

HOME ECONOMISTS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Although it may sound like a cliché, I really am very honoured to be invited to be a speaker at your conference. My Canadian colleagues who share my passion and commitment to getting home economists involved in policy were very impressed that you chose to have an *entire* conference on this key professional role. I was hard pressed to choose from all of the compelling sessions being offered over the next few days but have settled on those dealing with well-being, critical theory, leadership, and policy education as they reflect my current stream of thoughts on our political role.

INTRODUCTION

I began writing about the role of home economists in public policy in 1988, the same year I began my doctoral studies on consumer policy. With little coaxing, the editor of the *Canadian Home Economics Journal* (Estelle Reddin) accepted my suggestion to publish a series of articles on the role of home economists in the public arena. Those articles set out the justification of our political role (McGregor, 1988), a primer on what we need to know to function in this professional capacity (McGregor, 1989b), and a model to help practitioners recognize the degree of and nature of their political activities (McGregor, 1989a). Since then, I have written about the issues management process, approaching policy from a Hestian perspective, the policy analysis process, the social change perspective, and guiding family principles. I would like to share some of these ideas with you this morning as you embark on your three-day conference.

A LEGITIMATE ROLE

In the 1988 article, I maintained that few will disagree with the premise that home economists have the potential if not a professional responsibility to contribute to the shaping of public policy. In fact, many of the goals shaping the *Canadian Home Economics Association's* (CHEA) activities are related to policy: (a) promote the study of social issues via research, (b) recommend appropriate action to government and other agencies, (c) encourage member awareness of social and political trends, and (d) support actions taken by other organizations in respect of social issues (McGregor, 1988). A specific objective of CHEA's strategic plan is to "initiate, foster and support private and public policy which improves the quality of life for individuals and families" ("CHEA strategic plan," 1994, p.125).

As I will discuss in the opening remarks at the King and Amy O'Malley Trust post-conference workshop on public policy, home economists are very predisposed to this political activity for five reasons. (a) Home economics is an interdisciplinary and integrated discipline as is policy development and analysis. (b) We bring the human ecology perspective, a helping professional status, and systems of action perspective to the policy analysis process. (c) We are inherently concerned with the visibility and quality of culture and the human spirit, aspects that are often not a normal part of policy analysis. (d) We bring to policy analysis the attributes of reflection, creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and a predisposition to explore the unknown. Finally, as our unique focus is family needs and problems in the areas of family relations, consumption, shelter, foods, and clothing, (e) we are qualified to affect policy dealing with these issues (McGregor, in press a).

POLITICAL COMPETENCY

We need to ask ourselves, however, how familiar most home economists actually are with the political system and with the process of getting politically involved. Smith (1983) tendered a comprehensive list of strategies for home economists to use in shaping policy but did not specifically state the strategy of becoming familiar with the workings of the political system. It

seems that the basic principles related to policy making are assumed to be common knowledge but in reality are not. This assumption was born out recently in Canada. A recent survey of CHEA membership revealed that Canadian home economists felt they needed more experience and knowledge with lobbying, advocacy, networking, policy development, and the legislature infrastructure and process (McGregor, 1994b).

This lack of confidence in these areas is unfortunate because Parker (1987) reminded us that the common body of knowledge or information in home economics is made up of an integration of concepts with one being the role of the home economists in public policy related to family well-being. Actually, a quick glance at your program reveals several papers/workshops dealing with some of these same issues: writing submissions, influencing decision makers, developing a public voice, dealing with the media, and political empowerment through education!

Most home economists do not gain, as a part of their training, the knowledge and skills necessary to influence public policy as it relates to the family. In 1987, Johnson concluded that American home economists did not feel adequately prepared to get involved in public policy formation. She proposed that the potential of home economists to influence policy decisions was curtailed because we lacked the skills necessary to be effective political participants. The results of the aforementioned Canadian survey indirectly convey similar sentiments. Although 48% of the membership claimed they were satisfied with their level of involvement most of the time, the political activities that they checked were indicative of being a political onlooker (50%) rather than a political champion (35%) or political activist (12%)¹ (McGregor, 1994b). Although all types of political activities are important (McGregor, 1989a), I would hold that we have to move beyond being aware but inactive toward advocating for and supporting family issues even if we do not all opt for direct involvement in politics.

Researchers have pointed out that government is most responsive to groups that bring attention to and public support for their special interests (Adie & Thomas, 1982). As a group, home economists could do this more effectively if we understood the idiosyncrasies and contradictions within government as well as the people involved and the process entailed in establishing policies that affect every family in some form or other. To that end, I offered a primer that was intended to alleviate some of the ambiguity surrounding the entire process. Ultimately, I hoped that it would foster further interest in public policy involvement and provide home economists with the necessary functional information to enable and prompt them to take some initiative (McGregor, 1989b).

