**P 623: Couples Systems Therapy**

**Christian Theological Seminary**

*Fall 2010*

**Instructor:** Jacqueline Ludes Braeger, Ph.D., LMFT  
*E-mail Address:* jbraeger@cts.edu

**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

1.1.2 Determine who should attend therapy and in what configuration

1.1.1 Understand principles of couple processes

1.1.4 Comprehend marital and couple assessment instruments appropriate to presenting problem, practice setting, and cultural context

1.1.5 Understand the current models for assessment and diagnosis of relational functioning

1.1.1 Assess each client’s engagement in the change process

1.1.1 Diagnose and assess client behavioral and relational health problems systemically and relationally

1.1.2 Apply effective and systemic interviewing techniques and strategies

1.1.8 Identify clients’ strengths, resilience, and resources

1.1.3 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

Course Reading Worksheets: 2 points each week for total of 20 points

Students will complete a reading worksheet on each assigned reading for class that week for a total of 10 classes (there are 13 classes in the course). The format involves listing chapter citation, and then listing 3 ideas from this reading that caught your attention and a brief explanation of why (so for example, if there are 4 required readings for a particular class, you cite each reading & then list 3 points under each along with a brief explanation of why this caught your attention…which in this example would then include 12 bullet points in total)

* (Late reading worksheets will receive credit up to 2 classes beyond the due date, and then no credit will be given for an assignment turned in more than 2 weeks late.)

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: 9/14/10) (Late assignments will receive half-credit up to 2 classes beyond the due date, and then no credit will be given for an assignment turned in more than 2 weeks late.)
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: 9/28/10) (Late papers will receive half-credit up to 2 classes beyond the due date, and then no credit will be given for an assignment turned in more than 2 weeks late.)
**Group Presentations:**

You will have one session (50 minutes total) in which to make a group presentation on one of the course topical areas (*e.g.*, domestic violence, remarriage and the blended family, assessing and treating substance abuse in couples therapy). You will be paired with other class members who are also interested in your first or second choice of special topics. Your group will first need to determine a specific presentation format for that topic (corresponding chapter from Gurman (2008) *Clinical Handbook* to get ideas), then assign tasks within the group such as research, power point presentation creation, leading discussion, etc.

The ideal presentation will include the following: 1) A reading chosen at least one week in advance of 20 pages or less that will provide background information for your chosen topic, 2) a bibliography with at least 12 entries including books, articles and not more than 3 informative web sites relevant for your topic, 3) a power point presentation outlining key elements of your topic, 4) questions for class discussion that will be moderated by the presenters. Feel free to discuss possible topics with the instructor as needed.

At the end of your presentation time everyone - including the presenters - will be asked to fill out brief evaluations. Class responses will be considered in assigning presentation grades.

**The “Healthy Couple” Interview:**

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: 10/19/10** (Late assignments will receive half-credit up to 2 classes beyond the due date, and then no credit will be given for an assignment turned in more than 2 weeks late.)
RELATE Assessment: 5 points
A well-known and widely used premarital inventory is now available on-line (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: 11/9/10) (Late assignments will receive half-credit up to 2 classes beyond the due date, and then no credit will be given for an assignment turned in more than 2 weeks late.)

Final Exam: 25 points
During final exams week, a course final will be scheduled during regular class time on Tues. Dec. 14th at 6pm. The exam will cover material from that semester and include a combination of multiple choice, fill in the blank, matching and short answers. Students will be given study questions throughout the semester that will guide preparation for the final exam. (final exam is scheduled for Tues. Dec. 16, 2010 at 6pm in the regular classroom we have been using throughout the semester).

Extra Credit Assignment Selection: total of 5 points
Choose from the following options:

1. Observation of Couples Therapy 5 points
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 #13: 12/7/10) (Extra credit turned in after this date will not receive any credit.)
2. **Attend Annual AAMFT Conference in Atlanta, GA** 5 points

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. 9/23/10- Sun. 9/26/10. Assignment due Class #6, 10/5/10)*

**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**

31 August *(Session 1):* Course Orientation, Contextual Issues & Challenges Facing Today’s Couples, Research in Couples Therapy: What Really Works?

