Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology
The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Theory III: Family Systems Theory, Treatment and Research
Course # 78000.17984
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Course Description:
This first semester of a year-long course in family therapy draws upon family systems theories, research, and interventions to conceptualize the relationship between individuals and their intimate and larger social and environmental contexts, and to learn a range of systemically-based intervention techniques. A core perspective of prevention- and intervention-scientists is that we develop and refine theories of family and couple psychology by creating, implementing, and empirically evaluating interventions designed to create change. Thus, it is through study of systemic theories and techniques designed to create change in family and couple functioning that we learn more about how families function, and about the relationship between individual persons’ mental and behavior health and the family and larger contexts within which they live.

Conceptualizing psychological development as a function of the evolving, reciprocal relationship between the individual and her/his multiple levels of context is important whether one conducts therapy with individuals, therapy with couples and families, or interventions that involve larger systems such as communities, schools, hospitals, and the legal system. However, as this course is primarily a course in how to do couple and family therapy, the emphasis will be on how systemically-/contextually-based theory and research (including both “traditional” systems theories and post-modern/post-structural contextual theories such as social constructionism and narrative theory), as well as social psychological theories and research about couples and families, support the practice of systemic therapies with couples and families in their meaningful and influential larger contexts.

There are many schools of family and couple therapy, as well as broader systemic foci such as the diversity issues of race, class, culture, sexual orientation, religion, and gender, among others. This course takes an integrative stance, suggesting that all systemic perspectives are useful as part of a multilayered systemic approach to conceptualizing and intervening in the problems of individuals in their contexts. The course also seeks to bridge systemic thinking with individual-oriented theories of psychopathology, development, and treatment. Thus, this course covers theory and interventions from most of the major schools of family and couple therapy. Issues of diversity and oppression are introduced early on in the sequence of topics, so that all specific theories and practices can be evaluated thoughtfully regarding the degree to which they are sensitive to issues of difference among families and the persons within those families.
In addition to examining the variations in theory and practice necessary to work with diverse families, it is also important to address the variations in theory and practice necessary to intervene with diverse problems. Substantial literatures have amassed on working with families in which a member is diagnosed as schizophrenic, bipolar, alcoholic, learning disabled, and most other traditional categories of mental and social disorder. One of our texts will introduce family-based treatment of incest as an example of the kinds of modifications in theory and practice necessary to work most effectively with a particular problem. The group presentation and term paper also provide opportunities to learn how theories and techniques must be adapted to persons inhabiting particular social locations, and to understanding and intervening with particular psychiatric, psychological, and social problems.

A core organizing theme of the course is the issue of how a scholar/researcher/practitioner links theory and practice. Theory and practice are linked through the act of *clinical hypothesizing*. Clinical hypothesizing involves considering the “nomothetic” -- general theory or research findings about persons in particular situations and with particular problems -- and systematically testing the usefulness of these general ideas in the particular, “idiographic,” individual case. Why is it so important to link theory and practice? This course argues that thinking is a form of doing. How we think about individuals in their families and other social contexts -- their strengths and resources, the nature and sources of their problems, their membership and organization, and how we conceive our role as therapists -- guides our therapeutic practices. We cannot talk about "what to do" with families without carefully considering "how we think" about them. All of our theories about family functioning and change are constructions, embedded in our particular culture and point in history. As therapists, then, we must strive to be clear about why we think what we think -- about families in general and about any particular family with which we are working -- and must be well-versed in the range of ideas about families and therapeutic change, as well as in the research that supports or disconfirms theoretical premises.

In addition, it is critical to establish the efficacy or effectiveness of systemic interventions. To that end, we will read two prominent treatment manuals of programs that have been deemed empirically-validated treatments: Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT), and the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). We will review how these manualized interventions embody fundamental systemic and ecological theories, and how they systematize associated techniques.

The course is also designed to ground and illustrate core social psychological theories and research findings with clinical data about persons in their social contexts.

**Course Objectives:**

Students will emerge from this course with a foundation in the practice of couple and family therapy; a sound grasp of how family systems research and social psychology inform systemically-based clinical interventions; an experience in critically applying clinical data to refine general theories of human social behavior and experience; and a with an enhanced sensitivity to aspects of social location such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, immigration history/citizenship status, culture, and other dimensions of diversity that afford individuals and families experiences of privilege or oppression, and that affect family functioning.
Specifically, by the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate their knowledge of key theories and techniques of couple and family therapy, and the research supporting systemic theories and interventions. This knowledge will be demonstrated by students’ responses to in-class questions posed by the instructor and in-class discussions; reading reflection papers; performance on a group presentation; performance on a term paper; and performance on an exam.

