

**Sue L.T. McGregor. (2003). Globalizing and humanizing consumer education: A new research agenda.** *Journal of the Home Economics Institute of Australia*, 10 (1), 2-9. Posted with permission of the editor.

### **Abstract**

Consumer and family resource management educators should be shifting their focus from rights to responsibilities, leading to more responsible citizens in their consumer role. This paper suggests that such a shift involves integrating aspects of consumer education, citizenship education and global education, at the very least. The discussion also implies that human rights education should also become part of the equation since consumer rights cannot be entrenched if human rights are not in place. A four-cell research matrix is proposed and discussed, addressing the relationships between consumer rights and human rights and consumer responsibilities and human responsibilities, something that is new to the consumer education literature. Other scholars are encouraged to continue this dynamic line of thinking leading to a shift in educating consumers to be more responsible global citizens.

In a discussion of the dynamics of the changing global marketplace, Shim (1998) documented several changes in the way firms do business, ways that affect consumer purchase behaviour patterns in the consumer society. As a caveat, a recent UNESCO study reports that “Australia is a consumer society where per capita consumption spending doubled (in real terms) between 1949 and 1994. This means that Australia’s consumption of resources per capita is enormous with more cars per 100 persons than the United States of America and that Australia is second, just behind the USA, at the head of the world listing of ecological footprint size” (Fien & Skoien, 2001 - see also <http://www.uneptie.org/pc/sustain/youth/research-project.htm>). Furthermore, Collis et al. (1999) identified Australia as a Westernized consumerist nation, along with North America, Japan, Western Europe and Saudi Arabia.

Although a controversial issue, in this paper, the term Northern countries will be used to refer to industrialized, consumerist nations, including Australia. The term Southern countries (where 80% of the world’s population lives) will refer to less developed and developing nations which are not full-fledged consumerist nations- yet (South and Central America, Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and parts of Oceania). A 2001 UNESCO/UNEP study revealed that youth from Northern countries do not see themselves as responsible as those in Southern countries, a disconcerting fact given that it is the Northern consumer who is currently most responsible for unsustainable consuming behaviour. More significantly, half of the world’s population is under the age of 20 and 90% of them live in Southern developing countries. The UNESCO study found that Southern youth aspire to the consumer society lived in the North.

Shim (1998) recognized the shift towards producing goods and services in southern developing countries rather than in Northern countries. As this shift occurs, northern consumers, including Australian consumers, are buying more and more goods made by people living in southern developing countries. The governments of these countries expect their economies to grow because they have set up free trade zones, pockets of land and collections of government policies, in order to process goods to be exported to northern markets. These free trade zones are

notorious for low wages, less than optimal working conditions in sub-standard jobs, little to no organized labour protection and environmental abuses (Barlow, 1998).

Second, Shim (1998) documented that retailers in industrialized nations are thriving because they are able to buy their goods from firms that make their products in these free trade zones. They are thriving because northern consumers are buying. They are also thriving because the manufacturers pay minimal wages and distribution costs for the goods (due to telecommunications and technology) and sell them at high profits. Meanwhile, workers' labour rights, human rights and citizenship rights are notoriously neglected in these free trade zones so that products can be made of the highest quality at the lowest price to the retailer and the northern consumer.

Third, (1998) Shim noted that northern consumers are expecting quality at a low price and they are getting it. But, one has to wonder if they are aware of the costs involved to the worker, families, communities, societies and ecosystems in the source country? Also, Shim recognized the trend towards Internet shopping in industrialized countries meaning these consumers have even more access to firms who utilize outsourcing off-shore as a means of making products and bringing them to consumers' fingertips. Finally, Shim referred to the complexity of Northern country retail systems due to sophisticated consolidations and mergers. The intricate network of subsidiaries, branches and divisions, mainly situated in southern countries, makes it nearly impossible for a northern consumer to trace the distribution channels of Transnational Corporations (TNC's) to determine the origin of the product, the working conditions of the workers, their human rights and the impact on the ecosystem, even if they wanted to.

