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Integrating Genograms and Expanded Family Development Theory in an Application Project for a Family Science Course

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes an innovative approach to teaching about family development over the life course through an application project and assesses its effectiveness in student learning. The integration of genograms and expanded family development theory (FDT) into one project aims to provide an engaging and useful structure for the assignment and promote the inclusion of diverse families. In this assignment, students (1) create their family genogram and (2) write an accompanying paper to identify and apply the FDT stages and developmental tasks to each generation of their family. Assessment results demonstrate that this project provided students with a practical opportunity to apply theoretical course content to diverse, real-life families and helped to recognize family trends across generations. Students appreciated the hands-on learning experience and opportunity for self-reflection, which promoted engagement with course materials. Incorporating genograms and the expanding family life cycle helps to overcome the limitations of the original FDT by being inclusive of all families, thus contributing to more effective preparation of competent professionals.

Keywords: family development theory, genograms, expanding family life cycle, family science pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning

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Students' motivation to learn and engage in the classroom increases when instructors adopt innovative teaching strategies, design meaningful and inclusive activities, and emphasize the personal and professional applicability of the family science curriculum. Understanding family theories and being able to apply them to diverse families are essential elements of preparing students for research and practice with families (Smith & Hamon, 2017). Various approaches for teaching family theories have been used by instructors, both at undergraduate and graduate levels, including music-related activities (Willis Hepp, Strum, & Doneker, 2015), analyzing movies (Lee, Raza, Mulcahy, & Swann-Jackson, 2015), building conceptual models (Buehler et al., 2015), and using compassionate engagement (Zaloudek & Barnett, 2015). Applying theoretical concepts to students' personal lives through immersive class activities has been effective in teaching about family development (Hamon & Strong, 2019). Assignments that integrate diversity, inclusion, and reflections with course materials facilitate the learning experience and help develop cultural competency (Muraco, Totenhagen, Corkery, & Curran, 2014).

This paper will describe and assess an application project in an upper-level undergraduate course on family life. It is a required course in a family science and human development program that focuses on family development and transitions over the life course, as experienced by culturally and structurally diverse contemporary U.S. families. The paper will start with the overall course approach with an explicit and consistent emphasis on the inclusion of diverse families, followed by the infusion of family development theory (Smith & Hamon, 2017) with elements of the expanding family life cycle (McGoldrick, Preto, & Carter, 2016). The application project assignment consisting of both a genogram and paper will be described in detail and suggestions for implementing it will be offered. Assessment results will be presented along with supporting quotes to illustrate student learning and engagement.

Recognition and Inclusion of Diverse Families

In order to prepare competent professionals working with families in various settings, family science courses need to recognize and be consistently inclusive of diverse family forms (Muraco et al., 2014). This intentional approach is especially important when learning about family development theory (FDT), which originated in the 1950s and was based on middle-class, heterosexual couples in life-long marriages with children (Duvall, 1977). Both the original FDT and its later modifications (McGoldrick et al., 2016; Smith & Hamon, 2017) are addressed in this course and in the application project assignment, as diverse families of today are discussed. Using an intentionally inclusive approach aligns with course objectives and allows students to explore various family structures and forms, some of which may be unfamiliar to them due to their own upbringing and backgrounds. Recognizing diverse family forms and appreciating their strengths (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985) is imperative for students' professional preparation and future work.

The course begins with a survey of current U.S. family trends and statistics: decline in marriage rates, increase in cohabitation and single living, postponement of marriage and parenthood, decline in fertility, increase in voluntarily childfree individuals and couples, increase in nonmarital childbearing, and the decoupling of marriage and childbearing. The decline of the traditional nuclear family, and the increase of employed mothers and dual-earner households as well as women as the primary providers is noted. Single-parent households, as well as divorced, remarried, and blended families, are addressed as well.

Course materials promote inclusion of all families, including those that have been marginalized and historically less visible: LGBTQ individuals and same-sex couples, families with children with special needs, interfaith and mixed-race couples, as well as ethnically diverse families. The growth of immigrant families in our communities, many of whom also have members residing abroad, thus forming transnational families, is included in class discussions. The rise in aging families due to increases in life expectancy, as well as multigenerational living arrangements and grandparents raising grandchildren, is also recognized. Some of these trends may not be evident to students due to their own limited life experiences, upbringing, community location, or the tendency to assume that other families are similar to their own family of origin.

