

# Principle-Based Practice

SUE L. T. MCGREGOR

*Imagine yourself standing on a beach with the sand being pulled out from under your feet with each retreating wave. You must struggle to regain your footing each time. Now imagine standing on a cement pad on the same beach. Each time the waves come in, you can feel the force of their movement and their power, but your footing is not compromised. You can stand firmly in your position.*



Microsoft clipart. Used with permission.

**Sue L. T. McGregor, PhD, IPHE** ([sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca](mailto:sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca)) is professor emerita, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. She is an independent scholar, researcher, policy analyst, and educator in Seabright, Nova Scotia, Canada.

## Standing on Principle

This analogy illustrates the power of *standing on principle*—the cement pad in the image is made from your principles. Principle is from the Latin *principium*, ‘source’ (Harper, 2022). Principles serve as scaffolding (i.e., source of support) so that family and consumer sciences (FCS) practitioners can purposefully, with integrity, adapt to ever-changing conditions (e.g., familial, societal, economic, political, technological, ecological, and theological changes) while engaging in professional practice (Wen et al., 2012).

The phrase *standing on principle* also means consistently adhering to one’s beliefs and personal guidelines of rightness and correctness regardless of what one is facing (Elgin, 2013). Lore has it that American president John Quincy Adams coined the idiom “Always stand on principle even if you stand alone” (Andyman1943, 2015). Similar sentiments are shared in the list below. When standing on principle, FCS practitioners can say with integrity and authority (personal and otherwise) that a course of action should be followed because they have judged its rightness using their principles (Elgin, 2013; Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012).

## Famous Quotes Illustrating “Standing on Principle”

- *What I stand for is what I stand on* – Wendell Berry
- *On matters of style, swim with the current, on matters of principle, stand like a rock* – Thomas Jefferson
- *Find what is meaningful for you and stand by it* – Jay Woodman

- *There are some values that you should never compromise on to stay true to yourself* – Roy T. Bennett
- *Even if you stand alone as one, stand alone with purpose* – Scottie Somers
- *Chances are that if you stand alone, eventually, someone will notice you* – Anthony T. Hincks

### Principle Defined

*Principle* can be defined along several dimensions. Basically, it is an important assumption or idea that is required in a system of thought (e.g., how to accountably practice FCS). It is a characteristic ingredient of something that gives *that* something a special quality (e.g., a principle may provide unique insights into how to deal with the impact of an economic downturn on family well-being). Principles are also fundamental doctrines, a body of ideas, that form the basis for beliefs, theory, or policy and attendant conduct. They are general and fundamental truths that can be used in deciding the rightness and correctness of conduct and choices (Merriam-Webster, 2021). In short, a principle is something that has been established by someone (e.g., FCS professionals) as a standard and ethical reference point that guides their practice and conduct.

### Principled Versus Unprincipled Practice

As a caveat, a principle-based approach contrasts with an unprincipled approach, which leans more on (a) researching issues to collect facts and information; (b) focusing on the surface features of a presenting issue without understanding how principles come into play; and (c) engaging in routine, keep-busy activities instead of self-reflection and self-inquiry. Called the procedure-based approach to practice, it further entails (d) highly scripted (prescribed, narrow, and rigid) approaches to practice along with (e) the uncritical exercise of routine, technical expertise (Chan & Hui, 2012; Elgin, 2013; Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012; Wen et al., 2012).

### Benefits of Principle-Based Approach

Like the relentless waves in the picture, changing human conditions are inevitable. FCS professionals' efforts to address evolving challenges

to individuals, families, and communities' basic needs should be consciously grounded in principles because the context is always and relentlessly changing. A principle-based approach provides powerful resistance to knee-jerk, "bandwagon" reactions to disruptions and ensures consistent, ethical, and high-caliber practice (Covey, 1992). A principle-based approach can sustain FCS practice for decades, and it would ensure generative professional growth (Chan & Hui, 2012).

**A principle-based approach provides powerful resistance to knee-jerk, "bandwagon" reactions to disruptions and ensures consistent, ethical, and high-caliber practice.**

To explain, *generative* means being capable of producing, creating, or making something come about (e.g., a plant can generate flowers). Generative practice means each FCS practitioner would respond differently to a presenting problem (i.e., they would not bring things about the same way) (Flint et al., 2011). This diversity in practice is because they would draw on a unique set of principles that guide their reflection, thinking, and decision making. That said, most professions espouse a set of core principles from which practitioners can draw and then tailor to their philosophy of practice (Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012).

