

HEALTH & SOCIETY NEWS

The Robert Wood Johnson Health & Society Scholars Program at Columbia University is a joint initiative of the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP) and the Mailman School of Public Health (MSPH).

What explains racial disparities in infant health?

Although infant mortality in the United States has fallen over the past few decades, racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes persist. Low birth weight is the second leading cause of infant mortality in the US. Black women in the US have for decades been twice as likely as white women to give birth to babies of low birth weight—those weighing less than 2,500 grams, or about 5.5 pounds. Education and sociodemographic risk factors do not explain these racial differences. Because of racial segregation, black and white women sometimes live in very different kinds of neighborhoods. Can neighborhood context help explain the racial disparities in low birth weight?

To explore the influence of neighborhood on infant health, Julien Teitler and Nancy Reichman received a seed grant from the Columbia Health & Society Scholars Program in 2003. Teitler and Reichman were working with a remarkable resource—a dataset of all births in New Jersey from 1989 to

continued on page 7

Editor: Grace Hong, Program Assistant

© 2005 Columbia University, all rights reserved. The CHSSP newsletter is a publication of Columbia University, published four times per year.

Health & Society Scholars Program
Columbia University in the City of New York
420 West 118th Street
8th Floor, mail code: 3355
New York, NY 10027
Tel: (212) 854-3694
Fax: (212) 854-8925
Email: chssp@columbia.edu

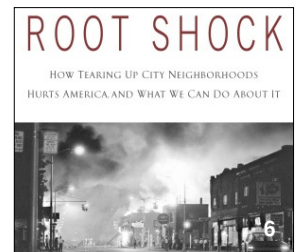
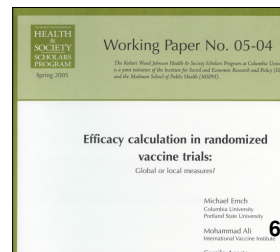
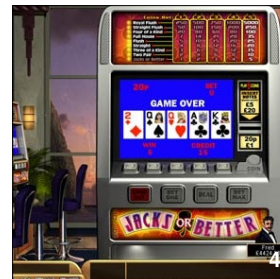


Table of Contents

What explains racial disparities in infant health?	1
Letter from the Directors	2
Grant Awards	3
Compulsion by Design: Video Gambling...	4
Seminar Highlight	6
New Working Papers	6
Featured Publication	6
Announcements	7
Calendar of Events	8



Our previous letters were full of ideas; news was not stressed as much. In general we hope to err on the side of ideas, but every once in a while, it is a good idea to report the news.

First, our Cohort 1 scholars (Jason Corburn, Molly Martin, Natasha Schull) are nearing completion of their time with us. Jason has accepted a position as Assistant Professor of International Affairs and Urban Planning at Columbia! He will join our H&SS group here as a faculty affiliate. Molly has accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Sociology at Penn State. Michelle Frisco (H&SS Scholar, University of Wisconsin) joins her there. The sociology and demography group at Penn State is about to discover population health. Even in the happy valley, we expect some big changes. Natasha is still on the job market, as anthropology is always behind the other disciplines—but we think she will be accepting a position soon. Second, our new cohort (Lisa Bates, Debbie Barrington, and Cindy Colon) is preparing to join us. To say that we are enthused is an understatement. Third, our Cohort 2 scholars are busy preparing their own revolution, organizing the next scholars' conference and quietly pursuing enormously innovative research. Jennifer Stuber and Sara Shostak have survey research instruments that are about to go out into the field. Mike Emch is importing spatial analysis to problems in adolescent health. Since the last newsletter, we have completed two more mini-seminars, wrapping up ADD/Autism and Teen Sexual Risk. Both seminars were home to some controversy. Focusing on pregnancy, Julien Teitler took Link's admonition to focus on population health (as versus individual covariates) seriously, and demonstrated that age at first birth is normally dis-

