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## The Benefits of Family Science Education: The Male Perspective

Michael R. Langlais

*University of Nebraska – Kearney*, [langlaismr@unk.edu](mailto:langlaismr@unk.edu)

Sylvia Asay

*University of Nebraska – Kearney*

Anthony Walker

*Indiana State University*

J. Mitchell Vaterlaus

*Montana State University*

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## The Benefits of Family Science Education: The Male Perspective

**Michael R. Langlais**

**Sylvia Asay**

*University of Nebraska – Kearney*

**Anthony B. Walker**

*Indiana State University*

**J. Mitchell Vaterlaus**

*Montana State University*

*The majority of university family science courses are predominantly comprised of women. Because family science classes are centered on information and concepts relevant for both men and women, it is important to understand gendered experiences to promote healthy family and romantic relationships. Not only would men benefit from these classes, but increasing male enrollment in family sciences courses will help promote gender diversity in higher education. The current study used qualitative analyses to examine the perceptions of male undergraduate students concerning the benefits of taking family science courses. Male undergraduates from three midsize universities in the Midwestern and Western United States provided open-ended responses via an online survey ( $N = 64$ ). Three themes emerged: the classes provided students with valuable information; they had a better understanding of themselves and others; and the classes related to their future career path. Results provide support to promote gender diversity in family science classrooms, which is crucial for the interpersonal and educational growth of both men and women. Further implications of participant responses are discussed.*

*Keywords:* family sciences, family science courses, male, qualitative

### Introduction

Family science is the “scientific study of families and close interpersonal relationships” with the explicit aim to strengthen and “empower families” (National Council on Family Relations; NCFR, 2016, p. 1). While close interpersonal and family relationships include both males and females, the majority of university family science courses (e.g., human development and family sciences courses, family and consumer sciences classes, and family studies courses) are predominantly comprised of women (Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Olson, 2014). According to the

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Direct correspondence to Michael R. Langlais at [langlaismr@unk.edu](mailto:langlaismr@unk.edu)

National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 75% of family science majors are women (Olson, 2014), and more women proceed to get careers in the field of family science than men (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). Family science courses originally stemmed from home economics programs, which were created primarily for women. Given these roots, the field of family science has historically been comprised of women, despite eventual changes in the focus of family science programs.

Given that the goals of family science courses include promoting the healthy development and maintenance of intimate and family relationships, it is imperative to have male students enrolled in these courses alongside female students. Increased male enrollment in family science classes also promotes gender diversity in the university classroom, which can benefit students and teachers by augmenting educational growth (Hurtado, 2001), exposing students to a variety of different perspectives (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005), and promoting interaction in the classroom (Maruyama & Moreno, 2000).

The purpose of the current study is to examine the perspectives of current male undergraduate students enrolled in family science courses regarding perceived benefits of taking family science classes to gain insight into potentially increasing male enrollment in those classes. By understanding undergraduate male perspectives concerning the benefits of family science courses, more can be done to increase male enrollment in these classes to benefit the healthy development and maintenance of romantic and family relationships.

### **Review of Literature**

Historically, the field of family science has been primarily comprised of women. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, family science programs were referred to as home economics programs that organized classes focusing on domesticity, such as cooking, with women being the target audience (Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Duncan & Goddard, 2011). However, in 1994, these programs were officially changed to family and consumer science programs, representative of family science programs, to break away from the singular focus of domesticity (NCFR, 2016). Currently, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS, 2017) states that family and consumer science is “a comprehensive body of skills, research, and knowledge that helps people make informed decisions about their well-being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life” (p. 1). Over time, the purpose of family science courses has shifted from a focus on domestic roles to a focus on the importance of relationships.