7 September *(Session 2):* Common Factors Research, Readiness for Change

**Readings:**


**Chapter 6: Getting clients fired up for a change: matching therapist behavior with client motivation** *(pp. 69-86) (On Reserve)*

7
14 September (Session 3): Emotional Intelligence and Couples Therapy

Relational Timeline due

Readings:

Introduction: New answers to old questions (pp. 1-16)
Ch. 1: Affective neuroscience & the emotional revolution (pp. 17-40)
Ch. 2: Wired for love (pp. 41-66)
Ch. 3: The prerequisites for relationship success (pp. 67-90)
Ch. 4: The overview of PET-C (pp. 91-106)
Ch. 5: PET-C assessment (pp. 91-106)

21 September (Session 4): Common Mistakes in Couples Therapy

Readings:

Introduction: Mistakes?! What Mistakes? (pp. 1-21)
Chapter 1: The “Battle for Structure” (pp. 22-50)
Chapter 2: Confidentiality Traps (pp. 51-69)
Chapter 3: Alliances and Coalitions (pp. 70-85)
Chapter 7: Overlooking Process Considerations (126-144)
Chapter 8: The Pitfalls of Anger and Conflict (pp. 145-166)

28 September (Session 5): Working with “Couples on the Brink,”

Special Topic: Couples and Divorce

Relational Awareness Paper due

Readings:


Chapter 11: Failing to Foster Commitment (pp. 196-217)
Chapter 12: Overlooking or Inadvertently Imposing Spirituality (pp. 218-243)

5 October (Session 6): Emotionally Focused Therapy

**Extra Credit: AAMFT Conference Report due**

**Readings:**


- Chapter 1: The field of couple therapy and EFT (pp. 1-22)
- Chapter 2: An attachment view of love: The EFT philosophy (pp 23-40)
- Chapter 3: The EFT theory of change: Within and between (pp. 41-52)

12 October No Class! (Reading Week)

19 October (Session 7): EFT (cont’d)

**Special Topic:** Domestic Violence and Couples

**Healthy Couple Interview due**

**Group #1 Special Topic Presentation**

**Readings:**


- Chapter 4: The basics of EFT: Tasks and interventions (pp. 53-112)
- Chapter 5: Assessment: Defining the dance and listening to music (pp 113-130)
- Chapter 6: Changing the music: Toward de-escalation (pp. 131-146)
- Chapter 7: Deepening engagement (pp. 147-170)
- Chapter 8: Emotional engagement: Enactments and bonding (pp. 171-186)
- Chapter 9: The consolidation of a secure base (pp. 187-200)

26 October  *(Session 8): Gottman Method Couple Therapy Model

**Special Topic:** Extra-Marital Affairs

**Group #2 Special Topic Presentation**

**Readings:**


2 November  *(Session 9): IMAGO

**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)
9 November  (Session 10):  Assessment Instruments / Pre-Marital Counseling

Special Topic:  Remarriage and Blending Families

Group #3 Special Topic Presentation

Readings:

16 November  (Session 11):  Solution-Focused Couples Therapy

Special Topic:  Substance Abuse and Couples

Group #4 Special Topic Presentation

Readings:

25 November  No Class!!!  (Thanksgiving Recess)

30 November  (Session 12):  Narrative Couples Therapy

Special Topic:  Treating Same-Sex Couples

Readings:
7 December (Session 13): Cognitive Behavioral Couples Therapy
   Special Topic: Personality Disorders

**Group #5 Special Topic Presentation**

**Extra Credit Couples Therapy Observation due**

**Readings:**
   Behavioral Couple Therapy. In A.S. Gurman, Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy (4th
   Ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press. (pp. 31-72).
   Borderline Personality and Related Disorders. In A.S. Gurman, Clinical Handbook of

14 December (Finals Week): **Final Exam scheduled during class meeting**