

**CMN 530**  
**FAMILY COMMUNICATION**

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**Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-5**  
**& by appointment**

*(please note: I am often in my office and you are welcomed to stop by any time without an appointment)*

**Family Communication** is the context we will use to study the intricacies of interpersonal communication. Specifically, we will be limiting our focus to the topic of family because, in drawing this limitation, we become less distracted by various sorts of relationships and more attentive to the most important aspect of this course: *the recognition and understanding of patterns of communication*. We will be particularly concerned not only with pattern recognition but with analyses of how patterns remain stuck and how change may be relationally constructed. The particular theories, concepts, and analytical methods we will use in this class are applicable to any close, personal relationship. Our attention to family relationships is, in some ways, arbitrary, but nonetheless, interesting.

A focus on family is useful for our study of communication patterns because some of the most innovative work in the field of interpersonal communication has emerged within the area of family therapy. While our own interests are not limited to therapeutic process or to the sorts of severely dysfunctional patterns that might necessitate therapy, we are interested in understanding how some unwanted patterns of interaction persist and how others so easily change. This focus on persistence and change of interactive patterns is, of course, the focus of therapy. Thus, we will explore several models of communication that have been developed within the family therapy field because they inform us about everyday patterns of interaction and the propensity of these patterns to become stuck and rigid. Our interest, of course, will be on methods for transforming these rigid patterns and creating new possibilities in family interactions.

As we study family communication we will come to realize the impossibility of making objective, factual statements about families and their communication patterns. This is a significant difference from the way other disciplines study family. Anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and most other disciplines tend to understand families as “types,” in “stages,” or varying sets of relationships. For us, however, each analysis we provide, each theory we employ, each question we ask and each answer we give is only part of broader cultural narratives. The stories that make our families unique, while apparently local, are by-products of multiple networks of relations and thus, represent the coordination of multiple conversational resources. Our focus in this course on *language practices* emphasizes the socially constructed nature of our worlds in general and family life in particular. In this course, we will develop a way of talking about communication such that we describe ourselves and others as actively participating in the construction of the worlds in which we live and thus in the creation of our identities and our realities. Consequently, we can not help but adopt a notion of relational responsibility. If this course is successful, you will learn new ways of talking and acting. This is what family interaction, and social life in general, is -- learning to coordinate multiple

conversational resources.

Why study family communication? One easy answer to this question is to say that because we are all part of some kind of family, family communication is important to us. But, in addition to being within our realm of day-to-day existence, the topic of family communication is also one that varies vastly from person to person (even among people within the same family). Each person's experience with his or her family is different but shares some semblance of similarity to another's experience. So, not only is this a topic you already should feel comfortable discussing, it is a topic that most often leaves us feeling as if we know nothing or very little. Many of us find that no matter how much we try to change unwanted family patterns and relationships, we fail. Much of our failure is due to our focus on individual family members and their attributes. We will talk throughout the semester about individualism. Typical of individualist discourse is the statement, "It's your fault!" – a statement heard frequently in families.

In this course, we will focus on shifting from an individualist to a relational discourse. This shift engages us in transformative dialogues within our own families as well as informs our analyses of other families' patterns.

On a broader level, studying family communication generates an understanding of the complexity of that small microcosm we call "family." Understanding this small unit provides an analogue for much of human interaction. We could use our study of "family" to help us understand global politics, governmental groups, organizational contexts, communities, roommate relationships, and intimate relationships – actually, any sort of relationship. Also, in our culture, as in most others, family is an important organizing institution. Cultures are developed around several central notions and "family" is most often one of those notions. Certainly, in our own culture, the development of personhood - from infancy to adulthood - is positioned within the context of "family." If the idea of family is of such importance to how we are as a culture, then our in-depth study of the communication processes that construct our ways of talking about family becomes central to any description of human interaction.

*. . . while people talk of everyday things . . . in talking about these matters they confirm or challenge the social relationship that exists between them. A verbal message is never merely a neutral transmission of information . . . it is always also a communication about the relationship (Danziger, 1967)*

*It is correct (and a great improvement) to begin to think of the two parties to the interaction as two eyes, each giving a monocular view of what goes on and, together giving a binocular view in depth. This double view is the relationship. (Bateson, 1972)*

*. . . our ways of talking are formative of social relations . . . to talk in new ways is to construct new forms . . . and to construct new forms of social relation . . . is to construct new ways of being. (Shotter, 1993)*

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

- to contrast our commonly accepted, objectivist, individualist assumptions about communication, the social world, and family with discursive, relational assumptions;
- to explore the role of metaphor in creating different orientations to and analyses of family life;
- to examine and deconstruct the metaphor of the family as a system;
- to engage in multiple analytic modalities of family interaction that provide illustrations of relationally constructed realities.

