

Imbuing the Study of Family Resource Management with a Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT. Family resource management is a course ripe for inclusion of international approaches and perspectives for a variety of reasons. First, the topic is inherently global; second, family studies students need to be prepared to work with culturally diverse families; and finally, global citizenship is increasingly identified as an aim of liberal arts education. This paper suggests strategies and approaches for imbuing family resource management with a global perspective. It may be of interest to faculty teaching family resource management or other family studies courses who wish to integrate a global perspective into their courses.

Family resource management is one of the 10 family life education content areas recognized by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). Competency in this area is required for certification in family life education. According to NCFR, family resource management involves “an understanding of the decisions individuals and families make about developing and allocating resources including time, money, material assets, energy, friends, neighbors, and space to meet their goals” (National Council on Family Relations, 2009). Family resource management includes the study of family goals and values, decision-making processes, and wants and needs. Courses in family resource management are commonly offered at the undergraduate level as a requirement for students in family studies or related programs.

The study of family resource management warrants a global perspective because family resource management issues are inherently global and family studies students should be prepared to work with diverse families. Furthermore, imbuing the study of family resource management with a global perspective supports the general movement toward global citizenship as part of universities’ liberal arts mission.

Family Resource Management Issues are Inherently Global

DeFrain and Asay (2007a) argue that families are the basic units of every society and that healthy individuals within healthy families are the bedrock of society. Availability and effective utilization of resources are critical to developing and maintaining healthy individuals and families, and by extension, healthy societies. Clearly, there are differences in the resources available to different societies and the ways that societies choose to allocate those resources. For example, gender roles, size and proximity of homes, hours worked per week, leave time, and household structure are approached differently in each country.

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Resource management is a critical issue for families across the world. Indeed, “resource management and environmental stewardship” is identified as one of the seven revolutions, or key areas for global opportunity and risk, by the Global Strategies Institute (2009a). Clearly, sustainable development and efficient use of resources are global family concerns. It is important for students to understand that the resources and needs of families in different parts of the world impact each other. It is worthwhile to consider resource management challenges and issues of American families in comparison to families in other parts of the world. Appreciating concepts even as basic as how family is defined can be enhanced through research on lifestyles in other countries. A global perspective allows us to contextualize resource management issues and help students develop a broader understanding.

Student Preparation

Family studies students should be prepared to work with diverse families and to understand social issues from a global perspective. Culture and diversity impact identification and allocation of resources and families’ worldviews influence their decision-making. Wants and needs are influenced by history, politics, and the environment (Moore & Asay, 2008). Additionally, family communication is a key topic in family resource management and family communication styles, too, are culturally bound. In their textbook on family resource management, Moore and Asay state:

Families exist within the cultural contexts of race, ethnicity, religion, politics, and economics. These frameworks impact the way individuals and families define and evaluate their relationships. As the global community continues to evolve, it is important to recognize, understand, and be responsive to cultural differences between and among cultural groups. (p. 40)

We live in a multicultural society. The U.S. is a diverse society comprised largely of immigrants; it is anticipated that the white majority who are European descendents will become the minority by the year 2050 (DeFrain & Asay, 2007b). Family life educators work with people from cultures across the world. Asay and Hennon (1999) point to an increasing interest in global understanding among family studies scholars and professionals. Robila and Taylor (2005) propose that understanding family issues from an international perspective will facilitate students’ ability to work with families and scholars from different cultures. Thus, understanding the cultures that families in the U.S. come from will help American family life educators work more effectively with American families, appreciate the diversity of American families, and be more sensitized to culture and diversity.

A global approach can give students a broader understanding of issues. For example, approximately 60 percent of single-parent families in the U.S. live in poverty; however, this figure is 43 percent for Germany, 14 percent for Italy, and just 6 percent for Sweden (DeFrain & Asay, 2007b). Looking at this issue globally rather than domestically may help students to understand how different social welfare systems impact vulnerable families. Smith and Ingoldsby (1992) note that nearly any topic studied by family researchers can be and is examined comparatively within a global context. In the words of Robila and Taylor (2005), “educating family studies students about global issues helps produce competent professionals ready to tackle the current issues of society” (p. 35).

