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Resistance to Philosophy -Why aren't we taking up this aspect of practice?

Purpose

This paper is a thought piece, sharing my reflections on resistance within the profession to engage with the idea of philosophy. Reflecting an amalgamation of literature and the author's intellectual insights, this paper is “meant to be thought-provoking and speculative that consists chiefly of background material and personal opinion and analysis” (“Think piece,” 2013). One of the key benefits of think pieces is to facilitate discussion on emerging topics without the benefit of empirical evidence, anticipating this empirical validation will evolve in the future if scholars in the field judge that the new idea has merit. Thought pieces are intended to provoke thought; they are legitimate tools for contributing to the cumulative improvement of theoretical knowledge and to help ideas grow (Max Planck Institute of Economics, 2006).

Because home economics is a mission-oriented profession (Vaines, 1980), it is incumbent upon its practitioners to engage with its philosophical underpinnings as well as with its intellectual (theory, concepts, knowledge) and practice/competencies components (Kieren, Vaines, & Badir, 1984). Marjorie Brown published a tome on this topic in 1993, focused on philosophical studies of home economics in the United States. Her compelling sub-title was *Basic Ideas by which Home Economists Understand Themselves*. She strove to provide philosophical thinking to the profession so its members can understand the profession, and their role within it.

In that same spirit, I have also been writing about home economics philosophy for years, even making up a new concept called *philosophical well-being* in hopes that people would engage with the idea (McGregor, 2004, 2006). Liz Goldsmith and I played lightly with the idea when we used a foggy mirror metaphor to get home economists talking about the role of philosophy in their practice (McGregor & Goldsmith, 2010). I also introduced the idea that home economics philosophy looks different around the world (McGregor, 2009). While writing that paper, it occurred to me that perhaps this diversity arises because practitioners are drawing upon different philosophers. Inspired by this insight, I wrote a paper for a *Kappa Omicron Nu* special issue on philosophy in home economics that I am guest editing (McGregor, 2012). To date, no one aside from me has submitted a paper for this issue, a year and a half later. Lack of submissions tells me there is a lack of currency for the idea of philosophy.

Brown (1993) believed “we *change ourselves* through new conceptual [and philosophical] insights and consideration of new possibilities” (p. xiii). Dancing with our philosophical core is one way we can change ourselves and, with those insights, continue to change and advance the profession. But why do we shy away from this dance? Why such resistance to the idea of philosophy? When discussing the role of philosophy in home economics practice, Brown asserted that “critical reflection at a philosophical level... involves people who are not themselves professional philosophers” (p. 337). That includes home economists. She further argued that we need to move beyond the “elitist conception of philosophy” and consider the merits of “public philosophizing” (p. 338). Public philosophizing involves public conversations, a tradition that has been interrupted in modern culture. These conversations revolve around the validity of certain beliefs, meanings and values. Bringing philosophical thinking into the public sphere is a neotrend, even for philosophers (Nemes, 2011). Why can’t our profession do the same thing? Why can’t we create “an ongoing tradition of a philosophical attitude... to think together publically” (Nemes, 2011, p. 831). What is holding us back? Because this reticence means the profession is being held back as well.

Dimensions of Philosophical Resistance

For this paper, I understand *resist to* mean to struggle against something. It can also mean to refrain from doing something by refusing to give in to temptation; if only this was the case - that home economists were resisting the temptation to be philosophical. No, resistance in this think piece means home economists are struggling against bringing a philosophical lens to their work. Without this lens, they engage in practice that is not reflective. Lack of reflection means lack of deep insights into *why they* are doing what they do (or not). Lack of insights sets people up for unaccountable practice, let alone unstimulating practice. This *philosophical lassitude* is not sustainable. The following text suggests five possible reasons for this situation, anticipating there are others.

Intellectually Inadequate

Philosophers think *above* the general level of thinking. It is the extreme stage of any subject, meaning people may not engage with philosophy because they do not feel elevated to that level of thinking. On the other side of the coin, the capitalistic, globalized, consumerized nature of the world has made people not think anymore; they let others do the thinking for them (ResearchGate, 2013). Either one - feeling intellectually inadequate or being intellectually disengaged - hampers people’s ability to engage philosophically with their life and career. These could be valid reasons for why home economists resist philosophy, but they still do not justify the resistance given that we are a mission-oriented profession. It is expected that people practicing in such professions are both academically and philosophically qualified to assume the responsibilities of their practice (Vaines, 1980).

