

# Spring Newsletter

Volume 59, Issue 3

## Note from the Chair

Happy Spring! We are heading into that magical time of year when the academic year is coming to a close, and the summer is laid out ahead in its entirety. Many of us will be wrapping up current projects and planning new ones. I also hope you will take this opportunity to spend time doing things outside of work that brings you joy, whatever that may be.

In the meantime, however, I am excited to share with you what we have planned for the Medical Sociology Section at the upcoming annual meeting, which will be held in Philadelphia from August 17 – 21. Your Council has been hard at work during the past few months to finalize our sessions and meetings. I cannot wait to see folks in Philly! Congratulations to those of you who have had papers accepted. Judging by the quality and depth of the research that will be presented at this year's conference, medical sociology scholarship is alive and well. I'm particularly excited by the research being carried out by more junior investigators who pose timely and important questions and seek to answer them with innovative methodological approaches.

Most of the Medical Sociology sessions will be held on Sunday, August 20th, with additional sessions on Monday, August 21st. Jennifer Reich put together a thought-provoking session on **medical mistrust, misinformation, and health** that features a diverse set of papers on topics ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to sexual and reproductive health messaging to institutional corruption during drug development. Our session on **racism, discrimination, health, and wellbeing**, which was organized by Alexis Dennis, includes research that addresses cutting-edge concepts in this subfield, including vicarious racism, racial disparities in suicide, racial discrimination in clinical trial participation, and the social construction of skin color within a medical subspecialty.

Thanks to Miranda Waggoner, we will get to hear from researchers doing ground-breaking work on **reproductive justice, health, and health care**. The papers featured in this session tackle critical issues such as how child welfare policies can lead to obstetric policing; how people navigate birthing trauma; the ability of midwives, doulas, and Black-owned birthing centers to foster refusal during the birth process; how birth plans are shaped by race and class; and the intersection of biomedicalization and neoliberal feminism on contraceptive choice. Finally, Christy Erving and Ryon Cobb organized a session on **structural inequalities, medicine, and health** with papers on the criminalization and medicalization of mental illness; inequalities in the blood plasma industry; stigma and sexual behaviors among people with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa; alternative birthing practices; and the failure of medical education to teach students about systemic inequalities.

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The Section will also hold the Reeder Award Ceremony, during which Dr. Troy Duster will be honored for his vital contributions to the field of medical sociology, as well as our annual Council and business meetings. We also have a 90-minute roundtable session, organized by Chris Bijou and Brandon Moore, with twenty-one different tables to highlight even more creative and innovative research within our subdiscipline. I am grateful to everyone who helped put these slates of sessions together and everyone who took the time to submit their research to ASA. It really does take a village!

We also solicited nominations for the six (!) Section awards this past Spring. The nomination committees are currently reading your submissions. The results will be announced in the Summer newsletter. And finally, we are surveying our membership to get a better idea of how we are doing and ways we can better meet your needs, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic has changed much about how we carry out our work. If you have not already done so, please complete this (brief) survey, accessible via ASA Connect.

Looking forward to seeing many of you in Philly!

Warm Regards,  
Cindy Colen

Chair, Medical Sociology Section  
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology  
Ohio State University



Cynthia Colen  
Chair, Medical Sociology Section

## COVID's Long and Lonely Shadow

Daniel Dohan



Is the health policy landscape returning to its sociological status quo ante COVID?

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020. In the following months, the US federal government and each state did so similarly. On May 5, the Director-General of WHO accepted the recommendation of the fifteenth meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee that "COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)."

The lines separating before and after the COVID emergency are blurry in the US. In 2020, the US separately declared COVID a public health (January) and national (March) emergency. Both emergencies were repeatedly extended until the Biden Administration signaled its intention to allow their expiration in May 2023. In January 2023, the newly-installed House Republican majority sought their immediate end, the legislation cleared the Democratic Senate, and Biden quietly signed off even as his administration stuck to the mid-May timeline to implement the new law. The 50 states also passed COVID emergency measures, which have mostly expired; a swath of states from Pennsylvania to Montana ended their emergencies particularly quickly. Soon, the US will have fully returned to a state of non-emergency.

