



**Course Syllabus  
Fall 2012**

**FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY  
COUN 0677**

**Sept 11 – Dec 4, 2012  
Tuesday, 1:00 – 3:50 pm**

**INSTRUCTOR: DR. SUSAN ELLFELDT**

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1-4 pm

To access your course materials at the start of the course, please go to  
<https://www.mytyndale.ca>

## **I. COURSE DESCRIPTION**

A critical appraisal of basic theoretical concepts in Family Systems Theory. Topics: historical and conceptual development of Family Systems Theory, introduction to General Systems Theory (both first order and second order cybernetics), family roles, rules, structures and interactive patterns, communication dynamics, assessment, engagement and termination using family systems theory, life cycle issues in marriage and family, and ethnicity and family therapy.

This course will provide students with a foundational understanding of the dynamics of family interaction from a systems perspective. The development of an understanding of systems theory, its application to family interaction, and its evaluation will form the basis of the course content.

### **Prerequisites and Corequisites:**

Family Systems Theory is a first year counselling course, open only to Counselling majors or with permission of instructor.

Pre- or co-requisite: COUN 574

## II. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Successful completion of this course will involve achievement of the following competencies:

- Demonstrate a theoretical understanding of the differences between an individualist/intrapsychic and a systemic/interpersonal perspective of human behaviour.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical concepts of family systems theory.
- Demonstrate application of family systems theory to family interaction.
- Demonstrate an understanding of one's self in relation to one's own family of origin.

## III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### A. REQUIRED TEXTS

Becvar, D. S. & Becvar, R. J. (1999). *Systems theory and family therapy: A primer* (2nd ed.). Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America Inc. ISBN 0-7618-1295-4

Richardson, D. (1987). *Family ties that bind*. North Vancouver: Self Counsel Press. (ISBN 0 88908 655 9)

Worden, M. (2003). *Family therapy basics* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thompson Learning. (ISBN 0-534-51971-7)

### Additional suggested reading:

McGoldrick, M. & Gerson, R. (1985). *Genograms in family assessments*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 0-393-70002-X

Napier, A. & Whitaker, C. (1978). *The family crucible: The intense experience of family therapy*. New York: Harper & Row. ISBN 0-06-091489-0

Papero, D. V. (1990). *Bowen family systems theory*. Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon. ISBN 0-205-12519-0

Richardson, R. W. (2010). *Couples in conflict: A family systems approach to marriage counselling*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press. ISBN 978-0-8006-9628-3

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 0-393-01104-6

Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J. B. & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes*. New

## **B. ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING**

**Regular attendance in and punctuality for all classes is expected.** Out of respect for your colleagues, please try to be on time for all classes. Absence from more than 2 classes may result in the loss of credit.

### **1. FAMILY OF ORIGIN PAPER – 35% Due Date: Tuesday Nov. 20, 2012**

Through the course of our lives we interact in many systems. However, it is the first system with which we interact, our family of origin, that has the most powerful and persistent influence on how we think and feel about ourselves and on how we interact with others. It is this system that has the most powerful impact, both positive and negative, on our future relationships. (Fredda Herz Brown)

An individual acquires from his early-family experiences, or "family of origin," a set of explicit and implicit expectations, values, attitudes, and beliefs which serve as points of reference for the evaluation of all interpersonal life experiences. These interactions with the family of origin begin with the birth of an individual and continue to exert an influence throughout life. (Brian Canfield)

Both of these quotes point to the influence of the family of origin on the individual. Understanding oneself, especially oneself within relationships, requires some understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of one's family of origin.

Einstein once said that our theories determine what we observe. Given the theoretical base of much of pop-psychology, it's no wonder we see pathology everywhere we look in our families. When children, regardless of their age, are troubled we ask, "What have these parents done wrong?"

Many family-of-origin therapists look for the sources of client's unhappiness solely in the "dysfunctional" family of origin. Often the conscious identification of problematic patterns in the family of origin and the relationship to contemporary adult life is a valuable exercise. Unwittingly, however, this process of focusing solely on family weaknesses often leads to further "disempowerment of the adult," "victimization," "parent-blaming," "family-bashing" and the myth of "parental omnipotence."

Most families, however, with all their inadequacies, generally care for their members. To celebrate this reality, however, we need words that identify and validate family strengths as well as family limitations.

