

From Abstract to Application: A Journey of an Instructor and Three Doctoral Students in a Family Theories Class

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ABSTRACT. Learning and understanding theory can be challenging not only for students, but can also present an equally challenging undertaking for instructors. Teaching theory requires instructors to transmit abstract knowledge to students through innovative strategies in a learning environment that is supportive of the diversity of students' learning experiences. This article presents a shared teaching and learning experience of an instructor and three doctoral students in an introductory Family Theories course. The teaching strategies illuminate multiple interactive, systematic, and reflective techniques offered to students to facilitate the learning experience. Students discuss their distinctive challenges and stratagems used for learning and understanding family theories through collaborative and shared learning approaches. Each student reflection highlights a particular learning trajectory leading to an application of the theory.

Keywords: family theories, teaching strategies, reflections

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Family scientists recognize that learning theories is important to conducting scientifically sound research and using evidence-based practices in clinical, educational, and public policy settings (Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005; Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Descriptions of the three major journals the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) publishes -- *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, and *Journal of Family Theory and Review* (2015) -- also clearly emphasize linkages among theory, research, and practice in family science. Despite recognition of the importance of incorporating theories in practice and research, teaching family theories is a challenging task. Very few empirical resources guide us on how and what to teach in family theories courses. Because of this lack of guidance, the insights that Murry, Rosenblatt, and Wieling (2005) and other family scientists provided in their chapter are rare treats for teachers of family theories. In this paper, we add to their precedent by sharing a systematic approach to teaching an introductory course on family theories at a graduate level using interactive and reflective strategies. We also share our journeys of exploring family theories as the instructor and the doctoral students who were new to a family science program.

Teacher's Reflection: How to Support Students to Learn Family Theories

During the first day of my family theories class meetings, I often ask students what they think about theories. During this conversation, students often depict theories as “hard” things to learn; “vague” concepts to grasp; and “too big” to apply. Due to their career interests as practitioners or applied scientists, which I describe below, my students often are eager to learn about practicality of theories. That is, they want to learn about how theories can help them better understand families who they serve through applied research projects, and how theories can guide them to serve families more effectively in their practices. To respond to students' needs while teaching specifics of each family theory, I implement the following systematic, interactive and reflective teaching strategies in my family theories class.

Rationale for Learning Objectives and Activities: How Do I Design the Course?

There are no concrete guidelines for family theory instructors to use when choosing theories or textbooks for their classes. As Murry and colleagues (2005) emphasized, however, I believe in drawing effectively and appropriately from newer and classic theories, familiar and less familiar theories, and primary and secondary sources. Doing so helps me best meet students' learning needs and to address my academic training and personal teaching philosophies. My teaching philosophy is to prepare students to transform knowledge into practice; appreciate diversity while working with families; and practice effective collaboration as family

professionals (Lee, 2012). I also stress the importance of interactive, reflective learning (Lee, Davis, Khaw, & Nittolo, 2014). Reflective learning involves a catalytic process that uses multiple ways of knowing (Horton-Deutsch & Sherwood, 2008). That is, reflective students will gain knowledge, have better understanding of what they know, and their knowledge into practice more effectively. Reflective learning generates lifelong adult learning outcomes by helping students move from focusing on gaining technical information to contextualizing the given information. As a result, reflective students are more likely to better understand themselves, describe their experiences, analyze the situations, develop new perspectives, and systematically evaluate their learning processes (Horton-Deutsch & Sherwood, 2008). In my family theories class, I exercise my teaching philosophy and the systematic, interactive, and reflective teaching strategies through the following learning objectives, required course materials, and three major course assignments. They are implemented to enhance students' theoretical reading comprehension and their ability to apply major family theories to diverse real life family issues in safe and collaborative manners. I also incorporate Bloom's (1956) taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and Gardner's (2011) multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 2009; Berk, 2009) in curriculum development to facilitate systematic, interactive, and reflective learning environments.

First, Bloom's (1956) taxonomy is one of the most frequently cited pedagogical frameworks in curriculum development. The major contribution of Bloom's taxonomy is to recognize a hierarchy in cognitive skills ranging from lower-order cognitive skills (e.g., remembering) to higher-order skills that require more sophisticated, deeper learning and cognitive processes (e.g., creating). In general, the assumption is that higher-order cognitive skills are built on lower-order cognitive skills. A series of articles featuring detailed information about the theory and the application of taxonomy in curriculum development appears in the journal *Theory in Practice* (Volume 41, Issue 4). This taxonomy is particularly effective for developing valid learning objectives and assessing students' learning aligned with these objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Therefore, learning objectives in my theory course advance from development of lower-level cognitive skills (i.e., remember and understand facts about each theory) to higher-level cognitive skills (i.e., apply gained knowledge of theories into analyzed movie clips), and finally to the highest-level of cognitive skills (i.e., evaluate existing theories and create their own theoretical models) through reflective learning experiences.

