In the modern world, socially deviant conduct has often been rationalized as the product of natural difference. The elaboration of scientific theories about crime, sexuality, but also mental illness and substance abuse has both provided schemas for understanding unsettling behaviors and legitimized attempts to manage them. This seminar is concerned with the “scientificization” and “medicalization” of deviance in modern European and American societies. By examining the contested boundaries between scientific and medical concepts and deviant behaviors, it will shed light on the complex relationships between cultural, social and legal standards, and the theory and practice of medicine and science.

We will be reading primary documents—including scientific and medical treatises, patient accounts and contemporary social responses—and secondary sources, which will help students develop the methodological and theoretical tools for analyzing the historical relationships between science and society. Thematically, we will be concerned with nervous disease in nineteenth-century Europe; with racism and science; with debates over lobotomy in the 1930s and 40s; and with the negotiation of sexual identity and disease throughout the twentieth century, amongst other things. Students can write their junior papers on a range of topics, including those from the history of the human sciences, the history of psychiatry, or the history of sexuality in the United States and Europe.

In addition to engaging with the course’s themes through weekly readings and discussions, this seminar has explicit methodological goals. The course is eminently practical in orientation, and will include field trips to the Firestone Library and writing exercises that will give students hands-on experience of treating primary and secondary sources, and forming historical arguments. They will learn how to find and formulate viable paper topics, to locate sources and carry out research, and to organize, conceptualize, write and re-write academic texts.