P 623: Couples Systems Therapy

Christian Theological Seminary

Fall 2008

Instructor: Jacqueline Ludes Braeger, Ph.D., LMFT

Credit Hours: 3 (Tuesday evenings, 6pm – 8:45pm)

Course Objectives
This course will focus on introductory exposure to theory, research and clinical application of couple systems therapy. Focus will include the development of skills in the clinical practice of couple therapy from a systemic perspective. By the end of the course, students will have accomplished the following learning objectives:

1. Introduction to a spectrum of theoretical and clinical approaches to systemic couple therapy.

2. Examine and critically evaluate the theory and practice of systemic couple therapy in light of current research findings regarding couple interactions and treatment efficacy.

3. Acknowledge and appreciate the contribution of your own unique relational experience and how this impacts your work with couples.

4. Enhance your sensitivity to issues of gender, sexuality and cultural diversity while working with couples.

5. Review historical and current trends in the field of couple therapy.

6. Focus on special issues involving couples in therapy, such as child-rearing, sexuality, domestic violence, infidelity, substance abuse and depression that will aid in assessment and intervention.

7. Increase your understanding of assessment and treatment issues for couples within the developmental context of life cycle stages.
MFT Core Competencies specifically addressed in this course:

1.1.2 Understand theories and techniques of couple psychotherapy
1.1.4 Understand the risks and benefits of marital/couple psychotherapy
1.3.2 Determine who should attend therapy and in what configuration

2.1.1 Understand principles of couple processes
2.1.4 Comprehend marital and couple assessment instruments appropriate to presenting problem, practice setting, and cultural context
2.1.5 Understand the current models for assessment and diagnosis of relational functioning
2.2.1 Assess each client’s engagement in the change process
2.3.1 Diagnose and assess client behavioral and relational health problems systemically and relationally
2.3.2 Apply effective and systemic interviewing techniques and strategies
2.3.8 Identify clients’ strengths, resilience, and resources

4.5.3 Articulate rationales for interventions related to treatment goals and plan, assessment information, and systemic understanding of clients’ context and dynamics

Course Requirements

Required Texts


Recommended Text:

Description of Assignments

Relational Timeline: 5 points
Identify significant relational events throughout the course of your life, beginning with birth through the present (e.g., parental separations, divorce, beginning of new relationships, loss of significant relationships through break-ups or death). Draw a timeline on a piece of paper or poster board. Locate each event in a corresponding position on the timeline. Place a dot above the line to the degree that you consider the event/experience primarily positive, and below the timeline to the corresponding negative valence. Connect the dots using a different color ink from the timeline sketch. This assignment is the first step in completing the relational reaction paper. Its purpose is to help you begin to reflect on your own life from a relational viewpoint. Timelines will be returned with your relational awareness papers (so make a copy for your use in that subsequent assignment).

(assignment due at the start of Session #3: 9/16/08)
(Late assignments will receive half-credit.)

Relational Awareness Paper 15 points
As therapists training in a mental health profession, we have an ethical and moral obligation to stay in touch with our own processes (particularly when entering into unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable areas). During this course, you are asked to write a reaction paper focusing on your own relational history and ways in which this may impact your work with couples. Use your relational timeline to reflect on significant relational events throughout the course of your life. Weeks & Treat (2001) identify a series of relational questions that are helpful to address when considering the impact of family-of-origin influences on intimate relationships in adulthood. These questions can also help the therapist in increasing awareness of ways in which personal experiences can impact clinical work with couples. The more conscious therapists are regarding their own processes, the less likely it is that “self-of-the-therapist” issues will negatively affect clinical sessions. Please address the following questions in writing your reaction paper:

What were the roles you observed in your parents’ (or primary caretakers’) relationship?
What did they appear to expect from each other?
What did you learn about being a husband? What did you learn about being a wife?
How much closeness/distance did you see in their marriage/relationship?
How did they handle their anger and conflict?
How did they show intimacy and affection?
How did they order their priorities among self, marriage, children, and work?
What emotions were encouraged, allowed, not allowed, denied, or considered “bad”?
Did your family members experience any traumas such as affairs, incest, unresolved grief, or psychological or medical problems?
What did you learn about intimacy from your parents and primary role-models?
In what ways have these family-of-origin issues impacted your adult relationships?
In reflecting on these questions, what do you suspect may be challenges for you in working with couples? What may be potential “blind spots” for you? (ask your partner, close friends or family members to help you identify potential difficulties/blind spots)
What strengths do you bring to working with couples?

Papers are due by the beginning of the specified class meeting. In order to earn full points for this assignment, all parts of the questions must be answered in full. You may also use this format to provide class feedback, discuss ways you are integrating course material into your professional work or personal life, or anything else you feel is important that you would like to share. The content of your reaction papers will only be viewed by the instructor (unless your
permission is given for any additional use), and returned to you with comments, questions, feedback & musings. Recommended page length: 5-6 double-spaced, typed pages.

