

**SOCI 3237 Medical Sociology**  
**1<sup>st</sup> term, 2024-2025**  
**Wednesdays 2:30 – 4:15**  
**CKB UG04**

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**Summary:**

During the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has made us especially aware of the importance of health and medicine in our lives. We all want good health, effective treatments of illness and affordable health care. Yet present-day health care is the flashpoint of many controversies: about the conflicts between patients and doctors; about the safety of medical treatments and reliability of medical knowledge; about inequality in health and longevity; and about the ever-increasing health care spending. This course dissects these issues from a sociological perspective. We ask questions such as: What counts as illness? How do people understand illness? Who gets ill and why? How does social connectedness influence health? How does our social environment interact with our genes to influence our health? Why do doctors and patients have trouble communicating? How should health care systems be organized? This course will also examine some of these issues in the contexts of Chinese societies, such as China and Hong Kong and seek to offer comparative perspectives.

過去几年，COVID-19 使我們特別意識到健康和醫學在我們生活中的重要性。每個人都需要好的身體和有效的醫療方法。然而在當今社會，醫療與健康卻是問題熱點。醫患糾紛，醫療事故，健康與醫療資源的不平等，昂貴與日漸增長的醫療費用是人們不斷討論的話題。同時人們也質詢醫療方法是否有效，醫學知識是否可靠，為什麼不同人群的健康狀況有著巨大的差異。本科著重從社會學的視角分析這些問題。我們將會探討：什麼是疾病？人們如何理解疾病？為什麼有的人更容易患病？人與人之間的連接是如何影響健康？社會環境是如何影響基因從而影響健康？為什麼醫患交流困難？醫療系統應該如何組織？課程亦會以華人社會，如香港及中國內地，為背景探討這些方面的議題，並與西方社會進行比較。

**Learning Objectives:**

1. To learn to critically assess biomedicine from sociological perspectives
2. To understand how social factors influence health and shape health inequalities
3. To gain insight into the constituent components of the healthcare system and the social and political factors related to the quality, cost and accessibility of healthcare.
4. To learn to critically compare medicine to other social systems.
5. To gain understanding of sociological theories from empirical examples in health and medicine.
6. To learn to draw links between their daily experience and observation, and conceptual issues.

**Note:** NOT recommended for students who have taken SOCI 4352

**Course requirements:**

- 1) **In-class quizzes (10%):** During some class sessions, you will be asked to answer one question. All of these in-class questions will account for 10% of the total grade.
- 2) **Sick role memoir (15%):** Describe a time when you or someone close to you experienced an illness and will be due on Nov. 20. I will hand out detailed guidelines for the memoir well before it is due.
- 3) **Tutorials and research project (25%):** You are expected to develop a project on a topic related to health, health care and the society during the tutorials. You can choose from a list of topics; you may also come up with your own topic but you need to talk with me to get my approval. The end product of the project is a presentation of your research project. Group projects are strongly encouraged. More details about the tutorials and research project is attached in the end of the syllabus. The grading is based on tutorial participation (5%), short progress report (5%) and presentation (15%).
- 4) **Final quiz (50%):** The final quiz will consist of short-answer and essay questions. It will be based on topics and concepts covered in the class and in required readings. I will hand out an outline of the topics and concepts before the exam. The final quiz will be open-book.

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
A	Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
A-	Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
B	Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.
C	Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
D	Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.
F	Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirement.

**Readings:**

Required text:

Cockerham, William C. 2022. *Medical Sociology*. Fifteenth edition. New York: Routledge (MS). Online access is available through the University Library ([https://web-p-ebshost-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=7c37fb0a-0dd8-4ac1-8b11-6162ad3206aa%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=3004138&db=nl\\_ebk](https://web-p-ebshost-com.easyaccess2.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=7c37fb0a-0dd8-4ac1-8b11-6162ad3206aa%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=3004138&db=nl_ebk)).

All other books required for this course are on reserve at the University Library. Journal papers can be downloaded from the databases for electronic journals through the University Library. Some reading materials may be distributed in class.

**Blackboard**

We will maintain a course website on Blackboard. Course syllabus and class PPTs are available on the website. Periodically announcements are made on the website. You should check it on a regular basis.

## **Academic Honesty**

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/> .

Students are required to submit the two short papers to the university's plagiarism detection system (Veriguide) before submitting the papers to me. Students should attach the signed "Academic Honesty Declaration Statement" with their papers.

