

<http://somatosphere.net/2011/01/syllabus-culture-mental-health-and.html>

Syllabus: Culture, Mental Health and Psychiatry

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Over the past couple of years I've been developing an advanced survey course on culture, psychiatry and mental health. I've now taught it twice at the University of Chicago, and while I'll continue to make changes, I thought that it might be interesting to share the syllabus with others.

As you'll see in the syllabus, the course is meant to give students an introduction to the central issues in the anthropology of psychiatry and cultural psychiatry. I've tried to frame the course more around concepts rather than illness/disease categories, although there are some exceptions, like the units on psychosis and addiction. There is a definite tension between these two ways of framing a course like this (conceptual vs. thematic) which is partially unresolvable, in part because some mental illnesses have certain conceptual issues that are more or less unique to them.

As for the format, each time I've taught the course so far, we've met twice a week — the first time for a lecture, the second time for discussion. This is one of the areas where I'm hoping to rework this course in the future, shifting to a format in which lecture and discussion are more closely interwoven. If anyone has suggestions for ways of integrating these two or for other hybrid forms, I'd love to hear about them.

In addition to a final paper — the guidelines for which I leave relatively open-ended — I've tried out a few writing assignments. The first time I taught this, students were asked to write one-page weekly reading responses — and post them on the course website the evening prior to the discussion section. This was meant as a way of getting the ground ready for discussion before students arrive in the classroom. While this worked to some extent, I also found that some students were spending too much time working to turn in polished responses rather than simply sketching out some ideas — and this, in turn, seemed to detract from the time they had to spend with the texts themselves.

When I taught the course again this autumn, I assigned two short papers in addition to the final one. The first was an illness narrative. Students were asked to interview a relative or friend about an experience with mental illness or caregiving for someone with a mental illness, or to read a

first-person narrative (typically a memoir) written about mental illness. They were then to write a paper that both presented the narrative and interpreted it, focusing on issues such as the conceptualization and categorization of illness, the relationship of their interlocutor's categories to biomedical ones, the network of diagnostic and healing institutions the patient traversed, and so on. This is a fairly standard assignment in introductory medical anthropology courses, but I was a little concerned about how a focus on mental illness would change things. As it turned out, the vast majority of students who set out to conduct interviews, were able to do so, producing some really astute narratives as a result. A few mentioned that this had been one of the more emotionally difficult assignments they had undertaken as undergrads, but that it had been equally fulfilling for that.

For the second assignment I gave students a list of several mental disorder categories from the DSM-4 (and one proposed for the DSM-5) and asked them to choose one and describe the conditions which have facilitated the emergence and prevalence of the category. We had read [Mad Travelers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses](#), in which Ian Hacking proposes the metaphor of the ecological niche as a way of thinking about mental illness categories — as well as behaviors and self-identifications — which clearly emerge at a certain historical moment and then disappear or become uncommon. I asked students to use Hacking's analysis as a model for their own discussion of a contemporary disorder. I also stipulated that this was not a research assignment, and that in their analysis they were to draw upon their own knowledge of the cultural settings they inhabit. The idea was to get them to think anthropologically about some aspects of a social world they share in, rather than to write a report on the history of a category. Some students struggled with this assignment, and in hindsight I think that in certain cases, asking them to do research might have been a better idea. However, other students wrote really brilliant cultural analyses of the conditions shaping disorders such as hoarding, anorexia, PTSD and social phobia.

Below you'll find the syllabus and my instructions for the transient mental illness assignment. If you have any suggestions for how a course like this might be improved, please comment or get in touch.

[Culture Mental Health Psychiatrist](#) (function() { var scribd = document.createElement("script"); scribd.type = "text/javascript"; scribd.async = true; scribd.src = "http://www.scribd.com/javascripts/embed_code/inject.js"; var s = document.getElementsByTagName("script")[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(scribd, s); })();

[Mental Disorder Assignment](#) (function() { var scribd = document.createElement("script"); scribd.type = "text/javascript"; scribd.async = true; scribd.src =

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"http://www.scribd.com/javascrip/embed_code/inject.js"; var s =  
document.getElementsByTagName("script")[0];  
s.parentNode.insertBefore(scribd, s); }());
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AMA citation

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