

Philosophical Well-being

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Preamble

This short think piece explores the new idea of philosophical well-being for family and consumer scientists. A well-lived professional life is contingent upon philosophical well-being. And, although technological and scientific knowledge and aesthetics can make life worth living, the art of philosophizing, engaging in skeptical intellectual curiosity, has to come first (Russell, 1987). The discussion concludes with a collection of novel strategies to help us break out of our intellectual cage to become especially adept at seeing the implications and assumptions behind the thinking that guides our practice and the world within which we live and work.

Dare I say that the modern profession of family and consumer sciences is “unwell.” It is philosophically deficient and impoverished and something must be done about this situation. The basic premise of this paper is that, although a collection of scholars is chipping away at codifying the philosophy of the profession, it is the responsibility of individual family and consumer scientists to clarify, and continually refine, their own philosophical well-being. “For any set of philosophical ideas to make a difference in human well-being, it must ‘aspire to inspire’” (Pietersen, 2001, p. 8). Nonetheless, no matter what these scholars come up with for philosophical underpinnings of the profession, there will not be a good fit between their rhetoric and individual practice (it will not *inspire*) unless each practitioner prepares herself to receive and reflect upon it. Once one starts to clarify and refine one’s philosophy of life, concurrently with what it means to be a professional, it can become a regular part of one’s daily reflection—leading to philosophical well-being. Then, when this happens, practitioners can more consciously strive to facilitate individuals and families as they build their own philosophical well-being, leading to a more critical and reflective citizenry. Knowing what this concept means can bring us all closer to this professional ideal.

Developing the Concept of Philosophical Well-being

Let us start with the familiar notion of well-being before we bring in the notion of philosophical. It is a given that family well-being is the focus of our profession, although Smith (2003) and others suggest that we have not reached a consensus on what it means. Well-being has many definitions because it does not have a very precise meaning. Tiberius (2003) agrees, noting that some believe there is no common notion of well-being while others contend that a universal notion of well-being does exist, despite cultural variations. But, it is generally defined as *something in a good state*, with “the something” being humans or social systems, although what is meant by being *good* is still unclear (Veenhoven, 2003).

The conventional approach in the family and consumer science profession is to conceive well-being as comprising seven dimensions: emotional, social, economic, physical, spiritual, environmental, and political (personal autonomy) (McGregor, forthcoming; McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998). Veenhoven (2003) approaches well-being from a different perspective, adding four “kinds of things that are well” with overtones of the approach used in FCS. The first thing that can be well is one’s living conditions—standard of living and social equality. The second is one’s ability to cope with the problems of life (inner life chances, capabilities, fitness). The third is personal enjoyment of one’s daily life (happiness and satisfaction, similar to our concept of quality of life). The fourth area has a moral focus and relates to the

meaning of life such that the *good life* is good for something more than itself (e.g., some higher value than self interest, such as ecological preservation or social equity and justice).

But, what of *philosophical well-being*—the healthy state of our intellect, with intellect referring to our ability to think, reason, acquire, critique, and apply knowledge and paradigms? The Wikipedia Encyclopedia (2004) defines philosophy as the act of constantly improving one's understanding by way of thinking and discussion. The Philosophy Dictionary (2002) defines philosophy as, literally, a love of wisdom. Philosophy is careful thought about the fundamental nature of the world, the grounds for human knowledge, and the evaluation of human conduct. These sources did not, however, marry the concept of philosophy with well-being. Plato did define *philosophical well-being* as the preservation of one's soul, claiming that it is better to be at odds with the whole world than to be at odds with, and contradicted by, oneself (Folks, 2002). In order to be in a state of harmony with oneself, one has to question one's life on a regular basis, asking "*what's it all about, Alfie?*" A professional needs to ask herself, "Why am I doing what I do, and what is the impact of those actions? What are the underpinnings of my practice? Am I philosophically sick or well?"

The home economics scholar who comes closest to this dimension of well-being is Henry (1995). She conceptualized "political well-being," and understood this to be *empowerment and autonomy* based on moral and ethical freedom. Political well-being, or an internal sense of power and autonomy, is construed as: (a) being in control of one's life; (b) able, and having the freedom, to make decisions; (c) being aware of, and able to anticipate, the consequences of one's actions on oneself and others; and, (d) having the skills to act on one's decisions. When this dimension of well-being is achieved, individuals no longer unquestioningly accept those practices in society that are frequently taken for granted, those practices which reinforce inequality and injustice.