### Collection of Principles and Import of Application

An impromptu email solicitation of approximately 400 professional FCS and home economics colleagues in more than 40 countries in fall 2021 generated a collection of principles proposed as key to FCS practice ( $n = 17$ ) (see Table 1). Metaphorically, their ideas represent possible substances that could be mixed to form that cement pad on the beach. One respondent recommended analyzing professional organizations' codes of conduct for evidence of guiding principles. To test this idea, the American Association of Family & Consumer

**Table 1.** Proposed Key Principles for Family and Consumer Sciences Practice ( $N = 24$ )

| Principles Identified Through Solicited Comments<br>( $n = 17$ )   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High academic standards</li> <li>• Integrity and honesty</li> <li>• A respectful manner when working and collaborating with people (courtesy and good faith)</li> <li>• Creative and critical thinking</li> <li>• Relevance (base practice on best practice and next practice)</li> <li>• Continual professional development</li> <li>• Perseverance</li> <li>• Foresight (deep respect for consequences and implications of one's actions)</li> <li>• Must assume a leadership role (avoid uncritically hopping on the bandwagon)</li> <li>• Prepared to work in diverse contexts and embrace diversity</li> <li>• Prepared to embrace ever challenging and changing environments and conditions</li> <li>• Employ holistic and integrated thinking (inter and transdisciplinarity)</li> <li>• Competent researcher or able to critically evaluate others' research</li> <li>• Prepared to help people find their inner power (empowerment)</li> <li>• Obligation to be policy analyst and advocate for individuals, families, and communities</li> <li>• Value the transformative intent and attendant accountability of actions taken in one's practice</li> <li>• Deeply knowledgeable about the human condition and basic human needs</li> </ul> |
| Principles Evident in Professional Codes of Conduct or Ethics ( $n = 7$ )  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe in the family as a fundamental unit of society</li> <li>• Respect confidentiality and people's privacy</li> <li>• Report unqualified or uncertified FCS practitioners to protect the public</li> <li>• Avoid conflict of interest</li> <li>• Assist in maintaining the integrity of the profession (i.e., keep it strong, independent, and useful)</li> <li>• Identify oneself as a Family and Consumer Sciences Professional or Home Economist)</li> <li>• Seek new ideas and initiatives that embrace change</li> <li>• Avoid the appearance of divided loyalties (i.e., treat everyone responsibly and fairly)</li> </ul>  |

Sciences (AAFCS) (2013) Code of Ethics and the (Canadian) Manitoba Association of Home Economists (MAHE) (1983) Code of Professional Conduct were analyzed. Results ( $n = 7$ ) are profiled in Table 1 and are separated to illustrate the respondents' off-the-cuff, on-the-ground thoughts relative

to formal organizational (sometimes legally binding) thoughts about the issue. Both sources ( $N = 24$ ) provide rich fodder for guiding principles.

FCS practitioners would stand on these and other principles as they worked on behalf of, with, and through individuals, families, and communities. They would agree with Mahboob and Tilakaratna (2012) that, "these principles are by no means prescriptive or unchangeable; they should be evaluated through regular feedback and consultation and revised as needed" (p. 12). Individual FCS practitioners would also pour their own cement pad made of principles that resonate with them personally (Flint et al., 2011; Mahboob & Tilakaratna, 2012).

### **Generative Epistemic Agency (Control Over Beliefs)**

Andras (2010) explained that a principle is a very important rule to follow when facing a situation, with the caveat that the matter can be explained or dealt with using other principles too. Each principle provides unique, alternative insights that may or may not be relevant to interpreting the situation. The person applying the principle must weigh and balance competing or complementary principles.

**As FCS practitioners grapple with their core principles, they will likely gain epistemic agency or control over their beliefs.**

As FCS practitioners grapple with their core principles, they will likely gain *epistemic agency* or control over their beliefs (Schlosser, 1999). Epistemic agency involves both (a) decisions about what to believe (doxastic agency) and (b) beliefs about one's beliefs (reflective agency or personal authority over what beliefs to hold) (Ahlstrom, 2010). To gain control, people may "acquire or revise beliefs by doing research, evaluating the evidence, considering opposing opinions, and so on" (Schlosser, 1999, para. 27).

