



Sociology Department

University of Colorado Boulder



# Spring 2019 Speaker Series

## THE “WESTERN DISEASE”: EPISTEMIC CONTESTATIONS OVER AUTISM IN THE SOMALI DIASPORA



There is some statistical evidence that Somali refugee populations have high prevalence rates of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Somali-Americans and Canadians call autism the ‘Western disease’ because there is no word for autism in the Somali language and because they claim autism does not exist in Somalia. Many Somali parents have forged ‘embodied health movements’ that offer an alternative theory of autism causation and directly challenge mainstream scientific authority. The ‘illness narratives’ that Somali parents tell in order to make sense of their children’s vulnerability to autism reflect the marginalization and inequality they have faced as new immigrants and visible minorities. They argue that it is the diet and medical environment in North America (including the use of preservatives, genetically-modified processing, and antibiotics in both health care and food production) that explains the high rates of autism within the Somali diaspora. The blaming of forced migration, the Western lifestyle, and North American health and food industries operates as a

CLAIRE DECOTEAU, PHD, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

# Thursday, April 18th

## 12:30 - 2:00 pm

### Ketchum 1B40 Light lunch served

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