

An Undergraduate Course in Adult Development: When the Virtual Adult is an Adult¹

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Abstract.— An aspect of an undergraduate psychology course on adult development was the preparation of case records on adults who consented to be studied. Participants (1) developed their abilities to observe and accurately record adult behavior across a variety of ages and contexts; (2) withheld judgments about behavior when evidence was lacking; (3) substantiated statements about behavior with evidence; (4) sought the meaningfulness and/or function of behavior; (5) gained knowledge and appreciation of what adults are up against at different ages and stages of the lifespan; (6) came to understand the developmental tasks of adults at various ages; and (7) became aware of the different views of human behavior.

Instructor's Description

This course seeks to sensitize the students to the theories and reality of adulthood and aging by introducing them to selected literature on adult development and to the preparation of a case record that includes mastering activities that permit an analysis of the adult's world.³

Course Objectives

Participants will: (1) develop their abilities to observe, objectively and accurately record, and interpret adult behavior across various ages and a variety of contexts; (2) withhold judgments about behavior when evidence is lacking; (3) substantiate statements about behavior with evidence; (4) seek the meaningfulness and/or function of behavior; (5) gain knowledge and appreciation of what adults are up against at different ages and stages of the lifespan; (6) understand the developmental tasks of adults at various ages; and (7) become aware of the different views of human behavior.

The Activities

Participants recruit adult candidates for study

Participants ask several adults with whom they have regular contact for permission to write brief accounts of their activities. Participants assure the adult candidates who consent to be studied that they will not write anything about them that they would not want written about themselves. The consent is limited to dates within the semester of the adult development course. The adult candidates are also advised that they may not be the adult selected for study. Participants maintain the case study subjects' privacy by not identifying them in any way.

Fictitious names are used in writing the case study record. They note ordinary activities that they observe or that they are told about. Each participant obtains a signed consent form from each adult candidate for study. Profiles of the two adults who gave permission are shared with the participant's study team. The participant's team decides which of the adults will be studied. After the team members identify the adults for each participant to study, the information and permission slips for those not selected and the permission slips for those selected for study are submitted to the instructor and secured. Hereafter, the participant's team will assist in the analysis of the case study record. Access to the case study records is limited to the participant, the 4 or 5 members of the participant's study team, and the instructor of the course. When the course ends, the case study record will be given to the instructor for grading. After some time, it will be destroyed.

Benefits/risks of the activities

Those adults being observed will assist the course participants studying adult development by allowing them to borrow behavior to learn and master activities that permit analysis of and understanding of an adult's world. Each of the adult study participants and teams are oriented to and requested to commit to a code of ethics to insure the protection and confidentiality of the adults being studied. The code provides that all information in the written case study records is kept confidential which means inaccessible to non-team members. All information presented and the discussions during team meetings must be safeguarded by all members of the team. Teams review the code of ethics at the beginning of each class meeting. If these guidelines are followed, no foreseeable risks are involved in the case study activities process.

Writing behavioral anecdotes

Information for the case study activities is based upon ordinary daily observations and conversations. The observations, conversations and other information are written out by participants in a bound composition

¹ In 2005, the case record on the adult was in lieu of a virtual adult computer program similar to "Sniffy" the virtual rat computer program for the study of behavior (Alloway, Wilson, & Graham, 2005).

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³ The activities for analyzing the adult's world are based upon activities developed and applied to the study of children and adolescents (e.g., Gay & Williams, 1993; Prescott, 1957, 1962; Williams & Gay, 1998).

notebook in the form of dated anecdotes. Participants are expected to write three to four behavioral anecdotes each week. They confidentially share their anecdotes with their team and work together analyzing, coding and interpreting them. Only anecdotal information that is written in the case record is communicated (read) to the team. This insures that the information given to team members about the adults being studied is documented and available for use during all the case study activities.