Imitates Crises

Some home economists may believe that if they philosophize, it means they or the

profession are in crisis. This is a misplaced belief, even when one accepts that philosophy finds its life in crisis (Messick, 2004). He explained that only in the constancy of questions can a philosophy continue and evolve (likewise for home economics philosophy). Furthermore, by its very nature, questioning means a constancy of doubt and the unknown, which can *present* itself as crisis *unless* people realize that all disciplines and professions undergo their own crisis of confidence and will succeed and flourish *if* they learn from the process.

Threat of Exposure of Intellectual Indolence

In an interesting argument, García-Düttmann (2011) proposed that some people may be afraid of philosophy because they perceive it as a threat to their established disciplinary jargon and assumptions or worse yet, a threat to their intellectual indolence (intellectual inactiveness). Face it... engaging with philosophy takes a huge effort. Indolence means avoiding activity or exertion. A fear of philosophy may reflect home economists' inclination to avoid intellectual exertion, to sidestep coming to grips with the deeper side of their practice. For indeed, philosophy concerns itself with questions about *existence and* what it means to be human (existentialism). Behar (2012) explained that *existential* issues have to do with the plight of human *existence*, with the meaning of life, and what meaning, if any, people's lives have. To deal with issues pertaining to *existing as human*, people would ask particular questions, including "With the limited time we have, what is really important? What do we value? What gives us joy and why does it give us meaning? What legacy do we want to leave for other generations and how can we accomplish this legacy?"

Speaking somewhat from experience, I suggest that existentialism is not normally within the purview of most home economists' musings. We tend to be more technical in our approach to practice than we are reflective or critical (see Brown, 1993). And we tend to narrow our focus on well-being and basic human needs instead of the human condition (Brown, 1993; McGregor, 2010). This is shortsighted because existential issues reflect people's ultimate concern for aspirations beyond the self, beyond the superficial. These issues pertain to how each person is related to the cosmos and to a concern for the human condition (Allan & Shearer, 2012; Gardner, 1999).

Fear of Revelations

Philosophizing is simply theorizing about fundamental and serious issues. If home economists are comfortable dealing with the deep issues families face, they should not feel fear when asked to philosophize (think deeply) *about these issues* and their approaches to practice when dealing with these issues. Nonetheless, García-Düttmann (2011) explained that some people fear philosophy because of the revelations about themselves (and the profession) that can emerge from the thought processes. He explained that this fear is often repressed, and that people are unaware they are afraid or would shrug of the idea as simply absurd. If people were to philosophize about life and their practice, their integrity may be compromised if they learned something and did not know how, or want, to deal with it: (a) reluctantly have to accept or

dismiss certain arguments; (b) face evidence that an agenda or ideology needs to be targeted and challenged, or (c) realize that continually raising questions will challenge the Power that wants you to stop questioning.

Indifference

In addition to fearing philosophy, García-Düttmann (2011) argued that people may be indifferent to the role philosophy plays (fear lurks behind the indifference). Indifference means apathy and apathy is crippling as far as professional growth is concerned. Aside from lack of concern, apathy also means spiritlessness, which equates to lacking courage, energy and determination. The future of home economics does not bode well if indifference is the reason practitioners are resisting philosophy. We need courage to move forward, energy to sustain the forward momentum and determination to keep going in the face of adversity. Seems to me a solid foundation in agreed-to beliefs, values and principles of practice (i.e., a professional philosophy) would serve us well - so why avoid it?

Conclusion

At its core, philosophy is about what it means to live a good life (Nemes, 2011). So, what would a *good home economics life* look like? We cannot answer this question if we continue to perpetuate the split between philosophy and our professional life. To be fair, perhaps we are not so much philosophically unwell or languid as we are *philosophically naive*, meaning we lack experience, wisdom and judgement as it pertains to how important philosophy is to our practice. After all, most home economists leave university without ever taking a philosophy course (myself included). This means they embark upon their career without the basis for critically reflecting upon the philosophical aspect of their practice, to balance their solid grounding in theory/knowledge and skills/competencies. This lacuna must be addressed and this paper hopes to stimulate dialogue about the seeming lack of philosophical engagement of home economists. My dream is that we will find comfort with, and inspiration in, *professional philosophization* (i.e., thinking together professionally).

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