Course Description and Objectives
Welcome to Sociology 212, Families in Society. In this social science general education course we will take an analytic look at families—a part of life we routinely take for granted, but that happens to be one of our most fundamental social institutions. I hope you find this topic an important part of your general education, since currently we find ourselves as citizens increasingly worried about what’s happening to families and continuing to be divided about what, if anything, should be done about family changes.

Steady high divorce rates, increased intrusion of work into family life, same-sex marriage debates, and wider acceptability of lifestyles other than traditional marriage, all illustrate that we are experiencing major changes in families and much greater family diversity. The emphasis on “family values” in politics and in our own conversations indicates that we are concerned about how increased family diversity is affecting society. Family diversity calls into question how we define what families are, how we think about the place of families in our own lives, as well as what we expect families to do for society.

A sociological perspective regards families as socially constructed; that is, how families look and act are affected by economic, political, and demographic changes. Our guiding perspective is that these larger social forces as well as families’ particular social location—their ethnicity/race, social class, life course stage, and historical time, for instance—help to create different kinds of families. Thus, families are social creations that reflect the society in which they live, as well as their location within that society.

Family diversity pushes us to consider a much wider definition of what constitutes “family.” The model of the “ideal family” (heterosexual, married, 2-parent, middle-class, breadwinner-homemaker) however, still is a powerful image in our cultural vision of a good society, despite the fact that most families do not look or act like this. Throughout the course we will shift the center in the way we think about family diversity; that is, we will not compare real families against the cultural ideal. However, we will consider at length why this cultural image is held so strongly and how social policies might redefine “family” to better help real families.

To define what a family is, we need to define what it does—for individuals and for society. For individuals, family is a set of relationships from which we receive personal fulfillment and intimacy. For society, family is the group responsible for raising the next generation and for caregiving. These two ideas of what families are often conflict with one another, and this conflict is reflected in debates over gender. Much of the controversy over family diversity can be understood as uneasiness about how women’s roles outside families are changing the ability of families to fulfill both of their purposes.

By the end of this course, you should be able to:
- Discuss and explain current trends in family life using an historical perspective;
- Apply the concept “shifting the center” to social debates about family diversity;
- Recognize the purposes of families as a social institution;
- Identify how gender, race, and social class create different kinds of families;
- Recognize the difference between how families look, and what purposes they perform;
- Identify different ways that families are socially constructed.

The ultimate course goal is to prepare you as an educated citizen to participate in informed debates about family issues.
General Education Course Skills

As a general education course, we will emphasize three skill areas. First, the course is conceptually organized around the skill area of “examining human differences.” Second, you will have practice in “reading complex texts.” Third, you likewise will practice “writing effectively.” How we will practice these skill areas is described below.

Course Organization and Class Meetings

During fall semester, we will meet 25 times in class, and a few times online (through our Sakai site). Each of our class meetings has very specific goals. I expect that absences from class will be rare and precipitated by justifiable circumstances. Since the exams will be based largely on class discussion, it is very important that you attend class. If you miss a class, you need to copy someone’s notes and talk about the missed class with one of your peers and/or with me.

My expectation is that our class climate will be one of open discussion and critical inquiry.

Here’s how our time together will be spent: I will usually take some of our class time to present information, and we will usually spend some of every class time having group discussions. Some of our classes will consist entirely of group discussion, while some will consist entirely of lecture information. At all times, questions and comments are much encouraged and welcomed.

If you find yourself struggling with the reading or class content, please come and talk with me. Likewise, if you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please meet with me as soon as possible so that we can make sure to put the accommodations in place quickly. In this regard, you also need to be working with Disability Services for Students, Office of Student Life, 330 Memorial Union, 874-2098.

In general, please keep me informed of any circumstances that affect your participation in this course. Keep in mind that I want you all to do well in this course, and will be happy to meet with you outside of class time as the need arises.

Please use sensible judgment about illness. Class attendance is important, so come to class if you are not contagious and are able to make it through with minimum discomfort. If you have to miss class, please let me know.

Course Book and its Role in the Course


This book is available at the URI Bookstore. However, you also can buy it online. Make sure you buy the 4th edition of the book (2011). And don’t worry---you’ll be able to sell it back. If you use the URI Bookstore, there is also the option of renting this book.

