
Intellectual Showcasing: Articulating the Thinking Behind our Practice

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Abstract

The tangible products and services provided by our profession benefit society, and involve intellectual activity, especially moral judgements. If we present ourselves to the public in such a way that people are clear about *why* we are doing what we do, then fewer misunderstandings would abound and more valued practice would result. This paper asks us to examine the merits of clearly articulating the assumptions, values, principles, ideologies, paradigms and valued ends that inform our practice. An approach for intellectual showcasing is offered that may serve as an accountability identifier for the public and us.

Keywords: systems of action, professional philosophy, practice, accountability, leadership

Introduction

The profession must present itself to the public in such a way that society is clear about what it offers, and why (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2005). Many people¹ in the profession believe that *if* the work of home economists can be made more visible and can be quantified, it will be more legitimate, valued, and respected. There is no doubt that this visibility is important. The profession provides a set of services that are beneficial to society as a whole. In addition to offering tangible products and services however, members of the profession also engage in intellectual activity, especially moral judgments. This paper is about the benefits to us and society if we showcase the *invisible thinking* behind the formation, delivery and evaluation of home economics practice.

It is challenging to showcase *thinking*. But, it is imperative that we try because thinking most assuredly shapes what gets done, how, and why and how this work is judged by others. Practitioners have to ask themselves, "What counts as an outcome and what criteria will we and others use to judge the merit and worth of the work?" Is an outcome taken to mean learning a new skill to cope with the status quo? Is it learning about oneself and relationships so one can change inside? Is it learning

about power relationships so society can be changed? Or, is it some combination of all three? The core message of this paper is that practitioners' thinking - their ideologies, world views (paradigms), belief systems, values, principles, and assumptions - plays a central role in determining which initiatives are undertaken, in defining what counts or is viewed as an acceptable and desired outcome of this work, and in how the public comes to view and value our practice (McGregor, Pendergast, Eghan, Seniuk & Engberg, 2007).

For example, why would practitioners choose to prepare, deliver and evaluate: (a) a "how to develop a household budget" program instead of (b) a program that helps participants investigate what money and debt mean to them, or (c) a program that facilitates the exploration of what it means to live in a consumer society (or some combination of these three approaches)? In the first instance, if practitioners believe that consumers have a key role to play in the economy, and that they fail in this role if they become indebted because they cannot manage their money, then it makes sense to give them a quick-fix so they can better manage their money and contribute to the economy. Practitioners could do a pre and post test, and show that their program *made a difference*.

If practitioners believe that it is not one's ability to manage money that is at issue, but the meaning that money has in one's life and one's relationships, then it makes sense to design a program that helps people gain an understanding of this aspect of their behavior so they do not continue to be indebted. Again, empirical evidence can be collected to prove if the program *made a difference*.

However, if practitioners are convinced that the problem is not just consumers' ability to manage money or deal with money attitudes and behavioral habits, but that the problem also concerns the way society is organized around the ideology of consumerism, then it would make sense to deliver a program that helps people explore their consumer role, and the role the family institution plays within a market society. In this case, it is much harder to get proof that this program *made a difference*, because such proof entails examining power relationships, ideologies, world views, and issues of freedom, justice,

¹ The author is comfortable with framing this particular discussion in the form of general statements about the state of the field of study, informed by philosophical musings and deep professional reflections more so than empirical evidence (see McGregor et al. (2004); McGregor and MacCleave (2007); Pendergast and McGregor (2007)). The process of verification is necessary to determine whether a generalization holds true for any given situation, and this verification can stem from empirical or interpretative scholarship. The latter refers to a focus on the meanings and understandings held by people, on participant involvement in the research, and on researcher self-reflexivity. The result is trustworthy data and insights (rather than valid and reliable data, the empirical standard of rigour). Both have their place in home economics scholarship. One hope is that this call for members of the profession to showcase the intellectual underpinnings of their practice will lead to richer studies about our practice.

peace, security, inclusion, equity and diversity. These are very hard to quantify.

Furthermore, what criteria are being applied by the others as they judge whether or not a difference was made by our work? Consider the following logic. If someone judging our work believes strongly that quick fixes are the best way to solve family issues, then any initiative that provides technical information about *how to do* something would be seen to have the potential to make a difference. Someone, on the other hand, who believes strongly that consumers are victims of the violence of consumerism, would not be convinced that the former program made any difference at all. In fact, this person may judge it as maintaining the undesirable status quo.

