

**Sociology 165a. Living and Dying in America:
the Sociology of Birth and Death
Brandeis University
Spring 2014**

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Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Fridays, 12:30-1:50pm; Location, Lown 201

Course Description

This course introduces you to the tools and concepts central to the sociological study of birth and death in the United States. We ask how people are born and die in America - not biologically, but by paying attention to the cultural norms, social institutions, and economic factors that influence the processes. We aim to understand how our ways of thinking about birth and death are shaped by our families, medical institutions, religious organizations, and our own life experiences.

By the end of the semester you will be able to:

- Describe how the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and death changed over time in the United States and point to some of the factors that influenced these shifts.
- Compare how medical institutions (and people) currently shape experiences of birth and death in the United States.
- Explain how less-medical alternatives like midwifery, home birth and hospice emerged in the last one hundred years and how they influence some people's experiences.
- Speak in an informed way about ethical issues and decisions related to birth and death such as prenatal testing, assisted reproduction, physician assisted suicide, etc.
- Apply insights about birthing and dying to your own lives and perspectives.

Much about birth and death in the United States takes place privately. As such, some of what we discuss is likely to be new and may be difficult. The course will be interactive and discussion-based including guest speakers, fieldtrips, and assignments that require you to speak with people outside the classroom about birth and death. I will support you (and you will support each other) though the semester, but I ask that you *please* think carefully about whether this is the right time for you to take this course. If

you are not certain, talk with me or speak honestly about the pros and cons of the class with one of the peer TAs who took it two years ago. If you lost a loved one in the past year, you should wait until a future semester to take the course. This is an experiential education class that meets requirements for the major in Sociology and HSSP.

Course Readings

The following required books are available in the bookstore.

- Erickson, Karla A. 2013. *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Morris, Theresa. 2013. *Cut It Out: the C-Section Epidemic in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Spar, Debora L. 2006. *The Baby Business: How Money, Science and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The books are also on reserve in the library. All other required course readings are available through (new) Latte.

Course Requirements:

1. **Attendance** is required. Please be on time out of respect for me and your fellow classmates. Your class attendance counts as 5 points towards your final grade. If you miss zero or one class, you will receive 5 points. If you miss 2 classes, you will receive 4 points. If you miss 3 classes, you will receive 3 points. If you miss 4 classes, you will receive 2 points. If you miss 5 classes, you will receive 1 point. If you miss more than 5 classes, you will receive 0 points. The only absences that will not influence your grade are those for religious holidays that you email me about at least one week in advance. *Please make sure to sign the attendance sheet that will be passed around in class.* We will have several discussion sections, as noted in the syllabus, and the TFs will also take attendance there. Signing in for someone else is a violation of University policies on academic integrity that I take very seriously.
2. **Reading** is required. All course readings must be done for the Tuesday of each week unless otherwise noted in the syllabus. To facilitate your reading and class discussions, I will regularly (about once every other week) pose a broad discussion question at the end of class. I will ask you to come to the next class meeting with response to the question (no longer than one page single spaced) which shows me that you have done the reading and are thinking about the question. The Teaching Fellows and I will collect and read your response papers. You will receive 2 points for each response paper you complete. Response papers cannot be made up if you are not in class unless your absence is excused. At the end of the semester, your response papers will count for 12 points towards your final grade.

3. **Class Participation** is central to this class, and I ask that you participate fully in class, section, and the small group discussions we will sometimes have as a part of class. If you are not comfortable speaking in class, please participate by meeting with me during office hours, sending related articles to the class email list, etc. You are allowed to have computers and cell phones in class only if you are using them to take notes or look at readings. I will reduce your participation grade when I see you reading Facebook, surfing the web, sending text messages, etc. ***If you will be using a computer, please sit in the first two rows of the class.*** If you are expecting an urgent call, please let me know at the beginning of class and step out to take it. Class participation will count as eight points toward your final grade. Feel free to check with me about your participation grade at any point in the semester.
4. **Written Assignments:** You will write two papers (5-7 double space pages each) in response to detailed assignments I distribute on the dates noted on the syllabus.
- a. This first paper asks you to tell the story of your birth based on information you gather from your parents and / or other family members and based on what you have learned through class readings. You will want to think about this practically (where you were born, what kind of education – if any – your parents had, etc.) as well as in terms of the meaning of birth, of children, etc. in your family, your religious tradition, etc. You should situate your own experience in the historical, demographic and cultural contexts we will be discussing in class by referencing at least two class readings in your paper. A detailed paper assignment will be distributed on *January 17* and due on *February 14*.
 - b. The second paper asks you to interview a friend, family members, or religious / medical professional about his / her experience of death and to write about that person's experiences in the context of at least two class readings. Are his or her experiences similar to those described by different authors or different? What factors might explain any differences? A detailed paper assignment will be distributed on *March 11* and due on *April 11*. We will practice having conversations about death in class before you begin this assignment.

