

# Section on Mental Health

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## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



Greetings and welcome to the Mental Health Section's spring newsletter! I hope you are enjoying this beautiful and life affirming time of the year. I recently returned from Cambodia and feel a combination of renewal from stepping into a fascinating new culture and exhaustion from jetlag.

This newsletter contains several items of

interest, including the lineup of mental health sessions at the 2016 ASA meetings, a note from Stephanie Hartwell about section membership, the list of candidates running for various section positions, and some dates to keep in mind as you plan your trip to Seattle. It also includes profiles of graduate students working on mental health topics as well as Kristi Williams' remarks about Debra Umberson – the recipient of this year's Leonard I. Pearlman Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Sociological Study of Mental Health.

I want to once again congratulate Deb on this honor. By the way, Deb also received the 2015 Matilda White Riley Distinguished Scholar Award from the section on Aging and the Life Course. The section is grateful to Gerrie and the Pearlman family for their continued support of this award.

### *Mental Health Sessions at the 2016 ASA Meetings in Seattle*

I am pleased to report that we will have five paper sessions on mental health at this year's meetings. Tetyana Pudrovska and Jennifer Caputo organized the two section-sponsored sessions on *Social Relationships and Mental Health* and *Social Inequalities and Mental Health*, respectively. Given the abundance of submitted papers, Elbert Almazan successfully negotiated two additional ASA-sponsored regular sessions on mental health. Elbert's sessions are organized around *The Social Antecedents of Mental Health*, *The Economic and Education Antecedents of Mental Health*, and *The Social Consequences of Mental Health*. In addition to these five paper sessions, Steven Foy organized a roundtable for the Social Psychology Section on *Stress and Subjective Well-Being*.

As you know, the number of section-sponsored sessions we get each year from ASA is based entirely on membership and we will continue to have two paper sessions as long as we meet the 300 member requirement; if we are below 300 members in the fall, we will only receive one session. The most recent membership report I received was in February and indicated that we had 220 members so please encourage your colleagues and graduate students to join the section; of course, the gift of student membership is a great mechanism for getting the next generation of

**Message from the Chair (continued)**

mental health scholars involved in the section and keeping our membership at 300. As Chair of the Membership Committee, Stephanie has been working behind the scenes recruiting new members, as well.

*A Note about Special Topics Sessions*

I tried to get a “special topics“ session from ASA for the 2016 meetings back in the fall of 2015 but learned that I would have had to apply for it well before I was elected to be section chair. It's unfortunately too late to apply for a special topics session for the 2017 meetings but I encourage anyone interested in developing one for the 2018 meetings to talk with me about the process. Without getting too wonky, the ASA Council approves all requests for special topics sessions and proposals must be submitted to ASA a year and a half before the intended meetings. Any section member may apply for a special topics session and they may be organized around any topic of interest to members – such as methodical innovations, policy changes, and grant writing in the area of mental health. If you have an idea for a special topics session for 2018, you should also touch base with Kristi since she will get the next call for proposals in January-February 2017.

*Mental Health Section Day Events and Reception*

To help you plan your trip to Seattle, here are some dates to keep in mind. Mental Health Section Day is scheduled for Day-2 of the meetings, which falls on Sunday, August 21st. Both the Council and Business Meetings, section-sponsored paper sessions as well as our section's awards dinner will, therefore, be held on Sunday. Consistent with previous years, the awards presentation and Pearlman Award Talk will be held during the 2-hour business meeting time slot. However, because ASA does not

permit sections to have receptions on Sunday (so they don't compete with ASA awards, the Presidential Address and their reception), we will have a joint on-site reception with Medical Sociology on Monday, August 22nd. Med Soc's Section Day is Tuesday, August 23rd.

In closing, please continue to send me announcements that you want to share with section members and don't hesitate to email me suggestions for our section and/or the 2016 program. Any ideas you have for recruiting new members to the section are, of course, always welcome.

