

COUPLE AND FAMILY SYSTEMS

Psych 668

Sample Syllabus



Required Text and Blackboard Readings: ***Note: textbooks required by individual professors may differ from this list*

Gerson, R., McGoldrick, M. & Petry, S. (2008) *Genograms: Assessment and intervention*. New York: W.W. Norton.

- This text is one that you can keep for future reference as a tool in your practice. It outlines the use of the Genogram for understanding family system dynamics and offers symbols for use in creating family maps. If you enjoy biographies—especially those with interesting gossip—you will find many well-known families discussed. In addition, practical uses of this tool for intervention are discussed in the text.

Genograms are valuable tools in three ways:

1. They can be employed as a method for understanding the families you are attempting to help. Drawing a three generation map of a family can reveal many issues and dynamics that simply thinking about them might not bring to light.
2. They can be used as therapeutic interventions when you work collaboratively with an individual to assist his or her understanding of the influences of family dynamics on current interaction patterns.
3. They can be used by you as an attempt to get clearer on the forces that shaped your attitudes and your countertransference reactions to the families you are attempting to help.

In addition to the above text, you will be asked to read and respond each week to readings on Blackboard. (See calendar for specific listings).

Statement of Purpose:

Since most students will take only this one course relating to work with couples and families, we must attempt to cover a lot of ground so that you will be familiar with all aspects of the field. My hope is that, on a personal level, you will leave this class at the end of the semester with an increased self-understanding and a greater clarity as to how the dynamics of your own family-of-origin play out in your life. On a professional level, I hope you will gain knowledge of the prominent couple and family theories and issues, along with the various interventions designed to deal with them and some new skills for intervening with couple and family systems.

***Knowledge and skill outcomes--Upon completion of this course, students will:**

- Come to see people as systems functioning within systems, rather than as individual personalities inside a “bag of skin.”
- Understand the difference between working with individuals and intervening with larger systems.
- Gain an appreciation for the various theories of family process and therapeutic intervention.
- Begin to view couple and family process from a constructivist perspective and recognize that families are complex adaptive systems that are autopoietic and whose outcomes cannot be fully predicted.
- Understand normal family developmental crises and possible unexpected traumatic issues that impact couples and families.
- Know that each family is a culture which must be understood as separate from other families.
- Develop a beginning skill in analyzing and assessing couple and family process.
- Understand the use of a Genogram as an analytical and therapeutic tool for working with family systems.
- Begin to develop intervention skills for working with couples and families.
- Gain clearer insight on their own family-of-origin, and its effect on them, in order to free themselves from some of the inhibiting embedded attitudes and beliefs that they have

learned subliminally during growing up.

*Successful completion of this course will launch you on your way to becoming a competent family counselor. Ultimate completion of this knowledge and skill set, however, will take the rest of your life.

Conduct of the Course and Methods of Instruction

This course will be conducted as a seminar in which you will bring your questions, wonderments, and opinions to class after doing the required reading, research, and personal reflection. The instructor will provide didactic input and video examples of couple and family therapy, as well as hosting the conversations in class regarding the readings and discussion of the student's families of origin.

- You are asked to read the text and the designated readings on Blackboard according to the calendar (below) and be prepared to actively discuss these in class.
- You are also asked to reflect on your own experiences in your family of origin and bring these reflections to share with the class. Questions to prompt this discussion are posted on each week of the calendar.
- You are asked to send an email attachment prior to each class meeting with reactions to the **Read** and **Reflect** sections for each session: (1) a paragraph containing your reactions to the reading (questions, arguments and wonderments), and (2) a paragraph containing your response to the question about your family of origin. (attach as a Word document)
- You will be asked to...**individually**...conduct research into a specific issue affecting couples and families and to offer a presentation and host a conversation in class regarding your issue. Please create a handout outlining the issues contained in your presentation and give a copy to each class member. If you wish, you may present with Powerpoint, so long as you do not simply show slides and read them to the class ("death by Powerpoint"). A brief presentation after which you engage the class in discussion is desirable. **[In order to avoid duplications, and to ensure that you begin your research with adequate lead-time, please declare your topic by the third week of class.]**
- You will be asked to conduct two family counseling sessions with a group from the Counseling Techniques class who will be presenting the family of one of the members. You will work with co-therapists and video-record the sessions.
- A final examination covering the general concepts of couple and family systems

will be completed at the end of the semester. Questions will be drawn from the class discussions and the Blackboard readings. The exam will be a combination of objective and essay items.