As the emergency fades, the disparate impacts and implications of COVID's uprooting of routines come into sociological focus. I'll briefly touch on two examples to recognize ongoing disparities in COVID's health impacts and contemplate how COVID may have accelerated the medicalization of loneliness.

During the three years March 2020-2023, COVID killed more than a million in the US and 15-20 million globally. Morbidity and mortality have been uneven throughout the pandemic and remain even as surveillance and attention fade. In the US, COVID and long COVID remain medically significant and socially driven. Medical sociologists can learn from and inform this work, e.g., the NIH community-oriented and social, behavioral, and economic research.

Medical sociologists also may want to keep an eye on loneliness, a condition being wrestled into the medical gaze. Long an object of sociological interest, loneliness began to attract public health attention in the years before COVID. Features of medicalization were at play, such as concern about at-risk populations and a focus on novel biological explanations rather than well-studied social dynamics.

As COVID accelerated in 2020, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy championed loneliness as an object of scientific investigation and a medical concern. Following a pandemic and Trump administration pause, Murthy's return to the Surgeon General's office coincides with renewed attention to loneliness. Too much time alone can make us sick, we're too lonely, and we can fix that. Reducing COVID transmission via social isolation had unavoidable harms. How policymakers and researchers grapple with the harm of loneliness is worth our attention as we emerge from COVID's long and lonely shadow.

Daniel Dohan

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## ChatGPT in Higher Education: The Latest in the Debate

Magdalena Szaflarski

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By now, most, if not all of us, have heard of ChatGPT,<sup>1</sup> a natural language processing tool (chatbot) driven by artificial intelligence (AI) technology that can answer questions and assist with composing written pieces, such as essays, emails, and code.<sup>2,3</sup> Its introduction in late November last year generated quite a buzz. ChatGPT is currently open to the public free of charge, and both students and professors have been all over it to try it and then use it to generate all kinds of content. ChatGPT can be accessed by visiting [chat.openai.com](https://chat.openai.com) and creating an OpenAI account. An estimated 100 million people used the tool in January alone, only a few weeks after its introduction, compared to TikTok needing nine months to grow a 100-million user base.<sup>2</sup>

Higher education is still trying to fully understand the implications of ChatGPT on teaching, learning, research, and other aspects – and attempting to form a proper response.<sup>3</sup> Many academics are terrified and consider it a danger to authentic learning based on original ideas and knowledge demonstration. With AI tools being more widely available, students are already taking shortcuts to avoid organizing ideas independently and composing original work. However, some academics see the tool as a positive development and advocate incorporating ChatGPT and other generative AI into academic life. One argument made here is that such tools “can help students – and professors – brainstorm, kick-start an essay, explain a confusing idea, and smooth out awkward first drafts.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, this academic wing argues that college education is meant to prepare students for their future work and lives, which are already beginning to immerse in these technologies. Thus, higher education is responsible for training on that end as well as occupational preparation.

The nitty-gritty of a systemic approach remains unclear. Where to even begin? Should instructors be charged with redesigning their course requirements, assignments, and tests to lower the chance of students creating AI-generated work? Some of us are already doing that, largely scratching our heads because our options seem limited, at least at the moment. Furthermore, how should we guide students in generative AI technologies, especially since we diverge in our perspectives? Another question relates to academic policies – Should academic integrity/ethics statements be re-written? Tools made available to detect AI use? Coursework on AI be added? AI tools have truly disrupted academia and have created both risks and opportunities. College committees are forming, new instructional programs are rolling out to address these challenges, and individual instructors are implementing changes independently.<sup>3</sup>

Those of us who have tried ChatGPT and/or other generative AI technologies are amazed at how good they are. ChatGPT produces clear, evidence-based, and, to a degree, analytic writing. AI-generated art or music can also be impressive. At the same time, these technologies are still being tested and have their limitations. For example, ChatGPT cannot answer questions that are worded in a specific way, requiring users to sometimes reword their questions or prompts to the point of losing sense. The tool only “guesses” the meaning of questions or prompts and may produce a response that is not quite on target. Experts say the rate of incorrect responses is high: “... these tools are just very good at putting words into an order that makes sense from a statistical point of view, but they cannot understand the meaning or know whether the statements it makes are correct.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the very extensive knowledge base underlying ChatGPT is limited to data up to 2021, so prompts that consider more current developments/events are even less likely to produce accurate responses. Finally, ChatGPT-generated responses do not automatically come with sources/citations, which are a pillar of academic writing. Even though there are ways to ask ChatGPT to provide sources or links to information,<sup>4</sup> robustness of these sources tend to be questionable. Users have to learn how to verify and validate ChatGPT sources.

