

## Sociology of Aging and the Life Course

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Lectures: M 1:20-3:50pm, AGR ENGR 101  
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*Age is not a particularly interesting subject. Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.*

– Groucho Marx

Living long enough to grow old is only unremarkable in societies with a remarkable standard of living. For individuals, old age represents triumph over illnesses, injuries, and a myriad challenges to survival; for populations, aging is an aggregate mark of human success in reducing fertility and curbing the risk of death through innovations in public health and medicine. Groucho Marx's proclamation that longevity is unexceptional in fact underscores the fact that aging – now increasingly common in both high- and low-income countries – is in fact a remarkable achievement. The wisecrack also points to a more intricate idea: that reaching old age and aging well are a function of well-being throughout the life course.

In contrast to Marx, I am convinced that age is a particularly interesting, multi-faceted, and compelling subject, with deep implications for individuals and populations. If you've read this far, perhaps you already agree. Either way, this course aims to give students an appreciation of the interdisciplinary study of aging across the lifecourse, and guide them in developing an understanding of how aging shapes the lives of individuals, families, and society more broadly.

The course will begin by familiarizing students with the factors that have rendered population aging one of the most dramatic and significant demographic features of the United States and other high-longevity societies, both rich and poor. We'll also introduce the life course perspective for the study of human development and aging. We'll discuss connections between individual biographies and the wider historical and socioeconomic contexts in which they unfold and highlight linkages between early-life experiences and later-life well-being.

Because the persistence or diminishment of health is central to the experience of aging, we will emphasize the distribution of health and illness among older adults, discussing the impacts of individual behaviors and health services but primarily examining the social determinants of health in later life and the consequences of population aging for societies.

## Required Readings and Workload

Readings will include theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented research. There is one required book for this class:

Moody, Harry R. and Jennifer R. Sasser. 2018. *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*. 9th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.

All other required readings will be available in PDF format via the course website. I reserve the right to make changes to this schedule if needed. Any changes will be announced in class, via the course email list, and posted on the course website.

This course assumes UW's standard 2:1 rule, meaning that for every course credit hour you spend inside the classroom (namely, 2.5 hours each week) you should expect to spend an average of three hours working on course requirements outside of class (so: 7.5 hours per week). In sum, 10 hours a week average workload. Note this is an average; some weeks you may spend more time, and some weeks less.

You should expect to read approximately 75 pages per week on average; some weeks will be lighter, and some heavier. (This doesn't include the reading you'll need to undertake for your research paper.) **Doing all of the readings, as listed below, is absolutely necessary for success in this course.** Keeping up with the assigned reading will be crucial to your grade. More importantly (to me, at least): you won't get much out of this course if you don't give yourself enough time to get and stay on top of the readings.

## Evaluation

Your grade in this course will be based on the following components:

### 1. Class preparation and participation, tracked through a series of weekly reading response posts, comments on others' posts, and attendance (160 points).

- (a) To help us all engage each other, I ask you to post an entry of approximately 300 words to a discussion thread on the course website. These entries should be made before each class on weeks 2 through 11 (with the exception of week 4, when class will not meet). Your posts are due by **5pm on Sunday** night before class.
- (b) You're also required to comment on the posts of your classmates, as often as you like, but at least once during each week (by **12pm on Monday**). Brief comments (of 100 words) will suffice, though you're always welcome to write more, if you're so inclined.
- (c) The lowest score among your posts will be dropped, so you'll end up with 8 graded posts, at 20 points each. This means that you can take one week off, at your discretion, during the semester. Entries posted after 5pm on Sunday will not be graded (consider that your "off" week).
- (d) The posts do not have to be polished critiques of the readings. That said, they shouldn't just be free-associating riffs on the article titles or abstracts. Good posts will be grounded in at least one text, meaning that they'll include references to page numbers or passages

that you want to discuss. Really good posts will draw connections among texts throughout the course, relate the readings to current events or controversies, take issue with points you disagree with or find to be unclear, or expand on an interesting point. You may include links to multimedia resources or web pages that connect to the weeks readings. Either an informal, reading journal-style tone or a more formal tone is fine, but your writing should be proofread and clear.

