

Sociology 0300F

**Unequal from Birth: Child Health from a Social Perspective**

Syllabus, Fall 2009: Brown University

**Where and When:** 402 J. Walter Wilson; Wednesdays, 3-5:20pm

**Instructor:** Margot Jackson, 303 Maxcy Hall, 401.863.3192, [margotj@brown.edu](mailto:margotj@brown.edu)

**Office Hours:** Wednesdays, 1:30-2:30pm; Thursdays, 5-6pm; or by appointment

**Course website:** Accessible through MyCourses: <https://mycourses.brown.edu>

It is common knowledge that, in every society throughout the world, some children are healthier than others. Imagine, though, if you were charged with the task of crafting a policy, designing a scientific study, or starting an organization aimed at reducing health inequalities among children. Where would you start? How would sift among the many social and biological factors that contribute to health, and pick a target among the varied and substantial social and economic inequalities that result from health? We can't solve these questions in this course, but we can come up with a systematic framework for thinking about and analyzing the complexity of relationships between social factors and health.

Specifically, this course provides a critical and in-depth introduction to the social determinants and consequences of children's health. The overarching idea that drives the course is simple: understanding inequalities in child health requires recognition of a process that unfolds across generations and across multiple contexts. From the moment that children are conceived, health is unequally distributed. This unequal distribution does not stop at birth, but continues over children's lifetimes and into the next generation. We will examine this idea by delving into specific case studies that highlight the myriad ways, both biological and social, in which child health is produced, and the equally complex ways in which it has consequences for individuals, populations and governments. Along the way we will also gain recognition of the fact that nothing is set in stone—health need not be "unequal from birth," nor are its consequences always unalterable.

Our focus will be global. In addition, although this is an academic course meant to engage ideas, we will attempt to make these ideas less abstract. That is, what might we do about all of this, and what are people doing? The course is designed for and limited to first-year students and should appeal to a variety of educational and career interests, including social justice, research, medicine, planning, and law.

## **ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING**

You'll engage in frequent brief writing assignments and one longer writing exercise.

### **Weekly Memos/Blog Entries (50% of total grade)**

An important part of writing and analysis is being comfortable with sharing your work—this allows for dialogue and critique. You'll post weekly memos (300-500 words max: conciseness is the key word here) on our course blog, accessible through the website. The blog is a venue for us to read each other's work and comment on it before class in order to jumpstart our discussion. I will not be looking for a magnum opus each week; perfectionism has its merits in some instances, but not here. What I *will* be looking for is an effort at critical analysis. Memos should not summarize of the readings, but should instead identify common themes and highlight important patterns, similarities and differences. Your blog entry is also a time to raise questions for discussion in class. Each week I will provide prompts, based on the readings, to help focus your writing.

Blog entries will be due beginning on 9/23. Entries must be posted no later than **5pm each Tuesday**, in order to give us time to peruse the entries before class on Wednesday. There are a total of 10 eligible weeks for memos; you must complete at least 8 memos. You get 2 weeks "off" of writing--I suggest choosing these weeks based on the schedule of your other classes and commitments. You are welcome to complete all 10, of course, if it helps to focus your reading and preparation for discussion. Not writing a memo, however, does not provide an excuse to ignore the assigned work and not participate.

### **Discussion and Class Participation (20% of total grade)**

Each week, a small group of students will be responsible for leading part of our group discussion. Specifically, I will ask 2 students to independently draw out connections between the assigned video segments and the readings, and raise some questions to jumpstart our discussion. My definition of participation means being prepared and making thoughtful contributions, rather than talking all the time.

A good discussion requires a few things. I don't have many rules, but I do ask that we all make every effort to be prompt and, above all else, to respect the opinions of others.

### **Final Writing Exercise (30% of total grade)**

Your final assignment will be an opportunity to further develop a topic/question/theme that is of special interest to you, drawing from the themes of the course. Treat this as a chance to begin investigating an area that you might want to pursue after the end of the semester, whether in your additional coursework, an independent study or a summer job. The terms of this project are intentionally flexible and could involve writing a paper that critically reviews the research literature on a specific question; a critical evaluation of a relevant social policy, based on research evidence; a mock proposal to conduct a research study among a particular population; or a proposal to design a community intervention that is informed by data and evidence. We will discuss this more in class.

### **OTHER DETAILS**

**Format of Readings.** There are no required texts for the course. Many students find course readers to be overly expensive and unnecessary, instead preferring to print things themselves, read online or download to one device or another. The readings are accessible as PDF files on our password-protected website. You can read each week's assignments however you choose; whatever your method, be organized (e.g., create a binder of the readings, folder with the downloaded readings, etc.).

**Video Segments.** The syllabus and website contain several video segments, which will often be integral parts of our discussions and your participation. You will be able to watch these videos online—I have arranged for many of these clips to be bookmarked within the full video. Other links (e.g., the Frontline segments) contain the entire show; in these cases I have noted which minutes to watch.

**Miscellaneous.** Regular class attendance is expected, and I will not accept late work unless there are extreme circumstances. As a matter of policy, I cannot grant incompletes.

## TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE

### 9/9: Introductions

\*Early ending (3:30pm) due to convocation.\*

### 9/16: Biology Isn't Everything, But Neither is Society: Integrating Social and Biological Perspectives

READ:

Anne Fadiman. 1998. Chapters 3 (pgs. 20-31) and 5 (pgs. 38-59) in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, And The Collision of Two Cultures*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York.

Peter Conrad. 1975. "[The Discovery of Hyperkinesis: Notes of the Medicalization of Deviant Behavior.](#)" *Social Problems* 23(1): 12-21.

Cindy Parks Thomas, Peter Conrad, Rosemary Casler and Elizabeth Goodman. 2006. "[Trends in the Use of Psychotropic Medications among Adolescents, 1994 to 2001.](#)" *Psychiatric Services* 57(1): 63-69.

Didier Fassin. 2003. "[The Embodiment of Inequality: AIDS as a Social Condition and the Historical Experience in South Africa.](#)" *EMBO Reports* 4: S4-S9.

VIEW:

In-class clips

WRITE:

No writing assignment

### 9/23: Race, Poverty and the Social Hierarchy

READ:

S.V. Subramanian, Paolo Belli and Ichiro Kawachi. 2002. "[The Macroeconomic Determinants of Health.](#)" *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 287-302.

J. Lawrence Aber, Neil G. Bennett, Dalton C. Conley and Jiali Li. 1997. "[The Effects of Poverty on Child Health and Development.](#)" *Annual Review of Public Health* 18: 463-483.

Anne Case, Darren Lubotsky and Christina Paxson. 2002. "[Economic Status and Health in Childhood: The Origins of the Gradient.](#)" *American Economic Review* 92(5): 1308-1334. [Skim technical details.]

Arline T. Geronimus. 1992. "The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African-American Women and Infants: Evidence and Speculations." *Ethnicity and Disease* 2: 207-221.

VIEW:

Unnatural Causes, "Children and Poverty" and "Race Gap"

WRITE:

Memo # 1

### 9/30: Children with Migration Backgrounds: A Paradox?

READ:

Andrew Fuligni and Christina Hardway. 2004. "[Preparing Diverse Adolescents for the Transition to Adulthood.](#)" *The Future of Children* 14(2): 99-119.

Nancy S. Landale, R.S. Oropesa and Bridget K. Gorman. 2000. "[Migration and Infant Death: Assimilation or Selective Migration among Puerto Ricans?](#)" *American Sociological Review* 65(6): 888-909.

Margot Jackson, Kathleen Kiernan and Sara McLanahan. 2009. "Mothers' Inputs to Child Health in the U.S. and U.K.: A Comparative Lens on the Immigrant 'Paradox'." Working Paper.

VIEW:

Unnatural Causes, "Latino Paradox" and "When Ties Fray"

WRITE:

Memo # 2

### 10/7: Genetic and Biological "Programming," Environment, or Both?

READ:

David Barker. 1997. "[Maternal Nutrition, Fetal Nutrition, and Disease in Later Life.](#)" *Nutrition* 13(9): 807-813.

Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips. "Rethinking Nature and Nurture." Chap. 2 (Pgs. 39-57) in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academy Press: Washington, D.C.

Jeremy Freese and Sara Shostak. 2009. "[Genetics and Social Inquiry.](#)" *Annual Review of Sociology* 35: 107-128.

Dalton Conley, Kate W. Strully and Neil G. Bennett. 2003. "The Baby or the Egg? Birth Weight and the Gene-Environment Divide." Chapter 1 (Pgs. 1-28) in *The Starting Gate: Birth Weight and Life Chances*. University of California Press: Berkeley.

VIEW:

Unnatural Causes, "Genetic Research" and "SES, Genes and Health"

WRITE:

Memo # 3

### 10/14: Mothers and Fathers, Boys and Girls: Parental Investments in Child Health

READ:

Paul Farmer. 1996. "Women, Poverty and AIDS." Chapter 1 (Pgs. 3-39) in *Women, Poverty and AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Structural Violence* (Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, Janie Simmons, Eds.). Partners in Health: Cambridge.

Andrew J. Cherlin, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Chrisina McRae. 1998. "[Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course.](#)" *American Sociological Review* 63(2): 239-249.

Suzanne M. Bianchi. 2000. "[Maternal Employment and Time with Children: Dramatic Change or Surprising Continuity?](#)" *Demography* 37(4): 401-414.

Monica Das Gupta. 1987. "[Selective Discrimination Against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India.](#)" *Population and Development Review* 13(1): 77-100.

See also [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23FOB-idealabt.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=monica%20das%20gupta&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23FOB-idealabt.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=monica%20das%20gupta&st=cse)

VIEW:

Frontline on "The Age of AIDS, Part 2: Chapter 3, 11:00-16:49:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/view>

WRITE:

Memo # 4

### **10/21: Space and Place**

READ:

David R. Williams, Michelle Sternthal and Rosalind J. Wright. 2009. "[Social Determinants: Taking the Social Context of Asthma Seriously.](#)" *Pediatrics* 123: S174-S184.