All my best,  
Robin Simon

**Debra Umberson named 2016 recipient of the Leonard I. Pearlman Award****Kristi Williams**

I am honored to present Debra Umberson as the 2016 recipient of the Leonard I. Pearlman Award for distinguished contributions to the sociology of mental health. As many of you know, Debra is a prolific and innovative scholar whose theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociological study of mental health have profoundly shaped our field. Her accomplishments extend well beyond scholarship and include her strong commitment and dedication to the section and to the many students she has mentored. In all of these ways, Debra Umberson embodies the full spirit and tradition of the Pearlman Award and represents all that makes our section such a valued and thriving intellectual home.

Debra's career has had a remarkable trajectory. After receiving a BA (Magna Cum Laude) and MSW from University of Arkansas, she completed an MA and PhD at Vanderbilt University in only 4 years, working under the direction of Walter R. Gove. She completed three years of postdoctoral research at the University of

Michigan where she trained with James House before joining the faculty of the Sociology Department at the University of Texas-Austin. Never one to waste time, Debra reached the rank of Full Professor within 8 years and has since held numerous leadership roles including Department Chair. She is currently Christie and Stanley E. Adams, Jr., Centennial Professor in Liberal Arts and the Director of the Population Research Center.

From the beginning of her career, Debra's research has been pioneering and high-impact. Some of her earliest work, published in multiple journals including a seminal article in *Science*, established the importance of social relationships to health and well-being in the United States. She was among the first sociologists in the country to discover that family roles, by functioning as agents of social control, can encourage spouses and parents to engage in healthier behaviors. In a focus that has continued throughout her career, she further showed how these processes are differentiated by gender. Debra's social control model of family roles has been widely tested and adopted in sociology, psychology, public health, and gerontology and has established her as one of the most highly cited researchers of our generation. Four of her papers from this early line of research have been cited over 500 times each.

Debra's many contributions to the sociology of mental health cut across a broad array of disciplinary, methodological and theoretical traditions. Her work bridges boundaries across fields as diverse as sociology, psychology, health psychology, demography, and public health. Even within sociology, her work spans a range of specializations, including population health, family, gender, aging, social stress, and psychosocial epidemiology. Integrating key theoretical

and empirical insights across these many domains, her work demonstrates how the nature and quality of social relationships influence health and well-being over the life course and describes for whom, through what processes, and under what circumstances they do so.

A hallmark of Debra's research is the blending of quantitative and qualitative methods to not only describe the social distribution and predictors of psychological distress at the population level but to also illustrate the processes through which such patterns are produced at the individual level. Her methodological contributions are perhaps best exemplified in her groundbreaking book *Death of a Parent: Transition to a New Adult Identity*, (published by Cambridge University Press in 2003). Her analysis of national longitudinal data and extensive in-depth interviews with bereaved adults provides the first definitive evidence that the loss of a parent is a critical turning point in the adult life course and reveals how the underlying symbolic meanings of relationship loss motivate change in mental health and health behavior. In other work, she has used mixed methods to shed new light on how the stress process unfolds for domestic violence offenders and, separately, for divorced fathers. Her recent mixed methods work explores the enduring toll of childhood adversity and loss for adult relationship quality, health, and well-being, especially among black men in the U.S. In a separate project funded by the National Institute on Aging, she is collecting qualitative and quantitative data to understand how marital dynamics and gender work to influence the health of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults.

In addition to her incredible record of scholarship, Debra's commitment and contributions to the ASA Section on the Sociology of Mental Health have been

extensive. She was Secretary/Treasurer from 1999-2002, a member of the Pearlman award committee in 2008, and served as section Chair-Elect and section Chair from 2005-2007. She has also played an important role in the publication of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (JHSB), serving as Deputy and Associate Editor and, most notably, as Editor-In-Chief from 2011-2013.

