

Bellevue College

SOC260: Death & Dying

Sara Sutler-Cohen, Ph.D. | Winter 2020: January 2 – March 20

Office Hours – By appt, online or on the phone

[Email](#) | [Website](#)

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course acquaints you with applied sociological concepts and perspectives as you become aware of and explore the realm of death in U.S. society. We will critically engage what it means to engage “Death and the Sociological Imagination” as we explore the socio-historical meaning of death over the past couple of centuries and how Death itself has become a booming industry in the United States. Through lecture, film, and other media, as well as assigned readings, this course will take you on an exploration of the many dimensions of the social space of death and dying. We will make broad use of history, social psychology, and cultural studies as they intersect with the field of sociology to better understand the many complexities of death and dying in our social landscape today. By the end of this course, I hope to have all of you thinking critically about death and dying, including the way political, social, religious, and cultural history has shaped death. We will also investigate how and why things work the way they do today and who we are in terms of the way we imagine the space of death in our social worlds. You will be asked, over the term, to confront the things you take for granted. Everyday occurrences will be challenged and thought through critically. Imagine yourself as Neo from “The Matrix” when he decides to take the Red Pill or Alice when she decides to explore the rabbit hole. Both must deal with what’s at the end of their adventures. What will *you* find at the end of *this* adventure?



A NOTE ABOUT COURSE CONTENT: Since sociologists examine just about every aspect of the social world, we talk about provocative material. When we explore controversial topics, they will always be framed within an academic context. Keep in mind that when we find ourselves in a space outside of our comfort zone, it's an opportunity for learning, and you may be confronted with subject matter that is difficult to watch, see, discuss, or listen to. Please note that you will be responsible for any course material you miss if you choose not to participate. If you have any questions or concerns about content or climate, feel free to speak with me about it right away.

READING REQUIREMENTS:

- All readings & handouts are available on our Canvas site.
- Review the Start Here Module closely!
- Readings are uploaded in each module.

STRONGLY RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- Any current Sociology Dictionary
- Any writing guide to help you in your quest for mastering college-level writing.
- Purdue College's [resources for college students](#).

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: If you have medical information to share with me in the event of an emergency, please contact me via email. Emergency preparedness is important! If you need course modifications, adaptations, or accommodations because of a disability, please see me immediately so I can also refer you to our Disability Resource Center (DRC). If you prefer, you may contact them directly by going to B132 or by calling 425.564.2498 or TTY 425.564.4110. Information is also available on their [website](#).

EXPLORE THE LMC! The Library Media Center is at your fingertips! I *strongly* encourage you to visit the LMC at least once a week, but you can also access it via the web. Talk to a Reference Librarian at the Library (D-126), by calling (425) 564-6161, or by [email](#).

- [LMC Research Guide](#)
- [Main Library Media Center](#)
- [For article databases](#)

LEARNING AND COURSE OUTCOMES: Upon your dedicated participation and completion of this course, you will demonstrate:



- 1) A general understanding of basic concepts most widely used in sociology today, including the recent move toward cultural studies.
- 2) A historically critical idea of death and dying as related to society and community.
- 3) A general knowledge and comprehension of how social, political, and cultural perspectives of death are played out, and how some folks perceive those experiences.
- 4) A general understanding of death and dying representations for various groups in historical and contemporary analyses of culture in the United States. In addition, we will explore the way in which these representations play out in popular culture texts.
- 5) A close inspection of The Business of Death in contemporary U.S. culture.

Rules & Expectations:

Check into our online classroom often. No need to check in with me on this one. Make this class work for you on your own time.

Complete your readings and homework assignments ***on time***. You need to read/review your required material to complete all homework assignments.

I do not accept second, third, fourth, etc. submissions. What you submit the first time is what gets graded.