## **Course schedule and readings (subject to minor changes throughout the term):**

Week 1: Overview of the course; Introduction to medical sociology; why did population health improved so much in the past 150 years? (Sept. 4)

MS Chapter 1: Medical Sociology

MS Chapter 2: Epidemiology

Week 2: Why did population health improved so much in the past 150 years? (Sept. 11)

McKinlay, John and Sonja M. McKinlay. 2019. "Medical Measures and the Decline of Mortality." Pp. 10-23 in *The Sociology of Health and Illness: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Peter Conrad and Valerie Leiter. Sage Publications. [on reserve in UL]

Cutler, David. Pp 1-9 and pp 47-60 in *Your Money or Your Life*, Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2004. [Online access available]

## **Part 1: Social determinants of health**

Week 3: Socioeconomic status and health over the life course (Sept. 25)

MS Chapter 3: The Social Demography of Health: Social Class

Link, Bruce G., and Jo Phelan. "Social Conditions as Fundamental Causes of Disease." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 35 (1995): 80–94.

Recommended readings:

Willson, Andrea E., Kim M. Shuey, and Jr. Elder Glen H. "Cumulative Advantage Processes as Mechanisms of Inequality in Life Course Health." *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 6 (May 1, 2007): 1886–1924.

Chung, Roger Yat-Nork, Gary Ka-Ki Chung, Michael Marmot, Jessica Allen, Dicken Chan, Peter Goldblatt, Hung Wong, et al. "COVID-19 Related Health Inequality Exists Even in a City Where Disease Incidence Is Relatively Low: A Telephone Survey in Hong Kong." *J Epidemiology and Community Health* 75, no. 7 (July 1, 2021): 616–23. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-215392>.

Week 4: Relative social status and health (Oct. 2)

Thoits, Peggy A. "Stress and Health: Major Findings and Policy Implications." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51, no. 1\_suppl (March 1, 2010): S41–53.

Marmot, Michael. "Relatively Speaking." In *Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity*, 82–104. New York: Times Books, 2004. [on reserve in UL]

Recommended readings:

Link, Bruce G., Richard M. Carpiano, and Margaret M. Weden. "Can Honorific Awards Give Us Clues about the Connection between Socioeconomic Status and Mortality?" *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 192–212. doi:10.1177/0003122413477419.

Week 5: Contextual social inequality and health (Oct. 9)

Wilkinson, Richard, and Kate Pickett. 2009. "Physical health and life expectancy." & "How inequality gets under the skin." in *The spirit level : why more equal societies almost always do better*. London; New York Allen Lane.[on reserve in UL]

Recommended readings:

Wong, Irene O. L., Benjamin J. Cowling, Su-Vui Lo, and Gabriel M. Leung. 2009. "A multilevel analysis of the effects of neighbourhood income inequality on individual self-rated health in Hong Kong." *Social Science & Medicine* 68:124-132.

Week 6: Social networks and health (Oct. 16)

Umberson, Debra, and Jennifer Karas Montez. 2010. "Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51:S54-S66.

Recommended readings:

Durkheim, Emile. 1951. "Anomic Suicide." Pp. 241-76 in *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*: The Free Press. [Online access available]

Christakis, Nicholas A., and James H. Fowler. "The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years." *New England Journal of Medicine* 357, no. 4 (2007): 370–79.

Week 7: Social capital, neighborhood and health (Oct. 23)

Klinenberg, Eric. 2002. "Race, Place and Vulnerability: Urban Neighborhood and the Ecology of Support." Pp. 79-128 in *Heat Wave: a Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Recommended readings:

Coleman, James S. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (January 1, 1988): S95–120. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228943>.

Browning, Christopher R., Danielle Wallace, Seth L. Feinberg, and Kathleen A. Cagney. "Neighborhood Social Processes, Physical Conditions, and Disaster-Related Mortality: The Case of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave." *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 4 (August 1, 2006): 661–78.

Borgonovi, Francesca, and Elodie Andrieu. "Bowling Together by Bowling Alone: Social Capital and COVID-19." *Social Science & Medicine* 265 (November 1, 2020): 113501. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113501>.

Week 8: Network interventions (Oct. 30)

Valente TW. Network Interventions. *Science* 2012; 337: 49–53.

Centola D. The Spread of Behavior in an Online Social Network Experiment. *Science* 2010; 329: 1194–1197.

Recommended readings:

Christakis NA and Fowler JH. Social Network Sensors for Early Detection of Contagious Outbreaks. *PLoS One* 2010; 5: e12948.

