



**When Perception is Reality: Subjectivity & Health in Latin America**

**Course:** When Perception is Reality: Subjectivity & Health  
**Semester:** Winter term  
**Meeting time:** Monday & Wednesday, 7 am to 9 am  
**Location:** Hospital Clínica Bíblica

**Instructor** Andrea Álvarez Marín, MPH/MPA  
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**Office hours:** By appointment (book an appointment by email)

**A. Course description (No prerequisites)**

This course focuses on the association between subjectivity and health, that is, the impact of people’s perceptions on their health behaviors. We will learn that people’s beliefs and attitudes influence their health outcomes beyond the impact of their objective life conditions. These beliefs are partly based on biomedical explanations of illness, but not always or not entirely. We will also discuss how expert and non-expert views on health not always coincide. Yet, we will continually emphasize the importance of considering people’s perceptions when developing clinical guidelines and public policies.

**Learning objectives.** As a result of completing this course, students will be able to:

- 1) Explain the concept of subjectivity and its importance for health professionals.
- 2) Enumerate different ways in which people’s perceptions influence their health outcomes.
- 3) Identify different social and cultural factors that shape people’s perceptions.
- 4) Describe the existing methods of assessing people’s perceptions and their limitations.
- 5) Understand how these issues play out in the Latin American region.
- 6) Incorporate subjectivity considerations into professional health settings.
- 7) Communicate important health information to non-expert audiences.

**B. Course contents**

Week/Session	Topic(s)
Session 1 Monday, January 8	Syllabus overview and Introduction to the social determinants of health
Session 2 Wednesday, January 10	Why do we need the social and behavioral sciences approach in public health? The meaning of health
Session 3 Monday, January 15	Movie: Unnatural causes
Session 4 Wednesday, January 17	The subjective experience of vulnerability
Session 5	Social norms as a social determinant of health

Monday, January 22	
Session 6 Wednesday, January 24	Stigma (emphasis on mental illness and weight bias)
Session 7 Monday, January 29	Ageism and its impact on healthy aging
Session 8 Wednesday, January 31	Lived experiences of illness
Session 9 Monday, February 5	Defining health in our own terms-the example of the recovery movement
Session 10 Wednesday, February 7	Coaching on building a persuasive health pitch to non-experts
Session 11 Monday, February 12	Midterm
Session 12 Wednesday, February 14	Edutainment—a way to reach non-expert audiences
Session 13 Monday, February 19	Documentary (TBD).
Session 14 Wednesday, February 21	Social media: friend, foe, or frenemy?
Session 15 Monday, February 26	The dark side—when the pursuit of health becomes toxic
Session 16 Wednesday, February 28	Social support and community empowerment
Session 17 Monday, March 4	Students present their pitches
Session 18 Wednesday, March 6	Methodology class I will hand in the final exam
Session 19 Monday, March 11	Assessing our own subjectivities in our professional work
Session 20 Wednesday, March 13	No class

### C. Methodology

This course combines lectures and in-class discussions. All the assignments were created for you to apply the course's key concepts to your daily professional lives. Current day job skills include good written and verbal communication. It's also important that you learn to communicate health concepts with lay audiences.

All written assignments have to be submitted by email.

I will provide the assigned readings electronically. I may select additional readings to enrich my lectures. Nonetheless, you will only be graded on what's covered on the assigned readings and on my lecture slides.

### D. Evaluation:

Attendance and Participation (weekly reflections, 4 per term)	20%
Edutainment proposal	10%
Midterm (in class)	20%
Health pitch	15%
Final exam (take home)	30%

**E. Assignments**

Assignment	Description	Due date(s)
Participation (weekly reflections) 4 in total	Aside from attending and participating in class discussions, you should send me a short paragraph (around 100 words) referring to a connection between what we've been discussing in class and something outside of the classroom (e. g. something that you learned in a different course, something that you find interesting about Costa Rica, something in a book you are reading, etc.). All examples and reflections are valid as long as you make a genuine effort to apply what you're learning to the broader context in which you live. These will be graded pass/fail. You should submit 4 reflections during the term, you choose when to submit.	On the weeks that you choose to submit a reflection, you have to email it to me by 5:00 pm on Sunday,
Edutainment proposal	As health professionals, we work on many topics that are extremely relevant to people's lives. Nonetheless, many people don't find these topics interesting or applicable to their daily lives. We should attempt to reach people where they're at and edutainment is one way to potentially achieve this. Each student will work on a edutainment proposal. Examples include creating a board game, creating a children's book, creating a comic book, or curating a mini exhibition. You don't have to complete the whole project, just write a proposal explaining your chosen health topic and how you would transform it into an edutainment project. We will have one full class to cover examples.	You have to email it to me by <b>5:00 pm on Monday, February 26.</b>
Three-minute health pitch	As health professionals, it is imperative that we learn how to communicate with non-expert audiences. Although we might feel passionately about a topic, others might not agree with us or might not see how the topic is relevant to their daily lives. We need to engage with them from what they value, not what we value. It's also important to learn how to communicate information succinctly. We'll discuss ways to communicate health information in a persuasive manner. Each student will choose one of our course's themes and will deliver a three-minute pitch to their classmates.	All students will present their pitches on <b>Monday, March 4.</b> Each student will have 3 minutes.
Exams	We will have two exams. The midterm will be done in class and will cover the main theoretical concepts discussed in Sessions 1 through 8. The final will be a take-home exam in which you will apply our	The midterm will take place on <b>Monday, February 12.</b> The final will be given to you on Wednesday, March 6