At the end of her discussion, Shim (1998) presented a series of interesting research questions. One such suggestion was to study the extent to how consumers of newly freed economies will display conspicuous consumption and materialism as they gain new personal wealth. One also has to wonder how the conspicuous consumption and materialism of northern consumers is affecting southern citizens. Also, despite a compelling discussion of how the global market is changing, Shim did not raise the issue of how these changes impact the consumption behaviour of northern consumers buying goods made predominately off shore, except to raise the question of whether consumers will continue to think that buying foreign products is wrong. They are buying foreign products all of the time - in a sense, they almost have no choice unless they make a concerted effort to buy local (appreciating that local producers can also be of ill repute). The intent of this paper is to raise the issue of how to bring a global perspective to socializing northern consumers so that their choice criteria and purchasing patterns begin to reflect the interconnectedness and interdependence of the citizens of the global market - their consumption decisions affect those not yet born, those living in other countries and the environment. This paper will discuss a global perspective and the merits of integrating this perspective with citizenship education, resource management and consumer education, especially consumer and human rights and responsibilities as citizens. It will culminate in the introduction of a four-cell research matrix designed to help others see the synergy between these fields of study.

### **A Global Education Perspective**

Several Canadian, American and South African home economics and family resource management scholars have delved into the concept of global education. The Australian Government's overseas aid agency supports professional development in global education throughout Australia for teachers and trainee teachers. This provides a coordinated approach for

teachers in government and non government schools to develop the knowledge and skills needed to integrate global education into the curriculum. If not already, home economists should be involved with this initiative and/or using their resources at

<http://www.usaid.gov.au/globaled/default.cfm> , <http://www.global-education.asn.au/> or <http://globaled.usaid.gov.au/devcentre-addresses.html>

Smith and Peterat (1992) drew on several global education theorists as they developed their discussion of what is global education, how does one globalize home economics curriculum and what are the key principles that one draws on as one teaches from, or practices, this perspective. Table 1 is a distillation of their analysis into 14 principles comprising a global perspective, in no particular order.

Insert Table 1 about here

Crawford (1993) shared guidelines she developed for globalizing family resource management curriculum so that students could be socialized to use resources in a globally responsible way, meaning that resources are managed at the local level such that world needs are met over the long term. Her guidelines included six major conceptual areas which she related to what she believed students should learn as a result of being exposed to a globalized curricula. She felt that several concepts should be entrenched in any curriculum designed to sensitize students to a global perspective including: the relationship between values and behaviour; the diversity of family resource management patterns; the interdependence between global systems and family resource management behaviour; ethical and global family resource management issues and problems; critical thinking; and, the power of global actors to create alternative futures.

The 1990 American Home Economics Teacher Education Yearbook (Williams, West & Murray, 1990) was dedicated to the topic of global education. In her introductory chapter, Williams (1990) acknowledged that the movement towards global education started around the mid 1960s, about 40 years ago. The profile of a global perspective that is shared by Williams is almost identical to that in Table 1 (likely because Smith and Peterat and Williams all cited and read a similar collection of global education scholars to gain their understanding of a global perspective). She tendered several ideas that reflect the intent of programs that embrace a global perspective: (a) gain an understanding of the world human condition, (b) examine various frames of reference and points of view (values) other than one's own, (c) prepare people to participate responsibly in the world, (d) foster respect for harmony, diversity, pluralism and interdependence, and (e) predispose students to gain knowledge and understanding of themselves in a two way relationship with the world community. These ideas are evident in Table 1, just worded differently.

Based on the premise that people and communities exist in relation to the larger world, and that people's actions have an impact of the lives of others around the world, West (1990) cited representative samples of principles (she called them curriculum goals) from the global education literature. In addition to those principles noted in Table 1, she added that people need to recognize that the pursuit of self-interest necessitates cooperation and that people need to appreciate the rights and duties of people toward each other, especially across nations (the latter will be especially linked to human and consumer rights and responsibilities in this paper). These two principles are especially germane to the topic of this paper. Succinctly, if one accepts that "global education is education for responsible participation in an interdependent global society"(Anderson as cited in Becker, 1979, p.99), that citizenship education is designed to socialize people into their role of a responsible participant in society and that consumer

education includes helping people appreciate that their consuming role is linked to their role as a socially responsible citizen (National Institute for Consumer Education, 1996), then it can be argued that consumer education, citizenship education and global education go hand-in-hand.