tributed in all western countries, those with low teen pregnancy rates as well as those with high teen pregnancy rates. What distinguishes these countries is only mean age, which suggests that those who study teens are looking in the wrong place. This challenge gave rise to an interesting question—when should we focus on tails of distributions to get insight into mechanisms? We will attack this problem in the next letter. Ezra Susser was lead protagonist in the ADD/Autism workshop, forcefully arguing that the idea of combining ADD and Autism in one workshop was wrong, that little meaning could be gained from the comparison, and that the comparison encouraged discussion of intellectual red herrings. Bearman recalls reading a paper on hermit crabs years ago. When they get too big for their shell, they need to find a vacant one. It turns out that the vacancy chains for hermit crab shells are the same length and duration as those for Methodist ministers moving from benefice to benefice. Sometimes, comparing apples and oranges is useful. There are interesting similarities between ADD and Autism more significant than the fact that they both start with “a”, impact young males, and have evidenced striking growth in the past few decades. Next letter, we will attack this problem as well.

Of course there is other news. Bearman beat Link in a game of squash, after 265 consecutive defeats. The whole group is looking forward to exploring addiction. The program is healthy. New work is emerging.

Peter Bearman

Bruce Link

Microgrant

Buffet

Investigator: Natasha Schull (Health & Society Scholar)

Natasha Schull will complete an ethnographic video entitled “Buffet.” The half-hour video addresses the cultural and experiential dimensions of gastronomic over-consumption through the lens of the Las Vegas buffet, a socially sanctioned binge-ritual that exemplifies problems of excess and waste in contemporary American life. “Buffet” contributes to current work on obesity in population health by considering two areas that have received scant attention from researchers: 1) the experiential aspects of over-consumption; and 2) processes of waste and their relationship with over-consumption. The video contributes an innovative methodological approach to the study of over-consumption by using a visual medium to track the movement of food through the consumption chain. In “Buffet,” the simple act of eating a meal illuminates complex social, political, and economic issues.



Cheesecake covers a Las Vegas buffet table.
Film still from Schull's video project

Seed Grants

The Effect of High-risk Behavior, Social Networks, and Neighborhood Characteristics on HIV Seropositive Status in Illicit Drug Users in New York City

Investigator: Crystal Fuller (Epidemiology)

This study will examine the independent effect of individual, contextual, and neighborhood social characteristics on HIV seroprevalence among young adult illicit drug users in four New York City boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx). Individual-level social characteristics will include demographics (e.g., race, educational attainment, economic status). Social contextual characteristics will include network size/composition (e.g., racial composition, size, type, and proportion of drug and sex network members, size and proportion of informational, emotional, and economic support members). Neighborhood-level social characteristics will include determinants such as socioeconomic status (SES), racial composition, and neighborhood social cohesion.

Ethical, Social and Policy Dimensions of Epilepsy Genetics

Investigators: Sara Shostak (Health & Society Scholar), Ruth Ottman (Epidemiology, G.H. Sergievsky Center)

This project examines the social, ethical, and policy dimensions of emerging genetic information about epilepsy, from the perspectives of individuals in families affected by epilepsy and their health care providers. The research focuses particularly on these respondents' perspectives on the clinical and social meanings of genetic information about epilepsy, the desirability and utility of genetic counseling and testing for epilepsy, and the dimensions of social organization that may affect the meaning, distribution, desirability, and utility of genetic information about epilepsy at different moments in a life course. The project is understood as the first step in developing a research agenda and a methodological tool kit that will enable the investigators to study the social, ethical, and policy dimensions of genetics in the context of population health.

Compulsion by Design

VIDEO GAMBLING ADDICTION IN LAS VEGAS

by Natasha Schull

HEALTH & SOCIETY SCHOLAR

Over the past two decades in Las Vegas, traditional forms of gambling have lost ground to electronic forms of play, mirroring the rise of consumer technologies like video games, personal computers, and the Internet. Today, the city's lucrative gaming industry derives the majority of its profits from video slot machines. As recently as twenty years ago, these devices brought in thirty percent of casino revenue; today they generate over seventy-five percent. Off the tourist "Strip" in residential areas of Las Vegas, machines bring in eighty-nine percent of casino revenue; this percentage is higher still when one considers the machines in gas stations, pharmacies, and supermarkets across the city.