Consider these four examples. An educator employs a critical pedagogy. A policy analyst views an issue through a critical (power relationship) lens. An extension worker designs a program in full consultation with those who will benefit from the program. A manager strives to become a transformative leader. If the person making the judgement about the merit of the outcomes of our work is a technocrat (focused on information and facts), the *efficacy* of these programs will not be an issue for them because values of *efficiency* will be applied to judge whether the programs achieved an outcome.

Conversely, different judgments about outcomes may be formed when evaluating work tendered by: (a) an educator who employs a *sage-on-the-stage*, expert pedagogy; (b) a policy analyst who assumes that competition, profits and wealth are desirable social ends; (c) an extension worker who imposes the program on the *clients*; or, (d) a manager who insists on performance appraisals, accountability measures and outcome-based evaluations to determine success. If people judging whether our initiatives made a difference base their decisions on evidence of more inclusion and fewer instances of oppression, marginalization and discrimination, they would judge our initiatives as less than successful because efficacy and self-autonomy would be their guiding criteria.

The power of clarifying the thinking behind our intentions is further illustrated in these three examples. By explicitly stating that the intent of writing a cookbook is to provide information to families about how to cope with declining incomes, the practitioner is less likely to raise the ire of others in the profession who see cookbooks as the bane of the profession. By explicitly stating that a program about textiles and crafts was designed to contribute to the preservation of a skill that generates income for women living in rural areas, or to preserve part of a valued culture, the practitioner lessens the likelihood of people concluding that the result perpetuated the sewing image. By explicitly stating that the intent of a money management course was not to change the world nor to discuss what it means to live in a consumer society, but to help families live within an income, the practitioner has mitigated any chance of people misconstruing their intent. In this case, technical information best served the needs of the families.

Conceptualizing an Intellectual Showcase Approach

Because of our moral obligations to society, members of the profession are compelled to consider the merits of showcasing and highlighting the thinking behind their research, programs, services, and initiatives. This effort would yield transparency leading to accountability to ourselves and the public. As a case study to illustrate this idea, the rest of the paper is anchored in the profession's conventional use of the central concept of system of actions. Brown & Paolucci, (1979). noted that the founders of the profession recognized that families engage in three kinds of actions (citing Hunt, Richards and Talbot's musings set out in the Lake Placid Conference Proceedings, especially those from 1901) and drew on the then leading edge ideas of Habermas (1970, 1973) and the notion of three metascientific² views (analytical/empirical, interpretative and critical), to further augment the founders' idea of three system of actions (pp. 40-50). Since then, many other home economists³ have drawn on their work (and also on Habermas (1984)) to the point that systems of actions is now a standard in our field (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989; Johnson & Fedje, 1999; McGregor & MacCleave, 2007). To facilitate the development of this case study about how to showcase and highlight the thinking behind our research, programs, services, and initiatives, Table 1 was developed. It juxtaposes the three system of actions approach against attendant theories, knowledge, interests, and resultant approaches to practice, all of which determine what is accepted (expected) as valued outcomes from our work (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). The basic premise of this approach to practice is that practitioners will approach each situation, in consultation with those impacted by the final decisions and decide, together, which combination of actions is relevant to address the issue. The practitioner works to create a *system* of actions, with a reasoned rationale for the specific combination of actions in that particular context. *System* refers to the interconnectedness of the three actions and Brown and Paolucci understood *actions* to mean the Greek concept of contemplative thought leading to a future act governed by intention (p.24). Drawing on Arendt's (1958) theory of the human condition, they suggested that *action* is different from behaviour (which can be predictable) because the act arises out of innovative, freely reasoned thought (pp.21-22). Action, in this context, can never be, nor should it be, predictable. Home economists eventually began to use the Venn diagram to illustrate this concept (three equally sized concentric circles). The next section weaves together a discussion of the elements in Table 1 to illustrate how

² Metascientific means a discussion of different kinds of science relative to each other.

³ Leading thinkers in our field who espouse this idea are Virginia Vincenti, Edith Baldwin, Yvonne Gentzler, Kaija Turkki, Margaret Henry, Donna Pendergast, Francine Hultgren, Linda Peterat, Patricia Thompson, Rosemarie von Schweitzer, Eleanor Vaines, Francis Smith, to name a few.

practitioners can think about arriving at a system of actions for a given problem or situation, thereby better illuminating the thinking behind their practice.

