

A Strengths Perspective for Assessing Older Adults: Curriculum Enrichment in a Human Behavior Course

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At the beginning of the article, the rationale for focusing on curriculum development and enrichment in the area of older adulthood is presented. The vulnerability of older adults and the need for the strengths perspective when assessing older adults is also discussed.

The second part of the article focuses on the two instructors' efforts to apply the strengths perspective when teaching about assessing older adults as part of the Human Behavior and Social Environment content. Innovative curriculum modules and assignments are described. They include use of the life story technique to teach students to assess older adults' current situations using learning theories, concepts, and the strengths perspective; use of dramatic vignettes to explore and sensitize students to the concerns and issues faced by older adults and their families; developmental milestones presentations; and use of older adults as guest speakers and experts for the purpose of emphasizing the resiliency and strengths of individuals faced with challenges related to the aging process.

Introduction

Social work education is mandated to prepare practitioners to respond to a changing society. Since the latest data as presented by Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, and Ambrosino (2001) as well as Schneider, Kropf, and Kiser (2000) indicate a continuing trend toward an aging population, curriculum development and enrichment in this area is vitally important. In fact, the new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, implemented in July 2002, require students to "practice without discrimination, with respect, and with knowledge and skills related to client's age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion,

sex, and sexual orientation." Curriculum content must be broad based in order to address the vulnerability of older adults. Therefore, foundation content must also stress the resiliency and strengths of older persons, their families, and their communities as they face major life transitions. This paper describes the integration of the strengths perspective in the assessment of older adults in a Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) class through innovative curriculum modules and assignments.

Social Work 330 at Ball State University is the second course in the HBSE sequence of the Social Work core curriculum. The ecological perspective is used in the HBSE sequence to provide students with a means of assessing clients and their situations within the generalist practice model. The overall goal is to help students understand the complex relationships among various social, cultural, familial, organizational, community, biological, and psychological aspects, which influence human development and functioning. The course employs a life cycle approach to human growth and development. In this perspective, older adulthood is considered age sixty-five and above. Students take this course prior to the senior level practice courses and the final semester-long, full-time practicum. It is our goal as instructors to incorporate the strengths perspective in order to help students accurately assess older adults as well as stimulate their interest in practicing with this population. Additionally, being a site for the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Gero-Rich Project (Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education) has allowed our program to review, re-focus, and renew our curriculum content on older adults.

At the conclusion of the HBSE course, students should be able to,

- Use a theoretical framework to understand the family, group, community, organizational, and cultural contexts in which individual growth and interpersonal interactions occur.
- Demonstrate and apply knowledge of life span development using a biopsychosocial framework and an ecological perspective for assessment.
- Understand resources and barriers in social systems, which may enhance or deter the achievement and maintenance of optimal health and well-being.
- Analyze the impact of oppression and discrimination on human behavior.
- Analyze and discuss the influences of social class, ethnicity, race, culture, physical and mental ability, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and national origin on human development and behavior.
- Critically appraise research and theories related to humans and their environment for use in generalist social work practice.
- Develop a view of humans that is consistent with a generalist practice perspective and the social work *Code of Ethics*.
- Apply human behavior knowledge to increase self-awareness and facilitate personal and professional development.

Rationale for Stressing the Strengths Perspective

A rationale for stressing the strengths perspective in social work assessment with older adults must include a review of demographics, as well as the biopsychosocial myths and realities that describe older adults.