Each paper is worth 25 points. You will lose one full letter grade (2 points) for each 24 hours after the due date the assignment is turned in (i.e. if you would have received a 22 but your paper is turned in within the first 24 hours after it is due, you will receive a 20, etc.). I expect you to properly cite and reference any articles you refer to when completing your paper. I will talk in detail about this when the first paper assignment is distributed. If you have any questions at any point, please do not hesitate to ask. You are encouraged to visit the Writing Center for additional support and guidance.

(<http://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/writingcenter/index.html>)

5. **Final Exam.** You will have a take-home final exam. The exam will be designed to assess what you have learned in discussions and course readings and to see how well you can apply what you have learned to new questions and problems. You may use your lecture notes and course materials when completing the exam. *At least one part of the final exam will ask you to reflect on issues discussed by some of the visiting class speakers. I encourage you to listen to them carefully and take notes when they visit.* The final exam will be distributed on *April 25* and due at noon on *May 2*. Your completed exam can be no more than ten double spaced pages. The final exam will be worth 25 points.
6. **Final Grades** will be based on class attendance (5 points), response papers (12 points), class participation (8 points), paper 1 (25 points), paper 2 (25 points), and the final exam (25 points).

Students interested in **extra credit** can write *up to 2* reviews of movies or books that have some aspect of birth or death as a central theme. These reviews should each be 2-3 pages doubled spaced 12 point Times New Roman. Each review should summarize and analyze the book or movie making clear how two different course authors might evaluate it. You will receive up to 2 points for each review you write provided you engage with course authors in it. These can be turned in no later than the last day of class. Please submit a paper copy to me and send an electronic copy to the class email list so we can all learn together.

Book Suggestions:

Bottled Up by Suzanne Barston

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life, Ira Byock

In Lieu of Flowers by Nancy Cobb

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

Heaven's Coast by Mark Doty

A Grief Observed by C.S.Lewis

An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination by Elizabeth McCracken

The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch and Jeffrey Zaslow

One True Thing by Anna Quindlan

Hospital by Julie Salamon

Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery by Richard Selzer

Good Night, My Son by Esther Smucker

Baby Catcher: Chronicles of a Modern Midwife by Peggy Vincent

Film Suggestions:

Away From Her

Babies

The Big C

Big Mama

Juno

Life as a House

Never Let me Go
Ordinary People
Orgasmic Birth
Six Feet Under
The Sweet Hereafter
Terms of Endearment
The Waitress
What to Expect When You're Expecting
Wit

Final grades will be calculated using the following point distribution:

94-99 A	74-76 C
90-93 A-	70-73 C-
87-89 B+	67-69 D+
84-86 B	64-66 D
80-83 B-	60-63 D-
77-79 C+	<60 F

****All written work must be completed to receive a passing grade in this class****

- 7. University Policy on Academic Accommodations:** If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please give me a copy of your letter of accommodation in the first two weeks of the semester. If you have questions about documenting a disability, please contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Office (x63470, brodgers@brandeis.edu). Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.
- 8. University Policy on Academic Integrity:** You are expected to be familiar with and to follow the University's policies on academic integrity (see <http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdc/ai>). I will refer any suspected instances of alleged dishonesty to the Office of Student Development and Conduct. Instances of academic dishonesty may result in sanctions including but not limited to, failing grades being issued, educational programs, and other consequences

Course Outline

I. Introductions

January 14. Starting the Conversation

II. Coming In: The Sociology of Birth

January 17. The Experience of Pregnancy

Barker, K.K. 1998. "A ship upon a stormy sea: the medicalization of pregnancy." *Social Science and Medicine* 47:1067-76.

Armstrong, Elizabeth M. 2002. "Longing for Certainty: the American Experience of Pregnancy" In *Society and Medicine: Explorations of their Moral and Spiritual Dimensions*, ed. J. Swazey and C. Messikomer, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Optional Reading:

A Thin Blue Line: the History of the Pregnancy Test Kit:
<http://www.history.nih.gov/exhibits/thinblueline/>

Paper Assignment 1 Distributed

January 21, 24. Prenatal Healthcare and Testing

Tuesday:

Bessett, Danielle. 2010. "Negotiating normalization: The perils of producing pregnancy symptoms in prenatal care." *Social Science & Medicine*. 71: 370-377.

Armstrong, Elizabeth. 2000. "Lessons in Control: Prenatal Education in the Hospital." *Social Problems* 47(4):583-605

Almeling, Rene and Miranda Waggoner. 2013. "More and Less Equal: How Men Factor in to the Reproductive Equation." *Gender & Society*. 27(6): 821-842.