(assignment due at the start of Session #5: 9/30/08)
(Late papers will receive half-credit.)

The “Healthy Couple” Interview: 25 points
This assignment is designed to give you experience interviewing a couple in a non-threatening, non-crisis, and non-clinical situation. You will not be conducting therapy with this couple, and it will be your responsibility to clearly identify your role to the couple as that of an interested “interviewer” wanting to learn about their experience of being a couple and their “culture” (e.g., relational rules, roles, interactional dynamics). You can choose friends, acquaintances or classmates to participate in this interview. You are asked to audiotape the interview (to allow for your full attention & minimize note-taking). You will turn in the audiotape with your written report. (Be sure to secure written informed consent from the couple you interview, ensuring that they understand the purpose and use of interview material).

You are asked to complete a 4-5 page, double-spaced report summarizing your experience of meeting with the couple. The report should include the following:

- a brief description of the couple
- a brief overview of the interview
- a brief summary of the strengths of the couple
- any interesting impressions
- a final paragraph explaining at what point in the interview the audiotape is cued, a statement about what was happening at that point in the interview, and why you selected this section

These sections should comprise no more than 1-2 pages. The bulk of the write-up should focus on your experience of what it was like to meet and talk with the couple. Please include discussion of relevant course and class material as it relates (or does not relate) to your interview experience.
(assignment due at the start of Session #7: 10/21/08)
(Late assignments will receive half-credit.)

Optional Assignment Selection: 10 points each

Choose three of the following 5 assignments:

1. Movie Analysis
   Select a popular movie (or TV series) that includes couple or marital dynamics, and write a paper discussing the couple’s interactional patterns (using concepts discussed in class and course readings). Describe what you think the couple would benefit from working on in therapy, and the theoretical approach(s) you would utilize to achieve beneficial couple change. Describe what interventions you would use in therapy. Include a skeletal genogram of the main characters in the movie.
   (recommended page length: 3-page, double-spaced typed)
   (assignment due at the start of Session #10: 11/11/08)
   (Late assignments will receive half-credit.)
2. **Observation of Couples Therapy**
Since several members of class are currently seeing clients in practicum, discuss with one of them the opportunity to observe a session of couples therapy with that practicum student. You will receive points for either observing or being observed. *(If you are not a counseling degree program student and would like an opportunity to observe a couple therapy session, discuss this with course instructor so other arrangements can possibly be made).*

If you are being observed, write a 3-page, double-spaced summary of the theoretical approach(s) and interventions used. If you are the observer, write a 3-page, double-spaced summary of what you observed (including theoretical approach(s) and techniques you observed). Turn in an additional copy that will be shared with your partner in this assignment. *(assignment due at the start of Session #10: 11/11/08) (Late assignments will receive half-credit.)*

3. **RELATE Experience:**
A well-known and widely used premarital inventory is now available on-line ([www.relate.byu.edu](http://www.relate.byu.edu)). For this assignment, you are asked to complete the RELATE questionnaire online with your partner (versions for individuals without current partners are also available) and review the computer-generated couple profile (there is a nominal fee for this service). Write a brief 2-3 page double-spaced reaction paper describing your experience of completing the inventory online, insights you gained through this exercise, and your assessment of the value of this service for couples with whom you might be working. *(assignment due at the start of Session #10: 11/11/08) (Late assignments will receive half-credit.)*

4. **Volunteer at Indianapolis Bridal Show:**
Accompany CTS Counseling Center staff and faculty members to the annual *Indianapolis Bridal Show* held on a Sunday afternoon in October at the *Scottish Rite Cathedral*. We are hoping this will be an opportunity to talk with couples and their extended families about opportunities to increase their relational intimacy, and answer questions about counseling services offered through Christian Theological Seminary. Briefly share your experience verbally with class members during the following course session. *(Bridal Show date & time will be announced in class – Assignment due the class following the Bridal Show Event)*

5. **Attend Annual AAMFT Conference in Memphis, TN (counts as 2 assignments)**
Receive course credit for attending professional annual conference sponsored by AAMFT that includes multiple workshops focusing on couples therapy. Briefly share your experience of the conference verbally with class members during the following course session. *(AAMFT Conference takes place Thurs. 10/30/08- Sun. 11/2/08. Assignment due Class #9, 11/4/08)*

6. **Create your own assignment**
Feel free to suggest your own optional assignment for course credit!! Be sure to confirm with instructor in order to secure course credit.
Final Take-Home Exam: 25 points
During class #10, you will have an opportunity to view a couple on tape. You are asked to compose a 3-4 page, double-spaced report including conceptualization of couple treatment plan, integration of a theoretical model(s), rationale for selection of that model(s), and specific interventions you would use with this couple. This will be an opportunity to integrate and apply course material to a clinical situation.
(assignment due at the start of Session #13: 12/9/08)

Grading and Attendance
Grades will be determined by the number of points accumulated out of a total of 100 possible points.