Gardner's (2011) multiple intelligences are another pertinent and popular educational theory in reflective, experiential learning. This theory argues that students have different preferred learning styles. Teaching students with different methods makes it more likely that students will recognize their preferred learning styles and learn using other styles (Darling, Cassidy, & Powell, 2014). Gardner originally proposed seven intelligences (linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical/rhythmic, bodily/kinetic, visual/spatial, intrapersonal, and interpersonal intelligences), later adding naturalistic and existential intelligence as eighth and ninth intelligences (Armstrong, 2009; Gardner, 2011). Taken together, Gardner's multiple intelligences are an effective tool for designing teaching strategies to facilitate interactive, experiential, and reflective learning (Darling et al., 2014). My course assignments are developed to be grounded in the multiple intelligences approach to enhancing students' learning

experiences of family theories in various ways. These include reading (Steps 1, 2, & 3), interactive, hands-on-thinking activity based presentations (Steps 1 & 2), movie application (Step 2), and writing (Step 3), as described below. Further details on the theory of multiple intelligence and how to use multiple intelligences in education appear in Armstrong (2009), Berk (2009) and Gardner (2011).

Learning objectives. The *Family and Child Studies Master's* and the *Family Studies Doctoral* programs at Montclair State University (MSU) emphasize multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches to preparing students to be practitioners and scholars devoted to supporting diverse families and their members around the globe. This emphasis means that many graduate students in our programs are practitioners or applied researchers working directly with diverse families in various human services agencies and education settings (Family and Child Studies Department, 2015). Consequently, students enrolled in *FCST 640: Family Theories* are often familiar with child development theories, pedagogical approaches, and clinical models they use in their practices. Very few students, however, have family science backgrounds, so they have not been exposed to historical and contextual information on classic family theories used frequently in the family science field..

Therefore, I have designed my family theories class so that students can achieve these learning outcomes: (a) understand an historical overview of development of family theories (Bloom's taxonomy-Remember & Understand), (b) understand key concepts and assumptions of various family theories (Bloom's taxonomy-Remember & Understand), (c) understand components of theory and the process of theory development (Bloom's taxonomy-Remember & Understand), (d) engage in inductive and deductive thinking about various family interactions and issues (Bloom's taxonomy-Apply & Analyze), (e) apply family theories to contemporary family interactions and issues critically (Bloom's taxonomy-Apply & Analyze), and (f) connect theory, research, and practice (Bloom's taxonomy-Evaluate & Create).

Selection criteria for required reading materials. Since many of the students who take FCST 640 with me often lack a foundation in classic family theories, I assign *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (*Sourcebook* hereafter) (Boss et al., 1993) as our primary textbook. *Sourcebook* provides significant details of historical development, key concepts and assumptions, and strengths and limitations of major family theories (Learning Objectives 1 and 2). I also assign supplementary contemporary journal articles and book chapters that provide more context on using particular family theories in contemporary family science research and practices, such as ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007), critical race theories (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010), and social organization and community capacity (Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Using *Sourcebook* along with contemporary research articles enhances students' understanding of the theory development process. These texts also bolster understanding of how family scientists have helped the evolution of various contemporary family theories grounded in the field's classic theories (Learning Objectives 1, 2, and 3).

Selection criteria for the required movie. To practice application of family theories (Learning Objectives 4, 5, and 6), I assign *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (Daniels, 2013, *The Butler* hereafter) as part of their required course materials. The movie follows the life course of protagonist Cecil Gains from his work on a plantation as a child to a position at the White House, where he serves as head butler for eight American presidents. The audience is welcomed into Cecil's life experiences against the backdrop of major American events of the 20th century: the civil rights movement, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, and President Obama's election. *The Butler* also depicts family ecology and family systems: the audience watches Cecil, his wife Gloria, and their two sons experience and respond to impactful social events.

Choosing *The Butler* as inspiration for this course is intentional. A rule of thumb for selecting movies appropriate for classroom use is to consider learning objectives, students' characteristics, and movie content and structure (Berk, 2009; Blomberg, Renkl, Sherin, Borko, & Seidel, 2013). In addition to following these general rules, my learning objectives require movies that depict family experience throughout life courses that major sociopolitical events around the globe shape. Choosing a film that addresses social justice and family diversity with a culturally and ethnically minority family's perspective is also important. A movie that meets these two salient criteria, such as *The Butler* or *Milk* (Jinks, Cohen, & van Sant, 2008), is especially useful in helping students better understand how colorism, sexual orientation, immigration, disability, and other relevant diversity issues influence contemporary families over time, while theorizing the families' complex, dynamic lives. Another benefit to choosing a movie based on these criteria is that the movie is unlikely to lose relevance to family issues over time, since the selected movie must be a historical drama.

