

**SOCI 255: Medical Sociology
Syllabus for Fall 2023**

Professor Catherine Tan
(She/Her/Hers)

Class meeting:
Location - Blodgett Hall TBD
Tuesdays and Thursdays at 1:30pm to 2:45pm

Email: ctan@vassar.edu
Office Phone: (845) 437-5509
(Do not call me. I never pick up.)

Office Hours
Blodgett Hall #304D
Tuesdays and Thursdays between 3:00pm-4:00pm

Course Description

How does something become “medical”? What does it mean to be ill? How does illness impact a person’s relationships and sense of self? How might a diagnosis stigmatize or validate experiences of illness? The significance of being ill (or of possessing a diagnosis) extends beyond the medical model of health—beyond clinical understandings of causation, treatment, and prevention. Disorders and diseases are socially and culturally dynamic. This course investigates the broader social context in which issues of health and illness are embedded. First, we will examine how the profession of medicine gained (and maintains) authority and legitimacy. Next, we will investigate medicalization, the way something previously non-medical is “made medical” and subsumed under medical jurisdiction. We will consider the social processes that facilitate the emergence of disorders and their characterization. Turning to experiences of illness, we will explore the social meaning of disease and illness to investigate how different conditions are embodied, perceived, and managed. Not limited to physical suffering, experiences of illness impact self-concept, social relationships, and resources. We will critically analyze how health disparities and social inequities are reproduced through these different processes.

Pandemic Policies

The COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple uncertainties, which demands flexibility and patience from faculty, students, and staff. By unanimous agreement of the Sociology Department, instructors may require students wear masks in classrooms, or may shift their course to either a hybrid or fully remote format, as conditions related to the pandemic, the college, and our learning change. At any time, if you ever have any safety concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me!

Course Structure and Assignments

Required Books

If for any reason you are not able to access these books, please contact me.

Conrad, Peter. 2007. *The Medicalization of Society*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press. (Ebook available online through Vassar Library)

Jenkins, Tania M. 2020. *Doctors' Orders: The Making of Status Hierarchies in an Elite Profession*. Columbia University Press.

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*. University of Minnesota Press. (Ebook available online through Vassar Library)

Shuster, Stef M. 2021. *Trans Medicine: The Emergence and Practice of Treating Gender*: New York University Press.

Underman, Kelly. 2020. *Feeling Medicine: How the Pelvic Exam Shapes Medical Training*, Vol. 21: NYU Press.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. 2019. *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy*: Univ of California Press.

Office Hours

“Office hours” are times reserved outside of our usual class meetings for students to say hello, have tea, and discuss and/or ask questions about the course materials and concepts with me 1:1. While you are not required to attend office hours, I *strongly encourage* students to see me *at least twice* during the semester even if you do not have a specific question (I will start the conversation. It will not be awkward, I promise). If you are unable to attend scheduled office hours, please email me to set up individual appointments.

Assignments and Points

Class Participation*	25
Memo One	25
Memo Two	25
Memo Three	25
Memo Four	25
Total	125

*Class participation includes engaging in discussions, asking questions, and attending classes.

Memos and reflection

Instead of a midterm and final, I will have four memos and one reflection due throughout the semester. Each memo will be 1.5 to 2.5 pages (roughly, 975 to 1625 words) following formatting expectations (see below). Memos will ask students to engage with the themes/concepts of the previous weeks, discuss the readings, offer their analysis, and demonstrate their understanding of the materials. Because memos are short, students are expected to write efficiently AND effectively—these are important skills to learn and practice. The reflection is an informal, single page (following memo formatting) open response/reaction to the readings.

Formatting

Please give yourself enough time to make sure that your assignments are in compliance with the formatting expectations before turning in your work. When in doubt, use THIS syllabus as a model. If you have trouble making this format changes on your word processing program, please consult with the college tech services.

