

## Teaching Multiple Perspectives: Family Theory and Case Assignments

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**ABSTRACT.** This article reports on the impact of an innovative assignment within an upper-division family resource management course in a public university. Although designed to enhance understanding of dynamic and complex decision-making approaches within and among families, analysis of student writings revealed increased understanding of actual application of theory to understanding of family and consumer behavior. After completing a small group carousel activity addressing major theories within the study of families, students were assigned imaginary “family” units and worked through 11 situations. Periodically, each student met within a “community” of other students representing four very different case families. To determine the impact of this case approach, students were asked to submit reflection papers describing their experiences. Students indicated that the experiences enhanced their understanding of course concepts and their abilities to apply multiple family theories to each situation.

*Keywords:* theory, family resource management, family science, pedagogy

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### **Teaching Multiple Perspectives: Family Theory and Case Assignments**

The education of professionals entering the field of family services relies heavily on theoretical knowledge and practical application skills. Family Resource Management (FRM), a special focus area in family science/studies programs nationwide, has unique teaching challenges for faculty. Upper-level students bring personal realities to the classroom, including socio-economic, life cycle, and family structure experiences. Most will serve individuals and families much different from their own when they move into family services areas of employment. Preparing them for such diversity is a challenge for faculty.

This article describes the rationale, development, and assessment of a learning methodology created to enhance knowledge and skills of university students enrolled in a family studies program certified by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR): specifically, the FRM course. The course referred to here satisfies one of the ten areas of emphasis required for a program to become a Certified Family Life Education (CFLE) program. This is a stand-alone course for seniors in the Family Studies Program with no prerequisite coursework required in financial management or economics. Enrollment is capped at 30 students; however, increasing student demand for this program of study has resulted in an average of 36 students per semester over the period the current study analyzes. Course material integrates family theory, consumer economics, decision-making, and resource management across the family lifecycle. Students use a textbook, web-based support materials, classroom presentations, and a 13-part family case study activity throughout their learning experience. Learning objectives for the Case Family Assignment include: to understand and be able to apply the Decision-making Process to the Management of Individual and Family Resources; to identify individual and family resources available; to identify needs of individual and family members as a group; to explore the dynamic relationship between needs and resources available across the life cycle; to identify available alternatives in the decision-making process; to select best available alternatives to meet family needs within the context of time and place; to be capable of clarifying personal and family values within the decision-making process; to implement appropriate planning strategies for families; and to understand the dynamic interaction of individuals/families/communities and the environment.

#### **Impetus for Change**

FRM is a complex, dynamic subject. Changes in economic, social, and global environments require continuous adjustment to curriculum and delivery. Toews and Cerny (2005) suggested that classroom information may be synthesized more effectively through real-world setting assignments. Ethical issues within the possible placement of undergraduate students in actual working situations with diverse families suggest that using case families (those created on paper) might be more practical. Browning, Collins, and Nelson (2005) reported that use of case studies and student role-playing enhanced retention of new information and eventual application of that information to real-life settings.

### **Family Case Study Component: Family Resource Management through Application Method**

**Participants.** Student authors of the reflective papers reviewed for this project were enrolled in one semester-long course entitled FRM over a three-year period. The course is part of an official university program of study resulting in a Bachelor of Science degree with provisional certification as a family life educator (CFLE). There were 116 students enrolled during these three years; 108 successfully completed the course during this time. Most students were majors in the Family Studies Program, a few minored in that program, and one took the course as an elective. Average class size was 36 students ranging in age from 20 to 55 years old.

**Curricular design of teaching method.** FRM is taught once a year, following a 15-week course schedule with two weekly class meetings of 75 minutes each. The textbook *Family Resource Management* (Moore & Asay, 2016) is the course's foundational reading. Students are required to read and complete online format quizzes over each chapter before in-class presentation of this material. Classroom time is reserved for application activities and exploration of emerging issues in the discipline.

