

Divorce in America

*Course number: V05.0160; 4 points credit.

*Instructor: Alan Ravitz, M.D., Associate Professor, NYU Department of Child Psychiatry

*This course will first be offered in Spring of 2009 and either each fall or spring thereafter; offered periodically in summer as well.

*Prerequisites: None.

Course Description:

Approximately one out of every two new marriages ends in divorce. This course is taught by an academic clinician-educator who has helped divorcing families on a daily basis for more than 25 years and provides an overview of the current literature on divorce and child custody. Given that divorce represents the failure of an intimate relationship, the first few weeks of class will address issues of intimacy, communication, and conflict resolution – including friendship, dating, sexual intimacy, and cohabitation. Once these basic concepts have been addressed, the remainder of the course will examine the interpersonal and social implications of divorce for children and adults. This course is appropriate for any humanities or social science student, since marriage and divorce are such ubiquitous phenomena in our culture. The lectures and readings will introduce specific topics, which will be further explored during in-class discussions.

The course will meet twice weekly, using a combined approach of lecture and discussion. Homework assignments will include readings from basic textbooks, primary social science sources, and redacted clinical material.

Course Aims:

Knowledge

Students will:

- a. Become familiar with various theories of marriage and family dynamics;
- b. Develop an understanding of the relationship between intimacy and communication;
- c. Define the role of conflict and conflict resolution in the breakdown and success of marriages.

Skills

Students will be able to:

- a. Describe the factors that predict marital success and failure;
- b. Outline the effects of divorce on both children and adults.

Course Syllabus:

Date: Course Topic

Week 1 **Marriage and Family Dynamics** – These classes will focus on providing an introduction to family systems theory, general systems theory, and ecological approaches to families. Other areas to be addressed include flexibility, cohesion, and communication; interpersonal qualities of successful families; life cycle issues; role expectations; and social construction of intimacy and the family.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 3, pp 64 – 98

Week 2 **Communication and Intimacy** – These classes will focus on the relationship between communication and intimacy. Areas to be addressed include gender differences in communication and competition; how communication is utilized in the development and maintenance of intimacy; and various positive and negative communication styles.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 4, pp 99 – 125

Driver, J. et al., Interactional Patterns in Marital Success or Failure, in Walsh, Froma, Normal Family Processes, New York, The Guilford Press, 2003, pp 493-513

Week 3 **Conflict and Conflict Resolution** – These classes will focus on how conflict and anger affect intimate relationships. Areas to be addressed include assessment of the intensity of conflict; phases of interpersonal conflict; social taboos related to conflict; myths regarding anger; the relationship between intimacy and anger; and styles of conflict resolution.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 5, pp 126 – 150

Heaven, P.C.L, et al., Personality and Conflict Communication Patterns in Cohabiting Couples, *Journal of Research and Personality* 40 (2006), pp 829-840

Week 4 **Sexual Intimacy** – These classes will address the relationship between sex and interpersonal intimacy. Areas to be addressed include the place of sexuality in society generally, and in premarital and marital relationships in particular; sexual behavior in college; and infidelity.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 6, pp 151 – 186

Week 5 **Dating and Mate Selection** – These classes will address how people decide to get married. Areas to be addressed include dating and premarital sexual activity; criteria utilized in mate selection; theories of mate selection; and cohabitation.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 10, pp 273 – 301

Week 6 **Social Context of Divorce** – These classes will present a brief history of divorce, with an emphasis on divorce in America; the legal reforms which began in the 1960s including no fault divorce; how divorce statistics are generated; and various theoretical approaches to divorce.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 1, pp 1 – 28

Week 7 **At Risk for Divorce** – These classes will address the factors that increase the likelihood of divorce, including changes in family roles, demographic factors, and individual and interpersonal factors such as communication problems, substance abuse, and personality issues.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 2, pp 29 – 51

Week 8 **Adults in the Aftermath of Divorce** – These classes will address how people decide to divorce, their reactions to separation, the tasks of separation (including single parenting, economic consequences, and social consequences), and the nature of the legal process. Additional topics will include a discussion of post-divorce shifts in social networks, role changes, psychological problems, the process of adjustment to divorce, and long-term consequences of divorce.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapters 3 & 4, pp 52 – 105

Week 9 **Effects of Divorce on Children** – These classes will review the data on the biosychosocial effects of divorce on children. This research compares the

functioning of children from divorced families with that of children in intact, two-parent families.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 5, pp 106 – 130

Week 10 **What Causes Children’s Problems?** – These classes will address research on the differences between kids in divorced and non-divorced families with a focus on age related factors, the quality of family life prior to divorce, and an assessment of the size and duration of the effect of divorce on developmental outcomes.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 6, pp 131 – 152

Week 11 **What Helps Children Adjust?** – These classes will address factors that affect children’s adjustment including individual qualities such as age, intelligence, and gender of the child, family factors such as parents’ well-being, quality of parenting, contact with the non-custodial parent, and parental cooperation.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 7, pp 153 – 175

Week 12 **Child Custody and Child Support** – These classes will address the various practical and legal arrangements that are implemented after parents separate. These include concepts of physical and legal custody and the question of what constitutes a child’s best interest. During one of the classes, a matrimonial lawyer will discuss the legal aspects of the process.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 8, 176 – 212

Week 13 **Remarriage and Stepfamilies** – These classes will address issues related to second (and third) marriages and divorces, relationships between step-children and step-parents, and relationships between step-siblings.

Reading:

Clarke-Stewart, Brentano, chapter 9, pp 213 – 234

Week 14 **Custody Evaluations: A Real Example** – During this week, the class will discuss two custody evaluations with the goal of trying to understand the factors that led to the failure of the marriages, the challenges of the divorces, and the impact of the parental conflict on the children.

Reading: Smith v Johnson & Dupa v Oxman

Note: Although these are real cases, and the evaluations are part of the public record, they are from out of state, and all names and identifying details have been altered so that the privacy of the families is maintained.

Week 15 **Review, Final Paper or Final Test**

Examinations and Grades:

- 1) Midterm exam 1 (25%) – multiple choice and short answer
- 2) Midterm exam 2 (25%) – multiple choice and short answer
- 3) Final exam OR Term paper (35%) – paper will analyze the failure of an intimate relationship, either their own, their parents', or another couple's with whom they were close (8 pages maximum)
- 4) Class participation (15%)