Using a movie in teaching is not a new idea; the practice has long been known to maximize students' positive learning experiences (Berk, 2009; Blomberg et al., 2013). Similarly, the intersectionality of various aspects of human and family lives depicted specifically in *The Butler* can be an excellent visual tool for guiding graduate students to explore family theories. *The Butler* has been particularly helpful for students seeking to better understand, explain, and predict complexity of family issues by applying multiple family theories to its story.

Procedure: What Will My Students Do in Class?

Step 1: Family theories presentations (Learning Objectives 1, 2, &3). First, each student examines and facilitates in-depth discussions of one of the major family theories included in *Sourcebook*. This requirement focuses on each student's ability to *remember and understand* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) details of the selected family theory. Each student shares this knowledge with the class by coming up with a series of interactive learning activities for one hour, including these key points:

1. Opening (5 min): Students present titles of the theories they will present, learning objectives of their presentations, and agendas of their presentations including times, formats of interactive learning activities, and brief descriptions of each

activity. Students also present three major discussion questions for classmates to consider while participating in their presentations.

2. Detailed description and evaluation of the theory (25 min): Students will discuss the history and current uses of the theory in family science; the scope, assumptions, and concepts the theory addresses; and its conceptual, empirical, and practical strengths and limitations based on their understanding of the *Sourcebook*, required reading materials, and annotated bibliographies of the three most recent empirical articles that use the selected theories prominently
3. Interactive learning activities that explore and demonstrate its major ideas, directions, and uses of family theories (20 min): Students facilitate interactive learning activities to promote further understanding of theories they present. Examples of activities include family genograms (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008) and family play genograms (Gil, 2006) to discuss family systems and development theories. Smith and Hamon (2012) also provide great examples of theory exercises and discussion questions.
4. Concluding discussion of any theoretical limitations and implications for future directions (15 min): Students will wrap up their presentations by facilitating group discussions to answer the three discussion questions that they present at the opening of their presentation.

Through implementing this assignment, I expect students not merely to repeat contents of the assigned *Sourcebook* chapter, but instead to challenge themselves to become active, reflective learners. This exercise should help students (a) gain more holistic understanding of theoretical information, (b) find original yet educational ways of learning family theories, and (b) prepare to apply family theories to real life situations in Step 2.

Step 2: Shared learning projects (Learning Objectives 3, 4, &5). Next, two students as a pair prepare a one-hour presentation to practice theory *comparison, application, and analysis* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to real life settings, using *The Butler*. I expect that this assignment will guide students to experience active learning processes of *understanding, applying, and analyzing* family theories (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). To support students' learning processes, I specifically set aside time for the entire class to watch and discuss *the Butler* together during the second or third week of a semester. I also reserve the movie for this class at the library for those who want to watch it again to prepare their presentations.

To effectively practice application of theoretical knowledge gained through Step 1, each group must come up with a series of interactive learning activities focusing on (a) brief comparative descriptions of two family theories they learned (10 min), (b) synopses of and reasons for the movie scene(s) they selected (5 min), interactive learning activities to deductively apply the selected theories to generate the most and best exploration, description, explanation,

and understanding of the movie (20 min), and (c) discussion of inductive theoretical development, theoretical limitations and implications for future directions (25 min).

Each group must make handouts for the audience, including a 1-2 page(s) comparative analysis of (a) the ways in which each of the selected family theories has generated the best description and explanation of the movie; (b) the ways in which the two selected family theories conceptually, empirically, and practically enhance understanding of the movie; (c) a figure of the theoretical model summarizing their theory application; and (d) a complete list of references they used for preparing their group projects. The next section provides example activities of this assignment in the three students' reflections.