The course book is an anthology (also called a reader), rather than a textbook. That means it is a collection of articles that have been written by various scholars. Anthologies have editors rather than authors. Editors take the initiative to collect various articles and organize them around a subject (such as families), and often they write introductions that explain the organization and provide a rationale for why each article was chosen. For instance, the editor of Shifting the
Center, Susan Ferguson, a Professor of Sociology at Grinnell College, compiled articles that discuss various topics about families, but from the perspective of family diversity. She explains the anthology’s purpose in the Preface to the book. I’ve chosen the Ferguson anthology of readings because it integrates material on race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation for each of the family topics we’ll consider. That is, rather than considering family diversity by comparing real families to the “ideal” family, Ferguson uses the premise that because families are socially constructed to fit their location within their own society, there is no ideal family, and the perspectives of all families need to be considered. From this perspective, then, all families are diverse, not just those who do not fit the cultural ideal. This anthology “shifts the center,” by focusing away from the idealized cultural image of families (i.e. the “center”), allowing you to learn about various family structures and to compare diverse family forms to one another.

The Ferguson reader provides us with our conceptual orientation to the course—that families are socially constructed and therefore vary depending on where they are located in time and space—as well as offers some interesting details about aspects of many different types of families. Thus, using the perspective of “shifting the center,” we will incorporate the skill area of “examining human differences” into the organization of the entire course.

Reading the various articles in this book will enable you to practice “reading complex texts.” Complex does not mean that these readings are difficult; on the contrary, I think you will enjoy them and learn a great deal from them. The term “complex texts” merely means that these readings are not pre-digested for you in the form of a textbook or other secondary reading. These are primary sources, and are not written just for students. In this course, then, rather than having a textbook author interpret primary research and writing for you, we will interpret and analyze these primary readings ourselves.

That’s where the last “skill area” comes in—not only will you practice reading complex texts, but you will write about these in a series of short assignments throughout the next fourteen weeks. There is a lot of writing, but some of it is done in groups, and you build your abilities to write effectively throughout the term. Each student will also interact (in person and/or online) several times with a Writing Consultant, Matthew Ead. Matthew, a Philosophy and English major, will help you develop your writing skills in different types of assignments. These writing assignments are described below.

Course Requirements

There are 7 different types of writing, discussion, and exam assignments in this course. All of these assignments are short assignments, and there are several of each type assigned throughout the semester. Why so many types of assignments, you might wonder? There are three reasons for the variety of assignments.

The first reason is because we are using an anthology, I have tried to find several different ways to help you write about the articles to keep these tasks interesting and engaging. The second reason for the variety of assignments is to help achieve one of the goals of this class—to facilitate your ability to apply our analytical framework to informed social debates about families. Thus, several different graded discussions will take place that will give you practice in discussing these issues in real conversations. These online conversations also help keep you engaged in the course outside of the classroom. And the third reason has to do with the real purpose of exams: exams are an effective way of helping you summarize the course at various points so that you can integrate the information and have it available to further build upon.
Here is a quick description of each type of assignment, and how they will figure into your course grade (*The chronological schedule of assignment also is included at the end of the syllabus*):

1. **Reading Quizzes from Ferguson Reader (12%)**
   For several parts of the Ferguson reader you will be required to read one article in those parts and be quizzed on its content. These articles on which you will be quizzed are as follows:

   - **September 13**  Part 1: Furstenberg article (everyone reads and is quizzed)
   - **November 8**  Part 4: Cherlin article (everyone reads and is quizzed)

   There are 2 of these quizzes during the term, each worth 6 points. Together these two quizzes will comprise 12% of your course grade. **PLEASE NOTE:** The reading quizzes will be administered through our Sakai site, and must be completed in a 25-minute timeframe sometime during the day. We’ll discuss this procedure in class so that everyone is clear about how to do this.