Awareness of diverse families today prepares students for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of FDT (Smith & Hamon, 2017). Examining how current families may differ in their experiences at each stage of family development and discussing which developmental tasks are easier, harder, applicable, or not relevant is beneficial. Students are introduced to the expanded family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016) and modifications to FDT, and asked to apply them, as will be described next.

Infusing Family Development Theory with the Expanding Family Life Cycle

When teaching about family development theory (Duvall, 1977), course readings on FDT (e.g., Smith & Hamon, 2017) are supplemented with perspectives from *The Expanding Family Life Cycle* by McGoldrick and colleagues (McGoldrick et al., 2016). The purpose is to expand the definitions of family and be inclusive of culturally and structurally diverse families. There are eight original stages of family development: married couple, childbearing, preschool, school-aged children, teenagers, launching center, midlife, and aging family (Duvall & Miller, 1985). It is important to discuss how the expanding family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016) can be applied to various family structures and developmental tasks modified for cohabiting (Sassler & Lichter, 2020) and LGBT couples (Ashton, 2016), divorced and remarried families (McGoldrick & Carter, 2016), and immigrant families (Falicov, 2016). Issues relevant to families with special needs children that may not be launched in the traditional sense and single-adult life cycle that originally would have been outside of FDT are addressed (Berliner, Jacob, Schwartzberg, 2016; McGoldrick et al., 2016).

When incorporating the elements of this family therapy-based model (McGoldrick et al., 2016), it is important to keep it appropriate for an undergraduate level course. While delving into therapeutic issues or family triangles is not pursued, this model's important recognition of diverse family forms in their social contexts is emphasized. In essence, class discussions do not simply mention the limitations and criticisms of FDT (Smith & Hamon, 2017), but instead emphasize how individuals can creatively apply this theoretical framework to include the many varied families of today. For example, the original FDT did not mention same-sex couples or cohabiting couples, but it is fair to conclude that the basic developmental tasks of newly-married couples will also apply to cohabiting/married same-sex couples and heterosexual cohabiting/ remarried couples. Consistently incorporating examples of diverse families in class discourse normalizes these family structures, which resonates with students, validates their family experiences, and helps them develop competency as future professionals.

Students are encouraged not to view FDT as a static, set in stone, prescriptive theory. Instead, they are expected to reflect critically on the theory's strengths and limitations and apply it in flexible ways to their immediate and extended family through the application project described in the next section.

Implementing the Application Project Assignment

This assignment has evolved over 15 years and is a required component of an upper-level undergraduate course on family life. In the process of modifying this assignment across semesters, feedback was sought from the students to assess what was working or not working, with the goal of developing an effective, useful, and engaging assignment.

The application project assignment consists of two parts: 1) a one-page sociodemographic genogram of the family and 2) a four-page paper in which students apply FDT to their family (identify developmental stages and tasks for each generation and analyze sociodemographic changes over generations). Combining genograms and the expanded FDT in the application project offers an engaging framework and useful structure to guide students through this assignment.

Creating Genograms: Identifying All Family Members

Having their individual families represented in a genogram format provides students with a big picture perspective of the three to four generations as they apply FDT in their papers. Students can adopt a more objective and scientific view of their family members. Instead of complicated family relationships that may feel overwhelming, they can see neat squares, circles, and lines that depict the structure of their families, aligned by generations. Using their genograms as a helpful visual, students can then compare the application of FDT within and between their family generations.

Using the Standard Genogram format and basic symbols from Genograms 4th edition (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2020), students are guided in depicting the structure of their families, which include at least three generations: their grandparents; parents, and their siblings, and themselves, their siblings, and cousins. Some genograms may include the fourth generation if students themselves or their siblings/cousins have children. Marriages, divorces, cohabitation, and affairs, as well as the children that these intimate relationships produced, are included in the genogram. Everyone's age, highest educational level, and occupation are to be indicated next to each person's symbol.

Students are instructed on the correct use of symbols for LGBTQ family members to be inclusive of nonbinary and transgender individuals, as well as diverse sexual orientations (LGBQA). Having these symbols alongside the symbols for cisgender individuals and heterosexual relationships acknowledges all individuals, even those who would not have been included in the original FDT. Many of these symbols are represented in student genograms every semester. For example, an uncle in a same-sex relationship with adopted children, a non-partnered lesbian aunt, a transgender sibling, a bisexual self, or a nonbinary family member. Certain students (i.e., nonbinary, LGBT) have expressed concern about being represented on their own genograms; they were relieved and happy to see an inclusive symbol.