Mentorship of junior scholars is central to Debra's legacy to the sociology of mental health. Her style is characterized by intensive, one-on-one guidance--an apprenticeship approach that fully integrates her students in the research process and allows them to make their own independent contributions at every stage. She has collaborated with more than 20 students, many of whom have gone on to positions at nationally recognized research institutes and academic departments. In fact, several of us came together to contribute to her nomination and to this announcement: Corinne Reczek (Ohio State University), Hui Liu (Michigan State University), Belinda Needham (University of Michigan), and Mieke Beth Thomeer (University of Alabama at Birmingham). Most remarkably, Deb has created an intellectual family of former students who are now strongly connected to each other by our immense respect and admiration for her. After 20 years, I am still in awe at my good fortune in being her student and now her friend.

Debra Umberson is, by any metric, a distinguished and accomplished scholar. But she is also a wise and generous colleague, a compassionate mentor and friend, and an approachably authentic human being. These together seem to me to define the full spirit of the Leonard I. Pearlman award. I can think of no one better suited to carry on Len's enduring legacy for our section and our discipline.

### **Candidates for 2016 Election**

#### **Chair-Elect:**

Janet Hankin, Wayne State University  
Scott Schieman, University of Toronto

#### **Nominations Committee Chair:**

Christina Falci, University of Nebraska  
John Taylor, Florida State University

#### **Awards Committee Chair:**

Melissa Milkie, University of Toronto  
Heather Turner, University of New Hampshire

#### **Council - Student Member:**

Wallis Adams, Northeastern University  
Will McConnell, Indiana University  
Atsushi Narisada, University of Toronto

### **Membership Report**



Stephanie Hartwell

The gift of student membership to the ASA Section on Mental Health is a great way to celebrate your graduate students' achievements and

milestones. The student rate for membership to our section, which includes a subscription to *Society and Mental Health*, only costs \$25. Membership in the section will allow your students to be aware of all section activities through emails and the newsletter. An added benefit is that it will help us maintain the 300-member threshold, which is necessary for us to continue having two section-sponsored paper sessions at the annual meetings. So please consider a gift membership for your graduate students since it is a great way to get them involved in the section.

In addition to the student gift membership drive, we have also sent an invitation to all authors presenting at this year's mental health paper sessions to join our wonderful

section. Please let me know if you have other ideas for membership initiatives at [Stephanie.hartwell@umb.edu](mailto:Stephanie.hartwell@umb.edu).

Anyone wishing to give the gift of membership in the mental health section can purchase them directly using the new section gift order system.

Visit <http://asa.enoah.com/Home/My-ASA/Gift-Section> and log in using your ASA ID and password. Once in the system, you can choose a section, and then search the member database by name. Only current ASA members (and those who are not already members of the selected section) are eligible to receive a gift section membership. You may purchase several memberships at one time, with an easy checkout and payment process within the secure ASA database. Section memberships will be activated immediately; recipients will receive an e-mail notifying them of the gift.

### **Graduate Students on the Job Market**



Kathryn Sabella, MA  
University of Mass Boston  
Department of Sociology

Email: [Kathryn.Sabella001@umb.edu](mailto:Kathryn.Sabella001@umb.edu); or [Kathryn.Sabella@umassmed.edu](mailto:Kathryn.Sabella@umassmed.edu)

Dissertation (working title): Employment and Education Experiences of Young Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

Kathryn Sabella is a PhD candidate in the sociology program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her research and teaching interests are in sociology of mental health with a particular emphasis on mental illness during young adulthood, public perceptions of mental illness, and mental health disparities. Kathryn is also skilled in

quantitative and qualitative methods; she has experience teaching research methods to diverse student populations and has developed ancillary resources for several undergraduate research methods textbooks.

