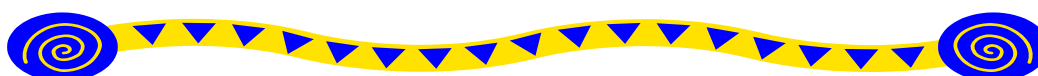


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Keywords: home economics, human ecology, family and consumer sciences, philosophical well-being, professional self-esteem, integrity, professional image

Abstract

This paper employs the metaphor of a foggy mirror to gain fresh insights into how the profession can ensure philosophical well-being. After describing the science of foggy mirrors, the discussion turns to three options available to the profession to augment professional self-esteem, philosophical alignment and integrity: (1) custom-design a non-fogging professional mirror, ensured by a global dialogue and consensus on a core professional philosophy and set of competencies; (2) treat our current professional mirror to reduce how often it fogs up, appreciating that temporary professional insights and clarity are preferable but not sufficient; and, (3) periodically swipe a permanently fogged mirror creating undesirable, permanent professional smears, with nominal clarity and vision. We argue that the best strategy is the first and we make a case for the necessity of an agreed-to philosophy of practice. Our hope is that, eventually, each person looking in the mirror will embody the agreed-to philosophical core of the profession.



Around the world, members of the profession (home economics, human ecology, family and consumer sciences (FCS), and human sciences) are celebrating the beginning of a new century of influence and professional growth. As anticipated, our 100th birthday celebration has led to “an intensive re-examination of where it has been and where it is going” (Goldsmith, 1993, p. 48). To illustrate, the theme for the 2010 101st American conference is a *New Century for FCS: New Challenges, New Solutions*. The theme for the 2010 International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) Council in Ireland is *Vision 2020: Home Economics, Changing Perspectives in a Changing Environment*.

As the profession moves through the 21st century, it is experiencing a convergence, a blending of the old with the new, deeply influenced by how we see ourselves, what we do and how others see us (McGregor, 2007a; Pendergast,

2009). Homes and families are the core social institution of all cultures. They are being re-defined as they struggle to change to cope with changes in other social institutions (e.g., economies, labor markets, governments, faith institutions) (McGregor, 2009a). For the sake of responsibly fulfilling multidimensional individual and family well-being (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998), it is paramount that home economists *own what they do and stand behind it* (Goldsmith, 1993, 2009). However, this aspect of our professional practice currently is compromised because of ebbing philosophical well-being and lack of alignment between personal and professional philosophy. The profession needs fresh insights into philosophical well-being because it affects our professional self-esteem (McGregor, 2006).

Regarding professional self-esteem, what do we see when we look in the proverbial mirror? How do we feel about that image? How philosophically-well are we, as professionals and as a profession? The purpose of this paper is to begin to explore these questions by employing a lighthearted (playful) metaphor of a foggy mirror. We assert that by using this metaphor, we can learn about ourselves, personally and as a profession.

To that end, the next section shares an overview of the science of foggy mirrors, followed with an application of this metaphor to help strategize about how to enhance philosophical well-being, professional self-esteem and philosophical alignment. We believe that the distorted reflection in a foggy mirror (or the reflection from a clear mirror) affects what we conclude about ourselves and our professional future. We examine what can be done to create a new mirror or de-fog a regular mirror so we are not continually staring at self-induced and externally generated professional smears, created as we swipe at the surface to temporarily remove the fog to gain vision and clarity. Our hope is that, eventually, each person looking in the mirror will embody the agreed-to philosophical core of the profession.

The Science of Fog and Mirrors

As a caveat, we recognize that the word science is complicated and often taken to mean natural science. As we employ this metaphor, we opt to first explain the natural, empirical science of a foggy mirror, anticipating that readers are familiar with the assumption that all sciences - natural, human and social - are germane to home economics practice. We believe this metaphor is a useful tool for crossing the borders of the academy, professional practices (generalized and specialized), business, and everyday life. By stretching our points of view (stretching our horizons), we can better relate to others, thereby enabling us to see the whole picture - a philosophically-well profession.