Whether by coincidence or not, one year after the 1989 article was published, in 1990, CHEA established a *Public Policy Committee*, which is tasked with promoting improved quality of life for individuals and families through coordination of briefs, position papers, and lobbying government. I currently chair this committee. I have conducted three issues forums held since then at annual conferences. There is movement toward scheduling the issues forum so that all can

¹

Political onlooker: aware but inactive; on the outside looking in on the policy process

Political champion: advocating for and supporting family issues but not directly involved in politics

Political activist: directly involved in the political process in varying degrees

attend rather than placing it concurrently on the conference agenda.

POLICY EDUCATION

Closely related to this whole issue of becoming politically competent and astute is the idea of policy education. This entails the development and use of skills to transmit opinions and effect political change (i.e., make one's voice count). This education must occur without the educator advocating any one position as she/he teaches others. The functions of policy education include (a) expanding your understanding of policy issues and the surrounding facts as they apply to the issue; (b) analyzing issues and understanding the policy making process so you can determine where, who, when, and how to interact and intervene; (c) building self- and external awareness; (d) testing strategies and working in coalitions via collaboration; and (e) sharing valid and reliable information thereby increasing your self-perception of you as a force in shaping policy decisions (Anderson & Miles, 1990; Tripple, 1990).

Elmore (1987) identified six concepts basic to developing personal political skills: learning how to think politically, listen and give testimony, build coalitions, select issues carefully, develop an attitude of persistence, and how organizational systems work. As will Edith Baldwin at the upcoming post-conference workshop, Collins (1987) called for the incorporation of critical thinking into public policy education. This approach allows us to thoughtfully consider issues in the range of our respective expertise and to develop knowledge of a method of logical inquiry and critical reasoning to reveal power dynamics and hidden ideologies and agendas. Key elements to critical thinking are dialogue, reflection, and questioning. This process entails asking probing questions of significance in an atmosphere of mutual support and cooperation leading to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Jones & Safrit, 1992).

ISSUES MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Another approach I have been calling for to help us influence public policy is the adoption of the issues management process (McGregor, 1993). I have argued that awareness of the issues management model would help us to further affect political change. The resultant change would be immediate and issue-specific - hence the name "issues" management. Issues management entails organizing the expertise of an association to enable it to participate effectively in the identification, shaping, and resolution of public issues that impinge on the welfare and well-being of individuals and families.

To continue, it involves monitoring issues to determine which ones to deal with, developing a position - a strategic response, taking action to deal with the issue, and evaluating the impact of your intervention. Four basic types of issues proceed through a predictable life cycle. I suggest that a perceived limitation of issues management is that it only allows us to deal on a short-term basis with the symptoms of larger, systemic problems that are allegedly better understood using the social change model (McGregor, 1993), described in detail by Zimmerman (1988).

SOCIAL CHANGE PROCESS

As I taught the issues management approach to my senior-level students and listened to their reactions, I began to consider that simply being informed about how to manage a 'specific issue' (e.g., housing, child care, divorce, income security, or consumer issues) does not imply that we can effectively influence political change to benefit the family as an institution and society at large (part of the mission of home economics). Issues management may well be an effective means to benefit the well-being of specific individuals and families, but in order to incite changes

in institutional values, we must supplement issues management with the management of social change (McGregor, in press b).

The fact that the home economics profession is both mission oriented and reformist oriented (Vincenti, 1982) helped shape my position that we can and should adopt a social change approach to influencing policy. Being mission oriented means we generate knowledge to use it rather than to have it (Vaines, 1980). A reformist orientation (Istre & Self, 1990; Mayer, 1989) means that we use this information so we can change institutions for the benefit of family well-being by working *within the system* that we want to change rather than from outside the system, which issues management implies.

To illustrate, if we practice from an issues management perspective to deal with family hunger, we would set up food banks as a way of managing an issue that occurs because people cannot buy food (loss of, insufficient, or undependable income). If, on the other hand, we practised from a social change perspective, we would lobby governments to help them appreciate that families are being bombarded by factors out of their control: rapidly changing political, economic, social, technological, and ecological systems (PESTE) as well as family demographics. Using this political tactic, we are leaning more toward dealing with the systemic value-based changes causing the need for food banks (an issue). The objective is to get government to adopt our value system as it deals with social change (PESTE).

