SOCIOLOGY 6023
SOCIOLOGY OF MENTAL HEALTH:
MENTAL HEALTH AS A SOCIAL MIRROR

Blair Wheaton
University of Toronto
Fall, 2023

Room: 17146
Day: Monday 2-4
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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OVERVIEW

While sociologists share with psychologists, epidemiologists, and psychiatrists an interest in mental health via the diagnostic concept of disorder, sociologists also typically pair this interest with a focus on the broader implications of mental health as a “social mirror” (Avison, McLeod, and Pescosolido, 2007) --- an efficient marker which “reflects” the emotional and functioning consequences of experience in varying social environments, social conditions, as well as the social contexts and individual histories in individual’s lives. In this role, mental health is aggregated shorthand, a reference point, for the meanings that flow from the summed impact of past and current experience.

The phrase “mental health is everyone’s ultimate dependent variable” (Wheaton, 2001) captures this role. This statement is designed to point to the prevalence of implicit concern for the subjective well-being of individuals buried in the manifest research questions that constitute fundamental sociological issues across the entire landscape of the discipline. If you have not had a course in the sociology of mental health before, we start from the position that mental health is endemic in a broad range of theorizing and research in sociology.

In this course we will examine mental health as a social mirror. The course is organized around general and specific special topic stages. In the early stages, we examine the state of the canon in the sociology of mental health pertaining to its role as a reflection of social inequalities. We begin by considering the difficult and sometimes controversial issue of designating mental health differences in categories (disorder) vs a continuum (distress), and the role sociology has played in this debate. We continue by considering a range of inequalities and the nexus of those inequalities, starting with the foundational role of social class, and moving on to gender, race, immigration, marital status, work, and age and the life course. Putting together those inequalities is a major issue. We will then consider the most general framework for understanding these inequalities – the stress process. I
will present ongoing research testing a generalized stress process model using longitudinal data in Canada.

The specific stages involve three special topics: 1) the internationalization of mental research, beyond North America, including an assessment of the generality vs specificity of “Western” explanations of mental health differences, 2) The effects of social contexts on mental health, starting with neighbourhoods and ending with macro historical events – this year: 9/11, natural disasters, and COVID; and 3) A discussion of whether and how specific forms of social change affect the mental health of populations.

**CORE TOPICS AND READINGS**

This section details the week by week content of the course and readings we will choose from for consideration in class.

**Important:** each week, we select readings from the list – we do not consider all readings. Usually, we consider two per presenting student, or three if short articles; in some weeks, there may be two students presenting and thus more articles will be chosen.

*Suggested “must discuss” readings are highlighted in purple.*

**WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF THE AREA**


**WEEK 2: DEFINING AND MEASURING MENTAL HEALTH**


**WEEK 3: SOCIAL PATTERNS AND THE FOUNDATIONAL ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS.**


**WEEK 4: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT RACE, GENDER, AND IMMIGRATION?**

2-4 readings selected from:


- Shirin Montazer and Blair Wheaton. 2017. “Economic Conditions in Countries of Origin and Trajectories in Distress after Migration to Canada: Results from the National Population Health Survey.” *Society and Mental Health* 7, #1: 1-20

**WEEK 5: INEQUALITIES II: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT AGE AND THE LIFE COURSE?**

2-4 readings selected from:


**WEEK 6: INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES? – MARRIAGE AND WORK**


**WEEK 7: EXPLAINING INEQUALITIES: INTRO TO THE STRESS PROCESS**
WEEK 8: GENERALIZATIONS OF THE STRESS PROCESS.

2-4 readings selected from:


WEEK 9: SPECIAL TOPICS I: INTERNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

2-4 readings selected from:


WEEK 10: SPECIAL TOPICS II: SOCIAL CONTEXTS I: NEIGHBORHOODS, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES

2-4 readings selected from:


WEEK 11: SPECIAL TOPICS III: SOCIAL CONTEXTS II: MACRO/HISTORICAL

2-4 readings selected from:


WEEK 12: SPECIAL TOPICS IV: SOCIAL CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

This class will be a discussion of two topics: the noise in research findings and how beliefs and theories “of the moment” affect our beliefs and thus our choices of credible evidence, using sociology of mental health examples, and a broad discussion of how social change affects population mental health.