- (e) I won't be able to provide feedback (beyond the score) on each of your posts. That said, I'll bring up at least a few of them in each session, and provide written comments on at least some of your posts. If you have any questions about your posts at any time, please do email me about them.
- (f) In order to get full credit for participation, you must attend lectures and be fully engaged in class activities. You will fill out a notecard with a brief response to each class session – these will not be graded, but they will be read and, when appropriate, responded to in future sessions. You may miss 1 class session without penalty. If over the course of the term you're serially (at least 2 or 3 times) absent or showing a lack of preparation, and you haven't provided advance notice of the reason(s), we'll have to talk, and you'll then have 10 points deducted from your preparation and participation grade for each additional unexcused absence and/or class in which you're unable to participate due to demonstrated lack of preparation. I really hope we can avoid this.

**2. Debates (160 points).** Students will be asked to engage with issues that are at the center of current public policy controversies by working in teams to conduct 8 informed in-class debates (20 points each) over the course of the semester. See more details below.

**3. Midterm exam (200 points).** The exam, on November 25th, will consist of brief term identification questions and short essays covering concepts discussed in class and in the readings.

**4. Research paper (340 points).** Your research paper grade will include three components: (i) Paper topic and initial bibliography (30 points, due October 19th); (ii) Detailed outline and thesis statement (50 points, due November 9); and (iii) Complete research paper (260 points, due December 16, 5:00 pm). See more details below.

**5. Presentation (140 points).** You will present the topic and findings of your research paper to the class. Additional guidelines will be forthcoming.

The total points possible for the course is 1000.

## Grade Distribution

This course isn't graded on a curve, which means that you'll earn the grade you receive based on your scores on individual assignments. You'll be able to assess your progress in the course at any time during the semester. Grades will be assigned in accordance with the UW undergraduate grade policy, using the following distribution:

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- A:  $\geq$  930 points
- AB: 870-929 points
- B: 830-869 points
- BC: 770-829 points
- C: 700-769 points
- D: 600-699 points
- F: 599 points or less.

## Debates

Between week 2 and week 11 (with the exception of week 4, when we will not meet), we'll conduct a debate during the second half of each class. The topic of each week's debate is listed in the detailed schedule below, and you will receive an email assigning you to a "side" on each debate after the first day of class. (There are 9 debates in total, so you can choose to sit one out, or have your lowest score dropped).

The readings are meant to inform both sides of the debate, but you're welcome and encouraged to do additional research on your own – both for the purpose of bolstering your side's argument (especially if the readings seem tilted in another direction), and for clarifying your own true position on the issue. Please come to lecture prepared with notes on 3 arguments in favor of your position, as well as evidence that supports these arguments. You must submit these notes (in paper or email form) during each class to receive credit for each debate.

In class, you will have 15 minutes to discuss your arguments with other students on your side of the debate and together, plan and deliver a 10-minute presentation summarizing the most convincing arguments and evidence for your position. You will listen to a similar presentation in favor of the opposite view, and have 5-10 minutes to confer with your group and formulate a rebuttal. At the end, we will have a group discussion about the relative merits of these arguments.

Each debate will count for 20 points towards your grade (for a total of 160). Satisfactory participation in each debate entails coming prepared with notes covering arguments and evidence (which you will submit by the end of class), contributing your ideas to the group's debate and rebuttal strategies, and delivering initial arguments or rebuttals to the class.

## Research paper

Students are expected to identify a topic of interest related to aging and write a research paper reviewing the academic literature on this topic. Successful papers will be structured around a research question (examples will be provided and discussed in class) and will cite at least 7-10 articles (that we have not discussed in class) from peer-reviewed scientific journals.

On October 19th, students will submit their proposed paper topic (ideally phrased as a research question) along with a bibliography of 5-7 relevant articles that address that research question. Then, on November 9th, you will submit a detailed outline that includes a thesis statement

(ideally: a carefully considered answer to the research question you posed) and a summary of the key arguments and data points that support the thesis. You will receive feedback on these assignments and will be expected to incorporate that feedback as you write your paper. Late assignments will lose one letter grade for each day that they are late.

Your final papers must be 8-10 pages in double spaced, in 12pt Times New Roman font. The final papers are due on December 16th via Canvas.

## Accommodations

I am committed to making Soc 575 an accessible and inclusive educational experience for all students. The McBurney Center is a key resource for expanding the accessibility of UW-Madison classes, and their website has detailed information about the services and assistance they offer: <http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/>. If you would like to request particular arrangements or accommodations for testing, assignments, or other aspects of the course, please be in touch with me directly, or work with the McBurney Connect system to send me a Faculty Notification Letter.

If you wish to request a scheduling accommodation for religious observances, please send an email by the end of the second week of the course stating the specific date(s) for which you request accommodation; campus policy requires that religious observances be accommodated if you make a timely request early in the term. See <https://kb.wisc.edu/page.php?id=21698> for details.