Step 3: Theoretical model development paper (Learning Objectives 4, 5, & 6). At the end of a semester, students develop theoretical models that they may be interested in testing during their Master's or Doctoral programs. The focus of the assignment is to enhance their ability to engage in inductive and deductive theoretical thinking about various family phenomena and to demonstrate it in scholarly writing. This assignment also helps students connect theory, research, and practice based on their personal and professional interests and application of material learned throughout the course. As the final stage of the coursework, this assignment requires students to (a) *analyze and evaluate* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) general findings of the literature on selected topics, prominently used theoretical concepts and hypotheses, general methodological issues, and limitations of the current studies; (b) *create* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) figures representing theoretical models they plan to test and which are derived from the literature; and (c) provide general overviews of their theoretical models and detailed discussions of hypotheses, propositions, assumptions, and concepts they plan to use and test. More specifically, their paper must include these key components

1. Introduction (1 page): Students will introduce the selected content area in family science and provide evidence-based rationale to suggest its importance by utilizing theoretical and empirical research.
2. Literature Review (10-12 pages): Students will provide detailed explanations of the two family theories they selected, including their historic influence in the field of family science and the assumptions, propositions, and constructs of each theory.
3. Theoretical Framework (5-6 pages): Students will draw figures representing theoretical models they plan to test. Next, students provide general overviews of their theoretical models and detailed discussions of hypotheses, propositions, assumptions, and concepts they plan to use and test. Students will also explain how they come up with new concepts, hypotheses, ways to operationalize theoretical concepts, and variables to bring into existing theories.

Students' Reflections: How We Learned Family Theories for the First Time

In Summer 2014, three of us took FCST 640. We all had extensive academic and professional backgrounds in demography, counseling, and psychology before joining the Family Studies Doctoral program at MSU, but all of us were new to the interdisciplinary field of family science. As emerging scholars in this field, we share our stories of learning family theories in the following section.

Hassan's Story with Family Ecology

Before joining the Family Studies Doctoral program at MSU I worked for three years in a national-level research organization in Pakistan. On the first day of the family theories class I was apprehensive because of my unfamiliarity with family theories. As an international student, I was also concerned about my English proficiency, especially while understanding and expressing theoretical concepts to my colleagues. Additionally, my experience applying theories to real life phenomena throughout my previous academic training was very limited. Therefore, I sincerely appreciated the instructor's diverse approaches to teaching family theories. In particular, I obtained strong conceptual understanding of family theories by viewing different illustrations of major theoretical concepts on the white board and seeing several examples of real world experiences. Adding diverse understanding of theory as a lens to explain my practical experience also helped me understand family phenomena and the multi-dimensional applicability of family theories in a richer way.

While working with underprivileged Pakistani families, I learned the importance of understanding reciprocal interactions between families and local environments. I believe that working with families to develop appropriate environments that meet their distinctive needs results in their positive development (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). To practice using theoretical concepts, I decided to apply family and human ecology to concrete examples in *The Butler*. I developed a measureable ecological model grounded in developmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) to explain movie scenes. Since visual illustrations helped me gain better understanding of complex theoretical concepts, I purposefully engaged my colleagues in drawing a model that described how Louis and the college students carried out explicit actions within the school (i.e., microsystem) to change unjust societal structures (i.e., macrosystem) during my shared learning project. This model also described how Louis's actions and his relationship with his colleagues influenced the lives of Louis and his family (i.e., mesosystem). This activity is based on a pedagogical approach that facilitates active processing via the Write-to-Learn assignment, which helps students learn and retain their knowledge better (Gingerich et al., 2014).

As expected, this activity facilitated active discussions about different family ecological systems and their influences on family lives (and vice versa) among students. Responses from colleagues reconfirmed my observations of Louis's story that I made through family and human ecology lenses. Based on my experiences in this class, I believe that giving students a chance to

visualize, discuss, and apply theories to their personal and shared experiences, such as our viewing of *The Butler*, is an effective way of teaching and learning family theories and their applications. After taking this theory class, I decided to use ecological theory as the main theoretical framework of my dissertation research project, thus continuing to work with the theory.

Kaitlin's Story with the Life Course Perspective

As a clinician and practitioner, I find that purposefully applying theory to family circumstance and experience enhances my understanding of theory. For me, theory comes alive when it is applied to a family story, rather when it is explained in the confined instruction of definitions and concepts. This is especially true for theory that presents more as a paradigm or philosophy of practice, such as the life course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). In my experience, high-level and encompassing theoretical perspectives like life course can be more difficult to grasp conceptually when they are not applied directly to family life. Use of a comprehensive symbolic representation of family life as in *The Butler* provided direct application of the life course perspective's concepts and assumptions, influencing my learning of the theory significantly.

