

Emphasize Aging: Teaching Lifespan Developmental Psychology From an Intersectional Perspective

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Abstract

Instructors of lifespan developmental psychology courses are faced with the impossible task of covering the entire lifespan. As such, aging can get neglected. The current paper advocates for approaches that emphasize aging throughout the course. One way to emphasize aging in lifespan courses is to approach the course from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality advocates for simultaneous consideration of multiply marginalized people. Encouraging intersectional discussions of developmental topics will enrich course discussions and students will develop the habit of critically evaluating the material. Indeed, intersectional perspectives are critical in nature. Simply examining the generalizability of concepts to intersecting subgroups leaves out examination of interlocking systems of oppression and topics of disadvantage and privilege. As such, the current paper provides suggestions for questioning whether developmental concepts and theories are complicit with forces of oppression and domination of older adults.

Keywords

aging, life span, teaching, intersectionality, critical thinking

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Instructors of lifespan developmental psychology courses are faced with the impossible task of covering the entire lifespan in multiple domains of development and from multiple theoretical perspectives. Human development is long and complicated and includes so many topics that are perceived as essential that topics related to aging, which tend to be at the end of the chapter or book, often get neglected. Especially, because developmental psychology is often taken by nonpsychology majors and can thus reach other professionals, it is important to take advantage of this opportunity to educate the broader public about aging. Because it is impossible to give all lecture topics full consideration in an average undergraduate Lifespan Developmental Psychology course, the problem of how to cover all of the content in class is unsolvable. Here, I suggest that the key to success will be to accept that it is impossible to cover it all and to emphasize aging because our decisions about what to cover reflect our values and biases. That is, when we neglect aging-related topics, we send a message to our students that these topics are not valuable. As such, we need to stop running out of time at the end of each chapter or semester and be intentional about including aging. To do so, instructors will likely have to cut other material they perceive as essential from what is covered in class and also find small (e.g., lecture examples) and large (e.g., term projects) ways to integrate the topic of aging throughout the course. To emphasize aging, I suggest strategies that integrate aging throughout the course while also taking an intersectional approach. According to this approach, oppressed social identities overlap and that oppression on the basis of these identities is connected to systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989). Doing so acknowledges aging as an often forgotten or oppressed group. The first strategy is to emphasize aging by integrating aging throughout the course by using a topical approach to human development while highlighting aging through lecture examples and testing. The second strategy suggests a contextual approach. This approach is especially good for those who are less familiar with intersectionality as a way to begin considering some of the cultural and societal influences on development without getting bogged down in the complexity of intersectionality. Next, intersectionality is introduced and defined as a strategy for emphasizing aging in the course. Given intersectionality is a critical perspective, ideas for engaging students in critical thinking from an intersectional perspective are included. Ideas for bringing these approaches together to integrate aging from a critical intersectional perspective are presented along with ideas for topics to cover, lecture examples, discussions, and assignments. Although these suggestions are made primarily with lecture classes in mind, they can be adapted for other types of classes (e.g., flipped, project based).

Integrate Aging

Integrating aging into each chapter and emphasizing these topics in your testing, lectures, and assignments are essential for communicating the topic's importance and value to students. One approach to integrating aging is to take a topical approach to the course. In the topical approach to lifespan developmental psychology, each chapter

covers a topic across the lifespan, whereas in the chronological approach each chapter is focused on a single age period. The chronological approach places aging at the end of the book and thus the semester. In contrast, the topical approach covers aging within each chapter. However, some topical approaches cover aging at the end of each chapter, whereas others integrate aging throughout the chapter. The later approach is best for emphasizing aging. Saving aging for the end of chapters or textbooks and semesters can send a message to students that it is the least important topic—especially when instructors can be rushed at the end of chapters or semesters.

Regardless of the textbook used or general approach, one tip for integrating aging within lectures is to think about the examples you use—if you currently use a childhood example when covering a topic, consider whether it is necessary to do so and whether you could switch to use an older adult example. For instance, when covering Bronfenbrenner’s theory, use an older adult rather than a child as the individual at the center. The older adult might be in a reading group with their peers (microsystem) and some of those members also go to their church (microsystem). When these two microsystems interact (e.g., planning book club events at church), that is an example of a mesosystem. Another way to emphasize aging is to test the students on the aging content. At times this information about aging can be a bit more detailed (e.g., a specific research finding that illustrates the main idea/concept) than the types of questions I typically ask about the readings (i.e., when not emphasized in lecture), but telling the students to pay extra attention to this material in advance of the exams and helping them see the pattern of what was covered in the book and on the exam will help them consistently attend to information about older adults.

