

## **SOCIOLOGY 332/GERONTOLOGY 332**

Death and American Culture

Instructor: Dr. Kathy Charmaz

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Prerequisites: Priority given to Sociology majors and minors

General Education: No

How does American (U.S.) culture shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions toward death? In which ways can sociological theories and perspective deepen our understanding of death, dying, and bereavement? This course applies sociological and social psychological perspectives to death, grief, and loss. We will explore how death and dying affects our lives and how American culture shapes the face of death. Through studying people who confront death, we learn about American culture and, moreover, about living. We will also look at how American culture fosters death as well as the ways our culture promotes individual risk-taking, collective risks, and mass destruction. Sectors of our population remain at risk due to malnutrition, homelessness, environmental hazards, and inadequate medical care. American culture also reaches throughout the world and shapes the face of death through war, politics, and consumer and corporate practices.

The course will have a comparative component. We will compare the research and perspectives of international authors with death, dying, and grief in the United States. Although this class consists of lectures and discussion, student attendance, preparation, and participation are crucial. Occasionally, sessions will be devoted to speakers, films, and small group discussions. You will have some options for written assignments.

### **Course Objectives**

By the end of the semester you should:

1. Gain a sociological perspective on death, dying, and grief.
2. Be able to apply sociological theories to the topics that we discuss.
3. Understand how American culture affects our perspectives on death and practices concerning it.
4. Develop your own critique of American death practices.
5. Increase your understanding of the cultural antecedents of your views of death.
5. Be able to compare American attitudes and practices with those of people in other countries.

### **Course Requirements/Grading**

You may choose between tests and take-home papers for your major work in the course. These assignments permit choosing between topics that you can apply to your life and topics from the readings. An oral presentation is one option but not a requirement. Students who take the course for personal interest may choose credit/no credit grading.