

**Couple's Therapy: Theory and Practice**  
**PCS 303-3**  
**Spring, 2009**

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*This online syllabus should be used to gain a better understanding of the content and focus of a course. The syllabus given out in the class may differ from this online version and its content supersedes that of the online syllabus.*

## **Description**

This course provides theological, theoretical and practical foundations for the practice of couple therapy. In this course, students will explore the development of marital therapy, foundations for assessment of couple problems, and the practical application of current evidence-based methods for assessing and treating couple problems. Readings, lectures and practical applications will be framed within a family systemic context and grounded within reflective theological understandings of the human person in relationship. Students will have the opportunity to experience a variety of intervention methods and begin the process of formulating a theological and personally integrated model of marital/couple therapy.

## **Definition**

The terms “couple” and “marital” are used interchangeably in this course to describe relationships in which people have formed a covenant of exclusive commitment to each other. This definition does not rely on legal or religious affirmation of such a covenant, and is intended to be inclusive of heterosexual and same-sex couples. The course will be sensitive to a broad spectrum of couple, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

## **Objectives**

By the end of the semester, class participants will be able to (AAMFT Competencies in parentheses):

1. Define and discuss the marital/couple life-cycle, (1.1.2; 1.3.1; 2.1.1;
2. Articulate at least one evidence-based approach to couples therapy, (3.1.1; 3.3.2)
3. Demonstrate an understanding of empirical foundations for treatment of couple problems, (4.1.1,2; 4.2.2; 4.3.2)
4. Implement at least one model of formal and theoretical assessment of couples cases, (2.1.4; 2.2.3; 2.3.1, 3,4,5,6,7,8,9; 2.4.1; 3.3.2; 4.5.2, 3)
5. Demonstrate a practical understanding of the process of therapy, including the impact of the person of the therapist in couples therapy, (3.2.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7; 3.4.1, 2, 3, 5; 3.5.3; 4.1.1, 2; 4.2.1, 2; 4.3.1, 2; 4.4.1; 5.1.1)

6. Articulate and discuss special issues of couple's therapy such as sexual problems, infidelity, violence, substance abuse, and divorce, and, (2.1.1, 2, 3, 4, 6; 3.3.2, 6, 7; 4.3.1, 2; 5.1.1)
7. Articulate a theology of marriage as it relates to marital therapy, including a model of addressing religious issues as they appear in marital therapy. (6.5.1; 1.2.3; 1.3.8)

## Method

This class will be a combination of lecture, participant presentation, theoretical discussion, and case demonstration. Through an integrating approach to the theoretical, theological and clinical material, participants will be exposed to a variety of couple's therapy understandings, while being afforded the opportunity to explore one or two systems of change and therapy. Class time will be divided roughly equally between theoretical and practical concerns.

## Requirements

### Due Date Summary:

**Case Study: May 8**

**Theological Paper 1: Feb. 21**

**Theological Paper 2: April 8**

**Theological Paper 3: April 29**

**Final Exam: Last Day of Finals**

- **Participation.** Participation includes attendance and leadership in class discussion. Preparation for class by reading the material is essential. Assigned readings are expected to prepare students to discuss in depth the subject of the day. In addition to regular attendance, students will participate in group presentations on assigned days. **Note: Presentations are not graded, but are participation in one or more quality presentation is a condition of finishing the course.**

**Presentation 1 (March 6, Multicultural Perspective)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Presentation 2 (April 1, Affairs)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Presentation 3 (April 29, Childhood Sexual Abuse)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Presentation 4 (May 1, Separation & Divorce)** \_\_\_\_\_

- **Construct an Assessment Package for Couples (Due as an appendix to your case study)**
  - Using materials from classroom presentations, Gottman's *Marriage Clinic*, and other reading, construct an assessment package that you can and will use with couples seeking

therapy. Start with Gottman’s recommendations for a “basic” package and work outward from there. Be sure to include both specialized interview guides *and* questionnaires you will have couples complete. Remember: 1) you will need things useable and client friendly; 2) you are dealing with one of the most important areas of people’s lives, so don’t hesitate to ask them to invest in assessment.