We will watch sections of *Le Premier Cri* in class. More info is here:
(<http://www.disney.fr/FilmsDisney/lepremiercri/>)

Friday:

Kuppermann, Miriam et al. 1999. "Who should be offered prenatal diagnosis? *American Journal of Public Health* 89:1592-3.

Rapp, Rayna. 2000. *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*. Routledge (Please read at least ONE of the following four chapters - c. 1 How Methodology Bleeds into Daily Life, c. 5 Waiting and Watching, c. 6 The Disabled Fetal Imaginary, c. 11 Endings are Really Beginnings)

Rothman, Barbara Katz. 2001. "Spoiling the Pregnancy: Prenatal Diagnosis in the Netherlands." In Raymond DeVries et al Eds. *Birth by Design: Pregnancy, Maternity Care, and Midwifery in North America and Europe*. New York: Routledge Press, p. 180-198.

January 28, 31. Childbirth

Tuesday:

Leavitt, Judith Walzer. 1983. "'Science' enters the birthing room: obstetrics in America since the 18th century." *Journal of American History*. 70:281-304.

Declercq, Eugene et al. 2001. "Where to give birth? Politics and the Place of Birth." In Raymond DeVries et al Eds. *Birth by Design: Pregnancy, Maternity Care, and Midwifery in North America and Europe*. New York: Routledge Press, p. 7-27 (skim)

DeVries, Raymond et al. 2001. "What (and Why) Do Women Want? The Desires of Women and the Design of Maternity Care. In Raymond DeVries et al Eds. *Birth by Design: Pregnancy, Maternity Care, and Midwifery in North America and Europe*. New York: Routledge Press, p. 243-266 (skim)

Friday:

Leavitt, Judith Walzer. 2003. "What Do Men Have To Do With It? Fathers and Mid-Twentieth Century Childbirth." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 77(2): 235-262.

Reed, Richard. 2005. *Birthing Fathers: the Transformation of Men in American Rites of Birth*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. (c. 1 American Fathers and Hospital Childbirth OR c. 6 Men's Experience of Birth, skim)

Goodman, Steffie. 2007. "Piercing the veil. The marginalization of midwives in the United States." *Social Science and Medicine*. 65: 610-621.

February 4, 7. Making Sense of C-Sections

Tuesday:

Little, Margaret Olivia et al. 2008. "Mode of Delivery: Toward Responsible Inclusion of Patient Preferences." *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. 112: 913-8.

Morris, Theresa. 2013. *Cut It Out: the C-Section Epidemic in America*. New York: New York University Press. (Introduction through c. 3)

Friday:

Morris, Theresa. 2013. *Cut It Out: the C-Section Epidemic in America*. New York: New York University Press. (c. 4 to the end of the book)

Guest Speaker: Hope Rex, Nurse on Labor and Delivery floor (for more than 30 years) at Brigham and Women's Hospital

February 11, 14. Choices in Childbirth

Tuesday:

We will watch *The Business of Being Born*
<http://www.thebusinessofbeingborn.com/>

Friday:

Discussion Section

Paper Assignment 1 Due

February 18, 21. No class

February 25, 28. Breastfeeding

Tuesday:

2005. American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement, "Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk."

Wolf, Jacqueline H. 2006. "What Feminists Can Do For Breastfeeding and What Breastfeeding Can Do for Feminists." *Signs* 31(2): 397-424.

Wolf, Joan. 2007. "Is Breast Really Best? Risk and Total Motherhood in the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*. 32(4): 595-636

Guest speaker: Susan Davies, IBCLC, Lactation Consultation Collaborative (at 1pm).

Friday:

Kelleher, Christa. 2006. "The Physical Challenges of Early Breastfeeding." *Social Science and Medicine*. 63: 2727-2738.

Waggoner, Miranda. 2011. "Monitoring Milk and Motherhood: Lactation Consultants and the Dilemmas of Breastfeeding Advocacy." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*. 37(1): 153-171.

March 4, 7. Assisted Reproduction and Adoption

Tuesday:

Spar, Deborah L. 2006. *The Baby Business: How Money, Science, and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (Please read TWO of the following chapters: Preface Reconceiving Recess, c. 1 The Quest to Conceive, c. 2 A Cluster of Cells, c. 3 Renting Wombs for Money and Love)

AND

Bell, Ann. 2009. "'It's Way Out of My League:' Low-Income Women's Experiences of Medicalized Infertility." *Gender and Society*. 23(5):688-709.

OR

Almeling, Renee. 2007. "Selling Genes, Selling Gender: Egg Agencies, Sperm Banks, and the Medical Market in Genetic Material." *American Sociological Review*. 72: 319-340 (skim for the central ideas)

Friday:

Spar, Deborah L. 2006. *The Baby Business: How Money, Science, and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (c. 6 Trading Places, c. 7 Songs of Solomon)

We will probably spend part of this class in discussion sections.