Blair Wheaton. 2001. “The Role of Sociology in the Study of Mental Health...and the Role of Mental Health in the Study of Sociology.” Journal of Health and Social Behavior 42 (September). 221-234.


Timothy Fraser, Daniel P Aldrich, Costas Panagopoulos, David Hummel, Daniel Kim, The harmful effects of partisan polarization on health, PNAS Nexus, Volume 1, Issue 1, March 2022, pgac011, https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgac011

**Make-up Day:** This is a Monday class. It will be necessary to add a make-up day on Thursday December 7th to complete 12 weeks in class.

**Class Structure.** In this seminar, we typically begin with student presentations on assigned papers. Students who posted comments on these papers will be expected to raise their questions as part of the presentation. In the latter weeks of the course, students will give short (10-15 minutes) overviews of their paper topics. I will reserve the last 15 to 20 minutes for commentary and a zoomed-out view of each topic.

Note that I present in weeks 1 through 3, week 6, and in week 12.

**REQUIRED WORK**

There are now three pieces of work to be completed in this class: 1) one in-class presentation on 2-3 assigned readings for a chosen week; 2) two posted comments on readings at any time during the semester; and 3) a final paper – one of the following: an original research paper, a “theory” paper speaking to materials in the course, or a extended critical analysis paper of an entire topic in the course, on a topic you **did not present on during the course**. See below for specifics about each type of paper.

Those who sign up early for presentations will have the most choice, and we will limit presentations to two per day at most. Specific readings will be chosen from week to week. Initially, choose a topic to cover so that we can schedule presentations.

**COMMENTS**

All students will post **two** comments on the course website offering questions, critiques, or analysis of readings discussed week to week. Each posted comment will focus on an essential issue in one of the readings, or across readings. There will be some scheduling of these comments so that there are some posted comments to be addressed in each week of the class – but no more than two per week. Each posted comment will be one to two paragraphs at most, and intended for discussion during the class. Comments must be posted by Sunday at 6pm for the Monday class that will discuss that reading. This gives presenters a chance to be aware of class comments before their presentation. incorporate comments into their presentation.

Comments can raise critical questions, argue for the importance of the reading and its contribution, suggest what is missing and should be considered, connect the reading to other readings, or propose research which follows up the reading and resolves questions in the reading or tests the generality of findings in the reading. These comments should mention the parts of the paper that led to the comment you make.

**PRESENTATIONS**

In-class presentations should focus on **essential** issues in the paper or chapter, and attempt to give a balanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses. I encourage students to take a critical perspective, but the mandate does not end there. I also encourage students to imagine promoting an idea, a theory, a different research design, or a new research question that follows from your analysis of the reading. It is helpful to think of this as an “Annual Review” exercise that argues for the role of the contributions of the reading, including its original ideas, what it clarifies, and the importance of what it proposes or concludes, but also balance this with a critical appraisal of the
ambiguities, gaps, "fit" of the various section of the reading to each other, if relevant, and any weaknesses in the evidence presented.

**PAPER**

Students will have the option of choosing from three different types of papers as a final paper. Papers should be between 8,000 and 10,000 words in total, including references.

**Option 1** is a research-based paper, written with an eye to the requirements of submission either to a conference, or to a peer-reviewed journal, or as a draft of a dissertation paper, or as a preliminary version of a paper to be followed up in the Research Practicum. This paper should analyze data you already have access to at the beginning of the course. Data can be qualitative, or quantitative, and can include content analyses, online data, or archival data. In this paper you argue for a unique role for the ideas / hypotheses proposed in the paper and test them using your data. It is expected you follow a standard structure in writing this paper.

