

HISTSCI 1490: The History and Culture of Stigma

Fall 2024

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Thursdays 3:00–5:00pm

Course Description:

This course will investigate the history of stigmatized diseases and conditions including cancer, mental illness, addiction, obesity, AIDS, and disability among others. A central goal will be to understand the stigmatization of disease and its effects in diverse historical and cultural contexts. The course will evaluate the impact of stigmatization on individuals, health disparities and outcomes, as well as historical and contemporary attempts to destigmatize illnesses that are subject to discrimination, prejudice, and isolation. We will center attention on structural forces that promote stigma and how they may be modified over time. Central goals of the course will be to understand the critical drivers of stigma, their impact on individuals and groups, and effective and innovative strategies for their reduction.

The following books are available on reserve and at the Harvard Coop:

- Goffman, E. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Reissue Edition). Touchstone. (Original work published 1963).
- Sontag, S. (2001). *Illness as Metaphor: AIDS and its Metaphors* (1st ed.). Picador. (Original works published 1978 (*Illness as Metaphor*) and 1989 (*AIDS and its Metaphors*)).
- Yoshino, K. (2007). [*Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*](#) (Reprint edition). Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- Lupton, D. (2018). *Fat* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Assignments:

The principal assignment for the course is for each student to develop a plan for a program/intervention to destigmatize a currently stigmatized condition or disease. A central premise of the course is that to conduct a successful and effective campaign of destigmatization, it is critical to understand and explain the process by which diseases become and remain a source of stigma. In this sense the course is organized to support interdisciplinary interventions directed at persistent and enduring stigmas. While the ultimate submission will be a detailed plan for such an intervention and its implementation, there will be several successive elements that will become part of the final plan. Each will be separately reviewed and evaluated.

1. Identification of an important and/or overlooked stigma that harms individuals and populations and inhibits their obtaining appropriate health care. Identify a text or memoir that expresses the experience of the particular stigmatized condition you seek to explore.
2. A historical and cultural analysis of the stigmatized condition that places it in a deeper context in order to understand the nature of the stigma and its significance, as well as obstacles to changing its social meanings and consequences.
3. A plan that explains how the proposed initiative will work at a social, cultural, and political level. An analysis of strategies for its implementation and impact. A proposed approach to evaluating the efficacy of the intervention. The plan should include a substantive example and/or pilot of the intervention. The class is organized as an “incubator” for destigmatizing initiatives and programs. Interventions may be at an interpersonal, local, national, or global level. These projects may be educational, artistic, legislative, and/or involve social media, games and/or simulations, photo exhibits, social experiments, and surveys, among other formats. The final plan may propose the organization of exhibits, explore the use of new media, or be directed at particular social and/or political networks. A student could write a short play, an illness narrative or “obiography,” a film treatment, produce a podcast, or a short YouTube video. In sum, the course hopes to support a wide range of approaches, disciplines, and rationales to the process of reducing specific stigmas.

As the course progresses, additional information about the projects will be presented. Additionally, we will

be studying a number of destigmatizing campaigns and evaluating their relative success as a basis for planning an intervention for this assignment.

The final session of the course will require a presentation of the projects, to be evaluated by a jury of health experts/entrepreneurs from diverse fields.

Grading:

Assignment 1 (due September 26th): 10%

Assignment 2 (due October 31st): 20%

Assignment 3 Preliminary Project Proposal (due November 25th)

Assignment 3 Final Project (due December 13th): 50%

Class participation: 20%