Late work Policy:

- You will recognize that every professor has their approach to late work. This pairs with teaching philosophies and styles, and as such, you want to review and understand the rules. I try to make mine as clear as possible, but if you ever have questions, post to our Q&A Forum.
- Discussion Boards: Initial Discussion Board Posts (your main Discussion Board homework) are due on Thursdays. You are required to respond to the Initial Posts of two of your colleagues by the Sunday in the week of the active Discussion Board. Five points deduct your Initial Post per day late. After Sunday, the Discussions close for the week and no more late work is accepted. Your timely and active participation in Discussions is an important aspect of this class.
- Other Homework: There is a two-day grace period for homework assignments. After that, I do not accept late work.
- Exams: If you don't have a midterm or final exam, no worries. Otherwise, note that I do not accept any late midterms or exams. The quizzes I have for my classes are always open until the end of the term.
- Final Paper: There are no late assignments accepted for Final Term Papers (sometimes called Portfolio Assignments) and all Incremental Assignments associated with the Final Paper.

Life happens. We have stressors. We must manage them. That includes traveling for work or pleasure and any problems with your jobs, partners, parents, siblings, friends, kids, other classes, etc. that come up. Please manage your lives so that you can also manage this class. Your life (and your homework) is your responsibility. That said, I allow two assignment extensions per term. Use those opportunities wisely.

I expect that your behavior in our classroom is respectful. Continued disrespectful behavior in my class will result in your grade lowering. Please keep your postings to discussion boards (DBs) thoughtful and polite. One-on-one conversations should be taken offline, so our DBs don't get clogged. If you find at any point that you are uncomfortable with anything posted to a DB, please email me right away. Be wary of soapboxing in this class; you may be tempted to present your opinion and editorialize but refrain from doing this. We're here to think about the world in a fair, balanced, thoughtful, and nuanced manner. One-way thinking doesn't work here.

Remember: Falling behind can be hazardous to your health!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: In this course, you will be completing assigned readings, participating in discussion board assignments, and completing short homework assignments. The work you do for this class will keep you critically engaged with the world around you from a sociological perspective. There is a Final Exam and a Midterm Exam. Expect to be writing every week. The key to this course is your thoughtful reflection on course material.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Attendance and Participation*:	75 points
Key Terms Assignments (5):	100 points
Flex Your Head Assignments (2):	150 points
Main Discussion Boards (3):	300 points
Course Exams, Overall:	300 points
TOTAL:	925 points



The Fine Print:

*Participation points accrue with various short assignments in the Discussion Area, such as your Introductory DB. These are labeled **PARTICIPATION DBs**. The Main DB assignments are labeled **MAIN DBs**.*

All assignments have corresponding rubrics and general directions, which are uploaded in our Handouts Area of the course.

Attendance & Participation:

- Sign in to the class no less than four times per week.
- Be engaged with all of your discussion board assignments.
- Provoke energetic and polite discussion.
- Listen/read/comprehend actively.
- Work respectfully with your colleagues in class.
- Take notes from your readings, look up words you don't understand, ask questions, and think critically about the world around you.
- Make use of the Q&A Board.

Key Terms Assignments: You are expected to understand certain terms used in the area of Death Studies. For these assignments, you will demonstrate your understanding by following exercises laid out for you in the Key Terms accompanying presentations. Remember this important note about your KT assignments: you ***must do the reading***. To do well on these assignments, reading the articles and watching the films all the way through is vital to your success. Be aware that some of these require a few days, or even a week, of preparatory work. Make sure you look ahead at your homework!

Flex Your Head Assignments: These short assignments are an opportunity to put your learning to use as you explore the world around you using the themes and theories we examine in this course. Be aware that some of these require a few days, or even a week, of preparatory work. Make sure you look ahead at your homework!

Main Discussion Board Assignments: The work done in the Discussion Board area will have you engage in course material and work closely together. You are expected to participate in these assignments to generate critical discussion amongst one another. Be aware that some of these require a few days, or even a week, of preparatory work. Make sure you look ahead at your homework! This method of learning gets you going socially! These assignments are always due on Thursdays and Sundays (your initial post goes up Thursday and your responses to one another are due by midnight on Sundays). Your DBs are graded on two things: your original post and your responses (at least two of them) to colleagues of yours in the class. You must do both to earn full credit.



Participation Discussion Board Assignments: These are meant to support you throughout the course. They are required, and the grades get folded into your overall Participation Grade.

Midterm and Final: Your Exams cover everything up through the week they're scheduled; the midterm is made up of short-answer questions. The Final Exam is also a series of short answer questions. Your responses should be clear and concise. You will never be asked a question out of "left field." Questions are based on all of our course material. Point distribution info will be on the exams.

