McGill University - Department of Sociology

Sociology 535 - Sociology of the Family
Fall 2020 - Wednesday 8:35 – 10:25

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Office Hours: Wednesday 14:00 – 15:30 and by appointment

General description and objectives:

In Canada as in most developed countries, families have experienced profound transformations over the last fifty years. On the one hand, the increased participation of women in the labour market has led to an important reorganization of family life, and both parents now have to juggle work and family expectations. On the other hand, the decline of fertility has led to a sharp reduction of family size. The introduction of the Divorce Law in 1968 marked the beginning of a redefinition of conjugal life, characterized by an increase in the number of divorces, the decline of marriage and the progression of cohabiting unions to form a union and raise a family. More recently, the rights and obligations of cohabiting couples at separation has been at the centre of legal cases and political debates, and the notion of “parenthood” is being revisited.

These changes have brought a substantial increase in the number of new family configurations (single-parent families and stepfamilies; cohabiting couples with children; same-sex couples with children). Individuals’ family life no longer follows a known and predetermined sequence of events, marked by the ceremony of marriage, the birth of children and their successive departure from home, and the death of one of the spouses. For an increasing proportion of individuals, family life now extends over a succession of various family episodes with blurred contours.

This seminar introduces students to an array of literature that studies families from different perspectives. The first part of the course deals with theoretical concepts (e.g., notions of kinship, filiation, marriage) and methodological issues faced when approaching the study of family. The next sessions focus on the redefinition of conjugal and parental life that has taken place over the last two decades, the impact of these changes on earnings and intergenerational relations, and on the institutional and policy responses developed by different provinces and countries to take into account these new realities.

* This course is a remote course and will not meet in a classroom. Classes will be held with Zoom using the following link: https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/97956335548. Each class will be held during the designated class time (8:35am to 10:25am). If students are unable to attend the live Zoom seminars, they should contact Professor Le Bourdais by email. Office hours will be held on Wednesdays at 2:00 pm. Professor Le Bourdais will be on Zoom (https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/93509244618) waiting for students at this time. If no students are there by 2:15pm, she will end the office hours. Students can also contact Professor Le Bourdais to set up a Zoom meeting at an alternative time.
Requirements and evaluation:

1. Participation (20%):

   **Class discussion leaders (10%)**: Each week, some pre-designated students will start the session by summarizing (5 minutes) the main points of argument in the assigned readings. They are expected to prepare a few questions or highlight some points of debate to spark and orient class discussion. The summaries and discussion starters should be broadly drafted in a **short paper (one page long) to be handed in**. A sign-up sheet will be available for students to select their preferred day to lead.

   **Participation in discussions (10%)**: Students are expected to read all the assigned readings in order to actively participate into the class discussions. Both leading and participating in discussions will be evaluated on the clarity of the presentation, the quality, rigour and relevance of the interventions, the openness towards others’ point of views, and the critical and constructive nature of the exchanges.

2. **Take-home exam**: The take-home exam is designed to ensure that students understand the concepts and definitions introduced in the readings and discussions, and to further stimulate reflection. The exam should be approximately 5 to 6 pages (doubled space) long and will count for 20% of the final grade. It will be based on the materials read up to September 23. The exam will be **distributed on September 23** and is **due on October 7**.

3. **Research and presentation of a court case dealing with family issues**: Working in small teams, students will choose a recent court case dealing with family issues, such as union rights and obligations (e.g., the rights and obligations of cohabiting couples at separation) or legal parenthood (e.g., the number of parents a child can have or the rights and obligations of separated parents in terms of custody and child support). First, they are expected to make a clear and succinct presentation of the case and of the main arguments of the ruling. Second, half of the team is expected to take position in favour of the ruling decision and to present the arguments to support their claim; the other half is to argue against the ruling. Students are to do a class presentation of their research and to turn in a copy of the synopsis of their presentation or of their Power Point or video presentation (October 28). The oral and written presentation will count for 20% of the final grade and will be evaluated according to the quality of the documentation and the clarity and logic of the presentation.

4. **A final paper that consists of conducting a personal research on a chosen topic in family sociology**. This research should result in a 20 pages long paper (doubled space), including references, which comprises a critical review of existing studies on the chosen topic. Figures or tables may be included but will not count to the paper length.

   The topic of research should be chosen by turning in a proposal indicating your goals (1 page or less) by **November 11 at the latest**. Students must set up individual meetings with the professor to review proposals.

   Final papers will be presented during the last day of class, on **November 25**; this presentation will count for 10% of the final grade. The final paper is due on **December 10** and will be graded on 30%. The evaluation will be based on: the clarity, the precision and logic of the writing and of the argumentation; the capacity of synthesis; the effort and quality of the
personal reflection and critical analysis; a judicious use of data, if appropriate; the quality of the bibliography.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Disability and illness policies
Individuals with university recognised disabilities will be afforded special considerations in the setting of examination times and venues and depending on the type of disability may be given extra time to complete the required work. Assignments and/or projects that are late due to illness will not be accepted without an authoritative third-party excuse and explanation. Examinations will not be re-scheduled without the same considerations.

Academic Integrity
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/ssr/honest for more information). (approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

L'Université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/ssr/honest/)

Right to submit in English or French written work that is to be graded
In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue.)
Calendar, Themes and Due Dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. September 2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. September 9</td>
<td>Kinship and family systems</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3. September 16</td>
<td>Theorizing families</td>
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<td>4. September 23</td>
<td>Defining and measuring families</td>
<td>Take-home exam distributed</td>
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<td>5. September 30</td>
<td>Diversification of conjugal and family life</td>
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<td>6. October 7</td>
<td>Marriage or cohabitation: Any difference?</td>
<td>Due date: Take-home exam</td>
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<td>7. October 14</td>
<td>Marriage, parenthood and earnings</td>
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<td>8. October 21</td>
<td>Family and parenthood in question</td>
<td>Approval of final paper topic</td>
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<td>9. October 28</td>
<td>Court cases related to family issues</td>
<td>Students’ debates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. November 4</td>
<td>Family change and intergenerational relations</td>
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<td>11. November 11</td>
<td>Family Policies</td>
<td>Research proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. November 18</td>
<td>Open topic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. November 25</td>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>Students’ presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 10</td>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>Due date: Final paper</td>
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Schedule and Reading list

Readings can either be found by clicking the hyperlink in the syllabus or on myCourses (readings are not in both places). You can also search for articles through the library.

1. **Introduction** (September 2)
   Presentation of the syllabus and discussion on interests and expectations.
   Brief introduction to different approaches to study ‘family’.

2. **Kinship and family systems** (September 9)

3. **Theorizing families** (September 16)

4. **Defining and measuring families** (September 23)


5. **Diversification of conjugal and family life** (September 30)

6. **Marriage or cohabitation: Any difference?** (October 7)

7. **Marriage, parenthood and earnings** (October 14)

8. **Family and parenthood in question** (October 21)


9. **Students’ presentation: Court cases related to family issues** (October 28)

10. **Family change and intergenerational relations** (November 4)


11. **Family Policies** (November 11)


12. **Open topic** (November 18)

Readings TBA.
13. *Students’ presentation of their final paper* (November 25)