Kathryn is also Project Director of the Transitions Research and Training Center (Transitions RTC) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. The Transitions RTC conducts rigorous research and knowledge translation activities in order to promote the full participation in socially valued roles of youth and young adults (Y&YA) with serious mental health conditions (SMHC). Kathryn has helped design and implement several feasibility and randomized control trials of cutting-edge interventions for Y&YAs with SMHC in the areas of peer support, college academic support, and community vocational supports for Y&YA with SMHC involved in the justice system. She has also helped develop the Participatory Action Research framework within the RTC whereby all research activities are conducted in partnership with Y&YA with lived experience of a SMHC who are employed by the RTC.

Kathryn's dissertation aims to provide a longitudinal understanding of the employment and educational activities of Y&YA with SMHC by interviewing young adults (ages 25-30), including young parents, who have experienced a life disruption (e.g. hospitalization, leave of absence from school) due to their mental illness. Youth and young adults (Y&YA) with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) are often delayed in participating in settings where early career exploration activities occur. Delays in early career exploration activities can have long-lasting effects on vocational attainment and those who become parents at a young age may be particularly vulnerable. The study will explore barriers and facilitators to achieving employment and education goals, describe the impact that early parenting can

have on these activities, explore sociological factors that can impact the experience of mental illness in young adulthood (e.g. social capital, race, class, and major life events) and test elements of Social Cognitive Career Theory

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **Society and Mental Health**

*Society and Mental Health* has a new website. You can find it [here](#).

### **New Book**

#### **Multiple Autisms: Spectrums of Advocacy and Genomic Science** by

Jennifer Singh MPH, PhD,  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Georgia Institute of Technology  
School of History and Sociology  
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Email: [jennifer.singh@hsoc.gatech.edu](mailto:jennifer.singh@hsoc.gatech.edu)  
Available at: <http://z.umn.edu/multiple>

### **Graduate Student Perspectives**

#### **Developing Classroom Activities to Teach About Issues in the Sociology of Mental Health** by Matthew Grace



As anyone who has experienced it can attest, watching a seemingly well-planned classroom activity go down in flames can be a particularly

disappointing moment for an instructor. Whenever the time comes to create a new classroom activity, I invariably return to a list of five steps for developing and executing classroom activities that I have collected from several sage colleagues over the years:

- 1) Identify a core issue
- 2) Provide background information and then drill down

- 3) Make the topic relatable to your students
- 4) Promote peer communication and interaction to integrate ideas
- 5) Use discussion to gauge students' understanding

Below, I walk through these steps using the example of an activity that addresses high suicide rates among American Indian adolescents and young adults.

1) Often the most difficult part of developing an activity is the simple act of selecting a topic. I typically begin the brainstorming process by looking at recent reports issued by NIMH or the CDC, or by scouring the health sections of newspapers like the New York Times. In some cases, I use student feedback from previous semesters to identify topics of interest.

2) To set the stage for an activity, I will usually use the first part of lecture to establish general findings on the topic, (e.g., sociodemographic variation in mental illness and suicide). I also try to have a reading due for the day that can be linked to the activity. For this example, I use Mueller and Abrutyn's article on suicidal suggestion among adolescents. Our discussion of this reading serves as a useful pivot to a broader conversation about the social determinants of suicide among young adults.

3) To help students connect with the day's activity, I discuss research relevant to their age group and/or home state. For this activity I discuss several findings—e.g., Indiana has the 26th highest suicide rate, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among Americans ages 15-24, and 90% of young adults who die by suicide have an underlying mental health condition.

4) For the activity itself, I provide the class with several key statistics on suicide among American Indians (e.g., American Indians

ages 18-24 have the highest suicide rate of any racial/ethnic group with a rate of 22.5 per 100,000 compared to 15.4 for whites, 8.3 for Hispanics, and 8.9 for blacks), and then break the class into "Presidential Task Force" teams of 6-8 students. Students are asked to work together to formulate a set of recommendations to address this national crisis and each group member is required to come up with at least one recommendation on their own to share with the group. I give the class roughly 10 minutes to discuss their ideas internally before making my way from group-to-group to check on their progress. Rotating among groups not only gives students a chance to ask follow-up questions from lecture, but also gives you as an instructor a better sense of the extent to which your students grasp the concepts you have covered.