Theory is presented during the second week of class. Students are divided into eight small groups and each group is assigned one of the theories presented in Chapter Two. These theories include (a) family systems, (b) social exchange, (c) symbolic interactionism, (d) conflict, (e) feminist, (f) family ecological, (g) family strengths, and (h) family development. Groups have approximately 15 minutes to study the material about their assigned theory and to create both visual and short summarized versions of the actual theory. The visual version is intended to be a mnemonic device for memory retention. Each group has three to five minutes of classroom time to present their information to other students in a carousel format—each theory group presents to each of the other theory groups, the presentations rotating through all groups. This assignment is designed to make students strongly familiar with at least one of the theories (through repetitive presentation to the other seven groups) and to provide memory retention cues for all students (through exposure of all students to mnemonic and theory summaries of the other seven theories.)

During the 15 weeks of course instruction, each student is assigned to one fictional “Case Family” within a set of five very diverse families, and to one fictional “Neighborhood.” Case Families have been created and included in the textbook to provide students with opportunities to experience how families might approach 11 different resource management challenges. Although each student is responsible for completing assignments as an individual, students working with the same Case Family meet weekly for short periods of time during class to compare and contrast their approaches to the same situation. Students meet in their Neighborhood groups every other week, with each student representing her or his particular Case Family to the other four students, who are representing the other four Case Families. After students receive corrected and graded versions of each of the 11 situational assignments from the instructor, class time is allotted to discuss how the different theoretical bases might interpret situations and outcomes.

**Assessment of methodology.** Simulations like the Case Family approach that this course uses continue to attract educators in areas of counseling, social work, and family fields (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2005; Lee & Greene, 2003; Magnuson & Norem, 1998). To explore this method's effectiveness and the resulting impact, the researchers used a qualitative case study approach. Creswell (2013) states that case study research can begin with a specific project that is "in progress" or with continuing situations such as an educational course that evolves over time to better address needs of the students. A good qualitative case study presents an "in-depth understanding of the case" (p. 98). To accomplish such understanding, the researcher must collect qualitative data such as reflective writings and classroom observations.

Over the course of three years, students submitted end-of-semester reflection papers about their experiences implementing the Case Family approach assigned within their FRM course. Students received instructions to "reflect on the impact of working with their Case Families on their understanding of the course material." Essays were gathered at the end of each semester. After removing identifying information from the essays, the author filed the essays in a secured storage cabinet. At the end of the third year, papers were analyzed for emerging themes *from* and insights *into* students' experiences.

The author and two graduate students read the reflective papers written by the 108 students who completed this course during the three year period. The readers culled out papers with insufficient responses, leaving 104 writings for analysis. Upon a second reading, the reviewers created separate lists of emerging themes for comparison and contrast. Two of the three reviewers noted "reference to family theory." During a third reading, each reviewer color-coded the papers to highlight five themes that emerged during comparison of lists: (a) attachment to fake family and members—reluctance to end relationship, (b) surprise at actual complexity of resource management in the case situations—cases supported course material, (c) recognition of diversity in decisions made by other students working with the same families and recognition of diversity in decisions made by other students working with other families, (d) theory recognition—increase in appreciation of theoretical frameworks, and (6) frustration with ambiguity.

References to theory recognition occurred at least once in 63 of the papers reviewed (or, in 61% of the papers). Since themes used for this analysis appeared across time in the student writings—they are evident in reflection papers from each separate course section—there is an element of reliability. Specific quotes are presented to serve as exemplars. Because student anonymity was guaranteed from the outset, no identifying information is provided with the quotes.

## Results

As the investigators read through the reflection papers at the end of each semester and once again during data analysis, they expected comments that supported using the Case Family assignments. Comments that directly addressed student experiences with the theoretical

concepts were illuminating. In this section, common themes that the researchers identified are presented with specific student comments addressing those outcomes.

### **Case Studies Supported Course Material**

I finally put the pieces together during the last neighborhood meeting! The Case Families had been created to be examples of families across the lifespan. I had the Omega Family, a senior-citizen couple with an aging mother. My roommate had the Beta Family, a couple with three kids. The families in my neighborhood were from different “family stages”...I think that was part of the family development theory we discussed.

Veteran teachers know why they use certain methods to design their curricula and their class environments. It is refreshing when students realize that their learning experiences were actually planned. Hughes (1994) stressed the importance of well-designed family life education programs grounded in theoretical perspectives, research, context, and application.

### **Enhanced Understanding of Diversity**

When we met in neighborhood groups, at first it was hard to understand why the “same” families might make different choices. Talking about how some theories supported my decisions and some didn’t, helped make sense of that for me.

Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) found that when questioned initially, pre-service teachers did not think diversity issues such as poverty would affect their eventual effectiveness as teachers. Similar attitudes have been expressed in family life education settings. Because the majority of students in this FRM course are white, middle-class women, it is essential for information and skills to be part of the pedagogy in all program coursework. Grounding student assignments in theory while providing students opportunities to safely explore their pre-conceived stereotypes in application assignments creates the kind of learning environment necessary for diversity development.

### **Reluctance to End “Faux” Relationships**

At the end of the semester I almost felt like I was leaving real family members instead of just a Case Family. This made me think about the symbolic interactionism theory my group “specialized” in. At first I couldn’t understand what the “uniquely self-created aspects” of family meant...but my case family became real and very unique as I interacted with them...writing this even sounds a bit funky. I remember someone in my group used the word, funky, to present our theory to the class.

Successful simulation exercises often result in imaginary personal connections to the artificial groups that were created. Magnuson and Norem (1998) discussed this result in their early implementation of a simulation used for teaching family counseling theories. Newns, Paul,

and Creedy (2015) presented their concept of “action ethics” (p. 246), where such personal investment in curricular activities leads to increased ability to think and act ethically as future practitioners.

### **Increase in Appreciation of Theoretical Frameworks**

Grandma Tau was financially stable when it was only her...she had to take care of her three grandchildren...I didn't understand why she would take on that responsibility in her situations, but when we talked about the family development theory and family systems, I started to understand her reasons.

The initial carousel classroom activity created a shallow level of expertise for each student, with just one of the eight theories underpinning the entire course. With each new case situation, students faced the challenge of explaining their case family's decision using that particular theory. However, students were also challenged to explore any of the other seven theories that might better explain the results. Case report assignments also included a specific theory-related application. By the end of the course and completion of all case reports, students have the opportunity to develop more understanding of their initial theory and to become familiar with the other theory bases.

### **Frustration with Ambiguity**

These cases were a lot of work...a LOT of work. And lots of times I had to really dig for information. At first I was mad about that and I thought the teacher should of given us more complete directions. Now I know she wanted us to have to dig. I remember how many times she said “not all theories will help you when you work with families” and “it is more important that you know how to find information then to be handed it.”

Dudziak and Profitt (2012) believe that the case study format provides students the opportunity to exercise multiple skills necessary for organizing, creating, analyzing, planning, and engaging within the field of family services. Magnuson and Norem (1998) also reported student frustration with limited information and ambiguity in their assigned simulation. They suggest that such reactions approximate actual experiences that students will undoubtedly encounter in their professional practices.

## **Discussion**

The case study analysis supports the premise that simulated application exercises and repetitive assignments both have positive impacts on the student learning process. As a teaching method, the case assignments provide a bridge between students' realities and those of families they will serve as professionals. Although the case study analysis method provides no empirical evidence of being more effective than alternative approaches, student reflections and instructor

observations during this period provide positive evidence that it is an effective instructional method.

Guba and Lincoln (1982) proposed that knowledge is a product of construction rather than of discovery. In other words, what one “knows” is only what he or she has come to believe to be true. New perceptions are illuminated by new information and reinforced through practical application, mixing with older beliefs that people have held for long periods. This challenges generalizations. Students seemed willing to admit that the case study assignments challenged previous stereotypes.

I had a hard time accepting that my “Family” had decided to have both parents work full time. I want to stay at home with my children in the future, but the lifestyle I really want probably won’t let me do that. Talking about the feminist theory and social exchange Theory helped me see that wives and mothers have to balance wants and needs and that women shouldn’t judge other women’s decisions.

Hilton and Kopera-Frye (2006) expressed frustration with the way FRM was evolving in the academic environment. They pointed out that courses preparing future family service providers should require opportunities for students to integrate various levels of family functioning and to comprehend specific information and practical skills that are relevant to other coursework information. Analysis of student-perceived outcomes from the three sections of this FRM course seems to support those ideals and to add theory competence to the mix.

Hughes (1994) proposed that measuring program impact (as the final phase of evaluation within family life education) requires rigorous analysis of coursework and experiential learning using pedagogical reflection. This study measures immediate, end of term comprehension and retention. Purposeful, continued assessment of this impact is important to the field of study. Future assessment should address long term effects of this type of theory and application course design on practicing professionals.

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