Four Kinds of Theories

Brown and Paolucci (1979) discussed four kinds of theories that can inform the work of the profession. Empirical theories seek to explain why or how something is true. Analytic theories seek to clarify what concepts mean to people, and to clarify the language used to communicate this meaning to others. Interpretative theories move into the realm of human interactions, and seek to understand the motives, reasons or intentions of someone's behaviour. Finally, normative theories devise and use reason to justify a specific explanation of why people should conduct themselves in a certain way. The latter three approaches are related to meanings associated with living day-to-day in our social-cultural context, and how these meanings shape actions. The empirical approach is related to positivism (the only way to be *positive* that data and knowledge are valid is to generate it using the scientific method) (Brown & Baldwin, 1995).

Brown and Baldwin (1995) proposed that members of the profession must be very aware of which theoretical perspective(s) is at play in their work. They noted that "our concept of theory contains certain presuppositions that influence the way we see the world and organize it, what we consider explanation to be, and whether and how we would change the world... We make certain assumptions about human agency and human capacities [when we choose certain theories]" (p.7).

Three Kinds of Knowledge (or Perspectives)

From a metascientific stance, Brown and Paolucci (1979) identified three different perspectives that home economists can bring to bear on their practice: empirical, interpretative and critical science. These perspectives inform what people can accept as valid knowledge.

Empirical knowledge. First, they can adopt the empirical perspective wherein they interpret the world as it is, but make no attempt to change it. They do not let their values guide the selection of research to be done, or concern for how the results will be used. This approach is often referred to as *value free* research. From this perspective, home economists would focus on helping families consume technological products to meet unexamined needs and goals. Work around the home would be very efficient, but not necessarily what families need to be happy, or to enhance their quality of life. Feelings, emotions, and relationships would be ignored, and not examined. From this perspective, home economists would be blind to the dominant interests of industry, economic systems, and political agendas that affect social conditions, the human psyche, and any notions of moral integrity. The profession would shy away from self-criticism and self-reflection. Changes made within the profession would be based on trends, no matter where the trends may lead.

Interpretative knowledge. Second, practitioners can assume an interpretative perspective whereby they seek to

reveal the underlying intentions of people's actions with others. Their intent would be to understand the inner *life-world* of the individual, and of social groups in cultural settings. This understanding would come from a deep exploration of the words and concepts people use on a daily basis to live and describe their lives. Ordinary language impoverishes or enriches people's lives, depending on whether it is clarified and spelt out clearly. This perspective is also called communicative practice because it relates to communication - the exchange of ideas and messages. From this stance, home economists would seek to grasp what underlies people's changes, or their failure to change. They would achieve this by working with people in their daily context, their home, work place, their culture. Practitioners would explore intentions, motives, and purposes of people's daily actions so they can understand the daily realities of human action. Their role would not be to judge, but to seek clarification and consensus of meanings. Through this process, individuals and families are expected to gain enough insights to change themselves when they are ready (Brown & Paolucci, 1979).

Critical science knowledge. Finally, from the critical science perspective, practitioners would strive to help others free themselves from inner compulsions, biases, stereotypes and prejudices, and free themselves from external constraints (e.g., ideologies, institutions, power relations). Critical science is not a data-gathering science. It does use the results of the other two data-gathering sciences (empirical and interpretative) to interpret the contemporary human situation or condition in order to determine what actions are *possible*, and the consequences of those possibilities. Scholarship in the field would consist of critiques (looking for power in relationships), rather than just data gathering using quantitative and qualitative empirical approaches. Those practitioners employing the critical science approach would be deeply conscious of ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, patriarchy, consumerism, capitalism, top-down globalization, political conservatism, Social Darwinism).

They would be vigilant in their scrutiny of forces shaping society (economic, political, technological, cultural, and scientific), always unveiling the hidden values, belief systems and assumptions behind others' actions that impinge on the human condition. They would believe that the family, a major social institution, needs to be freed from the domination of outside social forces. This freedom, this emancipation from oppression, marginalization and exploitation, would give people a sense of control over their environments (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Home economists would rally around issues of justice, security, freedom, peace, equity, equality, sustainability, rights, solidarity and nonviolence (Brown, 1993).

Three Kinds of Interests

Interests, or why someone wants to know something, are central to the formulation of new knowledge and

perspectives (Habermas, 1973). He proposed that there are three guiding interests that shape people's work. Those who have a *technical* interest, so named for their concern for specialized or specific techniques, want the ability to obtain control of their environment for survival and self-preservation. People with a *practical* interest, stemming from the Greek connotation of practice - to think before one acts - are concerned with the formation of ethical character, moral development, personal self-formation, and relationships with others. Those who have an *emancipatory* interest want to know things related to freeing people from inner and outer constraints, leading to

their full autonomy, responsibility, and liberation from oppressive ideologies and paradigms (Habermas, 1970). Respectively, these three types of interest generate: (a) *information* that expands one's power of technical control, (b) *interpretations* that reveal why one acts as one does in the respective context; and, (c) *analyses* that free one's consciousness from its dependence on inner or outer power constraints and from ignorance and distorted views of reality and relationships that result from such things as prejudice, trauma, repression, oppression and useless conventions (Vincenti, 2002).

