

Response to the 2008 IFHE Position Statement

Home Economics in the 21st Century

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I am honoured to be invited to share my response to the 2008 IFHE Position Statement. Position statements are intended to provide direction and a focus for the organization. Because they express how the organization wishes to be perceived by the public, its members and its stakeholders, these statements should be clear and defensible. IFHE has enriched its integrity as a professional organization by inviting responses to its Position Statement. While these solicitations open the door for more clarity, they also invite the inclusion of additional, perhaps, contending ideas. What better way to engage in *future proofing* in order to ensure a sustainable vision and reality for the profession!



Figure 1 Sue McGregor

Home Economics IS a Profession

I want to reaffirm IFHE's assertion that home economics *is a profession* and clarify what that truly means, the deep and profoundly moral import of that characterization of our work (Brown & Paolucci, 1978):

- A profession provides a set of services that is beneficial to society as a whole, a social end. Home economics holds the challenging reality that laypeople think they can provide services for individuals and families given that everyone lives day-to-day in some form of home environment. A profession recognizes this and builds its practice on human ethics and concerns, not just technical how-to practice.
- The set of services provided for the benefit of society involves intellectual activity, especially moral judgements, which require that each professional continually engage in scholarly activity focussed on the critique of existing knowledge and how it matches the evolving needs of individuals and families in today's environment.



Figure 2 Marjorie Brown

- Education for the profession (study) is vigorously supervised to ensure that those practising in the field are prepared to engage in morally defensible work. Entrance into the *practice* of the profession is thoroughly screened through a process of licensing or certification to ensure morally defensible work.
- Because of the level of competence and independent, intellectual, morally grounded thought required to practice in a profession, the scope and purpose of the profession is necessarily limited, but *not the complexity* of knowledge and practice in the profession. And, although the field may have to generate specializations in order to deal with the scope of the profession, all off shoots will adhere to the same agreed-to social end (see first bullet), making the profession holistic and sustainable.
- The knowledge appropriate to home economics is not unique. What *is* unique is that the field pays attention to the problems that families encounter from one generation to another (perennial problems), and then draws information and insights from a number of disciplines. After critically examining them, the home economist organizes these insights into knowledge that has practical use for the social ends of the profession, currently the well-being and quality of daily life for individuals and families (see section The Human Condition).
- To be a profession, home economics practitioners must engage in self reflection and self critique so that they can present themselves to the public in such a way that society is clear about what they offer. Otherwise, the field runs the risk of not asking the appropriate questions, posing the wrong problems, missing the underlying causes of symptoms that families are trying to cope with, thereby engaging in unprofessional practice and unethical conduct. To prevent this disastrous circumstance, pre-service and in-service initiatives must respect the *spirit of inquiry* and facilitate constant attempts to improve and refine theory and practice. As a true profession and professional, we must critique the human condition, which means investigating and denouncing social and individual



Figure 3 Beatrice Paolucci

damages caused by power imbalances in society. We must strive for *praxis*; that is, remain concerned with real inequality in society and then seek to link the insights gained from our ongoing critique to engage in social and political action.

Human Sciences

I was drawn to the first sentence in the Position Statement, the suggestion that that home economics is a profession situated within *the* human sciences. Recently, the highly respected leadership honour society of Kappa Omicron Nu, and some other academic programs socializing people into the profession, have opted to embrace the name *Human Sciences* for the profession (respectfully rejecting home economics, human ecology and family and consumer sciences). Conveniently, before reading the IFHE Position Statement, I had prepared a short, yet to be published, position paper on the recent trend to use term Human Sciences for home economics.



Figure 4 Kappa Omicron Nu logo

The human sciences was the original label for anything left over after the natural sciences have been accounted for. Today, *the human sciences* has evolved to represent the combination of both the humanities and social sciences. Even though there is some fluidity in how these two spheres are identified, the following is a safe enough distinction. Those practicing in the *social sciences* tend to use the scientific method to study humanity (sociology, psychology, political sciences, economics, history, anthropology, linguistics). Their goal is to quantify human interactions. On the other hand, those in *the human sciences*, the humanities, are committed to studying aspects of the human condition from a non-scientific approach (Classics and literature, philosophy, religious studies, women's studies, art, jurisprudence and law, and ethnic and cultural studies) (Wikipedia, 2008).

