Family Systems and C/A Mental Health

Description

Until the mid 20th century, the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and mental health were dominated by individually-oriented theories of human experience, development, and psychopathology. Family systems theory emerged as a response to limitations in that paradigm, offering a radically different way both of thinking about individuals and doing therapy. This emerging model views human experience as irreducibly relational. From a systems perspective, an individual is always embedded in networks of significant relationships, the most central of these is the family. This course will present family systems theory as a powerful tool for understanding families and for working with children and adolescents. Special emphasis will be made throughout on multicultural dimensions of theory and practice.

Learning Objectives

Students will learn key aspects of:

• Family systems theory, including its history and past/present trends;

• Family functioning as it pertains to child development and health; including such issues as:
  o Culture, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status,
  o Current trends in postmodern thought relevant to theory and practice;
  o A strengths and resilience model of psychological development and psychiatric treatment as contrasted with a deficits and pathology approach;
  o Family therapy models as they relate to prevention and treatment;
  o The importance of family in both child and adult development and
  o health.

Students will be able to:

• Conceptualize child and adolescent mental health issues from a family systems framework;

• Apply family systems framework to specific cases drawn from the hypothetical and actual case studies;
• Critically appraise the strengths and limitations of various proposed models of family therapy and family functioning.

Required Materials

**The following texts are required:**


Nichols, M. (2011). *The essentials of family therapy*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. [Older versions of this text are also available, but make sure it is at least from 2005 onward]


**Journal Articles and Book Chapters:** See syllabus.

Readings will be available in PDF format through NYU Classes.

**Lesson 1**

*From Individual to Family, From Symptom to System*

We will look at the mental health field at the time when ideas about the family and mental health began to change. We will focus on how discontent with dominant paradigms, such as psychoanalysis and behaviorism, led to the first stirrings of the family systems movement.

Readings:


*Napier, A. & Whitaker, C. (1988). The family crucible - Chaps. 1, 2, 3*
Nichols, M. - The Essentials of Family Therapy, Chap.1, 2

Lesson 2

*Family Systems Theory: The Family as a System*

Family systems theory offers a radical shift in perspective on individuals, families, psychotherapy, and mental health. We will cover basic principles and implications with emphasis on systems theory as a broad-based way of thinking.

**Readings:**


Lesson 3

*Understanding Families: The Family Life Cycle.*

The family life cycle is a basic construct used to understand family functioning. The relationship between individual and family pathology and these life cycle transitions will be explored.

**Readings:**

Carter & McGoldrick – The Expanded Family Life Cycle, Chaps.1, 2

Napier & Whitaker - The Family Crucible Chaps. 8-11
Lesson 4

*Understanding Families: Family Structure*

Key structural concepts in family therapy theory, such as boundaries, hierarchy, coalitions, and subsystems, will be covered. Case material and video will be used to illustrate these concepts.

Readings:

*Napier, A & Whitaker, C - The Family Crucible - Chap. 11, 12, 13*

*Nichols & Schwartz, Chap. 7.*


*Carter & McGoldrick: Chapter 9*


Lesson 5

*Understanding Families: The Intergenerational Perspective I*

We will focus on the work of Murray Bowen and his followers and will explore in detail the relevance of family of origin influences on a family’s life and functioning in the present. Genograms are visual representations of family systems and are a powerful and practical tool for understanding families over multiple generations. We will learn how to create genograms and use them.

Readings:

*Napier & Whitaker, Chapters 14, 15, 16*

*Nichols & Schwartz, Chap. 5*
Lesson 6

* First Paper Due

Lesson 7

Readings:
McGoldrick, M. et al., Genograms Chaps. 4, 5, 6

Carter & McGoldrick - Chapter 26

Napier & Whitaker - Chapters 17, 18

Readings:

Systems theory offers a way of discerning and describing patterns that maintain problems in families. These patterns are stable sequences that include behavior, emotion, and cognition. We will look at various ways of understanding and intervening in these patterns.
Watzlawick et. al. - Pragmatics 1 (in Journals folder)

Nichols & Schwartz, Chap. 6.


Lesson 8

Understanding Families: The Family as an Emotional System

From Bowen’s early theorizing to current ideas regarding attachment, we will look at how emotional process regulates family process and is, in turn, regulated by family process.

Readings:


Lesson 9

Family Assessment I: Risk and Resilience
Readings:


2nd Paper Due

Lesson 10

Family Assessment: Understanding Couples

Current theories regarding relationship satisfaction and health will be presented alongside current practice from the field of couples therapy.

Readings:

Carter & McGoldrick, Chap. 14, 20, 22, 23

Lesson 11

Couples Assessment

This section will focus on relevant dimensions of couples/relationship functioning. We will use as subject matter, Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Readings:

Albee, E. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf - Watch DVD

Watzlawick, Bavelas, Jackson: Pragmatics of Human Communication - Chapter 5
Applications of Family Systems Theory I

This section will focus on the application of family systems concepts to family assessment and family therapy. Emphasis in class will be on practicing this application with case material.

Readings:


Lesson 13

Applications of Family Systems Theory - II

Focus will continue on families w/ emphasis on particular populations, as well as on couples

Readings to be announced

Lesson 14

Family Systems Theory Today

Since the early '90s, family systems theory has been through a time of critique (both from within and outside the field), self-examination, growth and change. We will look at how postmodernism has affected how family therapists think about families and therapy, as well as how the field has responded to a multiplicity of viewpoints of health, pathology, and therapy itself.

Readings:

Nichols & Schwartz, Chap11

Family Therapy Goes Postmodern (to be distributed)


Final Paper Due