

“The mission of Tyndale Seminary is to provide Christ-centred graduate theological education for leaders in the church and society whose lives are marked by intellectual maturity, spiritual vigour and moral integrity, and whose witness will faithfully engage culture with the Gospel.”

Semester, Year	FALL, 2025
Course Title	FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY
Course Code	COUN 0677 1S
Date and Time	SEPTEMBER 9 – DECEMBER 2 TUESDAYS, 2:15 – 5:05PM
Delivery Format	SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE
Class Information	The classes will be livestreamed on Tuesdays 2:15 PM–5:05 PM.
Instructor	DR. SUSAN ELLFELDT
Contact Information	Email: sellfeldt@tyndale.ca Tel: 416-226-6620 ext. 6787
Office Hours	By appointment only.
Course Material	Access course material at classes.tyndale.ca or other services at Tyndale One . Course emails will be sent to your @MyTyndale.ca e-mail account only.

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

A critical appraisal of basic theoretical concepts in Family Systems Theory. Topics: historical and conceptual development of Family Systems Theory; introduction to General Systems Theory; family rules, roles, structure and interaction patterns; functional and dysfunctional family systems; life cycle issues in marriage and family and ethnicity and family therapy.

Recommended prerequisite: COUN 0574. COUN majors only or by permission of instructor.

II. LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a theoretical understanding of the differences between individual/intrapsychic and a systemic/interpersonal perspective of human behaviour.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical concepts of family systems theory.
3. Demonstrate recognition of system dynamics in individual, couple and family behaviours.
4. Demonstrate understanding of the therapeutic relationship, assessment, change techniques and termination of therapy using systems theory
5. Demonstrate an understanding of oneself in relation to one's own family of origin
6. Demonstrate an understanding of the impact of oneself and context on the therapeutic relationship

III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. REQUIRED READING

Becvar, D. S. & Becvar, R. J. (2024). [*Systems theory and family therapy: A primer*](#) (4th ed.). Lanham, MD: University Press of America Inc. ISBN 978-1538185681.

Richardson, D. (2011). [*Family ties that bind*](#). (4th ed.) North Vancouver, BC: Self Counsel Press. ISBN 978-1-77040-086-3.

Smith-Acuna, S. (2011). [*Systems Theory in Action*](#). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 978-0-470-47582-9.

B. SUPPLEMENTARY / RECOMMENDED READING AND TOOLS

Barker, P. & Chang, J. (2013). [*Basic Family Therapy*](#) (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & sons, Ltd. ISBN 978-1-119-94505-5.

Griffin, W. (1993). *Family Therapy: Fundamentals of Theory and Practice*. Philadelphia, PA; Brunner/Mazel. ISBN 0-87630-719-5.

McGoldrick, M. & Shellenberger, S. (1999). *Genograms in family assessments*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 0-393-70294-4.

Napier, A. & Whitaker, C. (1978). *The family crucible: The intense experience of family therapy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row. ISBN 0-06-091489-0.

Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J. B. & Jackson, D. D. (2011). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0-393-70707-6.

Watzlawick, P. Weakland, J. & Fisch, R. (2011). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. (Reprint ed.) New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 0-393-01104-6.

Worden, M. (2003). *Family therapy basics* (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole-Thompson Learning. ISBN 0-534-51971-7.

Tyndale recommends [STEPBible](#) – a free and reputable online resource developed by Tyndale House (Cambridge, England) – for word searches of original-language texts, as well as for topical searches, interlinear texts, dictionaries, etc. Refer to the library for other [online resources for Biblical Studies](#).

C. ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Regular attendance in and punctuality for all classes is expected. Out of respect for your colleagues, please try to be on time for all classes. Absence from more than 2 classes may result in the loss of credit.

1. Family of Origin Paper and Genogram: Due November 25; 35% of final grade

You will submit the completed genogram and paper via the course resource page. Genogram must be converted to a word document for submission.

Through the course of our lives we interact in many systems. However, it is the first system with which we interact, our family of origin, that has the most powerful and persistent influence on how we think and feel about ourselves and on how we interact with others. It is this system that has the most powerful impact, both positive and negative, on our future relationships. (Fredda Herz Brown)

An individual acquires from his early-family experiences, or "family of origin," a set of explicit and implicit expectations, values, attitudes, and beliefs which serve as points of reference for the evaluation of all interpersonal life experiences. These interactions with the family of origin begin with the birth of an individual and continue to exert an influence throughout life. (Brian Canfield)

Both of these quotes point to the influence of the family of origin on the individual. Understanding oneself, especially oneself within relationships, requires some understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of one's family of origin.