Having genogram symbols for birth and death, as well as miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion, however sensitive, allows students to recognize life in all of its aspects. Not only biological children, but also those who were adopted, fostered, or born through donor insemination can be included in genograms (McGoldrick et al., 2020). Overall, having designated and inclusive symbols allows students to recognize all individuals and normalize different kinds of families. It helps them learn that "not all families are the same" and reaffirm the importance of being "open-minded," to use their words.

Incorporating ethnic background and country of origin for students from immigrant families, as well as religious denomination (if important to them), is also possible. Discussions about transnational families that reside in more than one country but are part of students' genograms are an important recognition of our sizable student population with recent immigrant backgrounds and transnational ties. Our university is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, with a high proportion of the student

population raised in Hispanic households as well as many other immigrant-origin families residing in the area. When students write about their extended family overseas, they can include their family members and make valuable cross-cultural comparisons regarding FDT's application.

Although emphasis is placed on the use of genograms in therapy and in the medical field, this project emphasizes only the genogram's basic structure to map out a family's sociodemographic characteristics. The sensitive and complicated issues of drug or alcohol abuse, interactional patterns, and abusive relationships are excluded from this assignment, as they are beyond the scope of this course and the program.

To summarize, by creating their family genograms, students learn to concisely display a lot of information on a single sheet of paper and see the big picture of their families. They learn to read genograms and understand generational lines and connections among their family members, which provide them with a new perspective on the people they know. By extension, students become better prepared to work with and view other families in this way.

Guiding Students through Genogram Creation: Suggestions for Instructors

Provide Examples and Normalize Multiple Drafts

Sometimes students feel apprehension about creating their family genograms either due to their family's large size or because of strained relationships in the family. These concerns can be addressed by providing students with a) detailed instructions, b) diverse examples of genograms, and c) class demonstrations on how to draw genograms and show various complex family relationships (e.g., cohabitation, marriage, divorce, remarriage, nonmarital childbearing, and such). Through it all, it is important to emphasize a need for multiple drafts as students try to fit in every member and align the generations. This approach removes the unrealistic expectation of a perfect genogram on the first attempt and normalizes the iterative process of genogram creation.

It is recommended that students draw their genograms by hand instead of using online programs, which require extra time to input all the information, do not always use correct symbols and genogram structure, and come with a fee. Drawing by hand is a more efficient way to create one's genogram; it also results in a better understanding of genograms and helps to develop skills that can be used in the future. Most students submit hand-drawn genograms, with a minority using graphic design programs for improved appearance. It is important to emphasize that a genogram does not have to be perfect; it needs to be true to the family, neat, and demonstrate the correct use of genogram symbols and structure.

Class Demonstrations and Creating Genograms Together

During several class periods, time is allocated to check in on the progress of genogram creation and answer student questions. Usually, students need guidance on how to position symbols and lines, align generations, or show complicated family connections. It is critical to conduct class demonstrations as it helps to answer many student questions, anticipate any questions still being formulated, and reveal the diversity of family relationships represented in each class. There are two helpful strategies to employ during these class demonstrations. One strategy is drawing on the whiteboard with a marker, erasing as needed, then repositioning symbols and lines in response to student questions. Another strategy is projecting different examples of genograms posted to the course Canvas site and pointing out how various family structures were depicted by previous students (used with permission).

Both strategies are beneficial in their own way. The former strategy helps students feel more confident when creating their genograms (e.g., going through several drafts, and making and correcting

mistakes). The latter strategy increases the students' ability to read and interpret already completed genograms. These regular question and answer sessions work very well in keeping students working on their genograms and helping them advance if they feel stuck.

Peer support is also encouraged by having students share their genogram drafts with each other. An added benefit of seeing their classmates' genograms is the exposure to various family structures and backgrounds. For students who do not feel comfortable asking their questions in class, individual consultations and private feedback on genogram drafts can be offered. Altogether, these teaching strategies are reflective of common principles of good practice in SoTL and Family Life Education methodology (Darling, Cassidy, & Ballard, 2022; Felten, 2013).