Furthermore, we assume that professional, philosophical clarity is a combination of the nature of the person and the nature of the mirror. Regarding

the latter, the coating on the mirror represents our level of agreement about a philosophical core. Any reflection of the viewer bounces back off of this coating, in addition to reflecting the viewer's inner philosophical essence (the nature of the person). All home economists have some degree of philosophical well-being and some degree of alignment with the existing philosophical core (Vaines, 1990). A mirror forms an image by reflecting light. This metaphor suggests that the mirror reflects back the inner light (the philosophical wellness) of each home economist and does so by bouncing the image off of its existing philosophical coating (whether agreed-to or not). If the mirror is clear, it reflects back whatever is inside the person and does so from the level of current philosophical agreement of the profession. From an unfogged surface, the viewer gains clarity about inner and outer philosophical alignment. At least with a clear reflection, people can make choices. To that end, the paper is about the significance of having an agreed-to philosophical core and about how to achieve alignment between personal and professional philosophies of what it means to be a home economist.

Everyone is familiar with glass mirrors used in bathrooms and with the fog that can build up with too much moisture and condensation. Let us look at the science of foggy mirrors. A mirror is any object that is smooth enough to form an image. Glass is mostly sand. Glass becomes a mirror when, through a detailed process, a reflective substance is applied to the back (usually silver or aluminum). Sometimes a protective overcoat is applied to the glass to prevent oxidation of the reflective coating (to mitigate cloudiness).

The creation of fog on a mirror results from a physical reaction between water vapor (water in its gaseous state) and temperature of the air. The hot temperature of the water in the bath or shower reacts to the cooler temperature of the air in the bathroom, forming evaporation. This process causes people to see the *foggy steam*. The *steam* then sticks to the mirror. The resultant *fog* is a layer of moisture; that is, the water vapor is made visible. Fog is actually millions of little beads of water that collect on the surface of the mirror creating a sheet of water that scatters light, producing the distorted image in the reflection (see Figures 1 and 2, the latter used with permission from Wright, 2005).



Figure 1 One bead of water (used with permission)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dew_2.jpg

Fog obscures what is on the surface of the mirror. It dims the image, clouds reality and conceals the truth. Clarity is blurred, leading to uncertainty, confusion and vagueness. With such reduced visibility, it is hard to *really* see what is staring back at people from the mirror. Actually, everything in the room

is *foggy* as well, but only the mirror *shows it*. Touch the walls and ceiling and they are wet, too. Everything is wet because of surface tension. Water adheres strongly to itself and weakly to the mirror's surface; hence, the water clusters into drops. Because of the reduced tension between the surfaces of one water molecule to another, the tiny beads of water stick together rather than spreading out on the mirror's surface. When enough droplets come together to form a dense surface (*condense*), fog is created, blocking one's ability to see the real surface. The fog *is real*, but it creates the feeling of an illusion. Reality is still there, just not clearly visible. It is obscured because the heavy mist reduces visibility (see Figure 2).

Mirrors have been designed that do not fog up in the first place. These mirrors are coated with a product that reduces the surface tension between the water droplets and the glass. There are also systems that heat the mirrors from the back thus reducing the tendency to fog up. Finally, people have found creative ways to temporarily remove the fog build up on regular mirrors, including swiping the mirror with their hands or a special cloth, using a bathroom fan, or leaving the bathroom window open while showering.

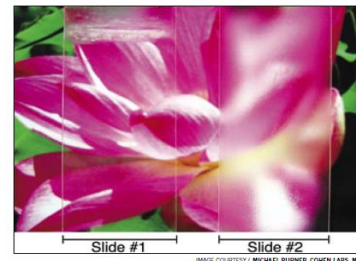


Figure 2 Fogged and unfogged surfaces (used with permission)

Learning from the Foggy Mirror Metaphor

Using this lighthearted metaphor (a combination of technical how-to and scientific know-how), we now explore what we can learn about practitioners' opinions of themselves when they gaze into their professional mirror. Basically, the metaphor tells us that (a) we can design our own mirror so that it *never* fogs up. (b) We can work tirelessly to mitigate unavoidable fogging of a regular mirror that has received a temporary treatment. Or, (c) we can let the mirror stay fogged up, swiping it clean when we need clarity. What would each of these strategies look like, and which is preferred to ensure philosophical well-being?

