

COM 591.01: SEMINAR IN FAMILY COMMUNICATION
SYLLABUS, SPRING 2012

Course Description

Advanced topics in family communication theory and research. Topics rotate from semester to semester. May be repeated for credit when topics change. Credit 3. This semester, the focus is **The Dark Side of Communication in Domestic and Close Relationships**.

Class Meeting Place and Time

The class meets on Tuesday evenings from 6:00 to 9:00 at the University Center in The Woodlands.

Instructor

Dr. Richard Bello, Professor of Communication Studies
Office: 322B Dan Rather Communications Building
Office Hours: (9:30 to 11:00 TTh; also by appointment
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Course Objectives

- To gain an in-depth understanding of theories and research related to the role of communication in abusive domestic relationships, especially as it deals with spousal and parent-child interactions.
- To gain an in-depth understanding of theories and research related to problematic communication in a variety of other close relationships, including friendship and courtship.
- To share effectively and appropriately, in writing and orally, one's thinking and research about family and close relationship communication dealing with abuse, conflict, and other serious relationship problems.
- To develop an original research project related to this semester's topic.

Required Readings

Students are required to read books edited by Cahn (2009) and Spitzberg and Cupach (1998). These works will be supplemented by several articles chosen by students and the instructor. One of the single most important things you can do as a graduate student of communication studies is to actually read these materials in a timely manner and be prepared to discuss them!

Class Meetings and Attendance

Attendance is absolutely essential because the course process depends largely on discussions of topics that are prepared and led by students themselves. There will, therefore, be a participation grade that is influenced by two criteria: attendance itself and the ability to meaningfully participate in discussions of course material. These participation grades will be automatically lowered by one letter for every absence beyond two. Credit for attendance depends on students arriving to class on time and staying for the entire time the class meets.

Class Procedure

There will occasionally be mini-lectures by the instructor that deal with especially important or complex topics. However, the majority of class time will be taken up by presentations and discussions that are prepared and led by individual students.

Projects and Grading Policy

Most significant to this course will be a research paper that is 12 to 20 pages long. You may choose from one of three assignments. The first choice is to write an exhaustive literature review on an abuse-related communication topic, pose a set of hypotheses and/or research questions, and conclude with a brief discussion of how you might go about testing the hypotheses or answering the questions posed. (This is probably the best choice for someone who enjoys the “grunt work” of doing meticulous library research and attempting to analyze and synthesize that research.)

The second choice is to do an in-depth communication analysis of a publically known case of domestic abuse. Think of this choice as more applied and specific in nature than the first one. It will involve covering less theoretical and research material, but it will mean applying the material covered in a careful and thorough way to the particular case you choose to examine. It will involve attempting to answer questions such as the following: How does the scholarly material shed light on what transpired? In what ways, if any, do the events of the case defy application and use of the scholarly material? Would knowing the scholarly material have allowed you to make predictions before the fact about what transpired, or does the material help you to understand better (in hindsight) what transpired? Can you deduce from the scholarly material any practical suggestions that might have helped to avoid problems associated with the case or would help in the future to avoid problems in similar cases? (This might be the best choice for someone who likes to think concretely and is good at making connections between research ideas and practical life experiences.)

The third involves the actual conduct of a pilot study in which you do a relatively brief literature review of an abuse-related communication topic that leads logically to a set of hypotheses and/or research questions, report on the methodology used to collect data, report the results, and finally conclude with a brief discussion of those results. Note: IRB approval will absolutely be required for the completion of this assignment! The key focus here is on the original research that you do, so it is the quality of your basic concept, the validity of your design and measurements, the appropriateness of your data analysis, and the write up of the results that will primarily determine

this paper's grade. (This choice is probably best for someone who enjoys thinking creatively and who gets excited at the prospect of doing original research. However, it is not for the faint of heart, in part because it will involve using statistics in the process of completing that research and convincing the IRB to allow you to do research on a vulnerable population.)

Papers must also be engagingly written, well organized, grammatically and mechanically correct, and follow appropriate elements of style (APA). Students will also present the key findings of their research papers in class.