Although family science courses are inclusive of all students, a gender divide remains despite the shift in focus, with female students continuing to represent the vast majority (Duncan & Goddard, 2011; Olson, 2014), thus limiting gender diversity in the classroom. Other studies further demonstrate the gender divide in academia. First, women have been more likely to

pursue degrees in humanities and social sciences, whereas men have been more likely to pursue degrees in STEM fields. Roksa and Levey (2010) described that men are more likely to select college majors where the job is specific to the major (e.g., accounting or engineering), whereas women are more likely to enter fields that are not as specific to occupations (e.g., social sciences). Additionally, males are more likely to enter fields based on occupational values in terms of money and power, whereas females tend to enter fields that provide flexibility to be with family. Interestingly, one study found traditionally male fields (e.g., firefighting) were perceived as more altruistic compared to traditionally female fields (e.g., nursing; Weisgram, Bigler, & Liben, 2010). Although studies have examined the lack of women in STEM fields and natural sciences (e.g., Landivar, 2013), to our knowledge, no published works exist about increasing participation of men in the social sciences generally, and family science specifically.

Studies seeking to understand and promote gender balance in college provide some potential explanations for the gender imbalance between natural and social science. First, women have been found to select courses and majors that are predominantly communal, meaning friendly and facilitative, as these reflect the types of behaviors they observe of other women (Dickson, 2010; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Social sciences courses are generally associated with communal behaviors. Men, on the other hand, often choose courses and majors that are predominantly agentic, meaning assertive and independent, and these behaviors are more reflective of natural science courses (Dickson, 2010; Eagly et al., 2000). Additionally, men are more likely to engage in courses that do not require them to ask for help, which is more representative of natural sciences, whereas women are more likely to engage in courses that encourage assisting others and receiving help from others, both of which are more representative of social science courses (Wimer & Levant, 2011). More research is needed to understand the gender imbalance across fields in postsecondary education, particularly the lack of men in social sciences, explicitly family sciences. An approach to understanding the lack of participation of males in family science courses is to examine the benefits that males perceive from their participation in family science courses.

There is theoretical support for the current study. Using a classic stage theory approach, Havighurst (1948) theorized that human development can be characterized as a progression through specific stages and that one's progress, in part, is dependent on the successful completion or resolution of stage-specific tasks. Tasks left incomplete or partially accomplished will pose a liability as one attempts to move on developmentally. Of the eight developmental tasks proposed by Havighurst, three are of particular interest for the current study: preparing for marriage and family life, preparing for an occupation, and adopting a masculine or feminine social role. The degree to which those tasks are accomplished will facilitate the completion of the next set of related developmental tasks, which includes developing a stable partnership, learning to live with a partner, establishing and caring for a family, starting an occupation or career, and establishing an independent household.

Additionally, the family gender roles outlined by Parsons and Bales (1955) indicate males are responsible for the instrumental care of family members. This position, though changing, largely remains in force. What has changed is the expectation for fathers to now also be involved in the expressive functions of family life (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Milkie & Denny, 2014). Expressive functions include being compassionate and displaying warmth, which are typically aligned with traditional female gender roles (Miller, 2012). Recent research supports these theoretical assertions, with young adults reporting their fathers as fulfilling both roles that are largely instrumental (e.g., earning an income) and sometimes expressive (e.g., caregiving; Finley & Schwartz, 2006). In short, literature and theory point to a variety of benefits for males in family science. What males think of family science courses is less clear. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research question to provide some direction regarding the lack of male enrollment in family science courses:

What are the perceived benefits of taking family science courses for undergraduate males who take family science classes?

## Methodology

### Sample and Procedures

Data for this IRB-approved, exploratory study come from 64 male students in family science courses from three universities in the Midwestern and Western United States. To maximize program diversity, each university represented a different family science program: Family and Consumer Sciences, Human Development and Family Studies, and Family Studies. Male participants were selected to participate in this study because they were currently enrolled in at least one family science course from each of these programs. Of the 64 participants in the study, only six were majoring in the family science field. The majority of the participants were college students were taking the family science class as an elective that they found interesting or intriguing along with a few who were preparing for a career in a family science field. Thus, the bulk of the information shared in this study represent male students who were not majoring in family sciences. However, 45.3% of participants stated that the course was required for their major, which included the general studies curriculum for their program, illustrating that slightly less than half of the sample was enrolled in the family science course because it was required. This sample is representative of most male students taking a family science course, particularly in the universities from which they were recruited.