The texts for this course have a system's orientation. After reading these books, I would like you to:

- a. Do a "Family-of-Origin Genogram" (incorporating 3 generations),  
Apply the concepts from the texts and the content of the course "Family Systems Theory" to your reflections on your family and to the genogram.  
You may have to interview family members to get adequate information for this project.
- b. Identify problematic patterns in your family of origin and how they have influenced you as an adult
- c. Identify qualities and strengths in your family of origin and how they enriched your adult life.

**You will then hand in your completed genogram and a 5 to 8 page reflection paper in which you will discuss your reflections on your experience of yourself through this exercise.**

**PLEASE NOTE: I am specifically interested in your reflections on how you understand yourself and your current relational patterns in light of the work that you have done on your family-of-origin study.**

**PLEASE NOTE: You are not handing in your family-of origin study itself, only your personal reflections after having completed your study.**

**PLEASE NOTE: The research and reflection for this assignment is extremely time consuming. In order to complete this assignment satisfactorily you will need to begin early in the school year.**

### **Learning Objectives:**

1. to translate learning from the classroom and from textbooks in relation to family systems theory in general and intergenerational family systems theory in particular, into one's own experience
2. to develop the skills to be able to observe interaction patterns within your own nuclear and extended families
3. to develop a sensitivity in perceiving how themes, issues and interactional patterns etc. are transmitted across generational lines
4. To reflect on how intergenerational issues within your family of origin have influenced you personally
5. To reflect on how intergenerational issues within your family of origin have influenced your interpersonal patterns

This assignment will not only give you the opportunity for increased self-understanding but it will also help you to develop skills that will facilitate your work with other individuals and families.

**Expected Standards:** A personal reflection paper that demonstrates

1. A thorough understanding of family systems theory
2. The ability to apply those concepts in achieving a greater understanding of one's self and one's current interpersonal relationships

2. **Richardson Assignments–15% Due weekly as noted in Course Schedule**  
From the Richardson text, students will be required to submit their answers to the questions embedded in the required reading for that week. The assignments will be graded on a pass/fail basis.

**Learning Objective:** to apply Systems Theory to one's own family

3. **FINAL EXAMINATION – 40 %**(Due Date: Date of final exam as scheduled for this course, Tuesday, Dec 11, 2012

The concepts of "Family Systems Theory" are significantly different from those involved in the traditional forms of psychotherapy. As you will discover, it is very much like learning a new language. As in the learning of a new language, learning the meanings of the symbols of that language often requires a lot of 'muscle work'. To encourage this process there will be a video-exam at the end of the course that will focus on your ability to 'see' interactional patterns and to 'think' in family systems terms.

The content which you will be expected to master will be drawn from the class discussions, the texts, and from any handouts that are distributed during the course.

The format of this exam will be discussed in more detail later in this course. Essentially, it will involve watching a portion of a 'professor-selected' video. Then you will be required to answer questions which will reflect your understanding from a systems perspective of the dynamics in that family. In preparation for this exam, students are encouraged to watch as many family-related videos as possible from the perspective of family-systems theory.

**Learning Objectives:**

- to use family systems theory to describe interactional patterns within a particular family case-study.

**Expected Standard:**

- A demonstrated ability to 'think' family-systems, while 'hearing' and 'seeing' the interactional patterns of a family, and then to describe those interactional patterns in family systems terminology.

4. **CLASS PARTICIPATION – 10%**

Active interaction and critical involvement with both the content and the other members of the class will be expected. Some consideration will also be given to matters of attendance, punctuality, and general class deportment.

### **C. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK**

1. **The reflection papers** should demonstrate the student's ability to process his/her internal responses personally and professionally. The ability to reflect upon and process feelings and thoughts is an important skill in counselling work.
2. **Title page and documentation:** The title page should include the name of the course, name of the instructor, title of the paper/assignment, student's name, and the date due. Students are expected to honestly reflect use of materials other than their own. Tyndale does not tolerate plagiarism in any form. Any sources used in the paper should be properly documented using the format provided by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.
3. **Papers** must be typed, double spaced, and written using inclusive language. Students are required to retain a copy of all assignments in hard copy or electronic form. Graduate level spelling, grammar and style are expected, and grades will be lowered if written expression is poor.
4. Tyndale Seminary's **policy on late assignments** will be followed. For each week late, the grade will be **reduced by 1 letter grade**. Extensions will be considered if the circumstances are extreme. **No final assignments or examinations will be accepted later than 5:00 PM on Dec 14.**
5. Integrity in academic work is required of all our students. Academic dishonesty is any breach of this integrity, and includes such practices as cheating (the use of unauthorized material on tests and examinations), submitting the same work for different classes without permission of the instructors; using false information (including false references to secondary sources) in an assignment; improper or unacknowledged collaboration with other students, and plagiarism. Tyndale University College & Seminary takes seriously its responsibility to uphold academic integrity, and to penalize academic dishonesty. Students should consult the current [Academic Calendar](#) for academic policies on Academic Honesty, Gender Inclusive Language in Written Assignments, Late Papers and Extensions, Return of Assignments, and Grading System.