- Construct a “clinically ready” package—that is, put a packet together that you would and could give to a client to take home to complete. ***Remember that how your packet is constructed partly represents you as a professional.*** Put considerable thought into how you want to represent yourself, how important it is for clients to complete the assessment, and the investment clients must make for successful therapy.
- Use **this project as part of your case study**. Assessment package will be turned in with your case study and graded as part of your case study.
- **Case Study (Due: No later than 5:00 pm May 14)** This is a two-part assignment.
  - A. ***Videotape a session with a mock client couple using couple therapy methods presented in class. After the videotaped session, review the tape with the client couple. Analyze the session with the couple and write a report summarizing what you and the couple found about the session:***
    - How well did the therapist connect with the clients?
    - How well did the therapist define the presenting problem?
    - Did the therapist help the clients set a reasonable goal?
    - Identify specific segments of the tape where client behavior or comments validate the therapist’s assessment conclusions (which will appear in the write-up below). That is, point out where you see pursuer-distancer relational dances, the Four Horsemen, attachment behavior, turning to or turning away, evidence about the marital friendship, etc.
    - Identify specific sections of the tape where methods or interventions learned in class were implemented. Identify the theory or technique used. Analyze how well the intervention or approach was used and its effect on the session. (Did you, for example, use a Dreams within Conflict intervention, identify secondary reactive positions with clients, etc.)
    - ***Turn in both the report and the videotape.***
  - B. ***Write an Intake Evaluation for the couple you videotaped.*** Refer to “How To Write An Intake.”
    - The case study will observe, assess, conceptualize, and plan treatment for a couple organized by methods taught in class (Gottman, EFT, Schnarch, Behavioral Sex Therapies, Oliver). Be sure and use appropriate materials from your assessment package (II above).
    - Use ***footnotes*** in your paper to annotate how the theories you studied in class affect your assessment, conceptualization and treatment plan. (For instance, you make a statement about your couple’s conflict and make a conclusion about the conflict--supply a note to show me which theory is influencing you and how. I want to be able to read your paper

and clearly track how you are using the theories studied in class.)

- ***Your case study should be written as a profession document, not an essay. It should be well organized, direct, concise, and illustrate good clinical logic. You should be able to complete the report in 10 double-spaced pages or less.***

**V. *Theological Integration Papers—You may work in groups of 3-4 and turn in one paper for the group.***

Three theological reflection papers (maximum: 7 double-spaced pages each). Be sure to integrate your study in other theological courses. ***Your papers are not to be “fill-in-the-blank” or short answer responses to the questions posed. Use the questions below to formulate an essay reflecting your stands. Use citations where appropriate and make certain these citations are in APA form. Since these are short papers, you must write well.***

- **A working theology of marital problems**

In order to provide good pastoral counseling to married couples, we must use our theological understanding of marriage, marital dysfunction, and sexuality to ground our understanding of marital problems and recovery. I am asking you in this paper to articulate:

- **What causes marital problems:** Couples work requires that we have a theory/theology of why couples have problems that need treatment. In this assignment, I am asking you to move beyond what any one MFT theory says about marital dysfunction and look to our Christian understandings of creation, the human person, and couple-ness to provide a grounding context for relating pastorally and theologically to clients. I am asking you to think theologically about such questions as
  - Why do married people have problems (what gets “broken” or disrupted)? What is there in the nature of human persons that seems to assure marriages will be troubled? Why are some marriages more troubled than others? How, theologically, do you understand marital failure? Are there ways that this relates to your understanding of couple-ness and creation? Be sure to consider what you have learned about theological anthropology in other classes. Consider also issues of theodicy, or why evil exists in a world God created good.
  - How do theories of couple therapy influence your theological understanding? Do you think that these theories are a “source of revelation” in some way that informs theology? How do you see this happening in your own work?
  - How does your theological understanding of marital problems guide or influence your approach to couples in therapy?

**2. What needs to be changed or healed in couples seeking treatment?** Think theologically. Relate this to what you stated above.

**3. What is the role/function of the pastoral therapist is when working with such couples? Consider the following:**

- How does theory inform your theology and theology inform your theory?
  - What are the “active ingredients” necessary for counseling to be productive?
  - What is the role of the pastoral therapist, and how does this relate to a Christian understanding ministry? What does the pastoral therapist actually *do*? How might this be different from what other therapists do?
  - Given your theological stands, how do you interpret a couple’s decision, in therapy, to divorce rather than stay married? How does this affect your theological commitments? Your understanding of yourself as pastoral therapist? Your assessment of your effectiveness as a couples’ therapist?
- **A Reflection on Difference: What do GLBT voices and sources like Queer theory have to offer our theological understanding of marriage and “couplesness?” (Due April 8)**
    - For this paper you will need to: 1) Read and explore Queer theory sources, 2) initiate conversations with GLBT colleagues, and 3) think broadly and deeply about this issue.
  - **A working pastoral theology of sexuality for intimate couples (April 29)**

The couple relationship/bond is also a sexual relationship/bond. Couples therapy, by definition, requires that we also have a foundation for understanding sexual relationships in committed couples. In this assignment, I am asking you to take a stand to identify your own theology of marital sexuality.

