SOC 476: Sociology of Families
Professor Christine Percheski (c-percheski@northwestern.edu)

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course is designed to provide an overview of recent scholarship in sociology and the social sciences on contemporary families in the United States and other industrialized countries. We will focus on research that considers how families have changed over the last century and how the structure, functions, and experiences of family life vary across race/ethnicity, class, and national context.

In the first section of the course, we will consider different theoretical perspectives and research methodologies for studying family change. These include sociological, economic, demographic, and historical perspectives.

The second section of the course will focus on how and why the institutions associated with families have changed. We will begin by examining how the prevalence, stability, and timing in the life course of marriage and cohabitation have changed. We will then consider the extent to which these institutions have undergone redefinition or changes in their level of institutionalization. We will devote considerable time to thinking about why unions form and dissolve.

Next, we will look at some activities of the family: having and raising children and interacting across generations and with kin. We will start by considering the factors contributing to declines in average fertility and changes in the context of fertility, particularly the rise in non-marital fertility as well as how parenting and childrearing have changed. Next, we will turn our focus to intergenerational ties and how extended families and kin support one another.

Lastly, we will look at two recently published books in the field of family sociology.

REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to attend all class sessions prepared to discuss the course material. Absences will be excused for legitimate reasons. Two or more unexcused absences will result in a grade of incomplete.

There are two types of assignments for this course: critiques of the readings and a final paper (either a critical literature review or a research proposal).

Reading Critiques
Students will write a critique of two readings from each week for 5 weeks of the course. Critiques are due by 8pm the evening before each class meeting and should be emailed to me at c-percheski@northwestern.edu. Each critique should be one to two pages single spaced, contain a brief summary of the reading, and focus primarily on evaluating the theoretical perspectives, methodological choices, or substantive interpretations of the research. Critiques should address the following questions:

1. What is the author’s argument?
2. What is the evidence for their argument?
3. Is the argument convincing?
4. How does this work contribute to the literature? Does it change our understanding of
families or family change? How does it relate to other readings in the course?

**Final Paper**
Students have a choice of writing a research proposal or a critical literature review for their final paper. Guidelines for these will be discussed in class and posted on Blackboard.

**WEEKLY READINGS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS**

I. How should we study families? How can we make sense of changes in families? Theoretical & Analytical Perspectives.

**Week 1: January 14 – Overview of Family Changes & Theoretical Perspectives on Families**


*Optional:*
II. How and why have the institutions of the family changed? Focus on marriage and cohabitation.

Week 2: January 21


Optional:


Week 3: January 28


Excerpts from Powell et al. 2010. Counted Out: Same-Sex Relations and Americans’ Definitions of Family.

Week 4: February 4


III. How and why have (selected) activities of the family changed? Fertility, Childrearing, Intergenerational Ties & Kin Support.

Week 5: February 11 – Parenting and Child Well-being (Part 1)


Excerpt from Edin, K. and M. Kefalas. *Promises I Can Keep*.


*Optional:*


Week 6: February 18 - Parenting and Child Well-being (Part 2)


Excerpt from Levey Friedman, H. 2013. *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*.

*Optional:*


Week 7: February 25 – Intergenerational Ties and Kin Support


IV. What characterizes exemplary work in the field of the sociology of families?

Weeks 8 & 9 (March 4 &11): Recent books in Sociology of Families
As a class, we will select two of the following books to read:

Damaske, S. 2011. *For the Family?: How Class and Gender Shape Women’s Work*. Oxford University Press, USA.