Consider that *the human sciences* is traditionally devoted to the practical needs of society, has the socio-historical reality as subject matter, is concerned with forces that rule society, and society's resources for promoting healthy progress (Dilthey, 1883). Home economics has *always* said it is about individual and familial well-being within the context of community and society. There is a big difference in the foci of

these two areas of study. In the home economics programs that have shifted focus to *Human Sciences*, there is a very noticeable change in language. Instead of saying family and individual well-being, these programs are now choosing a different noun - *human*: human needs, human problems, human well-being, the human condition, humankind. Barbara McFall (Research Associate with KON) clarifies that she feels the moniker Human Sciences allows practitioners to embrace the totality of the human experience and enables us to take up the original 19th century Lake Placid conceptualizations of the profession with a focus on the full human experience that favours: (a) immediate environments, not necessarily home, and (b) the *social being*, not necessarily family (personal communication, August 18, 2005).

To play devil's advocate, consider that home economics has evolved over 100 years by drawing insights from the natural, social and human sciences to develop its *own* body of knowledge, concepts and philosophy. We have stood outside these three spheres as a unique discipline. Does it make sense to name the profession after one of these sciences (dropping *the* and saying Human Sciences)? Or, can we consider KON and like-minded organizations to be visionaries, embracing a new conceptualization of human sciences, seeing this an opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary work that transcends the arbitrary division between the arts and the sciences and involves the study a number of disciplines in relation to a central problem - the human condition (University of Sussex, 2008). Consider this verbal soup to stimulate our thinking. I do not have an answer. But, I direct you to page 4 of the Position Statement wherein IFHE provides its rationale for retaining the name home economics (a name I support).

Re-branding or Ambassadors

At page 4, IFHE says it has decided to re-brand the profession instead of renaming it, and then to reposition it in the world. I have another suggestion. What about reframing ourselves as ambassadors of the profession (in addition to or in lieu of re-branding)? Whereas branding means putting a mark on something to indicate ownership, being an ambassador entails advancing the interests of the profession, guided by its values, mission and philosophical underpinnings. Ambassador stems from the Medieval Latin word *ambactia*, mission. The word brand is Old English for *torch*

(they eventually burn out). I know some will disagree with this point. You will argue that, to be more visible and accessible, we have to be able to define a distinctive characteristic by which people come to know us, a trademark. I suggest that we if we re-brand, we do so intending to create ambassadors instead of just conceiving the profession as a trademarked product or service. As ambassadors, we *can* reposition the profession firmly in the center of the 21st century (McGregor, 2007b).

Interdisciplinary

I agree with the comment at page 1 that a strength of home economics, if done well, is to prepare practitioners' minds to see connections among a diverse collection of sister disciplines to help inform their work with families. This is what is meant by an interdisciplinary approach to practice. I do not agree that these disciplinary bases are foods, clothing, shelter and the other areas identified in the second paragraph of the Position Statement. Rather, I was always socialized to believe that home economics degrees are structured so that we take courses from other disciplines (economics, psychology, sociology, law, philosophy, business) so we can find ideas that help us bring unique approaches to help families meet their basic needs, usually understood to be those areas listed as content in the second paragraph: foods, shelter, relationships, resource management, child development et cetera. In addition to taking courses from disciplines that are not focused on the family per se, home economics students take especially designed courses focused on family needs, processes and skill sets - a marriage of other disciplines and family-tailored courses. Their minds are trained to tease out content, theory and principles from aligned disciplines and then draw on the synergy created when connections are made between these insights and home economics' mission and philosophy so as to inform practice that is focused on individual family needs and functions.

Transdisciplinary

Also, in the second paragraph, IFHE asserts that home economics content is synthesized through transdisciplinary inquiry. While I wish with all of my heart that this were so, I am not yet convinced, and I am a little uncomfortable that IFHE takes this position. On the other hand, I *am totally convinced* that transdisciplinary inquiry is

something we should aspire to achieve. In her treatise on the basic ideas by which American home economists understand themselves, Brown (1993) stated emphatically that “*what is needed* is [a] transdisciplinary conceptual framework” (p.244, emphasis added). She shared evidence that the profession had not achieved this ideal in 1993, and I do not think we are there yet, in 2008. But, we are taking small steps forward. We are now using the word transdisciplinarity in our professional discourse, something very, very recent, I would say within the last three years. I wrote two papers about transdisciplinary inquiry (McGregor, 2004, 2007a), Kaija Turkki and colleagues use the term in Finland, and the new home economics journal recently launched in Pakistan (2007), *Nurture: Research Journal for Human Civilization*, self-identifies as an international, transdisciplinary journal (<http://www.chek.edu.pk/indexnurture/>).