Dealing with Difficult Family Situations or Missing Information

It is important to acknowledge that this assignment may not be a positive experience for all students, and instructors need to provide students with the necessary support. Some students may struggle to find needed information to complete their genograms due to strained or estranged relationships. Others may go through difficult realizations when comparing their family relations against the somewhat ideal expectations of FDT. Occasionally, there may be students who went through the foster system or who are middle-aged, nontraditional students with families of their own. These circumstances often require modifications to the assignment.

There are several approaches that can be used to address these challenges. First, assignment instructions should explicitly state that no one will be penalized for things outside of their control. For those students who have no contact with some family members due to estrangement, distance, illness, etc., providing as much information as possible is sufficient. Instructions can also emphasize that it is acceptable to provide the best approximation of ages and significant dates for family members.

Second, for middle-aged non-traditional students with children, a suggested modification is to instruct these students to begin their genograms from their parent's generation instead of their grandparents, who are often no longer alive. This makes them the middle generation on the genogram, as is the case in real life, and allows for a useful application of FDT to their family.

Finally, because self-reflection and thinking about one's family may bring up some difficult issues, all students should be reminded about the campus counseling resources available and be encouraged to seek help if needed. Occasionally, in situations where students have unique or traumatic family experiences, a private conversation during office hours can take place where the assignment can be completed in a modified form to allow a student to fulfill course requirements while not contributing to their personal trauma. For example, a student can be asked to create a genogram of a family depicted in a movie and apply FDT to its fictional characters. Alternatively, a student with no knowledge of their biological roots might base their assignment on the non-biological family that raised them.

When taking courses dealing with family and child development, students reexamine their own family background, dynamics, and upbringing. Despite any potential discomfort, there is a lot of value in examining and rediscovering one's family as a young adult for one's personal growth and in preparation for working with other individuals and families.

Paper: Applying FDT to Several Generations of Students' Families

The second element of the application project is a paper in which students apply FDT to their families by answering three specific questions:

- 1) Apply expanded FDT to each generation of your family as seen on your genogram.

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- 2) Reflect on using a genogram and applying FDT to your family.
- 3) Analyze demographic and social trends across generations of your family.

A four-page limit on the paper is imposed to keep students focused on the direct application of FDT to their family and prevent them from writing extensive stories about their family's history and traditions. Assignment instructions include a detailed rubric with three main questions to address in their papers (see Appendix A), and specific "check yourself" questions to ensure students stay on task and within the page limit. This approach ensures that the application paper will not become an overwhelming assignment and that students can successfully demonstrate their understanding of the expanded FDT. Another purpose of the detailed rubric and imposed structure for the paper is to prevent students from delving into sensitive family issues and complicated relationships that are outside of the scope of this assignment and course.

Both students' informal comments in class and written feedback demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. At an initial glance, the instructions may appear lengthy, but once students start following them, the paper writes itself. Organized and clear instructions accompanied by a rubric make keeping on track easy.

Methods

A qualitative research design was employed using a post-only survey to assess student learning and the effectiveness of course assignments. Consistent with the principles of good practices in SoTL, the inquiry should be focused on student learning, conducted in partnership with students, and grounded in the context of the course (Felten, 2013). The systematic study of student learning and critical analysis of the instructor's teaching are essential for strengthening pedagogical practices in family science (Mauer, DiGregorio, & Reinke, 2022; Maurer & Law, 2016).

Procedures

Through the years, as part of normal educational practice and reflection, students were asked to comment on the meaningful moments in class and the most useful assignments in the traditional end-of-semester reflection, which was offered for an extra credit of nominal value. Students' written responses as well as verbal comments during class discussions, provided valuable feedback over many semesters of using and refining this assignment. IRB approval (protocol FY22-23-2726) was obtained to formally use student feedback assessing the effectiveness of class assignments based on their responses to the following questions:

- 1) What were the most useful assignments for you in this class?
- 2) Reflect on your experience of working on the application project: genogram and paper. Did it help you understand family development theory better (e.g., theory's stages and developmental tasks)? If yes, in what way?
- 3) Write about two meaningful things you will take away from this class that will be helpful in your professional and your personal life.

The responses were collected at the end of the semester through a learning management system for further analysis.