OpenAI provides a brief overview of capabilities, limitations, and considerations for using ChatGPT for teaching and learning.<sup>5</sup> One of the main opportunities for educators is streamlining and personalizing learning. Examples include drafting and brainstorming for lesson plans and other activities, assisting with designing quiz questions or other exercises, customizing materials for different preferences, providing grammatical or structural feedback on portions of writing, or even critiquing AI generated text. At the same time, there are risks associated with such personalization, including breaches of student privacy, biased treatment, or the development of unhealthy habits. Educators should understand the limitations of AI generating tools before implementing them for teaching and learning. Students should use tools under the direct supervision of their teachers and professors for the best learning outcomes.

The key concern about using these tools has been the potential for academic dishonesty and plagiarism detection. Academic institutions are modifying and updating their policies to address these concerns. More importantly, technology-aided plagiarism detection solutions have started to proliferate in response to ChatGPT. A Princeton student spent a chunk of his winter break creating GPTZero, an app he claims can detect whether a human or ChatGPT creates writing. A popular platform Turnitin is also touting its own solutions. At the same time, critics suggest that “rather than upping the surveillance-and-detection stakes with tools that are, at best, spotty and unreliable, teachers can talk with students reflectively about what’s at stake with A.I.-generated text.”<sup>6</sup> This should be done alongside building activities and assessments to make classroom work more specific and experiential.

A recent article<sup>7</sup> investigates the initial prevalence of ChatGPT use and areas of interest in higher education. Using web-based tools, the study aimed to determine how commonly academic institutions in the USA and Canada had referenced ChatGPT on their websites. Each website returned between 0 and 7,180 results for “ChatGPT,” with 593 institutions (27.5%) mentioning ChatGPT at least once. Of those that mentioned it, the average number of references was 98. Thus, even though only a quarter of institutions mentioned ChatGPT, those that did were extensively engaged in the debate. Top-5 mentions of ChatGPT were noted for Boston University, the University of Mississippi, Northeastern University, McGill University, and Harvard University. Furthermore, references to ChatGPT were aligned along three main types: opinion pieces, articles, or announcements of lectures related to generative AI; reports of experiments with generative AI; and grading or other policies related to using generative AI in an educational setting. The study represents an early look into engagement with ChatGPT in higher education, but more research on these issues is surely on the way.

1 OpenAI. “Introducing ChatGPT.” <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>

2 Ortiz, Sabrina. 2023. “What is ChatGPT and Why Does It Matter?” ZDNET. April 18. <https://www.zdnet.com/article/what-is-chatgpt-and-why-does-it-matter-heres-everything-you-need-to-know/>

3 McMurtrie, Beth. 2023. “ChatGPT Is Everywhere.” Chronicle of Higher Education. March 6. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/chatgpt-is-already-upending-campus-practices-colleges-are-rushing-to-respond>

4 Gerwitz, David. 2023. “How to Make ChatGPT Provide Sources and Citations.” April 14. <https://www.zdnet.com/article/how-to-make-chatgpt-provide-sources-and-citations/>

5 OpenAI. “Educator considerations for ChatGPT.” <https://platform.openai.com/docs/chatgpt-education>

6 Gilliard, Chris and Pete Rorabaugh. 2023. “You’re Not Going to Like How Colleges Respond to ChatGPT.” Slate. February 3.

7 Veletsianos, George, Royce Kimmons and Fanny Bondah. 2023. “ChatGPT and Higher Education: Initial Prevalence and Areas of Interest.” EDUCAUSE Review. March 15. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2023/3/chatgpt-and-higher-education-initial-prevalence-and-areas-of-interest>

# CHAIR OF MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

## Membership Announcement:

Happy Spring! I wanted to share a few announcements and ongoing efforts related to our section's membership.