For all your written work: Submit proofread work **only**. Work not proofread will be returned **once** for a rewrite, expected to be handed in within 48 hours. If you need help with your writing, please make use of the following student support services:

- [Academic Success Center](#)
- [Academic Tutoring Center](#)
- [TRiO Student Support Services](#)
- [Writing Lab @ BC](#)

Below is a checklist for you to go over before you hand in each written assignment.

- Twelve-point sized Times font, double-spaced
- 1" margins all around
- APA Citations where appropriate – credit must be given even where any *ideas* presented in the paper are not your own (see notes below about avoiding plagiarism)
- Title pages and bibliographies are not counted as pages due
- Student information is at the top left of the page, single-spaced
- There are no extra spaces between paragraphs.
- Paragraphs contain no less than four sentences.
- Magazines, newspapers, journals, and books are *italicized*. Movie titles, article titles, song titles, etc. are "in quotation marks." Quotes inside of a quotation use 'single quotation marks.'

- Avoid the universal “we,” “our,” “us” – ask yourself: Can I speak for everyone? If you cannot, do not write it. Avoid phrasing such as “nowadays...” and “since the beginning of time.” Be accurate. Know what you’re writing and why.
- *Do not use* Wikipedia, CliffNotes, or other such encyclopedic references. Wikipedia is not peer-reviewed and, therefore unreliable. Do your research. If you’re going to research online (which is encouraged and legit), make sure you understand what you’re looking for. Do a deep dive into the internet to find your stuff.
- Be sure that no more than 20% of your papers are outside sources. You must be providing your analysis while you draw from the material presented to you in class.

Your written work is evaluated on:

1) Content

- a. Fulfilling the entire assignment. Doing the minimum amount of work expected will likely get you a passing grade, but not an outstanding one. You’re expected to go the extra mile.
- b. Fully developing your argument(s) and making use of examples and evidence to support your argument(s).
- c. Flow of thought throughout the paper, with strong analyses and conclusions.

2) Writing Style

- a. Excellent command of the written English language. In other words, most excellent grammar. **NOTE: If you struggle with grammar and spelling or are an ESL student, please let me know! I’m happy to work with you and point you in the right direction.**
- b. Clarity of thought.
- c. Good organization and attention to detail.
- d. Persuasiveness of your argument/s.
- e. Creativity. Make it an interesting read!
- f. PROOFREAD your work. Please do a spell/grammar check before you hand it in. Read it out loud to yourself, too! It helps.
- g. Dude, like totally, don’t write **colloquially**. A conversation is a conversation. A paper is an entirely different way of presenting your research and ideas. ☺

Preventing Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty occurring when students use information or material from outside sources and do not properly cite those sources. This is grounds for disciplinary action. It is your responsibility to understand plagiarism and its consequences. Plagiarism occurs if:

- a. You do not cite quotations and/or attribute borrowed ideas.
- b. You fail to enclose borrowed language in quotation marks.
- c. You do not write summaries and paraphrases in his/her own words and/or doesn’t document his/her source.
- d. You turn in work created by another person.
- e. You submit or use your prior work for a current or past course, or work from one current course in another course *without express permission* from your professors. This may also be considered academic dishonesty.
- f. Consequences: If it is determined that you have plagiarized or engaged in other forms of academic dishonesty, you will likely fail the assignment and possibly the course, despite

points earned through other work. Acts of academic dishonesty are reviewed for disciplinary action.

Grading:

Please use the following rubric to help explain the grade you're given for a given assignment. I offer comments on all of your written work and general comments on the Discussion Boards – sometimes more, sometimes less. Please read my comments and do not hesitate to come to me with any questions you ever have on a grade you receive. There is no limit to how many times you email me! My email door is *always* open.

90-100 = A. “A” work shows me you’re engaged with all course material by utilizing quotes and ideas. It is writing **completely free** from grammar and spelling errors, demonstrating your command not only of the English language but of the form and flow of a solid piece of written work. I also like to see/read/hear your “writing voice.” That is, I want your style to come through! Your arguments should be solid and backed up with intellectual ammunition. You should demonstrate a strong understanding of our readings and the in-class media and how they intersect with one another. Your ideas should be “fleshed out” and not just a series of statements, in other words.



