

Survival Tips for New Family Science Professionals

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ABSTRACT. Transitioning into an academic position can be challenging on a number of levels. Using examples from my first two years as an Assistant Professor of Child and Family Development in a rural town outside Savannah, Georgia, I illustrate my professional journey as a family science educator. A feminist standpoint framework (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1998) embedded within the overarching theme of life course theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Elder, 1998; Hareven, 1987) lends itself to chronicling this process, via reflection on my experiences and those of my students in the setting of family science education. The paper ends with concrete recommendations and tips for new professionals within family science.

Keywords: teaching, family science, new professionals

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As individuals entering colleges and universities become increasingly more diverse, educators must adapt and respond to new direct and indirect demands of students. Many institutions within higher education have responded to this trend with initiatives, programs, and policies designed to support diversity and help students as they transition to college (Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009). However, there are few comparable supports for new faculty. Using examples from my first two years as an Assistant Professor of Child and Family Development in a rural town approximately 60 miles outside Savannah, Georgia, I illustrate my professional journey as a family science educator. Integration of feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1998) embedded within the framework of life course theory (Elder, 1998; Hareven, 1987) aids my exploration of the internal and external elements that have impacted my transition to teaching family science at Georgia Southern University. Utilizing this theoretical groundwork, I focus on attempting to understand how my standpoint intersects with those of my students within the family science education setting and I reflect upon lessons learned thus far.

Developing as an Educator

For me, the decision to teach about families was not a spontaneous one. There was no defining “ah-ha” moment, no epiphany, no revelation, and no critical juncture. My path through the many tributaries of family science has been a gradual, systematic one that continues to develop and expand. Through reflection on personal experiences, anecdotal evidence from students and colleagues, and the essential interplay between demographic characteristics and social environment, I have come to realize the very nature of teaching family science in my shoes.

Context matters, and no matter how many times I say this to students, it feels different when referring to my own place in the world of education. After having recently uprooted myself from the Northeastern corridor of the United States, I find myself living, breathing, and teaching in unfamiliar territory. My transplant from living on the outskirts of a city to a very rural town in Georgia has made me realize the true nature of situated knowledge.

Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Each of my students operates from a different standpoint (Harding, 1986; 1987) shaped by their experiences, demographic variables, and belief systems. Standpoint theory evolved from roots within feminist theory and Marxism. The most salient underlying assumptions of standpoint theory include the influence of power dynamics, class structure, sex, and gender (Hartsock, 1998; Hekman, 1997; Roy & Campbell, 2012). These assumptions intersect to create one’s position in society. From this intersection, a standpoint is created. Upon my arrival in rural Georgia, I quickly realized that teaching family science to a body of undergraduates, many of whom had never been outside of their hometowns, let alone their home states, provided some very new challenges stemming from variations in standpoint. Teaching within this context

compels me to remain cognizant of the influence of individual experiences, for myself and for my students. In this light, I see theoretical frameworks I previously adopted within research endeavors as highly applicable to my classroom.

Life Course Theory

Similarly, all my students are developing along the paths of their own academic trajectories, which are akin to the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Elder, 1987; Hareven, 1987.) This educational pathway is situated within the broader context of human development and influenced by simultaneous interactions of multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Renn, 2003). These interactions at the familial, peer, school, work, and cultural levels are dynamic, not static; they maintain the developmental environment in which our students learn (Renn, 2003). Since I teach courses with sensitive content areas (e.g., sexual behavior, diversity, racism, privilege, gender, prejudice, discrimination), I believe it is imperative that I recognize the influence developmental pathways can have on student learning, across time and place.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Let Go of Preconceived Ideas about Baseline Knowledge

The overwhelming majority of my students are female, holding varying positions within our society, and experiencing a range of micro- and macro-level oppressions (Allen, 1988; Collins, 1999; Harding, 1987). Students arrive in my classroom in numerous ways: some are first generation college students within their families, some have decided to participate in higher education despite family members' viewing this as selfish and/or futile, and others are here with familial support. Bronfenbrenner (1986) recognized the influential nature of social support and it stands to reason that social support also influences my students' educational attainment. Entering this academic position, I envisioned that the paths of my students would exhibit a degree of *equifinality*, because one of my goals as an educator is to ensure that regardless of what information each student has upon entering, they all leave with equitable levels of understanding to empower themselves and others (Lerner, 2006). I have since learned that there can be no baseline or common starting point in courses teaching value-laden content deeply rooted in religiosity. Thus, my ideas about equifinality and course goals needed to be reworked – and quickly.