Most families, however, with all their inadequacies, generally care for their members. To celebrate this reality, however, we need words that identify and validate family strengths as well as family limitations.

Considering the information gained in the readings and lectures, and using system's theory and terminology, apply the concepts from the texts and the content of the course to your reflections on your family and to your family genogram as follows:

- a. **Do a "Family-of-Origin Genogram"** (incorporating 3 generations). You may do this free hand or use a computer program for genograms such as Genopro. Whatever method you choose, you **must include a legend to indicate** what the various symbols mean. **You must convert your genogram to an electronic copy that can be read as a word document. To be complete, your genogram should express the following:**
- Relationship dynamics among members (enmeshment, cut off, conflict, separation, divorce, abuse)
 - Ethnic background
 - Immigration
 - Dates of birth, death, marriage, divorce
 - Other issues of note such as diseases, mental illness, addictions, etc.
 - Brief descriptor of individuals of importance in your family history

Note: Genograms must be formatted on an electronic word document and submitted with the rest of the Family of Origin assignment. (Be aware that Genopro and other specialized programs cannot be downloaded unless the receiving computer has that program.)

- b. **Write a 12-13 page paper** which discusses the following in **4 parts**:

Section 1: **A brief introduction** to your family and any pertinent information the reader should know.

Section 2: Analysis of your family identifying **the themes, issues and repetitive interactional patterns in your family of origin** and where these patterns have been transmitted across generational lines. This section should identify patterns using First Order Cybernetic language and terms primarily.

Section 3: **Reflection on how these patterns (positive and negative) impact you personally today.**

Section 4: Identification problematic patterns in your family of origin and **how these will impact your safe and effective use of self as a therapist.**

Note that I am especially interested in your reflections on how, in the light of your family of origin study, you understand yourself, your current relational patterns, and the impact of those patterns on you as a therapist.

YOUR FAMILY INTERVIEWS:

- **PLEASE NOTE:** The research and reflection for this assignment is extremely time consuming. In order to complete this assignment satisfactorily you will need to begin early in the semester by interviewing **willing family members** to get adequate information for this project. **It is not enough to rely solely on your own experience in your family.**
- **Use the handouts titled “Family of Origin paper”** found in the top section of your class page for suggestions on questions to ask family members.
- **Personal interviews are best** in that they give you opportunity to ask additional questions about the family members answers. This allows for greater depth of understanding of the family processes.
- **Please note** that we do **not** expect you press family members to give you information who are upset with disclosure of family information after you have explained the value of the assignment for yourself.
- **The questions and topics are only suggestions.** It is not necessary to ask every question. As you proceed with interviews, certain themes will become apparent and will help you narrow down your areas of focus.
- **If you cannot locate three generations for personal interviews,** access information about those generations from aunts, uncles, and cousins, or parents.
- **If you have no one but yourself left in your family,** let me know the reasons for that in your introduction of your family, and gather information as best you can.

2. Richardson Assignments; Due November 4th; 10% of final grade

From the Richardson text, students will be required to submit their answers to the “Questions” embedded in the required Richardson reading. These assignments are most useful when completed during the week assigned. They add understanding of the lecture materials and provide foundation for the Family of Origin paper. *They should be completed and typed on a word document on the week assigned and all submitted on November 1st on the class page. Length is not an issue, but thoughtful reflection is required.*

3. 1st Quiz: Due October 28th; 10% of final grade

This will be a short answer quiz in which the student must define and demonstrate recognition of various systems and dynamics of 1st Order Cybernetic Theory discussed over the course of the semester.

[Note: Quizzes will be take-home and students given 3 days to complete and submit via the class page.]

4. 2nd Quiz: Due November 18th; 10% of final grade

This will be a short answer quiz focused on concepts discussed over the course of the semester. Students must define and demonstrate recognition of the terms and processes of 2nd Order

Cybernetics. *[Note: Quizzes will be take-home and students given 3 days to complete and submit via the course resource page.]*

5. Final Examination; Due December 9th; 35% of final grade

[The Final will be done during class over Zoom and turned in at the end of that allotted time via email.]

To encourage this process of translating theory into practice, there will be a video presentation most weeks and students will participate in a family system's analysis of each video. The final will be a video exam at the end of the course that will focus on your ability to recognize the relational dynamics in the video and use Family Systems terms to describe those processes.