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In order to realistically meet course objectives, class attendance is required. For every absence exceeding one, five points will be subtracted from your final grade. According to Seminary policy, students are required to notify the course instructor of any absences. No student may receive credit for a course if they miss more than ¼ of the class sessions.
Course Schedule

2 September (Session 1): Course Orientation, Contextual Issues & Challenges Facing Today’s Couples

Readings:

9 September (Session 2): Key Theoretical Perspectives in Couples’ Therapy

Readings:
- **Chapter 1:** “The couple as a unique system” (pp. 3-21)
- **Chapter 2:** “Theories of couple therapy: Part one” (pp. 23-49)
- **Chapter 3:** “Theories of couple therapy: part two” (pp. 51-73)
- **Chapter 4:** “An integrative model for couples therapy” (pp. 75-93)

16 September (Session 3): Research & Theory: What Really Works?

Relational Timeline due

Readings:
- **Chapter 1:** *Myths and mistakes of marital therapy* (pp. 3-30)
23 September  (Session 4): Assessment & Treatment Planning

Readings:
   Chapter 5: The assessment of couples and their problems (pp. 95-113)
   Chapter 6: Diagnosis, goal setting, & treatment planning with couples (pp. 115-137)
   Chapter 4: The Assessment of Marriage (pp. 113-160)

30 September  (Session 5): “The Basics” – Foundational Concepts & Tools in Working with Couples

Relational Awareness Paper due

Readings:
   Chapter 7: “Treatment Strategies” (pp. 141-163)
   Chapter 9: “Intimacy & Sexuality” (pp. 189-208)

7 October  (Session 6):  “The Basics” (cont’d)

Readings:
   Chapter 8: “Communication and relationship education” (pp. 165-187)
   Chapter 10: “Conflict: Negotiation and Resolution” (pp. 209-232)

14 October  No Class!  (Reading Week)
21 October (Session 7): Integrative Models: The Gottman Method

Healthy Couple Interview due

Readings:
   Chapter 3: “The sound marital house: A theory of marriage” (pp. 87-110)
   Chapter 6: “Assumptions and intervention overview” (pp. 179-200)

28 October (Session 8): Integrative Models: Emotionally Focused Therapy

Readings:
   Chapter 1: “Introduction: The nature of EFT,” pp. 3-11
   Chapter 2: “Theoretical background to EFT,” pp. 13-39
   Chapter 3: “Intervention in EFT,” pp. 41-102
   Chapter 4: “Steps 1 and 2: Assessment and cycles,” pp. 105-139
   Chapter 5: “Steps 3 and 4: De-escalation”, pp. 141-164
   Chapter 6: “Steps 5 and 6: Expanding and heightening emotion,” pp. 165-191
   Chapter 7: “Step 7: key change events: re-engagement & softening,” pp. 193-237
   Chapter 8: “Steps 8 and 9: Consolidation,” pp. 239-255

4 November (Session 9): Integrative Models: IMAGO Therapy

Conference Report (Optional Assignment) due

Readings:
   Chapter 1: “Introduction to IMAGO relationship theory and therapy” (pp. 1-21)
   Chapter 2: “Couples dialogue: The essential skill” (pp. 23-39)
   Chapter 3: “Session one: The cosmic journey, the brain, and couples dialogue” (pp. 41-63)
   Chapter 4: “Session two: Development, childhood wounds, and mate selection” (pp. 65-80)
   Chapter 5: “Session three: Developing empathy and reimagining the partners” (pp. 81-95)
   Chapter 6: “Session four: Reromanticizing the relationship” (pp. 97-109)
   Chapter 7: “Session five: Restructuring frustrations” (pp. 111-127)
   Chapter 8: “Session six: Resolving rage” (pp. 129-145)
11 November (Session 10): Special Challenges: Extramarital Affairs  
Pre-marital Counseling and Preventative Services

Optional Assignments due (Movie Analysis, Couple Therapy Observation, or RELATE Assignment)

Readings:
   Chapter 12: “Extramarital Affairs” (pp. 255-275)

18 November (Session 11): Special Challenges: Divorcing Couples  
Blending Couples

Readings:
   Chapter 11: “Divorcing Couples” (pp. 233-253)
   Chapter 14: “Blending Couples” (pp. 299-316)

25 November  No Class!!  (Thanksgiving Recess)

2 December (Session 12): Special Challenges: Treating Same-Sex Couples

Readings:
   Chapter 15: “Same-Sex Couples” (pp. 317-332)

9 December (Session 13): Special Challenges: Counseling Couples with Alcohol Problems

Final Take Home Exam due:

Readings:
   Chapter 13: “Counseling couples with alcohol problems” (pp. 279-298)