

Feb. 3, 2004

**THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FAMILY
INTRODUCTION TO COURSE**

- I. Names, majors, year, anthropology experience, why taking course?
 - A. Recitation sessions: 1 hour each
 1. Arrange sections
 - B. Housekeeping details
 1. Small packet of readings
 - a. notice that the final exam is open book
 - b. last time it's being taught
 2. Do the readings listed under the date and title of session
 - a. A separate piece of paper on Reader Responses is being handed out
 - 1) Reading responses: several sentences, no more, on one or two of the readings—your *response*
 - 2) There are 6; shouldn't take you more than 10 minutes; if it does, you're missing the point
 - a) You can write as much as you like, though
 - b) They will be factored into your grade
 3. Written work—paper assignments discuss
 4. The final exam is open-book. You can bring class notes, too.

- a. They will be essay questions
 - b. I'll be handing out last year's study questions so you can get a clear understanding of what the final is like
5. Films are listed on the syllabus
- a. Films are scheduled for Feb 24, March 16, April 1 and May 13
6. Tuesday Feb. 17 will be a Monday schedule of classes; we won't meet

II. Nature of the course

A. Is on the family only in the contemporary USA...not even England

- 1. And there's still way too much to cover
- 2. Very little comparative anthropology in the readings
- 3. The reading is for the most part easy
 - a. The readings are quantitatively heavy in MIT terms
 - 1) A lot of the reading is sociology
 - 2) So tell us if it's overly simplistic or has too much jargon
 - 3) The reading is easy in part because we know something about this topic, even you international students
 - 4) But you'll see that the lesson is often that we *don't* know—we just have stereotypes
 - a) It's OK to talk about stereotypes, just so they're labeled as such

III. Context of the Course

A. The literature on family has been exploding in the last 35 years

1. The field of family history, and related areas in sociology and anthropology have been affected by the women's movement
 - a. And the gay/lesbian movement and multiculturalism
 - b. These movements began in the 60's

B. They had a salutary effect on the field of family studies

1. Particularly in sociology; with some exceptions; earlier, sociology of the family was a dreadful field
 - a. It was very low on the academic research totem pole
 - b. It was quite ideological (still is, but people are more aware of it because there is such controversy now)
 - 1) In the 1950s and 1960s such courses were designed to get students ready for marriage and starting their own families
 - 2) This course is definitely not a "how-to" course
 - 3) Of course, if you find your relations with your older or younger sibling, or your parents are better because of what you learned here, if your marriage is helped by the course, fine, write me about it, send me a check
2. The newer literature is more exciting
 - a. In part because of the controversial nature of the topic
 - 1) Not dedicated to preserving the status quo, as was

the case before

- 2) Especially today when the family is such a political football...everyone is claiming the moral high ground

IV. You *will* find that a lot of your readings are written by people who think they know something and are only too willing to give advice

A. This is expectable in a course touching so many serious and controversial issues

1. Just look at the reading list topics

B. Your job is to extract and examine the biases, the polemics, the sometimes hidden agendas of the authors

V. Therefore: a *word of advice* on how to approach these materials:

A. **Critically**

1. Think about what the writers say and what they are implying

2. Can you figure out their underlying assumptions?

- a. Can you figure out *your* underlying assumptions?

3. Such assumptions are always there, because this is a value-laden topic

4. We'll ask you to think about their methodology

B. Most definitely, this is not a course in which you devour the textbook, memorize it and do exercises during lab to further pound the material into your head

1. This course asks that you critically assess the readings, and adequately defend your point of view

- D. Hopefully after taking this course you'll be better able to critically read published materials on the family—newspaper, for example

VI. How the course is run

- A. Lecture format, but with discussion throughout

- 1. Interesting or dull discussion depends on you

- B. Cautions:

- 1. To provoke discussion I sometimes take sides for the purpose of argument

- a. And oftentimes crack jokes

- 1) Some of you who do not speak English as your mother tongue may not pick up the irony or understand the joke

- a) If you have doubts, ask me. Ask me after class. Ask me via e-mail. Ask me anonymously

- 2) If you don't like the joke, please write me about it, anonymously if you want

- 2. Because the topic is so ideological I can't always play the role of omniscient and impartial professor

- a. I am neither omniscient nor impartial

- b. So be tolerant...I'm playing two roles that at times are incompatible

- 3. Also, there are many sensitive areas

- a. Don't feel angry at a fellow student (or me) if we hurt your feelings or seem callous or too conservative or too

liberal, and then leave class without saying anything

- 1) Let us know
4. And don't ever feel obliged to reveal something personal
- a. If you *want* to, great
 - b. If it can help you work out your feelings to talk about a family problem with others—or write about it in a paper for us—fine
 - c. But this is entirely your option
 - 1) In the autobiography assignment in previous years students have written about some very sensitive issues and produced fine papers and have found writing the paper to be helpful to them
 - 2) We will respect your confidence, if you choose to write about something sensitive that's troubling to you
5. Some discussions will be polarized, and sometimes students aren't the most tactful of people
- a. So please treat everyone's opinions with respect
 - b. We want discussion and debate, not flaming and trashing
 - c. Particularly given how important these topics are to all of us and what a variety of cultures and political stances we have represented among us

VII. What we'll look at:

A. Origins and definition of the family

1. Very brief attention: the main purpose is to introduce you to

this topic and to clear up some myths

- a. About what probably happened and the limits of our sources of information
 - 3) Speculation about the origins of the family is an exciting field right now...lots of new scholarship
 - b) In primate studies and studies of foraging societies

B. Then a week on the American family in the past

- 1. Demolishing more myths

VIII. Then will come 5 sessions on defining the family

- A. During this time you'll read Wolf, *The House of Lim*
- B. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how difficult it is to define the family and how ideological and ethnocentric most definitions are
- C. The last session on "definition" in fact discusses change
- D. Throughout the course we'll be addressing the connections between family and social class and race and ethnicity

IX. Then onto gender and sexuality

- A. The following concerns:
 - 1. The social and cultural context of sexuality; how incredibly important this is
 - a. The very notion that sex is a "drive" or "instinct" is a feature of the cultural context—the meaning—sex and sexuality have for us

2. Another example: how sex is tied in with marriage, and how this link is changing
- X. Then we look at marriage, one lecture on defining and analyzing it
 - A. Marriage is a very hot topic right now
 - XI. Then Parenting
 - A. Just about everything we look at concerns the ways parenting is changing in US society
 1. New reproductive technologies, for example
 - B. The problems that changes can bring—stresses
 - C. Divorce
 - D. Family violence
 - XII. Economic issues
 - A. As part of this section we look at extremely poor families: rural African-Americans in the south
 - B. Examine correlations between social class and ethnicity/race
 - XIII. Changes: demographics, activists' issues
 - A. Multigenerational bonds
 - B. The elderly
 - C. Migration