Demographics

The number of elderly is rapidly growing, currently numbering 35.9 million in the United States—12.3 percent of the total population. By 2030, they will comprise 20 percent of the population and will number 71.5 million. Seventy-six million aging baby boomers and 2 million immigrants will contribute to this projected growth. In 2002, minority populations represented 17.2 percent of the population. This will increase to 26.4 percent of the older adult population by 2030. Sixteen percent of the sixty-five and over population are representative of minority populations, and these numbers are projected to reach 25 percent of the elderly population by 2030, an overall increase of 223 percent as compared with 77 percent for the white population (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], <http://www.aoa.gov/prof/statistic/profile/2003/4.asp>, retrieved April 29, 2005). The fastest growing sector of older adults is those aged eighty-five and over, which is at 4.3 million today and is projected to be 9.6 million by 2030. Those in this age group may have high needs for care with activities of daily living (ADLs) or have severe cognitive impairment, requiring assisted living or nursing home settings. Over half (52.5 percent) of the people in this age category not living in institutions require some help in performing ADLs (DHHS, retrieved April 29, 2005). Overall, today 7.3 million older people require assistance with personal care, chores, or financial arrangements, and this number is projected to nearly double over the next twenty years (General Accounting Office, 1999). Eighty percent of functionally impaired elderly live in communities and the rest, 1.5 million, reside in nursing homes or other institutions (American Association of Retired Persons, 2000). Medicaid, with stringent eligibility, pays for about half of all nursing home expenses and some postacute skilled care for those who are impoverished. At-home services paid for by Medicare are short term and focused on skilled care (United States Senate, Special Committee on Aging, 1998).

As a group, minority elders experience higher poverty rates and social isolation and poorer health (Federal Forum on Aging, <http://www.agingstats.gov>, retrieved April 29, 2005; Villa, 1998). Barriers to paid care and cultural/religious mandates for some racial and ethnic groups may increase care-taking responsibilities for adult children (Olson, 2001).

Prejudices, Discrimination, and Vulnerabilities

Ageism involves prejudices and stereotypes, which exist because of membership in a group that cannot be changed. According to Palmore (1998), the

negative beliefs and attitudes held about older adults result in stereotypes that the elderly are sick and disabled, senile, unable to work productively, have no desire for sexual activity, and are ugly, isolated, and poor. In addition, prejudices directed toward older adults result in negative discrimination in employment training, as well as limitations to participating in and receiving assistance from federal programs and state and local social services. For example, despite federal legislation prohibiting discrimination, many older adults find it difficult to find work, are withheld from promotions, and are fired or forced to retire from employment. Elders are often excluded from training because of beliefs that they cannot learn new skills or will not be working much longer. State and local governments also limit vocational rehabilitation, making it available only to younger persons. Finally, despite coverage by Medicare, elders have been found to receive less than adequate health care. Treatable illnesses are often seen as untreatable aspects of normal aging. Elders are seen as less desirable patients. Family behaviors may be discriminatory by discouraging widowed parents from seeking new mates, denying parents' sexuality, or fearing loss of inheritance. Elder abuse and neglect exist as the most extreme form of family discrimination (Palmore, 1988; Quinn, 1987; Redburn & McNamara, 1998).

Social integration is another important theme in later life and is compromised for certain types of individuals. For example, social network size decreases during old age with the loss of work role, increasing health problems, and declining income. Older men's increased marriage rates suggest an increase in their social integration. More older women live alone than in the past because of a decrease in co-residence with adult children after becoming widowed or experiencing poor health. An outflow of young people in rural areas decreases the probability that older rural parents will receive support in times of need. Volunteer activity declines with increasing age. Early retirement has also created potential for a longer period of decreasing roles (Pullman & Glassgow, 2000; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004).

In spite of the challenges facing older adults, many of them demonstrate resiliency and lead satisfying lives. For example, retired individuals may explore new roles by participating in volunteer activities or being active mentors or grandparents. Some have financially prepared for retirement and have resources for living comfortably and for traveling and engaging in fun activities. Many older adults have rich networks of natural helpers in their environment to call on when help is needed. These might include family members, friends, neighbors, church members, or members of organizations to which they belong. In addition, a number of older adults are able to cope with declining health, making adjustments as needed. In fact, while gains have not been equal among those with limited education, women, and minorities, the Federal Forum on Aging's *Older Americans 2004: Key Indicators of Well-Being* reports that older adults are achieving better health and wealth and educational levels than those of the past (Federal Forum on Aging, retrieved April 29, 2005).