Global Citizenship

There is a lot of rhetoric today about global citizenship. Global economic crises and terrorism are ever-present reminders that the world is small and interconnected and events in

one part of the world can impact lives everywhere. Global citizenship is the positive and optimistic notion of individuals who are civically aware and engaged. Oxfam Great Britain (2005) suggests that the global citizen is aware of and has an understanding of the world around him or her, values diversity, is involved in the community on a variety of levels, does not tolerate social injustice, acts to make the world more equitable and sustainable, and accepts responsibility for his or her actions. In focus groups with students in British Columbia, researchers found that participants described global citizenship as a “consciousness” and “commitment to the principle of one planet, in which the interests of individuals are viewed in light of the overall needs of the planet” (Lyakhovetska, 2004, p. 12).

The movement toward global education to provide students with an international perspective has been advanced in the secondary school social science curriculum since the 1960s and ‘70s (Zhao, Lin, & Hoge, 2007; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2003). Universities, too, espouse the idea of global citizenship and often include in their mission statements a desire to facilitate the development of global citizens. Braskamp (2008) suggests that a liberal education is necessary for global citizenship. He writes, “Leaders and citizens of tomorrow need an understanding of the world’s cultures, languages, religions, economics, science and technology, and a sensitivity and respect for all cultural traditions” (p. 2). Imbuing the study of family resource management with a global perspective supports the general movement toward global citizenship as part of universities’ liberal arts mission.

Shiel and Mann’s (2006) model for “Developing the Global Citizen” suggests that institutions of higher education can promote global perspectives through curricular and extracurricular activities that focus on global issues, global processes, internationalization, and sustainable development (as cited in Shiel, 2007). Based on their descriptions of these categories, family resource management falls into at least three of these areas. First, family resource management is itself a global issue. Second, family resource management includes a focus on intercultural awareness, which is an element of internationalization. Finally, family resource management includes an emphasis on sustainable development. For example, in family resource management, we discuss resource conservation and societal responsibility as well as the impact of consumerism on society.

Imbuing a Global Perspective in Family Resource Management Courses

I have used a number of activities and exercises to imbue a global perspective in my Family Resource Management course. Strategies used successfully include: having students develop a research paper and a follow-up class presentation on the needs of and resources available to families in other countries; using international comparative statistics to analyze trends in divorce rates, teen pregnancy rates, and other issues pertinent to family life; viewing and discussing photographs of families from different countries; and viewing and discussing videos that compare family life in different countries. Each of these strategies will be discussed.

Research Paper/Presentation

Students were required to write a research paper focusing on family needs and issues in a country of their choosing and then give a brief presentation to the class on their findings. Students chose a wide range of countries across the world. This gave students a chance to explore a country of interest to them and to extend their knowledge of issues discussed in class. It helped students see how family issues are very similar across the world and also to recognize the differences in needs and resources in different parts of the world. It gave students the opportunity to teach one another. Also, since some students are inevitably from

other countries themselves, either as first generation immigrants or as the children of immigrants, it gave students a chance to explore their own cultural backgrounds. For example, one student in the class who was adopted into an Irish family had Columbian roots, and she decided to study Columbian families.

Major themes that emerged from student papers and presentations included topics such as: the evolving roles of men and women, birth control and family planning, domestic violence, childrearing practices, and the impact of poverty and war on families. Smith and Ingoldsby (1992) surveyed instructors of comparative family studies courses to identify elements of course structure and to learn faculty perspectives on key topics and success of the family life education field in keeping abreast of international issues. Several of the themes identified in my students' work also emerged as key topics for inclusion in comparative family studies courses in Smith and Ingoldsby's research, including marital structure and marital power, parent-child relationships, and poverty and social class.

Students were asked for their feedback on the research paper; specifically, what they enjoyed about writing the paper and what was most challenging for them in completing the assignment. Students reported that they appreciated the opportunity to study a country of their own choosing. Many students said they enjoyed studying a country that they had either visited, had a special interest in, or that was part of their own family heritage. Students appreciated the flexibility and creativity of this assignment, as they were given the opportunity to focus on any family issues they wanted to with respect to the country at hand. One student, who focused on Saudi Arabia, wrote:

I enjoyed writing this international family needs and resource paper because I learned so much about their family life with the extended family all living together, their marriages are for the most part still 'arranged', and that they are the number one oil country. I liked learning about their lifestyle, I liked how interested I was in their lifestyle, and I liked how much it opened my eyes to other countries. It was difficult putting their experiences into the right words, it was challenging understanding how differently they live than us, and hard to understand how some of them view and treat women.