Table 1 Three systems of action juxtaposed against theories, perspectives, knowledge, interests and approaches to practice

| | Types of theories | Types of perspectives or knowledge | Types of interests | Approaches to practice |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Technical COPE <i>meeting basic needs and wants</i> | analytical/empirical - explain why or how something is true | want to know how to interpret the world as is, but don't change it causal explanations technical information and procedures | predictions and control (allegedly for self-preservation, survival, and progress) focus on techniques and procedures, often linear in nature | help people buy goods and services to meet unexamined needs and wants |
| Interpretative ADAPT <i>human social interaction</i> | seek to reveal motives, reasons, intentions, values, beliefs, attitudes, meanings and expectations | want to understand the inner 'life-world' of people, the daily realities of human action. Also referred to as communicative because it deals with words and their meaning, rather than causes. There is a concern for expectations about behaviour between people. | interpretation and understanding leading to the formation of ethical character and moral development | help people understand why they behave the way they do so they can have better relationships |
| Critical INNER AND SOCIAL CHANGE <i>freedom from inner and outer constraints</i> | normative - justify what <i>should</i> be done to improve the human condition | want to reflect on forces shaping the human condition ethical and moral reasoning critical and creative thinking transformative learning and practice | critique of, and liberation from, inner and outer constraints on autonomy and freedom a focus on power and ideologies leads to an analysis that frees people's consciousness | help people critique and formulate goals for society, and how to accomplish these goals. Strive for enlightenment and empowerment. |

System of Three Actions

Brown and Paolucci (1979) parlayed the notions of theories, knowledge and interests into a construct labeled "three systems of action" (p. 41). (a) *Three* refers to the three ways of thinking, knowing, and interests, as well as to the attendant theories; (b) *system* refers to the interconnectedness of these factors (home economists must rely on all of these, p.39); and, (c) *actions* is the Greek concept of contemplative thought leading to a future act that is governed by intention. As noted earlier, a Venn diagram (intersecting circles) is the conventional way to represent the notion of a system of three actions. From a system of actions perspective, Brown and Paolucci would have practitioners approach each problem situation by engaging in all three ways of thinking, theorizing, and assuming an interest. Instead of presuming that what was done in the past would work again, people would *think* about each situation from all three

perspectives, and determine which combination of *actions* is most appropriate for each situation. An example of this approach is illustrated in the following discussion. Showcasing the Thinking Behind this Paper: Thinking Behind this Home Economics' Initiative
Imagine the impact that each research report, journal article, policy analysis, newspaper article, course or outreach program would have if it contained a Venn diagram showcasing the thinking behind the initiative. Readers would know which type of outcome the practitioner intended, and thus would be less likely to come to incorrect or pejorative conclusions about the work. If the public saw this *accountability identifier* on all work generated by the profession, they could begin to gain a dependable perception of the depth of our thinking, and the far reaching implications of our work (the human condition). A variety of different outcomes would become valuable and valued, partly because practitioners had

taken the time to clarify their intellectual and ideological underpinnings, in the face of opposition, critique and resistance.

As an example, Figure One illustrates the thinking behind this article. Whereas most home economists employ the idea of a Venn diagram with equal sized circles to illustrate systems of action, in this paper, it is proposed that the size of each circle in the Venn diagram (each action: technical, interpretative and emancipatory) can reflect the weight the practitioner places on which type of action is most appropriate for a given situation.