1. This is a gentle reminder to renew your section membership as soon as possible if you have not already done so and encourage your colleagues too. Our numbers continue to remain lower than in 2022, and we want to see them increase.
2. If you would like to generously sponsor someone's section membership for 2023, you can!
  - a. If you want to sponsor someone but do not have someone in mind, please email me ([sshuster@msu.edu](mailto:sshuster@msu.edu)).
  - b. If you know of someone specifically who wants/needs a sponsorship, here are the steps to take:
    - i. Log into your member portal
    - ii. Find the "Contributions/Give" category
    - iii. Click on "Purchase a gift section membership."
    - iv. Select Medical Sociology from the drop-down
    - v. Search for the individual by name and proceed to check out.
3. If you have not already, please take a few minutes before May 15 to complete this survey to help us plan for future events, programs, and possibilities for our section: <https://tinyurl.com/2023MedSocMembership>.

Finally, I want to sincerely thank everyone for their continued engagement with our section. If you have any questions or concerns, have ideas for a membership drive, or would like to join in on the fun of the membership committee, please do not hesitate to reach out to me!

## Call for Papers

"Unequal Care: Trans Medicine and Health in Dangerous Times" in Social Science & Medicine. Submissions are due 9/1/23.

This special issue will include innovative empirical research on transgender medicine and healthcare during a moment of hyper-visibility and dangerous times and is shaped by the overarching irreverent though apt question: What the hell is wrong with trans medicine and healthcare? How can we fix it?

We welcome submissions on a wide range of topics related to: 1) emergent intersectional inequalities in trans medicine, health, and healthcare; 2) socialization and medical training for providers of trans medicine and healthcare; 3) centering patient experiences and embodied knowledge; and 4) the social, political, and legal construction of health, healthcare, medical knowledge, practices, and culture in trans medicine, health, and healthcare.

To read the full call, please use this link:  
<https://tinyurl.com/UnequalCareinDangerousTimes>



**Stef Shuster**  
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## Parsing Postdocs

TANIA M. JENKINS

In decades past, postdocs were less common in sociology. They could sometimes be viewed as a consolation prize or placeholder for those who did not get permanent jobs after graduation.

Those times have changed. Increasingly, evidence suggests that postdocs, particularly research-intensive ones, are growing in number and becoming key stepping stones toward getting coveted tenure-track faculty positions in sociology. A recent study found, for example, that social science PhDs who completed postdoctoral training were more likely to eventually get a tenure-track position with higher salaries than their counterparts who did not complete a postdoc.

So what is a postdoc exactly, and how does one find one? Below, I provide a brief overview of the different kinds of postdocs and offer advice on where to find them.

## Not all Postdocs are the same

Postdocs can take on very different forms, depending on the funding source, the breakdown of teaching and research, and the duration. Some can even occur after a faculty member begins a tenure-track position. What they have in common is that postdocs offer scholars an opportunity to think, write, teach, and advance their scholarship in some way.

A 2013 analysis of postdoc positions advertised through the ASA Job Bank revealed that 59% of postdocs were research-oriented, 36% were a mix of teaching and research, and 5% were teaching-oriented. Research-oriented postdocs are positions where the postdoc focuses on advancing research—their own or someone else's. Some postdocs exclusively allow the recipient to work on their own research, while others require the postdoc to work on a faculty member or supervisor's research. Still, others are a mix of both. The funding mechanism largely influences the degree of collaboration in a research-oriented postdoc. Some postdocs (e.g., the NSF SBE Postdoctoral Research Fellowships, American Association of University Women, Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship) are funded through governmental or foundation-based fellowships made directly to the scholar. Some university-based postdoctoral fellowships are also like these (e.g., Harvard's Society of Fellows; The Carolina Postdoctoral Program for Faculty Diversity). These postdocs typically offer protected time for more independent work or offer the option (but not the requirement) to teach (e.g., ACLS fellowship). Others, like the NIH T-32 training grants, are funded through grants made to organizations, which then hire postdocs who are required to complete some amount of collaborative work on a larger project with more limited time for their research. Finally, some postdocs are funded through faculty grants and typically require more direct work on the faculty member's project, with less time for independent research.