Contextual Approach

If your goal is to take an intersectional approach (described in the next section), a less complicated point of entry for beginners is the contextual approach. The contextual approach acknowledges the real-world settings where humans develop and thus emphasizes that human development does not occur in isolation of immediate contexts or broader cultural forces. This approach to understanding human development is best described by Bronfenbrenner’s Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and is also a key aspect of other developmental theories such as Baltes’ (1987) and Vygotsky’s (1978).

Because contextual approaches are well established, depending on the text chosen, the book can do a lot of the work to frame the course from a contextual perspective. In addition to choosing a text with aging integrated in each chapter, a contextual approach can increase opportunities to integrate aging within most chapters instead waiting until the end of the semester. Choosing a topical book with a contextual approach means you can rely on your text to integrate aging and developmental contexts (e.g., Kuther’s, 2019, *Lifespan development in context: A topical approach*).

For example, considering how older adults are valued or cared for in different cultures can shed light on how older adults are marginalized in some, but not all cultures.

Similarly, thinking about how what age someone is considered an older adult at different times in history and around the world will help students understand the contextual nature of age periods. For example, students could consider the influences of the USA (and other countries) currently having a relatively longer lifespan than earlier times in history on marriage. They might think about how marriage is now longer and includes more time together after the children are adults. Another topic students might discuss as a class, in pairs, or as a written assignment, is what grandparenting might be like in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Additionally, examining sexuality in older adults from a contextual perspective is another idea for lecture examples, class discussions, or assignments. With this topic you could emphasize the influence of more immediate versus more distal contexts. For example, you could ask students how they think the context of marriage might influence the degree to which older adults are sexually active. It might be that married older adults have more access to a sexual partner. However, they might be more habituated and less excited by their long-time spouse and thus have less interest in sex. Another context that might affect sexual activity is the living context. One might imagine that whether older adults are living at home versus an active senior community versus an older adult nursing home might affect sexual activity. More distal contexts such as cross-cultural examinations could also be considered. For example, do we think that the sexual activity of older adults might vary in affluent versus poorer countries? Considering what it is about a culture (e.g., wealth, security, religion) that might affect the sexual activity of older adults will help the students understand distal influences (or macrosystems) on development. Of course, these contextual factors will interact with individual factors such as health status. By considering these interacting factors, the complex reality of human development is highlighted. As such, considerations of contexts of development will enrich the discussion of older adults.

Along with fully integrating aging into all topics (to the extent possible), considering the contexts of human development helps the students consider the broader cultural context as well as the more immediate contextual situations. Understanding the contextual influences on human development will help students develop their intersectional analysis and engage in critical thinking.

Intersectional Approach

The next and most central strategy presented here is to approach the course from an intersectional perspective. The term intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (1989) to refer to the idea that oppressed social identities overlap or intersect and that oppression on the basis of these identities are connected to interlocking systems of power, oppression, domination, and discrimination. As such, oppression toward each marginalized group cannot be understood in the isolation of other marginalized identities.

For example, if someone is an LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) older adult, then they are members of two oppressed groups. In our current USA, cultural context, older adults, and members of the LGBTQ community are

marginalized. It might be that older members of the LGBTQ community face issues and have concerns that are typically *not* addressed by the average LGBTQ groups or groups/organizations aimed at helping older adults. In fact, the issues affecting older members of the LGBTQ community might be fairly unique. We could further complicate this example by including an additional social identity. For example, the issues faced by older members of the LGBTQ community might be different for white people versus black people—and these issues might further depend on whether the white or black person is wealthy, middle class, or poor. As illustrated by this example, the concept of intersectionality gets complicated quickly. To help students understand intersectionality, I suggest using Crenshaw's (2016) Ted Talk or Dobson's "Intersectionality a fun guide" which is freely available online (link to Online Supplement: <https://miriamdobson.com/2013/07/12/intersectionality-a-fun-guide-now-in-powerpoint-presentation-formation/>)

