Families have long been considered the basic unit of our communities and society. From this vantage point, as go families, so go communities and society. The institution of the family can then be understood and studied as a microcosm of neighborhoods, communities, and society. We also have come to understand much more clearly how our neighborhoods, communities, and society shape our families and provide (or do not provide) them encouragement, support, and protection in varying degrees and forms as families endeavor to fulfill their pivotal roles. While these matters are at once social and psychological, they are also economical, political, and philosophical. For us to understand these interdependent relationships we must also become mindful of those things that will make them healthier and stronger as well as more responsive, adaptive, and resilient. Not everyone agrees on what this means should be done, how it should be done, and who should do it. But just about everyone agrees that something should be done. One very important question we will explore is whether families are declining and doing poorly or adapting and doing well. The experts do not agree. However, the experts do agree that there are a number of very critical issues facing contemporary families and, therefore, our communities and society.

There are a host of family issues (some consider them “problems”) — cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, single parenting, divorce, fathers who don't provide economic and social support to their children, child and spouse abuse, to name a few — that involve individuals and couples in partnerships, marriages, and families in ways that result in great costs to those individuals and families. Such costs are even more enormous and consequential as they are carried into and manifested in our neighborhoods, communities and society. Part of our course of study will be to assess and understand these costs and what can be done by individuals, families, and our communities to understand them and resolve the related problems where possible. Before we study some of these problems in greater depth and detail, we need to become familiar with some of the important questions regarding contemporary families that are being asked by interested parties in our culture and society today. A major objective of this course is to understand these important questions and how they are variously perceived and answered within different relevant points of view. What are families? What are families for? Who belongs to them? What do you have to do before you can become a family? Is cohabitation with someone else sufficient to become a family? Is marriage to someone else necessary to become a family? Does your partner have to be a member of the opposite sex or can he or she be of the same sex? Do you have to create or adopt a child before you can become a family. Can all adults parent children well enough? Should all adults be allowed to adopt and rear children? Who are the best parents for the optimal development of children? Do these parents need to be coupled in some way? Do the couples need to be heterosexual or can they be homosexual or bisexual?

Through our study of these questions we will learn that the experts on these matters do not agree on the answers. We will also become more aware of the complex concerns and issues that are relevant to the study of strong, resilient, and successful families and the things that make them so. Fortunately, there is much more agreement amongst the experts on the characteristics of strong families. Other matters of focus for this course are building and preserving (1) successful, strong, healthy, and resilient individuals and families, (2) secure, stable, warm, and open home environments to house and sustain them, and (3) supportive, responsive, and cohesive communities to surround and sustain them. We live in a culture that accentuates the bizarre, negative, and dysfunctional. In contrast, considerable research has documented the kinds of things that characterize strong and healthy relationships, marriages, and families, such as respectful, appreciative, and supportive relationships, processes, interactions, activities, communication, listening, problem solving, conflict resolution, and coping strategies. A major objective of the course is to study these characteristics with the intent of learning to recognize and create them in our own individual lives, marriages, families, and communities as antidotes to the negative images, messages, and
emphases in our society. The course will emphasize the things we have learned through research that couples and families do to provide for individual, family, and community well-being amidst the many challenges facing them in our society. This requires that we acquire an understanding of the workings of relationships, partnerships, marriages, and family systems that are strong, healthy, and resilient which we know contribute to healthy, responsive, and responsible communities. Among other things already mentioned, we also will study things we know to be of importance to strong families and communities, such as shared histories, traditions, and rituals; kinship bonds; intimacy; ethical, spiritual, and religious orientations; coping strategies; parental supervision and monitoring; and ways of reducing delinquency, youth violence, drug abuse.

REQUIRED COURSE READINGS

1. Some other course readings for the term will be placed on “Electronic Reserve” at the Marriott Library General Reserve. These readings will also be available in printed form at the General Reserve Desk in the Marriott Library.