5) After re-convening the class, I ask a representative from each group to deliver its recommendations. To ensure that the whole group is engaged, I typically ask other members of the group to elaborate on the logic behind each recommendation. After we get through each group, I have the class as a whole debate the merits of each proposal and reach a consensus on a final set of three recommendations. Last semester, students came up with a list of strategies including the creation of emergency psychological service teams, loan forgiveness programs that incentivize practitioners to work for the Indian Health Service, and gun control reform.

Well-executed classroom activities reinforce key points from lecture and encourage students to think critically about social issues. My experience in using the activity outlined here is that it helps to broaden students' understanding of how historic and contemporary inequities experienced by American Indians can shape mental health outcomes and suicide

rates. Additionally, by recalling lectures and readings on topics like race/ethnicity and social networks from earlier in the semester, students re-integrate fundamental course concepts and solidify their understanding of previously covered material. Like many issues that we cover in sociology courses, suicide is a sensitive topic. In past semesters I have had students disclose the loss of family and friends by suicide. Although these personal revelations can make other class members reluctant to discuss their thoughts on suicide prevention, more often than not, I have found that these disclosures have led to inclusive, thoughtful discussions about suicide as a public health issue.

#### *References*

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2015. "Mental Health Facts: Children and Teens": National Alliance on Mental Illness. Retrieved March 28, 2016 (<https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers>).

Jiang, Caroline, Andreea Mitran, Arialdi Minino & Hanyu Ni. 2015. "Racial and Gender Disparities in Suicide among Young Adults Aged 18–24: United States, 2009–2013." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**About the Author:** Matthew Grace is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University. His research and teaching interests include medical sociology, mental health and illness, and the life course. His dissertation explores how social relationships and social stressors influence the mental health and retention of premedical students. He is also the student member of the ASA Section on Mental Health.

## **Undergraduate Research and Sociology**

**Decentering My Own Ways of Being: The Value of a Sociological Perspective for Studying Abroad** by Kelsey Weymouth-Little, Bryn Mawr College '16

“Kuli!” my host mother said repeatedly, as she pushed the choice pieces of chicken toward my side of the tajine. It was my first night in my two-month homestay in Rabat, Morocco, as part of the SIT Morocco: Migration and Transnational Identity study abroad program, and I had learned enough in the week-long orientation to know that “kuli” meant eat and was an insistent mealtime command—especially for guests—and that the tajine was an earthenware pot in which many Moroccans cook food, and that I was supposed to use pieces of bread to pick up the steaming meat and vegetables closest to me. But no amount of academic knowledge could prepare me for the way my clumsy fingers couldn't manage to tear pieces of chicken off the bone, for the slight embarrassment I felt as my host mother took pity on my incompetence and tore strips of chicken for me effortlessly, and for the deep-rooted reluctance I felt to abandon my preferred fork and knife and dig into the tajine with only bread and my hands.

Later that night, I stood on top of my host family's squat toilet and poured cold water from a bucket over myself, shuddering with the sensation of uncleanness after going two days without a shower, even though there was no trace of dirt on my pale skin. My host family was more than willing to accommodate my desire to shower every other day even though, I later learned, they attended the hamam, or community bathhouse, once a week, and rarely washed themselves on top of the squat toilet. The one time I went to the hamam with my host sister, I went through my five-minute shower routine and

then sat, for more than an hour, trying to figure out how to occupy myself as my host sister went through an elaborate process, and I felt in that moment like she had more patience in that situation than I, who had always been taught to shower quickly to conserve water and time, could ever muster.