**All assignments must be completed and submitted in order to receive a credit in this course.**

**NOTE: All written submissions must adhere to APA standards. All written submissions should reflect graduate-level competency in regards to matters of grammar, punctuation etc.**

## D. SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Family of Origin Paper	35%
Richardson Assignments	15%
Final Exam	40%
Class Participation	10%

## IV. COURSE SCHEDULE, CONTENT, AND REQUIRED READINGS

### Sept 11 Session I: Paradigm Shift

- History of systems theory and major theorists
- Paradigm of individual psychology
- Paradigm of relational psychology
- Emergence of Systems Theory
- Comparison of systems and individual psychologies

**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 10, Becvar Chapter 2, Worden pp 8-15

### Sept 18 Session 2 First Order Cybernetics

- Culture and theory
- Open/closed systems
- Subsystems and structure
- Entropy/negative entropy
- Information flow and punctuation
- Rules
- Homeostasis/morphostasis/morphogenesis

**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 1 & 3 (p11-24) and Worden Chapter 1, pp 1-8  
Richardson workbook: Chapter 1 (no questions due)

### Sept 25 Session 3 First Order Cybernetics: Issues of Homeostasis and Change

- Wholeness
- Equifinality
- Equipotentiality
- Homeostasis
- Feedback processes

- First and second order change
- Information flow and punctuation
- Recursion

**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 3 (24-34)

Richardson workbook: Chapter 2 (all 5 sets of questions due)

## **Oct 2 Session 4** First and Second Order Cybernetics

- Challenges to Systems Theory
- Objective truth
- Change – Constructing new meanings
- Reality is social convention
- Expert or fellow traveler
- Criticisms of second order cybernetics

**Reading:** Becvar Chapters 4 & 5

Richardson workbook: Chapter 3 (3 sets due)

## **Oct 9 Session 5** Second Order Cybernetics

- Epistemology of participation
- Consensual domains
- Process of change
- Non-purposeful drift
- Feedback – always negative
- Open or closed?
- Reality as a multiverse
- Structural coupling
- Structural determinism
- Wholeness
- Integration of first and second order cybernetics

**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 7 & 8

Richardson workbook: Chapter 4 (5 sets due)

## **Oct 16 Session 6** Development and Family Life Cycle

- Erikson – Individual development
- Theory and transitional stress
- Gender concerns
- Stagers of Family Life Cycle



**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 6, Worden pp 42-52  
Richardson workbook: Chapter 5 (5 sets due)

**Oct 23 Reading Days – no class**

**Oct 30 Session 7** Communication Principles

- Cybernetics and communication
- Axioms of communication
- Pathological communications

**Reading:** (*material drawn from Watzlawick et al, Pragmatics of Human Communication*)  
Richardson workbook: Chapter 6 (6 sets due)

**Nov 6 Session 8** Encounter - Therapeutic Alliance

- Quality of relationship
- The person of the counsellor
- Therapeutic alliance
- Issue of empathy
- Empathy and the family
- Therapeutic boundaries
- Use of self
- Genogram help

**Reading:** Worden Chapter 3  
Richardson workbook: Chapter 7 (one set due)

**Nov 13 Session 9** Observation/Assessment

**Rules-an observation lens**

- Boundaries
- Disengaged/enmeshed
- Around power
- Around intimacy
- Around communication patterns

**Reading:** Worden: Chapter 2  
Richardson workbook: Chapter 8 (work on Genogram)

**Nov 20 Session 10** Observation/Assessment

- What to look for
- How to look

**Reading:** Worden: Chapters 5 & 6

**Assignments** Family of Origin paper and genogram due

**Nov 27 Session 11** Change

- Establishing goals and clarifying treatment plans
- Change techniques from a systems perspective
- Change and resistance to change
- Dance of change
- Problem versus solution
- Frequent resistance patterns
- First and second order change

**Reading:** Worden: Chapter 2 & 7

**Dec 4 Session 12** Treatment Summary and Termination

- Treatment summary
- Meeting treatment goals
- Consolidating gains

**Reading:** Becvar Chapter 9  
Worden Chapter 8

**Dec 11 Final Examination**

**No work accepted after 5pm on Dec 14**