## Academic Honesty

In your written assignments, you are expected to exercise academic honesty and integrity and to produce original work. If you must use the exact words used in another source, use quotation marks to indicate that those words are not your own and provide full credit to the source. If you are using an idea you obtained from someone else, cite the author(s), even if you did not quote her/him/them directly. The set of ideas you must cite includes those obtained from Wikipedia or any internet source. According to UWS 14, academic misconduct occurs when a student:

- seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or citation;
- uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise;
- forges or falsifies academic documents or records;
- intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others;
- engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of [...] academic performance;
- assists other students in any of these acts.

The university's Writing Center has an excellent webpage about how to successfully quote and paraphrase texts: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QuotingSources.html>. See also these guidelines about avoiding plagiarism: [http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA\\_plagiarism.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html).

The internet makes it very easy to plagiarize (both intentionally and not), but it also makes it easy to identify plagiarized texts. Evidence of academic dishonesty in an assignment will result in an automatic grade of zero for the assignment, and will be reported to the Dean of Students following a meeting with the professor.

## Department learning objectives

Beyond the specific substantive and methodological content I will cover in this course, I have designed this course to achieve the following instructional objectives designated as priorities by the Department of Sociology:

- *Critically Evaluate Published Research*: Students will be able to read and evaluate published research as it appears in academic journals and popular or policy publications.
- *Communicate Skillfully*: Students write papers and make oral presentations that build arguments and assess evidence in a clear and effective manner.
- *Critical Thinking about Society and Social Processes*: Students can look beyond the surface of issues to discover the "why" and "how" of social order and structure and consider the underlying social mechanisms that may be creating a situation, identify evidence that may adjudicate between alternate explanations for phenomena, and develop proposed policies or action plans in light of theory and data.
- *See Things from a Global Perspective*: Students learn about different cultures, groups, and societies across both time and place. They are aware of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among residents of the United States. They understand the ways events and processes in one country are linked to those in other countries.
- *Work effectively in groups*: Students will improve their skills in understanding group dynamics and working well with people from different backgrounds with different strengths and weaknesses.

## Departmental notice of grievance and appeal rights

The Department of Sociology regularly conducts student evaluations of all professors and teaching assistants near the end of the semester. Students who have more immediate concerns about this course should report them to the instructor or to the chair of the Sociology department, Professor Christine Schwartz (cschwartz@wisc.edu).

## Course Overview and Organization

For the first 11 weeks of the course, class sessions will consist of a combination of lectures, discussions of the assigned readings and students' posted responses, and in-class debates. Following the exam in week 12, class sessions will be devoted to student research presentations.

Week	Date	Topic	Notes
1	September 9	Introduction	
2	September 16	Aging individuals and populations	
3	September 23	Aging and health	
4	September 30	<b>No class</b>	<i>Rosh Hashana</i>
5	October 7	Early life influences on later life outcomes	
6	October 14	Aging in the US & globally	<b>Paper topic due 10/19</b>
7	October 21	Gender across the life course	
8	October 28	Later-life health disparities: Race & SES	
9	November 4	Work and retirement	<b>Outline due 11/9</b>
10	November 11	Aging and the family	
11	November 18	Ageism & the end of life	
12	November 25	<b>Exam</b>	
13	December 2	Student research presentations	
14	December 9	Student research presentations	<b>Paper due 12/16</b>

## Detailed Schedule

### Sept 9: Introductions

After an overview of the course's logistics and themes, we'll watch and discuss the movie *Nine to Ninety*, directed by Alicia Dwyer and produced by Juli Vizza.

### September 16: Aging Individuals and Aging Populations

*Debate: Is the aging of our population good or bad for society?*

Moody & Sasser, Basic Concepts I: A life course perspective on aging. pp.1-27.

Wilmoth, J. R. 2007. Human Longevity in Historical Perspective. Pp. 11-22 in *Physiological Basis of Aging and Geriatrics* (4th ed.), edited by P. S. Timiras. New York: Informa Healthcare.

Martin, L. 2011. Demography and Aging. **pp.33-36 and 41-43** in *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (7th ed.), edited by R.H. Binstock and L.K. George. Academic Press.

Katz, S. 1992. Alarmist Demography: Power, Knowledge, and the Elderly Population. *Journal of Aging Studies* 6(3): 203-225.

### **September 23: Aging and Health**

*Debate: Should we ration health care for older people?*

Fries, J.F. 1980. Aging, natural death, and the compression of morbidity. *New England Journal of Medicine* 303: 130-135.