Although Henry's (1995) notion of political well-being brings us closer to *having a philosophy that is well* (Isn't that a nice turn of phrase?), it does not go far enough. Being politically well means one has a sense of personal and political freedom and control. This then leads to the likelihood that one will engage in reasoned political and social actions that take into account the impact on others and that strives for the greater good. At this point in time, her concept does not go far enough to capture the essence of having a healthy philosophy. Henry and McGregor and Goldsmith (1998) introduce the notion of spiritual well-being. The spiritual aspect of well-being encompasses the joy and sense of completeness associated with the holistic connectedness of the world, an appreciation of nature as a dynamic ecosystem, the pure joy of living, and peace and faith gained from insights and moments of growth and enlightenment. This concept definitely moves us closer to a better understanding of that nebulous concept of philosophical well-being.

Gulick (1998) takes us even further with his premises that people *using philosophy* can contribute to their own well-being. First, one needs to reflectively explore why one does what one does and what consequences these actions have. Second, one has to engage in critical reflection as well. Third, one has to pay attention to, and foster, experiences that make life worth living (existentially meaningful experiences). Fourth, there is a moral and ethical dimension with a twist. The existential experiences one is involved with (that make life worth living) should involve benefits to the whole human community. Finally, one has to be radically open to things in the world so, when these expose themselves, one can determine their depth, weight, and complexity and appreciate the mystery of life. Although he does not use the term *philosophical well-being*, his ideas are useful in developing the concept. To bring Gulick's ideas to a discussion of FCS philosophical well-being, one would reflect on why one does what one does (and the subsequent consequences), would foster community focused meaningful experiences that make life worth living for everyone, and would embrace the mystery of life.

It seems that philosophical well-being is achieved by continually examining the world one lives in, and one's relationship with that world. The objective is to always make morally responsible decisions that

benefit all humanity and nature. This entails questioning the prevailing world view and pondering the impact of practicing by using the theories and models stemming from it. Being *philosophically well* means one would always consider how one's practice might need to change to reflect the insights gained from continuously improving one's wisdom, defined as deep, thorough, and mature understandings of life. One becomes a philosopher, a person who seeks reason and truth by thinking, meditating, deliberating about, and celebrating, life.

Philosophical Isolation: Breaking out of Our Intellectual Cage

Philosophers have an extraordinary rich repertoire of theoretical and paradigm perspectives at their disposal. Therefore, they are especially adept at seeing the implications and assumptions behind the thinking that guides their practice and the world within which they live and work (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2004). This is a standard of practice that family and consumer scientists could achieve if they cultivated their philosophical well-being. Are you endowed with a rich repertoire of perspectives beyond the prevailing world paradigm of capitalism, neoliberalism (free markets), corporate led globalization, consumerism, and Social Darwinism? Are you a philosopher or just a practitioner locked in her intellectual cage built years ago when you left the university? The world has changed. Have you? I know from personal experience that I was *philosophically isolated* for years after I graduated from my undergraduate degree in 1975. It took the actions of a few brave mentors to challenge me to break out of my *intellectual cage* so I could free myself for intellectual and philosophical growth.

Questions arise from this discussion: How is your practice affected if you are not sure of your life and professional philosophy or if you are philosophically ill? How can you engage in critical practice if you have not given serious attention to clarifying your philosophical well-being? What happens to your practice if you cannot reconcile who you are with the new philosophy being espoused for the profession as a whole? How does this lack of congruency, if it exists, affect any actions you take to facilitate individuals and families as they strive for well-being? Are you, for example, able to facilitate consumers' critical reflection so they can critique the world in which they live and make morally responsible decisions minimizing structural violence in the marketplace? Are you likely to help individuals and families see the merit of fostering community focused meaningful experiences that make life worth living for everyone instead of self-centered ones? Are you open to helping people appreciate the benefits of embracing the mystery of life instead of craving certainty and resisting change (McGregor, 2003a,b,c)? If the three philosophical cornerstones of your professional identity are not in sync—personal philosophy, professional philosophy, and the philosophy of the profession as a whole—you are less able to practice in such a way that truly improves family well-being and society at large (Vaines, 1990).