### **Citizenship Education Perspective**

Citizenship education comprises three components: civil, political and social. The civil component refers to community involvement, and learning about and becoming involved in the life and concerns of one's community. This involvement becomes global simply by conceiving of oneself as a citizen in a world community as well as a local or national community. The political component refers to learning to be effective in public life. If public life is conceived, from a global perspective, as the power sphere (business and government), then the political can refer to the global principles of state of the planet awareness and knowledge of global dynamics (see Table 1) meaning that the person can strive to be an activist on behalf of the human condition by taking issue with actions of, and being a voice at, national and international political and industry bodies and agencies. Finally, the social component of citizenship education refers to moral and socially responsible behaviour. From a global consumer perspective, this would mean that citizens would make morally justifiable consumption decisions based on the global principles of social awareness, involvement consciousness and repercussion consciousness. In an earlier discussion, McGregor (1999b) provided evidence of the synergy between consumer education and citizenship education. She suggested that a strong argument can be made that lack of education in citizenship can translate to less than responsible consumption decisions in the global marketplace. As well, lack of education from a global perspective can translate to less than responsible consumption decisions as concerns rights and social justice, ethical trade and ecological integrity (see McGregor (2002) as well for more recent thinking on this topic).

Consider that Gabriel and Lang (1995) actually said that "a citizen is a responsible consumer, a socially aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure to communal well-being" (pp.175-176). This definition of citizen as consumer is brimming with global principles, in descending order: responsible participation, social awareness, responsible value deliberations and morally defensible decisions, awareness of human choices and consequences, understanding of world conditions, balancing self-interest with mutual interest and, lastly, respect for relationship of self relative to the world community. This is further display of the synergy between consumer education, global education and citizenship education. Another global principle that is relevant to this paper is that people need to appreciate the rights and duties of people toward each other, especially across nations (West, 1990). From a consumer education viewpoint, this can easily be extrapolated to refer to the need to appreciate the links between consumer rights and human rights and consumer responsibilities and human responsibilities. Even more compelling are the links between consumer rights and human responsibilities and consumer responsibilities and human rights.

### **Introducing the Research Matrix with Discussion**

Following Crawford (1993) and Shim's (1998) example, the author proposes a research agenda for this topic, illustrated in matrix form in Figure 1. Cells 1 and 4 address the relationships between rights to rights and responsibilities to responsibilities. Cells 2 and 3 focus on the relationships between rights and responsibilities. Cells 1 and 4 were examined in an earlier paper (McGregor, 1999a). Their summary will be followed by some initial thinking about

the latter two relationships, cells 2 and 3. Others are encouraged to continue this dynamic line of thinking leading to a shift in educating consumers that parallels the shift in the economy, distribution channels, and retail mechanisms as identified by Shims.

Insert Figure 1 about here

### **Consumer and Human Rights - Cell 1**

Consumers have seven recognized rights in the marketplace (Consumers International [CI], 2003): safety, information, choice, voice, redress, education, and a healthy environment (see [http://www.dticebu.net.ph/09\\_b\\_01.htm](http://www.dticebu.net.ph/09_b_01.htm) for more detail). It is assumed that business will respect these rights and that government will enter the equation when this respect is denied. In 1948, the UN recognized a collection of human rights organized by six themes including: the themes of (a) civil and cultural rights and (b) economic, social and political rights. The former comprises, among other things, recognition under the law, movement within the country, public assembly, and ability to participate in government. The latter includes employment and working conditions, social security, standard of living and education, plus others <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

There are inherent links between consumer rights and human rights. In fact, one cannot have consumer rights if human rights are not in place and enforced. To illustrate, one cannot enjoy the consumer right to education if the human rights of literacy, schools and basic education are not available. Consumers cannot have the right to information, if they are illiterate and cannot read the product or service information. Consumers cannot have the right to choice (price, availability and quality) if their human rights of adequate income and steady employment not are assured. Consumers cannot exercise their right to having a voice in the policy process if they cannot vote, cannot meet in groups in public or are not allowed to participate in government (McGregor, 1999a).

### **Consumer and Human Responsibilities - Cell 4**

The UN does not have a declaration on human responsibilities. This gap may be redressed shortly given that an organization called the InterAction Council recently succeeded in getting the UN to examine a proposal for a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities (Küng, 1998) and to publish a paper on the relationship between rights and responsibilities (to be released in 2004). As an aside, the InterAction Council, formed in 1983, is comprised of some 30 former heads of government or state and faiths from all continents and different political orientations. Their objective is to balance human rights with human responsibilities. The InterAction Council (1997) proposed a collection of five basic responsibilities that humans should respect including: (a) non-violence and respect for life, (b) justice and solidarity, (c) truthfulness and tolerance, (d) mutual respect and partnerships, and (e) treat everyone in a humane way. Consumers International (CI) (2003) recognized five consumer responsibilities: (a) strive for social concern, (b) for solidarity, (c) to be critically aware, (d) to take action and be involved, and (e) to exercise environmental awareness (see [http://www.dticebu.net.ph/09\\_b\\_01b.htm](http://www.dticebu.net.ph/09_b_01b.htm) for more detail).