**Research and teaching postdocs** are positions where the postdoc is required to teach and conduct research. Some universities' Society of Fellows requires that recipients do both (e.g., University of Michigan). At the same time, other organizationally-funded projects may only be able to pay for a part-time postdoc, thereby paying them to teach during the other part of their time. Finally, **teaching postdocs** are focused exclusively on enhancing the scholar's teaching and pedagogical skills (e.g., The University of Chicago Teaching Fellows program).



# Where to find out about postdocs?

Like faculty positions, the ASA Job Bank is a good place to start when looking for postdocs. Some postdocs are available yearly, like many of the foundation, governmental, and university-based fellowships. [Harvard](#) and the [NIH](#) offer lists of these grant opportunities for postdoctoral scholars. Unlike faculty positions, however, learning about postdoc opportunities often happens more informally through networks, mentors, listservs, and even social media. Don't hesitate to ask advisors, faculty, friends, and former postdocs to look for opportunities that may come their way.

If you have suggested career & employment topics you'd like to see addressed in future newsletters, please send them to: [tania.jenkins@unc.edu](mailto:tania.jenkins@unc.edu).

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**Tania Jenkins**

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# SPECIAL TOPICS: PLANNING FOR SUMMER

Spring is in the air, and summer is just around the corner! The wind is fueled by sighs of relief from graduate students for another semester down. As academics, our summer motivations can teeter between actually taking a break and using the summer to get ahead. Whatever your plans, it's important to remember that balance is key to avoiding burnout. Here are some tips to help plan for a great summer!

## REST

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While many of us continue to work through the summer, it is important to remember that rest is essential to continue to do good work and avoid burnout. Sleep is essential for brain function and [regulating physical health](#), such as cardiac function, hormones, metabolism, and memory formation. Sleep deprivation or deficiency has been linked to [heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and depression](#). So, if you've been clocking in late nights with finals and manuscript drafts, now is a good time to catch up on some much-needed zzz's! [Here](#) is a link to an NIH brochure with some tips on improving the quality of your sleep.

## PLAY

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Play often gets a bad rep as a waste of time, especially in our academic lives, but studies have found that play is [essential to survival for many animals](#), and humans are no exception! In his book [Essentialism](#), Greg Mckeown highlights how play is essential for helping our minds work innovatively, broadening our abilities to plan, strategize, analyze, and make decisions. Additionally, it is an antidote for stress. [The National Insititute for Play](#) defines play as a "state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time." So whatever play may be for you, try to make time for it this summer.

## READ

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Ah, yes, reading will forever be a part of our academic careers. Summer can be a great time to research or catch up on reading all the "saved for later" PDFs you haven't looked at. If you plan on getting ahead with reading for your thesis or dissertation, touch base with your advisor or committee members to see if they have recommendations. You can also do a more [focused reading on academic life, teaching, writing, or professional development](#), or use this time to treat yourself and read for leisure.

## WORK

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Workshops and conferences abound during the summer and provide great training opportunities in various topics, like methods or preparing for fellowship applications. There are also many opportunities for internships or work opportunities during the summer. Make sure to check out your section's pages on [ASA Connect](#) to stay up to date on available opportunities within ASA!



**Danielle Maestas**  
Student Editor Chair  
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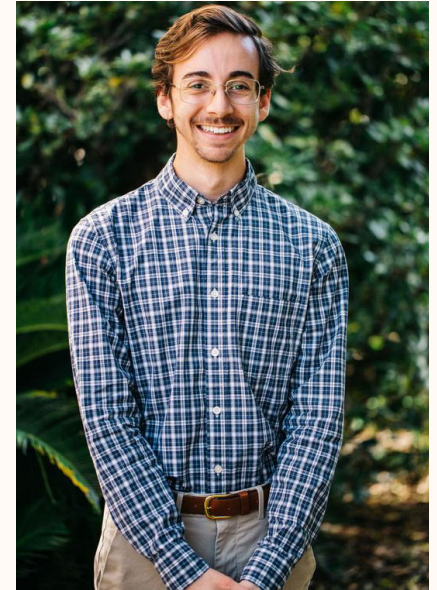
## **Cultural discourses and HIV/AIDS activists' meanings about PrEP**