- Font: Times New Roman
- Size: 11
- Margins: 1-inch all around
- Left alignment
- Single-spaced

- Consistent in-text references and bibliography (I prefer ASA or Harvard citation styles)

Classroom Etiquette

Engagement

Maintaining an academic, respectful, and honest classroom environment is a collective effort. I am relying on you to please:

- Be respectful of others' ideas and arguments. This means providing space for fruitful debate.
- Allow speakers to complete their comments/questions before sharing your own thoughts. You do not have to raise your hand to speak, but please do not interrupt each other.
- Arrive to class on time.
- Complete and submit your assignments on the days they are due.
- You are allowed to use your laptop/tablets for taking notes.
- Improper use of laptops and cellphones will impact your participation grade.

Email Policy

You may email me any time/day, but please do not expect an immediate response. I try to respond to emails within 24 hours. If you do not hear from me within 24 hours, please follow up. I only reply to emails Monday-Friday (so, I might not respond to emails received on Friday until the next Monday). In your email subject line, include the name of the course (i.e., SOCI 255). In the body of your email, please use a proper address (e.g., Dear Prof. Tan) and signature.

College Resources & Policies

Title IX Reporting Responsibility and Resources

Vassar College is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students that is free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these incidents, know that you are not alone. Vassar College has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.

Please be aware all Vassar faculty members are “responsible employees,” which means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking, I must share that information with the Title IX Coordinator. Although I have to make that notification, you will control how your case will be handled, including whether or not you wish to pursue a formal complaint. Our goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and have access to the resources you need.

If you wish to speak to someone privately, you can contact any of the following on-campus resources:

- Counseling Service (counselingservice.vassar.edu, 845-437-5700)
- Health Service (healthservice.vassar.edu, 845-437-5800)
- Charlotte Strauss-Swanson, SAVP (Sexual Assault and Violence Prevention) director (savp.vassar.edu, 845-437-7863)
- SART (Sexual Assault Response Team) advocate, available 24/7 by calling the CRC at 845-437-7333

The SAVP website and the Title IX section of the EOAA website (eoaa.vassar.edu/title-ix/) have more information, as well as links to both on- and off-campus resources.”

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is a very serious matter (cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, etc.) and will be dealt with accordingly. Students should expect a failing grade for the assignment/exam. The incident will also be reported to the Department Chair and the Dean. For more information on academic honesty, please refer to this link: <https://deanofthecollege.vassar.edu/documents/college-regulations/j/>

Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are available for students registered with the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (AEO). Students in need of disability (ADA/504) accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter.

Textbook Accessibility and Affordability

Vassar students often report challenges accessing and affording required course materials. The College is committed to ensuring that every student can participate fully in the curriculum, regardless of financial need. The [Movement for Affordable Textbooks \(MAT\)](#) website highlights a variety of resources – financial, library, departmental, and peer-to-peer – that can help [students](#) navigate the costs of textbooks and other materials.

Course Schedule

This schedule indicates the themes and readings of each week and any assignments due. This schedule is tentative and may change to reflect our progress as a class.

Each week’s assigned readings must be completed *before* class. Please be prepared to discuss the assigned readings in class/online.

*NOTE: Readings may change (except for the books)

Week One Introduction to SOCI 255

Aug 29 & 31 *Tuesday*
Review syllabus

Introduction: Sociological approaches to illness and health (continued)

Thursday
Conrad, Peter and Kristin K. Barker. 2010. "The Social Construction of Illness: Key Insights and Policy Implications." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51(S): S67- S79.

Sontag, Susan. 1977. “Part One: Illness as Metaphor.” *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador.

Week Two The medical profession: Expertise, jurisdiction, and authority (continued)

Sept 5 & 7 *Tuesday*

Freidson, Eliot. 1988. *Profession of Medicine: A Study of the Sociology of Applied Knowledge*: University of Chicago Press. (Chapters 1 and 2)

Thursday

Freidson, Eliot. 1988. *Profession of Medicine: A Study of the Sociology of Applied Knowledge*: University of Chicago Press. (Chapter 3 and 4)

Week Three The medical profession: Expertise, jurisdiction, and authority (continued)

Sept 12 & 14

Tuesday

Timmermans, Stefan and Hyeyoung Oh. 2010. "The Continued Social Transformation of the Medical Profession." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51: S94-S106.