Sample

The data used in this paper came from 110 students: two sections of the course in the spring 2022 semester (N=56) and two sections of the course in the fall 2022 semester (N=54). Student demographic information was not formally collected. Based on class observations, the vast majority of students were female (which is typical for programs in family science), with three male and two nonbinary students.

The majority of students were traditional-aged college students; three were middle-aged mothers who returned to school to complete their degrees. Students were ethnically and racially diverse, representative of the diverse NY/NJ area, and university designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. According to university statistics, 45% of students identify as Hispanic, 44% are first-generation college students, and nearly half of students come from lower-income families (recipients of federal Pell Grants). Many students have recent immigrant backgrounds and come from diverse countries of origin.

Analysis

Students' responses were anonymized and compiled into files to be analyzed for evidence of understanding FDT and the usefulness of using a genogram and paper in the application project assignment. Evaluative data on student learning have been systematically reviewed for emerging themes and patterns. In a constant comparative analysis, responses were reread and further evaluated for salient themes that recurred and were significant across data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos with color-coded notes and a record of themes with representative quotes were compiled. Additional student feedback was collected in the spring 2023 semester (N=58). A review of these data confirmed previous findings and the themes presented in this paper.

Findings

Four main themes were identified through data analysis. These themes, along with sub-themes, are summarized in Table 1 and presented below with illustrative quotes.

Table 1

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Application Project Integrating Genograms and Expanded FDT

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1. Benefits of using genograms to study families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful visual of family generations • Engaging and meaningful experience
Theme 2. Benefits of combining a genogram and paper in the application project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying FDT to one's family • Identifying diverse families and trends
Theme 3. Application project as an effective assignment in preparing competent practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the FD stages and developmental tasks • Appreciation of diverse families and flexible application of expanded FDT • Increased empathy and understanding of others
Theme 4. Application project as a means of personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness and reflection • Predictability of life stages and developmental tasks • Perspective on life and timing of accomplishments

Theme 1. Benefits of Using Genograms to Study Families

Useful Visual of Family Generations

A great number of student comments included acknowledgements of being visual learners, who really appreciated being able to physically sketch their genograms for a “bird’s eye view of the family” and to “see the whole family: who is married, divorced, single, who has kids and siblings.” When one thinks about their family, it may seem “complex and messy,” but this assignment “created a visual to help me understand my family’s generations.” Having completed the genogram, students found it very helpful to see all their family members organized on one sheet of paper: “Suddenly, my big family made sense because everyone is connected.” Students also enjoyed the hands-on aspect of genogram creation, making a drawing and organizing family members according to the Standard Genogram format and symbols.

Genograms helped students include all their family members, including the ones residing in other states and countries. This was a valuable lesson in how members may be living in different places, but they are still considered one’s family. The concept of transnational families was very relevant to these students, many of whom have recent immigrant backgrounds and transnational ties. Seeing their overseas grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins pictured on a genogram made them included and acknowledged, which increased student engagement. Having to place these transnational family members into the FD stages created opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons of social norms, gender role expectations, and variations in the life course, as well as discussions of the applicability of FDT to other cultures.

Engaging and Meaningful Experience

Students described genogram creation as an engaging, rewarding, and enjoyable activity. Seeing one’s entire family on a single sheet of paper in the genogram format was reported as incredibly useful, even if it was challenging for some to find out demographic information or position their family members. Once they began to follow the instructions, review the examples, and work on genograms in class, it turned out “not so bad.” Students appreciated the “straight-forward” genogram format that provided a “very clear and concise way of viewing my family over generations.” Most students enjoyed learning more about their family members and reported feeling proud of the result.

In the process of creating their genograms, students spoke with parents and reached out to their extended family to obtain needed demographic information, which was described as a reflective bonding experience that “truly brings you closer to your family.” With some exceptions, most students reported rewarding interactions when reconnecting with family members to confirm information. Young adults were learning new facts about their families they never knew before, which made them more appreciative. Many students found it fulfilling to learn more about “where I came from and the people who helped raise me.” Another quote illustrated the impact of this experience, “I was struck by just seeing the two sides of my family and how they lead up to my existence.”

