

Department of Sociology & Anthropology  
Illinois State University  
**SOA/SWK 311: Issues in Gerontology:**  
***The Changing Terrain of Work and Retirement in the U.S.***

Spring 2018

Meets Tu/Th, 2-3:15

Classroom: Schroeder 112

Office Hrs: Mon. 1:30-3:30; Tues. 3:30-4:30 & appt. Email: [cwellin@ilstu.edu](mailto:cwellin@ilstu.edu)

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Course Overview

This course addresses advanced topics in social gerontology, but its particular topics and approach vary across semesters, according to the instructor. My goals in designing this section were 1) to choose a substantive focus that is timely and relevant to contemporary society; 2) to capitalize on my own background in the study of work and aging, respectively; and 3) to integrate a multi-disciplinary approach, in keeping with the varied backgrounds, interests, and career plans of students in the course.

As the title implies, this course will focus on roles and transitions that are central to socio-economic status and personal identity in industrial societies—those surrounding employment and retirement. Our jobs not only support our material needs but, in the U.S. especially, have historically provided access to benefits such as health insurance and supplementary pensions which have made possible our traditional expectation of a “good” old age. Moreover, the impact of work transcends material needs: it offers (or denies) creativity and fulfillment and sets the temporal rhythms of our days, permitting (or constraining) our ability to spend time with friends and family or invest in other roles and activities.

In turn, the significance of retirement has grown enormously in recent decades: given increased longevity and (for many) better health status, people can expect to live twenty or more years beyond their exit from paid work. The meaning and purpose of this *Third Age* (following youth and middle-adulthood) are only now being defined, as tens of millions of “baby boomers” construct later life in ways that are as varied as they are distinct from those in earlier generations. Although there have been dynamic changes in employment across the decades (none more dramatic than the increase in women’s labor force participation in the past 40 or so years), we have come to see as natural a particular *life course* timetable that we’ll describe, following a key article by Riley & Riley, as “age-differentiated.” Basic to this pattern is the expectation that education is completed early in life, followed by continuous involvement in work careers in our adult years, after which one enters into a planned retirement. Though seen as “natural,” this pattern was in fact the product of particular historical, economic, demographic and political conditions following the Second World War.

The economic recession of recent years has magnified social trends, regarding work and retirement that have been developing for some years. In short, work and career models that were established in the post-war period (based on stable employment, labor unionization, and relatively healthy economic growth) are now being questioned and examined both within public discourse and academic research. *What are implications of these changes for our lives?*

For younger and middle-aged people, orderly career models—assuming long-term, stable employment with a single firm—have given way to others, based on temporary or contract work and expectations of multiple job (if not career) changes throughout adulthood. For older people, the security of retirement funds from private and public sources has been severely shaken, leading many to extend their work lives well past the traditional retirement age. These trends are reverberating widely, affecting everything from personal identity and family arrangements, to educational institutions and major social policies such as Medicare and Social Security.

In this seminar, we will grapple with the nature and major implications of this changing terrain of work and retirement in the U.S., changes that have cast many research traditions and findings within social gerontology into question. We will review and critique theoretical models of work and retirement, and use these tools to explore and assess current empirical research in this very dynamic area of social gerontology. Among the questions we will pursue: *What have been dominant models of work and retirement, based on what scholars have termed the “normative” life course? How is the impact of recession and of a post-industrial economy more generally, being felt and adapted to in distinctive ways among particular groups defined by class, race, and gender? And, finally, what are among the positive and creative possibilities for work and retirement (“a third age”), in an era when conventional approaches to work careers and retirement have been called into question?*

As should be apparent from this overview, such questions require investigation within a *life course* perspective, rather than one that treats only the later stages of adulthood. Equally clear is the need to explore the meanings (both collective and individual) and responses people construct about these social changes, an agenda which demands both interpretive, social psychological research, as well as knowledge about macro-level structural change in economy and society. For this reason, we will develop an *interdisciplinary* dialogue between sociology and kindred clinical fields (including psychology, human development, and social work).