For many of my students, exposure to new information pertaining to sexuality conflicts with values and belief systems of their upbringing (Sherkat, Powell-Williams, Maddox, & De Vries, 2011). I have incorporated religion into all of my classes at Georgia Southern University, because there are facets of development that these belief systems influence, directly and indirectly.

A primary illustration of the interplay between religiosity and education is the variation in content surrounding sex education. To be forthright, I have fallen behind in my syllabus for Sexuality in Human Development repeatedly because the students had so many questions during lectures pertaining to contraception and sex – a result of having been exposed solely to

“abstinence only” sex education before my course. For example, during my first semester a student asked if it is possible for a woman to give birth a litter of puppies if she engages in sex with a dog. There has also been a significant amount of pushback from students. Intuitively, I know that people do not like to be ushered out of their comfort zones. Many students expressed levels of cognitive dissonance when asked to evaluate the role religion plays in their education, values, and views of social issues. This reaction has prompted me to reevaluate my role as an educator at the undergraduate level in this context. More specifically, educating students who enter my classroom with such a wide range of information surrounding gender and sexuality makes it difficult to identify appropriate starting points.

In response to this realization, I have reframed the issue and now view it as a potential source of strength both for students and family science educators. As an interdisciplinary field, we are adept at engaging with research and theoretical frameworks from many bodies of literature. This provides us the ability to adapt to each group of students accordingly. I believe this flexibility commissions us to evolve with each cohort of students, but to do so, we must let go of our preconceived ideas about starting points for courses that address content so intertwined with value systems.

Lesson 2: Acknowledge the Strain Between Standpoints

Given that I am a transplant to the South who is openly gay with my colleagues and gender nonconforming, and because I present information that the majority of my students have never been exposed to, acclimating to one another’s perspectives was bound to be a gradual process. With the understanding that knowledge and meaning are often tied to specific social locations and power dynamics (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002), I found myself trying to maintain a delicate balance between the desire to practice effective teaching and the need for self-preservation – and this was absolutely exhausting.

My standpoint has created discomfort for me personally because I have struggled to make sense of student responses that were, in my estimation, blatantly homophobic, sexist, and racist. These critical moments in teaching family science have and will continue to shape me as an educator and as an individual. There were times during the last two years where I questioned whether or not I had made a healthy decision, in terms of my own well-being, to work in a part of the country that has historically marginalized gender and sexual minorities and continues to do so.

More specifically, the issues I contend with on a daily basis regarding my own gender expression and sexual orientation were magnified upon my arrival in the Southeastern corner of the country. While students and the community in general have been relatively accepting of my self-presentation, there are always outliers. Androgyny may be sweeping through contemporary fashion trends and most of Europe, but it most certainly is a novelty here. I have constantly contended with student assumptions that predominantly surround my knowledge of parenting without my being a parent, my familiarity with marriage without my being married, my understanding of heterosexual relationship patterns while presumably having no experience in such relationships, and my ability to conceptualize experiences of marginalized groups based on

race and/or socioeconomic status because I am Caucasian, with a position of power with the classroom.

As an educator embedded in an academic setting, it is important for me to reflect on the university culture. Insofar as working and living in the South has required my significant adaptation, I find colleagues are willing to meet me halfway. Initially, things were very abrupt because I interpreted their curiosity as intrusive. As time passed, I realized my history of being marginalized to my gender presentation and sexual orientation made me defensive with other faculty as a means of coping and self-protection. I have had a hard time responding to other faculty telling me that students are inquiring about my sexuality and joking about what I will wear to commencement ceremonies, but I try to remember that my presence here is as new for them as it is for me. This constant strain is something that I, in my naiveté, did not anticipate. Having achieved the same status, I assumed I would be afforded the same levels of respect and dignity as other faculty receive. Yet, for many of students, my gender nonconformity seems to provide them justification for doubting me, my abilities, and my worth as a professor. I am still coming to terms with this strain between my vision of myself as a professor and the visions of students and colleagues. I imagine that many new professionals will have comparable experiences, while likely hinge on different characteristics.