Case study record building occupies the time of the team members for about the first six to seven sessions. During these sessions, the team members provide feedback to one another about their anecdotes based upon the criteria / characteristics of a 'good' anecdote. The guidelines for the characteristics of a good anecdote taken from Prescott (1957) are: (1) Inclusion of the date, place, and situation. This is the setting. (2) Describes the actions of the adult, reactions of others involved, and the responses of the adult. (3) It quotes what is said to the adult and by the adult during the action / interaction. (4) Includes 'mood cues'—postures, gestures, voice qualities, and facial expressions that give cues to feelings. (5) Goal is a little vignette of a behavioral moment in the life of the adult.

Along with feedback about whether the anecdotes meet the criteria, the team members also learn to *discriminate objective* from *subjective* information. Parentheses are placed around anecdotal information that is determined to be *subjective* as in the example from the case of Linda Smith (a pseudonym), a 45-year-old, given below.

January 9 9:15AM Clothing Outlet

Linda is 45-yrs-old and works with me in a clothing outlet. Linda is often assigned the task of restocking the shelves at various locations throughout the store. When she has spoken to me, she usually does not look directly at me but to the side or down. (She often seems to hide behind her hair that hangs around her face.) (Linda is very soft spoken and does not tend to initiate conversations.) (She is not as well groomed or stylish as many of the other sales associates.) Her supervisor says of her that she is a very dependable worker.

Categorizing *objective* from *subjective* information continues throughout the case study process. The intention is that participants will be able to attain objective 1 of improving their ability to objectively and accurately record and interpret the behavior of adults at various ages across a variety of ordinary contexts. It is also intended that participants will attain a greater sensitivity to the difference between *objective* and *subjective*

information and how they both contribute to understanding the individual. It is also worth noting that Information shared in anecdotes may raise questions from team members. Participants write the questions and responses to them as anecdotes and the written responses are read to the team. Through their participation the team members become familiar with all of the individuals being studied.

Recurring patterns: One means of learning about current life goals or tasks

There is no time in our lives that we are not being influenced by a personal agenda of life goals or tasks. Havighurst (1972, 1980) refers to each individual's personal agenda as developmental tasks. These are tasks that every individual in a society must master if s/he is to be seen as a successful participant and contributor to society or culture. Developmental tasks are further defined as arising at a certain time in the life of the individual. The timing for mastery is partly determined by maturation and partly by social and cultural expectations. The final element in the definition of developmental tasks is that when an individual masters them at the time deemed appropriate by society, s/he is rewarded by significant others and members of the larger society as being successful. On the other hand, if an individual is not able to master one or more of the developmental tasks at the time prescribed by society, s/he might be regarded as inadequate and less capable.

One way to become aware of the developmental tasks that an individual is working on is to process the case study record applying a Recurring Patterns procedure. The procedure involves reading the record carefully and listing any behavior or situation that occurs two times with the dates of each event. Thereafter, add the dates for each subsequent occurrence of the events. Participants continue listing recurring behaviors throughout the process of writing and sharing the anecdotes with the support of team members.

Examples of recurring behaviors of Linda Smith:

Arrives a half hour earlier for work than her colleagues.

The Profile, 1/9, 1/15, 1/17, 1/20, 1/23, 1/26, 1/27, 2/2, 2/4, 2/9, 2/13, 3/10

Smiles at work. 1/9, 1/15, 1/17, 1/23, 1/27, 2/2, 2/20, 2/23, 3/4, 3/11, 3/11

Comments about visiting her husband at the hospital. 1/15, 1/17, 1/20, 1/23

Expresses feelings of being worried about the cost of her daughter's tuition. 1/15, 1/20, 2/10, 2/19, 3/11

Colleagues comment that Linda works very hard. 1/9, 1/15, 1/17, 1/23, 1/26, 1/27, 2/2, 2/4, 2/9, 2/13, 2/19, 2/20, 2/23, 2/26, 3/11

Expresses concern about her husband who is recuperating from a heart attack. 1/15, 1/17, 1/26, 3/11
 Has positive interaction with a colleague. 1/17, 1/27, 1/29, 2/24, 3/11, 3/11
 Has poor interaction with a colleague. 1/9, 1/23, 2/10
 Her supervisor's comments about her dependability. 1/9, 2/4, 3/11

Insight and understanding of the multiple, complex, and interrelated causes of and influences on recurring behaviors can be gained by applying the multiple hypotheses process. It involves looking over the list of recurring behaviors and selecting any clear pattern of behavior that is of interest or challenge to the participant for analysis via a multiple hypotheses process. The multiple hypothesis process is a guided experience that makes it possible for participants to gain some understanding of the motivations leading to a recurring pattern of behavior in which one is interested. This process is based on the assumptions that:

1. Human beings are goal directed and behavior is an attempt by individuals to move toward desired goals.
2. Behavior makes sense when viewed through the eyes of the individual doing the behavior.
3. A behavior may have multiple causes. These causes are often complex and inter-related.