HESTIAN APPROACH TO POLICY

Drawing on Pat Thompson's work (1988, 1992), of which some of you may be familiar, I recently posed the suggestion that we may better shape and influence policy if we assume a Hestian rather than an Hermean perspective to familial and household issues. Hestia was the Greek goddess of the home and the hearth (family private sphere) while Hermes was the god of the city state, marketplace, communication, and thieves (public sphere). Approaching policy from a Hestian perspective means that, when asked to respond to a request from or when taking a familial issue to policy makers, we advocate for an empowerment and emancipation approach to policy (McGregor, 1994a).

We do this by (a) calling for entrenchment of the values of caring, relationships, and connections versus the values of control and power. (b) We petition policy makers to deal with real problems in a collaborative, partnership mode rather than in the abstract. (c) We press for intrinsic rewards as well as extrinsic, monetary rewards. (d) We reinforce human betterment values as well as monetary values. (e) We champion domestic life rather than public life. And (f) we acknowledge that home economists work within a cyclical time frame (anticipate results in the long term) rather than a linear time frame (expect results in the short run, as do politicians) (McGregor, 1994a).

A SPHERES OF INFLUENCE APPROACH TO POLICY

Feeling discomfort with the dichotomy of the Hestian/Hermean metaphor, Ellie Vaines (in press), from the University of British Columbia, very recently extended this dual sphere system to encompass eight spheres of influence. These range through the cosmos; the biosphere; the power sphere (politics and business); the public sphere (community and neighbourhood); the private sphere (home as factory, interrelationships, and a moral center); the inner sphere (self); the unknown sphere; and the unknowable sphere. Displayed in a helix or a geodome web, these

spheres of influence constitute the whole system within which families live and interact. Ellie argued that conceiving families as being influenced by eight different interrelated sub-systems enables us to accommodate and communicate our increasing complex social reality.

I have only just begun to extrapolate what this conceptualization means for perceiving our role in public policy, but my initial reaction is that it provides a much needed **contextual** framework from which to conceive the "family - home economists - policy arena" equation. I offer that it best reflects the human ecological perspective that is gaining acceptance in the home economics profession (Bubolz, 1990; Bubolz & Sontag, 1988): family ecosystem in reciprocal relationships with its natural, socio-cultural, and human built environments from which it procures, manages, and restores resources to fulfil its nurturing role.

NETWORK PERSPECTIVE TO INFLUENCE POLICY

In my recent doctoral dissertation (McGregor, 1992), I strongly advocated for a network perspective to study policy affecting the consumer interest (and by association family well-being). Specifically, we should study the *attributes of the relationships* among the institutions or the people in the institutions we want to influence or change in addition to the *attributes of the institutions*, the *attributes of the people* in the institutions, or the *attributes of the policy or program*. This focus moves us beyond our traditional reliance on the micro-economic paradigm to understand policy, a paradigm based almost solely on the principles of competition, power, efficiency, equity, and control (McGregor, 1994a) (i.e., Hermean values).

Within the context of the Hestian/Hermean metaphor or the spheres of influence perspective, the network approach to policy makes sense given that it deals more with the human component of the policy equation than with the bottom line and power balance. Instead, we examine, for example, the intensity, commitment, connectedness, cohesiveness, stability, and regularity of interactions in the policy network. Very recently, Edith Baldwin (1991) called for a revitalization of the home economics social movement. A major component of her new integrative paradigm is a *network* of practitioners themselves networking with political players. This networking process inherently includes establishing, managing, and maintaining human relationships, the nexus of the network perspective.

FAMILY PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE INVOLVEMENT IN POLICY

On a closing note, I would like to introduce the idea of family principles to guide home economists as we influence policy affecting families. As of yet, the Canadian profession does not have a set of concrete family principles to guide our involvement in policy, although I believe these principles are enshrined in our collective subconscious: family diversity, kinship, partnerships, intergenerational responsibilities, well-being, roles, equality, families and work, and family finances. I have drafted a set of principles that complement and strengthen other family-oriented institutions yet reflect CHEA's own mission as regards families and the profession. Dialogue is ongoing to finalize the set of family principles, especially in light of the impending social security reform in Canada (i.e., our employment, learning, and income security programs). To facilitate this dialogue, the principles will be published in the next issue of the *Canadian Home Economics Journal* (Spring, 1995).² The final set of CHEA family principles will provide

² Update: ultimately published as McGregor, S. L. T. (1995). Family principles and family policy. *Canadian Home Economics Journal*, 45(1), 27-29.

collective direction and philosophy for home economists lobbying for family issues.

CONCLUSION

I know that it is early in the morning, and this may seem a bit overwhelming, but I think it is exciting and challenging to discuss our role in the political arena. I trust that the introduction of such issues as our legitimacy and competencies, policy education, issues management, social change, a Hestian approach, a spheres of influence approach, a network perspective, and guiding family principles provides a framework to shape the dialogue that I am positive will stem from what promises to be a very exciting and enlightening conference.

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