Crimmins, Eileen . 2017. "Trends in Mortality, Disease and Physiological Status in the Older Population." pp.3-30 in *Future Directions for the Demography of Aging*. Mark Hayward & Malay K. Majmundar (eds). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Moody & Sasser, Controversy 4, pp.167-199.

### **September 30: No Class (Rosh Hashana)**

### **October 7: What Determines Later-Life Outcomes?**

*Debate: What matters more for health in later life: early or midlife factors?*

Stephen S. Hall (2007) Small and thin: The controversy over the fetal origins of adult health. *The New Yorker* <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/11/19/small-and-thin>

Montez, J.K.and M.D. Hayward. 2011. "Early Life Conditions and Later Life Mortality." Pp. 187-206 in *International Handbook of Adult Mortality*, edited by R.G. Rogers and E.M. Crimmins. New York: Springer Publishers.

Kunkel, S.R. and Morgan, L.A., 2015. Aging and Health: Individuals, Institutions, and Policies. Chapter 8 in *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*. Springer Publishing Company. pp. 205–237. (SKIM)

Ann Bowling & Paul Dieppe. 2005. What is successful ageing and who should define it? *BMJ* 331:1548-51

### **October 14: Aging in the United States and Globally**

*Debate: Should scarce resources be invested in younger or older people?*

Moody & Sasser, Social and Economic Outlook for an aging society p. 297-330. (SKIM)

Moody & Sasser, Controversy 8, pp.331-360.

Kunkel, S.R. and Morgan, L.A., 2015. Global Aging. Chapter 10 in *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*. Springer Publishing Company. pp. 271-298. (SKIM)

Engelman, M., & Johnson, S. (2007). Population aging and international development: Addressing competing claims of distributive justice. *Developing World Bioethics*, 7(1), 8-18.

## **October 21: Gender Across the Life Course**

*Debate: Who is more vulnerable, women or men?*

Austad, Steven N. 2006. Why women live longer than men: Sex differences in longevity. *Gender Medicine* 3(2): 79-92

Anne Case and Christina Paxson. 2005. Sex Differences in Morbidity and Mortality. *Demography* 42(2):189-214.

Calasanti, T. 2010. Gender Relations and Applied Research on Aging. *The Gerontologist* 50(6):720-734.

Fredriksen Goldsen K.I, Jen, S., and Muraco A. 2019. Iridescent Life Course; LGBTQ Aging Research and Blueprint for the Future. *Gerontology* 253-274. **Focus on p. 266-272.**

## **October 28: Aging, Race, and Socioeconomic Status**

*Debate: Should we prioritize health interventions that address racial disparities or socioeconomic ones?*

Dannefer, D. Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 58(6):S327S337, 2003.

Williams, David R. and Mohammed, Selina A. 2013. Racism and Health: Pathways and Scientific Evidence. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(8) 1152-1173.

LaVeist, T. A. (2005). Disentangling race and socioeconomic status: a key to understanding health inequalities. *Journal of Urban Health* 82(3), iii26-iii34.

Darity Jr, W., Hamilton, D., Paul, M., Aja, A., Price, A., Moore, A., & Chiopris, C. (2018). *What we get wrong about closing the racial wealth gap*. Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

## **November 4: Work and Retirement Across the Life Course**

*Debate: Should the retirement age be raised?*

Zajacova, A., Montez, J. K., & Herd, P. 2014. Socioeconomic disparities in health among older adults and the implications for the retirement age debate: a brief report. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, gbu041.

Moody & Sasser, Controversy 9 and 10, pp.361-441.

**November 11: Family and intergenerational relations**

*Debate: Should families be primarily responsible for eldercare?*

Kunkel, S.R. and Morgan, L.A., 2015. Aging and the Family: Personal and Institutional Contexts. Chapter 5 in *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*. Springer Publishing Company. pp. 107-135.

Moody & Sasser, Controversy 5, pp.201-235.

**November 18: Ageism and the End of Life**

*Debate: Should people have the choice to end their lives?*

Achenbaum, W. A. (2015). A history of ageism since 1969. *Generations*, 39(3), 10-16.

Kaufman, S.R., 2000. Senescence, decline, and the quest for a good death: Contemporary dilemmas and historical antecedents. *Journal of Aging Studies* 14(1); 1-23.

Moody & Sasser, Controversy 7, pp.265-296.

**November 25: Exam**

**Dec 2 & Dec 9: Student research presentations**

The final paper is due via CANVAS on December 16th.