**D'Amours, Jason V. 2022**

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### **Abstract:**

Since the approval of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention in 2012, research has increasingly considered how communities of men who have sex with men make sense of this prevention technology, often highlighting individual-level attitudes about PrEP. Drawing on interviews with 16 HIV activists, this study aimed to determine how activists make sense of advances in HIV prevention technology. Participants' sense-making about PrEP took the form of not merely the expression of individual attitudes, but rather reflections connected to their personal biographies and activist experience. Activists sustain seemingly contradictory discourses about PrEP, at once drawing on personal biographies and a discourse central to activist history to express scepticism about PrEP, but also other discourses to justify pharmaceutical intervention for prevention. Study findings provide evidence of the importance of attending to past and present cultural discourses when examining health advocacy groups' constructions of advances in science.



**Jason V. D'Amours**  
**Doctoral Candidate**  
**Department of Sociology**  
**Florida State University**

## **Diagnosis and the practices of patienthood: How diagnostic journeys shape illness experiences**

**Jeske, James, and Joyce. 2023**

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### **Abstract:**

Sociologists have a rich history of studying the process of diagnosis and how people experience illness. Yet, the sociology of diagnosis and illness experience literatures have seldom been fully integrated. Instead, these literatures highlight one element of the illness journey, wherein scholars either primarily study diagnostic processes and categories or people's illness experiences. Drawing on empirical studies that examine diagnosis and experiences of illness in varied settings (diagnosis during breast cancer surveillance, diagnosis and experience of autoimmune illness and incarcerated women's experiences of diagnoses and illness), in this article we build on our concept of regimes of patienthood to explain how diagnostic journeys, and the relations and power dynamics that manifest during this time, shape the illness experience and practices of patienthood. We construct a classification of diagnostic processes grounded in our empirical research that span (1) sudden diagnoses, (2) long, changing diagnostic journeys and (3) diagnostic journeys marked by disbelief and denial of care. Our findings demonstrate how diagnostic journeys and illness experiences are intertwined, with different diagnostic pathways impacting how illness is experienced. Analysing these categories collectively demonstrates that diagnostic journeys, while heterogenous, shape the practices that patients develop to manage health conditions and navigate unequal health-care encounters.

**Melanie Jeske, PhD**  
**Postdoctoral Researcher at the Rank of Instructor**  
**Institute on the Formation of Knowledge**  
**University of Chicago**

# **“Focus more on what’s right instead of what’s wrong:” research priorities identified by a sample of transgender and gender diverse community health center patients**

**Leblanc et al. 2022**

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## **Abstract:**



**Merrily Leblanc**  
**PhD Student, Sociology**  
**Northeastern University**

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals disproportionately experience disparate health outcomes compared to their cisgender peers. This study aimed to collect qualitative data from a sample of TGD community health center patients on health research priorities to inform future TGD-centered research in the field of TGD health. Between September–November of 2018, four focus groups (two groups in Boston MA, two in New York NY; n = 28 individuals) were held to evaluate community-identified TGD health research priorities with a sample of patients from two community health centers. Thematic analyses were conducted and restricted to social factors impacting health. Findings were incorporated into the development of The LEGACY Project, a longitudinal cohort of TGD patients, assessing the impact of gender-affirming care on health outcomes.

Cross-cutting themes about TGD research priorities pertaining to social factors and health included: (1) Embodiment: understanding and investigating the complex and intersectional lived experiences of TGD individuals; (2) Social determinants of health: the impact of structural and interpersonal stigma on TGD health; and (3) Resiliency and health promoting factors: the need to expand public health research beyond disparities to assess resiliency and health promotion in TGD communities. Participants identified investigating the impact of social influences on health as a research priority for TGD patients. Recalibrating field norms from individual researcher priorities to TGD population-driven research will help ensure investigators address topics that may otherwise be missed or overlooked and may optimize the reach and impact of research in TGD health.

