Critical Perspectives on Aging and Health
(a course sponsored by UC Berkeley Resource Center on Aging)

PH 290, Spring 2011
Course control number 76285

INSTRUCTOR Marty Martinson, DrPH
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CLASS TIME Tuesdays, 4 - 6pm
PLACE 2519 Tolman Hall
UNITS 2
GRADING Grade or S/U

PURPOSE PH 290 draws on theories in political and moral economy, feminist gerontology, disability studies, cultural studies, and ethics to examine aging and health in the U.S. These sociopolitical and humanistic frameworks will be defined and utilized to examine cultural and structural influences on aging, relations between individuals and social worlds, and subjective meanings of aging. By shifting from mainstream gerontology’s focus on the individual’s ability to adapt to aging to a focus on the broader structural and cultural forces that influence how we experience aging, how we age differently, and how we construct meanings around aging and being old, the course will address what Stephen Katz has called the “gap in gerontological criticality.”¹

Theories of social gerontology such as disengagement theory, activity theory, and continuity theory will be reviewed for what they suggest about “healthy aging” and expectations for late life. The underlying assumptions of models of negative aging (frail, dependent) and positive aging (successful, productive) will be examined, as will the emergence of critical gerontology as a means of investigating these assumptions and uncovering issues of power, inequality and constructed meanings as they affect and reflect aging and health. Finally, the policy and practice implications of critical gerontology approaches to healthy aging will be explored.

COMPETENCIES

Participation in the course will provide students with the opportunity to partially master the following core competencies:

• Identify, assess and think critically about the determinants of older adult community and population health, including cultural, social and biobehavioral factors contributing to health related behaviors.

• Apply theoretical and methodological perspectives in analyzing the behavioral, cultural and ethical dimensions of a community health issue, especially as it affects the older population.

• Critically analyze and evaluate the nature and process by which research informs practice and practice influences research in community and population health of elders.

• Demonstrate cultural competence and an understanding of diversity, especially as they pertain to the health of elders.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, each student will be able to:

1. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual-level, interpersonal-level and community/structural-level theories of social gerontology.

2. Describe a range of selected theoretical frameworks that inform critical gerontology, and utilize a combination of these theories to construct interdisciplinary analyses of issues in aging and health.

3. Apply critical perspectives to gerontological models of positive aging, e.g. active aging, successful aging, productive aging and civic engagement.

4. Construct a critical analysis of a contemporary issue in aging and health, including relevant policy and/or practice implications.

5. Demonstrate improved writing skills.

COURSE DESIGN

This class will emphasize a seminar approach with interactive sessions. Presentations by the instructor, students and guests will be integrated with small group problem-solving, case study analyses, and large group discussions. Students will be expected to engage in intensive reading and critical thinking that will be reflected in class discussions and writing assignments. Students will participate in the planning and co-facilitation of one class session.

READINGS

All required readings will be posted on bspace.
ASSIGNMENTS
There are two short essays, one class co-facilitation, and one 8-10 page written assignment for this course. Following is an overview of each assignment and relevant due dates.

Critical Reflection Essays: During the semester, students will be required to write two critical reflection essays, 2-3 pages (double spaced) in length. These essays will be based on the readings/class discussion of your choice.

The first essay is designed to encourage thorough reading, critical thinking, and synthesis of the readings. It will also be used to stimulate class discussions. This essay should summarize: 1) the primary focus of each reading; 2) the authors’ key points for each reading; and 3) your critical reflections on the articles separately and how they relate to each other. This essay must be done in conjunction with the readings from a class between January 25 and March 1. The essay is due on the day those readings are to be discussed.

The second essay will be your critical reflection upon a class session of your choice. This essay should briefly summarize the key points raised in the readings and in the class discussion, and then include your critical reflections on the ideas raised in the class discussion. This essay must be done in conjunction with the reading/discussions from a class between March 8 and April 12. This essay is due in the class session immediately following the class session reviewed in the essay.

Class Co-facilitation: Students will be required to co-facilitate, with other students, one class session during the semester. To prepare for this co-facilitation, students will meet in advance with each other to discuss the readings and prepare the class session. The session should include a critical discussion of the readings, be interactive, and encourage critical thinking among class participants.

Final Paper: Research paper OR interpretive life narrative project.

Prospectus due: March 8 (1 page description of proposed project; not graded)
Draft due (optional) April 5 (not graded)
Final paper due: April 26

OPTION 1: Research paper
Write an 8-10 page research paper on a topic/issue related to aging and health, integrating a critical analysis with explicit use of 1-2 theoretical frameworks discussed in the course. Describe if and how the issue has previously been conceived/addressed in your own discipline through other non-critical lenses and how the critical lenses (theories) you have chosen contribute to enhanced understandings of the issue. Also describe what your critical analysis suggests in terms of policy and/or practice implications. Please use proper APA format for your in-text citations and References.

OPTION 2: Interpretive life narrative project
Interview a non-relative elder during the semester. The interview should last 60-90 minutes. (You may split this into two interviews if you’d like to do so.) In this interview, ask the person to describe:
1) A brief overview of their life history
2) In what ways their life history has influenced their health
3) How they would define “healthy aging”
4) How they would define “a good life” in old age

Write an 8-10 page paper summarizing the elder’s responses to these questions and then analyzing what you learn through these interviews using 1 or 2 theories covered in class. Describe how these theories provide critical insights into the elder’s life story, perspectives on aging, and perspectives on health.
OFFICE HOURS
Marty Martinson will be available for advising and discussion outside of class. Office hours can be arranged by email: martym@berkeley.edu

SUMMARY OF STUDENT REQUIREMENTS

1. Complete all readings before the class session for which they are assigned and be prepared to discuss.
2. Contribute to class discussions and activities.
3. Participate in co-planning and co-facilitating one class session.
4. Complete all written work by due dates (see Assignments)

GRADING
Grades will be determined by the instructor, using the following guidelines:

- Class participation and attendance: 30%
- Critical reflection essays (2): 20% total (10% each)
- Class co-facilitation session: 15%
- Final paper: 35%

SCHEDULE

PART 1: CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO AGING

January 18: Overview of course; Why critical approaches to aging?


January 25: Review of gerontological theories; Emergence of critical gerontology


Readings for further study (not required):
February 1: Political and moral economy of aging


*Readings for further study (not required):*

February 8: Feminist gerontology


*Readings for further study (not required):*

February 15: Disability and aging


February 22: Poverty, inequality and health in late life


**Readings for further study** (not required):

March 1: Humanistic gerontology


**PART 2: APPLYING CRITICAL APPROACHES TO AGING AND HEALTH**

March 8: Critical perspectives on models of healthy aging: Successful aging, active aging, productive aging, and civic engagement


March 15: Biomedicalization, Biotechnology and aging; the construction of health and disease


Readings for further study (not required):

SPRING BREAK

March 29: Dementia, Care, and Ethics


Readings for further study (not required):


April 5: Social policy and aging: Social Security and Economic Security


PART 3: LINKING THEORY TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

April 12: Social policy and aging: Medicare and Long Term Care

http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/content/full/hlthaff.25.w114v1/DC1


April 19: Student presentations

April 26: Student presentations; future considerations for critical gerontology; celebration!

