reading and class discussions, I will regularly (about once every other week) pose a broad discussion question at the end of class. I will ask you to come to the next class meeting with response to the question (no longer than one page single spaced) which shows me that you have done the reading and are thinking about the question. The Teaching Fellows and I will collect and read your response papers. You will receive 2 points for each response paper you complete. Response papers cannot be made up if you are not in class unless your absence is excused. At the end of the semester, your response papers will count for 12 points towards your final grade.

- **Class Participation** is central to this class, and I ask that you participate fully in class, section, and the small group discussions we will sometimes have as a part of class. If you are not comfortable speaking in class, please participate by meeting with me during office hours, sending related articles to the class email list, etc. You are allowed to have computers and cell phones in class only if you are using them to take notes or look at readings. I will reduce your participation grade when I see you reading Facebook, surfing the web, sending text messages, etc. If you are expecting an urgent call, please let me know at the beginning of class and step out to take it. Class participation will count as six points toward your final grade. Feel free to check with me about your participation grade at any point in the semester.

- **Written Assignments**: You will write two papers (5-7 double space pages each) in response to detailed assignments I distribute on the dates noted on the syllabus.
  - This first paper asks you to tell the story of your birth based on information you gather from your parents and/or other family members and based on what you have learned through class readings. You will want to think about this practically (where you were born, what kind of education – if any – your parents had, etc.) as well as in terms of the meaning of birth, of children, etc.
your family, your religious tradition, etc. You should situate your own experience in the historical, demographic and cultural contexts we will be discussing in class by referencing at least two class readings in your paper. A detailed paper assignment will be distributed on January 20 and due on February 17.

• The second paper asks you to interview a friend, family members, or religious / medical professional about his / her experience of death and to write about that person’s experiences in the context of at least two class readings. Are his or her experiences similar to those described by different authors or different? What factors might explain any differences? A detailed paper assignment will be distributed on March 13 and due on April 20. We will practice having conversations about death in class before you begin this assignment.

Each paper is worth 25 points. You will lose one full letter grade (2 points) for each 24 hours after the due date the assignment is turned in (i.e. if you would have received a 22 but your paper is turned in within the first 24 hours after it is due, you will receive a 20, etc.). I expect you to properly cite and reference any articles you refer to when completing your paper. I will talk in detail about this when the first paper assignment is distributed. If you have any questions at any point, please do not hesitate to ask. You are encouraged to visit the Writing Center for additional support and guidance.

(http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/writing/writingcenter/index.html)

• Final Exam. You will have a take-home final exam. The exam will be designed to assess what you have learned in discussions and course readings and to see how well you can apply what you have learned to new questions and problems. You may use your lecture notes and course materials when completing the exam. *At least one part of the final exam will ask you to reflect on issues discussed by some of the visiting class speakers. I encourage you to listen to them carefully and take notes when they visit.* The final exam will be distributed on April 24 and due on May 9. Your completed exam can be no more than ten double spaced pages. The final exam will be worth 25 points.

• Final Grades will be based on class attendance (5 points), response papers (12 points), class participation (6 points), paper 1 (25 points), paper 2 (25 points), and the final exam (25 points).

Students interested in extra credit can write up to 2 reviews of movies or books that have some aspect of birth or death as a central theme. These reviews should each be 2-3 pages doubled spaced 12 point Times New Roman. Each review should summarize and analyze the book or movie making clear how two different course authors might evaluate it. You will receive up to 2 points for each review you write provided you engage with course authors in it. These can be turned in no later than the last day of class. Please submit a paper copy to me and send an electronic copy to the class email list so we can all learn together.