2. Several required readings can be accessed directly from web pages on the internet.


Lecture notes for the different reading assignments are available to read and/or download to your own computer from my faculty web site which is located at: http://www.fcs.utah.edu/faculty/herrin/. Simply scroll down to the relevant items listed under the section labeled “Current Course Syllabi, Overhead Notes, and Materials.” The notes are essentially the text of the overheads that I use in class lectures. Hopefully, by having the notes for a particular lecture when you attend, you can listen more for things that are of interest to you and how the things we are learning might be applied in your own lives and jot down some notes about such things rather than having to copy down all the information on the overheads.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AVAILABLE IN THE BOOKSTORE


COURSE LEARNING DEMONSTRATIONS, ACTIVITIES, AND COURSE “ODDS and ENDS”

EXAMS (80% of total course grade). There are three in-class exams. The highest two of three exam grades are counted for the final grade after the lowest of the three exams is dropped. If you know that you will miss two of the three exams, please realize it will be difficult to get a grade higher than a D. If you are satisfied with your first two exam grades, you do not have to take the third exam. The exams contain approximately 100 to 130 items that are primarily multiple-choice and true/false items with some matching and short fill-in items. Exams cover both topics and content discussed in class lectures and/or the readings. THERE ARE NO MAKE-UP EXAMS. THE EXAMS ARE TYPICALLY GIVEN DURING THE SECOND CLASS MEETING OF THE SECOND, FOURTH, AND SIXTH WEEK OF THE TERM. THE THIRD EXAM IS NOT COMPREHENSIVE.
IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES (20% of grade). During most class meetings we engage in activities, as individuals and/or in small groups, that build on your class preparation, readings, and other class activities. A few activities may require work outside of class but most are completed in class. For these activities, you receive credit if you are present, participate, and turn your work in at the end of the particular class meeting with your name on it. Since these activities take place and have their intended meaning within the context of a particular class meeting, you have to be in class to participate and receive credit. Parts of activities missed because you were late in coming to class or activities missed because you were not in class at all, cannot be made up. These exercises are intended to provide experiences with additional forms of learning in addition to reading and listening to lectures. Your grade for these activities will be determined by the percentage of the total number of these activities that you complete in class. There will be at least ten of these activities.

CLASS MEETINGS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

The following is a list of the topics and questions we will study along with the readings that will be assigned for those topics. The relevant dates for the different reading assignments will be forthcoming.

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY A FAMILY? WHAT ARE FAMILIES FOR?

FAMILIES ARE FOR HAVING CHILDREN OR JUST FOR ADULTS?

DOCUMENTING CHANGING PATTERNS IN FAMILIES

ARE FAMILIES DECLINING OR ADAPTING AND PROGRESSING?

IN-CLASS EXAM ONE

CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG AND HAPPY FAMILIES

TO COHABIT OR TO MARRY OR FIRST ONE THEN THE OTHER?
http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/swlt2.pdf or http://www.smartmarriages.com/cohabit.html

http://www.unmarried.org/10problems.php
Alternatives to Marriage Project. (2002). “Frequently asked questions about cohabitation.”
http://www.unmarried.org/cohabfaq.php

PURPOSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE
http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2002/01/14/usatcov-divorce.htm or
http://www.divorcerecovery.net/resources/newarticles2002/Even_Trying_To_See_The_Bright_Side.htm


PREPARATION FOR REMARRIAGE
http://www.smartmarriages.com/remarrying.html

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL, HAPPY MARRIAGES

WHY MARRIAGES FALTER

BE INTIMATELY FAMILIAR WITH EACH OTHER’S WORLD and HONOR AND RESPECT EACH OTHER
Gottman. “Principle 1: Enhance Your Love Maps,” in The Seven… (Chapter Three, 47-60).

BE EMOTIONALLY ENGAGED, CONNECTED, AND INDEPENDENT
Gottman. “Principle 3: Turn toward Each Other Instead of Away,” in The Seven… (Chapter Five, 79-97).

SHARE POWER AND RESPECT EACH OTHER’S VIEWPOINTS

IN-CLASS EXAM TWO
UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF YOUR CONFLICTS

RESOLVING CONFLICT IN A LOVING RELATIONSHIP

COPING WITH AND SOLVING THE RESOLVABLE

IDENTIFY, UNDERSTAND, AND RESPECT EACH OTHER’S IMPORTANT DREAMS

BUILD DEEPER, MORE MEANINGFUL AND REWARDING RELATIONSHIPS

IN-CLASS EXAM THREE