While my academic program in Morocco was not explicitly sociological, throughout my semester abroad I continually drew on sociology to help me understand my experiences. Especially at the beginning of my time in Morocco, I felt like a baby, having to learn skills I'd always taken for granted, like eating and bathing, in an entirely new way. I might have felt more embarrassed or personally incompetent than I did without symbolic interactionist theory to remind me that I was living in a society that shared few symbols or significant gestures with my own, that my failure to communicate or function in Moroccan society wasn't on me individually but was a result of my foreign socialization. But more importantly, I think, my sociological education was always a reminder to me to decenter my own experiences and ways of being, to view them as just as culturally constructed as the experiences and ways of being of my host family and other Moroccans I met. Just because I had been taught that a fork and knife was the “civilized” way to eat didn't mean that using one's hands was unclean, and just because I felt my skin crawl when I didn't shower every other day didn't mean that once a week, extensive visits to the hamam didn't do even more to keep one clean, not to mention that standards of cleanliness are also socially constructed. I didn't ever become fully comfortable eating with my hands or showering less frequently, and I never did figure out how to spend over an hour at the hamam productively, but, by thinking sociologically, I constantly reminded

myself to see my host family's ways of being as both equally valid and socially constructed as mine, and I opened myself up to new experiences by viewing them not as strange, but as ways to ethnographically learn about Moroccan culture. Even though I was glad, once my semester abroad ended, to return to my norm of forks and flush toilets and showerheads, I now sometimes find myself missing sitting around the tajine with my host family, eating copious amounts of fresh-baked bread and tearing chicken off the bone with my bare hands.



**About the Author:** Kelsey Weymouth-Little is a senior at Bryn Mawr College majoring in Sociology. She spent the Fall Semester, 2014, in Morocco as part of an internship. For her future, she plans to work at a nonprofit organization focusing on social justice issues.

#### **From the Newsletter Editor**

I continue to remind everyone to please send me information about your activities that you would like to share with section members. Please put "newsletter" in the title of the email.

Here is a partial list of other possible contributions for future newsletters:

- Upcoming conferences, calls for papers, grant opportunities or special issues of journals.
- Newly published books by section members. Please include publication date and publisher information.

**-Graduate or post-doctoral students on the market and would like to be profiled. Please send your picture, title of your dissertation, email address, affiliation, and a brief statement of your work (200-300 words).**

-Congratulatory information (e.g., promotions, new jobs, awards, honors, grants).

-Short articles on topics that cross boundaries with other sections, such as animal-human interactions and mental health. We ask that you keep submissions brief (no more than 500 words).

-Descriptions of class activities/books/films for use in undergraduate sociology of mental health and illness classes or general tips and strategies for teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate level.

Don't forget to look at other Associations for conference presentations:

[Society for the Study of Social Problems](#)

[American Public Health Association](#)

If there are other venues where sociologists can present their work, please let me know.

Lastly, I especially want to thank Kelsey and Matt for their articles and hope that others will send me ones in the future. If anyone has a graduate student or an awesome undergraduate like Kelsey, please encourage them to submit an article about their teaching, research or internship interests.

The next Newsletter will come out this summer a few weeks before the meetings in Seattle. It will have the usual information about Section events. It is also a perfect place for graduate student profiles for those on the job market.

Thanks,  
Richard

SMH

SOCIETY AND MENTAL HEALTH

[The Journal of the ASA Section on the Sociology of Mental Health](#)

Editor: Elaine Wethington, Cornell University  
 Past Editor William R. Avison, University of Western Ontario

Editorial Scope of SMH: Society and Mental Health publishes original articles that apply sociological concepts and methods to the understanding of the social origins of mental health and illness, the social consequences for persons with mental illness, and the organization and financing of mental health services and care. Its editorial policy favors manuscripts that advance the sociology of mental health and illness, stimulate further research, inform treatments and policy and reflect the diversity of interests of its readership.

Manuscripts must be submitted electronically at  
<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/smh>

For more information about the Journal go [here](#) or contact:

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