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## **Call for Publications**

If there is an article, book, or publication you would like included in the next newsletter, please send information and optional photo to [maestas.d@northeastern.edu](mailto:maestas.d@northeastern.edu)



# Student Section

## Student Editors



For this issue of the newsletter series on public sociology, we interviewed two sociologists whose work focuses on mental health. Through our interviews, we aimed to highlight their perspectives on public sociology. In addition, we were interested in learning as to how their work engages with the public. Questions and responses have been paraphrased to accommodate space limitations.

## Yue Qian

is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the Ohio State University. Her research concerns inequality at the intersection of gender, family, and work.

Currently, this work examines two lines of inquiry: (1) how couple dynamics in intimate relationships reflect and shape gender inequality in the broader society; (2) how social and mental health inequalities manifest and evolve in the COVID-19 pandemic.



## Tiffani Elliot

is a sociology doctoral student at Northeastern University. She holds a B.S. in Psychology, a minor in Biology, and an M.A. in Sociology from Texas State University. Her research broadly focuses on medical sociology and the sociology of mental health, focusing on improving the way behavioral healthcare systems interact with underserved and historically oppressed communities.

Tiffani is interested in rethinking approaches to mental healthcare that better recognize the unique needs of marginalized groups and acknowledge the complex social factors that influence mental health. Through her research, she advocates for a mental healthcare system that moves beyond pathologizing mental distress that results from the lived experiences of social injustice and inequality. In doing so, Tiffani aims to promote a person-centered mental healthcare system that respects sociocultural preferences regarding treatment, adequately addresses structural inequalities, and provides comprehensive and continuous care.





## How did your lived experiences contribute to your desire to study the world through a sociological lens?

**YQ:** I have always been interested in research on gender, family work, and well-being. One of my closest collaborators and friends—Wen Fan—is a medical sociologist. In graduate school, we started collaborating on a project that combined our research interests; we liked it so much that we kept working on more projects together. Since 2015, we have published nine papers together. I have to say: finding a collaborator and friend makes our journey in academia so much more enjoyable!

My ongoing research on mental health and COVID-19 was very closely impacted by my background as a Wuhan native. The COVID-19 outbreak first occurred in Wuhan, my hometown. I was born and raised in Wuhan, so I felt deeply connected to this city. I felt that the least I could do to help people in my hometown was to understand how their experiences and mental health were affected by Wuhan's unprecedented 76-day lockdown. I was fortunate enough to get a large grant to collect primary data and research this topic, along with my fantastic colleagues Wen Fan and Amy Hanser.

**TE:** So I would say that my research interests largely stemmed from my interdisciplinary background in psychology and sociology and the professional experiences I've had working in institutionalized care settings with mental health probate courts and with agencies that support those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So all of those professional experiences were happening when I switched between the disciplines of psychology and sociology. And I think it sort of emphasized the ways that we need to more adequately address social and structural determinants of health and mental health rather than only pathologizing distress that might be rooted or a result of social inequality.

## How does your work engage with public-facing sociology?

**YQ:** I have done a lot of public sociology, and I really enjoy doing it. I consider doing public sociology to be my creative hobby. I also find a strong sense of fulfillment when I share my research with a wider audience. For example, a very fun experience for me was to give a TED-style talk (in Chinese) about gender inequality and changing marriage patterns in the global context. The video of this talk has received over 3 million views since it was released online in 2018. I am so pleasantly surprised!

I am also a founding editor of a popular social sciences blog on WeChat (China's most popular social media platform). I have managed this blog since 2015, and we have accumulated over 60,000 subscribers. I invite scholars all over the world to write about their research in layman's terms. I very much enjoy it because I get to stay on top of the most recent publications and have the opportunity to connect with many talented scholars.

**TE:** I would say that I'm still in the beginning stages of figuring out how my research will engage with public sociology, but I anticipate this including partnering with community organizations, considering policy engagement at some level, and making the research that I do accessible to non-academic audiences.