Kim DA, Hwong AR, Stafford D, Hughes DA, O'Malley AJ, Fowler JH, and Christakis NA, "Social Network Targeting to Maximise Population Behaviour Change: A Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial," *The Lancet* 2015; 386: 145-153.

Zhang, Jingwen, Devon Brackbill, Sijia Yang, Joshua Becker, Natalie Herbert, and Damon Centola. "Support or Competition? How Online Social Networks Increase Physical Activity: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Preventive Medicine Reports* 4 (December 2016): 453–58.

## **Part 2: The Social Organization of Health and Health Care**

Week 9: The social construction of illness (Nov. 7)

Conrad, Peter. 1992. "Medicalization and Social Control." *Annual Review of Sociology* 18:209-232.

Recommended readings:

Martin, Emily. *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987: pp27-67 [Online access available]

Conrad, Peter. "The Shifting Engines of Medicalization." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 46, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 3–14.

Week 10: Patient-doctor relationship (Nov. 13)

MS Chapter 9: Doctor-Patient Interaction

Recommended readings:

Mishler, Elliot George. 2019. "Reading 28: The Struggle between the Voice of Medicine and the Voice of the Lifeworld." In *The Sociology of Health and Illness: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Peter Conrad and Valerie Leiter. Sage Publications. [on reserve UL]

Lutfey, Karen, and Jeremy Freese. 2005. "Toward Some Fundamentals of Fundamental Causality: Socioeconomic Status and Health in the Routine Clinic Visit for Diabetes." *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (5): 1326–72

Week 11: Health care systems (Nov. 20)

Parsons, Talcott. "Social Structure and Dynamic Process: The Case of Modern Medical Practice." In *The Social System*, 428-479. Psychology Press, 1991. [Online access available]

MS Chapter 16: Global Health Care

Blumenthal, David, and William Hsiao. "Lessons from the East — China's Rapidly Evolving Health Care System." *New England Journal of Medicine* 372, no. 14 (April 2, 2015): 1281–85.

**Final Quiz** (2:30-4:30pm, Nov. 27)

## Research Project

### I. Topics

The following is a list of topics for the research project.

1. Select a country/region and investigate the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the epidemiology, the policy responses and social inequalities in the experience and consequences of the pandemic.
2. Select a country/region and investigate its health care system: how does the country/region deal with the task of providing health care to its residents?
3. Investigate the social determinants of health and the social inequality in health in Hong Kong.
4. Select a country and investigate the epidemiology, and the cultural dimension of health, disease and healing in that country.
5. Select a disease or disabling condition and examine the epidemiology, the inequality in the disease, the experience of illness and how the health care system deals with the disease.
6. Select a health behavior, e.g. smoking or physical activities, and investigate the prevalence and health consequences of the behavior, changes in the health behavior, and social determinates of and social disparities in the behavior in a specific country/region.

Whichever topic you choose, the TA will disseminate detailed instruction on the project. You may come up with your own topic but you need to get my approval.

### II. Data Sources

1. Online databases or prominent journals in social science research in health and medicine including but not limited to Social Science & Medicine, Sociology of Health and Illness, Journal of Health and Social Behavior, Health Services Research;
2. News reports;
3. Official governmental documentation.

Whatever your sources are, you need to clearly specify how you obtain the information.

### III. Presentation (see tutorial guidelines)

### **Tutorial Guidelines**

There are five tutorials to help you develop the research project. Group projects are encouraged; two to three students will form a group.

The tutorials will be conducted in English.

Students are encouraged to email the TA with questions regarding the research projects and presentations, as well as the class.

#### **Tutorial 1: Orientation**

Tutorial introduction: introduce the objectives and guidelines of the tutorials.

Group formation: help students to form groups.

Presentation date confirmation: use lucky draw to help decide the presentation date.

#### **Tutorials 2 – 3: Discussion of research design in group/individual meetings with the TA**

Students will finish the preliminary design of their group project and meet with the TA to discuss the research design. Students are required to submit a short progress report (1 page) at least two days prior to the meeting. The report should include the following:

What is the research topic?

What is the significance of the topic?

How to conduct the research? (Research method)

How to structure the presentation?

The meeting will last around 15 minutes and the TA will schedule the meetings prior to the tutorials.

#### **Tutorials 4 – 5: Presentations**

Each group should prepare a handout of the presentation and email to the tutor at least two days before their presentation date. The presentation should be limited to 15 minute and cover the following: the motivation, the objectives, existing literature and theories, the significance, the data collection process and the findings.