Strengths Perspective Defined

The strengths perspective in assessment emphasizes highlighting the clients' unique attributes, talents, abilities, capacities, hopes, values, visions, and knowledge instead of focusing only on the clients' problems, difficulties, needs, and deficits. In addition to the clients' personal factors, the strengths perspective entails identifying useful community resources and support networks in the clients' environment instead of narrowly focusing on deficits or causes of problems (Cowger, 1992; Hepworth, Rooney, & Larson, 2002; Saleebey, 1992, 1996, 2002; Weick, 1992).

A strengths perspective for assessing clients is essential for effective social work practice. All subsequent phases of social work intervention hinge on the type of assessment made. A strengths perspective enables a social worker to approach clients with a positive attitude, which, in turn, enhances clients' motivation and gives clients hope. This opens doors for client growth, change, or increased effective coping. This perspective also enables clients, who often lack confidence and feel like failures when seeking services, to have improved self-esteem. Furthermore, the strengths perspective makes it easier for social workers to uphold the individualization value, even when dealing with clients in the same situation or facing a similar problem. The perspective is also consistent with the ecological perspective. Identifying strengths in the clients' environment minimizes the possibility of clients being blamed for their circumstances. In addition to that, identifying clients' strengths in relationship to personal assets, environmental resources, and the ability to survive or cope with difficulties empowers clients because it gives them control over their situation (Bricker-Jenkins, 1992; Cowger, 1994; Saleebey, 1992, 1996, 2002). Assessment of older adults, because they are a vulnerable population, requires the incorporation of this perspective.

Curriculum Enrichment Related to the Strengths Perspective

The remainder of the article will focus on how the instructors integrate the strengths perspective in the content related to older adulthood in the HBSE class. As examples, specific curriculum modules and assignments will be described. While emphasizing the strengths perspective, we are cognizant of the fact that the problems and issues older adults face, their difficult circumstances, and deficits in their environment should not be minimized. Students are helped to understand that strengths may include simple things such as maintaining a family in spite of financial hardships, being able to form and maintain relationships, coping effectively with hardships, being resourceful, and seeking to acquire additional knowledge and skills.

1. The Application of the Life Story Approach to Teach Students to Assess Older Adults' Current Situations by Integrating Theories, Life Cycle Concepts, and the Strengths Perspective. One way of empowering clients is to give them a voice

and to respect what they have to say. This can only be accomplished by thinking of clients as individuals who know something, who have ideas, and who have learned from their experiences. An assignment is used to prepare students for this approach. Students complete an intensive interview with an older adult, learning to ask appropriate questions and apply theory and a strengths perspective to understanding the individual's needs and development over the life span. A final paper incorporates gathered information and completes an analysis integrating learned concepts and theories (see Appendix A for assignment description). For example, using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, students are encouraged to assess the selected person's psychosocial functioning. As the person reviews his or her life, has the person attained a sense of ego integrity or is he or she in a state of despair? Psychological adjustment may be analyzed using R. C. Peck's concepts pertaining to self-differentiation, body transcendence, and self-transcendence (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). In addition, to help students acquire computer and research competence, World Wide Web sources are required. In preparing for this assignment, students review a sample, videotaped interview completed by a faculty member. The person interviewed is an African American woman who experienced poverty and oppression, participated in the civil rights movement, and became a community activist. A portion of this videotape will be shown as a part of the presentation.

Through this assignment, students learn that there are individual differences in the process of aging. As they gather information from their subjects, students discover that these individuals do not necessarily conform to stereotypes and they hear stories of survival and resiliency. The life story paper analysis also emphasizes the need to prepare for old age and enhance coping through 1) planning for retirement, 2) affiliating with groups or associations, 3) maintaining family ties and interest in friends, 4) continuing social and civic responsibilities, 5) coping with illness and loss of spouse, and 6) adjusting to changes in physical strengths and health.