Thursday

Timmermans, Stefan. 2005. "Suicide Determination and the Professional Authority of Medical Examiners." *American Sociological Review* 70(2):311-33.

Sweet, Paige L. and Danielle Giffort. 2021. "The Bad Expert." *Social Studies of Science* 51(3):313-38.

[Professor Tan distributes Memo One prompt.]

Week Four The medical profession: Disruptions to physicians' expertise and authority

Sept 19 & 21

Tuesday

Shuster, Stef M. 2021. *Trans Medicine: The Emergence and Practice of Treating Gender*: New York University Press. (Intro and Chapters 1 & 2)

Thursday

Shuster, Stef M. 2021. *Trans Medicine: The Emergence and Practice of Treating Gender*: New York University Press. (Chapters 3-5, Conclusion)

Week Five Challenging medical authority/expertise

Sept 26 & 28

Tuesday

Dumit, Joseph. 2006. "Illnesses You Have to Fight to Get: Facts as Forces in Uncertain, Emergent Illnesses." *Social Science & Medicine* 62:577-90.

Zavestoski, Stephen, Phil Brown, Sabrina McCormick, Brian Mayer, Maryhelen D'Ottavi and Jaime C. Lucove. 2004. "Patient Activism and the Struggle for Diagnosis: Gulf War Illnesses and Other Medically Unexplained Physical Symptoms in the US." *Social Science & Medicine* 58:161-75.

Thursday

Fenton, Anny T. 2019. "Abandoning Medical Authority: When Medical Professionals Confront Stigmatized Adolescent Sex and the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccine." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 60(2):240-56.

Reich, Jennifer A. 2020. "Vaccine Refusal and Pharmaceutical Acquiescence: Parental Control and Ambivalence in Managing Children's Health." *American Sociological Review* 85(1):106-27.

DUE: Memo 1 due September 28th by 11:59pm
Covers content from Week One to Four

[Professor Tan distributes Memo Two prompt.]

Week Six **Challenging medical authority/expertise, continued**

Oct 3 & 5

Tuesday

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*: University of Minnesota Press. (Introduction, Chapters 1-3)

Thursday

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*: University of Minnesota Press. (Chapters 4-5, Conclusion)

Week Seven **Learning to doctor**

Oct 10 & 12

Tuesday

Jenkins, Tania M. 2020. *Doctors' Orders: The Making of Status Hierarchies in an Elite Profession*: Columbia University Press. (Intro, Chapters 1, 2)

Thursday

Jenkins, Tania M. 2020. *Doctors' Orders: The Making of Status Hierarchies in an Elite Profession*: Columbia University Press. (Chapters 3, 4, Conclusion)

DUE: Memo 2 due October 12 by 11:59pm
Covers content from Weeks 5 & 6 (and 4 if you want to include it as well)

[Professor Tan (1) returns Memo One, (2) passes out Memo Three, and (3) administers midsemester questionnaire]

Week -- **October Break!**

Oct 17 & 19

Extra

Goldberg, Emma. 2021. "'It's Tough to Get Out': How Caribbean Medical Schools Fail Their Students." *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/health/caribbean-medical-school.html>

Olsen, Lauren D. 2019. "The Conscripted Curriculum and the Reproduction of Racial Inequalities in Contemporary Us Medical Education." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 60(1):55-68.

Week Eight **Learning to doctor (continued)**

Oct 24 & 26

Tuesday

Underman, Kelly. 2020. *Feeling Medicine: How the Pelvic Exam Shapes Medical Training*: NYU Press. (TBD)

Thursday

Underman, Kelly. 2020. *Feeling Medicine: How the Pelvic Exam Shapes Medical Training*: NYU Press. (TBD)

[Professor Tan returns Memo Two]

Week Nine **“Racial outsourcing” in health care**

Oct 31 & Nov 2

Tuesday

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. 2019. *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy*: Univ of California Press. (Intro, Chapters 1-3)

Thursday

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. 2019. *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy*: Univ of California Press. (Chapters 4 and 5, Conclusion)

Week Ten

Medicalization

Wednesday night extra: Watch Sound and Fury (2000) documentary at 7pm

Nov 7 & 9

Tuesday

Zola, I.K. 1972. "Medicine as an Institution of Social Control." *Sociological Review* 20:487-504.

