

SOS4150

## **Sociology of Health and Illness**

### Course description

#### **Course content**

This course will provide a sociological analysis of population health. The course surveys social determinants of health and links theoretical work (e.g. fundamental cause theory, material, psychosocial, or biomedical explanations) to empirical analyses of health, focusing on recent controversies in the field and on the potential of policy interventions to improve population health.

The aim of the course is three-fold:

- First, to explain to students a paradox on the persistence of health inequalities in modern welfare states, Norway being one of the unequal societies in Europe in terms of differences in health outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.
- Second, to equip students with an awareness that health care systems account for only small part of variation in health outcomes and that social determinants of health are of primary importance to understand why in some societies' health outcomes are better than in others.
- Third, to present to students with cutting-edge theoretical and empirical insights on how and why health inequalities within societies exist, why they also intensify, in some instances, and which policy interventions, if any, are effective in tackling health inequalities.

The course will address these and related questions:

- What are potential social determinants of health at the micro-level (e.g. socioeconomic status, health behaviours)?
- How do meso-level institutions and organisations such as social networks and communities influence health?

- How do macro-level institutions and policies such as welfare state provisions and the nature of political economy shape individuals' health?
- Is there enough evidence to claim that the association between socioeconomic status and health is causal?
- How does health selection (i.e. healthier individuals achieving higher socioeconomic status) explain observed social gradient in health?
- Which are most influential theories explaining social inequalities in health?
- How did an epidemiological transition from communicable to non-communicable diseases change the patterns of health inequalities?
- What are the driving forces behind health inequalities in non-communicable diseases (e.g. aging societies, deaths of despair)?
- What are the implications of the COVID-19 for health inequalities in communicable diseases?
- How do anti-vaccination and other health related social movement shape population health?

Throughout the sessions we will discuss one of the central questions of the course on what we mean when we talk about health and how health and health inequalities should be measured. Another central area of the course will be ongoing debate between the school of social determinants of health vs. the school of health determinants of life chances. Socioeconomic status and health are associated, but there is no consensus about the causal direction of the association. We aim to make sense of conflicting findings and theories in a causal framework.

In recent years, health research has focused on non-communicable diseases that afflict the ageing, industrialised societies, but with COVID-19 and decreasing life expectancies in some countries, this focus can be shifting again. We discuss recent trends such as 'deaths of despair' or the compression of morbidity considering the global pandemic.

Health is a contentious issue in the public arena, with both government and non-government actors being heavily engaged. We will examine populist movements and anti-vaccination sentiments as social movement actively shaping population health now. Conversely, policymakers who had aimed to reduce socioeconomic inequalities in health usually struggle to achieve measurable success, which we will also discuss.

## **Learning outcome**

### **Knowledge**

#### **This course will provide students with:**

- An analytical perspective on most widely acknowledged theories in sociology of health and illness;
- A familiarity with novel and ground-breaking empirical studies on health inequalities conducted in recent years;
- Knowledge on how micro-, meso-, and national-level developments complement each other to explain the extend of health inequalities;
- Knowledge how the COVID-19 pandemic exaggerated health inequalities not only in this communicable decease but also in non-communicable deceases;
- An understanding of difficulties in reducing health inequalities in different historical periods and country contexts;
- An overview of the methods researchers use to answer questions about health inequalities.

### **Skills**

#### **Students will be able to:**

- Understand, explain, discuss and use core concepts, such as health equity vs. health inequality, relative vs. absolute measures of inequalities in health, **deaths of despair**, sectoral vs. comprehensive strategies to address health inequalities, accumulation of health advantages and disadvantages, vaccine hesitancy movements, etc.;
- Link the state of health inequalities in Norway to the most important theoretical explanations and to the state of the art comparative empirical studies on this issue;
- Use acquired knowledge from the course to come up with appropriate theoretical and empirical frameworks to be used in own research;
- Select on of the areas of the course a topic for their master thesis.

### **Admission**

Standard rules

**Teaching**

The course will be organized as 12 seminars including lectures and discussions two times a week.

The lectures will be given in English.

**Examination**

Term paper