Custom-Designed Non-fogging Professional Mirror

Professional integrity means one has to deeply respect the person who stares back from the mirror (McGregor & Gentzler, 2009). Imagine waking each morning of one's professional life and looking into a professional mirror that reflects back a healthy image of professional self-esteem and philosophical well-being (Figure 3). There is never any fog *because* there is philosophical well-being and alignment. Philosophical well-being is defined as always considering how one's practice might need to change to reflect the insights gained



Figure 3
Custom-designed unfoggable mirror

from constantly improving one's wisdom through deep, thorough and mature understandings of life. A philosophically-well home economist will have become a philosopher, a person who seeks reason and truth by thinking, meditating, deliberating about and celebrating life (McGregor, 2004, 2006).

An improved attitude or philosophical well-being *can* happen if we socialize (or re-socialize) members of the profession to a common philosophical core, one that holds regardless of areas of specialization or subfields that have emerged over the past 100 years (see McGregor, 2009c, in press b; McGregor & MacCleave, 2007). We have to custom-design our own non-fogging professional mirror. This process entails respecting the tension between the profession's philosophical core and each practitioners' personal professional core, such that when they come into contact, they sheet off each other leaving a clear surface, indicative of philosophical alignment (e.g., Vaines, 1990). Through global dialogue, we can create this non-fogging mirror, akin to the breath of cool, fresh air that draws moisture away from the mirror, bringing clarity and focus to practice (McGregor, in press b).

Mitigate Unavoidable fogging

If, as a profession, we do not design our own professional mirror, and instead engage in remedial strategies to slow down the eventual fogging of a regular mirror, we end up creating a fall back plan (Figure 4). Most of the time, we are comfortable with what stares back at us in the mirror. We are relatively secure in our awareness and acceptance of a philosophical core for the profession and its imperfect alignment with our personal philosophies, including how we see ourselves as home economists and how others see us. This temporary comfort is possible because we took steps to slow down philosophical angst knowing that it would eventually materialize (the mirror *will* fog up). We would anticipate that when things get rough, our vision would be impaired by the clouding of the mirror (philosophical misalignment). There would be anticipated, periodic philosophical roadblocks that would warrant our attention. We would not be able to regain clarity unless we undertook another treatment of the mirror (philosophical reflections), knowing that this too is temporary. Nonetheless, this temporary treatment is better than the remaining option, which is living with a perpetually fogged professional mirror that can only be temporarily cleared with technical, quick-fix treatments - often too little, too late, if at all.



Figure 4 Treat to off-set unavoidable foggy mirror

Periodically Swipe a Perpetually Fogged Mirror

With a perpetually fogged professional mirror, unless the professional home economist swipes the mirror, she cannot see her image in the mirror. All

that reflects back is a blurred, obscured, hazy professional image. This repeated lack of clarity can lead to low professional self-esteem and unsatisfactory, misaligned philosophical well-being. Simply swiping the mirror with one's hand or cloth will smear the mirror (Figure 5), and this smear will reappear the next time the mirror fogs up. It is not philosophically healthy to keep staring at a professional smear. Even if someone were to write something positive on a foggy mirror (e.g., "*I am proud to be a home economist*"), that message will only appear when the mirror fogs up again; otherwise, it cannot be discerned. There is no constant reinforcement of this professional validation. Also, the message disappears very quickly, meaning the professional and philosophical reinforcement is not lasting.



In truth, *any* message written on a mirror will continue to reappear until the mirror is cleaned or a new coating is applied to the back. So, if the image or message that emerges when the mirror fogs up is "*I am not sure about being a home economist*", this message never goes away and provides little professional solace. The result is that home economists avoid looking in the professional mirror and run the risk of becoming (remaining) philosophically unwell. In a series of short-term, quick fixes, they end up having to continually clean the surface of the mirror, always struggling with the nature of the messages that emerge when the mirror eventually fogs up again. This temporary fix to philosophical misalignment and low self-esteem is very labor and psychologically intensive.

Controlling the Fog (Philosophical Alignment)

The authors asked themselves, "Do we fog up the mirror ourselves or does it get fogged up by external factors?" We concluded that the answer may be a bit of both. Regarding the former, if there is no intentional, coordinated effort to ensure world-wide global agreement of a professional philosophical core, *we* are to blame for fogging our mirror, for perpetuating professional angst and personal dissatisfaction with being a home economist. *We can control this* situation by building a custom-designed mirror that never fogs up, using a specially designed back coating (see below); that is, agree to a common philosophical core and advocate for personal and professional philosophical alignment.