80-89 = B. The “B” tells me you’re doing very good work. You may have a couple of grammar issues, but your work is still tidy, and the writing is still strong. You have a firm grasp on the themes in the course, but you may not be as well-versed in the readings and/or media and/or lecture material as you could be. I should see that you’re being challenged and that you’re struggling with the course issues and themes, and what they represent to you in an interconnected way. Your understandings of some of the course materials are stronger than others.

70-79 = C. “C” work means that you’re not as invested in the material as I would like to see. Your writing is relatively weaker than it could be, and you’re not thinking as critically as I would like you to. You write the bare minimum of the length requirement. Some of what you point out I may not follow logically, and your use of the course materials may not be as solid as it could be. You omit some of the important points raised in class.

60-69 = D. Ah, the “D.” “D” is for “Don’t Be Discouraged.” I will work closely with each of you as much as time allows, getting you up to speed in class. Your struggles should not be with writing so much at this point but if they are please see me immediately. “D” work is not proofread, nor does it deal critically with the themes in the course. It responds, perhaps, to one part of one of the readings but there is little-to-no integration of material and you’re not responding to the questions raised in the assignment. Demonstrated understanding of the course materials is not presented clearly, or at all. (NOTE: A “D” and below may be rewritten **once, with permission from me**, if you choose to do so. It must be turned in within 72 hours, and I enter the better grade.)

A: 94-100
A-: 90-93
B+: 87-89
B: 84-86
B-: 80-83
C+: 77-79
C: 74-76
C-: 70-73
D+: 67-69
D: 60-66
F: 59 and below

COURSE OUTLINE AND SCHEDULE:

ALL MATERIAL REQUIRED UNLESS SPECIFIED AS *RECOMMENDED*

Module One, January 2

Readings:

- "The Sociology of Death" Presentation
- *Death, Dying, and Bereavement* (Recommended Reading)

Assignments:

- Participation DB 1 – Introductions. Due Sunday, 1/5
- Participation DB 2 – Sociological Imagination & Death. Due Sunday, 1/5

Quote of the Week: "Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything; or, as we are told, it is really a change: a migration of the soul from one place to another." – Socrates, Philosopher (469 – 399 BC)

Module Two, January 6

Readings:

- Parker, B., Schneider, M., & Winter, L. (2007). Imagining the Alternatives to Life Prolonging Treatments: Elders' Beliefs about the Dying Experience. *Death Studies*, 31: 619-631.

Film:

- ["Facing Death"](#)
- ["Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality"](#)

Assignments:

- Key Terms 1 Due Sunday, 1/12

Quote of the Week: "Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible." - Frank Zappa, Musician, Writer, Poet (1940 – 1993)

Module Three, January 13

Readings:

- Thomson, Graeme. (2008). The Art of Dying. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 55 Issue 12, pB16-B17
- Tomer, A. & Wong P. (2011). Beyond Terror and Denial: The Positive Psychology of Death Acceptance. *Death Studies*, 35, 99-106.

- Sutler-Cohen, Sara C. (2011). "Plans are pointless. Staying alive is as good as it gets." *Zombie Sociology and the Politics of Survival. Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Walking Dead.* Moreman, C. and Rushton, C., eds. McFarland & Co.

Assignments:

- Key Terms II, due Sunday 1/19
- Flex Your Head Assignment I, due Sunday 1/19

Quote of the Week: "All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsions, habit, reason, passion, desire." - Aristotle, Philosopher (384 – 322 BC)

Module Four, January 20

Please note, the next two weeks deal with suicide. The films we're going to watch can be very challenging to watch. If you have any difficulties discussing or studying suicide, please let me know. These are very well done films. They are incredibly thoughtful and quite beautiful.

Reading:

- Kitanaka, Junko. (2008). Diagnosing Suicides of Resolve: Psychiatric Practice in Contemporary Japan. *Culture, Medicine, & Psychiatry*, Vol. 32 Issue 2, p152-176.

Film:

- [Aokigahara: Suicide Forest](#)

Assignments:

- Main Discussion Board I, initial response due Thursday 1/23, Responses to the Initial Posts of two classmates due by Sunday, January 26.