Theme 2. Benefits of Combining a Genogram and Paper in the Application Project

Students’ feedback demonstrates that completing a genogram and paper together in the application project assignment was “hugely beneficial” for understanding FDT better: “I loved how the genogram and paper were connected. By doing the genogram, it helped me a great deal with the paper.” Working on the genogram and paper in tandem allowed students to place their “family members into the stages while seeing it all right in front of me.” There were many comments speaking to the utility of genograms in understanding FDT: “Genograms made it much easier to picture and understand FDT and

how it applied to my family;” “With my genogram, I can visually see the developmental stages that each member is associated with.”

Students commented that a genogram alone “could not provide the whole story, so the paper was a useful tool in better understanding my family and the FD theory.” In writing the accompanying paper, many students reported being able to “apply and elaborate on the new FDT concepts” and “bring all class information together.” While looking at their family genogram, students were able to “compare and contrast family members” and notice the differences in development and stage placement. In the process, they gained insights on how age, the timing of marriage or becoming a parent, going through a divorce, or having a disability may impact people’s placement into stages and how things may vary across generations of their family.

Applying FDT to One’s Family

The application of FDT to one’s family members in a scientific way was consistently described as highly beneficial to learning, in addition to being a “very interesting” and “eye-opening” activity. Students reported high engagement in “observing and analyzing my family through the lens of FDT,” placing their grandparents, parents, and extended family into stages and then describing how the developmental tasks related to them. Having to inspect every FD stage and the developmental tasks it comes with in order to correctly place each family member into the best-fitting category “created a tremendous amount of understanding.”

Students commented that “anyone can memorize information,” but when you are “required to write a paper and relate information back to your own family, greater understanding results.” Through this assignment, many students discovered that the more they related course materials to their families, the better they could understand them. As one student wrote, “Reading about FDT is one thing, but knowing how to identify it in families and apply it really demonstrates understanding. [Now it is] all installed in my memory.”

Identifying Diverse Families and Trends

Examining sociodemographic characteristics across generations in their families led students to become aware of trends they may not have noticed previously. They commented that it was interesting to “see and learn about my family members’ marriages, occupations, and highest-level education because I honestly never thought about these before.” Looking at their genograms, many students realized the changes that took place in their families across three – four generations: “How much fertility went down,” “Cohabitation increased in the younger generation,” or “I am the first to go to college.” Students also shared findings that surprised them: “I realized that divorce is a more common trend in my family than I thought.” Another quote provides a summary of common realizations that students reported across generations of their families: “The times have changed so much! People are getting married later on, focusing on their education and career first. They are having children later, and it is usually fewer children than previous generations.”

Several students admitted that they used to “feel bad” about their “messy” families, with “separations, cohabitations, divorces, kids [born] to single moms, and other things I’ve seen happening in my family growing up.” But discussing in class family variations as normative and seeing the genogram symbols designed specifically to represent marital separation, affair, divorce, remarriage, or nonmarital childbearing really changed their perceptions. Students became more aware of “how diverse and different families are” and realized that “many other people have complicated families, too.”

Theme 3. Application Project as an Effective Assignment in Preparing Competent Practitioners

Students identified multiple benefits of this assignment to working with families and children in future settings, including teaching, social work, therapy, and the field of child life, to name a few. Having the knowledge to “support family members with each life stage” was consistently recognized as beneficial to their future careers.

Recognition of FD Stages and Developmental Tasks

Many students noted that it will be imperative for them as teachers to remember that “families are all in different stages in life, and with each stage come varying needs.” This assignment helped them become aware that they will need “to not only understand the child,” but also realize that parents are working on their own developmental tasks according to the stage(s) they are in. Teachers need “to understand their [students’] home life and how it could be affecting their behavior and learning in class.” For instance, “if a child’s family is having a newborn,” or “a grandfather is battling cancer,” the child will be affected and will need support. Future child life specialists preparing to support families in crisis, “who must cope with their child’s injury, surgery, or diagnosis,” recognized: “I now see it is vital to understand what other issues may be causing them stress as they move through the stages of FD.”

Appreciation of Diverse Families and Flexible Application of Expanded FDT

Increased awareness that there is no standard of “what a family should look like” and that there will be variations and discontinuities in a child’s life was frequently commented on by the students. They wrote about the importance of recognizing that children may be “experiencing divorce, single-parenting, remarriage, illness, or loss of family members,” and they would need support. Another student summarized the diversity of families she will be working with: “There are families who are married, divorced, no children, lots of children, step or half siblings, families with kids but not married, families with special needs, where grandparents are raising their grandkids, and so much more.” Students interested in social work commented how important it was to understand how all of these families may progress through the stages of FD and find ways to improve the lives of their future clients.