CALENDAR

Procedures and Content Areas

Assignments due for the following dates:

Class Meeting #1: Introduction to the course, discussion of **Articles of Faith Regarding Couple and Family Counseling** (see **Blackboard number 1.**), sharing something about our families.

- **Read:** in McGoldrick, et. al.: *Mapping Family Systems and Creating Genograms. Also become familiar with the symbols used in a Genogram (inside front cover). (pp. 1-60)* and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.

Class Meeting #2: Bring your own popcorn or personal movie snack. **View video in class:** “*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” As you watch, imagine that George and Martha will be your clients: *Who is to blame for most of their problems? What is the meaning of their talk about their son? How do they fight? Why do they include another couple in their disputes? How would you go about trying to help this couple? Which of the partners do you most identify with?*

- **Read:** the *Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson handout* (No email response required, but be prepared to view the video with a prepared mind.)

Class Meeting #3:

- **Read:** (2.) *Some Influential Family Therapists, (2a) Family Therapy Historical Development, (2b.) What is Family Therapy?, (2c.) Types of Family Therapy* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**What aspects of your birth have importantly influenced you toward your current style of life? Who are you said to most resemble in your family? To what extent have you and your siblings (in any) divided up personality attributes, such as being “the intelligent one” or “the artistic one?”**] (see McGoldrick, et. al.: Birth order pp. 30, 121-122/ Birth timing pp. 146/ Birth position pp 126-144/ Naming pp. 147-148, 202-204, 206)

Class Meeting #4:

- **Read:** (3.) *Implications of Systems Theory on Couple and Family Dynamics, (3a.) Multigenerational Transmission* [On Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**What inherited forces from your family history have influenced your choice of a career? What is the criterion for a successful life, according to your family of origin?**] (See McGoldrick, et. al.: *Multigenerational Transmission* pp. 15, 40-44/ *Cultural Heritage* pp. 50-53, 66-70/ *Community* pp. 55-57/ *Career* pp. 110)

Class Meeting #5:

- **Read:** (4.) *Who Does What to Whom?, (4a.) Application of Chaos Theory to Family Interaction, (4b.) Family Therapy as Chaos Theory* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**What was your role in the family and how does it still play out in your relationships? What difficulties arise in your current relationships because of your continued tendency to act out of aspects of your role? What would have happened in your family if you had not fulfilled their role expectations for you?**] (See McGoldrick, et. al.: *Roles* pp. 158/ *Caretaking* pp. 161-164/ *Brother-Sister Roles* pp. 122-26, 128/ *Family Relationships and Roles* pp. 45-48, 122-26/ *Gender* pp. 41, 43, 131, 148)

Class Meeting #6:

- **Read:** (5.) *Family Life Cycle, (5a.) Several Things No One Tells You About Marriage, (5b.) The Invention Romantic Love, (5c.) Reconfiguring Marriage and Family* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**What is your family myth and what secrets must have been kept to maintain this myth? What kind of people would your parents say you are collectively? On the social “pecking order,” where does your family fit? What ideal do you feel obligated to live up to? What do you need to live down? Where are the gaps in information concerning the behaviors of members of your extended family?**] (see McGoldrick, et. al.: *Discrepancies* pp. 108-09/ *Missing information* pp. 37, 106-7, 137/ *Secrets* pp. 58, 193-95)

Class Meeting #7:

- **Read:** (6.) *Bowenian Family Therapy*, (6a.) *Attachment and Other Minds*, (6b.) *Interpersonal Perception* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**Describe the boundaries, coalitions, and triangles in your family. To whom do you owe your greatest loyalty? With whom did you have your greatest conflict? Do you think you were parentified, infantilized, ignored, pathologized, venerated, etc?]** (see McGoldrick, et. al.: Boundaries/ Cutoffs 45, 154/Informal kinship 10-12, 72-73, 118-119/ Parent child triangles 170-175/ Triangles 168-188)