As local gamblers are drawn into repeated exchange with Las Vegas's ubiquitous gambling machines, the incidence of gambling addiction rises. At Gamblers Anonymous meetings in the city, over ninety-five percent of the participants are addicted to video poker, a game whose addictive properties have earned it the title "the crack cocaine of gambling" and "electronic morphine." (Within the gaming industry, video poker is called the "cash cow," the "golden goose," the "work horse" of games.) My forthcoming book, *A Perfect Game: Design and Dependency in Las Vegas*, draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among game designers and compulsive machine-gamblers in order to better understand the relationship between changing rationalities in game design and "irrational" modes of behavior and experience such as compulsive gambling.

When playing machines, compulsive gamblers enter what they call "the zone"—a dissociative state in which worldly parameters of time, space, body, self, and mon-

etary value dissolve. In the economy of the zone, the aim is not winning but continuance of play. To enter the zone, gamblers require social isolation and non-interruption. One gambler told me: "I didn't want to have a human interface." Another said: "I want to hang a *DO NOT DISTURB* sign on my back." Gamblers speak of the zone as a state of "total independence and control," in which they can set their own pace without having to "take anyone else into account."

Machine design facilitates the zone by combining features that insulate players from interruption (like noise cancellation technology to remove "destructive interference" from the outside world) with "capacitative" features that allow players to modulate speed, volume, and choice of cards, lending them a sense of autonomy that increases their investment in play. While gamblers seek a state they call the zone, designers seek a state they call "continuous productivity."

Push-buttons replace pull-handles, accelerating play from 300 to 600 games each hour. Embedded bill acceptors allow players to insert large bills into machines and acquire credits rather than stopping to feed coins in one by one. A feature called the "dynamic play rate" senses and adapts to each player's unique speed. Continuous productivity relies not only on speed but on *duration* of play, or "time on device." Ergonomic design—for example, chairs that facilitate circulation to the legs and screens that slant at thirty-eight degrees to reduce slouching—ensures physical comfort and longer play. New model slot machines carry a "library of game variations in the same box"; some even carry embedded television monitors. "These emerging systems," an advertisement explains, "can permit players to view television shows or to enjoy



In a gas station off the tourist strip, a man gambles alone.

Mobile automated teller machines, wireless handheld units, and portable credit card advance systems—as well as new systems like “PersonalBanker,” which allows players to access their financial accounts from the console of the gambling machine—quicken financial transactions and keep people playing. The aim is to promote a sense of autonomy, control, and ability to modulate aspects of play. “You want a situation where the customer can get anything they want when they sit down at your machine,” said the president of a gaming company.

The sociologist Max Weber understood technology as a key force of modern rationalization and disenchantment—the process by which impersonal principles of coordination and calculation come to govern existence, evacuating human experience of pleasure, value, and a sense of magic. The entertainment technologies of Las Vegas at once exemplify and complicate an account of modernity as disenchantment. Unlike the shop machines of industrial labor and production, they function not through the discipline, remedy, or exclusion of human nature, but by responding to human impulses, idiosyncrasies, and inclinations. The immediacy of their response creates an enchanted sense of blurring between person and machine. A gambler told me: “There’s times I feel this vibration between what I *want* and what *happens*.” Gamblers become unable to distinguish between a

closed circuit special events and personal messaging while they continue their gaming activities on the same machine. Players then do not need to exit the play area.”

It is precisely these capacitative features, enabling gamblers to exercise control, autonomy, and skill, that gamblers—and designers, when pressed—recognize as the gateway to compulsive, driven behavior.

sense of autonomy or being in charge and a sense of automaticity or being controlled.