We will also discuss the *interpretive/narrative* approach to the study of aging. I’ll argue this is especially appropriate and powerful for exploring and understanding issues central to our course, and one that is strongly represented in assigned readings. We will discuss this approach not only as a “method” for studying aging, but also as a theoretical perspective that is central to concerns at the roots of sociology, psychology, and clinical fields such as counseling and social work. *We perceive our biographies and sense of identity as a kind of story, which we revise over time; this is both an individual story, and also a collective, cultural one which today is in flux.*

### Course Goals and Agenda

Our objectives in this course are for students 1) to become conversant with theoretical perspectives on the life course, along with their distinctive assumptions, strengths and limitations; 2) to know and critically assess empirical social research, both of “traditional” and more current patterns of work and retirement; and 3) to articulate and begin to address particular questions and issues of relevance—intellectual, professional, or personal—for students. *Applying the concepts and research skills to occupational fields or careers of particular interest to you will make the seminar come alive, and be extremely helpful in understanding choices about work and further education.* The nature and depth of this inquiry will vary somewhat between undergraduate and graduate students. However, we come together with different backgrounds and strengths, all of which are important and complementary for meeting the goals of the group.

### Teaching Format

There will be limited use of lectures in this course; I will typically begin meetings with remarks that frame and connect readings. My hope is to rely a great deal on class discussion. The discussions will be grounded firmly in the readings; thus students are to *read assigned materials before the session listed on the syllabus*. Our reading material is quite varied, but some of it—especially theoretical readings early in the semester—will be challenging. Nonetheless, evaluations of your work will directly tap your comprehension of, and ability to apply and integrate, this material. The best policy is to make strong efforts to read before class, in order that our meetings can be helpful and dynamic in your learning process. This is an *advanced* course and, as such, requires that students take substantial responsibility for your learning. The most powerful step you can take, in this regard, is to be a conscientious and active reader. Also, *take notes as you read, to help you to clarify and pose questions whether in class or during office hours*. We will also have several student-led discussions, videos, and occasional guest speakers. ***\*Regular class attendance is expected and essential to success in this course. If/when illness or emergency intrudes, kindly let me know prior to class. I will be flexible and supportive of students, but only if/when you take responsibility for keeping me informed.***

### Required Texts

There are two books (both required) for the course, along with an extensive list of readings you can access via my “instructor’s folder” [I.F. below] on the CAS-IT website, which is linked to my departmental website. (Some readings are *suggested* for undergraduates, but *required* for graduate students, *designated RG below*) Scanning readings, which you can access on-line or print out as you prefer, is an imperfect solution to the dilemma of balancing cost and convenience for students. The books (available in used paperback editions) are:

Robin Leidner. (1993) *Fast Food, Fast Talk*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Robert S. Weiss. (2005) *The Experience of Retirement*. Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell Press.

### Assignments, Exams, and Grading

Our course objectives are varied, and no single mode of expressing or assessing learning is ideal. I offer several ways for students to earn credit in the course. *First*, there will be two brief, reflective essays, intended to help you engage with course topics, and/or to demonstrate your grasp of lectures and readings. The essays will be essential for helping all concerned to absorb, critique, and apply ideas that may at first seem daunting and abstract. *Second*, there will be one in-class “objective” exam, what will assess how effectively you are reading and integrating material. Ours is a writing- and speaking- intensive course; still, the in-class exam will be useful, especially for clarifying concepts and theoretical arguments in our first weeks, which provide a foundation for later work. *Third*, students will write one take-home essay exam (of roughly 10 pages) addressing questions you choose from a list of prompts I provide. *Fourth*, you will write a final paper (of between 12-15 pages), exploring in greater depth a theme or topic of your choice from the semester. [There will be an *option*, by permission of the instructor, to supplement your final paper with primary narrative data, gained through an interview or through library/archival sources.] Credit is also attached to class and/or office hour participation.

There are **100 available “points”** available, to be earned as follows:

- 2 brief (4-5 page) reflective or summary essays, each worth 10 points = 20 pts.
- 1 in-class objective exam, consisting of multiple-choice questions = 20 pts.
- 1 mid-term take-home essay, based on prompts I provide = 25 pts.
- 1 final paper, allowing you to develop a topic of your choosing = 25 pts.
- Participation/Contributions to Classroom and/or Reggie Net discussion = 10 pts. = 100 pts.

