

**Teaching Anti-Oppressive Lifespan Development Online through
a Cultural and Contextual Lens**

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Abstract

Lifespan Development is a required content area for both CACREP accreditation and licensure boards. Historically centered theories of development are born out of work and research conducted by Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) theorists, so therefore are presented to students through a very narrow and biased cultural lens, often with oppressive implications. Implementing innovative, interactive, culture- and context-promoting inclusive strategies in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments is both relevant and necessary for future counselors to consider how their integration of updated lifespan development theories informs their clinical practice. This article presents inclusive applications that leverage online relational strategies to refresh Lifespan Development and scaffold meaningful opportunities to turn anti-oppressive developmental theory into anti-oppressive clinical practice.

Keywords: Anti-oppressive developmental theory, context, culture, inclusive strategies, online counselor education

Teaching Anti-Oppressive Lifespan Development Online through a Cultural and Contextual Lens

Most Lifespan Development theories studied today in counselor education programs arose out of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) ideologies and experiences. To develop “normative” structures, stages, and phases of development, these early pioneers strove to identify what optimal development looked like. Whether focused on personality, cognitive, or social-emotional development, these influential theories (e.g., Piaget, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, Gilligan) have stood the test of time. However, these seminal theories do not always reflect the experiences of developing individuals through an understanding of both relevant and intersecting identities (Hays, 2008), the impact of privilege and oppression (Hardy, 2022; Menakem, 2022), or real-world socio-and political-factors impacting all development (Heuer & Stullich, 2011; Menakem, 2022).

As the field of counselor education seeks to de-colonize its syllabi and pedagogy, teaching Lifespan Development through a cultural and contextual lens is a necessary step to implement anti-racist, anti-oppressive pedagogy from the beginning of counseling programs. Digitally delivered classes may incorporate both asynchronous and synchronous engaging strategies to invite the whole person-in-context of the counselor-in-training to reflect on their own, classmates’, and future clients’ lived experiences. Intentional relationship-building among the cohort enhances personal and professional development, improving morale, student engagement, and student learning outcomes (Degeneffe et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Snow et

al., 2018). Beginning to apply critical thinking about updated theory to a member of their community via service-learning helps anchor the term's takeaways with some preliminary clinical skills practice.

Centering Intersecting Identities

To de-center developmental theory historically based on the families of privileged, cis-het, White theorists, counselor educators may introduce Pamela Hays's ADDRESSING model (2008) at the start of their term, and socially locate themselves by sharing how they are shaped by salient identities and experiences (Dorn-Madeiras et al., 2020). Naming one's relative privilege and subjugation on the various domains intentionally levels the relationship between faculty and counselors-in-training (CIT) where possible, while also introducing CITs to crucial skills for joining ethically and responsibly with their clients. Educators may facilitate CITs joining within their online cohort by creating affinity spaces along the ADDRESSING domains and opening breakout rooms within the online class with titles such as Age, Disability (Developmental or Acquired), Religion/Spirituality, Ethnicity/Race, Socioeconomic Status, Sexuality, Indigeneity/Heritage, National Origin/Language, Gender; students may self-select into the breakout room/s of their choice to share what they choose, while also practicing non-judgmental listening skills. Students are free to share only what they wish and return to the main room should a microaggression occur; this is important gatekeeping information and students should be encouraged to ask their instructors for help with such events when their need for respect is not met (Anonymized, in press).

Educators may also choose to use the Whole Name Exercise, inviting students to begin joining through a structured introduction where they may choose to share the meaning of their name, what they know about why their families chose it, what it means to them now, any

changes they may have made, and reasons for those changes, only if they wish (Baima & Sude, 2021). Leading this joining activity in the context of Lifespan Development gives CITs a model to follow for inviting the multicultural, self-identified gender of each client, helping their first clinical groups join more deeply and inclusively rather than members simply relying on implicit bias, subconscious assumptions and projections based on others' phenotypes, accents, and movement repertoire (Hardy, 2016a,b; 2022; n.d.).

Clinical Skills for Lifespan Development

Lifespan Development may typically be taught as a theoretical knowledge-based class without the intentional introduction of relevant clinical skills. The current authors encourage Lifespan instructors to engage students in critical thinking about cultural and contextual considerations not just across the individual lifespan, or the family life cycle, but over the arc of history (Anonymized, 2022). We also encourage instructors to introduce clinical skills relevant to integrating that developmental knowledge. To do so, weekly synchronous discussions and asynchronous discussion boards can first tackle updated interdisciplinary research relevant to ages and stages each week (Anonymized, 2022).

Educators may use Google's Jamboard or another shared note-taking space for students in breakout groups to document each other's sharing in response to specific prompts chosen by the instructor. The current authors encourage instructors to develop a short series of prompts that highlight key takeaways instructors hope the CITs glean from the week's materials shared on a page for each small group (e.g., How do the intersectional identities of this week's case study get impinged upon at the various layers of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model? How can the counselor advocate at the mesosystem to mitigate that impingement where possible? What are intergenerational circumstances beyond the control of this client system that merit intervention

and support by a family counselor?), sharing the link just before CITs are to move from the large group into breakout rooms. This spontaneous access is different from discussion boards in that real-time instructor assessment of reading comprehension and critical thinking skills increases the likelihood that CITs will complete all the reading rather than just focus on an asynchronous prompt at their leisure. These prompts can be drawn from assigned texts and supplementary articles, and the instructor can move between breakout rooms to assure each student is both participating and making space for others to participate. This can also be measured through tracking reflective listening posts on the shared note-taking space.