	theoretical discussions to a current public health problem.	and you will have to submit it by email on <b>Wednesday, March 13 by 5:00 pm.</b>
Self-Evaluation	Instead of a participation percentage, each of you will be evaluating your work. As budding professionals, you should increasingly make yourselves accountable for the consequences of your decisions. Did you do your best in this course? Did you maintain a positive outlook and willingness to learn? Did you respect your fellow classmates? Did you do your work in a conscientious manner? This is an honor exercise as I will register the grade that you give yourselves, no questions asked.	

**E. Average minimum amount of out-of-class or independent learning expected per week.**

Around 12 hours.

**F. Bibliography**

Cislaghi, B. & Heise, L. Using social norms theory for health promotion in low-income countries. *Health Promotion International* 2019, 34(3): 616-623.

Cyril, S., Smith, B. J., Possamai-Inesedy, A. & Renzaho, A. Exploring the role of community engagement in improving the health of disadvantaged populations: a systematic review. *Global Health Action* 2015, 8(1).

Ebrahimpour, F., Maryam, E. & Varaei, S. Photovoice: Method of data collection in qualitative research. *Nursing Practice Today* 2018, 5(1): 216-218.

Glass, T.A. & McAtee, M.J. Behavioral science at the crossroads in public health: extending horizons, envisioning the future. *Social Science and Medicine* 2006, 62(7):1650–1671.

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Wallerstein, N.B., Yen, I.H. & Syme, S.L. Integration of social epidemiology and community-engaged interventions to improve health equity. *American Journal of Public Health* 2011, 101(5): 822-830.

Xiaochen Hu, R., Luo, M. & Li L. W. Associations of ageism and health: a systematic review of quantitative observational studies, *Research on Aging* 2021, 43(7-8), 311-322.

### **G. Additional course policies**

**Attendance.** You are expected to attend and participate in all classroom discussions. All students have very interesting ideas to contribute!

**Special Needs.** In case of requiring additional time for taking exams, or if experiencing any circumstance during the course of the term that would interfere with your ability to complete your work or take a test, let me know. Please reach out. My job is not only to work as the course instructor, but also to guide you to any other resources that you may need.

**Changes to Syllabus:** The student acknowledges receipt of this syllabus and the information herein by continuing to attend this course. The instructor reserves the right to make changes to this syllabus if circumstances warrant such a change, with previous approval of ICDS' Academic Director. All major changes will be provided to the student in writing.

**Safety and security.** In the case of an emergency, if possible, the class should shelter in place. If the building that the class is in is affected, follow the evacuation procedures for the building. After evacuation, seek shelter at the ICDS Office during office hours, or go straight to your home as the predetermined rendezvous location and wait for ICDS' instructions.

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY CODE**

Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.

Students in this course are expected to abide by common sense, normal regulations on Academic Integrity. Violations of the Academic Integrity policy include, but are not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, cheating, and academic misconduct, including dishonest acts such as tampering with grades or taking part in obtaining or distributing any part of an administered or non-administered test/assignment. The intent to violate this policy also represents a violation of this policy.

**Possible Sanctions for Violating Academic Integrity Policy:** If an act of academic dishonesty is determined to have occurred, one or more of the following sanctions will be imposed, depending on the severity of a first-time offense:

- Reduction of a course grade
- An "F" grade for the assignment or exam

- Failure for the entire course
- Other action(s) deemed appropriate by the faculty member.
- Any of the above sanctions with the inability to withdraw.

The decision about the sanction to apply will be made jointly by the course's professor and ICDS' Academic Director, in consultation with home university on-site Director for the program, if applicable. The incident will be reported to the home university and may result in an official conduct record for the student(s).

**Second violation:** A second violation will result in suspension or expulsion from the program, in addition to any sanction issued from the list above.