COURSE DESCRIPTION
The sociology of stress and mental health can be considered a core element of sociology, as well as an interdisciplinary linkage to the study of mental health in psychiatry, epidemiology, and psychology. In this seminar we emphasize the unique perspective sociology offers in the larger interdisciplinary discussion of stress and mental health. We also give attention to the broad importance of studying stress and mental health in other areas of sociology, such as stratification, gender, work, family, race/ethnicity, and urban studies. The main objective of the course is to recognize the importance of the social origins of stress and the complex pathways through which it impacts individuals’ well-being across social situations, roles, and environments.

To accommodate various backgrounds in the subject, this course first provides an introduction and overview of basic issues in the sociology of stress and mental health, including its fundamental assumptions, findings, theories, and critical debates. Throughout the remaining classes, we will consider a series of selected topics related to systems of inequality in exposure and vulnerability to stress and mental health consequences. Examples of such systems include social and economic class locations, ethnicity, family, and gender. Related to these systems, but of importance in their own right, are the organization, community, and neighborhood contexts in which people live and their associated social networks. We will also consider the role of personal and social resources that help individuals negotiate their experiences of stress and mental health consequences, including coping behaviours, self-concept, and social support.

The emphasis will be on recent, innovative readings and research (post-millennium), but we will also review more influential work from the past that has shaped the unique perspective of sociology of stress and mental health.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
By the end of the course, you will:

- Develop an understanding of the importance of sociology of mental health, including the substantive, disciplinary, and practical implications of the research area.
- Be able to effectively present, interpret, and critique research findings on mental health outcomes from a sociological perspective.
- Be familiar with the interpretation of mental health as a continuous or fluid experience, divorced from diagnosis, and influenced by social context.
- Understand how various groups of society experience stress, stressors, and psychological distress differentially.
- Be more familiar with published research in the sociology of mental health.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
This course addresses several University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (see, http://cll.mcmaster.ca/COU/pdf/Undergraduate%20Degree%20Level%20Expectations.pdf).

- Sociologists rely on a range of theories to test hypotheses and answer research questions about the sociology of stress and mental health. Gaining knowledge of these diverse approaches will expand the student’s depth and breadth of knowledge.
- Different research questions about mental health require different types of research methods. Students will learn to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to answering research questions.
This course will teach students the application of established theories, concepts, and research findings, as well as interpret and critically reflect upon conclusions using a sociology of mental health perspective.

This course will further develop the student’s communication and writing skills through various evaluative tools.

COURSE READINGS

Required Reading
Sociology 3HH3 Custom Selected Readings (ULRs will be provided via Avenue to Learn)


These readings reflect the fundamental core of the course, and will serve as the foundation for our in-class discussions. Given time restrictions, we may not cover every aspect of the readings during class periods. However, you should be familiar with all materials referenced on the syllabus. Students are required to express related opinions, questions and insights about the readings in class. The book by John Mirowsky and Catherine Ross helps set the foundation for the materials discussed throughout this course.

METHOD OF EVALUATION

Weekly activities and participation 15%
Media response paper 10%
Mid-Term 1 15%
Mid-Term 2 15%
Research Paper 25%
Final Exam 20%

Weekly Activities and Participation (15%)
Every week students must come prepared to participate in an activity with their group related to the relevant course material. These activities will vary from class-to-class but will include an application of the weekly material in some collaborative manner. All group members will be required to participate in these activities to earn full marks. More details about the weekly activities will be provided in class.

In-Class Mid-Terms (15%) and Final Exam (20%)
The class exam will consist of multiple-choice questions. You are responsible for materials covered in student-led presentations, lectures, and assigned readings. The mid-term will be held during regular class hours in the normal classroom. The mid-term offers you an opportunity to see how well you are doing in the course to date.

Media Response Paper (10%) 
You will write a short analysis of a contemporary media topic that deals with some aspect of stress and mental health (i.e., current events, news articles, or relevant controversies discussed in other mediums, such as on-line forums and blogs). I will provide a list of suggested topics within the first few weeks of classes. You will apply course concepts and findings learned to-date in the class to your selected topic. Critical thinking of media and course materials should be emphasized in your response paper. Your media response paper is due worth 10% of your final grade. Please ensure that your paper is approximately two to three pages, excluding references and title page, Times New Roman 12pt font, double spaced with one-inch margins.

Research Paper (25%) 
The purpose of the research paper is to provide students with the opportunity to review and apply the concepts and ideas learned throughout the course. You will choose someone you know as a case study, and apply course concepts and findings to help explain their emotional or psychological state, or alternatively, to help explain why they do not have problems given a high-risk life history. The anonymity of the person should be protected.
Your current knowledge of the person and their life circumstances must be sufficient to write the paper (note that you will not be interviewing this person, but instead, will reflect on their situation based on your personal knowledge of the individual’s current and previous life circumstances). You may discuss a range of topics related to the individuals’ past and present work and family situations, neighbourhood context, social and demographic background, and personal or social coping mechanisms, such as support systems, or psychological resources. You may also discuss a variety of mental health outcomes, such as generalized distress, anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and emotional reactions, such as anger or guilt.