Class Meeting #8:

- **Read:** (7.) *Structural Family Therapy*, (7a.) *Circumplex*, (8.) *Strategic Family Therapy*, (8a.) *Haley and de Shazer* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**How would you place your family's average structure or interactional patterns on the Circumplex Model? What major changes have impacted your family and how have these changes affected your family structure?]** (see McGoldrick, et. al.: Life changes 87-95/ Finances 69, 75-76/ Launching 208/ Stressors 15-17, 59-60/ Conflict 45/ Health issues 58, 276, 285-87/ Addiction-Substance abuse 39, 76, 159)

Class Meeting #9:

- **Read:** (9.) *Narrative Therapy*, (9a.) *Collaborative Therapy*, (9b.) *Framework for a White/Epston Type Interview* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: [**What stories would your family tell about how you have sustained yourselves through difficult times? How have social supports helped to increase your family's coping with life events? On a scale of one to ten, with one being a total lack of resilience and ten being that your family can cope with anything that comes up, what number would you give to your family? What have you learned as a person from your family about dealing with adversity?]** (see McGoldrick, et. al.: Memberships and Affiliations 49-50/ Religion or Spirituality 51-52, 54-55, 58-59, 70/ Strength feedback 80/ resilience 41, 165-66/ Humor 259-60)

Class Meeting #10:

- **Read:** (10.) *Conjoint Family Therapy*, (10a.) *Experiential Family Therapy*, (10b.) *The Satir Change Model* [all on Blackboard] and send an email paragraph (attach as Word document) on your reactions, questions, and comments.
- **Reflect** on your experiences in your family-of-origin and include in the email attachment a paragraph in response to: **[How was the topic of sex handled in your family? What sort of sex life do you suppose your parents have had together? What sexual issues have been problematic in your extended family? How has your attitude regarding sex been shaped by your family?]** (see McGoldrick, et. al.: Intimacy 190-91, 195/ Sex 111-113/ Sexual Abuse 45, 76-77, 267-69/ Love Affairs 219-220)

***Prior to Meeting With Your Client Family:**

- **Read:** (11.) *Flow and Family Therapy* [On Blackboard]

Class Meeting #11: Student presentations on your researched topic areas
[Each presentation will be designed to take ½ of the class period]

Class Meeting #12: Student presentations on your researched topic areas
[Each presentation will be designed to take ½ of the class period]

Class Meeting #13: Student presentations on your researched topic areas
[Each presentation will be designed to take ½ of the class period]

Class Meeting #14: Viewing and discussion of your sessions with the “families” from Techniques Class [**Bring video tape or DVD cued at a section in which you believe your therapy team did well**]. Be prepared to discuss the dynamics of the client family, what you think they might have needed, and what you were trying to do.

Class Meeting #15: Viewing of remaining videos of your family sessions.

- *Final Exam.* Wrap up.

Student performance evaluation criteria and procedures:

It is expected that you will completely perform the following behaviors in order to qualify for an A in the course:

- Attend class and participate fully (you must also pledge to keep discussions confidential!)
- Read assignments each week and send a paragraph via email attachment prior to the class meeting. (As indicated on the calendar)
- Send a paragraph each week via email attachment in response to your reflection on your family-of-origin (As indicated on the calendar)

- Research and present to the class on the couple and family issue of your choice (see some suggested issues below)
- Collaboratively perform two family counseling interventions with a family provided for you from the Counseling Techniques class

The quality of your responses to the readings each week, your presentation to the class, and your performance on the final exam will be assessed by the instructor.

Some Possible Issues for Research and Presentation *:

Child neglect and physical abuse
Families and divorce
Infidelity
Gay partnerships and parenting
Family violence
Families and drugs and alcohol
Blended families
Co-habitation and pre-nuptial agreements
Sexual Abuse
Single parent families
Families and poverty
Families and legal troubles
Unwanted pregnancy and abortion
Culture and families
A death in the family
Sexual issues in couples
Feminism and Family Therapy
John Gottman and his predictions of marital success
Gender differences regarding commitment and marriage

*Some other issue of interest to you.