2. Demonstrate a capacity to critically evaluate family systems theories and applied practices utilizing three perspectives:
   a. examining the adequacy of the *empirical research* supporting these theories and techniques;
   b. understanding how *power relationships within the academic and larger social/historical context* supports the ascendance of particular theories and therapeutic techniques over alternative theories and techniques;
   c. evaluating the degree of generalizability/suitability/applicability of theories and practices from the perspective of *intersectionality* – the multiple interacting social locations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of difference.

This knowledge will be demonstrated by students’ responses to in-class questions posed by the instructor and in-class discussions; reading reflection papers; performance on a group presentation; performance on a term paper; and performance on an exam.

3. Demonstrate the capacity to apply general family and couple clinical theory and techniques to particular case material, thereby demonstrating the ability to identify a problem and employ appropriate problem-solving processes to develop viable solutions. Acquisition of the capacity apply general theory and techniques to particular case material will be demonstrated by students’ responses to in-class questions by the instructor and in-class discussions; reading reflection papers; performance on a group presentation; performance on a term paper; and performance on an exam.

4. Demonstrate understanding of guidelines for ethical practice as a family and couple counselor. Acquisition of an understanding of ethical practice will be demonstrated by students’ responses to in-class questions posed by the instructor and in-class discussions; reading reflection papers; performance on a group presentation; performance on a term paper; and performance on an exam.

5. Demonstrate effective written and oral communication skills through weekly in-class discussions, a formal in-class group presentation, and a term paper.

Course Organization and Format:
The course is organized to reflect the multiple levels of meaningful relationships between persons and their complex ecologies. We will begin with a detailed case presentation of therapy with a multi-stressed family, struggling with problems in the relationships between the partners, between the partners and their children, between the partners extended family members, between the family and their built environment (housing), and between the family and larger systems (legal, educational, welfare, political, employment). We will then engage in close readings of several definitive texts in systems and social psychological theory, and reflect on how these
theoretical descriptions illuminate aspects of the family’s struggles and sources of resilience. The course will then return to the formation of intimate dyads, and proceed along the broad, variegated journey described as the “life cycle” of the couple and family – the challenges and resources engaged in forming, expanding, sustaining, and dissolving these relationships. Particular theories and practices of couple and family therapy will be introduced in examining each phase of the life cycle. Theories/findings from family systems and social psychology will be utilized as the empirical substrate of our understanding of these periods in persons’ journey through the ecology of relationships, as well as normative and alternative cultural constructs about “healthy” couples and families, and the role of relationships in leading a “happy life.”

The course combines lectures, discussions, readings, role-play exercises, student presentations, and viewing of videotapes as learning modalities. You are also encouraged to bring to class discussions specific clinical experiences with families that illustrate important theoretical and treatment issues.

*Please note that the schedule of topics listed in the syllabus is subject to change, depending on group interest in a topic, and opportunities for special presentations.* Changes in dates on which topics will be discussed will be decided by the whole group and announced during class with as much advance notice as possible.

**Requirements and Grading:**

**First Semester Term Paper**

A 20-25 page double-spaced paper that summarizes recent systemic writings on one clinical and/or social problem. These papers will either be done by you alone, or in groups of three students, with one of you reviewing the systemic theory, another reviewing the research, and another reviewing the clinical techniques/interventions used to address a particular clinical or social problem. We will decide early in the semester whether you will do these papers (and the associated presentations, see below) individually or in groups.

The paper should be divided into three sections:

a. Theory from family systems and social psychology about the problem (including how the systemic viewpoint differs from nonsystemic viewpoints, and the systemic alternatives to the traditional diagnostic, individually-based (e.g., psychodynamic, behavioral), and linear (as opposed to circular and interactional) formulations of the problem

b. Research from the family systems and social psychology literatures on the problem

c. Systemically-based interventions for the problem, and any outcome research available on the efficacy or effectiveness of the interventions

d. Literature that attends to differences in theory, research, and practice based on differences in families’ cultures and social locations

Topics can include any of the usual diagnostic categories of psychiatric disorder (for instance, any Axis I or Axis II disorder); interpersonal problems such as affairs, divorce, domestic violence, child maltreatment (sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse); and broader social issues that affect families such as community violence, poverty, racism, the
foster care system, homelessness, the boundary between work and the family, the impact of technology on families, and so on.

First Semester In-Class Presentation
The final class will be 4 hours long and designed as a half-day conference. You will each present for 15 minutes (with 5 minutes for questions and discussion) on the topic of your term paper. Alternatively, the presentations may be done in groups of 3 students, in which one of you reviews the systemic theory, another the research, and another the clinical techniques/interventions used to address a particular clinical or social problem. These presentations can be conducted in any style and with any media you wish (PowerPoint, videotape, lecture without audiovisuals, experiential exercise, or a combination), but must include an emailed 2-3 page handout, or the PowerPoint file, summarizing key points.