Why transdisciplinarity for home economics? Because human problems do not fit neatly within the boundaries of one discipline, and because the academy does not have all of the answers to solve (even pose) problems related to the human condition; hence, an approach is needed that goes beyond academic boundaries and merges with civil society - that is the transdisciplinary approach. The products of transdisciplinary work are: (a) a framework that *gives meaning* to the work done within different disciplines (including home economics), and (b) a way to reflectively bring these disciplines into context with human purpose (Brown, 1993). She explains that this approach does not eliminate the need for intensive specialization; rather, it respects the tension between the rational, fragmented academic approach and the complex, emergent richness of the lived world of human beings. The result is work that contributes to enhancing the human purpose and human condition so we have a livable world.

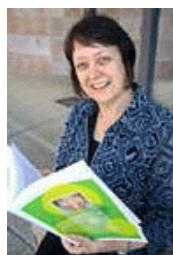


Figure 6
Donna
Pendergast

Kaija Turkki (2006) recognized this purpose recently when she rejected the term generalist, proposing a new kind of specialization within home economics. We would become *integral specialists* with expertise that integrates, links bridges, sees connections, looks for patterns, coordinates and communicates. This innovation in home economics

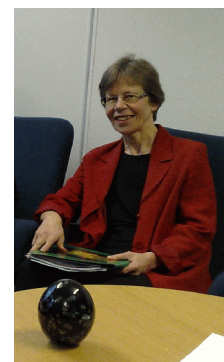


Figure 5 Kaija
Turkki

thinking scaffolds Brown's (1993) suggestion that home economists need a transdisciplinary approach in order to facilitate interdisciplinary inquiry, and vice versa, in order to make meaningful connections with civil society and humanity.

Donna Pendergast (2001) urges us to be expert novices (adaptive experts), good at relentlessly learning new things and letting go of things that do not work anymore. Transdisciplinarity is one of those new things we have to learn. So is integral leadership and practice, but I have no space here to develop the idea save to say it moves us beyond integrated holistic practice towards work grounded in the new sciences of chaos theory, quantum physics and living systems theory (McGregor, 2008a).

The Human Condition and the Human Family

I note on p.3 of the Position Statement that one of the four areas of practice for home economics is the societal arena where we are supposed to work for empowerment and *well-being* of individuals, families and communities (via transformative practice to facilitate sustainable futures). As well at page 3, well-being is identified as an essential dimension of home economics. Taking direction from our esteemed elder Marjorie Brown, I suggest that we expand our thinking to move beyond well-being to embrace the human condition as our new valued social end, especially if we are engaging in transformative practice to facilitate sustainable futures, both of the profession and the world's (McGregor, 2006). Focusing on well-being, as we have traditionally conceived it, compromises our ability to enhance the human condition (Brown, 1993). Let me explain.

Again, I am working on a position paper about the human condition and home economics practice, as yet unpublished. I draw heavily on Brown's (1993) critique of home economics practice to date, with its focus on well-being. With deep insight, she maintains that home economists tend to see the world in fragments that they understand one piece at a time. Due to this fragmentation, they have come to understand well-being as coming in separate packages (economic, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, environmental and personal autonomy) with little concern for the moral or cultural imperatives of seeing them separately. Indeed, with the best of

intentions, McGregor and Goldsmith (1998) described in detail *the* seven dimensions of well-being.

Brown (1993) maintains that home economists who do not see the world holistically, have a mind full of little islands with no bridges between them (p.109). They assume that, “because the world is fragmented, well-being is to be achieved by individuals and families separately and independently from other persons and from society” (p.106). To rectify this stance, she suggests that we move from seeing well-being comprising any number of different dimensions to seeing it as based in very basic normative concepts and principles (p.111). By normative, Brown means stating how things *ought to be* as opposed to being positivistic wherein one states, factually, how things are. For example, instead of *describing* the economic, social, physical and emotional states or *conditions* of families and individuals, we should go further and *interpret those conditions* using concepts such as: justice, equity, equality, fairness, freedom, human rights, human responsibilities, human security, resilient communities, violence and non-violence, participation, power, interests, et cetera.

Using the concept of the human condition, instead of family well-being, home economists would deal with each dimension of wellness or well-being from the assumption that one cannot address one separate element without considering the impact on/of other elements. They would progress from perceiving families as separate, distinct social entities with labels based on what they look like (same sex couples, single, common law etc). Instead, home economists would see them as a basic democratic unit in the world with functions they are responsible for to ensure social progress and prosperity of the entire human family (McGregor, 2006, 2008b). Home economists would cease to see well-being as the purview of individuals or specific family units or family types and begin to be concerned with the *wholeness of the human family*. Our practice would change profoundly. The result would be an approach to daily practice, policy, curricula and research that focusses on the condition of the human family



Figure 7 Cover for Sue McGregor’s book on Transformative Practice

instead of the fragmented approach that has held us back from reaching our potential as powerful transformative change agents on the global stage. Talk about future proofing! Thanks for your attention to my thoughts.

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