To understand the current gendered experience in family science, the researchers sampled from students who were currently enrolled in family science courses. Utilizing convenience sampling, male students enrolled in one of 11 family science courses were recruited by instructors to complete a 20–30 minute anonymous online survey hosted by Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)).

These courses were selected because they represented a course that the authors of the study were teaching. Of these 11 courses, five were entry-level general studies courses (i.e., Intimate Relationships, Lifespan Development), and six were upper-division family science courses (i.e., Family Resource Management, Diversity, Family Law and Public Policy, and Applied Theory in Human Development and Family Studies). However, the bulk of participants (87.5%) were obtained from the entry-level courses.

In comparison to the number of male students enrolled in the entry-level courses, 75.7% opted to participate in the study, while 80% of males enrolled in the upper-division courses participated in the study. Participants were provided a link to an online survey on their courses' online management platform. An informed consent form was included on the first page of the survey, and participants provided consent by selecting to proceed to the survey questions. The survey included semistructured questions regarding participants' current and past experiences with family science courses, including "In your opinion, what are the benefits for males taking family science courses?" "In your opinion, why are there more females than males in family science courses?" and "In your opinion, what factors would influence if you would take another family science course?" Data for this study were obtained during a single semester (Spring 2016). Participants received extra credit in their courses for completing the survey.

Demographic statistics for the study sample by university are presented in Table 1. The majority of participants were white (72%) and were underclassmen (32.8% freshmen and 31.3% sophomores). While most of the students had not been exposed to a family science class in high school (71.9%), the greater part of the sample had previously completed at least one university family science course (71.9%). Twenty-nine of the 64 participants (45.3%) stated that the family science course in which they were enrolled was not required for their major. The numbers across universities differ largely due to the paucity of males enrolled in these programs.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by University (N = 64)**

		Indiana State University	Montana State University	University of Nebraska - Kearney	Total	$\chi^2$ (8, 63)
<i>n</i>		2	49	13	64	
Grade	Freshman	0 (0.0)	17 (34.7)	4 (30.8)	21 (32.8)	19.64*
	Sophomore	0 (0.0)	17 (34.7)	3 (23.1)	20 (31.3)	
	Junior	2 (100.00)	3 (6.1)	1 (7.7)	6 (9.4)	
	Senior	0 (0.0)	7 (14.3)	4 (30.8)	11 (17.2)	
	Fifth year or more	0 (0.0)	5 (10.2)	1 (7.7)	6 (9.4)	
GPA		2.93 (.46)	3.12 (.65)	2.80 (.44)		---

(continued)		Indiana State University	Montana State University	University of Nebraska - Kearney	Total	$\chi^2$ (8, 63)
Ethnicity	White	0 (0.0)	37 (75.5)	9 (69.2)	46 (71.9)	16.44**
	Black	2 (100.0)	1 (2.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (4.7)	
	Hispanic	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (7.7)	1 (1.6)	
	Asian	0 (0.0)	2 (4.1)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.1)	
	Indian	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.6)	
	Other/Mixed	0 (0.0)	8 (16.3)	3 (23.1)	11 (17.2)	
Family Science Classes Completed	Zero	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	33.31***
	One	0 (0.0)	37 (75.5)	9 (69.2)	46 (71.9)	
	Two	0 (0.0)	3 (6.1)	3 (23.1)	6 (9.4)	
	Three	0 (0.0)	2 (4.1)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.1)	
	Four	0 (0.0)	3 (6.1)	0 (0.0)	3 (4.7)	
	Five	1 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.6)	
	Six or more	1 (50.0)	4 (8.2)	1 (7.7)	6 (9.4)	
Family Science Class Exposure in High School	Yes	1 (50.0)	14 (28.6)	3 (23.1)	18 (28.1)	.38
	No	1 (50.0)	35 (71.4)	10 (76.9)	46 (71.9)	
Current Family Science Class Required for Major	Yes	2 (100.0)	23 (46.9)	4 (30.8)	29 (45.3)	2.93
	No	0 (0.0)	26 (53.1)	9 (69.2)	35 (54.7)	
Gender of Current Family Science Instructor	Male	1 (50.0)	7 (14.3)	10 (76.9)	18 (28.1)	17.04***
	Female	1 (50.0)	42 (85.7)	3 (23.1)	46 (71.9)	