2. The Use of Dramatic Vignettes to Explore and Sensitize Students to the Concerns and Issues Faced by Older Adults and Their Families To prepare students to effectively deliver services to older adults, they are sensitized to issues older adults and their families face. They are involved in exploring the biopsychosocial issues impacting older adults and their families through a series of dramatic exchanges. As examples, themes may relate to suffering a loss or major illness such as a stroke, receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, or an older adult reacting to a family's decision to place him/her in a nursing home. Additionally, personal fears and concerns about aging are shared through a timeline exercise. Individually, students project how long they want to live and must describe their rationale for that projection. The strengths perspective is highlighted by letting students view a video that goes into more detail about the issues older adults face but also shows individuals who are successfully coping with the challenges. Examples considered include the use of available resources such as financial, health, nutrition, older-adult centers, transportation, day care cen-

ters, homemaker services, nursing homes, congregate housing facilities, and retirement communities. Many students' misconceptions of elders are changed when they see retired adults dancing for fun, enjoying swimming, or sharing information about the romantic aspects of their marital life.

During discussions pertaining to the video, various roles played by older adults are illustrated such as being foster grandparents to children in institutions or volunteering as members of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program to meet a variety of community needs (e.g., reading to children in schools or libraries). Membership in the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), an organization that helps owners of small businesses and managers of community organizations faced with problems, is also highlighted. Furthermore, efforts to impact legislation and to play an active role in politics through membership in the Gray Panthers are emphasized.

3. Developmental Milestones Presentation Selected students observe and assess an older person's current functioning and compare that with the standard textbook information pertaining to the biological, psychological, and social aspects of aging. The students present their findings to the class using visual aids such as posters, photo albums, or a PowerPoint presentation. To address issues of dependency in old age, one or two students visit an extended care facility, making observations and reporting reactions to the class. During these discussions, examples of successful aging and resiliency are highlighted.

4. Elders as Experts To emphasize the resiliency and strengths of older adults in preparing to meet the challenges of old age, older adults who are adapting and coping successfully with the aging process are invited to class to speak about their experiences. They share information about the physical changes they have to deal with and what is helping them to cope with the various challenges. They also share information about what they do to maintain and sustain a good life. The various roles they play in the community such as offering leadership in organizations and their support systems such as family and friends are discussed. They also share information related to preparation for retirement. A sample video clip of such experts making a presentation will be included.

As the strengths perspective in assessment is stressed, instructors help students to be open-minded, positive, and flexible as they consider social work practice with older adults. Besides the linkage to 400-level practice classes, the diversity aspect of the curriculum is addressed when students are encouraged to view older adults as a diverse population with a wide range of practice needs. Assessment of negative societal attitudes addresses issues related to justice. As resources in the environment are discussed and related problems such as the inadequacy of social services are analyzed, a horizontal link between the human behavior and the social environment classes and social welfare/policy classes is made. The developmental milestone project and the life story assignment encourages students to utilize research skills that enable students to understand that the textbook is not the only source of knowledge and realize that other sets

of truths can be discovered through collaboration with clients. Consequently, these assignments help to link Social Work 330 to research.

In a classroom assessment, students were asked to rate the above activities and assignments on a 5-point scale (1 for not useful and 5 for very useful or beneficial). The average rating was 4.1. The assessment also included consistently positive comments, noting that such activities and assignments provided a change of pace from lecture, encouraged participation, and helped them to remember and understand concepts they were trying to learn. In addition, our courses were included in an overall pretest/post-test curricular evaluation implemented through the Gero-Rich project. These results indicated that students had a more positive perception of older adults following the HBSE course.

One notable limitation to our efforts in curriculum enrichment is the fact that the strengths perspective was only integrated into an HBSE class, as related to assessment with older adults, and was not infused into other classes. Recommended next steps would be to infuse this perspective throughout the curriculum, not only in relationship to older adults, but with other populations as well.