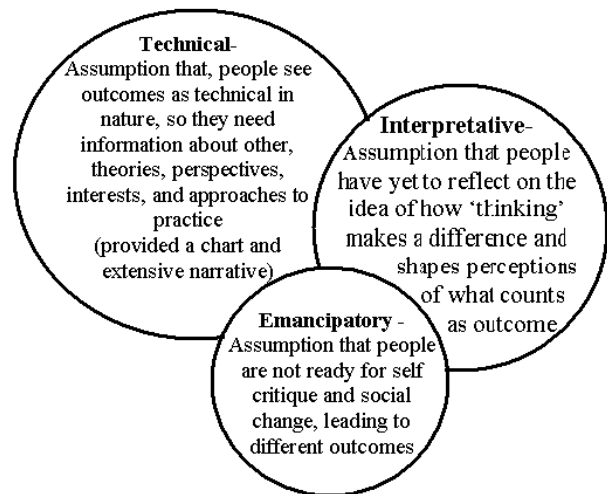
Figure 1 reflects this author's assessment of the readiness of people to receive the idea of showcasing the intellectual and ideological underpinnings of their work. The expected *outcome* is future dialogue about this approach to practice, and ultimately changes in practice. The largest circle is indicative of the author's assumption that, in order to engage in this future dialogue, practitioners need technical information about ways of knowing, theorizing, and stating interests, and about the concept of a system of three actions. To that end, the paper focused on providing this technical information in the form of a chart, and an accompanying narrative. The size of the technical action circle, at first glance, tells anyone reading this paper that the author's main intent is to provide a short term technical fix for the profession in hopes that future, richer work will emerge. Indeed, the presence of the other two differently sized circles tells a deeper story. Read on.

The second largest circle reflects the author's assumption about the readers' readiness to embrace the idea that 'showcasing the thinking behind their initiatives can make a difference.' It is smaller than the technical circle because of the author's belief that most members of the profession are not engaged in reflective practice to the extent that they can articulate their feelings, beliefs and attitudes about what counts as a valued outcome from their work. When pressed, most home economics practitioners are not able to fluently, persuasively and forcefully put into words their ideas about what counts as a valued end of their practice. They are so deeply trained in the technical approach to practice (see Table 1) that any other sort of outcome is not entertained, or even valued (McGregor et al., 2004; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). The result is that the public does not hear a cohesive message from the profession about which ideologies, values or principles are behind our work. They see us as *cookers and sewers*, and do not value the work. Until people in the profession engage in personal and collective reflection about the significance of the impact of the thinking that shapes their work, they perpetuate a public image with which no one is happy and they do a disservice to society (McGregor, 2005, 2006a).

The smallest circle reflects the author's assumption that members of the profession are not yet ready to articulate what they should do to improve the human condition. They are not yet prepared to reflect on the forces shaping the human condition, are not posed to undertake ethical and moral reasoning, and are not strongly versed in the

skills of critical and creative thinking. The smaller size of this circle also reflects the assumption that readers are not ready for transformative practice, not comfortable with focusing on issues of power and ideology, forces that contribute to the degree of a person's autonomy, freedom and consciousness. Its diminutive size also implies that readers are not yet able to help people critique and formulate the moral goals of society, or how to accomplish these social ends. Members of the profession are not yet able to take a strong stance for enlightenment, empowerment, emancipation and transformation, and reflect this stance in their work.

Fig.1: Showcasing the thinking shaping this article



Some Parting Words

Not everyone will agree with the thinking that shaped this article. But, at least the thinking *is* showcased. It is now visible for all to see, evaluate and judge. Because the thinking behind the ideas shared in this paper has been made explicit for those reading it, people are in a much more powerful position to critique the work, and take an informed stance with the author about the ideas in the paper, and judge whether this initiative *made a difference*. Assumptions are revealed, inferences are clarified, ambiguity is reduced, and a powerful venue for communication is opened. If the thinking behind our actions was made transparent, then degrees of difference, perceptions of what constitutes an outcome, and the intended impact would become much more apparent. Fewer misunderstandings would abound, more inclusive practice would emerge, and we would deliver morally defensible services to society.

The profession owes it to society to become cognizant of the powerful impact of its unexamined and unarticulated thinking (Brown, 1993; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2005, 2006b; McGregor et al., 2007; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Even the best intentions can go awry or be misunderstood if viewpoints and worldviews are not clarified, and anticipated consequences are not articulated. If Brown and Paolucci (1979) and East (1979) were right, even 30 years ago, that home economics is a *focus on the home in order to*

Oimprove humanity, then members of the profession face a pressing, moral obligation to begin to elucidate and communicate the thinking behind their work, else others will not appreciate the magnitude of what the profession is about - the betterment of humanity through the strengthening of individuals and families as a social institution. Brown (1993), McGregor (2007) and McGregor et al. (2007) make a case for moving the profession toward a focus on the human condition, to augment our conventional focus on well-being and quality of life (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998). Indeed, recent thinking from Japanese home economists also positions

the profession within the context of bettering and protecting humanity with a focus on the home (Fusa, 2004).

Improving humanity is the most honorable professional commitment imaginable. With this commitment comes a responsibility for transparency and accountability about the intellectual and ideological underpinnings of the work generated by the profession. This visibility further enables us to practice from a position of professional and personal integrity and ethical and moral responsibility. Showcasing our thinking can make a difference!

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