Lesson 3: Perform Cost/Benefit Analyses of Your Teaching Strategies

Congruent with previous research, my disclosure of self-identifying as a feminist teacher has come at a cost (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). Hall and Mitchell (2014) suggest that self-disclosure in the classroom is an active choice. However, nonverbal disclosure occurs implicitly for many individuals that fall outside students' normative expectations of how a professor should look, physically. Not surprisingly, this dilemma was one that I have expended a great deal of energy managing, insofar as once students decide something about an educator, disproving their assumptions can be quite difficult. Consequently, I had to employ varying levels of verbal disclosure to mediate nonverbal disclosure, which I consider to be predominantly out of my locus of control (Rotter, 1975). As a result, I received several negative student evaluation ratings wherein students pointed out that the courses focused too heavily on issues of privilege and power. This finding has also been documented by other family science educators who engage in feminist teaching (Blaisure & Voivunen, 2003; Roy & Campbell, 2012). I have also had several students note in their course evaluations that I do not "look like the typical female professor" and that they were expecting someone "in a skirt with a long ponytail."

In addition, students (albeit a very small percentage of them) expressed disdain for my openly stating I was operating from a feminist standpoint perspective. Two of them left anonymous feedback stating they felt pressured to agree with what I said simply because someone in a position of power said it. This finding overlaps with information in Few-Demo's (2015) work surrounding the dilemmas that faculty members who authentically presenting their own feminist teaching perspectives face. As a follow-up to Hall and Mitchell's (2014) suggestion of attending to one's tone when self-disclosing, I also found that when compounded with stigmas attached to other facets of my identity (e.g., gender expression), not even the most cautious of deliveries could offset risks associated with self-labeling as a feminist teacher.

Moving through my first two years, I found negative student responses disheartening. This prompted my realization that, for some of my students, their conceptions of feminist ideology threaten their belief systems. For instance, many of the students in my classes plan to marry and have children. A number of my students went so far as to joke about obtaining their “M-R-S” degrees. In relation to such comments, I have to come to recognize that my self-identifying as a feminist teacher may disempower students who feel at odds with stereotypical views of the foundations of feminism. Notably, however, the overwhelming majority of my students reported benefiting from my level of transparency and thought that my teaching style was a “breath of fresh air.” From these experiences, I have learned that by working to be authentic in my efforts to empower students, I may very well risk alienating segments of them (Hall & Mitchell, 2014; Hess, 2005). Moving forward, I am better prepared for this risk and I believe the strengths of this approach outweigh its weaknesses. However, continuous reassessment of the costs and benefits of this approach to teaching is paramount, since each student cohort is unique and may respond differently.

Lesson 4: Capitalize on Reciprocity

Over the last two years it also became evident that teachable moments possessed potential for reciprocity. My students and I are both learning through our exchanges. In this sense, family science is an inherently reflexive endeavor whether our students are conscious of that or not. Examining reflexivity from within the family science classroom, one sees its application in terms of the extent to which students and professors self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, and biases. Levels of awareness, acknowledgement, and ownership of these biases vary tremendously among students and family science educators, but nonetheless shape interpretation of information (Creswell, 2013; Few-Demo, 2015; Hall & Mitchell, 2014; Naples, 2003).

As I reflect upon having embarked on a journey to a new position, a new home, and in many ways, a new life, I see room for growth on personal and professional levels. My journey as an educator continues to extend beyond university property here in Georgia. The town surrounding the university is small, with its population hovering around 30,000 people. More specifically, over 40% of this population lives below the poverty level. This disparity creates a fairly stark contrast between university workers and students on the one hand, and members of the general community on the other. Despite such adversity, these students come to class, they participate with fervor, and they are eager to work in our field. Many of my students express desires to effect change in their communities, to educate families and help children, or to teach. Research has demonstrated that empowerment of undergraduates can increase their self-efficacy and enhance their desires to learn (Werner, Voce, Openshaw & Simons, 2002). In turn, the motivation I see in my students helps me learn how to be a more effective educator and prompts me to empower them in any way I can. I must keep in mind that transformative experiences may take place in my classroom not only for my students, but also for myself, because their drive motivates me as well. This level of reciprocity is a critical component of all teaching, but is perhaps most salient within family science given the readily applicable content we teach.

Conclusion

At the beginning of each semester, I like to think I am a little more prepared than I was at the start of the previous term. Perhaps, more realistically, I have learned that self-preparation is just as, if not more important than, course preparation. As I continue moving through my own journey as a family science educator, I remain acutely aware of how myriad demographic variables, predominantly my gender presentation and sexual orientation, shape my delivery and reception of information in my classrooms. Similarly, as students traverse their education in family science, it is important to help them be aware of their comprehension of standpoint and how it influences their interpretation of course material.

For new professionals entering family science, academia's pressures can make transitioning to a position in higher education daunting. This adversity is often compounded by external pressures from within and outside the classroom. My hope is that the tips offered here will help new professionals offset some issues I encountered immediately upon transitioning to academia. I routinely remind myself of these tips as I continue my professional journey within family science.

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