Sometimes, the mirror becomes foggy because of external factors, such as the state of the economy. Who can deny the impact of the recent global recession on educational budget cuts? Smith and de Zwart (2010, p.26) observe that "[i]n the past twenty-five years, home economics has been buffeted by policy changes at the post-secondary and governmental levels, which has [sic] shaken any preconceived notions about the permanency of its status as a school

subject.”

The authors maintain that the main external factor that fogs our mirror is the public’s misunderstood, misconstrued understandings of home economics and what it is about, informed by prevailing world views. In such instances, we have to accept that we cannot directly control another person’s ideology or world view. We *can* understand that, usually, people hold (mis)conceptions of home economics due to past encounters with professionals in the field, and with more deeply entrenched, powerful ideological stances of what is important and valued in the world. Prevailing worldviews do not value families or the home except when they fulfill the roles of consumers, producers, and employees or laborers. If our *raison d’être* is families and homes, it stands to reason that we will not be valued as a profession by others who embrace these prevailing worldviews. We have to take a stand and pushback against these mindsets (Goldsmith, 2009; McGregor, 2007b; McGregor, Pendergast, Seniuk, Eghan & Engberg, 2008; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007).

We can no longer downplay our century-long focus on home and family. The profession’s contribution to the world is too unique and too significant to be marginalized and ignored (McGregor, 2007b, in press a; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Smith and de Zwart (2010) suggest as solutions more lobbying to maintain and promote existing home-economics related degrees and the development of certification programs, more mentoring of teachers and professionals already out there, more dialogue, and above all promoting the value of the field. Although we appreciate and support these efforts, we take a different stance in this paper, arguing that we need to build each of philosophical well-being, personal and professional alignment, and professional self-esteem that are not readily compromised. Only then can we feel confident that we are assuming a solid philosophical stance as we collectively approach the solution of practical perennial problems faced by families around the world.

In particular, we need to open another space for home economics where we can engage in behavior that challenges the ideological status quo (Pendergast & McGregor, 2007; McGregor 2009b). In the process of creating our own custom-designed, crystal-clear professional mirror, and in striving for personal and professional philosophical alignment, we have to re-conceive and use power in ways that are consistent with the needs of humanity, not the market or global economies. When we finally free ourselves of the weight of a smaller vision of ourselves (the image reflecting back from that cloudy mirror), we will enable each other to move closer to each other and connect professionally and with humanity (reduce the surface tension). It is time to come out from under the shadows and the distortions that may come from a flawed mirror (i.e., an ill-thought out philosophical core and/or misalignment of personal and

professional philosophies).

Conclusions

From its beginnings, the profession has been focused on the human condition, lived out on a daily basis in families and homes (Brown & Paolucci, 1978; McGregor, 2010). The profession has a rich history of addressing human needs in the home, community and work force (Goldsmith, 2010b). It is an honourable calling. The good of humanity depends on families and homes and, by association, on home economists (East, 1979). But, we need to be philosophically well and in alignment in order to meet this challenge.

Members of the profession need to free themselves from their old views and align themselves with new ideas (i.e., a new, custom-designed philosophical core). As more and more of us become philosophically well, we can become professionally assertive, grounded in a solid, agreed-to philosophy of practice and personal and professional alignment. Philosophy means friendship (*philo*) and wisdom (*sophia*) (McGregor, 2004, 2007b). With more philosophically-inspired leadership, we would better ensure a highly sustainable discipline and profession (Goldsmith, 2010a), and a stronger family base for humanity. We would continue to emphasize more informed judgments and effective decisions (DeVaney, 2010), grounded in an agreed-to philosophical core.

Ellen Swallow Richards stood for education, for advancement, for fairness, and for a belief in human goodness and progress. To follow in her laudable footsteps, we need to own what we do and to stand behind it. We need to re-claim our place at the table from a position of collective philosophical alignment and power (Goldsmith, 2009; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). If we all embraced this line of thinking, we would not hesitate to look in the mirror anymore; rather, we would design a philosophically-sound mirror (core) and then relish and welcome the clear, certain reflection of ourselves (philosophical alignment), and of this outstanding profession.

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