Conrad, Peter. 2007. *The Medicalization of Society*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press. (Chapter 1)

Thursday

Conrad, Peter. 2007. *The Medicalization of Society*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press. (Chapters 2-5, 7, and 8)

DUE: Memo 3 due Nov 2 by 11:59pm

Covers Weeks 7-9 (and the extras if you choose to include them)

Week Eleven

Medicalization, continued

Nov 14 & 16

Tuesday

Barker, K.K. 1998. "A Ship Upon a Stormy Sea: The Medicalization of Pregnancy." *Social Science & Medicine* 47(8):1067-76.

Waggoner, Miranda R. 2013. "Motherhood Preconceived: The Emergence of the Preconception Health and Health Care Initiative." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 38(2):345-71

Thursday

Johnson, Austin H. 2019. "Rejecting, Reframing, and Reintroducing: Trans People's Strategic Engagement with the Medicalisation of Gender Dysphoria." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 41(3):517-32.

Carpiano, Richard M. 2001. "Passive Medicalization: The Case of Viagra and Erectile Dysfunction." *Sociological Spectrum* 21(3):441-50.

Kempner, Joanna. 2006. "Gendering the Migraine Market: Do Representations of Illness Matter?" *Social Science & Medicine* 63(8):1986-97.

Week Twelve Diagnosis and cultural attitudes

**Nov 21 &
Thanksgiving**

Tuesday

FIELD TRIP TO LOEB

Jutel, Annemarie. 2011. *Putting a Name to It: Diagnosis in Contemporary Society*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press. (Introduction)

Saguy, Abigail C. and Kjerstin Gruys. 2010. "Morality and Health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders." *Social Problems* 57(2):231-50.

Kaufman, Eli J. and Catherine Tan. 2022. "White as Milk: Biocentric Bias in the Framing of Lactose Intolerance and Lactase Persistence." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 44(9):1533-50.

[Professor Tan returns graded Memo 3 and passes out Memo 4]

Week Thirteen Experience of illness

Nov 28 & 30

Tuesday

Bury, Michael. 1982. "Chronic Illness as Biographical Disruption." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 4(2):167-82.

Tan, Catherine. 2018. "'I'm a Normal Autistic Person, Not an Abnormal Neurotypical': Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis as Biographical Illumination." *Social Science & Medicine* 197:161-67.

Thursday

Barker, Kristin K. 2008. "Electronic Support Groups, Patient-Consumers, and Medicalization: The Case of Contested Illness." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 49(1):20-36.

Au, Larry and Eyal Gil. 2022. "Whose Advice Is Credible? Claiming Lay Expertise in a Covid-19 Online Community." *Qualitative Sociology* 45(1):31-61.

Gyenes, Nat and An Xiao Mina. 2018. "How Misinfodemics Spread Disease." *The Atlantic*.

Week Fourteen Clinical encounters and cultural health capital

Dec 5

Tuesday

Shim, Janet K. 2010. "Cultural Health Capital: A Theoretical Approach to Understanding Health Care Interactions and the Dynamics of Unequal Treatment." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51(1):1-15.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2019. "I Was Pregnant and in Crisis. All the Doctors and Nurses Saw Was an Incompetent Black Woman." *Time Magazine*.
<https://time.com/5494404/tressie-mcmillan-cottom-thick-pregnancy-competent/>

DUE: Memo 4 due on Dec 8th (Friday) by 11:59pm
Covers content from Weeks 10 to 14

*To learn more on health inequalities, please join me for *SOCI 252: Health Inequalities & Activism*