

# Sustaining Homes and Families for the Good of Humanity: A Commentary

Sue L.T. McGregor

*This article explores the history of the home economics/family and consumer sciences (HE/FCS) profession, a field that arose from the synergy created by the 20th-century Industrial Revolution (late 1800s and early 1900s). The profession was intended to strengthen and protect the home and family from the vagaries of scientific and technological progress. Our mantra for years was to optimize the quality of life and well-being of individuals and families. Our enduring rhetoric, however, does not reference the profession's connection to humanity (McGregor, 2010), despite the urging of Brown and Paolucci (1979) to concern ourselves with the human condition (in the preamble to their mission statement).*

*Humanity* refers to the collective of humankind instead of just specific individuals and families—our historical *raison d'être*. Humanity is the cradle within which everyone lives, grows, develops, and evolves. Cradles provide a framework for support so that things can flourish (Anderson, 2014). Juengst (2019) viewed families as a “feature of the human condition that has traditionally been taken for granted” (Section 5). So has the ability of fami-

lies to nurture (cultivate) or suppress (subdue) people's natural talents and abilities that can so strongly shape the human condition (Juengst, 2019).

My thinking about the profession changed forever about 15 years ago when I read Marjorie East's (1979) profound response to Brown and Paolucci's (1979) home economics definition document. East suggested that home economics “is focused on the home in order to improve humanity” (1979, p. 141). The commentary herein is based on my assumption that we have not heeded East's radical innovation tendered nearly 50 years ago. It now seems incredibly apropos during the global pandemic (COVID-19) that is affecting all humanity, with individuals and families at the crux of everything. The choices they make have an impact on the whole world, intimating that they should be strong in their choices. This paper teases out East's ideas in more detail, so we can consider engaging with them as we continue our historical journey into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Home and Family As a Means to an End

East (1979) recognized our potential connection to humanity when she said, “home economics is that field of study and that profession which applies rational thought to home life for improving that matrix for human development” (p. 141). Things form, develop, and flourish within a *matrix*, a term derived from Latin *mater*, “womb, mother” (Harper, 2022). East envisioned *home life* as “the molding force for individual development” (p. 141).

From this insightful position, East then made a radical suggestion (i.e., outside FCS/HE historical tradition). She said, “nothing about the home, or family, is important intrinsically, only as a means [to an end]” (p. 141). When something is a means, it becomes an agent that can be used to achieve a goal or result (Anderson, 2014). Put simply, East proposed that home and family is the matrix for individual self-formation and development for the good of humanity (see also, Juengst, 2019). The resultant individuals, with varying degrees of maturity, will grow up to live within the cradle of humanity and contribute to the human condition. They are a means to a *greater* end. For this reason, family and consumer sciences/home economics should focus on the home and family for the good of humanity.

My takeaway going forward from our longstanding history, informed by East’s (1979) profound revisioning of home economics, is that homes and families must be sustained for the good of humanity, and we can do that by working through individuals and families as well as with and for them. Although this sounds simple enough, it is a challenging concept to accept because working *through* families sets them up as a *means to an end*, which East fully acknowledged. But she then clarified two very important points. Our *end* would now be the improvement of humanity; our *means* to that end would thus become strong and resilient homes and families.

I propose that we could ensure those means by a reframing of the issue. We would continue to help people optimize their well-being and quality of life *while* conceiving them as living within the cradle of their home and family, which must be strong for the good of humanity. The Family and Consumer Sciences Body of Knowledge (FCS-BOK) acknowledged our longstanding focus (well-being and

quality of life) and augmented it with basic human needs, but it does not reference humanity or the human condition (McGregor, 2014; Nickols et al., 2009). Moving forward, our philosophy (central beliefs) would shift from helping each individual and each home and family unit to be strong and resilient for their own good to helping them become viable so humanity itself can be strong and resilient—an improved human condition.

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## The Human Condition

Put simply, we would still do our work but for a very different reason—homes and families would need to be supported and sustained so they can improve humanity and the human condition (see also, McGregor, 2010, 2014). Humanity’s present condition reflects the totality of the actions humans have taken to date leading to humanity’s current state of existence (Arendt, 1958). This condition can be characterized as unsustainable, violent, fearful, and oppressive in combination with the potential for stewardship, forgiveness, hope, and solidarity (McGregor, 2010). As I have suggested:

If the profession does not give the human condition the emphasis it deserves, it cannot attend to the problems and opportunities that the human condition inevitably will pose. And, even though the profession cannot possibly address all of the problems inherent in the human condition, neither can it ignore them. (McGregor, 2010, p. 14)

As a caveat, attendees at the profession’s 1993 name and identity-changing meeting in Scottsdale,

Arizona, agreed that the profession should assume leadership in enhancing the human condition, but that it should do so by “shaping societal change” (p. 1) (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 1993) not by working *through* families (see also, Simerly et al., 2000).

### **Sustain versus Sustainable**

To aid in the imperative of not ignoring the problems of the human condition, FCS/HE can distinguish between *sustaining homes and families* and *sustainable homes and families*. Sustaining is a verb (an action) stemming from Latin *sustinere*, “to hold.” *To sustain* means to strengthen and support (to hold steady and constant) in order to keep something going continuously over a period of time. In contrast, *sustainable* is an adjective. It describes instances when something is sustained for an indefinite period of time while avoiding the depletion of natural resources or damaging the environment in the process (Anderson, 2014; Harper, 2022; “Sustained,” n.d.).