**DM:** How do you think sociology can help policy better address those issues?

I think sociology has a really unique opportunity right now, specifically given our current mental health crisis and how it has been linked to ongoing struggles for racial justice and the collective stress and trauma brought on by the Covid 19 pandemic. I think this has sparked a lot of public discourse about how psychological well-being is connected to the sociopolitical climate. So, I think sociologists are really well equipped to grapple and problem-solve with those sorts of issues, especially now.

## Do you think public-facing sociology is becoming more valued?

**YQ:** Public sociology is not necessarily formally valued because when it comes to getting an R1 job, tenure, or promotion, research productivity still carries much more weight. But I think public sociology is a great way to increase the impact and reach of our research. As researchers, we all want our research to be read and cited, and public sociology can definitely help with that. In addition, broader research impact and knowledge translation activities are increasingly emphasized when we are evaluated for grants and promotions. Thus, demonstrating our commitment to public sociology could potentially help our grant applications and career promotions.

**TE:** I think when it comes to topics of mental health, I feel like other allied disciplines, such as psychology and psychiatry, have historically been more public-facing when it comes to topics on mental health. I do feel like the field is becoming more involved with community-engaged research. Still, I would love to see more sociologists of mental health enter spaces where they contribute to inter and trans-disciplinary work, highlight social and structural determinants of mental health, and even engage in policy reform or public health.

## Do you think it is important for graduate students to engage in public-facing sociology?

**YQ:** As a grad student writing my dissertation, I started doing public sociology (e.g., writing blog posts about sociological research). At that time, I felt that writing a dissertation alone every day was such an isolating experience. I decided to write about some fascinating research I came across to add a bit of fun to my dissertating life. My articles became so popular, and I got so much fulfillment from all the online reactions. Writing op-eds, blog posts, and other public-facing articles also helped hone my skills in telling a compelling story, identifying an opening hook, and writing with clarity, all of which are extremely important for academic writing. Therefore, for grad students, doing public sociology can be a great way to find community, derive fulfillment, sharpen our communication skills, and establish expertise in certain areas.

**TE:** I feel like if we're starting at the beginning of our career of centering our research in ways that are more focused on public sociology, then that will translate into whatever career paths we follow, whether academic or not academic. And so I think while we're developing the skills that we're learning in our doctoral studies, if we can engage in public sociology while doing that, I feel like that will easily translate into the research we do after that. And I think it will largely inform even the directions we go in afterward. Yeah, I think the answer is yes. I think breaking the bounds of academia and making change is important, especially if we're doing community research right. You know, in ethical ways, because for the most part, we will be using people to do research. So if we're not giving back to those communities, what's the point?

## Do you feel like public sociology could help address problems related to intersectionality?

**TE:**

Yeah, I think that sociology has theoretical and methodological toolkits, so to say, that is very well equipped to address things like inequality and intersectionality, which not every discipline has. So, I think that's one reason why sociology is useful in thinking through mental health or health equity research, as well as public-facing sociology. I'd like to see more inter and transdisciplinary work because I realize that a multidisciplinary approach should and could be taken with mental health and health.

# Notes from the Newsletter Editor



Happy Spring and Happy End of the Semester! I hope everyone has the chance to recharge and spend time doing things that ignite passion, both regarding scholarly activities and personal enjoyment over the summer. I have had a wonderful time engaging with so many incredible people in our community, and I am thankful for the generous and continued support. I want to express my gratitude to the columnists and interviewees Cynthia Colen, Daniel Dohan, Magdalena Szaflarski, Katie Sweeny, Tania Jenkins, stef shuster, Nancy Toure, Torish Konach, Gerald Nowark III, Zhe Zhang, Danielle Maestas, Yue Qian, and Tiffani Elliot who continue to pour so much time and energy into creating informative content.

Danielle and I will gather at ASA this year to plan the content we hope to cover during the upcoming academic year. Please let us know if anyone has any information or material they would like to see covered

The newsletter relies on contributions from members of the community. If there is important information that you would like featured in the Summer 2023 newsletter, please email me at [pettisph@msu.edu](mailto:pettisph@msu.edu).

Be kind to yourself and others; in doing so, we will continue building our vibrant community.

In gratitude,

**PJ Pettis**  
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