Yoosun Park, Kathryn M. Neckerman, James Quinn, Christopher Weiss and Andrew Rundle. 2008. "[Place of Birth, Duration of Residence, Neighborhood Immigrant Composition and Body Mass Index in New York City.](#)" *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 5: 19-30.

Elizabeth Frankenberg, Jed Friedman, Thomas Gillespie, et al. 2008. "[Mental Health in Sumatra After the Tsunami.](#)" *American Journal of Public Health* 98(9): 1671-1677.

Robert J. Sampson, Patrick Sharkey and Stephen W. Raudenbush. 2008. "[Durable Effects of Concentrated Disadvantage on Verbal Ability among African-American Children.](#)" *PNAS* 105(3): 845-852.

Janet Currie and Johannes F. Schmeider. 2009. "[Fetal Exposure to Toxic Releases and Infant Health.](#)" *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings* 99(2): 177-183.

VIEW:

Unnatural Causes, "High Point" and "Stress and Violence"

WRITE:

Memo # 5

### **10/28: Government I: Politics and Policies**

READ:

Sarah Burgard. 2002. "[Does Race Matter? Children's Height in Brazil and South Africa.](#)" *Demography* 39(4): 763-790.

Douglas Almond, Kenneth Y. Chay, and Michael Greenstone. Forthcoming. "[Civil Rights, The War on Poverty, and Black-White Convergence in Infant Mortality in the Rural South and Mississippi.](#)" *American Economic Review*

Kevin Miligan and Mark Stable. Forthcoming. "[Child Benefits, Maternal Employment and Children's Health: Evidence from Canadian Child Benefit Expansions.](#)" *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings*.

VIEW:

--Unnatural Causes, "Diabetic's Nightmare"

--Frontline on "Age of AIDS, Part I:" Chapter 7, 0-7:30:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/view/>

WRITE: Memo # 6

#### **11/4: Government II: Children and the Health Care System**

READ:

Christina Paxson and Norbert Schady. 2005. "[Child Health and Economic Crisis in Peru.](#)" *World Bank Economic Review* 19(2): 203-224.

Janet Currie. 2006. "In Sickness and In Health: The Importance of Public Health Insurance." Chapter 2 (Pgs. 33-60) in *The Invisible Safety Net: Protecting the Nation's Poor Children and Families*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Barbara Bergmann. 1996. "Medical Services for Child Well-Being in France." Chapter 5 (Pgs. 70-91) in *Saving Our Children From Poverty: What the United States Can Learn from France*. Russell Sage Foundation: New York.

VIEW:

--Frontline on "Sick Around the World:" Chapter 1, 0-12:41:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/>

--Frontline on "Sick Around America:" Chapter 4, 34:05-39:47:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundamerica/view/>

--Unnatural Causes, "Kim Anderson's Story"

WRITE:

Memo # 7

#### **11/11: The "Long Arm" of Physical and Mental Health**

READ:

Thomas W. McDade, Melinda A. Beck, Christopher Kazawa and Linda S. Adair. 2001. "[Prenatal Undernutrition, Postnatal Environments, and Antibody Response to Vaccination in Adolescence.](#)" *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 74(4): 543-548.

John Hoddinott, John A. Maluccio, Jere R. Behrman, et al. 2008. "[Effect of a Nutrition Intervention during Early Childhood on Economic Productivity in Guatemalan Adults.](#)" *Lancet* 371: 411-16.

Anne Case and Christina Paxson. 2008. "[Stature and Status: Height, Ability and Labor Market Outcomes.](#)" *Journal of Political Economy* 116(3): 499-532.

Janet Currie. 2005. "[Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness.](#)" *The Future of Children* 15(1): 117-138.

VIEW:

35 Up, "Neil I, II and III"

WRITE:

Memo # 8

### **11/18: Timing, Dose and Fluidity: Upward and Downward Deflections**

READ:

George E. Vaillant. 1988. "[What Can Long-Term Follow-Up Teach Us About Relapse and Prevention of Relapse in Addiction?](#)" *British Journal of Addiction* 83: 1147-1157.

John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson. Chapters 1 (pgs. 1-4 only) and 6 (pgs. 114-149) in *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

Margot Jackson. 2009. "[Children's Health, Academic Experiences and Qualifications in Adulthood: The Case of Great Britain.](#)" California Center for Population Research Working Paper Series PWP-CCPR-2007-007.

VIEW:

42/49 Up, "Neil IV, V and VI"

WRITE:

Memo # 9

### **11/25: \*No class: Happy Thanksgiving\***

### **12/2: Coming Full Circle: Research, Policy and Practice**

READ:

Alberto Palloni. 2006. "[Reproducing Inequalities: Luck, Wallets and the Enduring Effects of Childhood Health.](#)" *Demography* 43(4): 587-615.

Other readings TBA.

VIEW:

TBA

WRITE:

Memo # 10

### **12/9: Last Class: Student Presentations and Summing Up**

### **12/15: Final Paper Due**

\*HAPPY BREAK!\*