Using this set of assumptions, one selects a recurring behavior and states it in the form of a question. Why would Linda or any 45-year-old person be so conscientious about her work as a sales associate that she would arrive one half hour earlier than necessary? Participants of the study team brainstormed answers to this question. Examples of their educated guesses are listed below.

Multiple hypotheses

Why would Linda or any 45-year-old person be conscientious about her work as a sales associate that she would arrive one half hour earlier than necessary? Could it be that Linda (+ = fact supporting hypothesis, - = fact refuting hypothesis):

Really enjoys her work as a sales associate. +The Profile, +1/9, +1/15, +1/17, +1/20, +1/23, +1/26, +1/27, +2/2, +2/4, +2/9, +2/13, +3/10

Is encouraged by colleagues and supervisors. +1/9, -1/9, +1/15, +1/17, -1/23, +1/23, +1/26, +1/27, +2/2, +2/4, +2/9, -2/10, +2/13, +2/19, +2/20, +2/23, +2/26, +3/11

Needs the income from her job to support her family. +1/15, +1/20, +2/10, +2/19, +3/11

Is afraid of losing her job. (No data supporting or refuting this hypothesis)

This process usually gives participants confidence about a number of the hypotheses tested and a summary can state this. This task should be completed and shared with the team. The following is an example of a summary statement:

1. Linda receives encouragement from colleagues and supervisors in her work.
2. It appears that she enjoys her work as a sales associate.
3. Linda seems to need the income from her job to support her family.
4. There was no support for being afraid of losing her job.

Coding the anecdotes: Another means of learning about current life goals or tasks

As the case study record becomes more substantial participants are introduced to a further interpretive activity involving a coding process. Information or facts in the anecdotes are assigned to one or more of the following six areas (adapted from Prescott, 1957, 1962; see also Penry, Gay, & Evans, 1991):

1. **Physical**—maturity level; energy output; health; handicaps; skill in body use; physical attractiveness.
2. **Affective**—Is there any information in the anecdotes that tells us about situations and events involving "important others" and their behavior which may tend to increase or decrease feelings of security on the part of the individual? (Intra-family relationships? Close friends? Pets? Other important individuals?)
3. **Social**—cultural background; rural vs. urban; region; social class; family expectations; values; methods to achieve internalization of expectations and values.
4. **Cohort / Peer group**—group acceptance/rejection; activities; roles; status; behavioral codes; group standards.
5. **Self-development**—conception of and feelings about self as influenced by physical, affective, social and peer-group; processes used to work out meanings such as symbolizing, abstracting, generalizing, reasoning, imagining, inventing or creating; intermediate and long-term purposes as revealed through behavior.
6. **Self-adjustive**—quality of the person's feelings about physical adequacy, affective relationships, social significance, status among peers and adequacy as a person; reactions to events that evoke pleasant or unpleasant emotions and how they are coped with when experienced repeatedly or with great intensity.

When a particular fact, behavior or interaction provides information about one of the six areas of the framework, the team member inserts the number for the area in the left-column beside the sentence. In some instances, a

particular fact or behavior is relevant to several areas. In such instances, the participant / team member writes the numbers for each of these areas. Coding is begun during team meetings and continued by team members on their own. Participants often seek advice from the team about their coding decisions. The following is an example of an anecdote with coded facts and information from the case of Linda:

January 15 12:00PM

- 4.12** Linda invited me to join her for lunch today. We had our lunch in the store's restaurant. She ordered a salad and the soup of the day. These choices revealed to me
- 1.06** how Linda remains so thin and fit looking. Our conversation focused on our families. Linda and her
- 2.01** husband have been married for 25 years and have a daughter and a married son. Linda's daughter is still at university and is supported by Linda and her husband. I also learned that Linda has worked in this store for the
- 5.05** past 7 years. She expressed that she really enjoys her work and appreciates the contribution her paycheck makes to her family.