- How does marital sexuality relate to your understanding of creation and *imago dei*? What does it reflect about human persons? About human wholeness? About God? What do you make of the powerful force it seems to be in human relationships?
- What is your image of “what God intends” for human marital sexuality, and how do you support this? Pay careful attention to your hermeneutic approach and exegetical practice when supporting your arguments with authority from tradition and scripture. Be sure to attend to how your approach to issues and theology may be colored by unexamined teachings or assumptions.
- What is the relationship between sexuality and intimacy? Does this in any way relate to *imago dei* and/or our understanding of the relationality of God? How?
- How do couples’ problems in sexuality relate to your theological understanding of human pain, marital dysfunction, and problems of evil (refer to paper #2). What part do you think human life lived in culture has to do with this (i.e. patriarchy, cultural norms, etc.)?

- How does your theological understanding of human sexuality influence goals in therapy? Interventions in therapy? Your personal avoidance of dealing with sexual issues in marital therapy?

## VI. *Final examination*

Final exam will be a multiple choice examination on computer in the library. It is meant: 1) to test your mastery of the knowledge expected in this course, 2) approximate and prepare you for the MFT Exit Examination, and 3) help you prepare for the national MFT examination you must take prior to licensing.

## Course Grade Weights

- Theological Reflection Papers—10% each (30%)
- Case Study—45%
- Final examination—25%

## Texts

### Required

Gottman, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Johnson, S. (1996). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy: Creating Connection*. NY: Bruner/Mazel.

Oliver, M. (1994). *Conjugal Spirituality: The Primacy of Mutual Love in Christian Tradition*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward.

Schnarch, D. (1991). *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy*. New York: Norton.

### Selected reading from:

Jacobsen, N. and A. Gurman, eds. (1995). *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. New York: Guilford Press, (*Selected chapters*)

Piercy, F. and D. Sprenkle. *The Family Therapy Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. NY: Guilford, 1996. (*On library reserve*)

### Recommended

O'Leary, K., Heyman, R., & Jongsma, A. (1998). The Couples Psychotherapy Treatment Planner. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

## Schedule

### Foundations

Feb. 5 ***Introduction (Blackboard, Lecture 1 & 2)***

Overview, requirements and goals  
 Systemic assumptions and foundations  
 Nature and history of marriage  
 Thinking theologically about couples

Feb. 10 ***Introduction Continued (Blackboard, Lecture 1 & 2)***

Required reading

“A Practical Theology of Families,” Chapter 10 in Browning, Miller-McLemore, Couture, Lyon, & Franklin. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*. (Library Reserve)  
 Johnson, S. (2003). “The Revolution in Couple Therapy: A Practitioner-Scientist Perspective. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, v. 29 (3), 365-384.

Feb. 12 ***Toward a Theory of Marriage and Marital Conflict (Blackboard, 3 Lecture II Introduction to Gottman)***

Required reading

Gottman, Ch. 1 - 3  
 Reference: Gurman & Jacobson, Ch. 13

- A. Research in Couples Therapy
- B. Gottman’s Research and Theory: Observing couple dynamics
- C. Class exercise: Role play and vide examples

Feb 17 & 19 ***Assessment: Gottman Model (Blackboard, 4 Lecture III Couple Assessment; 4a Assessment Tools for Couples)***

Required reading

Gottman, Ch. 4 & 5  
 Reference: Gurman & Jacobson, Ch. 16

- A. Assessment philosophy and procedures
- B. Assessment catalogue
  - Interview protocol

- Marital problems
- Co-morbidity & individual psychology
- Substance abuse
- Violence & abuse
- Depression

Feb 24 & 26 ***Intervention: Gottman Model (Blackboard, 5 Lecture IV & V Gottman Intervention)***

Required reading:

Gottman, Ch. 6-10

A. Understanding interventions & goals of marital therapy

B. Use of assessment tools continued—From assessment to treatment planning

Mar. 3 ***Intervention: Gottman Model (Blackboard, 5 Lecture IV & V Gottman Intervention)***

Required reading:

Gottman, Ch. 11-15

A. Implementing Gottman therapy model; relapse prevention

Mar. 5 ***Multicultural Perspective for Couples Therapy***

Required reading:

Gurman & Jacobson, Ch. 22

- Group presentation/discussion

Mar. 10 & 12 ***Emotionally-Focused Couples Therapy (Blackboard, 6 Lecture VI Emotionally Focused Therapy)***

Required reading

Johnson, S. *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*.

Reference: Gurman & Jacobson, Ch. 8

A. Theory & Approach to Therapy

B. Clinical issues: Treatment planning and special considerations

Mar. 17 ***Emotionally-Focused Therapy Continued***

Required reading:

Johnson, S. *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*.