Reading Reflection Papers
Across the semester, you are required to submit three reading reflection papers – a half page to one page in length, single-spaced 12 point font maximum -- in which you address the following questions about one of the core readings:

1. Novelty/Interest: What idea or finding intrigued you most about this article/chapter, and why?
2. Constructive Critique: What was missing or seemed problematic about the position/conclusions advanced in this article/chapter?
3. Application: How might this idea/finding (or the article/chapter as a whole) affect your work in individual psychotherapy?

Readings will be randomly assigned to students at the beginning of the semester. You are welcome to trade articles/chapters for which you will take responsibility for the paper; but let me know. You must email this paper to me and the entire class by the evening (not later than 10 p.m.) before the class for which the article/chapter is assigned. Failure to submit the paper will result in no credit.

Exam
There will be one, one-hour exam at the end of the semester. The exam will consist of multiple choice and short-answer questions.

Course Grading
Classroom Participation (asking relevant questions, offering thoughts, accurately answering questions about readings posed by instructor): 10%

Reading Reflection Papers: 15% (5% each of three papers)

In-Class Presentation: 25%

Final Paper: 25%

Exam: 25%

NOTE ON LATE PAPERS:
Please note that, in order to be fair to your classmates, final papers are due on the date set in class, with no exceptions! Papers will lose a half grade per day late.

Readings:
Required readings for the course are arranged in an electronic course pack in the order in which they appear in the syllabus. The readings are emailed as .pdf documents. Books are either available in the bookstore or are on reserve in the library (see below). Required readings are bolded and are listed in this syllabus immediately under the class dates/topics for which they are particularly relevant. Reading reflection papers (see below, under Assignments) will be assigned for required readings. Other (not bolded) readings are recommended but we will not necessarily go over them in great detail. Note that in class, I will select sections of some of the longer core readings for close scrutiny and discussion, but you are responsible for reading the entire article/chapter.

For each week, readings drawn from the family systems literature are listed under the heading Family Systems Readings. Readings drawn from the social psychology literature are listed under the heading Social Psychology Readings.

Over the years I have greatly reduced the required reading list so that we can thoroughly encounter and absorb a few representative texts. But keep in mind that these readings barely scratch the surface of the couple and family therapy literature (never mind the enormous body of relevant work in social psychology), and so, I encourage you to read much more, and I have many articles, chapters, and books readily available.

Four books are required. One copy of each book will be on reserve in the CCNY library, and two (the less expensive ones) will also be available in the bookstore:

Required Texts:


Along with the readings, you will receive electronically a set of handouts that provide additional, practical guidelines on a variety of topics and treatment issues. Further handouts will be distributed throughout the year.

**Weekly Reading Assignments and Class Topics:**

**Fundamental Ideas and Practices in Systemic-Ecological-Contextual Therapy**

In the first five weeks, we will introduce core systemic ideas and core practices of conducting couple and family therapy, as well as key theories and findings from social psychology that illuminate and support systemic theory and practice. In terms of ideas, we will review in depth the core overlapping notions of context, ecology, and systems. Other key concepts examined will be the distinction between linear and circular causality; complementarity and symmetry; the notion of the systemic “function” of symptoms (including that of maintaining homeostasis); family structure and boundaries; family rules; family resilience; the role of social location (race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of difference and the intersections among them) and larger systems in affording the family resources or sources of oppression and marginalization; among others. In terms of practices, we will focus particularly on systemic interviewing and assessment; on collaboratively establishing a contract or focus for therapy; on the balance between practices that elucidate meanings and those that encourage changes in action patterns; on addressing families’ social locations and the impact of similarities and differences between family members locations and those of the therapist; and on handling difficult moments in therapy.
Week 1

LOGISTICS AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

OVERVIEW OF STANCE: INTEGRATING SYSTEMS THEORIES AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

THE INCREASING OVERLAP BETWEEN CULTURALLY-SENSITIVE PSYCHODYNAMIC, DEVELOPMENTAL, AND SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

• Overview of an integrated systemic approach
• Videotaped case presentation

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL (AND DEVELOPMENTAL) PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


NOTE: As the above readings are for the first class, your reflection papers for these readings are due by the evening prior to the class for week 3, so as to give you a chance to read the material and write a thoughtful paper.

Week 2

CORE CONCEPTS ABOUT PERSONS IN CONTEXT AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING

In this and the following class, we will use the case presentation to identify fundamental concepts of family systems theory. We will also examine how social psychologists have conceptualized and researched the central role of relationships in individuals’ mental and physical health and development, as well as the role culture in social interaction and well-being.