Quote of the Week: "I leave you my portrait so that you will have my presence all the days and nights that I am away from you." - Frida Kahlo, Activist, Poet, Painter, Sculptor (1907 – 1954)

Module Five, January 27

Assignments:

- Midterm Examination due Sunday, February 2. The Exam will open at 8:00 am, PST on Thursday, January 30. and will be available for you until 11:59, Sunday the 2nd. The Exam should take no more than two hours but will be open for four to accommodate anyone needing extra time. It is open book and open note. Use your Key Terms assignments as your study guides.

Module Six, February 3

Reading:

- [Why do people commit suicide?](#)
- [Controversy over "The Bridge"](#)

Film:

- [The Bridge](#)

Assignments:

- Main Discussion Board II. Initial Post due Thursday, February 6, responses by Sunday, February 9.

Quote of the Week: "Of course you don't die. Nobody dies. Death doesn't exist. You only reach a new level of vision, a new realm of consciousness, a new unknown world." - Henry Miller, Novelist (1891 – 1980)

Module Seven, February 10

Readings:

- Lynch, T. (2004). Funerals-R-Us: From Funeral Home to Mega-Industry. *Generations*, 28 (2), 11-14.

- [Infinity Burial Project Blog: The Infinity Mushroom](#)

Video & Film:

- [The Undertaking. Frontline.](#)

Assignments:

- Key Terms Assignment III, due Sunday 2/16

Quote of the week: "You think you're so clever and classless and free." - John Lennon, Musician, Activist, Poet (1940 – 1980)

Module Eight, February 17

Readings:

- Gibson, M. (2007). Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture. *Health Sociology Review*, 16(5), 415-424.
- ["This site lets you control your social media profiles after you've died"](#)

Review Website:

- [DeadSocial](#)

Video:

- [Mary Roach on C-Span](#)

Assignments:

- Flex Your Head Assignment II, due Sunday 2/23
- Key Terms Assignment IV, due Sunday 2/23

Quote of the Week: "Health nuts are going to feel stupid someday, lying in hospitals dying of nothing." - Redd Foxx, Comedian, Artist, Writer, Actor, Activist (1922 – 1991)

Module Nine, February 24

Leap Year!

Readings:

- Ironstone-Catterall, P. (2004). When Isaak Was Gone: An Auto-Ethnographic Meditation on Mourning a Toddler. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 50(1), 1-21.
- Kaufman, K.R., & Kaufman, N.D. (2005). Childhood Mourning: Prospective Case Analysis of Multiple Losses. *Death Studies*, 29(3), 237-249.

Assignments:

- Key Terms Assignment V, due Sunday 3/1
- Flex Your Head Assignment 3, due Sunday 3/1

Quote of the Week: "I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear. I hope to be spared as much pain as possible on the approach path. I was perfectly content before I was born, and I think of death as the same state. I am grateful for the gifts of intelligence, love, wonder, and laughter. You can't say it wasn't interesting. My lifetime's memories are what I have brought home from the trip. I will require them for eternity no more than that little souvenir of the Eiffel Tower I brought home from Paris." - Roger Ebert, American Journalist, Screenwriter, Film Critic, Television and Radio Personality (1942 – 2013)

Module Ten, March 2

Film:

- Tim Wilson, [Griefwalker](#). 2008. National Film Board of Canada.

Assignments:

- Main Discussion Board III, initial response due Thursday 3/5. Responses due Sunday, 3/8.

Quote of the Week: “A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.” – Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Leader, Minister, Activist, Writer, Intellectual, Religious Thinker (1929 – 1968)

Module Eleven, March 9

- No readings – catch up and study for your final. Please closely review your assignments for your Final Exam.

Assignments:

- Participation DB, Learning Outcomes Review, due Sunday, 3/15

Quote of the Week: “Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see.” – Helen Keller, Activist, Poet, Writer, Community Leader (1880 – 1968)

Final Exams Week: March 18-20

Final Exam will be open from 8:00 am 3/18 through 11:59 pm 3/20

The exam is untimed but will end when you close the exam, and you will not be able to return to it. There are no late exams accepted.

Quote of the Week: “If you're losing your soul, and you know it, then you've still got a soul left to lose.” – Charles “Hank” Bukowski, Poet, Novelist (1920 – 1994)

Let's have a wonderful term!