The five consumer responsibilities recognized by CI inherently reflect the human responsibilities suggested by the InterAction Council. McGregor (1999a) compared the responsibility to exercise social concern while making consumption decisions against the collection of human responsibilities. In brief, social concern deals with being aware of the impact of one's consumption decisions on other citizens. Consumers would moderate their consumption decisions if they were concerned with the Golden Rule; if they were to hold all marketplace players accountable; if they were to respect justice, solidarity, diversity, other's

well-being, standard of living and working conditions.

This paper takes McGregor's (1999a) initial discussion further by relating the other four consumer responsibilities (CI) to the collection of human responsibilities tendered by the InterAction Council (1997). First, the consumer responsibility to exercise environmental awareness parallels the general human responsibility to act in a non-violent way and respect life, including ecological protection, and to exercise justice and solidarity which includes sustainability and respect for intra and inter-generational ecological imperatives. Second, consumers have the responsibility to organize themselves and to develop collective strength and influence so they can promote and protect their interests, referred to by CI as solidarity. The InterAction Council also suggested solidarity as a human responsibility and meant by this honesty, integrity, fairness and to strive to meet one's potential while not abusing power and wealth. Third, consumers have the responsibility to be critically aware of, and to question, their choices in the marketplace. This consumption responsibility does not have a direct parallel with human responsibility, but it can be equated to the human responsibility of mutual respect and partnerships relating to caring for others' well-being, welfare and safety, augmented by critically aware consumption decisions. Finally, responsible consumers will take action and get involved, be assertive rather than passive, and make a concerted effort to make their voice heard. Two parallel human responsibilities would be (a) acting in peaceful ways while making one's voice heard, respecting privacy and confidentiality, being honest, and (b) holding business, government, the media and other consumers to this high standard.

### **Consumer Responsibilities and Human Rights - Cell 3**

Let us now examine the links between consumer responsibilities and their impact on human rights in the global village. As global citizens, consumers have to realize that their actions in the marketplace will impact the rights of citizens in other parts of the world. If a consumer acts responsibly (strives for social concern, solidarity, to be critically aware, to take action and be involved and to exercise environmental awareness), they cannot help but foster the improvement of human rights in other countries. Being aware of the impact of one's consumption decisions on other citizens (social concern) and the environment will mean that decisions to consume a good or service will be made using a different set of choice criteria including the impact on another's standard of living, working conditions, gender relations, moral and material interests and intellectual property and social security (health, education and social welfare), all human rights (Lusby, 1990; McGregor, 1999a; Nolen & Stover, 1993). Consuming from a critically aware perspective means questioning the price of a good or service (CI, 2003). If one is concerned with the link between human rights and responsible consumption, more than price has to be questioned! As noted in the previous sentence, choice criteria have to be expanded considerably to also include: trade relations, country of origin, power relations between state, citizens, industry and international bodies, to name the most salient. Also, a responsible consumer is supposed to work with other consumers (solidarity) and take assertive action to lobby for the consumer interest and make the consumer voice heard by government and business. If these organized consumers spoke on behalf of the rights of citizens in other countries affected by northern consumption, they could have an impact on the human rights of other citizens perhaps on family well-being and standard of living, working conditions and labor laws, education, access to education, and the right to organize.

### **Consumer Rights and Human Responsibilities - Cell 2**

This final section will provide a sketchy beginning of examining the link between consumer rights in the marketplace and human responsibilities in the global village. As noted,

consumers have seven recognized rights in the marketplace (CI, 2003): safety, information, choice, voice, redress, education, and a healthy environment. Also, the InterAction Council (1997) proposed a collection of five basic responsibilities that humans should respect including: non-violence and respect for life, justice and solidarity, truthfulness and tolerance, mutual respect and partnerships, and treat everyone in a humane way. If people act responsibly as citizens will they, by association, find respect for their role as consumer? Or... if people expect rights in their role as consumer, will they tend to act any less responsibly as a citizen? This idea is still underdeveloped; hence, the questions instead of answers. But consider this... will the fact that consumers expect to have their rights respected in the marketplace desensitize them to their responsibilities as humans in the global village? To illustrate, will the right to choice and a variety of products lead to the expectation that this choice be there regardless of the impact on the lives of those living elsewhere, those not yet born or on the environment? Will the obligation to sustain the environment, future generations and the security of those living elsewhere be readily adopted by northern consumers? What factors mitigate assuming this moral responsibility? Does seeing oneself as a citizen first and consumer second even stand a chance of gaining credence in a consumer society bent on perpetuating the myth of consumerism - defining oneself by what one owns rather than how one relates to others? What is involved in challenging the global economic links between north and south and east and west given that these links are seen to be good for business, good for northern consumers but less than beneficial for many southern citizens?