Comments like this one suggest high levels of learning and enthusiasm experienced by students.

Examining Data

In Family Resource Management, we often study family trends in the United States such as marriage rates, divorce rates, fertility rates, and so forth. Comparing these rates to those in other countries gives us more data to consider and reflect on rather than just trends in the U.S. Students have been provided with comparative statistics, such as teenage pregnancy data and divorce rate data from different countries. They have also reviewed infant mortality rates, life expectancy, and adult literacy rates from *The State of the World's Children* (UNICEF, 2009). (The web page featuring this report also has a short video on global maternal health that can be a useful teaching tool.) As a group activity, in class, students interpret the data and try to make sense of it. This helps students understand and analyze data and understand how the U.S. compares with other countries on key family life issues. Students can consider issues such as why, despite declines, the United States continues to have a substantially higher teen birth rate than other industrialized nations (UNICEF, 2001). It can also help students confront stereotypes. Students can consider how the data compares with their expectations and discuss what this implies about their biases and predispositions.

Global Family Photos

There is an exercise included in the Moore and Asay textbook (2008, p. 80), which is based on photographs from the book, *Hungry Planet: What the World Eats* (Menzel & D'Aluisio, 2007). It involves viewing, reflecting upon, and discussing photographs of families shown surrounded by all of the food that they consume in a typical week. The slides also include information on how much money these families spend on food in a week. Students notice how some families are eating mostly or all natural products and others are eating mostly processed food products. They observe the amount of food families are consuming and the amount of money they are spending. Students discuss issues such as time and how time constraints and perceptions of time value affect whether individuals prepare their own food or opt for pre-prepared alternatives. They discuss the tenuous relationship between wealth and health and the fact that being more prosperous does not necessarily translate into healthier eating habits.

Menzel's and D'Aluisio's earlier books of photographs of families around the world, *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (Menzel & Mann, 1995) and *Women in the Material World* (D'Aluisio & Menzel, 1996), may also be appropriate sources of photographs for class viewing and reflection. Additionally, Peter Menzel's website has an enormous stock on photographs which can be drawn upon (Menzel, n.d.).

Activities such as these can highlight the striking disparities between poor and wealthy nations. They can lead to rich discussions of wants and needs and the relativity of these concepts. Viewing and reflecting on photographs of families from different parts of the world can also lead to discussions of values and can result in a clearer understanding of the relationship between values, wants, and needs.

Videos

The video, *Time Frenzy: Keeping up with Tomorrow* (Gliner, 2004), focuses on Americans' use of time and feelings about time and has been used in Family Resource Management classes to help students consider Americans' time perception in international perspective. The video compares Americans' perceptions of time with those of Italian and French individuals. It suggests that American society is relatively fast-paced, with an emphasis on productivity, while Italian and French cultures tend to be slower and more focused on human relationships. A Frenchman who immigrated to the U.S. gives the example of how, when he first starting working in America, a colleague asked him if he would like to get lunch. The Frenchman was excited about getting to know his American colleague; however, the American simply took the Frenchman to the cafeteria with him, they purchased lunch, and then they both returned to their own workstations to eat lunch separately while continuing to work. The Frenchman expressed shock as a situation like this would not have happened, apparently, in France. The video also deals with issues such as policies and legislation relevant to leave time from work, balancing work and family life, and the impact of our driven lifestyle on children and on our health. This video helps students to see that the way that we conceive of time in the United States is neither the only way to think about time nor necessarily the healthiest or best way to think about time. It opens students' minds to other perspectives on time.

These are just a few examples of ways that an international perspective has been incorporated into Family Resource Management. Other strategies may be used as well. Moore and Asay's (2008) textbook, *Family Resource Management*, provides several international stories, including "worldview" vignettes that offer glimpses into family issues in other countries. For example, there is a story about grocery shopping and availability of fresh

food in Romania (p. 68). These stories may be used as a complement to other strategies to imbue Family Resource Management with a global perspective.

Students appear to have appreciated the study of family resource management with a global perspective. While the curriculum for Family Resource Management can be rather full, a global perspective can build on the existing curriculum and help to make it more meaningful. On evaluations, students have made comments suggesting that they understand families and cultures around the world better and that they learned about the environment and sustainable resources. This class also had a small service component and although students' service did not have to be related to international issues, some students also viewed that experience as relevant to global citizenship. One student commented, "This class has helped me think about the bigger picture in life."