The profession has fully engaged with the idea of individual and familial obligations to sustainable consumption and production (e.g., Home Economics Victoria & Perraton, 2008; International Federation for Home Economics, 2019; Maguire & McCloat, 2017) but not so much with sustaining the home and family for the good of humanity. Success in this endeavor depends on keeping homes and families strong as a powerful social institution. In a different paper, I distinguished between the constructs of home and family (McGregor, 2016).

### **Family As Social Institution**

The human condition both reflects and affects the stability of homes and families, which validates our obligation to sustain them. Sustaining homes and families keeps them strong as a social institution. An institution (from Latin *instituere*, “to set up; to establish”) (Harper, 2022) is a permanent, stable, and secure organization in the social, daily life of a people. Institutions are established to provide a predictable structure and stable patterns of human activities. People come to depend on institutions for a variety of reasons, and their absence or failure is

noteworthy (Miller, 2019; Prewitt, 2019; The Atlantic’s Marketing Team, 2018).

Less-formal, localized examples of institutions (i.e., commonplace yet complex gathering spots, hubs, and connections) include familiar people as well as the local corner store, the local pub, or the local post office. The colloquialisms “it was an institution” or “she was an institution” refer to something or someone that was a long-standing, important part of your life, always there shaping your daily routine and outlook on the world (as institutions are want to do). Its (their) absence or failure that is noteworthy, often with examples including losing the local pub, the local corner store, or a highly memorable community member (Miller, 2019).

More formal, nonlocal examples of social institutions also exist (i.e., complex social forms set up to provide order, facilitate discourse, and/or provide services vital to society). They are characterized herein as nonlocal (absent) because people normally do not think of these aspects of their life in this manner. Such institutions include the family, economy, labor market, governments, legal and justice institutions, religious institutions, healthcare and education institutions, media, nongovernment and nonprofit organizations, professional associations, research institutions and establishments, and political institutions (McGregor, 2009; Miller, 2019; Sokalski, 1992).

People play a role in the development and evolution of social institutions. People (a) provide and receive benefits (e.g., wages, jobs, consumer products and services, a sense of security and familiarity) and/or (b) carry and share burdens (e.g., allocated tasks and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill on behalf of others) (Miller, 2019; Prewitt, 2019). The family as a social institution is charged with socializing its members (gained through procreation, adoption, fostering, guardianship) to become responsible adults who contribute to humanity (McGregor, 2009; Sokalski, 1992).

In more detail, families are supposed to fulfill several basic institutional obligations: (a) provide emotional support, care, and maintenance of group members; (b) socialize children into adult roles and responsibilities; (c) control and protect family members; (d) maintain family morale and

self-esteem; and (e) produce (labor) and consume goods and services to sustain and stabilize the formal economy and the household's economy. The attendant values, roles, customs, traditions, practices, relationships, and behavioral patterns within family units are important to the life of individual members as well as communities and societies (McGregor, 2009; Miller, 2019; Sokalski, 1992).

But social institutions can fail people; indeed, the public's faith in them is at an all-time low around the world (The Atlantic's Marketing Team, 2018). The family institution cannot be left to flail and flounder. Too much depends on it. Braun and Bauer (1997) believed that "if family well-being suffers, families are less able to perform the functions they ideally are intended to perform. . . . When families are not functioning well, society cannot function well" (p. 73). If society is malfunctioning, the human condition suffers. The Atlantic's Marketing Team (2018) referred to "society's volatile condition" (para. 13) and the role humans play contributing to history and, by association, the human condition.

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In the midst of a seemingly never-ending global pandemic (COVID-19), members of the HE/FCS profession are encouraged to engage with East's (1979) radical idea of viewing homes and families as not only important in their own right, but also as a means to a *greater end*—the future of humanity. The list below contains a roster of possible avenues for such engagement whether in curricular (public/private schools, colleges, universities) or professional development initiatives.

***Avenues for Engaging With the Radical Idea of Sustaining Homes and Families As a Means to an End for Improving Humanity:***

- Arrange debates (win/lose) or dialog circles (shared understandings) about the radical idea

of calling homes and families *a means to an end* with the end being improved humanity

- Arrange for people to reflect and think on the idea of humanity as a cradle, and suggest images or tender lists of what they would put in the cradle to make homes and families stronger
- Arrange for people to prepare a case study of how to improve the atmosphere in a stressed home and family so it can become stronger for humanity; a topical idea is whether to be vaccinated for COVID
- Arrange for people to write a script and produce a skit or video about homes and families as a *means to an end* to improve humanity; the video's message can be pro, con, or ambivalent about the idea

As a caveat, some individuals may resist associating families with the concept of a means to an end. But East's radical idea triggered something deep in me. It was an "aha" moment and really resonated with me. I hope this commentary triggers others' reflections as well. Profession-wide engagement with her ideas would be a powerful way to move forward from our historical reliance on well-being and quality of life. All said, I sincerely believe that sustaining and keeping homes and families strong would strengthen the entire world, which is a far cry from bolstering the well-being of specific family units for their own sake. Our profession has a chance to learn from its history and totally rethink how it wants to move forward.

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