Often times race, gender, or sexuality is at the center of an intersectional analysis, but it can be any identity and instructors of lifespan developmental courses can center age. Using this approach emphasizes not only aging but also other marginalized groups. For example, students are often interested in context of prison and it is easy to think about how being incarcerated would affect one's social, cognitive, and biological development. According to Cox (2018), the number of older adults (55+ years old) in state prison has increased dramatically (i.e., by 400%) between 1993 and 2013. Here age, race, and gender can be used as intersecting identities to discuss the socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive effects on older, black men by the immediate context or microsystem of prison. That is, this information could be integrated into your coverage of Bronfenbrenner's theory or as examples of the three domains of development. This information could be used again when covering Social Emotional Selectivity theory by asking students to consider (e.g., in a class discussion) whether the theory applies to incarcerated older adults. Thinking about the structural or systematic barriers that exist for marginalized groups to optimize their develop would be an important part of an intersectional conversation.

Again, people who teach about race and gender frequently use this intersectional pedagogical approach (see Case, 2016)—here the suggestion is to just take that well-established approach, but center aging. In fact, a great place to get ideas for examples and topics is books about race, gender, or sexuality. Many of these texts have a chapter on older adults or aging. For example, many psychology of women texts cover body image, sex, and menopause in older adult women. Material from those courses can be used to enhance a lifespan developmental course. For example, when covering menopause, students could be asked to consider whether there are any systematic barriers to resources that might make marginalized females' experiences different than other more privileged groups. For example, how might a transgender man's experience of menopause be different than a cisgender woman's? Asking students not to just focus on what is unique about individuals holding multiple identities, but also helping them think through the power inequities (e.g., lack of access to an educated/understanding physician) is essential to understanding intersectionality. An additional source for

examples and ideas is the American Society on Aging Generations Blog (n.d.). This blog has short readings on many intersectional topics where age is centered. For example, one blog about healthy aging considers sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. This could be integrated into a lecture or discussion about successful aging. Another short reading on this blog explores the question of who will do the caregiving for grandparents when caregivers are deported. This example could be integrated into the coverage of caregiving. Another source for ideas is the “Lives in Contexts” context in Kuther’s (2019) book, which are linked to specific topics within the chapter. Several of these are on intersectional topics and include discussion questions. By taking an intersectional approach, students will learn to incorporate diversity and other complex issues that will make the course more critical and more inclusive.

Critical Thinking

Because intersectional perspectives are critical in nature, critical thinking is a large part of a course that takes an intersectional perspective. To engage students in critical thinking from an intersectional perspective, instructors can utilize topics that are already part of a traditional lifespan developmental psychology course. For example, many courses cover the topic of generalizability and students can be encouraged to consistently ask whether the findings or theories being covered would generalize to older adults. Students can also be encouraged to ask why older adults are missing from many topics. For example, are grandparent–grandchild attachments considered in the coverage of attachment theory? Doing so moves beyond a seemingly neutral approach to generalizability or attachment because questions about who is left out are not neutral questions, but asks whether developmental science is complicit with forces of oppression. That is, these types of questions highlight who is helped by versus who is left out of developmental science. When older adults are included in the topics being covered, students can be prompted to go further and ask whether findings from a reported study or tenets of a theory generalize to older adults with other intersecting identities such as social economic status (SES) or race/ethnicity. Encouraging discussions around topics of intersecting identities (e.g., older adult affluent black men vs. older adult black men with lower SES) will enrich course discussions and help students develop the habit of regularly questioning and critically evaluating the material.

Other course themes can be used to emphasize aging from a critical intersectional perspective. For example, Baltes’ (1987) concept of gains and losses across the lifespan can highlight that aging is not all about losses, which could help the students view older adults more positively—and accurately. For example, students could be encouraged to examine whether menopause is viewed as a gain or a loss (e.g., freedom from menstruation as a gain vs. a loss of reproductive capabilities). To bring in the intersectional approach, these topics can be combined with other social identities. For example, does the question of whether menopause is a gain versus a loss vary depending on whether the person you are thinking about is heterosexual versus lesbian? Similarly, Baltes’ (1987) Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model across the