Another integral part of the course will be planned presentations and discussions led by individual students. Each student will prepare four or five of these, each dealing with a separate chapter covered in each of the textbooks. Prepare a two to four page outline of the chapter and bring enough printed copies for everyone in the class. Also, prepare a set of questions designed to promote class discussion about the chapter, and be prepared to lead that discussion after your presentation. That same evening, you will also be required to bring copies for everyone in the class of at least one article on an original piece of research from a scholarly communication journal. (Alternatively, you can send students the article copy as a link in an email or as an attachment, but this must be done no later than the day before the class meets so that students have adequate time to print the article and bring it to class.) You will need to summarize orally the basics of the methodology used in the study and the key findings of the study. The article you bring should be recent and should deal with one of the sub-topics covered in the book chapter that you find especially interesting.

Here are some of the *key standards you should be guided by for these presentations*: they must be ready on the assigned date (including the outline), the outline must be detailed enough to study from but must be in *outline* form, the material must be presented conversationally (in other words, *not read*), and presenters should feel free to be creative in terms of their techniques. *I strongly encourage this semester the use of speaking notes that are not the same as the chapter outline you give to the class. Also, presenters have the option of focusing the spoken part of the presentation on a particular sub-topic or subdivision of the chapter that they find especially interesting or important.*

Here are the *key standards that class members should be guided by in the processing of these presentations*: the chapter being reported on must have been read by the evening of the report, students should listen actively and attentively, and students are strongly encouraged to ask appropriate questions and make comments that contribute to the discussion in a positive manner.

There will also likely be a comprehensive final exam during the week set aside for finals.

Grade breakdown: Paper 50%, Pres/Disc's 35%, Participation 15% (without exam) OR
Paper 50%, Pres/Disc's 20%, Participation 15%, Exam 15%

General Class Policies

- A. Be on time.
- B. Don't leave early.

C. In class, **turn off or silence** all cell phones, beepers, or other electronic communication devices and **put them away**. **They are not to be used during the conduct of the class!** That is one of the purposes of a 5 to 10 minute break.

D. Although you are allowed, of course, to use computers during class, they are for the purpose **only** of taking notes that are directly related to the class, unless a specific request is made by students and instructor for the user to search for information on the web. They are not for the purpose of browsing the Internet, checking e-mail, etc.

E. Arrive to class rested and ready to participate. Be open and receptive to new ideas--you will hear a lot of them this semester. Questioning your assumptions is the basis of learning.

F. Project makeups or late papers will be allowed with no penalty only if the student can present written evidence of a legitimate reason for having missed the due date. Minus a legitimate, documented reason, late papers will either not be accepted or, at the discretion of the instructor, will be accepted with a penalty of at least one letter grade.

G. Plagiarism will result, at a minimum, in a zero for the assignment involved. In addition, do **not** turn in the same or very similar papers in more than one of your classes. The work you do for a given class should be unique to that particular class.

H. If you have a documented disability that requires assistance, please contact the Chair of the Committee for Continuing Assistance for Disabled Students at 294-1720.

Notice: You will find online a more detailed description of these policies at <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/>

Course Outline

1-24	Syllabus and orientation to course; feedback on preferred chapters
1-31	Chapter 1, Cahn; Assignment of presentations; Outlining and presentation
2-7	Chapters 2 & 3, Cahn
2-14	Chapters 4 & 5, Cahn
2-21	Chapters 6 & 7, Cahn
2-28	Chapters 8 & 9, Cahn

3-6	Chapter 10, Cahn Paper decisions and topics due
3-13	Spring Break Holiday
3-20	Introduction, SC Research and APA issues
3-27	Chapters 1 & 2, SC
4-3	Chapters 3 & 4, SC
4-10	Chapters 5 & 6, SC Progress reports on papers
4-17	Chapters 7 & 8, SC More research and APA issues
4-24	Chapters 9 & 10, SC
5-1	Chapters 11 & 12, SC Research paper due
5-8	Final Exam or Paper Presentations

References

Cahn, D. C. (Ed.). (2009). *Family violence: Communication processes*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (Eds.). (1998). *The dark side of close relationships*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.