2. **Reading Questions from Ferguson Reader (18%)**
   For 3 out of 4 articles in different sections throughout the Ferguson reader, you will be required to answer a set of reading questions (available on our Sakai site) on the article. These articles are:

   - **September 20**  Part 2: Coontz article (Historical Changes)
   - **September 22**  Part 2: You each will be assigned to read one additional article in Part 2 about historical changes
   - **September 29**  Part 11: You each will be assigned to read one of the articles about poverty
   - **November 29**  Part 8: Mason article (Divorce and Blended Families)

   There are four of these assignments in total, and I will count three of them in your course grade. This means you may skip one without penalty, or if you complete all four, I will drop the lowest grade. Individually, each reading question assignment counts 6 points toward your course grade, for a total of 18% of your course grade.

3. **Individual Article Analyses (10%)**
   In two separate assignments, one for Part 10, and the second for a selection of related articles from Parts 4, 5, and 6, each of you will be assigned to read one article, and write an article analysis. Each of these “individual article analyses” will count 5% of your course grade (total 10% of your course grade).

   On the day these article analyses are due, we will meet in “article groups,” where you will discuss your analysis with others who have analyzed the same article. In this way, you should understand your article better. After your discussion, each group will make a report to the class about their article (in-class article analyses). As a class, we’ll find similarities and differences between each article and discuss how each uniquely and similarly reflects the theme of the Part.

   - **October 18** – Part 10 articles
   - **November 1** - Parts 4, 5, and 6 articles (a selection)

   ***Specific instructions for the Individual Article analyses and a grading rubric are attached to this syllabus***
4. **Group Part Analyses (10%)**

For the last two course topics, we’ll switch the way we analyze the Ferguson reader from analyses of individual articles to analyses of entire Parts. Thus, for Parts 8 and 9, you will work in groups of approximately 4 students. Within your group, you will choose one article apiece for each assignment, so that each of the articles in the Part is being read by at least one student in each group. For your own purposes, not to turn in for a grade, each student will read and analyze their own article in the part (using the same format you’ll have used for your individual article analyses), and come to class with notes to use. You’ll meet in your group and each group member will contribute their analysis of their own article in a group discussion. Then as a group, in class, you’ll write up your discussion in the form of an analysis of the part. The analysis of the part will be handed in and graded at the end of class. Each person in the group will receive the same grade on this written assignment. This is truly a group effort. Your group depends on your analysis of your article, and you depend on each member of your group for analyses of their articles.

Each group write-up of their Part Analysis will be graded on a five-point scale. Part Analyses are due in class on the date listed below. If you are not in class on a day when Part Analyses are scheduled, you cannot receive credit for the assignment.

- **November 22** – Part 8
- **December 6** – Part 9

***Specific instructions for the Part Analysis assignments are attached to this syllabus.***

5. **In-Class Small Group Discussions (5%)**

On **September 13** and **September 29** we will spend half of our class time in small group discussion where you will discuss specific questions about assigned articles. Each small group will write up a brief summary of the discussion that will be handed in for a group grade. These discussions will involve readings in Part 1 and Part 11.

**Part 1:** September 13: As individuals, you will be assigned one of the articles in Part 1, and answer brief reading questions to guide your discussions (*for yourselves, not to be turned in for a grade this time*), and when you come to class that day, you will discuss your article with others who have read the article. Each group will turn in a brief summary of their group discussion.

**Part 11:** September 29: As indicated above, you each will be assigned one article in Part 11, and answer a set of assigned questions for that article. *These questions will be turned in and graded.* In class, however, you will meet in small groups with others who have not read the same article, and together you will discuss your articles. Each group will turn in a brief summary of their group discussion.

Each one of these discussions will constitute 2.5% of your course grade.

6. **On-line Small Group Discussions (15%)**

Three times during the semester we will have Sakai Forum discussions online:

1. **September 29** – **October 5**—poverty and welfare policy;
2. **October 13** – **October 20**—work and family life;
3. **November 17** – **November 29** —divorce.
Each one of these on-line discussions will count 5% of your course grade. Together, these discussions will constitute 15% of your course grade.

To guide both our in-class and Sakai Forum discussions, I will distribute a “discussion rubric” which describes my expectations for your participation. See the Schedule of Classes (below) for more details of each class activity.

7. **Exams (30%)**

There will be three exams in the course, including a final exam. The exams will be in multiple-choice format, and will include information from class discussion and lecture (remember to get notes from someone if you miss a class!)