**Option 2** is a “theoretical” paper on one of the following topics:

- An analysis of the problem of generalizing work on mental health in North America either comparatively, or cross-culturally, with some discussion of differences in mental health concepts.
- An application of course theories, concepts, and models to research in other areas of sociology, with a discussion of implications for the chosen literature(s).
- The importation of theoretical frameworks in other areas of sociology to the sociology of mental health, with discussion of implications for research in the sociology of mental health.

**Option 3** is an extended critical review of an entire topic in the course – thus focusing on all of the readings from one of the weeks, plus additional relevant readings you find that may support your analysis. I need to emphasize one essential feature of this option: a critical analysis does **not** mean to me a simply critical stance. This paper should focus on the balance of strengths, contributions, and weaknesses of that topic as represented by the literature, leading in the final section to a broad research proposal that will help clarify, resolve, extend, or modify major questions in that area.

**WEIGHTS FOR SCENARIO I**

The table below states the weights assigned for each piece of work in this course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Work</th>
<th>Number / Weight</th>
<th>Total Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-class presentation</td>
<td>1 x 30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments online</td>
<td>2 x 15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paper, <strong>due December 18th.</strong></td>
<td>1 x 40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GRADING DETAILS**

I use the following guidelines for translating letter grades into numeric equivalents. This is important because you can only derive an overall numeric grade by using this translation. In general, I use a midpoint equivalent at each letter grade level.
I also add “borderline” grades, reflecting what I feel is appropriate for work clearly on the border between two grade levels. This helps create finer distinctions in final grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Numerical Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A / A+</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A- / A</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+ / A-</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B / B+</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B- / B</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FZ**</td>
<td>0 - 69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CLASS SCHEDULE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Presentations</th>
<th>Who?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sept. 11</td>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sept. 18</td>
<td>Defining and Measuring Mental Health</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sept. 25</td>
<td>Social Patterns and Social Class</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>October 2</td>
<td>Race, Gender, Immigration</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October 9</td>
<td><strong>No class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>October 16</td>
<td>Age and the Life Course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>October 23</td>
<td>Institutional Resources?: Marriage and Work</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>October 30</td>
<td>Explaining Inequalities: Intro to the Stress Process</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov. 6</td>
<td><strong>No class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nov. 13</td>
<td>Generalizations of the Stress Process</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nov. 20</td>
<td>Special Topics I: International and Comparative Studies</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nov. 27</td>
<td>Special Topics Ii: Social Contexts I: Neighborhoods, Schools, Communities.</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following parts of the syllabus are a required template, but also express important principles, procedures, and values.

**PENALTY FOR LATENESS CLAUSE**

For both undergraduate and graduate courses, instructors are not obliged to accept late work, except where there are legitimate, documented reasons beyond a student's control. In such cases, a late penalty is normally not appropriate.

*In this course, the required work schedule is determined by choices of week in the initial class. Comments can be posted in any week from weeks 2 through 12. The paper is due December 18th. Please note: a late paper must be accompanied by a medically certified explanation. In these cases, and only in these cases, papers may be accepted up to three weeks after the end of class. Late papers without a medical explanation will receive a 10% discount in the grade – not in the weight.*

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY CLAUSE**

Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean's office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties. Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips on how to use sources well: [http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize).

According to Section B.I.1.(e) of the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters it is an offence “to submit, without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere.”

By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university's rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/The-rules/code/the-code-of-behaviour-on-academic-matters) and Code of Student Conduct (http://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/publicationsandpolicies/codeofstudentconduct.htm) which spell out your rights, your duties and provide all the details on grading regulations and academic offences at the University of Toronto.

**ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES**

It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons. Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council "Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities" at
In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you.

Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at [http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as](http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as), call at 416-978-8060, or email at accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, [http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc](http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc), or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

**EQUITY AND DIVERSITY**

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated.

Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at [http://equity.hrandediversity.utoronto.ca](http://equity.hrandediversity.utoronto.ca).