You do not have to strive to define and refine your philosophical well-being on your own. Schuster (1999) clarifies that philosophy means friendship (*philo*) and wisdom (*sophia*). What better way to develop one's understanding of one's accumulation of wisdom capital and professional capital (aspects of one's philosophical well-being) than in concert with friends, new and old? He notes that person-to-person exchanges in examining life have disappeared and been replaced with academic papers and scholarly work (of which this is one example . . . sorry). Our challenge is to keep a meaningful inner and interpersonal conversation going. Schuster points out that "healing through meeting" serves to break the isolation capsule we tend to place around ourselves and can lead to transformation. Dialogue, and encounters that shape philosophical well-being, is not bound to a particular routine or to a specific place. The effort to get philosophically well is worthwhile since cultivating philosophical well-being can recreate, or change, lives in a positive manner.

Getting Started

A well-lived professional life is contingent on philosophical well-being. And, while technological and

scientific knowledge and aesthetics can make life worth living, the art of philosophizing, engaging in skeptical intellectual curiosity, has to come first (Russell, 1987). There are several things we can do to start this healing process. Instead of telling you what to talk about, I am sharing some ideas about how to start the conversation!

- **Philosophical Cafés** (face-to-face) – Professionals in family and consumer sciences can take direction from other fields and establish and participate in philosophical cafes, either online or in real time. The former started in 1997 in Paris with the Café-Philo. An American version can be seen at <http://www.cafe-phil.org>. The cafés are places where coffee (fair trade coffee of course) and philosophy can mingle.
- **Cyberspace Cafés** – Make sure to check out Café Utne for another example of a place in cyberspace where people and ideas can interface <http://www.utne.com/cafe/>. Family and consumer sciences could easily establish such a venue. This café would be for dialogue rather than shopping etc. as is the conventional use of the term cyberspace café.
- **Salons and Dialogues** – A similar approach would be to organize and participate in salons where dialogue is encouraged. The word salon is French for *drawing room*. Salons, small groups of people who gather together for conversation, are making a comeback. *Utne Reader* has useful guides on how to conduct salons at its website (Sandra & Spayde, 2002; Utne, 1991). Dialogue is shared exploration towards greater understanding, connection, or possibility. Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (n.d.) provide a very useful discussion of why dialogue is a useful approach for intellectual growth and how to go about it. Kappa Omicron Nu also provided a discussion on dialogue in its newsletter, aptly named *Dialogue*. Margaret Wheatley (2002) recently published a book on the importance of conversations. This resource would provide valuable direction for those wanting to heal their philosophical selves through conversation.
- **Virtual Salons or Chat Sites** – Family and consumer sciences could establish and manage e-mail virtual salons about the topic of philosophical well-being. There would be a *salon-keeper* whose role is to keep the conversation stimulating, involving, and transformative. These are an extension of static distribution lists and involve people engaging in online discussions of what they think about philosophical well-being. Some good examples of etiquette, logistics, etc. for educational chat rooms are available at <http://www.siec.k12.in.us/~west/edu/chat.htm>.
- **Study Circles** – In local areas, study circles could be formed around the notion of philosophical well-being. A study circle is a group of 8-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue. This is why it is such a good idea right now since many people in family and consumer sciences have specialized and moved away from a central philosophical core. In a study circle, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. A facilitator helps the group focus on different views and makes sure the discussion goes well. A lot of useful information on this format is available at the Study Circle Resource Center at <http://www.studycircles.org> or call 860-928-2626.
- **Reading Circles** The idea of reading circles is often credited to Paulo Freire. He developed “culture circles” or problem-solving study groups to guide discussion and learning experiences. These resemble college seminar groups. After agreeing on material worth reading, everyone reads it and then gets together to discuss. Each state or local area could establish Reading Circles with some coordination from a central source if desired. Some ideas on how to structure a reading circle are at the Vancouver Community Network site at http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/2_15_discussion_group.html. As well, Brown and Hayes

(2001) provide a model of reading circles as a mode of professional learning.

- **Web based networking** – Following the lead of The New Civilization Network model, <http://www.newciv.org/>, family and consumer science professionals could set up a web-based site as a way to link people who are committed to becoming philosophically well.
- **On-Line FCS Philosophical Well-being Journal** – Family and consumer sciences could convince someone to publish an online journal where *think* pieces can be placed for others' consideration about the concept of philosophical well-being. A good place to start is with the Kappa Omicron Nu *Human Sciences Working Papers Archive* (HSwp), where you are reading this paper right now!

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