[All written work is to be either typed or word-processed. **NO LATE WORK WILL BE ACCEPTED without prior instructor approval.** In formatting papers, please double-space, use one-inch margins and 10-12-point type, with either Times-Roman or Courier fonts preferred. Clarity, word-usage, organization and style—all are essential for college writing, and for full credit in this course. *All written work should be original and stated in your own words; any language drawn from other sources must be appropriately noted, and paraphrased material properly noted. The use of any material without citation, from printed, video, or internet sources, constitutes academic dishonesty and will result in zero-credit for the assignment and, if flagrant, in formal sanctions against the student. See the ISU policy on plagiarism for clarification of responsibilities and regulations.*]

*Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Student Accessibility and Accommodations at 350 Fell Hall, (309) 438-5853, or visit the website at [disabilityconcerns.illinoisstate.edu](http://disabilityconcerns.illinoisstate.edu).*

### Expectations for Your In-Class Behavior

Respectful, considerate behavior is called for at all times. You are expected to be awake, prepared, and ready to give your full attention. Students may not use phones, computers, tablets, or other electronics in class.

### Class Schedule and Reading Assignments

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Assignment</u>
1/16	Seminar introduction: students will receive individual background forms.	
1/18	Overview of topics and learning goals for the seminar.	
1/23	Classic sociology of work	Hughes; Becker (a); Bucher & Strauss IF
1/25	Classic sociological views	Erikson; Merton; Mortimer & Simmons IF
1/30	The Life Course perspective	Settersten; Elder (a)
2/1	Life Course II (Models)	Riley & Riley; Dannefer IF <b>Essay # 1 DUE*</b>
2/6	Aging and work (macro&micro)	Henretta; Pavalko, Ch’s 2&4 IF
2/8	Post-industrial work	Rubin; Smith, IF
2/13	Qualitative inquiry	Hendricks; Wellin (a) IF;
2/15	Narrative approaches	McAdams; Kenyon et al, in Handbook, IF
2/20	<b>In class objective exam</b>	<b>20 items</b>
2/22	Constructing the Life Course	Holstein & Gubrium, Ch’s 1-2 IF

**Class Schedule and Reading Assignments**

<b><u>Date</u></b>	<b><u>Topic</u></b>	<b><u>Assignment</u></b>
2/27	Aging and the Self	Giarusso; D. Karp; Stebbins IF
3/1	<i>No new reading: catch up</i>	<i>Identify questions/Areas of Confusion</i>
3/6	Case study: Service jobs	Leidner, Ch's 1-4
3/8	Interactive Service jobs, II	Leidner, Ch's 5-7
<b>3/13 and 3/15 No Class: Spring Break*</b>		
3/20	Work, gender, and life course	Reskin & Padavic Chs.1,3,4,7 IF
3/22	Gender and retirement	Calasanti & Slevin; Moen, et al.;Carp IF <b>Brief essay # 2 DUE*</b>
3/27	The experience of retirement	Savishinsky IF; Weiss, Ch's 1-5
3/29	Experience of retirement II	Weiss, Ch. 6-conclusion
4/3	Constructing life as retired	Myerhoff (video); Erickson, et al, IF
4/5	Racial & Social Class Inequality	Newman; TBA IF
4/10	Late Life Communities	<i>The Open Road</i> video <b>Take-Home Essay DUE*</b>
4/12	Life style & aging	Hendricks & Hatch, IF
4/17	Special topic: Illness Careers	Jaffe & Wellin; Gubrium IF
4/19	Special topic: Human services	Burns; "Human Services: Neoliberal State, IF
4/24	The "Gig" or Sharing Economy	Bozek readings, <i>Opposing Viewpoints</i>
4/26	Non-profit work/careers	Readings: TBA
5/1	Student-Led Topics	Readings TBA
5/3	Student-Led Topics	"" ""

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**Final papers due at the end of final exam week  
Friday, May 12th.**