What is a cultural anthropologist to make of the puzzling finding that new gambling machines both heighten and erode a sense of agency? Gamblers and designers alike claim that newer machines compel play through features that are known in the gaming industry as “capacitative”—that is, features enabling gamblers to exercise control, autonomy, and skill. Yet it is precisely these capacitative features that gamblers—and designers, when pressed—recognize as the gateway to compulsive, driven behavior. Counter-intuitively, the machine zone depletes the very faculties that enable it. “You have no choice but to choose,” said one gambler. Tracking the specific mechanisms and engagements that convert autonomy into a kind of “automatism” in the case of Las Vegas machine gambling, I argue, can illuminate broader social tensions between neo-liberal ideals of agency such as “consumer sovereignty” and emerging forms of dependency in contemporary America. ■



Gamblers play video poker—“the crack cocaine of gambling”—in an airport.

Seminar Highlight



Sherman A. James, National Advisory Committee member of the Health & Society Scholars Program, visited Columbia University on March 11 and gave a talk on life-course socioeconomic position and hypertension risk in African American men. The seminar, co-sponsored by Columbia's Health & Society Scholars Program and the Department of Epidemiology, highlighted findings from James's eighteen-year study on the effects of low SES and race on cardiovascular disease in Pitt County, NC. James is an internationally renowned social epidemiologist and currently the Susan Bennett King Professor of Public Policy Studies in the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University.

New Working Papers

05-04 Efficacy Calculation in Randomized Vaccine Trials: Global or Local Measures?

Michael Emch, Mohammad Ali, Camilo Acosta, Mohammad Yunus, David A. Sack, John D. Clemens

05-05 Reconnecting with our Roots: American Urban Planning and Public Health in the 21st Century

Jason Corburn

05-06 The Play of Pharmaceuticals in Las Vegas

Natasha Dow Schull

05-07 Family Background and Adolescent Weight: An Examination of Social and Genetic Influences

Molly A. Martin, Gary D. Sandefur

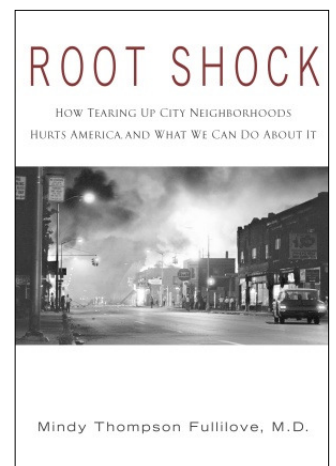
For descriptions or electronic copies of working papers, visit www.chssp.columbia.edu. For hard copies or to submit a paper, write to chssp@columbia.edu.

Featured Publication

Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It

Mindy Fullilove (Psychiatry, Sociomedical Science)

Fullilove recounts the story of urban renewal and its effect on the African American community as one of "root shock": a traumatic stress reaction related to the destruction of one's emotional ecosystem. Between 1949 and 1973, this federal program, spearheaded by business and real estate interests, destroyed 1,600 African American neighborhoods in cities across the United States. The anger it caused also led to riots that sent whites fleeing for the suburbs, stripping them of their own sense of place. The big gashes left in the centers of U.S. cities are only now slowly being repaired. Focusing on three very different urban settings—the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the Central Ward in Newark, and the small Virginia city of Roanoke—Dr. Fullilove argues that the twenty-first century will be one of displacement and of continual demolition and reconstruction. Acknowledging the damage caused by root shock is crucial to coping with its human toll and building a road to recovery.



Stay Connected

Please contact us to:

- Subscribe to the email or print newsletter
- Update your contact information
- Keep us informed of your research and publication activity
- Submit an article to the newsletter
- Participate in the Working Paper Series

Grace Hong
Program Assistant
Tel: (212) 854-9489
Fax: (212) 854-8925
gh286@columbia.edu

Announcements

Welcome, Cohort 3 Scholars in Population Health

Please join us in welcoming the new 2005-2007 Health & Society Scholars. Debbie Barrington, Lisa Bates, and Cynthia Colen will begin their fellowships this fall. **Debbie Barrington** is a doctoral candidate in Epidemiologic Science at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include the social epidemiology of reproductive and perinatal outcomes, and Caribbean-American women's health. **Lisa Bates** is a doctoral candidate in Epidemiology at Harvard. Her recent studies have focused on the roles of socioeconomic context and processes of cultural change in shaping health outcomes among immigrants in the U.S. **Cynthia Colen** is a doctoral candidate in Health Behavior and Health Education at the University of Michigan. Her primary focus is on racial and ethnic inequalities in health, effects of material deprivation on maternal and child health, and fertility timing among different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

Look for more extensive profiles in our fall issue!