This coding procedure gives organization to the facts and information in the anecdotes. For example, the number 5.05 means that the fact or information is coded as area 5. Self-development and that it was the 5th time data was coded for this area. Participants begin tabulating / listing the coded facts, behaviors or interactions according to the six areas. The tabulation / listing of coded facts, behaviors, or interactions reveals what area or areas are most prominent in this particular adult's world.

Mid-study questions to assist in better understanding case-study individuals

Participants who have been in the Adult Development class since the first will find that they have written 12 to 15 and possibly up to 20 anecdotes. By this time, team members who have been offering guidance and assistance with the coding process are likely quite familiar with all of the adults being studied. Team participants have been asking questions to clarify the information that has been shared with them in the anecdotes. Today, each team is asked to review each adult being studied and propose a question or questions that will help the members better understand the adults being studied. The question(s) should be entered in the case study dated for today. Participants do not limit the questions to those that they are assured that they can answer. It is expected that questions will be posed that one may not be able to answer. Even questions that cannot be answered because of the limitations of the study activities are important to document. Questions that can be answered via our activities should be.

Case Study Summary

A final activity is the preparation of a thoughtful essay summary of the case study record using information from the profile, anecdotes, mid-study question(s), multiple hypotheses, and the tabulated data of the six areas by responding to the following questions:

1. What developmental tasks was this person working on at the time of this study?
2. What personal and/or environmental adjustment problems does this person face?
3. What assets or strengths does this individual possess as a person or in her / his environment?
4. What aspects of this person's experiences have made noteworthy contributions to her / his attempts to learn to resolve various developmental tasks?
5. What might others do, not do, or do differently to facilitate this person's optimum development?

When the essay is completed, it is shared with the members of the study team. Participants note any feedback they receive and request each team member's signature at the bottom of the essay indicating that it has been shared with them. Participants are reminded that the other members of the team are depending upon them for support as the case studies are being completed.

Instructor's observations

Regarding effectiveness, from the perspective of students' / participants' course evaluations were generally positive—receiving an overall average of **1.5** on the instructor evaluations with **1** being positive on a continuum to **5** as negative. It is noteworthy that many of the students / participants who were commuters had access to adult candidates of the most extensive age ranges for study. A case study review form is shared in an appendix.

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**Appendix
Case Study Guide and Review Form**

	NAME:	
1	Code of Ethics	
2	Profile of the individual studied	
3	Comments on group's feedback & recommendations for selecting an individual to study	
4	Anecdote rate is 3 to 4 per week (30 to 40 anecdotes)	
5	Anecdotes have subjective statements identified with parenthesis	
6	Anecdotes become more objective throughout the term of the record	
7	Area 1 Physical Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
8	Area 2 Affectional Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
9	Area 3 Socialization Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
10	Area 4 Peer Group Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
11	Area 5 Self-Developmental Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
12	Area 6 Self-Adjustive Processes— Coded anecdotes <input type="checkbox"/> Tabulated list <input type="checkbox"/> Comments:	
13	Mid-study Questions to Better Understanding Case-Study Subject (Date: _____)	
14	List of Recurring Behavior Patterns	
15	Analysis of Recurring Patterns via Multiple Hypotheses Step	
16	Proposal of at least 10 hypotheses	
17	Hypotheses evaluated for support / refutation by facts in the record	
18	Summary statement on Multiple Hypotheses Step	
19	What developmental tasks was the person working on at the time of this study?	
20	What personal and/or environmental adjustment problems does this individual faces?	
21	What assets or strengths does this individual possess as a person or in her / his environment?	
22	What aspects of this person's experiences have made noteworthy contributions to her / his attempts to learn to resolve various developmental tasks?	
23	What might others do, not do, or do differently to facilitate this person's optimum development?	

Comments: