

2024

De-Colonizing and Enlivening Lifespan Development in Counselor Education with Experiential Exercises Across the Curriculum

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Recommended Citation

Horton, E., Smedley, D., Roller, K. M., & Coker, K. (2024). De-Colonizing and Enlivening Lifespan Development in Counselor Education with Experiential Exercises Across the Curriculum. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 18(2). [10.70013/m3uq8xg7](https://doi.org/10.70013/m3uq8xg7)

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Abstract

ACA and IAMFC codes of ethics center culturally-affirming lifespan development skills as professional identity responsibilities specific to counselors. Despite the critical importance of lifespan, the training of CITs in this area is inadequate and grounded in research based on homogeneous samples and discriminatory practices. Counselor education is deeply in need of a lifespan curriculum that reflects diverse populations. The updated lifespan curriculum must be inclusive and consider the impact of context and culture on lifespan development. In this conceptual article, we call on counseling faculty to infuse updated developmental science with clinical skills development across their plans of study.

Keywords

lifespan, human growth, decolonizing, experiential, counselor education

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Received: 05/11/23

Revised: 04/26/24

Accepted: 05/28/24

DOI: [Insert link]

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Abstract

ACA and IAMFC codes of ethics center culturally-affirming lifespan development skills as professional identity responsibilities specific to counselors. Despite the critical importance of lifespan knowledge and skills outcomes, as evidenced in the 2023 CACREP standards, the skills-based training of counselors-in-trainings in this area is inadequate and rooted in theory grounded in research based on homogeneous samples and discriminatory practices. Counselor education is deeply in need of a lifespan curriculum that reflects diverse populations. The updated lifespan curriculum must be inclusive and consider the impact of context and culture on lifespan development. In this conceptual article, we call on counseling faculty to infuse updated developmental science with clinical skills scaffolding across their plans of study.

Keywords: lifespan, human growth, decolonizing, experiential, counselor education

Central to the preparation of CITs are the established curricular standards. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) establishes the minimum curricular standards for accredited master’s and doctoral counselor education programs. CACREP (2023) defines *counselor education* as “a distinct academic discipline that has its roots in . . . [lifespan] development” (p. 32). Recently, CACREP revised its curricular standards effective July 2024. In the revised draft, the new standards maintain the prioritization of lifespan development within the counseling curriculum. According to the CACREP-established curricular standards, lifespan development is one of the eight common core areas “for obtaining essential knowledge *and skills* necessary to function effectively as a professional counselor” (CACREP, 2023, p. 12). Moreover, the CACREP standards

include “theories of individual and family development across the lifespan” (p. 13) in their key performance indicators. Notably, the newly revised CACREP standards also require programs to infuse diversity, equity, and inclusion across the curriculum and “address culturally sustaining content and strategies across the eight foundational curriculum areas” (p.12). However, the current approach to lifespan curriculum contradicts the diversity expectations in the CACREP standards. The importance of lifespan in preparing CITs extends beyond CACREP standards and into licensing examinations.

If you teach in a counselor preparation program accredited by CACREP, then you or one of your colleagues teach lifespan development. In the updated CACREP (2023) standards, *Lifespan Development* now encompasses thirteen core

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curricular standards to guide readings, topics, discussions, and assignments. Of the thirteen standards, seven are theory or model-based and the remaining six focus on some variation of factors, structures, or influences on lifespan development (CACREP, 2023). Notably, none of the thirteen curriculum standards mention teaching strategies to employ such theories and factors of lifespan development. The omission of teaching strategies within lifespan development courses can lead counselor educators to view foundational lifespan development courses as a primarily didactic, knowledge-based experience, but the current authors assert counselors-in-training (CITs) require scaffolded skills development to positively impact their clients' lifespan development needs.

We would like to invite you, the Lifespan Development instructor, to put down your PowerPoint slides, lecture notes, and content-based exams and instead consider this content as ripe for critical analysis and reflection, role plays, clinical practice, meaningful discussions, and activities designed to challenge traditional views of lifespan development. If the counseling curriculum is comprehensive professional preparation for humanitarian service, how do we ensure that the content we ask our students to engage with represents the disparate yet related components coming together from each class, each learning opportunity, and each clinical practice experience to be woven together into a skillset of expertise that positions our graduates to be effective counselors? Too often, classes in a counseling program are treated as their own self-important focus instead of as an integral and integrated part of the whole. As you hold this image, consider how it applies to your courses, particularly your Lifespan Development course.

Critical Analysis of Existing Lifespan Curriculum

An incongruence exists within counselor education concerning the lifespan curriculum taught

to CITs. Lifespan development is addressed in our ethical codes (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors [IAMFC], 2017), our multicultural competencies (Singh et al., 2020), and our counseling curriculum (CACREP, 2023). It is evident that lifespan development and assessment serve a fundamental role in counseling. However, counselor educators continue to prepare CITs by drawing from lifespan theories founded upon misogynist and discriminatory research (e.g., Gilligan, 1979; Moynihan, 1965; Shockley, 1972) and practices (Apicella et al., 2020). The exclusive nature of the theories used in lifespan curriculum is evident in the content offered in existing lifespan textbooks (e.g., Berger, 2021; Broderick & Blewitt, 2015) and the content covered in licensing examinations developed by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC, 2023). Therefore, counselor educators aspiring to be anti-oppressive advocates must critically evaluate existing lifespan curricula against our ethics, multicultural competencies, and curriculum standards.

Ethics

The foundational nature of lifespan to professional counseling is buttressed by the acknowledgment of lifespan in multiple ethical codes (e.g., ACA, 2014; IAMFC, 2017). Throughout the ACA (2014) ethical code, lifespan appears within our core professional values, ethical decision-making standards, counseling relationship obligations, and assessment standards. For example, within the ACA *Code of Ethics* preamble, the first core professional value is “enhancing human development throughout the life span” (p. 3). Above all other professional values, the first ethical commitment expected of counselors is to continuously assist in improving the lifespan development of clients. The prioritization of lifespan development in professional values demonstrates the overarching prioritization of lifespan.

The second core professional value listed in the ACA *Code of Ethics* (2014) preamble is “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential,

and uniqueness of people with their social and cultural contexts” (p. 3). Again, listing the importance of honoring the diversity of people within their social and cultural contexts as the second core professional value exhibits the importance of cultural and social contexts within counseling. However, the lifespan curriculum within counselor education is incongruent with our core professional values.

Gender

For example, Kohlberg’s (1976) justice-based moral reasoning is often the only moral development theory taught to CITs. Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning was normed from a homogenous and misogynistic sample (Gilligan, 1982; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Although Gilligan (1977) directly disputed Kohlberg’s (implicitly patriarchal) work, as evidenced by the development of her (feminist) moral development theory, Gilligan’s care-based moral reasoning rarely appears beyond a sentence in lifespan textbooks or as a significant portion of lifespan curriculum in counselor education curricula.

Socioeconomic Status

Not honoring the socio-economic context of lifespan development is apparent in the homogenous socio-economic samples utilized in research on infant development. Socio-economic levels heavily impact infant development (Fernald, 2010; Singh et al., 2023). However, despite an estimated 51% of U.S. children living in low socio-economic settings, most infant development research samples consist of only middle-class participants (Singh et al., 2023). Moreover, Fernald (2010) explained that at the 2010 International Conference on Infant Studies, less than 1% of the 1,000 total research presentations included participants from low socio-economic households, even though roughly 30% of children lived in poverty at the time of the conference.

Multicultural Competencies

Historically, the foundational research utilized in lifespan curriculum was entrenched in ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, and socio-economic discriminatory practices. Sue et al. (1982) asserted that throughout the 1960s and 1970s, developmental researchers portrayed minorities and other marginalized populations as inferior with low intelligence and genetic deficits. The discriminatory approach to research was evident in Kohlberg’s (1968) ongoing research regarding moral development. According to Kohlberg (1968), the moral development of children in the “lower class” was slower and shallower. Kohlberg (1968) reported that the stunted moral development was due to lower-class families not possessing high moral standards like those seen in middle-class families. While a shift in developmental research occurred as the 1970s progressed, the shift did not reduce discriminatory research. Researchers exchanged the previously held belief that minorities were inherently or genetically inferior with the belief that their stunted development was due to cultural deprivation and lifestyle inferiority (Sue et al., 1982).

While Sue et al. (1982) successfully advocated infusing multiculturalism into counseling, the pervasive use of homogenous samples in developmental research continued. Henrich et al. (2010) reviewed research samples utilized in lifespan developmental psychology research and found that the most often represented sample comprised “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic” (WEIRD) participants (Henrich et al., 2010, p. 3). Henrich et al. reported that 96% of developmental psychological samples originated from only 12% of the world’s population, rather than the global majority. An updated understanding of more recent developmental psychology research samples revealed that over 90% of developmental research samples continued to comprise WEIRD participants (Apicella et al., 2020), rather than the global majority. With the continued use of lifespan curriculum established upon homogeneous developmental research samples, CITs are inadequately prepared to assess lifespan development for the global majority.

Inadequate preparation of CITs to work with diverse populations is incongruent with the multicultural expectations stated in counselor ethics and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies' (MSJCC; Singh et al., 2020) framework. Within the multiple layers of the MSJCC framework, lifespan development is intertwined with counseling and advocacy interventions. Essentially, counselors are empowered to intervene at the community, institution, and public policy level when clients' lifespan development is impeded and/or oppressed (Ratts et al., 2015). The integration of lifespan development in multicultural competencies reinforces the significant role of lifespan in counseling and demonstrates continued incongruence between often-outdated lifespan curriculum and multicultural competencies.

Curricular Standards

Utilized for the licensing of counselors, the NBCC (2023) offers two national examinations, the National Counselor Examination (NCE) and the National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination (NCMHCE). Drawing from the common core areas of curriculum established by CACREP, NBCC included lifespan development as a core content area on the NCE and the NCMHCE. The alignment of NBCC and CACREP often leads counselor educators to focus on preparing CITs to pass the examinations created by NBCC, specifically in areas such as lifespan. Since lifespan curriculum remains grounded in the utilization of theories founded upon misogynist and discriminatory research practices, counselor educators have no choice but to place an overemphasis on teaching these theories. Counselor educators are left in an ethical bind between their duty to prepare CITs for licensing examinations that continue to utilize the exclusionary lifespan theories and their duty to prepare CITs to work with diverse client populations. The current authors assert we can simultaneously prepare CITs for licensure exams and anti-oppressive ethical practice by centering critical thinking about seminal WEIRD theories and scaffolding updated skills practice.

Interdisciplinary Science

Lifespan development knowledge has evolved via interdisciplinary science over the last several decades (Coker et al., 2022). Drawing increasingly from medical, interpersonal neurobiological, sociological, anthropological, political, economic, and allied mental health sciences, lifespan development no longer places the onus of an individual's development simply within their family system, but acknowledges families are inherently nested within the influences of every layer of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (McDowell et al., 2022). As traumatology research has also evolved, counselors are increasingly sensitized to historical, transgenerational, cultural, and other shared traumas within and between Bronfenbrenner's nested systems that impact development and mental health (Adams et al., 2023). Anti-oppressive counselors now need to work from a multi-systemic lens, deeply self-reflexive about our inherent limitations based on lived experience while seeking to understand, leverage, and improve where possible the systems that form and shape our clients' experiences (Coker et al., 2022).

Lifespan development and mental health are now understood to be impacted by many circumstances beyond clients' and families' control (Coker et al., 2022). To best serve our clients' development, counselors need to work effectively in multidisciplinary teams and settings that our clients depend on for their development. Anti-oppressive counselors seek to learn about the cultures, governments, laws, environmental impacts, wars, conflicts, barriers, and other stressors that oppress our clients' development. Anti-oppressive counselors also seek to provide relevant, culturally responsive logistical and emotional support to enhance resilience along the lifespan, from pre-conception to death. Taking an integrated, multidisciplinary, culturally responsive approach to assessing unmet needs and supporting client wellness across the lifespan aligns with professional identity ideals and CACREP (2023) standards while ensuring ethical treatment for our clients. This

team-based approach also facilitates necessary advocacy actions and strengthens the mental health systems that clients depend on for their healthy development.

Assumptions

The authors of this conceptual consideration of ways to decolonize and enliven developmental theories and models come to this work with a few assumptions. These assumptions are born out of our collective experiences as counselors and therapists, counselor educators, and teachers and researchers of lifespan development. These are also assumptions we regularly share with our students to cultivate a climate of critically analyzing and critiquing the very theories and models we want them to learn.

Lifespan Development Content as Skill-Based

As early as 1988, some counselor educators suggested that the practice of clinical counseling was often divorced from our understanding of development (Ivey & Goncalves, 1988). Ivey and Goncalves (1988) offered the following assertions. First, that exploring clients' cognitive-developmental levels can provide key insights into how they make sense of their worlds; second, that a variety of counseling theories, models, and techniques can be framed within a developmental approach; and third, that the process of counseling can (and should) be intentionally used to foster positive movement across levels of development.

Subsequent research has yielded similar assumptions. For instance, those specializing in children have found that impingement on or lack of accurate assessment of early developmental needs can result in referral to school counselors who then need to activate multidisciplinary pathways to meet those needs (Abrams, 2023; Martinez et al., 2020; O'Connell et al., 2009). Counselors specializing in launching youth report that developmental impingements can inform help-seeking in

problematic ways that often require anti-oppressive, developmentally-informed counseling interventions to navigate safely (Barker et al., 2005). Similarly, counselors specializing in adults must be skillful with the changing social, economic, and medical developmental stressors their clients face that often drive mental health referrals (Hynan et al., 2015). Unresolved childhood and adolescent developmental needs commonly press to the surface for sensitive care once one has safely reached adulthood (Werner & Smith, 2001). Adults with intellectual and developmental delays are greatly underserved across mental health disciplines (Huff, 2021). Counselors specializing in later life need to be skillful with changing risk and protective factors as client development often requires acceptance of loss for ongoing growth (Hensen & Koltz, 2018). Counselors addressing end-of-life at any developmental stage need a grounded embodiment of culturally responsive meaning-making related to development that was thwarted or is being grieved in any way (Hoerger et al., 2018).

Many Traditional Theories and Models of Lifespan Development are WEIRD

Seminal developmental theories reflect the earliest conceptualizations of the human development process, including the foundational understanding of ego, cognitive, moral, attachment, and adult development from a predominantly WEIRD frame of reference. These theories are dated and reflect flawed research methodology, overgeneralization, individualistic perspectives, and cultural bias (Coker et al., 2022). Anti-oppressive lifespan development takes an intentionally anti-racist, anti-misogynistic, anti-homo-and-transmistic (i.e., "hating") stance, and fosters critical thinking about the colonizing practices that seek homeostasis through controlling behaviors impacting development. Anti-oppressive and enlivening developmental theory takes a liberatory approach to human rights and needs, infusing the next generation of counselors with a deeply prosocial, culturally responsive, and empathic understanding of what client systems need for their optimal

development, as well as centering resilience practices. Encouraging students to critically analyze WEIRD theories of development, to seek updated and relevant research that helps to “fill in the gaps” of theories that are built on narrow and homogenous frameworks, and to explore ways of integrating concepts of identity development through cultural and contextual lenses are key to de-colonizing and enlivening lifespan development content. The impact of not doing so risks ignorantly putting non-WEIRD populations at a deficit; the benefit of doing so highlights the resilience required and exhibited by non-WEIRD populations to thrive in spite of global oppressive structures impacting development. Here is one example of how counselor educators can move students from learning the seminal WEIRD theory into integrating a different way to understand and utilize the theory within other contextual and cultural frameworks. Bowlby (1969) developed a theory of attachment to identify the impact of the bond between infants and their primary caregiver, usually their biological mother. Li et al. (2021) examined Chinese fathering and father-child attachment, pointing to the work of Bowlby as an example of foundational theories from which to build, but that was limited by their WEIRDly rooted norms and assumptions. Instead, Li et al. (2021) postulated that an exploration of the roles and identity of Chinese fathers would significantly enhance our understanding of early childhood attachment and fathering identity development, highlighting how the hierarchy of attachment does not always have biological mother at the top, aka the “monotropy”. Laying out these breadcrumbs for students to follow enables them to learn about the relevant underpinnings of theories of attachment, while also understanding the limitations of WEIRD frameworks and the need for ongoing inquiry from other cultural and contextual lenses.

Lifespan Development Content Can be Taught Across the Curriculum

It is typical for lifespan development content to be taught primarily in one course within a counselor training program. Often, CACREP-accredited programs strive to meet all of the CACREP (2023)

standards related to lifespan development in that one course. While this approach meets the spirit of the standards, it does create potential barriers to CITs’ ability to fully integrate lifespan development theories and concepts into their identities as future counselors. Rather than silo developmental considerations into one course, how do we better help the CIT integrate concepts that will actually serve them as future counselors?

The authors acknowledge that online-only counseling programs depend primarily on verbal interaction to deliver content and assess learning outcomes, while hybrid and residential programs allow for the spontaneity of nonverbal communication essential for culturally responsive care to be taught and assessed more fully (Mariska & Harrawood, 2013). We propose that faculty provide fishbowl demonstrations of the following skills to scaffold and assess nonverbal skills from small group practice in all formats. One way faculty can help CITs work more effectively with nonverbal communication that is central to culturally responsive clinical service is to make explicit the tone, pacing, prosody, and thoughtful use of silence, attuned eye contact, and other modes of mimesis that experienced counselors embody in session (McDowell et al., 2022).

To scaffold relevant lifespan development knowledge and skills outcomes into an integrated plan of study, we encourage core faculty to introduce and develop CACREP standards for lifespan development across the entire curriculum intentionally. For instance:

- 1) Poll first-term CITs on which lifespan stage they are in currently and have them do a reflective journal on how their life stage and development thus far informs their educational and career choice currently. Have them email the reflection to themselves to save for a future term. Then, ask CITs to revisit that original reflection and further develop how their current life stage and life experience inform their decision. As clinical skills practice, have them

interview each other in small group breakouts about how they've deepened their understanding of themselves and human development since beginning the program, and then report to the class as if they were sharing lifespan development themes in clinical group supervision.

- 2) Take a topical rather than a stage-based approach and incorporate relevant role-plays: e.g., in Human Sexuality, scaffold sexual and gender identity development, plus risk and protective factors, across the entire lifespan (Horton & Jacobs, 2023); in counseling skills courses, scaffold joining, rapport-building, assessment and intervention with a diverse mix of developmental considerations incorporated, such as clinical termination across the lifespan; in Trauma and Crisis, scaffold themes such as effects from in-utero substance exposure, early adverse childhood experiences, teenage pregnancy, forced migration or engagement in war, job loss leading to homelessness, sudden age-related decline, relational abuse, and other traumatic experiences that often lead to crisis with critical periods of lifespan adjustment in mind. Have students practice intake and assessment across the lifespan (first an elderly client, then middle-aged, then a teen, then a child) for these courses using triads with a peer providing feedback at each round while moving between groups to observe themes and provide skills scaffolding.
- 3) Collaborate with core faculty on how to integrate developmentally-attuned content and skills into every course, e.g., structuring the Assessment course across the lifespan, and facilitating role-plays of assessment sessions with specific measures for each stage of development with various risk and protective factors considered; structuring the Group Counseling class across the lifespan and doing role-plays for stage-appropriate joining and facilitation of themes, needs, and activities appropriate for that stage.

Assumptions

Counselor educators need to teach lifespan development concepts differently to align with our professional identity. Relying on the didactic lecture, for example, does not develop the necessary critical thinking skills required for students to understand how to counsel clients across the lifespan and to know how to address developmental considerations in case conceptualization. Because experiential learning can promote content knowledge, reflective processes, cognitive development, and cultural humility, experiential activities appear to be applicable for counselors learning about human development (Chan et al., 2021; Sanchez et al., 2019). The authors propose that engaging, experiential strategies across curricula are necessary for CITs to be able to integrate developmental considerations with other core content areas. As such, we offer experiential activities related to lifespan development across the core content areas outlined by CACREP (2023). Within each of the core content areas, potential experiential learning activities are posited for early, middle, and late developmental stages. While beyond the scope of this article, we also recommend that any adopted activity be folded into the identified course learning outcomes (CLOs) for each course and potentially linked to identified program learning outcomes (PLOs) as well. For example, assessment tools (e.g., eLumen, Watermark) can be used to house rubrics to evaluate both student performance and assignment effectiveness.

Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice

Early

For the early developmental stage in the professional counseling orientation and ethical practice domain, the counselor educator might walk CITs through an inner child-guided meditation

(Fargo, 2022). The inner child-guided meditation allows CITs to explore their own developmental experiences compared to normative developmental processes. While the guided meditation might stir up emotions for the CITs, the experiential exercise emphasizes self-reflection in the profession and the ethical imperative of counselors tending to their own mental health, before asking clients to make themselves similarly vulnerable. The professional counseling orientation and ethical practice course also sets the tone for the program and its expectations; thus, the inner child guided meditation can accentuate the need to begin and continue to tend to one's own mental health throughout the program in addition to learning clinical skills.

Middle

The coursework for the professional counseling orientation and ethical practice domain often occurs at the outset of a counseling program. The emergence of a new professional identity, coupled with the experiences of middle adulthood, provides CITs with a unique opportunity to gain the multifaceted skill of introspection. Borrowing from relational-cultural theory, counselor educators can guide CITs through an activity that provides a deeper understanding of CITs' relational and controlling images and their assumptions regarding the profession. The CITs are offered a physical representation of a mask (i.e., printed mask on paper that CITs can write on, a collection of mask props, plastic craft store masks for CITs to personalize) that symbolizes their relational or controlling image. For an experiential addition, the counselor educator guides the CITs through putting on their masks, imagining what might help them overcome their relational or controlling image, and finally, removing the mask. Using a classroom-appropriate group process, the counselor educator guides CITs through a discussion of their masks, how they symbolize the relational or controlling image, how the mask acts as a barrier that prevents CITs from presenting authentically in the counseling profession, and the experience of removing the mask.

Late

Within the late stage of development, following an initial discussion about counseling ethics, the counselor educator could lead the class through debating a controversial topic: physician-assisted euthanasia. After a meaningful debate, the students might read Kurt and Piazza's (2012) article exploring the ethical guidelines for counselors working with clients interested in physician-assisted euthanasia. CITs might participate in a think, pair, and share to explore the ethical decision-making process when supporting clients in late adulthood navigating a terminal illness (Kaddoura, 2013).

Social and Cultural Diversity

Early

For the early developmental stage in the social and cultural diversity domain, counselor educators can tailor or add questions to the Privilege Walk with a developmental lens. For the Privilege Walk, students will stand in a horizontal line in the middle of the room. All students will have their eyes closed until the end of the exercise. As the instructor reads a statement or question, the participant will step forward or step back if it applies to them. Developmentally minded questions can be emphasized and appropriately processed after the activity. Examples of developmentally minded questions might be: "If you were told by your parents that you were beautiful, smart, or successful, take one step forward," and "If you almost always feel comfortable with people knowing your sexual orientation, take one step forward." Beyond asking questions with a developmental focus, counselor educators can ask processing questions that encourage students to reflect on lifespan processes after the Privilege Walk.

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, counselor educators might take a developmental look at a popular culture film. Nittoli and Guiffrida (2018) use popular culture films, such as *Precious*, to talk about race, ethnicity, privilege, and power with their students in the multicultural counseling course. As an extension to this, counselor educators may invite students to consider the developmental impact of *Precious*' experiences. *Precious* is 16 years old in the film; how does trauma impact the developmental process? How do *Precious*' intersectionalities of identity impact the developmental process? What came up for you as you engaged with the film?

Late

Within the late stage of development, CITs could look at milestone birthday cards for people (18, 21, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80) and consider: (a) What messages are being conveyed? (b) What stereotypes? and (c) How do they reflect ageism? CITs might write a reflective paper and engage in large group discussions about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences while evaluating the milestone birthday cards.

Lifespan Development

Early

For the early developmental stage in the lifespan development domain, counselor educators might facilitate a “dinner party” with developmental theories. The prompt might be as follows: “You are hosting a dinner party and have a distinguished guest list - among the VIPS are Piaget, Freud, Erikson, Skinner, Watson, Bandura, Vygotsky, and Gottlieb. The conversation is wild and you enjoy learning from all these experts in the field. Suddenly, the topic shifts to parenting and things begin to get heated! You know you need to break up the argument, but before you do, choose 3 of the dinner guests mentioned above and reflect on how they might respond to the following statement –

Genes, environment, and culture all play equal roles in raising healthy and happy children” (Swirsky, 2021). Each student would choose or be assigned what “dinner guest” they are and prepare for the dinner debate in advance. Have students enact the dinner party in class debate-style, backing up their statements with specific examples and evidence.

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, CITs create a culminating project with a personal reflection piece embedded, such as creating something that captures the critical parts of their development. To illustrate, for a literature lover, a student could make a bingo card of books to represent ages and stages. Similarly, a student who connects with music might create a playlist for their life. For each stage of life, the CIT picks a song or two that describes their development or what they experienced at that age and stage. The CIT can then explain how that song fits that particular life stage and use specific lyrics to support their reflection.

Late

Another culminating project in the lifespan development course idea is to have students develop a comprehensive case study and lifespan theory critique throughout the course (Roller & Coker, 2023). In Phase One, students identify someone known to them who is currently at an age or in a phase of development that is of interest to the student, such as late adulthood. Students write a one-page proposal identifying a plan for engaging with their participant over a period of weeks in some way that might enhance their development. This is not to include counseling but rather could include activities such as assisting the individual in the emerging adult phase of development with updating their resume or helping a newly-divorced father in middle adulthood with developing recipes for dishes to prepare when he has his children with him. Phase two of the project is for the student to carry out their plan, noting key elements of their interactions and beginning to consider how these

interactions positively enhance movement, developmentally. Phase three is to begin to conduct research on one to two developmental theories that can be applied to the case study participant. Phase four of the project is to prepare a recorded presentation that includes a description of their participant including their intersecting identities and relevant cultural and contextual features, the theories under review including any recent and relevant research and critique of the theories, and a synthesis of how the activities with the participant impacted any developmental movement or milestones.

Career Development

Early

For the early developmental stage in the career development domain, counselor educators might students create a “career fair” for elementary school children. Students practice breaking down careers, interests, and aptitudes in a developmentally appropriate way. Too often, adults ask children what they want to be when they grow up. What are alternative questions that counselors can integrate during the career fair to assess interests and aptitudes and provide education about future opportunities?

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, counselor educators can have students define the age that they felt they will or have entered/ended: adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, etc. Put the numbers on the whiteboard and then discuss the events, feelings, and changes at that stage. Discuss the variation in ages and perceptions. Discuss differences in how they conceptualized their careers and interests at different ages and stages.

Late

Within the late stage of development, CITs can role-play a client in late adulthood who is struggling with the decision of if they should retire or continue working. The client's accountant says that they can afford to retire, but they aren't sure what their purpose would be or what their day-to-day would look like if they retired. What developmental theories can help you, as the counselor, use to support this client?

Counseling and Helping Relationships

Early

For the early developmental stage in the counseling and helping relationships domain, counselor educators can ask students to consider development in their treatment plans. The CACREP (2023) standards for counseling practice and relationships involve “developmentally relevant and culturally sustaining counseling treatment or intervention plans” (E.13, p. 14). Accordingly, CITs might write treatment goals and objectives with specific consideration on how to make the treatment plan developmentally appropriate. In a discussion or a reflective paper, CITs address how their treatment plan was congruent with the developmental needs of the client and how they intended to tailor their counseling approach based on said developmental needs.

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, a meaningful assignment can be for CITs to interview a licensed professional counselor regarding their beliefs about the counseling relationship (e.g., their journey with discovering their theoretical orientation). CITs may journal before and after the interview, with specific developmental prompts such as their experience with lifespan theories through the process. CITs might ask the licensed professional counselor, “How do developmental theories inform your work as a counselor?”

Late

Within the late stage of development, after some exploration of their current personal theory about how to effectively assist clients as a counselor, CITs might create a “theory meal” (Fox & Helcamp, 2023). The “theory meal” might include a protein or primary, foundational theory and sides, or theories they intend to integrate into their theoretical approach (Fox & Helcamp, 2023). As part of the reflection on the theory meal, CITs are asked if or how their theory meal shifts if they are counseling an eight-year-old, an eighteen-year-old, or an eighty-year-old. The counselor educator facilitates a group discussion about how to consider developmental stages and needs within our theoretical approach.

Group Counseling and Group Work

Early

For the early developmental stage in the group counseling and group work domain, CITs plan a group specifically for children under the age of twelve on a topic of interest. For example, a student might elect to write out a plan of how to lead a child-centered play therapy group for children to support social-emotional development in a school counseling context (Blalock et al., 2019). Other students could role-play as young children to provide the student the opportunity to actualize their group and discuss developmental considerations for group counseling. The counselor educator might elect to do an inner circle of the group counselor and child clients and an outside circle of observers offering developmentally focused feedback (Jacobs et al., 2015).

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, the counselor educator might facilitate a sociodrama to explore a

social issue related to middle adulthood, such as COVID-19 with a specific focus on the effects for clients in this developmental stage (Moreno, 1943). The sociodrama involves students enacting psychodrama tenets and playing roles relevant to the social issue (Schnabel, 2021). Examples specific to COVID-19 might be the SARS-CoV-2 virus, an Asian American person who experienced anti-Asian xenophobia, and a medical doctor staffed at the CDC (Li et al., 2021).

Late

Within the late stage of development, CITs can interview someone who is at least 65 years old. Interview questions include: (a) Which developmental stage was their favorite and why? (b) Which stage was most challenging and why? and (c) What are the most rewarding and challenging aspects of their life now? When engaging in personal reflection afterward, CITs consider: (a) Do you think there is/was/will be a best age for you? If so, what is it? Why? If not, why? The counselor educator can lead a group discussion after the interview and ask CITs about their thoughts relevant to group counseling. Discussion questions might include: (a) How would a group need to be structured for clients in late adulthood to be interested in participating? and (b) What type of mental health topics might be of interest to clients in late adulthood for a group?

Assessment and Testing

Early

For the early developmental stage in assessment and testing, counselor educators can integrate prenatal assessments. Scoping reviews show there are dozens of validated measures in use today for exposure to prenatal stress, but this can lend itself to imprecision in tracking risks and outcomes, as well as guidance for intervention (Dong et al., 2022). The Benevolent Childhood Experiences scale

(Narayan et al., 2017) is a counterpoint to risk assessment, focusing on protective factors that counselors may leverage in family and community-based treatment. The Adverse Early Experiences and Resiliency Survey gathers both risk and protective factors, which can provide a more balanced view of how to effectively intervene based on supports still missing. Every gestating parent needs and benefits from social support, however, if a gestating parent scores 3+ on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale, it is essential to strengthen their social support system to mitigate longitudinal risks for them and babe (Racine et al., 2018).

Middle

To explore middle adulthood, the counselor educator might invite students to role-play and counsel a middle-aged client, such as Lucia (Horton & Jacobs, 2023). A sample role-play could be: “Lucia is a 47-year-old Cisgender Latina female who recently separated from her husband. Lucia has three adult children, the youngest of whom has recently moved out of the home to pursue college. Lucia lost her middle son due to gang violence; he was tragically murdered three years ago. Lucia is finding herself more involved in her aging father's care. Lucia spent most of her adult life as a homemaker and stay-at-home mom for her three children while her husband worked as an electrician. She always dreamed of becoming a teacher and having a positive impact on young children's lives but married at 18 and had her first daughter at 19. She describes her life of being a wife and mom as “mostly happy” though sometimes she would wonder how her life could have been different if she chose a different path and pursued her interest in teaching. She is reluctant to come to counseling but is trying it due to feeling lonely and ostracized from her go-to support system, her Catholic church, following them hearing the news of her pending divorce” (Horton & Jacobs, 2023, p. 14). Following, the counselor educator leads a discussion about the client’s developmental processes (i.e., Erikson’s stages of adulthood) and assessment measures for this client and other clients

of the “sandwich generation” (Riley & Bowen, 2005).

Late

Within the late stage of development, the counselor educator might start by showing the students Dixon’s (2007) article with assessments measuring mattering, purpose, depression, and wellness among older adults. Students search on the university database and Google Scholar for counseling assessments specific to late adulthood. Using Google Docs, invite students to write the names of assessments they can find on the shared document. Process with students their thoughts and reactions, such as how few counseling assessments exist for late adulthood, and how that might impact developmentally appropriate quality of care for the population.

Research and Program Evaluation

Early

For the early developmental stage in the research and program evaluation domain, counselor educators ask CITs to consider a parenting topic, such as spanking, screen time, or extracurricular activities. Then, the CITs find a research article about said parenting topic and write a summary and discussion of the findings. Often, students impose their preconceived notions and beliefs onto the findings and report what they believe, rather than what the results indicate (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010). The class discusses how although research claims to be objective and trustworthy, bias is difficult to eradicate. Educators also facilitate discussion regarding developmentally appropriate parent consultation, considering our bias, and grounding our parent consultation or family therapy in research, rather than personal opinion.

Middle

The instructor might use literature relevant to middle adulthood developmental experiences as CITs learn to be consumers of research. Counselor educators must acknowledge and normalize the fear associated with the academic requirements of a research methods class (Davis, 2019). Davis (2019) accentuates the need to tie research methods to counseling practice, such as utilizing research articles on timely counseling topics. To illustrate, a research methods class might read a counseling article about de-colonizing counseling practices (Singh et al., 2020). Then, the class can discuss how to de-colonize counseling practices across the lifespan (e.g., what does de-colonized counseling look like for a client in middle adulthood navigating becoming an empty nester, or not becoming an empty nester as expected due to economic and/or other factors).

Late

Service-learning can be an efficacious skills-building experience for CITs learning program evaluation skills (Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2022). As part of the research and program evaluation course, CITs might engage in program evaluation for an agency that serves clients in late adulthood, such as a program that offers meal support to low-income older adults. Throughout the service-learning process, CITs would reflect on lifespan development and how to appropriately integrate such into the program evaluation process.

Conclusion

ACA (2014) and IAMFC (2017) codes of ethics center culturally affirming Lifespan Development skills as professional identity responsibilities specific to counselors. CACREP (2023) now captures these responsibilities with thirteen standards across the plan of study, which shows the evolving awareness counseling programs need to apply to this key topic as the field makes calls to decolonize our syllabi. The international study of

developmental science has become much more interdisciplinary and contextual in the decades since the seminal theorists posited their WEIRD-centered measures by which privileged and problematic “norms” were set (Coker et al., 2023). We call on all counseling faculty to break what you were taught, and infuse updated developmental science with clinical skills development across your plans of study. Future directions include the ongoing inclusion of resilience-based, anti-oppressive, generative theory, assessments, and developmental interventions based on and published by the global majority. Counselor identity is rooted in the compassionate liberation of humanity from suffering; to realize this aspiration, we need to de-colonize and enliven our sensitive engagement with our clientele’s development and prepare the next generation of counselors to do so with self-reflexive curiosity, openness, wisdom, and heart.

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How to Cite this Article:

Horton, E., Smedley, D., Roller, K., & Coker, J. K. (2024). De-colonizing and enlivening lifespan development in counselor education with experiential exercises across the curriculum. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 18(2), 1-15.