What explains racial disparities in infant health?

continued from page 1

1992, linked to mortality data as well as 1990 census tract measures of social and economic composition and housing conditions. Pilot support from H&SS let them plan the next phase of the project, in which they will add spatially-referenced data on environmental contaminants from the Toxic Release Inventory and other EPA databases, as well as health care access, communicable diseases, and crime.

From the start, this project bridged disciplines and campuses at Columbia. Teitler, a sociologist and demographer, is on the faculty at Columbia's School of Social Work. Nancy Reichman, an economist, was at the National Center for Children in Poverty at the Mailman School of Public Health. She is now Associate Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey. The two had collaborated before, on work from the well-known "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing" project as well on analyses of birth outcomes in New Jersey. As the project began to expand, Teitler and Reichman invited Virginia Rauh to join them. Rauh, a perinatal epidemiologist in Population and Family Health at Mailman, is co-deputy director of the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health. Her work relating air pollution and other environmental factors to reproductive

health outcomes made her a terrific complement for this new research team. Also on the team are Lenna Nepomnyaschy, a post-doc at the School of Social Work, Sandra Garcia, a doctoral student, and Doug Miller, a GIS specialist at ISERP.

Over time the project has broadened, as Teitler, Reichman, and Rauh have put together an ambitious plan to study racial, ethnic, and generational differences in low birth weight. The New Jersey data remain important; the rich neighborhood and environmental data, along with the diversity in the state population, provide a unique resource. They will also study the relation between length of US residence and birth outcomes using three large birth cohort studies, including Fragile Families. Finally, they will compare racial disparities in low birth weight in different countries—the first international comparison of this kind.

These distinct studies share a common question: whether the social, economic, and physical environment can help us understand long-standing disparities in one of the most important contributors to infant mortality. We look forward to learning more. ■



Calendar of Events

Seminars

*Addiction mini-seminars

Faculty leaders: Peter Messeri, Lirio Covey
March 25 & April 1; 10am-12pm both sessions
Irving Center Conference Room, Presbyterian Hospital PH-10

*Cohort 1 - Talk 1

April 8; 10am-12pm
Room 270B, International Affairs Building

*Cohort 1 - Talk 2

April 15; 10am-12pm
Room 270B, International Affairs Building

*Cohort 1 - Talk 3

April 22; 10am-12pm
Room 270B, International Affairs Building

*Cohort 2 Talk

April 29; 10am-12pm
Room 270B, International Affairs Building

* Open only to H&SS affiliated faculty, fellows, and invited participants.

For more information about Health & Society Scholars sponsored seminars, workshops, and events, email chssp@columbia.edu.

Other Important Dates

RWJ Foundation Site Visit to Columbia

Visitors: Carol Chang, Pamela Russo, Susan Scrimshaw
March 23, all day
Room 926, Mailman School of Public Health

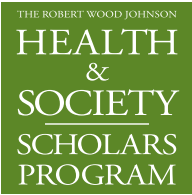
RWJ Foundation Health & Society Scholars Annual Meeting

Columbia Participants: Debbie Barrington, Lisa Bates, Peter Bearman, Luisa Borrell, Cynthia Colen, Jason Corburn, Michael Emch, Molly Martin, Ilan Meyer, Kathryn Neckerman, Virginia Rauh, Natasha Schull, Sara Shostak, Jennifer Stuber, Julien Teitler

May 11-14

Santa Fe, New Mexico

HEALTH & SOCIETY NEWS



420 West 118th Street
8th Floor, mail code: 3355
New York, NY 10027