*Note:* All variables are presented as counts with column percentages in parentheses; GPA is presented as averages with standard deviations in parentheses. GPA was calculated by dividing current GPA by maximum GPA, as schools varied by maximum GPA. ANOVA analysis revealed no significant differences by university ( $F(2,63) = 1.47, p = .24$ ). \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

## **Analysis**

After data collection, two primary investigators, experienced in qualitative research conducted thematic analyses and interpretations of the meaning of participant responses using axial coding (Creswell, 2007). As the rich base of data was analyzed, a common set of themes emerged. Although participants' university, coursework, instructors, and majors were different, their experiences naturally fell into statements of relationships and common themes (Creswell, 2007). Three themes were agreed upon by the first two authors and were checked by the other two authors to ensure the participants' experiences were accurately represented (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The authors had varying experience with qualitative analysis.

## **Results**

The results of the qualitative analysis provided three themes representing the perceived benefits of taking family science classes from an undergraduate male perspective. The themes are presented in order of prevalence. First, participants indicated that classes provided students with valuable information. Second, completing the course provided them with a better understanding of themselves and others. Finally, participants indicated that the classes related to their future career path.

### **Valuable Information**

Participants reported that the information they received from taking a family science class was beneficial. Many students mentioned that the information that they were learning was not only interesting but important to know. One participant stated, "It is really fun to learn about the entire cycle of the human lifespan. People are the most unpredictable things in this world, so it is interesting to be able to peg people down to a science."

Participants were interested in topics such as relationships and developmental processes. Several suggested that the information they were learning helped to broaden their perspective on topics related to family science. One participant shared, "It can be fairly informative and can help explain some developmental things you questioned as a teenager/young adult." Participants also talked about the influence that an engaging and enthusiastic professor had on their interest in the content that confirmed their interest in helping others. One participant reasoned he would take another family science class if "the content was excellent and the instructor was good. Also, I have a desire to be a good father, and this class is helpful in achieving that."

### **Better Understanding of Myself and Others**

Many participants said that taking a family science course has led them to a greater understanding of themselves and others. They spoke about the usefulness of the information they were gaining and how applicable it was to both their past and future as a family member. Participants made statements such as “is personal and very interesting,” “is applicable to everyday life,” and “helps understand your own development and development of future children.”

Participants talked about the failures of their parents and other family members as well as their own relationship mistakes and how they planned to learn from these in the future. Some participants specifically mentioned the benefits of having new information that helped to explain the actions and reactions of others, an understanding of the developmental processes, and details about positive communication. One participant stated he enrolled in the class “because I wanted to understand my family.” There was a focus on learning how to have healthy relationships. For example, one participant indicated that a benefit for him in taking the class was “to understand how to make women happy and how to go about a relationship,” while another disclosed, “the benefits for males are learning how not to be a dumb boyfriend.” Some mentioned feeling more competent by having this knowledge in the areas of romantic relationships and parenting. One person felt he was a “better person” for taking a family science course.

### **Significance to My Career Path**

While participants identified the personal benefits of taking family science classes, they also mentioned some professional benefits related to their future career. Although most of the participants were not seeking a career in family science, they still connected what they were learning to their career field. One participant said he enrolled “to help me be culturally, socially, and politically correct in my future endeavors in a working profession.” Those pursuing careers in psychology, teaching, youth development, law enforcement, and counseling said that the information would serve to supplement their career goals.

Regardless of their career path, participants mentioned how helpful the information would be to their ability to work with individuals, as well as their interpersonal relationships with co-workers. One participant summarized, “[The course] helped me to become more aware of those around me, strengthen bonds with people, become politically correct in my workplace, and gain knowledge about different cultures and their styles of parenting, living, etc.” Some participants also felt that the in-depth discussions of real issues that occur in family science classes would have a positive impact on their professional lives. Further, participants felt that knowing developmental processes and other topics would help in advancement in their careers. One participant said, “It has taught me a lot about the stages of development which will help me with

my degree in psychology.” Another participant stated, “Real talk about real issues contrasts sharply with other classes I’ve taken that are so out of the realm of my future experience as a working professional.”