The content which you will be expected to master will be drawn from the lectures and class discussions, the texts, and from any handouts that are distributed during the course. This exam will involve watching a portion of a 'professor-selected' video. Then you will be required to answer questions which will reflect your understanding from a systems perspective of the dynamics in that family in the video. The examination will include questions on the processes of counselling as well (the therapeutic relationship, therapist's use of self, therapeutic plan and change processes, etc.). In preparation for this exam, students are encouraged to review the lectures, their take-home quizzes, and in-class video discussions as well as the texts. *Students will take the final during classroom time, typing their answers, and submit the final on the class page in the section named "Finals Week" before leaving the zoom platform for the Final.*

6. In addition to the above assignments, all counselling majors are now mandated to have 6 counselling sessions with a counsellor as part of their coursework.

Students who reside in Canada may book with a counsellor at the [Tyndale Wellness Centre](#). Directions for this booking will be found on a video on the class page. These bookings must be made by the first class session. The sessions will be at reduced costs, and students who use the 6 sessions to discuss personal issues may reimburse the loss through Tyndale's medical insurance plan. If students want to engage in counselling beyond this mandated 6, they may make further arrangements with the Wellness Centre. Students who utilize the 6 sessions only to discuss safe and effective use of self may not apply for insurance reimbursement. Students residing outside Canada are responsible for arranging and paying for the cost of 6 session with a qualified provider and are required to email their professor their arrangements by the first week of the semester. Students already in counselling outside Tyndale may count those sessions for the 6 sessions if they are done within the semester the student attends the Family Systems course. **For all students, the 6 sessions must occur within the 12 weeks of the course, and documentation from their therapist is required at the end of the 6 sessions to prove attendance. Please have your therapist fill out a Certificate for the Completion of Counselling form (a sample is posted at the top of the Class Page) and post it on the class page during Finals week. To obtain a certificate of completion, the student must do the following:**

- Attend 6 bi-weekly sessions during the semester
- Read 100 pages of a resource of their choice from the list provided in the on-line booking instructions on the class page
- Pay the fees for the six sessions.

During these required 6 sessions, students are responsible for the agenda for each session. If a student has difficulty deciding on agendas for their sessions, they may read from the suggested references found in the directions on the class page to generate ideas about issues in their lives that might impact safe and effective use of self as a future psychotherapist.

D. SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Evaluation is based upon the completion of the following assignments:

Assignment	Due	%
1. Family of Origin Paper	Nov 25	35%
2. Richardson Assignments	Nov 4	10%
3 & 4. 2 Midterm Quizzes (10% each)	Oct 28 Nov 18	20%
5. Final Exam	Dec 9	35%
Total Grade		100%

IV. COURSE SCHEDULE, CONTENT AND REQUIRED READINGS

Sept. 9 Session I: Paradigm Shift

- History of systems theory and major contributors
- Paradigm of individual psychology
- Paradigm of relational psychology
- General Systems Theory
- Emergence of Systems Theory

Reading: Becvar: Chapter 1, Chapter 2
 Smith-Acuna: Chapters 1 & 2
 Richardson: Chapter 1
 Griffin: pp13-33 (on class page)

Sept. 16 Session 2: 1st Order Cybernetics

- Positive and negative feedback loops
- Circular causality

- Family structure
- Video: Strategic

Reading: Becvar Chapter 3

Smith-Acuna: Chapter 3

Richardson: Chapter 8 (begin the work of building your family genogram)

Smith et al: pp123-133 (on class page)

Sept. 23. Session 3: 1st Order Cybernetics (cont.)

- Family rules
- Zones of tolerance
- Video: Structural

Reading: Becvar: Chapter 9

Richardson: Chapter 2 **(5 sets of questions)**

Sept. 29 Session 4: 1st Order Cybernetics (cont.)

- Boundaries
- Open and closed systems
- Entropy and negentropy
- Information flow
- Family roles
- Change and resistance to change
- Video: Cognitive Behavioural

Reading: Smith-Acuna: Chapter 6

Richardson: Chapter 4 **(5 Question sets)**

Oct. 7 Session 5: 1st Order Cybernetics (cont.)

