Sociology M138, Winter 2009
Death, Suicide, and Trauma
TA: Tara McKay

Office hours: Tuesdays 11am to 1pm at Northern Lights

How to contact me: By email, during OH, or before/after lecture (preferred)
Email: tmckay@ucla.edu (please do not email me your assignments, but submit them to the section website)

Absences: If you miss section, please check the syllabus and consult with other students in your group to catch up on what you’ve missed. Please speak to me in person with appropriate documentation to request an excused absence. If you can attend another one of my sections to make up your absence, you are welcome to do so without pre-arranging this with me.

Overview
Our main goal in section is to develop the analytical and methodological skills you need to successfully complete your group project. At the beginning of the quarter, we will devote more time in section to talking about the concepts and methods in readings assigned for section. As the quarter progresses, we will devote more time to your group research projects. In the final two weeks, you will present your group projects in section.

Group Projects
Sociologist Eric Klinenberg introduced the concept of the “social autopsy” in his study of the heat wave disaster of the summer of 1995 that claimed more than 700 lives in Chicago. Klinenberg distinguishes a social autopsy from the better known medical and psychological one. In a medical autopsy, a pathologist investigates a dead body to deduce the cause and manner of death. In a psychological autopsy, a psychologist interviews relatives and friends to reconstruct the psychological events leading up to suicide or to determine whether suicide was the manner of death. According to Klinenberg, a social autopsy also uses dead bodies as evidence; not for medical purposes but to reconstruct the events preceding the death and examine the social policies or lack thereof to provide a broader societal explanation for death. Thus, in the Chicago disaster, Klinenberg looks at the way the media, the mayor, the medical examiner, and public health officials interpret the sudden surge in deaths and he explores the variety of municipal and state policy initiatives or lack thereof that “facilitated” the disaster.

Social scientists have argued that in some suspicious deaths a social autopsy might be warranted to explain the sudden passing. The purpose of the group project is to offer you the opportunity to engage in supervised research and to explore some of the classical and contemporary sociological studies on death investigation. To prepare you for these projects, we will collectively discuss a number of exemplary works that will provide a theoretical and methodological backdrop for thinking about your own group project. The task of the students is to conduct a social autopsy of one particular case-study. As a group, you will select a suspicious death and provide a socially contextualized explanation for the death. The research
will likely consist of a combination of interviews with policy makers, care providers, maybe relatives of people who underwent these deaths, and primary-sources library research. Each student is expected to individually complete components of this project and work with their group to integrate this research into a presentation and 10-page group paper.

**Reaction Papers**

Students will be expected to write a one-page reaction paper when we complete the books by Durkheim, Goffman, Pape, and Banner. Your reaction papers should critically engage with the author’s argument (rather than simply summarize it). These assignments should be submitted to the “Reaction Papers” section of the TA website before the beginning of lecture. Late papers will not be accepted. See the course syllabus for additional information.

**Schedule**

Please review this schedule carefully so that you can prepare for section and not miss any deadlines. Note that some deadlines are for the entire group and some are for each student. All assignments should be posted on the “Group Project” section of the TA website by 10am Tuesday. Late assignments will not be accepted.

Week 1: No section.

Week 2: The social autopsy

   Reading: Klinenberg article
   Group Project: during class you will select groups, discuss topics, and plan a meeting outside of class to finalize your statement of topic.

Week 3:

   Reading: Farmer article
   **Group Project group deadline**: Statement of topic. The statement of topic should be maximum 1 page and should address:
      - What topic has your group has decided to study?
      - What is your preliminary research question?
      - What component of the project will each member take and what is their plan for data collection and analysis, or literature review?

Week 4:

   Reading: Ali article
   Group Project: Each group member should come prepared to discuss 2 scholarly articles that they have found on their topic for the group project. I propose that everyone bring in a one-paragraph summary of your article that you can use for your final paper, but you can delegate amongst yourselves.

Week 5:

   Reading: Please chose one of the two remaining articles: Barnes or Elliot

Week 6: Individual presentations
Case context (scale, temporal and cultural specificity)

Week 7: **Individual presentations**
Psychological analysis

Week 8: **Individual presentations**
Role of family, friends, work

Week 9: **Individual presentations**
Role of media

Week 10: **Individual presentations**
Role of the state

**Group Project group deadline**: Integrated 10-page research papers.
**Group Project individual deadline**: Evaluations. Each group member should submit an evaluation of their own and other group members’ contribution to the final paper. Include a letter grade for each group member and a brief explanation.

**Grading**
Section attendance and participation are mandatory. Your grade in section accounts for 20% of your final grade and is broken down as follows:

a. section participation (15%)
   i. meaningful contributions to discussions reflecting an understanding of the readings
   ii. constructive participation in discussions of others’ research

b. section attendance

Group projects contribute 20% to your overall grade in the class. Half of this grade will come from your individual sections and presentations and the other half will reflect the final group paper.

**Suggested readings for Group Project development:**