The exams will be delivered through our Sakai site. You will have 40 minutes to complete each exam. Each exam will have approximately 12 multiple-choice questions. If we are caught up with the syllabus, we will not meet in class on exam days. You will have the flexibility to schedule the 40-minute timeslot for the exam within an 18-hour timeframe. We’ll talk about this procedure in class so that everyone knows what to do.

Each of the exams is worth 10% of your course grade, for a total of 30%. The final exam, while mostly focusing on the content of the last third of the course, will require you to take a cumulative view of the course material.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Students with legitimate reasons for missing scheduled exams must contact me in person or by phone before the exam timeframe to obtain permission to take a make-up exam. Students must be prepared to provide evidence for their reason for missing an exam.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>October 6 – Exam 1</th>
<th>November 10—Exam 2</th>
<th>December 16—Final Exam</th>
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**Grading Scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>93.5 – 100 = A</td>
<td>87.5 – 89.4 = B+</td>
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<tr>
<td>89.5 – 93.4 = A-</td>
<td>83.5 – 87.4 = B</td>
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<tr>
<td>79.5 – 83.4 = B-</td>
<td>73.5 – 77.4 = C</td>
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<tr>
<td>69.5 – 73.4 = C-</td>
<td>67.5 – 69.4 = D+</td>
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<tr>
<td>below 59.5 = F</td>
<td>59.5 – 67.4 = D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.5 – 79.4 = C+</td>
<td>67.5 – 69.4 = D+</td>
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## Reading and Assignment Schedule

**September 8 - 13**

**Introduction to Course Themes**  
definition and purpose of family; family diversity;  
social construction and social location; race, class, and gender.  
“Shifting the Center,”  
*The Sociological Imagination.*

Assignment:  
9/8 Read: Preface (pp. vii – ix)  
9/13 Discussion questions for Part 1 assigned article; *in-class article analysis*  
9/13 – 9/14 *Reading quiz on Furstenberg article (Part 1) Sakai administration (Wednesday afternoon - Thursday timeframe)*

**September 15 - 22**

**Historical Trends in Families**  
fertility, mortality, marriage, and divorce trends;  
variations by social location; population dynamics

Assignment:  
9/20 *Reading questions, Coontz article (Part 2)*  
9/22 *Reading questions, Part 2 assigned article*

**September 27 – October 6**

**Social Construction of Family Life I: Poverty and Families**  
Definitions, trends, welfare reform and poverty, explanations of poverty

Assignment:  
9/29 *Reading questions, Part 11 articles; in-class article analysis*  
9/29-10/5 *Sakai Discussion: Why are people poor? How should social policy respond to poor people?*

**Thursday Oct 6**  
**EXAM 1 (Sakai site administration)**

**October 11 – October 20**

**Social Construction of Family Life II: Work and Families**  
Definitions of work, caring in families, gender and work, societal responses to work and family balance

Assignment:  
10/13 – 10/20 *Sakai Discussion: How should work and family be organized?*  
10/18 *Individual analyses due in class; in-class article analysis*
October 25 – November 8  

*Marriage, Cohabitation, Partnerships, and Parenting*  
Marital satisfaction, meaning of marriage and partnerships, cohabitation; parenting

Assignment: Ferguson, Part 4 & 5

11/1 *Individual analyses* due in class, in-class article analysis (selections from Parts 4, 5, & 6)

11/8 *Reading quiz*, Cherlin article (Part 4)

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<th>November 10</th>
<th>EXAM 2 (Sakai site administration) no class</th>
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November 15 – November 29  

*Divorce, Remarriage, and Blended Families*  
Trends, legal changes, child custody, children and divorce, stepfamilies

Assignment: Ferguson, Part 8  
11/22 *In-class part analysis* (Part 8 articles)  
11/29 *discussion questions*, Mason (Part 8)  
11/17 – 11/29  *Sakai Discussion*: Is the divorce rate too high?

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December 1 – December 8  

*Families and Violence*  
Definitions, societal response, gender and violence

Assignment: Ferguson, Part 9  

12/6 *In-class part analysis*

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FINAL EXAM (Sakai site administration): Friday, December 16