lifespan can work against stereotypically negative views of aging. For example, students can be asked to think about how it is not just older adults who have to select and compensate in order to optimize. Bringing in topics of ability and disability across the lifespan would be another way to use the intersectional perspective when engaged in critical thinking about the SOC model. Additionally, thinking about the ways that older adults can and do select and compensate to optimize development can help provide a positive view of aging. Do some older adults who hold fewer privileges have to compensate more than those with more privileges (e.g., access to healthcare/insurance)? Other concepts such as “different not deficit” can be used to point out where views of aging are negative or otherwise problematic. For example, are culture-specific patterns of caregiving reflective of a deficit or does the pattern reflect an aspect of a culture that makes those behaviors adaptive in that context (e.g., older adults living with their families vs. in their own homes or a facility)? By highlighting cultural (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) differences, students can develop skills in critiquing conclusions that interpret differences as reflecting deficits. This question could be further complicated or made intersectional by also examining whether their analysis changes depending on whether the older adult is a member of the LGBTQ community or whether they have higher versus lower SES. Encouraging students to consistently ask these types of questions throughout the semester will facilitate the development of critical thinking skills from an intersectional perspective.

Integrating Aging From a Critical Intersectional Perspective

Because there is so much information to cover in a lifespan course, it is worth thinking about the small and quick ways to emphasize aging from an intersectional perspective by integrating aging topics in examples and class discussions. As discussed earlier, instructors can switch out a child example for an older adult example when either would work equally well. For example, to use the earlier discussed prison example, instructors do not need to add a module on prisons to your course, but could use this example when covering Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and then can come back to it (or parts of it) when other examples of developmental contexts and intersecting identities are needed. Revisiting the same examples two or three times (especially complex examples that take some time to explain) can be an efficient way to integrate and thus emphasize aging from a contextual and intersectional perspective.

Additionally, instructors can develop and assign an individual or group project where students are asked to bring these approaches together. Some assignments can be as simple as a “pair and share” discussion where students are asked to think about one of the questions above (e.g., is menopause a gain or loss and how might that depend on sexual orientation). Students can discuss the question for a few minutes in a pair and then share a summary of their discussion with the class. Other in-class assignments might ask students to watch a short video (e.g., a Ted Talk) on a topic covered in the course (e.g., friendship) and ask students to think about the identities and privileges held by those depicted or discussed and to think about how that might

affect aging. For example, in a Ted Talk video, Fonda and Tomlin (2015) discuss their lifelong friendship and how it facilitates healthy aging. The students could be asked to think about how the women have a number of privileges (e.g., white and wealthy; gender is discussed as both an advantage and a disadvantage) and to speculate how the friendships may or may not be affected by these privileges and how that might affect aging. If needed, these types of assignments can be designed to take up very little class time by asking students to do some of the work outside of class (e.g., watch the video and/or write responses to the discussion questions before class).

If the class allows for a bigger project (e.g., term projects such as term papers and/or presentations), students can be asked to examine a topic (e.g., grandparenting, caregiving, addiction, friendships, health disparities, stress, immigration, sexuality/love, retirement, death/dying, body image) from an intersectional perspective. For example, students could research how friendships are part of or affected by each of Bronfenbrenner's systems as well as by intersecting identities (e.g., younger vs. older adult cross-gender friendships or even LGBTQ older vs. younger adults' friendships). Perhaps they could be asked to do this for each of the three domains of development (i.e., physical, cognitive, and sociocultural). A section of their paper could be devoted to a critical evaluation of the body of literature in terms of inclusiveness. Admittedly, this is a large project for the average undergraduate lifespan developmental course. However, some variation or just a piece of it could be assigned. In short, there are a number of small and big ways for the aging to be integrated and emphasized from a contextual and intersectional perspective.

Conclusion

Although it is true that there are small ways to emphasize aging in lifespan developmental courses that do not take much time, it is also true that in order to emphasize aging, some other information will have to be cut. The decision about what to cut goes back to the earlier point about how instructors are not able to cover everything in a class and that the decisions about what is included reflects our values. If we value aging, then the topic should not be neglected.

In teaching lifespan developmental psychology, we must consider the characteristics of our students. Although many are psychology majors, many are majors in health fields such as nursing and exercise science. When the course is part of the general studies requirement, any number of majors could be in the course. Lifespan developmental psychology might be one of only a few psychology classes taken by students who go on to work in applied settings. Not only is it important to educate health majors about each age period by not excluding older adults, but it is also important to capitalize on the opportunity to help these future professionals be critical consumers of information and to recognize and work against systematic bias against marginalized groups and potentially even inspire some to make innovations in their own fields to optimize human development.

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