- Dysfunction around change
- 1st and 2nd Order Change,
- Mishandled change attempts
- Equifinality
- Recursion and Circular Causality
- Family boundary issues
- Closeness and distance in families
- Circumplex model
- Video: Corrales

Reading: Barker & Chang: pp 63-64 (on class page)

Smith-Acuna: Chapter 5

Becvar: Chapter 10

Richardson: Chapter 3 (1 Question set & 2 exercises)

Circumplex graph (on class page)

Oct. 14 Session 6: Bowen's Model (a bridge)

- Bowen Model: Differentiation of self
- The family emotional process
- Triangles
- Tracking the family emotional process
- Video: Multigenerational

Reading: Richardson workbook: Chapter 5 (3 Question sets & 2 exercises)

Oct. 21 READING WEEK; NO CLASSES

Oct. 28 Session 7: Introduction to 2nd Order Cybernetics

Quiz #1 (1st Order Cybernetic Theory)

- Individual versus systems approach
- Introduction to 2nd Order Cybernetics
- Objective truth
- Origin of Knowledge
- Position of observer
- Not knowing stance
- Reality a social invention
- Comparison of the two systems branches
- Video: Solution Focused

Readings: Richardson: Chapter 6 (4 Question sets & 2 exercises)

Nov. 4 Session 8: 2nd Order Cybernetics – Theoretical Constructs

Due: Richardson workbook: Chapter 7 (1 Question set)

Richardson (All question sets from Chapters 2-7 to be submitted on class page)

- Theoretical assumptions and constructs of 2nd Order Cybernetics
- Autopoiesis
- Consensual domains
- Epistemology of participation
- Feedback
- Non-purposeful drift

- Video: Solution Focused
- Open or closed
- Reality as a multiverse
- Structural coupling
- Structural determinism
- Wholeness and self-reference
- Video: Narrative

Reading: Becvar: Chapter 4 and Chapter 7

Nov. 11 Session 9: Erikson: Human Development

- Some thoughts about the purpose of family
- Erikson Social Development Theory through adolescence
- Emerging Adulthood
- Adulthood
- Old Age
- Video: McGoldrick 1

Readings: Becvar: Chapter 6

Emerging Adulthood article (on class page)

Richardson: Chapter 9

Erikson stages (on class page)

Nov. 18 Session 10: Family Life Cycle

Quiz 2

- Criticisms of Erikson
- Phases of family life (from Nichols: *Marital Therapy: an Integrative Approach*)
- Common transition issues
- Dislocations of Life Cycle
- Horizontal and vertical stressors
- Video McGoldrick 2

Readings: Nichols: Marital Therapy Chapter 2 (on class page)

Smith-Acuna: Chapter 7

Becvar: Chapter 8

Nov. 25 Session 11: Therapeutic Relationship

- The therapeutic relationship
- Quality of the relationship
- The person of the therapist

- The Therapeutic alliance
- Therapeutic boundaries
- Therapy process
- Assessment
- Treatment considerations
- Video: McGoldrick Part 3

Assignment #1 Due: Family of Origin paper and genogram

Readings: Becvar: Chapter 5

Worden: Chapter 3 (on class page)

Barker and Chang: Ch. 8 (on class page)

Dec. 2 Session 12: Termination/Communication Theory

(material drawn from Watzlawick et al, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*)

- Interview process
- Questions and Statements
- Observation/Assessment
- The ebb and flow of therapy
- Termination
- Axioms of communication
- Video: Hardy

Reading: Watzlawick et al: (on the class page)

Smith-Acuna: Chapter 4 and 9

Dec. 9 Final Examination (time to be announced)

Counselling Session Completion Form due

No work will be accepted after 5pm on December 12.

V. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Selected bibliography will be posted on classes.tyndale.ca.

VI. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL COURSES

A. EQUITY OF ACCESS

Students with permanent or temporary disabilities who need academic accommodations must [contact](#) the [Accessibility Services](#) at the [Centre for Academic Excellence](#) to [register](#) and discuss their specific needs. *New students* must self-identify and register with the Accessibility Office at the beginning of the semester or as early as possible to access appropriate services. *Current students* must renew their plans as early as possible to have active accommodations in place.

B. REQUIREMENTS FOR LIVESTREAM INTERACTION (SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE COURSE ONLY)

- Livestream attendance for the entire duration of the class at announced times
- Headphones (preferred), built-in microphone, and web-camera
- Well-lit and quiet room
- Stable high-speed internet connection, preferably using an Ethernet cable over Wi-Fi
- Full name displayed on Zoom and Microsoft Teams for attendance purposes*
- A commitment to having the camera on to foster community building*

**exceptions with permission from professor*

C. GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTIONS

Tyndale University prides itself in being a trans-denominational community. We anticipate our students to have varied viewpoints which will enrich the discussions in our learning community. Therefore, we ask our students to be charitable and respectful in their interactions with each other, and to remain focused on the topic of discussion, out of respect to others who have committed to being a part of this learning community. Please refer to “Guidelines for Interactions” on your course resource page at classes.tyndale.ca.