Students need help developing a flexible understanding of FDT, emphasizing that it should be applied as a starting point or a guide but not as a rigid, prescriptive framework. Families can be in multiple stages at once if they have several children or transitioning between stages—and the theory highlights the many developmental tasks and demands they have to deal with. A student interested in becoming a therapist shared her realization that it is not her job “to make sure my clients have a proper placement in the theory;” instead, expanded FDT can be used as “guidance to see where they are in their lives at the moment.” Students clearly saw the value and utility of flexible application of the expanded FDT in their future professional lives.

Increased Empathy and Understanding of Others

When reflecting on their learning in class, students consistently highlighted increased empathy towards others (both within and outside of their families) and the realization that “everyone goes through different stages in life with stressors and obstacles.” Understanding what may be going on in someone’s life “by knowing what developmental tasks they may be dealing with in their stage is super beneficial!” Many students noted their increased ability to “understand someone’s actions or stress because I have knowledge of stages in FDT and what comes with each.” Having completed this assignment, students reported increased compassion for people struggling in their FD stage and felt better prepared to help them.

Theme 4. Application Project as a Means of Personal Development

On a personal level, students overwhelmingly reported that creating their genogram and writing a paper resulted in knowledge that was “very insightful” and “super useful in understanding myself and my family members.” It helped them “gain insight into the milestones that one may reach throughout the course of their life” and “become aware of the stressful transitions between the stages,” something they knew little about prior to this assignment.

Self-Awareness and Reflection

Many students wrote about being able to recognize the developmental tasks and transitions discussed in class, as those currently experienced by themselves and their families, and found this awareness and self-reflection reassuring. Learning about FDT helped students to “recognize struggles and events” in their families, such as launching children and changing parent-child relationships, loss of grandparents, siblings marrying, or having children. Being able to apply the expanded FDT “to myself and my family members made me feel less alone,” several students noted. Newly acquired knowledge and self-reflection helped these young adults recognize the normative developmental stressors and transitions they experienced. Another student shared, “Having knowledge of the stages and what tasks they come with helped me to assist my family. I truly believe that this class found me at a perfect time.”

Predictability of Life Stages and Developmental Tasks

Students also noted a sense of comfort derived from seeing the “big picture of family life” and the predictability of life comprised of stages and developmental tasks. It made them “feel more prepared for what life has in store” for them. Young people are so consumed with the immediate demands of their daily lives that having a long-view framework of FD felt reassuring: “Understanding the stage that I am in as I grow and develop is huge! It really helps me make sense of where I am in life or where I am headed.” Others similarly appreciated their increased ability to have a new outlook on life, “gaining a sense of predictability and understanding of people’s actions due to the stages they are in.”

Perspective on Life and Timing of Accomplishments

Another important takeaway reported by students included a reflection on the familial and societal pressures “to accomplish a checklist of things.” Many commented on the “pressure to get married and have kids at a certain age, but in reality, everyone will do that at their own time.” For example, when comparing her cousins of the same age, a student realized that “they were at different stages per FDT, and that is completely okay!” Additionally, as students examined family trends across generations, they realized that in their lives, they “do not have to do exactly” what their parents and grandparents did in the past and can choose what's best for them. A new perspective on family life reportedly freed young adults to pursue their own path instead of meeting outside expectations.

Seeing life stages outlined in the expanded FDT helped students realize that life is long, and instead of “stressing out that I need to do everything now, I can remember that I have a lot of time ahead.” Having explored the diversity of family structures and life paths, they realized that, “there is no true timeline or one way that someone should live.” This awareness led students to a decision “to live to the fullest in the phase” they are in at the moment and trust that in time, everything will fall into place.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The application project that incorporates genograms and expanded FDT continues to serve as a highly engaging and useful assignment in an undergraduate family science course. Student feedback demonstrates that this assignment helped them develop a strong understanding of family development

over time and gain skills to create genograms and apply FDT to diverse families. Creating a genogram and writing an accompanying paper helped students to apply everything they learned in class and to gain a new perspective on their families. Having a one-page representation of the family in the form of a genogram was imperative. It allowed students to clearly see the trends and changes across generations, in addition to assisting their application of the expanded FDT to family members. Thus, students gained both the content knowledge and the self-awareness that are essential for competent family professionals.

This paper contributes to SoTL and can be of interest to educators seeking to innovate their teaching of family science courses at all levels. Depending on learning objectives, instructors can adopt the project in its entirety or borrow its elements for smaller assignments or assessments in lower-level courses. With appropriate modifications, this project can also be used in graduate courses focused on exploring deeper family issues, complicated patterns, and histories. I hope this project and specific recommendations for its implementation will be useful to educators seeking to increase student engagement, active learning, and professional preparation.

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Appendix A

Instructions and Self-Check Rubric for the Application Paper

Main Questions	How to Address These Questions	Detailed Instructions and Self-Check Rubric
Question 1 Apply expanded FDT to each generation of your family as seen on your genogram. [Q1 requires the longest answer]	<p>Identify and name the stage of family development (or a transition between the stages) each generation of your family is in at the moment (e.g., stage 3 families with preschoolers).</p> <p>Write a full paragraph for each generation: specify developmental tasks that each member of your family has to accomplish / is in the process of accomplishing.</p> <p>Describe how your family members are experiencing their stage(s): what developmental tasks are they working on, and in what way?</p> <p>Which tasks are easy, and which tasks are challenging?</p> <p>Are there tasks that are not relevant to a particular person/couple, and why?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A complete paragraph about your grandparents. If some of your grandparents passed away, focus on the ones living. If none are currently living, write about the ones you may remember the most and what their life was like before passing away (stage and tasks). Do not write about all of the stages they have lived through over their life course; only focus on the current or the last stage. 2. A complete paragraph about your parents—stage(s) and developmental tasks. Discuss them as a couple. If parents are in several stages at once, name them all, address their developmental tasks, and explain how being in more than one stage at once is impacting their experience (easier/ harder?). If divorced, separated, remarried, or re-partnered, discuss parents separately from each other and together with their new partners. 3. A complete paragraph about yourself (and your siblings, if you are in the same stages). Name your stage (i.e., beginning adulthood) and describe how you are working on your developmental tasks (e.g., separating from your family of origin, accepting emotional and financial responsibility for yourself, pursuing education and career/job(s), dating and developing intimate relationships). If siblings and cousins are minors, they should be discussed with their parents' stage; do not write about them separately. 4. A paragraph about your extended family (aunts and uncles). Due to space limitations, it is acceptable if you only describe one or two couples from your extended family.
Question 2 Reflect on using a genogram and applying FDT to your family. [Q2 requires the shortest answer]	<p>In other words, you are commenting on the advantages and disadvantages of using a genogram and expanded FDT for understanding your family.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was it useful to see your family displayed in the genogram format on one page? Why or why not? 2. Without repeating the general critique of FDT, assess if it worked for your family. What was different in your application of the expanded FDT to the families in your genogram (easier or more challenging, why or why not)?

Main Questions	How to Address These Questions	Detailed Instructions and Self-Check Rubric
Question 3 Analyze demographic and social trends across generations of your family. [Q3 is very important—answer it fully]	<p>Look at your genogram and think like a social scientist.</p> <p>What socio-demographic trends, changes, and patterns do you see across 3-4 generations of your family?</p> <p><i>Note:</i> Remember, we are not looking to explore complicated relationships among family members, addictions, mental illness, conflicts, etc. The focus of this assignment is on seeing the big picture of your family from the demographic viewpoint over time and in light of the social changes and trends discussed in class.</p>	<p>Respond to all these questions. Even if the answer is a "no," state it and describe the trend or its absence.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fertility: Do you observe a decline in fertility in younger generations (e.g., grandparents had more children than parents, and so on)? 2. Marriage/Cohabitation: Is there a decline/ delay in marriage (e.g., unmarried aunts or cousins; older age at marriage in younger generations)? Do you see cohabitation in any of the generations? 3. Divorce: Do you notice divorce/ remarriage or mostly intact marriages across generations of your family? 4. Education & occupation: Do you notice any changes in educational attainment (e.g., younger generations have more college degrees than the older generations) or occupations (e.g., grandmothers were homemakers vs. mother and aunts are employed and pursue careers)? 5. Background: Are marriages taking place with individuals of similar or different social/ ethnic/ religious background? 6. Do you notice any other trends? Reflect if your perception of your family changed in the process of working on this assignment. Why or why not?