

Feature Article: Teaching Tips

Teaching About Aging And Diversity Through Vignettes And Research Examples

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Vignettes and narrative excerpts from research can be effective tools for teaching about aging and diversity. In this column, I describe vignettes that may be used to stimulate students' thinking about the influence of social structure on older adults' lives and how research examples may be used to illustrate communication and interaction challenges facing immigrant families.

Vignettes

Fried and Mehrota's (1998) [Aging and Diversity: An Activity Learning Experience](#) contains numerous resources for teaching about aging and diversity. I use four vignettes to introduce the topic of aging and diversity and specifically, to stimulate discussion about the potential ways in which class, gender, and race/ethnicity inform and affect older adults' lives. Below, I describe the vignettes in order to provide the reader with a sense of the range of items addressed.

Each of the vignettes describes older adults with different life predicaments. One vignette provides a description of an older mother who was born and raised in China and who now lives in the U.S. She desires to live with her only child, an adult son. Her adult son is married and he and his wife own a small family business that they are struggling to keep alive. The son and his wife would like to hire care for the mother. Another vignette describes an older African American woman who has been abused in the past, has had

a history of mental illness, and now finds herself homeless. In another vignette, a description is provided of a couple, a 70 year-old husband who has recently retired from an automobile factory and a 50 year-old wife whose full time job until recently, consisted of raising her children. The wife now feels that she is 'going through the motions' in her marriage. Both were born and raised in Columbia. The remaining vignette describes a financially secure widower of two years who has recently become romantically involved but who does not desire to re-marry.

The short vignettes provide efficient and accessible examples of several elements of diversity—class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Students read the vignettes, and afterwards, answer questions about the ways in which social class was involved in each older adult's life, the role of gender in each situation, and how ethnicity might influence older adults' physical and mental health (see Fried and Mehrota, 1998). Students have been eager to share their ideas about the potential influences of class, gender, and race/ethnicity on the older adults' lives. They provide examples of the ways that membership in a particular group has potential benefits and drawbacks. Some students report that the structures are complex, interacting, and non-additive, and that over the course of a life, the adults have probably seen no-to-some improvement in how members of their group(s) are regarded. After reading the vignettes and answering the discussion questions, students are presented with research examples.

Research Examples

I use research examples from my studies on female immigrants from Japan who live in the U.S. and their adult daughters. The examples tell of the communication struggles of im-

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migrant mothers who are not fluent in English and their monolingual English speaking adult daughters, and the differences in relationship expectations of mothers and daughters arising from their unique cultural frames of reference.

Many students have not studied immigrant families, so they are unfamiliar with some of the struggles immigrant families face, such as communication difficulties. To introduce students to this topic, I give a mini-lecture on immigrants and language barriers and discuss the importance of communication in relationships. As a class, we discuss some of the potential outcomes (e.g., difficulty in forming affectionate bonds) facing families in which one member is not fluent in the dominant language and the other members are fluent in only the dominant language. I then read excerpts from interviews in which mothers and daughters describe their attempts at communication and express their frustration with the experience. After coverage of communication within immigrant families, the class learns about cultural frames of reference.

Students receive a mini-lecture on how cultural frames of reference influence the expectations that people

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have of themselves and others, and how cultural frames of reference change with new experiences. The research examples include descriptions by immigrant mothers and their adult daughters of how their expectations about parent-child interdependency can be traced to the values of the cultures in which they were exposed. Mothers' beliefs about parental dependency on children reflect what they saw as children in Japan—elder parents' dependency on adult children as common practice. Adult daughters' notions of interdependency differ from their mothers because they were reared in the U.S. where elder parent to adult child dependency was and is less common than it is in Japan. The excerpts also show that mothers' beliefs about interdependency have been altered over time to include expectations of elder parent independence from adult children. I discuss a continuum of interdependency and emphasize that within and across immigrant families, beliefs about levels of desired interdependency vary.

Students respond positively to the research examples. Oftentimes, they are interested in knowing more about the particular mother-daughter pairs, if these experiences are true of other immigrant groups, if fathers and sons have similar experiences, and some students want to share examples from their personal or work experiences. Hearing women describe their experiences seems to bring immigrant family issues to life. The research examples easily capture students' attention and illustrate issues facing immigrant mothers and their adult daughters.

Aging and diversity can include a broad range of topics, from gender, race/ethnicity, and social class to a language barrier and cultural frame of reference. In this column, I have described how vignettes and research examples can be used to explore aging and diversity in the classroom. Certainly, a plethora of resources could also be used to teach about this important topic.

Reference

Fried S. B. & Mehrota, C. M. (1998). Aging and diversity: An activity learning experience. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis.

APA on the Web:

Minority Fellowship program: <http://www.apa.org/mfp/>

Science Policy and Congressional Fellowships: <http://www.apa.org/ppo/fellow.html>

Resources for Students: <http://www.apa.org/students/>

Healthy Aging: What Does the Research Tell Us? A Congressional Briefing <http://www.apa.org/pi/agebrief.html>

Education Committee & Teaching Tips

The Teaching Tips column provides pedagogical ideas of interest to instructors of courses in adult development and aging. Teaching Tips focuses on innovative activities, instructional approaches, and reviews of materials that have proven to be useful in teaching students about the psychology of adult development and aging.

If you are interested in submitting your ideas for this column, please contact:

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Congratulations to:

Leonard W. Poon, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Director, University of Georgia Gerontology Center, who was conferred *Philosophiae Doctor Honoris Causa* at Lund University, Sweden, on May 26, 2000. Dr. Poon was honored for his research on adaptation and survival of the oldest old, The Georgia Centenarian Study, as well as his work as the Executive Director of the International Centenarian Study which brings together researchers from France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, U.K., and U.S. to jointly uncover the secrets of longevity.