Conclusion

It is hoped that through integration of these described modules, students in the HBSE class will broaden their perspectives and abilities to assess older adults. It is also hoped that students will engage in social work practice that will include dialogue and collaboration with those we serve, along with a view of strength and resiliency rather than a focus on pathology. Each person's story, experience, or interpretation can help guide our practice (Saleebey, 2002). The following quote by Douglas Friedrich (2001, p. 150) captures the essence of the conclusion we hope students will discover by the end of our semester together:

Life is not a combination of dichotomies. There are too many human characteristics to consider in understanding development, stability, and decline. One can show no signs of disease or disability, but deal with later life in unsatisfying ways. On the other hand, one can have multiple diseases or disabilities, and move successfully through the lifespan, including older adulthood.

The aforementioned flexible perception of older adults, which is consistent with the strengths perspective, will enhance student's preparation for effective social work practice with older adults and lead to greater interest in providing relevant services to this population.

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Appendix A

Social Work 330: Human Behavior and the Social Environment

Biopsychosocial Life Story Interview and Analysis

I. Purpose of the Assignment

Students will apply the knowledge gained in this course related to human development and functioning throughout the life span (person in environment) to an individual's life situation. Students will also be required to use interviewing skills to obtain life story information.

II. Description of the Assignment

A. Interview

1. Each student will be required to interview an individual in later adulthood, over the age of sixty-five, in order to prepare a description of a life story and analyze various life events and transitions she (or he) has experienced.
2. Questions will need to be prepared and structured to ask the person about various life stages and transitions. Reviewing the text will be helpful in preparing questions for the interview.
3. You should plan on at least two to three hours to complete the interview. You may also want to plan more than one interview time.
4. The student will be responsible to inform the interviewee about the purpose of the assignment. The attached release form must be signed prior to completing the interview.

No interview should be completed without a signed release.

****Papers submitted without a release will not be accepted.****

B. Analysis Report

1. Life Story Description

In the first portion of the paper, each student will be required to write a description of the individual's life in a chronological sequence. The paper should include pertinent information from each life stage the person has experienced (prenatal, infancy and childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and later adulthood).

2. Analysis

As a next step, the paper will use text, class, and other research materials to address the area listed below. In other words, how can we use theory to help us identify and understand the significant life experiences of the person interviewed?

- a. Discuss significant developmental milestones, life course events, and transitions identified in the life story. Using a biopsychosocial framework, analyze the significant microevents, physical and psychological, which have shaped the personal experiences of this individual? In addition, referring to b through d listed below, how have various interactions with mezzo- and macrosystems influenced the person?
- b. Describe ways in which the person's experience of family influences who he/she is today; reflect on childhood to current experiences (mezzoevents).
- c. How have various peers, social groups, or work groups influenced this individual's life? (mezzoevents).
- d. Discuss the influences of culture, community, or other institutions and organizations on his/her life (macroevents).
- e. Include in your entire analysis an identification and discussion of the individual's resiliency using a strengths perspective.
 - 1) What have been this person's achievements?
 - 2) How has the person surmounted adversity?
 - 3) Describe the skills and attributes he/she has developed or learned from these experiences?
 - 4) What environmental resources have been available to and supportive of this person (i.e., significant family members, friends, peers, group memberships, mentors)? (Saleeby, 2002)

3. Develop an ecomap that will illustrate this individual's current life situation. Attach the ecomap to your report. The ecomap will reflect the person's current life situation. If you prefer, a genogram

could be completed instead of the ecomap. The genogram should be reflective of the current family configuration as well as the family history of at least three generations.

4. Document the research used to analyze this person's life story. In addition to the text, at least four additional resources are required. The student can use any acceptable format for documentation and listing bibliographic resources.

C. Evaluation

1. The report will be evaluated relative to the clarity and completeness of the descriptive report. In other words, does the paper tell the person's life story in a chronological sequence as described in B.1 above?
2. The analysis and integration of research materials and adequacy of addressing areas elaborated in 2.a through 2.d above will also be evaluated. A minimum of five resources will be required.
3. Is the ecomap or genogram complete and descriptive of the individual's current situation?
4. The overall quality of the paper will also be considered. For example, is the writing style clear with correct grammatical usage? Does the writer use appropriate documentation and listing of resources?
5. The paper is worth a total of sixty points toward the student's final grade.

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