

Divorce in America

Course Outline & Syllabus

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Approximately one out of every two new marriages ends in divorce. This course provides an overview, by a clinician who has dealt with divorcing families on a daily basis for more than 25 years, 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 interpersonal concepts have been addressed, the rest of the course will examine the social and interpersonal implications of divorce for adults and children.

The textbooks for the course will be: (1) *Marriages and Families: Intimacy, Diversity, and Strengths* by David H. Olson, John DeFrain, and Linda Skogrand, 6th ed., 2008; and (2) *Divorce: Causes and Consequences*, by Alison Clarke-Stewart and Cornelia Brentano, 2006. Readings will otherwise be comprised of primary sources drawn from the social science literature.

Throughout the term the class will discuss clinical material 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.

Date: Course Topic

- 1 **Introduction: A Primer on Human Motivation: Why Do We Do What We Do?**
- 2 **Communication and Intimacy; Conflict and Conflict Resolution** – This class will focus on the relationship between communication and intimacy, as well as how conflict and anger affect intimate relationships. 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; as well as 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 4, pp 99 – 125; chapter 5, pp 126 – 150

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

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

- 3 **Sexual Intimacy, Dating, and Mate Selection** – This class will address the relationship between sex and interpersonal intimacy, and then how people decide to get married. 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; as well as dating and premarital sexual activity; criteria utilized in mate selection; theories of mate selection; and cohabitation.

Reading:

Olson, DeFrain, Skogland, chapter 6, pp 151 – 186; chapter 10, pp 273 – 301

- 4 **Social Context of Divorce (At Risk for Divorce)** – This class 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; 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 1 & 2, pp 1– 51

- 5 **Adults in the Aftermath of Divorce** – This class 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

- 6 **Effects of Divorce on Children; What Causes Children's Problems?** – This class will review the data on the biopsychosocial effects of divorce on children. This research compares the functioning of children from divorced families with that of children in intact, two-parent families; as well as 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, chapters 5 & 6, pp 106 – 152

- 7 **What Helps Children Adjust? (What is the Effect of Conflict?)**– This class will address factors that affect children's adjustment including individual qualities such as age, intelligence, and sex of the child; family factors such as parents' well-being, parenting quality, contact with the non-custodial parent, and parental cooperation.

Reading:

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

- 8 **Child Custody**– This class 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