## REQUIREMENTS

**Class activities** (25%): Each Thursday of the semester will be devoted to in-class activities focused on applying concepts from the readings and lectures to your own and your classmates' family communication patterns. You will be graded on these activities which will include interviews, analyses, simulations, and discussions. Missing these activities will result in a failed grade for each specific assignment. Your *participation* in every class will also be reflected in this grade. Participation (active and informed) is a necessary part of this course. Missed classes will lower your grade.

**Family Pattern Analyses** (25%): You will write one analysis of another student's undesirable family pattern during the semester. The theory or model you use to analyze the family pattern will depend on when your paper is due. I will give you each a due date during the second week of the semester and provide details for writing these papers as the deadlines approach.

**Midterm Exam** (25%): The midterm exam will be a combination of short answer and essay questions.

**Final Exam** (25%): Please note that the final exam for this course will be on **Tuesday, December 13 from 1-3pm**. Make your travel plans accordingly. The final exam will be a combination of short answer and short essay.

## REQUIRED TEXTS:

Family Communication reading packet #12 (available only at Durham Copy – downtown)

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J., and Jackson, D.D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York: W.W. Norton. (Available at Durham Book Exchange)

## COURSE POLICIES

**Academic honesty:** The University of New Hampshire's Academic Honesty Policy will be strictly enforced. Please familiarize yourself with this policy as it applies to written classroom examinations, out-of-class work, issues of plagiarism, misrepresentation, all academic policies, and computer ethics.

**Absences:** I expect you to be present at each and every class. Excuses for illness or emergencies should be obtained **prior** to the class you will be missing rather than after the missed class. Please realize that coming to class unprepared will be considered an absence. You are expected to have read the assigned material **prior** to class.

## SCHEDULE

**Date:**            **Topic/Reading/Assignments**

### INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY COMMUNICATION

**8/30**                    **Read for Thursday:** The Saturated Family (pp. 2-10)  
**9/1**                      **Class activity:** family interviews – are you modern or postmodern?

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### SYSTEMS THEORY AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

**9/6**                      **Read:** *Pragmatics of Human Communication*  
                                 Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 13-47)  
**9/8**                      **Class activity:** family systems interviews

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**9/13**                    **Read:** *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Chap 4: The  
                                 Organization of Human Interaction, pp. 118-148  
**9/15**                    **Class activity:** Interview and write unwanted, repetitive pattern

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**9/20**                    **Axioms of Communication**  
**Read:** *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Chap 2: Some Tentative  
                                 Axioms of Communication (pp. 10-21)  
**Read:** *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Chap 3: Pathological  
                                 Communication, pp. 72-117.  
**9/22**                    **Class activity:** application of axioms of communication

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**9/27**                    **Read:** *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Chap 5:A  
                                 Communication Approach to the Play *Who's Afraid of*

*Virginia Woolf?* pp. 149-186.

9/29

View and discuss *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*

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10/4

**I will be out of town this week at conferences. You will have required, in-class work to do in my absence....but no reading this week!!!**

10/6

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### THE STRUCTURAL MODEL

10/11

**Monday Class Schedule: No Class**

10/13

**Read:** Structural Family Therapy (pp. 11-25)

**Read:** A Family Model (pp. 26-46)

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10/18

View and discuss excerpts of *Ordinary People*

Summary and discussion of systems, pragmatics, and the structural model

10/20

**MIDTERM EXAM**

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### THE STRATEGIC/INTERACTIONAL MODEL

10/25

**STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS PAPERS DUE**

**Read:** The Theoretical Perspective (pp. 47-52)

**Read:** The Practical Perspective (pp. 53-61)

10/27

**Class activity:** Strategic analysis activity

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11/1

**Read:** More of the Same (pp. 62-66)

11/3

**Class activity**

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### LANGUAGE AND FAMILY SYSTEMS

11/8

**STRATEGIC ANALYSIS PAPERS DUE**

**Read:** Human Systems as Linguistic Systems (pp. 67-89)

11/10

**Class activity:** Linguaging systems

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### FROM SYSTEMS TO STORIES

**11/15**  
**11/17**

***Read:*** Shifting Paradigms: From Systems to Stories (pp. 90-107)  
***Class activity***

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## NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FAMILY

**11/22**                      **NARRATIVE/CONSTRUCTIONIST ANALYSIS PAPERS DUE**  
***Read:*** The Narrative Metaphor and Social Constructionism: A  
Postmodern Worldview (pp. 108-130)

**11/24**                      **Thanksgiving Holiday**  
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**11/29**                      ***Read:*** Therapy as Social Construction (pp. 131-140)

**12/1**                        ***Class activity:*** View and discuss excerpts from *The Joy Luck Club*  
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**12/6**                        Summary and review of course

**12/8**                        **(continued)**  
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***FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, 13 December, 1:00-3:00***