### **Conclusion**

On a personal note, as a home economics scholar, I am not the first person to ask these questions but I feel compelled to raise them in light of our professional obligation to teach people how to be good consumers, one aspect of family well-being (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998). Although many will feel uncomfortable with the following assertion, I agree with Brown (1993) that our profession tends to narrowly define a 'good consumer' as one who gets good value for their dollar because they manage their resources efficiently. Do all members of the profession conceive of 'value' as also including the well-being of other citizens and the integrity of future generations and the ecosystem; that is, effectiveness, meaning doing the right thing? Brown would suggest not yet, noting that the profession has not critically examined the assumptions of the market economy and the family's role in that economy. McGregor (1998) suggested that the profession can grow from reexamining its roots in economics and even suggests a set of globally sensitive economic principles placing the citizen first and the consumer second.

I feel strongly that consumer and family resource management educators should be shifting their focus from rights to responsibilities leading to more responsible citizens in their consumer role. This paper suggests that such a shift involves integrating aspects of consumer education, citizenship education, and global education, at the very least. This discussion also implies that human rights education also become part of the equation. The principles inherent in a global perspective provide a solid foundation from which to integrate consumer education and citizenship education. All three perspectives provide a powerful, long reaching approach to educating citizens into their consumer and resource management roles. The change in language, from "educating people to be consumers" to "educating citizens into their consumption role" reflects the explicit shift to seeing a person as citizen first and a consumer second. This change is necessary if we are to prepare the next generation of citizens to be caring and responsible consumers and managers of the earth's and human resources which comprise the human, global

community.





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Williams, S., West, D., & Murray, E. (Eds.). (1990). Looking toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Home economics and the global community. NY: McGraw Hill/Glenco.

## Table 1

Collection of 14 Global Principles (drawn from Smith and Peterat, 1992)

***Perspective consciousness*** - we must begin to appreciate that our view of the world is not universally shared by others

***State of the planet awareness*** - we must be aware of prevailing and emerging world conditions and developments

***Cross-cultural awareness and diversity*** - we must appreciate that there are a diversity of ideas and practices found in human societies and communities

***Knowledge of global dynamics*** - a modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world order is necessary

***Aware of changing choices and alternatives*** - we must be aware of problems related to choices facing people and nations and how these choices change as one gains a consciousness of global systems

***Balanced development*** - the demands on local supply to support development initiatives must not place undue strain on local supply

***Voluntary simplicity*** - we should strive to create a life style by streamlining and simplifying personal possessions and consumption

***Complementary technology*** - the technology introduced into a country should be compatible with, or not compromise, local indigenous technology or how it is passed on to the next generation

***International reciprocity*** - we must appreciate that each culture has much to give and gain from cross cultural interactions

***Sustainable lifestyles and production*** - we must ensure that current collective lifestyles and

*production methods renew and support, rather than harm, the environment and ecosystem, other people or future generations*

***Systems consciousness*** - we need the ability to think in systems mode rather than a dualistic mode

***Involvement consciousness and preparedness to consider repercussions*** - we need to appreciate that the choices we make, and the actions we take, have repercussions for the global present and future

***Process mindedness*** - we need to appreciate that learning and personal development are a continuous journey with no fixed destination (life long learning and socialization)

***Responsible value deliberations and morally justifiable decisions*** - we must base consumer and resource management decisions on values as well as facts; make decisions on the basis on good reason rather than habit, fear, force, self interest or customs; be able to morally and ethically justify our positions on issues knowing that we may encounter resistance

Figure 1

Research Matrix for Globalizing and Humanizing Resource Management and Consumer Education

	<b>Human Rights</b>	<b>Human Responsibilities</b>
<b>Consumer Rights</b>	<b>Cell 1</b> - consumer rights assume human rights are already in place	<b>Cell 2</b> - consumer rights in the marketplace and their impact on human responsibilities in the global village
<b>Consumer Responsibilities</b>	<b>Cell 3</b> - consumer responsibilities in the marketplace and their impact on human rights in the global village	<b>Cell 4</b> - consumer responsibilities inherently reflect human responsibilities