Book Suggestions:
Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom
Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life, Ira Byock
In Lieu of Flowers by Nancy Cobb
The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion
Heaven's Coast by Mark Doty
A Grief Observed by C.S.Lewis
An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination by Elizabeth McCracken
The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch and Jeffrey Zaslow
One True Thing by Anna Quindlan
Hospital by Julie Salamon
Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery by Richard Selzer
Good Night, My Son by Esther Smucker

Film Suggestions:
Away From Her
Babies
The Big C
Big Mama
Juno
Life as a House
Never Let me Go
Ordinary People
Six Feet Under
The Sweet Hereafter
Terms of Endearment
The Waitress
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**All written work must be completed to receive a passing grade in this class**

- **University Policy on Academic Accommodations**: If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please 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 Undergraduate Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu). Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

- **University Policy on 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/sdc/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, failing grades being issued, educational programs, and other consequences

Course Outline

I. Introductions

January 17. Starting the Conversation

II. Coming In: The Sociology of Birth

January 20. The Experience of Pregnancy


Optional Reading:

Paper Assignment 1 Distributed

January 24, 27. Prenatal Healthcare and Testing

Tuesday:

Friday:
Rapp, Rayna. 2000. Testing Women, Testing the Fetus. Routledge (Please read at least ONE of the following four chapters - c. 1 How Methodology Bleeds into Daily Life, c. 5 Waiting and Watching, c. 6 The Disabled Fetal Imaginary, c. 11 Endings are Really Beginnings)

January 31, February 3. Childbirth
Tuesday:

Friday:

Guest Speaker for first half of class: Hope Rex, Nurse on Labor and Delivery floor (for 31 years) at Brigham and Women’s Hospital

February 7, 10. Choices in Childbirth

Tuesday:
We will watch The Business of Being Born: http://www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com/

Friday:
Discussion Section

February 14, 17. Breastfeeding

Tuesday:

Friday:
Guest speaker: Susan Davies, IBCLC, Lactation Consultation Collaborative

**Paper 1 Due**

**February 21, 24. No class**

**February 28, March 2. Assisted Reproduction and Adoption**

Tuesday:

AND


OR


Friday:

We will probably spend part of this class in discussion sections.

**III. Going Out: the Sociology of Death**

**March 6, 9. How People Die**

Tuesday:

Nuland, Sherwin. 1994 *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*. New York: Knopf (Please read the Introduction, c. 12 The Lessons Learned and one of the following three chapters c. 1 The Strangled Heart, c. 3 Three Score and Ten, c. 10 The Malevolence of Cancer, c.1-3, c. 10-12)

**Paper Assignment 2 Distributed**

Friday:
Please read TWO of the following:
Kaufman, Sharon. 2005. ...And a Time to Die: How Hospitals Shape the End of Life. New York: Scribner. (c. 1 Death and Hospital Culture)

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Guest speaker Angelika Zollfrank, MDiv, BCC, Staff Chaplain and Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor, Massachusetts General Hospital.

March 13, 16. Prognostication and a “Good” Death

Tuesday:
Christakis, Nicholas A. 1999. Death Foretold: Prophecy and Prognosis in Medical Care. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Preface and TWO of the following chapters c.1 Prognosis in Medicine, c. 2 Making Use of Prognosis, c. 3 Error and Accountability in Prognostication, c. 8 Duty to Prognosticate)

Friday:
OR

March 20, 23. Hospice

Tuesday:

Friday: Guest Speaker from an area hospice. Details TBA.

March 27, 30. Advanced Planning

Tuesday:

Guest speaker: Katherine Mitchell, Staff Chaplain, Brigham and Women’s Hospital

Friday: No class
April 3: Ethical Dilemmas at the End of Life

Decision-Making:

Medical Futility:

We will probably spend part of this class in discussion sections.

April 6: No Class

April 10, 13: No Class

April 17, 20: Grief

Tuesday:

In class we will watch the film Griefwalker: http://films.nfb.ca/griefwalker/

Friday:
        Guest Speaker: Kathleen Gallivan, SNDdeN, PhD., Director of the Chaplaincy Department, Brigham and Women’s Hospital

*Paper 2 Due*

April 24, 27: Funerals and Rituals Around Death

One day this week we will meet in class. The other we will visit a funeral home in the area. Details TBD. The final exam will be distributed on Tuesday.

Reading
Do It Yourself Funerals: http://www.npr.org/programs/death/971208.death.html

*IV. Wrapping Up*
May 1: Concluding

We will wrap up and de-brief today.

*Final Exam Due May 9 by noon under my office door in Pearlman Hall*