D. GUIDELINES FOR THE SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK

Grading Rubric

Please consult the rubric provided for each assignment on your course resource page at classes.tyndale.ca.

Academic Integrity

Please do not use any A-I programs in completing your assignments.

Integrity in academic work is required of all our students. Academic dishonesty is any breach of this integrity and includes such practices as cheating (the use of unauthorized material on tests and examinations), submitting the same work for different classes without permission of the instructors; using false information (including false references to secondary sources) in an assignment; improper or unacknowledged collaboration with other students, and plagiarism (including improper use of artificial intelligence programs). Tyndale University takes seriously its responsibility to uphold academic integrity, and to penalize academic dishonesty. Please refer to the [Academic Integrity website](#) for further details.

For proper citation style, consult [Citation Guides](#) for different styles. Students are encouraged to consult [Writing Services](#).

Students should also consult the current [Academic Calendar](#) for academic policies on Academic Honesty, Gender Inclusive Language in Written Assignments, Late Papers and Extensions, Return of Assignments, and Grading System.

Turnitin Text-Matching Software

Tyndale has a subscription to Turnitin, a text-matching software that ensures the originality of academic writing and verifies the proper citation of all sources. The instructor for this course will use Turnitin for assignments submitted through your course resource page at classes.tyndale.ca. Upon submission, you will receive a summary that includes your submitted files along with a similarity report generated by Turnitin. Please be aware that Turnitin can also detect AI-generated content from tools like Grammarly, so students should be mindful of when using such software. It's advisable to confirm with your instructor before using any AI tools into your assignments. Below are some useful resources:

- [Student](#) Guides for Turnitin via classes.tyndale.ca course resource page
- Interpreting Similarity ([Guide](#), [Video](#), [Spectrum](#))

Research Ethics

All course-based assignments involving human participants requires ethical review and may require approval by the [Tyndale Research Ethics Board \(REB\)](#). Check with the Seminary Dean's Office (seminaryoffice@tyndale.ca) before proceeding.

Late Papers and Extensions Policy

All papers and course assignments must be submitted by the due dates indicated in the course syllabus. Unless the instructor already has a policy on grading late papers in the course syllabus, grades for papers submitted late without an approved extension will be lowered at the rate of two-thirds of a grade per week or part thereof (e.g., from "A+" to "A-," from "B" to "C+"). Please note that some programs, such as cohort-based or intensive courses, may follow a different policy due to the nature of the program.

Faculty may not grant an extension beyond the last day of exams for the semester. Requests for extensions beyond this date must be addressed in writing to the Registrar by filling out the [Extension Request Form](#). The application will be considered only in cases such as a death in the family, medical emergency, hospitalization of oneself or immediate family member or prolonged illness requiring treatment by a physician. Factors such as assignments for other courses, holidays, and technology-related difficulties are insufficient grounds for requesting an extension.

A temporary grade of incomplete (“I”) may be granted by the Registrar. Once an extension is granted, it is the student’s responsibility to contact the instructor and make satisfactory arrangements to complete the outstanding work. A grade of “F” will be recorded for students who do not complete the outstanding work by the deadline.

E. COURSE EVALUATION

Tyndale Seminary values quality in the courses it offers its students. End-of-course evaluations provide valuable student feedback and are one of the ways that Tyndale Seminary works towards maintaining and improving the quality of courses and the student’s learning experience. Student involvement in this process is critical to enhance the general quality of teaching and learning.

Before the end of the course, students will receive a MyTyndale email with a link to the online course evaluation. The link can also be found in the left column on the course page. The evaluation period is 2 weeks; after the evaluation period has ended, it cannot be reopened.

Course Evaluation results will not be disclosed to the instructor before final grades in the course have been submitted and processed. Student names will be kept confidential, and the instructor will only see the aggregated results of the class.

F. LIBRARY RESOURCES

[Tyndale Library](#) supports courses with [e-journals, e-books](#), and the [mail delivery of books](#) and circulating materials. See the [Library FAQ page](#).

G. GRADING SYSTEM & SCALE

For each course’s grading rubric, please refer to your course syllabus or classes.tyndale.ca. For general grading guidelines, refer to Seminary [Grading System & Scale](#).