- A. The process of therapy
  - Case examples
  - Integrating models
- B. Clinical case studies/role play examples

Mar. 19 ***Special Issues in Marital Therapy—Affairs***

Required reading:

Jacobsen and Gurman, Ch. 18

- Group presentation & discussion

Mar. 24-26 **Spring Research and Reading**

Mar. 31 &  
April 2 ***Sexual Dimensions of Marital Therapy (Blackboard, 7 Lecture VII Sex Therapy Foundations)***

Required reading:

Schnarch, Ch. 1-5

- A. Sexuality and intimacy
- B. Diagnosis of sexual disorders

Ap. 7 ***Sexual Dimensions of Marital Therapy (Blackboard, 8 Lecture VIII Schnarch...)***

Required reading:

Schnarch, Ch. 6-10

- A. Intimacy, sexual desire and problems of desire
- B. Traditional sexual therapy interventions

Ap. 9 **Easter Break**

Ap. 14 ***Special Issues in Couples Treatment—Same-sex Couples (Guest Speaker)***

Required reading:

Jacobson and Gurman, Ch. 21

Ap. 16 ***Sexual Dimensions of Marital Therapy (Blackboard, 8 Lecture VIII Schnarch cont.)***

Required reading:

Schnarch, Ch. 6-10

Ap. 21 & 23 ***Sexual Dimensions of Marital Therapy (Blackboard, 9 Conjugal Spirituality)***

Required reading:

Schnarch, Ch. 13 & 14

Oliver, pp. 1-54

A. The sexual crucible

B. Sexuality and spirituality

Ap. 28 ***Special Issue in Couples Treatment—Childhood Sexual Abuse***

Required reading:

Jacobson & Gurman, Ch. 17

- Group presentation & discussion

Ap. 30 ***Special Issues in Couples Treatment—Separation & Divorce***

Required reading:

Jacobson & Gurman, Ch. 19

- Group presentation & discussion

May 5 ***Therapy with Remarried Couples***

Required reading:

- TBA

May 7 ***Concluding Discussions***

## Class Policies

### *Grading: Grade Scale and Philosophy*

A	96.6-100
A-	93.6-96.5
B+	90.6-93.5
B	87.6-90.5
C	85.6-87.5
C+	83.6-85.5
C	81.6-83.5
C-	79.6-81.5
D	70.6-79.5
F	Below 70.6

Individuals admitted to graduate study are expected to perform consistently and well in academic work. This is translated into grades in the following way:

1. Basic mastery of the body of knowledge at a level expected in graduate study will earn scores in the B to B+ range.
2. Grades of A- are granted for work which demonstrates
  - basic mastery of the body of knowledge, and
  - independent thought about the subject matter.
3. Grades of A are granted for work which demonstrates
  - mastery of the required body of knowledge,
  - independent thought about the subject matter, and
  - creative/integrative use of the material, exceptional writing which integrates the material into a student=s own system of thought, and/or exceptionally well done or articulate research.

### *Attendance*

Learning is a complex activity that requires conceptual and experiential participation by those who wish to learn. Student attendance and participation is fundamental to the way the learning environment is structured for this course. Attendance and participation is required to earn a passing grade. While circumstances may require an adult learner to miss class occasionally, absence from more than 10% of the classroom experience will affect student learning and (consequently) the student's grade. Extreme circumstances, such as health problems, family concerns, etc. must be discussed with the professor *prior* to multiple missed classes. Students unable to attend at least 75% of classes are advised to drop the class prior to the registrar's WP deadline, or receive a failing grade.

### *Form for Writing Assignments*

- All papers submitted for grades must be written in APA approved style and be double-spaced.

- All papers are to be submitted electronically to [ltownsend@lpts.edu](mailto:ltownsend@lpts.edu) as an e-mail attachment
- All sources used in writing assignments must be cited appropriately and according to APA style. ***Failure to cite sources is plagiarism. You must give credit for quotes and ideas used in your writing. Papers submitted for grades that demonstrate plagiarism will receive a failing grade, and students will be subject to the seminary policy regarding plagiarism.***

### ***Late assignments***

Late assignments will lose ½ grade point per day without prior arrangement with professor. Papers are due by midnight (e-mail) on the assigned day.

### ***Plagiarism***

Plagiarism will result in class failure and referral to the Dean of the Seminary for disciplinary action. All use of another's material ***must*** be documented and appropriately cited.

### ***Incompletes***

Incompletes will be granted only for serious personal or family illness or crises and must be negotiated prior to the last day of classes.

### ***Inclusive language is a seminary policy***

Learning is fundamentally concerned with communication, self-expression, and personal and social transformation. Learning respects individuals, their feelings, their value and worth, and their particular potential for contribution to common knowledge and community virtue. Learning is fundamentally and intentionally inclusive.

Since all learning is inherently ethical and political, and theological discourse has been traditionally patriarchal and gender exclusive, the Seminary has established a policy, in the interest of constructing an inclusive and egalitarian community, that the language (symbols, metaphors) used in our class discussions and written work shall be gender inclusive and respectful of all persons and groups as valued human creatures of God.

Racism also permeates our society and is detrimental to any learning environment. We need to use language, symbols, and metaphors that honor our commitment to racial inclusiveness.