Multiple layers of context

• Family culture, dimensions of difference, privilege and oppression
• Definition of systems and the systemic perspective
• Diagnosis: Individual pathology vs. systemic dysfunction
• Family organization: "structure," subsystems, boundaries, hierarchy, coalitions, alliances, degrees of connectedness
• Family process: circularity, pragmatics of communication
• Family development
• Family narratives
• Family problems and strengths

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Week 3

CORE SYSTEMIC AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS ABOUT PERSONS IN CONTEXT AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING: FOCUS ON STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND RESILIENCE

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS

Week 4 BASICS OF FAMILY THERAPY PRACTICE

- A detailed look at the first interview
- Videotaped demonstration

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


Week 5 BASICS OF FAMILY THERAPY PRACTICE (CONTINUED)

- Establishing a collaborative respectful therapeutic relationship
- Handling difficult moments
- Videotaped demonstration

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


Couples: Relationship Formation, Growth, Stability, and the Intergenerational/Cultural Context

In weeks 6 through 11, through theoretical and empirical readings in family systems, social psychology, and illustrative case material, we will address the following questions: What has social psychology identified as the key variables affecting romantic attraction and sustained intimacy between partners? What is the role in attraction and conflict of conscious and unconscious patterns from each partner’s family of origin? Along with problem patterns, what are the resources passed down across the generations, and how do we assist family members to locate and use these strengths and sources of pride? How does each partner’s social location (race, class, sexual orientation, education, immigrant/citizenship status) associated privileges and histories of oppression affect the
processes of mate selection, bonding and commitment, as well as relationship satisfaction and stability?

**Week 6**  
**COUPLES: INITIAL ATTRACTION AND FORMATION**

In this class, we will review systemic theory and social psychological research on attraction, intimacy, relationship satisfaction and stability. We will examine core concepts and therapeutic practices of intergenerational approaches in family therapy.

**FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS**


**SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS**


**Handout:** Guide to Constructing Genograms

**Week 7**  
**COUPLE FORMATION, SATISFACTION, AND STABILITY (CONTINUED)**

In this class, we will examine the challenges faced in forming and sustaining couple relationships by persons in social groups marginalized and oppressed due to their social locations, and the impact of external stress more generally on couple satisfaction and functioning.

**FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS**


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Week 8 COUPLE CONFLICT: GENDER ROLE CAUSES AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

In this class, we will focus on the role of gender in structuring patterns of power and connectedness in couples.

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS

Week 9  COUPLE SATISFACTION AND CONFLICT: COGNITIVE AND NARRATIVE CAUSES AND INTERVENTIONS

In this class, we examine family systems and social psychological theories and research on the role of conscious and unconscious cognitions in intimate relationships and conflict. We will discuss interventions that focus on changing couple partners’ negative cognitions and narratives about one another and the relationship.

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Weeks 10-11  COUPLE CONFLICT: IDENTIFYING AND INTERRUPTING PROBLEMATIC EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL SEQUENCES

In the next two classes, we will examine the theory and research from family systems and social psychology on the behavioral sources of couple conflict, and will learn research-supported interventions for interrupting dysfunctional relational patterns. We will examine research on key problem behavior patterns, learn how to introduce research-based, psychoeducational material in couple and family therapy, and role play of research-based communication and problem-solving skills.

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Handouts: Four-to-Five session PREP Module

Tips on Coaching Communication Skills

A Couple’s Guide to Exploring Hidden Issues

Week 12 THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD: EARLY YEARS OF FAMILY LIFE

How do couples and families develop over time? How do couples adjust to having a baby? What about couples that cannot conceive, or elect not to have a child? What about blended families – how do the biological and step-parents negotiate roles, and how do children respond? What are some of the common transition points for families, and what are some of the typical patterns of adjustment? Is there one "normal" family life cycle, or does the life cycle depend on culture and other factors? What happens when a family does not adequately handle challenges or adjust to developmental changes in its members? What's adequate adjustment, anyway, and who's to say?

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


(Suggested Books for Clients)


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Week 13 EMOTION REGULATION AND ATTACHMENT IN FAMILIES

In this class, we will examine the family systems and social psychological theory and research on the role and intergenerational transmission of emotion regulation skills and attachment styles in couples and families, and discuss interventions designed to increase self and relational emotion regulation in parents and children.

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL (AND DEVELOPMENTAL) PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Week 14    FAMILY-BASED INTERVENTIONS WITH CHILD PROBLEMS: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

In this class, we will draw upon material discussed throughout the semester to learn an integrated approach to working with families and child emotional/behavioral problems. The approach integrates feminist, social constructionist, behavioral, play, and systems perspectives, and is supported by research from social psychology.

FAMILY SYSTEMS READINGS


SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY READINGS


Week 15 (Four Hour Class): STUDENT PRESENTATIONS AND FINAL EXAM