Throughout the paper, you will address the following three points:

1. **Give a short history of the problem, or circumstances that could have led to a mental health experience, including important circumstances that must be included to answer questions #2 and #3.** Discuss the specific content of the problem, relating it to known criteria for chronic or episodic stress, psychological distress, and related mental health outcomes. Also briefly discuss, if appropriate, issues of duration of symptoms, timing in the life course, and severity. This question must be answered in 1 to 2 pages.

2. **Comment on the specific risk for these problems suggested by findings on the social distribution of mental health from the course.** Does your case fit these findings or not? If not, hypothesize why. Answer this part in 2 to 3 pages.

3. **Discuss the role of social statuses, stress exposure, vulnerability, and coping resources in explaining the development of their problem and whether the problem has diminished or—if applicable—grown over time.** It is important here that you focus only on what you argue are the “crucial” stressors or coping resource problems that explain why the problem occurred when it occurred, and how it was maintained over time. If you choose to analyze someone who has avoided mental health problems despite stress, present why you think the stressors they have experienced are important and how their coping resources helped avoid problems. Answer this question in 4 to 5 pages.

Your research paper is due the final week of classes, and is worth 25% of your final grade. Please ensure that your paper is approximately eight to ten pages, excluding references and title page, Times New Roman 12pt font, double spaced with one-inch margins. You must hand in a paper copy. Electronic submissions will not be accepted.

**LATE ASSIGNMENTS & MISSED TEST**
Late assignments will be deducted 5% per day starting immediately after the designated due date and time has passed. Students who miss a test or assignment deadline due to special circumstances must contact me at least 48 hours prior by email and provide formal documentation as outlined below under Departmental/University Policies.

**ACADEMIC DISHONESTY:**
Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, specifically Appendix 3, located at http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicIntegrity.pdf

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:
1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.
In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) designed to reveal plagiarism. Students will be required to submit their work electronically and in hard copy so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work to Turnitin.com must still submit a copy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com; however, papers that are not submitted to Turnitin will be graded last and subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

**GRADING**
Please see the McMaster Grading System for the current grading scale:
http://registrar.mcmaster.ca/calendar/2012-13/pg145.html

**E-mail etiquette and Avenue Policy:** Email correspondence with the professor must contain your full name and student ID. All emails must be respectful in tone and content.
COURSE SCHEDULE

PART 1. INTRODUCTION: STRESS PROCESSES AND MENTAL HEALTH

NOTE: Required readings are numbered below. *Indicates supplementary readings.

Overview: The Sociological Study of Stress Processes and Outcomes

May 1: Introduction to Course Content and Design

May 3: The Stress Process and Defining Social Stress

(1) Mirowsky and Ross Social Causes of Psychological Distress, pp. 3-20; 159-170.

May 8: Conceptualizing and Measuring Distress


May 10: Test 1 [covers materials to date]

PART 2. SOCIAL PATTERNS AND SELECTED STATUSES

May 15: Basic Social Patterns: Socioeconomic Status and Age

(7) Mirowsky and Ross Social Causes of Psychological Distress, pp. 75-83; 112-128.

May 17: Gender, Work and Family

(10) Mirowsky and Ross Social Causes of Psychological Distress, pp. 84-111.

May 22: Victoria Day – No Classes

May 24: Race, Ethnicity & Immigration


May 29: Test 2 [covers materials from Test 1]

PART 3: SOCIAL RESOURCES, CONTEXTS, AND CAVEATS

May 31: Psychological Resources, Alienation, and Identity


June 5: Neighbourhood Context


**Media Response Paper due today**

June 7: Stigma, Labeling, and Medicalization


June 12: Treatments and Institutionalization


**Research Paper due June 19**

**Schedule subject to change based on unforeseen circumstances**
DEPARTMENTAL/UNIVERSITY POLICIES:

Do NOT fax assignments. Please see your instructor for the most appropriate way to submit assignments.

The Sociology staff do NOT date-stamp assignments, nor do they monitor the submission or return of papers.

The McMaster Student Absence Form (http://www.mcmaster.ca/msaf/) is a self reporting tool for Undergraduate Students to report absences that last up to 3 days and provides the ability to request accommodation for any missed academic work. Please note, this tool cannot be used during any final examination period.

You may submit a maximum of 1 Academic Work Missed request per term. It is YOUR responsibility to follow up with your instructor immediately regarding the nature of the accommodation.

If you are absent more than 3 days, exceed 1 request per term, or are absent for a reason other than medical, you MUST visit your Associate Dean’s Office (Faculty Office). You may be required to provide supporting documentation.

This form should be filled out when you are about to return to class after your absence.

Students should check the web, the white board and the Undergraduate Bulletin board outside the Sociology office (KTH-627) for notices pertaining to Sociology classes or departmental business (e.g. class scheduling information, location of mailboxes and offices, tutorial information, class cancellations, TA job postings, etc.).

Computer use in the classroom is intended to facilitate learning in that particular lecture or tutorial. At the discretion of the instructor, students using a computer for any other purpose may be required to turn the computer off for the remainder of the lecture or tutorial.

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

It is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student’s own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.