A key concept in the life course perspective suggests that family members' life course trajectories are "linked" with one another's trajectories and with time, place, and socio-cultural/historical influences (Elder, 1998; Macmillan & Copher, 2005). The arc of *The Butler* provides various examples of this concept of "linked" lives by depicting the interlocking of multiple role trajectories of all main characters. The movie is edited to show specifically how each character is responding individually to the social events of the time, and also how their individual experiences become intertwined in their family's development. To illuminate the concepts of life course perspective further, I engaged the class in a version of an activity known as a life map (Hall, 2010). In this activity, I asked colleagues to fold a piece of paper in half so there is crease in the width of the paper. On the top half of the paper, I invited them to draw a life line on which they would map significant events experienced in the life of one character of the film (e.g. Cecil). My colleagues then repeated this on the bottom half of the paper for another character in the film (e.g. Cecil's son, Louis). Through the process of linking the two life maps, we reflected on key concepts of the life course perspective including the socio-cultural context of roles and significant transitions in the lives of these characters. More specifically, we reflected on how transitions on one life map might have been influenced by a significant event, role, or transition on the life map of the other.

In my experience, playing with the concepts of role trajectories, linked lives, and socio-historical contexts of the movie characters through the life map activity provided texture and weight to otherwise unfamiliar and obscure concepts. Because the instructor gave us the opportunity to use experiential, symbolic, and interactional learning techniques, my applied skills honed as a practitioner were used as a strength for my emerging identity as a family science scholar. Writing now, a year after taking the course, I notice I have an embodied grasp of the life course perspective and of theories my student colleagues presented. Applying all of them to the

representational example of a family life over time, coupled with the use of experiential activities, made family science theories much more accessible for me to initially learn, and more possible for me to remember over time. It is my hope that this will also be the case for many other students with different learning styles.

Rebecca's Story with the Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange combines theoretical concepts from behavioral psychology (reinforcement), sociology, and utilitarian economic theory (cost-benefit ratios) and assumes that (a) interactions are based on expected rewards or punishments and (b) individuals have access to all information they need to make rational decisions (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). In *The Butler*, social exchange is woven through many characters' decision-making processes. The main characters rarely express verbally what they are considering when making choices, but social exchange is clearly featured before important transitions in their lives. By observing experiences, dynamics, and interactions of the Gaines family, I found it easy to recognize social exchange in action. For example, when Cecil, the main character, decides whether or not to take a job at the White House, he must weigh the position's costs and benefits. On the one hand, the job will bring Cecil more money and power and enable him to provide for his family. On the other hand, this position comes with costs, such as Cecil's being unable to share his work experiences with family and being required to work long hours as an invisible man among some of the most powerful men in the world. After we watched the movie once in class, I spent the next three weeks reflecting on how *The Butler* may have illustrated social exchange theory. My understanding of this theory and how it could be exemplified in a family grew because of the opportunity to consistently identify social exchange processes in multiple scenes.

One unique experience of the shared learning project was that Kaitlin and I collaborated to present combined analysis of scenes in *The Butler* using two different theories. We applied life course and social exchange theories simultaneously, solidifying differences and similarities between these theories while analyzing selected scenes. Through this process, we not only saw how the decision-making process of each member of the Gaines family had grounding in social exchange, but could also see how each decision affected individual family members' transitions at particular moments in their life courses and through the course of history. That is, integrating the social exchange and life course perspectives helped us better describe how the Gaines family and their members made meaning about what occurred at several significant transitional moments. Theoretical blending broadened our understanding of family members' decision-making processes within *The Butler*'s unique contexts of couples, families, communities, and historical time.

Despite my limited academic background in family science, taking an interactive course of family theories acquainted me quickly with family theories and relevant scholarship. In particular, shared learning environments provided a safe space for class discussions and allowed us to think aloud as we integrated each new theory into our own paradigms for this interdisciplinary field of family science. As I write, a year has passed since I was enrolled in this course. Even now, I am convinced that this course and the manner in which it was taught

solidified my understanding and recognition of family theories we discussed, especially the theory assigned to me. I am willing to testify that having the opportunity to learn and apply theory to a movie heightened my continuing understanding of such theories. I can also attest to my positive experience in subsequent graduate courses. In general, compared to cohort members who did not take this course and had comparatively traditional courses in family theories as undergraduate or master's level students, I have a more complete, contextualized understanding of the theories we studied, using *The Butler* as context.

Conclusions

Teaching and learning family theories are not easy tasks. However, we agree that sharing theoretical discourses in FCST 640 was one of the most exciting and thought-provoking journeys we have taken as an instructor and as doctoral students in the family science field. A systematic three-step approach to teaching family theories facilitated our collaborative, interactive, and reflective learning experiences. Each of us became peer educators and presented contexts rich with diversity where we developed and applied family theories. As reflective learners, we could systematically evaluate our ongoing learning processes and effectively transform our knowledge into our own research, practice, and other coursework we completed. Building theoretical knowledge throughout this course was a rewarding learning experience that helped us better understand the families with whom we live and work.

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