Another benefit for participants related to their understanding of social issues. Participants talked about their increased understanding of cultural diversity, poverty, and the need for social support. Several said they felt more culturally competent and more sensitive to the needs of diverse populations by taking a family science class. For instance, one participant reported, “My future career requires cultural competency in the diverse families across America.”

## Discussion

The current study used qualitative analyses to examine the perceptions of male undergraduate students concerning the benefits of taking family science courses. Three themes emerged that demonstrate family science courses can benefit undergraduate male students in a variety of ways, whether they are pursuing a career in the family science field or another field. As such, increasing male enrollment in family science courses may be one potentially fruitful avenue for enhancing their personal and professional development.

### **The Benefits of Valuable Information and Personal Application**

The ultimate purpose of teaching family science is to empower relationships and family (NCFR, 2016) through helping people make informed decisions about their well-being and relationships (AAFCS, 2017). The men in this study perceived that they learned information that could help them in their personal lives. Havighurst (1948) posited that men in this age group (i.e., undergraduate college students) are preparing for marriage and families, occupations, and adopting social roles. Specifically addressing the tasks during this stage, men in this study perceived that taking family science courses helped them understand typical development across the lifespan, allowed them to reflect on their own intimate and family relationships, and provided guiding information to think forward about their roles as a romantic partner and father.

While fathers in the past largely took on only instrumental roles in families (Parsons & Bales, 1955), there is emerging evidence that contemporary fathers take on instrumental and some expressive roles in family life, such as caregiving, increased compassion, and providing support for others (Finley & Schwartz, 2006; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Participants in this study addressed that they learned more about the inner workings of families and relationships and developmental stages. This knowledge may increase men’s capacity to more easily take on more expressive roles within their future family relationships. Supporting this rationale is Havighurst’s (1948) premise that accomplishing the tasks during the adolescent/emerging adult stages will influence the stage of adulthood (e.g., marriage, parenting, independent household). Roska and Levey

(2010) argued that men need information via family science courses to help maximize the potential of their family and romantic relationships for themselves and their partners. It appears that men in this study would agree with this as they found the information to be personal and applicable to their present and future.

### **Benefits for Future Career**

Havighurst (1948) theorized that during adolescence and emerging adulthood, developing humans are preparing for an occupation, and their preparation during this stage of development influences their ability to start and maintain a career in adulthood. Presently, more women than men have careers in the family sciences (Duncan & Goddard, 2011), and several men in this study reported that they were not going into family science careers. However, men reported that they could use the information in their future career, regardless of the field. Participants indicated that the family science courses prepared them to work with individuals and groups within the workplace. Additionally, participants reported that the courses increased their ability to be culturally competent. Globalization has greatly increased the cross-cultural interactions in the workplace, which requires universities to prepare students to be culturally competent in their chosen career fields (Deardorff, 2009).

According to Leskes and Wright (2005), general education should be viewed as a complement to career preparation and specialization, which is necessary to becoming an educated person. Laird, Garver, and Niskode-Dossett (2011) suggested that because many students do not live on-campus where they can intellectually interact with others, it is essential that practical skills, such as working effectively with others and solving complex real-world problems, need to be addressed in general education classes. It appears that men in this study perceived that family science classes could provide the vehicle for promoting these practical interpersonal skills that also allow them to further develop their cultural competency.