III. Going Out: the Sociology of Death

March 11, 14. How People Die

Tuesday:

Lepore, Jill. "The Politics of Death." *The New Yorker*. November 30, 2009

Erickson, Karla A. 2013. *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying*.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (c. 1)

Gawande, Atul. "Letting Go: What should medicine do when it can't save your life."

The New Yorker, August 2, 2010

(<http://www.newyorker.com/services/referral?messageKey=c4ed623feff3db70a6f18f762d5b4475>)

Paper Assignment 2 Distributed

Friday:

Erickson, Karla A. 2013. *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying*.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (c. 2 to the end)

We will probably watch clips from the Bill Moyer's series *On Our Own Terms* this week (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/onourown/terms/>)

Tentative Guest speaker Angelika Zollfrank, MDiv, BCC, Staff Chaplain and Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor, Massachusetts General Hospital.

March 18, 21. Prognostication and a "Good" Death

Tuesday:

Kaufman, Sharon. 2005. *...And a Time to Die: How Hospitals Shape the End of Life*.

New York: Scribner. (c. 1 Death and Hospital Culture)

Steinhauser Karen, et al. "Factors Considered Important at the End of Life by Patients,

Family, Physicians, and Other Care Providers. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 2000; 284: 2476-2482.

Pew Research Center. November 2013. "Views on End of Life Medical Treatments."

Friday:

Christakis, Nicholas A. 1999. *Death Foretold: Prophecy and Prognosis in Medical Care*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Preface and TWO of the following chapters c.1 Prognosis in Medicine, c. 2 Making Use of Prognosis, c. 3 Error and Accountability in Prognostication, c. 8 Duty to Prognosticate)

March 25, 28. Hospice and Palliative Care

Tuesday:

Garces-Foley, Kathleen. 2003. "Buddhism, Hospice and the American Way of Dying."

Review of Religious Research. 44(4):341-353.

McNamara, Beverly et al. 1995. "Threats to the Good Death: The Cultural Context of Stress and Coping Among Hospice Workers." *Sociology of Health and Illness*. 17(2): 222-244.

We will watch part of the film *Pioneers of Hospice: Changing the Face of Dying* in class today.

Tuesday:

Guest Speaker: Kathleen Gallivan, SNDdeN, PhD., Director of the Chaplaincy Department, Brigham and Women's Hospital. (She will speak both about working with palliative care patients and about organ donation – the two are not related!).

April 1, 4. Sudden Death, Suicide, and Ethical Dilemmas at the End of Life

Tuesday:

Howarth, Glennys. 2007. "The Social Organization of Sudden Death." In *Death & Dying: A Sociological Introduction*. Malden, MA: Polity Press. P. 155-176.

Owens, Christabel, Helen Lambert, Keith Lloyd and Jenny Donovan. 2008. "Tales of biographical disintegration: how parents make sense of their sons' suicides." *Sociology of Health & Illness*. 30(2): 237-254.

Timmermans, Stefan. 2005. "Death brokering: constructing culturally appropriate deaths." *Sociology of Health & Illness*. 993-1013.

Friday:

Pew Forum. November 2013. "To End Our Days: The Social, Legal and Political Dimensions of the End of Life Debate."

Drickamer Margaret et al. 1997. "Practical Issues in Physician-Assisted Suicide." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 126: 146-151.

Oregon Death with Dignity Act

April 8, 11: Advanced Planning and Grief

Tuesday:

Christopher, Myra. 2010. "It's Not Optional." *American Journal of Bioethics* 10(4): 1-2.

Bonanno, George. 2009. *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life after Loss*. New York: Basic Books (c. 1-4 and c. 12)

Worden, William. 1991. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* Springer Publishing. (c. 1 and 2).

Frances, Allen. "Good Grief." *New York Times*. August 14, 2010.

Guest speaker: Judith Tsipis, Professor of Biology and Director of the Genetic Counseling Program, Brandeis University. Professor Tsipis will be speaking as the mother of a son with a life limiting illness who died in 1998.

Friday:

Discussion Section

Paper 2 Due

April 15, 18: No Class

April 22: No Class

April 25: Funerals and Rituals Around Death

Tuesday: Visit to Joyce Funeral Home, 245 Main Street, Waltham
(<http://www.joycefuneralhome.com/>).

For background, please read:

Laderman, Gary. 2003. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Please read TWO of the following: Introduction, c. 1 From House Calls to Funeral Homes, c. 4 Keeping the Dead in Place)

Do It Yourself Funerals: <http://www.npr.org/programs/death/971208.death.html>

The final exam will be distributed today (if not before)

IV. Wrapping Up

April 29: Concluding

We will wrap up and de-brief today.

Final Exam Due May 2 at noon in my mailbox in Pearlman Hall.