Further Suggestions

It would be worthwhile to build upon the service learning opportunities inherent in an international perspective either through local service with culturally diverse communities and organizations or through actual international service. Service learning may be defined as:

a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222)

Service learning is often used in family studies courses and is valued for its real-world opportunities and benefits to students and community organizations (Karasik & Berke, 2001; Murray, Lampinen, & Kelley-Soderholm, 2006; Ritblatt & Obegi, 2001; Toews & Cerny, 2005). Service learning could be used as a way to engage family studies students in international experiences.

Community-based learning involving interviewing people from other countries and collecting oral histories is another idea. Based upon de Montmollin and Hendrick's (2006) service matrix, community-based learning is similar to service learning in that there is a strong learning component for students; however, community-based learning does not emphasize service in the way that service learning does. It would be fascinating to teach Family Resource Management as part of a study abroad program where students could observe firsthand the needs and resources of families in different countries.

Students who cannot travel abroad can have virtual international experiences. Virtual foreign exchange programs have been offered by university systems to allow students to have an international experience without travelling (Cooper, 2003). The internet can provide a wealth of ideas for global education activities including advocacy (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999). For a comprehensive discussion of the use of internet resources for global education see Selcher (2005).

The Seven Revolutions is a program of the Global Strategy Institute of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C. Researchers have identified seven global revolutions including: population, resource management, technology, information, economic integration, conflict, and governance, as areas that will fundamentally change the way we live – for the better, or for the worse (Global Strategy Institute, 2009a). They suggest that we need to be talking about and thinking about these issues and trends so that we can manage these revolutions and make them work for the benefit of humanity and the world. The Seven Revolutions website includes a series of short

video interviews with scholars on issues pertinent to the revolutions. Faculty in universities across the United States have taken the seven revolutions and created full courses around them or have integrated discussion of the seven revolutions into existing courses. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) has partnered with *The New York Times*, CSIS, and eight college campuses to develop Seven Revolutions courses and materials that can be disseminated.

The seven revolutions appear to be relevant to family studies and in particular to family resource management. Key questions relevant to family studies are whether we have enough food and water, as well as other types of resources, to sustain anticipated population growth and how we can harness the power of technology to educate and inform and reduce global poverty (Global Strategy Institute, 2009a; 2009 b). Using the seven resources as a framework for teaching family resource management could be an innovative and valuable approach.

There are also a number of programs on college campuses involving newspaper readership. These programs make newspapers available to college students and faculty and one aim is to encourage the use of newspapers in courses. Newspapers and current events can help to bring a global perspective into courses and can be a valuable complement to other strategies in family studies courses.

Measuring Outcomes

Appropriate goals for such activities include: exposing students to and developing students' interests in countries and cultures different from their own, preparing students for work with culturally diverse families, developing students' capacity to interpret comparative data, strengthening students' critical thinking skills, and increasing students' sense of global citizenship.

For faculty interested in imbuing a global perspective into their family studies courses, one obvious question is how to measure the outcomes of this work. Clearly, this will depend on the goals of the course. However, one possible source for measuring outcomes is the Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009), a newly developed survey instrument relevant to global citizenship.

Conclusion

There are several challenges to imbuing family resource management or any family studies course with a global perspective. Few family studies programs offer courses on international families (Robila & Taylor, 2005). Faculty may not be aware of resources to support them and may not have the time to develop new teaching materials. Faculty may feel uncertain about their knowledge and expertise in family life in other parts of the world and may not wish to convey this uncertainty to their students.

However, for faculty interested in this area, there appears to be an opportunity for the development of such courses as well as research on best practices in the teaching of international family issues. While my experience is with Family Resource Management, an international perspective can also be used with other family studies courses as well. Smith and Ingoldsby (1992) suggest strategies such as having students research their own family heritage and bringing in guest speakers from different countries and backgrounds. Faculty can also build upon their own experience living, travelling, or volunteering abroad.

Not just classes but whole departments of family studies may consider moving toward an integrated international approach. This could include specific coursework in international family studies as well as additional courses that embed global perspectives into the existing curricula. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to consider the inclusion of a global perspective from a student development framework. A foundation in global knowledge and cultural

understanding, followed by opportunities to apply such knowledge in supportive settings, may be ideal for student growth.

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