Instructors can also highlight the clinical skills being used with this small group practice: immediacy, reflective listening, validation, open and closed-ended questions, differentiating content from process, and summary statements can all be incorporated as students track their small group discussions on the shared note-taking space. CITs can then summarize their group's takeaways with the whole class in a debrief led by the instructor. Instructors moving between groups may also provide live supervision and feedback about beginning clinical skills, using exemplar summary statements to give students a model to aim for.

Instructors are encouraged to be intentional about de-centering privileged voices and amplifying historically marginalized voices; it is not unusual that more privileged students from individualistic cultures will feel comfortable being more assertive, while less-privileged students or those socialized in collectivistic cultures will wait for an invitation that may not be forthcoming (Broeder, 2021; Hardy, 2016; Zakaria & Ab Rahman Muton, 2022). Thus instructors may need to pause small group discussions to make space for less assertive, more introverted, or high-context process-oriented students to be heard, and provide psychoeducation

to the small groups regarding cultural contexts for sharing space and time intentionally (Hardy, 2016a,b; 2022; n.d).

Role-play

After providing small group feedback on knowledge integration and critical thinking about developmental research, in addition to cross-cultural processing in small groups, instructors can provide guidelines for applying age and stage theory in preliminary skills practice with imaginal clients from diverse backgrounds. The current authors encourage the use of role-plays centering developmental themes and applying basic counseling skills to draw out the developmental work to be addressed. One way to do this is to use case studies from assigned readings (Anonymized, 2022). Another is to use video clips from popular culture that the instructor curates or CITs are each assigned to bring relevant to the week's reading, from YouTube or other publicly available sources (Hornton, 2023). A third method is to have CITs brainstorm imaginal characters they would like to practice supporting and give them developmental projects to take on with basic counseling skills. Debriefing what is challenging can spark engagement with course material as CITs feel its relevance in the context of trying to understand the developmental work underway for those they serve. Scaffolding this preliminary practice in a predominantly theoretical, knowledge-based course provides an opportunity for stress inoculation, skills introduction, and dispositional gatekeeping while softening the learning curve of clinical skills development. It also serves as a foundation for a meaningful final project.

Asynchronous Activities

Reflective practice can also take place in between synchronous class meetings using tools within the Learning Management System (LMS; e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Brightspace). After engaging with material for the particular age and stage of focus, through reading, listening to

podcasts, or watching videos, students can reflect on their own experience with the material through the use of reflective journals. Different from discussion posts, which typically represent academic writing with empirical sources, reflective journals encourage students to really examine their own lived experience in the context of the ages and stages of development and presented developmental theories. Anchoring these journal entries to an identified case study can also help breathe life into the students' reflections as they consider how they, as a future counselor, might work with a particular client through a developmental framework. Here is one such example taken from the authors' Canvas courses:

*Focusing on **emerging adulthood through early adulthood** for this journal entry, assess your own strengths and limitations in working with a client like Bi'lal. How could your strengths be leveraged in the therapeutic environment? How would you compensate for those areas where you feel you have limitations? What theory of development discussed in the readings would you likely employ in working with Bi'lal?*

Multicultural Service-Learning Activity

A Lifespan Development course can build systematically toward a service-learning final project to help ground the term's reading, discussions, and skills practice in intentional outreach to improve a community member's life in some small way. Instructors may invite CITs to reflect on someone they know who may benefit from a little extra support and attention, making clear this is not clinical outreach. CITs may then turn in a proposal for a small service-learning project for feedback and further development. Once approved, the CITs carry out their plan and document how it is going through reflective journals at assigned intervals. These reflections can include prompts such as "How is your experience with your community member somewhat

explained by the theories we have been studying? Name at least three ways it is also different. How does that help you understand future clients you may serve??"

CITs can anchor their community member's multicultural identities juxtaposed against their own by incorporating the ADDRESSING model. CITs may then apply one or two of the traditional WEIRD theories they must learn for licensure exams, while also thinking critically about the limitations of those theories by highlighting what their service-learning member's actual lived experience is showing them. Overcoming the limitations of WEIRD theories by pulling in relevant updated interdisciplinary research you have discussed across the term encourages proactive advocacy in support of client development from an anti-oppressive lens. CITs can record their presentations to share with classmates and receive feedback, questions, and suggestions for further development. This also helps students practice for professional presentations and future employment interviews.

Conclusion

Lifespan Development is often taught at early stages in the curriculum in CACREP counseling programs. As a course, it merits updating as CACREP aims to de-colonize its pedagogy. Among the many opportunities ripe in creating an anti-oppressive program is to de-center WEIRD lifespan development theories and integrate interdisciplinary, historically informed developmental science from the beginning of the counseling program (Anonymized, 2022). Setting an interactive tone, where diverse students are intentionally welcomed through structured joining processes and a variety of student constellations are arranged across the term helps students connect with each other in deeper, more meaningful ways that better prepare them for effective cross-cultural work in diverse clinical settings (Degeneffe et al., 2021; Snow et al., 2018). Leveraging online platforms and tools that can showcase students' lived experiences and

critical thinking helps refresh Lifespan Development and make it an inspiring course to learn about oneself and other human beings within their complex cultural context, facilitating counter-narrative sharing (Miller et al., 2020). Thinking critically about developmental research empowers CITs to work from an anti-oppressive lens; having opportunities to reflect on interdisciplinary developmental science elevates the resilience exhibited by many who are oppressed. Creating service-learning opportunities translates theory into practice, demystifying why lifespan development matters in the multicultural context of CITs.

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