Epistemic agency necessitates taking responsibility for continuous professional growth via purposeful and progressive discourse with self, other practitioners, and an evolving knowledge base (Chan & Hui, 2012). Through this process, FCS practitioners' core principles become an object of inquiry. New principles can emerge, or existing principles can be validated, adjusted, or dismissed (Ahlstrom, 2010; Chan & Hui, 2012; Russell, 2002). This generative process better ensures that FCS practitioners can approach problems, issues, and contentious situations with a full understanding of the principles undergirding their work thereby helping them use these principles to judge the situation and frame a justifiable course of action (Chan & Hui, 2012).

On a closing note, Elgin (2013) referred to "intellectual courage—the disposition to hold fast to a belief despite opposition, so long as you consider your reasons sound" (p. 138). Sound reasoning when judging a course of action is more ensured if one's practice is principle based. And importantly, principle-based epistemic agents tend to be "cognitively admirable [more so than] the cavalier, intellectually fickle jumper to conclusions" (Elgin, 2013, p. 138). Essentially, the public is more likely to trust FCS practitioners and view them as authoritative agents if these professionals consistently engage in principle-based practice.

### Conclusion

Practicing based on principles prevents FCS practitioners from setting universal solutions to issues without due consideration of the context. It helps them mold their approach to practice, so their responses are justifiable, context specific, and mindful of implications. From a principled stance, FCS practitioners would recognize the need to consider diverse perspectives while concurrently standing firmly on their principles. Resultant principle-based insights would (a) help FCS practitioners reason through and predict any possible challenges and fallout of their actions, and (b) provide justifications for the principled stand they took to work with, on behalf of, and through individuals, families, and communities (Elgin, 2013; Mahboob & Tilakaratna 2012).

### References

- Ahlstrom, K. H. (2010). *On epistemic agency* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst]. Open Access Dissertations. 310. [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open\\_access\\_dissertations/310](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/310)
- American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences. (2013). *AAFCS code of ethics*. <https://www.aafcs.org/about/about-us>
- Andras, J. (2010). Concept and function of principles. A critique of Robert Alexy. In N. Borowski (Ed.), *On the nature of legal principles* (pp. 19–36). Franz Steiner.
- Andyman1943. (2015). Stand on principle. *Tumblr*. <https://rollsoffthetongue.tumblr.com/search/stand+on+principle>
- Chan, C., & Hui, D. (2012, August). *A principle-based approach to engaging and sustaining teacher and student growth in knowledge building* [Paper presentation]. Sixteenth Annual Knowledge Building Summer Institute, Toronto, ON, Canada. <http://ikit.org/SummerInstitute2012/Papers/3003-Chan-Final.pdf>
- Covey, S. (1992). *Principle-centered leadership*. Simon and Schuster (Fireside).
- Elgin, C. Z. (2013). Epistemic agency. *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(2), 135–152. doi:10.1177/1477878513485173
- Flint, A. S., Zisook, K., & Fisher, T. R. (2011). Not a one-shot deal: Generative professional development among experienced teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(8), 1163–1169. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2011.05.009
- Harper, D. (2022). *Online etymology dictionary*. <https://www.etymonline.com/>
- Mahboob, A., & Tilakaratna, N. (2012). *A principles-based approach for English language teaching policies and practices [White Paper]*. TESOL International Association. <http://www.tesol.org/docs/pdf/a-principles-based-approach-for-english-language-teaching-policies-and-practices-.pdf?sfvrsn=0>
- Manitoba Association of Home Economists. (1983). *MAHE code of professional conduct*. <https://mahe.ca/why-join/code-of-conduct/>
- Merriam-Webster. (2021). Principle. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/principle>
- Russell, A. (2002). *The role of epistemic agency and knowledge building discourse to foster interprofessional practice in a Canadian hospital* [Paper presentation]. American Education and Research Association Annual Conference (Session 6.10). New Orleans, LA, United States. <http://ikit.org/fulltext/2002AERAAnn.pdf>
- Schlosser, M. (2019). Agency. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/>
- Wen, Y., Looi, C.-K., & Chen, W. (2012). Supporting teachers in designing CSCL activities: A case study of principle-based pedagogical patterns in networked second language classrooms. *Educational Technology & Society*, 15(2), 138–153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jeductechsoci.15.2.138>