SOCI 389 ¹
Course Title: Death and Dying

Instructor: Tucker D. Farris, M.A.

Course Description:

(From UVIC Catalog): “Sociological approaches to death and dying, emphasizing cross-cultural differences in the construction of the meaning of death and dying, the rituals accompanying these processes, and their legal, economic and political aspects. The course also focuses on how death is accounted for and processed by state and health agencies.”

This course will examine the social process(es) of death and dying in contemporary society with specific attention paid to the current social context of the COVID-19 world health crisis. Students will explore the concept of death from a variety of theoretical and philosophical traditions in order to gain a specific understanding of the social weight placed on mortality and, as a result, may hopefully gain valuable insights into life as a social being. We will cover several areas specifically related to how different cultures and spiritual traditions approach the philosophy of death, as well as exploring the idea of death with a sociological lens. This will be a class where one may expect to explore the idea of death in a social way and we may together explore the narratives and ideas surrounding the end of life in our cultural contexts as well as in others.

Ultimately, the end of life is a deeply social component of our existence, where awareness of our own mortality colours our experience of everyday life in ways that are both implicit and explicit. This course will allow students to explore the deeper meanings of death and dying across cultures and within their own social contexts to strive at developing a more complete system of social knowing around death.

Course Objectives:

Students will engage in critical mediations and theoretical applications towards the concept of death and the process of dying. They will grapple with these crucial components of life (and social life) in a socially metacognitive fashion. There are several key objectives students will be expected to accomplish over the course of the term: (1) to gain a broad understanding of key philosophical and theoretical understandings of the social components of death and dying; (2) to contextualize death and dying in the contemporary social world, with a specific focus on the implications and social changes surrounding death and dying as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 world health crisis; (3) to gain an understanding of cross-cultural social rituals surrounding mortality, death, and dying; (4) to exhibit a degree of metacognitive introspection into their own mortality and the social factors they engage with in their social realities as a result; (5) to develop a sociological knowledge of the legal and institutional factors pertaining to death, and to explore

¹ This outline is only intended to give an overall sense of the course. A detailed course outline will be made available in August before the first day of class. Only that outline is to be considered official.
the concepts of legal institutions’ contributions to the overall definition of mortality. Finally, it is expected that this course is part informative and part reflective so that students may develop both an understanding of death and dying from an academic perspective, as well as a personal one. Students will engage these social forces in both academic and personal ways through readings and through the semester-long composition of an introspective sociological journal wherein they will reflect on the concepts discussed in class and their current existence in a global pandemic. These journals will be referred to as ‘plague diaries’ and will be students’ primary form of assessment for the course.

Course Pre-requisites:
None, SOCI 285 recommended

Topics May Include:
The metaphysics of death and dying in contemporary society, philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the subject in both historical and contemporary veins, the sociologically interactive components of death and dying, spiritual contributions to the human understanding of mortality, cross-cultural explorations of death ritual and conception (including indigenous perspectives and effects of colonialism on these perspectives), typology of death (I.E. when does a death become ‘tragic,’ or ‘heroic”), institutional realities of death and dying (legal processes of death/interactions with the state regarding death), the neoliberal state and death, genocides and state-sanctioned death, social interpretations of death (I.E. socially constructed explanations and rationalizations of death), sociohistorical components of death and dying, the future of death (explorations in our contemporary engagements in death and a sociological look into emergent trends of how death is being considered as we evolve into the 21st century), and most critically: death and dying in the age of COVID-19.

Required Resources May Include:
Course material will be a sampling of readings from peer-reviewed journals, primary writings from key theorists, and excerpts from Daniel Defoe’s *A Diary of the Plague Year*. All readings will be made available via coursespaces.

The course will require access to a computer with internet connection and audio/visual capabilities or other means of digital engagement for both discussion and assessment components of the course.

Additional resources may include documentary films/video clips/podcasts (‘oral histories’ related to COVID-19 and death within the pandemic)

Mode of Delivery:
The course is scheduled for Monday and Thursday at 6:30 PM (PST) to 7:50 PM (PST) and will be implemented with both synchronous and asynchronous components. Each week students will read the required readings and choose one additional ‘choice reading’ from the selections posted on coursespaces. Monday will consist of a pre-recorded lecture on the focal points of that week and a summary of the required readings. On Thursdays, students will meet via synchronous video conference to discuss ‘choice readings’ these discussions will be in small groups that are determined by which readings students read. The first half of class will be students breaking off
into groups based on their chosen readings for that week and discussing them based on a set of guiding questions. The second half will be a collective group session wherein students from each group will present their choice readings to the class and provide ‘mini-lectures’ on that content to the entire class. Additionally, students will engage in a weekly written assignment (the ‘plague diary’) which will see them engaging with course material and applying it to the current world health crisis and their own lives. These contributions will be relatively short, but the diary will grow to be a substantial metaphysical/introspective piece on death and dying. Students’ final assignment will be to edit their diaries into a complete volume and to write a short (5-7 page) commentary of their work over the semester.