

“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, 2026
Course Title	FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY
Course Code	COUN 0677 1S
Date and Time	SEPTEMBER 15 – DECEMBER 8, 2026 TUESDAYS 2:15 PM – 5:05 PM
Delivery Format	SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE
Class Information	Classes will be livestreamed <i>via Zoom</i> on TUESDAYS: 2:15 – 5:05 PM.
Instructor	HOLLY A. KRISTENSEN Email: hkristensen@tyndale.ca
Office Hours	After class (5:05-5:25 PM) or by appointment.
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:

- Differentiate between individual/intrapsychic and a systemic/interpersonal perspective of human behaviour.
- Identify the theoretical concepts of family systems theory.
- Recognize system dynamics in individual, couple and family behaviours.
- Examine the therapeutic relationship, assessment, change techniques and termination of therapy using systems theory.
- Examine oneself in relation to one's own family of origin.

- Inspect the impact of oneself and context on the therapeutic relationship.

III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. REQUIRED READING

Becvar, D. S. & Becvar, R. J. (2018). [*Systems theory and family therapy: A primer*](#) (revised 3rd ed.). Lanham, MD: University Press of America Inc. ISBN 978-0-7618-6982-5

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. 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

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

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 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 DECEMBER 1; 35% of final grade.**

You will submit the completed genogram and paper via the course resource page. Genogram must be converted to a word or pdf 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 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. **Construct 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 Microsoft Word or pdf document. To be complete, your genogram should express items like 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
- **A clear legend** to indicate meaning of symbols used

Note: Genograms must be formatted on an electronic Word or pdf 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 10–12-page paper which discusses the following in **4 parts**:

Section 1: **A brief introduction** to your family and any pertinent information you would like the reader to 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. Please use family systems terminology where it applies.

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

Section 4: Identify 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. 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 the opportunity to ask additional questions about the family members answers. This allows for greater depth of understanding of the family processes.
- **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 only 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 Reflection Questions; Due November 10; 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 reflections 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.

These reflections (see section IV of this syllabus for specific dates) should be completed and typed on a Microsoft Word document. As mentioned, it is useful to answer the questions on the week assigned. Each week you will add to that same document. Submit the final document on the class page. Length is not an issue, but thoughtful reflection is required. (Most students end up with anywhere from 18 to 30 pages or so.)

3. 1st Quiz: Due Friday, October 16 at 11:59 pm; 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 First Order Cybernetic Theory discussed over the course of the semester.

[Note: Quizzes will be take-home, (made available after class on Tuesday) and students given 3 days to complete and submit via the class page.]

4. 2nd Quiz: Due Friday, November 20 at 11:59 pm; 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 Second Order Cybernetics. *[Note: Quizzes will be take-home, (made available after class on Tuesday) and students given 3 days to complete and submit via the class page.]*

5. Final Examination; Due December 15; 35% of final grade

[The Final will be done during class over Zoom and turned in at the end of that allotted time via the submission link on the course page.]

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 on the submission link in the section named "Finals Week" before the end of class.*

6. MANDATED 6 COUNSELLING SESSIONS:

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 the class page. ***These bookings must be done by the first week of class.*** The sessions will be at reduced costs, and generally students 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 residing outside Canada are responsible for arranging and paying for the cost of 6 session with a qualified provider, and they email their professor about their arrangements by the first week of the semester.

These 6 sessions must occur within the 12 classes of the course (excluding final exam day), and documentation from their therapist is required at the end of the 6 sessions to prove attendance. 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.

When these sessions are completed at the Wellness Centre, a Certificate of Completion will be released, allowing the student to receive a grade for the course. If sessions are taken outside the Wellness Centre, a similar note of completion must be emailed to your professor prior to final's week.

7. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK

- a) **The Family of Origin paper and Richardson Reflection Assignment** should demonstrate the student's ability to process his/her internal responses personally and professionally. The ability to reflect upon and process feelings and thoughts is an important skill in counselling work.
- b) **Title page and documentation:** The title page should include the name of the course, name of the instructor, title of the paper/assignment, student's name, and the date due. Students are expected to honestly reflect use of materials other than their own. Tyndale does not tolerate plagiarism in any form. Any sources used in the paper should be properly documented using the format provided by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th ed. (2019). Use a 12-point font ("Times New Roman" or "Courier" is preferred). The [APA Style Guide](#) is a helpful web site for all questions regarding APA style.
- c) **Papers** must be typed, double spaced, Times New Roman 12 PT Font, and written using inclusive language. Students are required to retain a copy of all assignments in hard copy or electronic form. Graduate level spelling, grammar and style are expected, and grades will be lowered if written expression is poor. Please see the Academic Writing Center if you need assistance with your writing skills.
- d) Tyndale Seminary's **policy on late assignments** will be followed. For each week late, the grade will be reduced by 1 letter grade. Extensions will be considered if the circumstances are extreme. No final assignments or examinations will be accepted later than 11:59 PM on December 15.

D. SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Evaluation is based upon the completion of the following assignments:

Family of Origin Paper	35%
Richardson Reflection Assignment	10%
2 Midterm Quizzes (10% each)	20%
Final Exam	35%
Total Grade	100%

IV. COURSE SCHEDULE, CONTENT AND REQUIRED READINGS

The course is organized around the five modules below. The topics presented each week reflect these important themes in Family Systems Theory and Therapy.

Module	Theme	Weeks
I	Thinking Systemically	1–3

II	Family Organization and Change	4–5
III	Multigenerational Systems	6–7
IV	Constructivist and Postmodern Systems	8–9
V	Applying Systems Theory	10–12

Weekly Topics	Required Readings
Week 1 - September 15: Paradigm Shift • Why systems thinking? • Individual vs systemic explanations • History and major contributors • General Systems Theory	Readings: • Becvar: Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 10 • Smith-Acuna: Chapters 1 & 2 • Richardson: Chapter 1
Week 2 - September 22: First Order Cybernetics • Circular causality • Homeostasis • Feedback loops • <u>Video</u>: Strategic Therapy	Readings: • Becvar Chapter 3 • Smith-Acuna: Chapter 3 • Richardson: Chapter 2 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)
Week 3 - September 29: First Order Cybernetics (cont.) • Family rules and Roles • Zones of tolerance • <u>Video</u>: Structural Therapy	Readings: • Richardson workbook: Chapter 3 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)
Week 4 - October 6: Change in Family Systems • Boundaries • Open and closed systems • Entropy and negentropy • Change and resistance to change. • <u>Video</u>: Cognitive Behavioural Family Therapy	Readings: • Becvar: Chapter 9 • Smith-Acuna: Chapter 5, 6 • Richardson: Chapter 4 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)

Week 5 - October 13: Change in Family Systems (cont.) • First and Second Order Change • Equifinality • Recursion and Circular Causality • Circumplex model NOTE: Quiz #1 Due: Fri, October 16@ 11:59 pm (Available after class today)	Readings: • Barker & Chang: pp 63-64 (on class page) • Becvar: Chapter 8 • Circumplex graph (on class page) • Richardson: Chapter 5 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)
Week 6 - October 19- 23 READING WEEK (NO CLASS)	No readings
Week 7 - October 27: Bowen's Model • Differentiation • Triangles • Family projection • Emotional process • Multigenerational transmission <u>Video</u>: Multigenerational	Reading: • Richardson workbook: Chapter 6 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)
Week 8 - November 3: Second Order Cybernetics • Position of Observer • Language • Origin of Knowledge • Social construction • Not-knowing stance • <u>Video</u>: Solution Focused Therapy	Readings: • Becvar: Chapter 4 • Richardson workbook: Chapter 7 • Complete Richardson question sets -see guideline on course page)
Week 9 - November 10: Constructivism and Postmodern Therapy • Autopoiesis • Consensual domains • Reality as a multiverse • Structural coupling • Structural determinism	Reading: • Becvar: Chapter 5 and 7 • Richardson: Chapter 8 (use exercises to facilitate your reflections for Family of Origin Paper)

• <u>Video</u>: Narrative Therapy	• Due: Richardson Assignment at 11:59pm *
Week 10 - November 17: Development Across the Life Cycle • Erikson Social Development Theory • Emerging Adulthood • Adulthood • Old Age • Common transition issues • Developmental Stressors NOTE: Quiz #2 Due: Fri, November 20 @ 11:59 pm (Available after class today)	Readings: • Becvar: Chapter 6 • Emerging Adulthood article (on class page) • Richardson: Chapter 9 • Erikson stages (on class page)
Week 11 - November 24: Diversity and Family Context • Phases of family life (from Nichols: <i>Marital Therapy: An Integrative Approach</i>) • Culture • Race • Intersectionality • Power and Systemic Oppression	Readings: • Nichols: Marital Therapy Chapter 2 (on class page)
Week 12 - December 1: Therapist's Use of Self • The person of the therapist • The Therapeutic alliance • Therapeutic boundaries • Principles of Communication • Systemic conceptualization • Treatment Planning NOTE: Due: Family of Origin paper and genogram @11:59pm	Readings: • Watzlawick et al: (on the class page) • Smith-Acuna: Chapter 4 and 9
Week 13 - December 8: Final Examination	Due: Self-Awareness Counselling Session Completion Form No work will be accepted after 11:59pm on December 15

V. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Available 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

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](#).