### **Implications**

This exploratory study shows that men enrolled in family science courses see a variety of benefits of taking these courses. Unfortunately, despite the benefits for males in taking family science courses, there remains a gender imbalance in the field of family science (Duncan & Goddard, 2011; Olson, 2014). Future research should be conducted to replicate these findings at universities across the United States. Men in this study perceived that taking the courses had benefits in their personal relationships and their future relational roles (including employment). Comparative studies that include men who have and have not taken family science courses would be helpful to identify ways to understand and increase male enrollment in family science courses. Additionally, longitudinal studies would help identify the potential long-term benefits of males taking these courses for their personal and professional lives. Replication and

longitudinal studies may provide evidence for institutions of higher education to require more family science courses as general education courses. General education courses could be a way of recruiting more men into family science programs once they learn the benefits of taking such courses and identify potentially rewarding careers opportunities within the field. However, no studies to our knowledge provide support that this could work. Future studies should examine the correlation between enrolling in family science courses and whether or not students change their major. Interestingly, one study has illustrated that women are more likely to change their major than men (Dickson, 2010).

It would also be important to gain perspectives from men (both those who have and have not taken family science courses) regarding the barriers they have experienced in taking family science courses (i.e., structural barriers, such as course scheduling or offerings, as well as social barriers, such as stereotyping) and their perspectives regarding how to overcome these barriers. Identifying barriers may allow for adjustments in programs that would promote more male enrollment in family science courses. A study of students' perceptions of males entering the dietetic profession found 71% of male respondents endorsed the gendered nature of the field generally as a barrier to increasing male participation in that female-dominated field. More specifically gender stereotyping (including being viewed as 'woman's work' or too closely connected to home economics), lesser professional status, and lack of role models were identified as perceived barriers (Lordly, 2012). Other studies have illustrated that gender-dominated programs can benefit from adjustments. For example, Irvine and Vermilya (2010) examined veterinary medicine, a male-dominated field, and suggested changing impressions by "ungendering" the profession. They stated that gendered professions are embedded in organizations and continue through policies, practices, culture, and interaction. Specific suggestions included changing the culture of the "token" gender and pointing out specialty areas that are better suited to the characteristics of each gender (Irvine & Vermilya, 2010). Moreover, recommendations from the field of nursing indicate access to a male faculty mentor, opportunities for gathering as a group, and actively confronting and dispelling gender stereotypes as potentially fruitful institutional strategies to address the gendered divide in that profession (LaRocco, 2007). Following suit with nursing, family science programs may need to examine ways that they promote the "token" male in the classroom (Dyck, Oliffe, Phinney, & Garrett, 2009; Stott, 2004). While some males may relish the idea of being singled out, considering it an advantage, other males may feel uncomfortable and consider it discriminatory.

### **Limitations and Conclusions**

Although the current study examined males' perceptions of family science classes, this study is not without limitations. First, this study is more representative of midsize universities in the Midwestern and Western United States. Results from the current study may not be generalizable to different sized universities or universities outside of the current study. Second, the sample

size is limited, and there is a lack of ethnic diversity. Larger, more diverse samples would provide a better illustration of study findings. Next, these participants were already enrolled in family science courses. Information concerning their motivations for enrolling in a family science courses, besides whether it was required, was missing. This information would help contextualize the results of this study. Additionally, the sample is comprised of primarily non-family science majors. Male undergraduate students majoring in family science may provide a different perspective compared to males not majoring in family science. Future studies should build on the findings of the present study and examine the viewpoints of male students who have not enrolled in a family science course to compare with male students who have enrolled or are currently enrolled in family science courses.

Although there were some limitations to the current study, this study is the first of its kind to examine the benefits of taking family science classes from a male perspective. This study provides qualitative support to promote gender diversity in family science classrooms, which is crucial for the interpersonal and educational growth of both men and women. Faculty and administration must recognize the significance of these benefits not only for the individual student but for society as a whole. Increasing the number of males who are introduced to the concepts of family life, including committed relationships and parenting, will strengthen their own family and society as a whole.

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*Michael Roger Langlais*, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska – Kearney who teaches courses and conducts research in the field of intimate relationships and family studies.

*Sylvia Asay*, PhD, is a Professor at the University of Nebraska – Kearney and is an expert in the family strengths perspective.

*Anthony Walker*, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Indiana State University and specializes in topics regarding religiosity, family studies, and youth and adolescent development.

*J. Mitchell Vaterlaus*, PhD, LMFT, is an Assistant Professor at Montana State University, who specializes in interpersonal relationships and family systems, family law, and new media and technology on family and human development.