

Why a “family ecological” perspective for home economics?

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It is always heart warming to know that someone who was once involved in our education process is still interested and wishes to be involved. One such person is Beverly Pearse, who used to teach at UBC. She is now Dr. B. Dixon, Department Head of Home Economics at Rusden State College, Melbourne, Australia. She has taken the time to send us the following ideas – to help us in continuing to focus and improve our own teaching.

Much has been said lately about redefining home economics from a "family ecological" perspective. Such an exotic phrase may well leave average classroom teachers shaking their heads and wondering what all of this academic game playing means for their day-to-day home economics teaching. The intent of this article is to clarify the term *family ecological approach* and to explicate a rationale for shifting the focus of contemporary home economics.

For some time now, home economists have agreed that the concept of "family" is central to the discipline. There are a number of *theoretical* ways in which the study of the family may be undertaken. Hill, Rueben, and Hansen (5) defined five major approaches to the study of the family; namely: institutional, structural-functional, symbolic-interactional, situational, and family developmental.

Each is labeled according to the types of behaviour it treats and the social space and time with which it is concerned. (3) Beyond these five approaches, several alternative methods of viewing family are currently popular. Edward Shorter's *The Making of the Modern Family* illustrates the in-vogue historical approach. A network approach does social mapping to answer the question, "Where does a family link?" Kantor and Lehr define linking as "the regulating of distance; that is, the physical and conceptual associations and dissociations of all persons within the family's spatial interior." (8)

An ecological approach to family emphasizes the interrelationships of a group of organisms that form a community or, more specifically, "this interdependent relationship focuses on the home as a life support system for family members." (6, p. 315) Paolucci, Hall and Axinn identify the basic units of the family ecosystem as: organisms (family members), environments (natural and human built), and the family organization that functions to transform energy in the form of information into family decisions and actions. (9, p. 16)

Applying an ecological approach to family, the secondary school home economics classroom teacher's primary objective is to encourage students to be aware of the interrelationships between their own family groups and the macroenvironment, or to adopt as the focal point the home as an ecosystem." (6, p. 315)

A family ecological approach is an appropriate choice of orientations around which to operate Australian secondary school home economics classes. I see this approach as being consistent with the needs generated by the current global state, current educational trends and attitudes, and present secondary school home economics curriculum.

The needs generated by the current global state

For almost 200 years, we have taken for granted an ever-rising standard of living. Now, as the '70s come to a close, it is clear that a change of lifestyle is imminent and critical in the developed world. Consider the statement:

There is no longer an "away." One person's trash basket is another's living space....there are no consumers - only users. (4, p. 105)

Home economics teachers have a social responsibility to convey values associated with the Canadian-coined phrase “the conserver society.” Students must be encouraged to see their interdependence and interconnectedness with the macroenvironment and to be aware that their decisions *have* impact in a global sense.

Current educational trends and attitudes

In the face of increasing school costs, decreasing school budgets, and calls for a return to "core curriculum," the accountability of school home economics programs becomes an issue. A defence of many present home economics programs is difficult; a swing toward a family ecological approach could ease such a defence.

A family ecological approach would mean that home economics is playing an integrative role in the secondary school. Secondary school biological sciences are beginning to reflect an ecological approach to the natural environment. The social sciences have moved into the realm of concern over "humanness" and "quality of life." Home economics courses using a family ecological approach could interface between an ecological awareness in the natural environment and an ecological awareness in the social -emotional environment. (6, p. 316)

A family ecological approach would be in keeping with current trends in educational methodology. Such an approach could facilitate attempts to increase relevancy indexes. Auserwald asserts that looking at families in this systematic ecologically aware fashion could "combat the anomie and dehumanization characteristic of our age." (2, p. 206) Trends toward values clarification (11) Problem solving and decision making (7) in the classroom would be facilitated by such an approach, as would movements towards humanistic and personalized education (10).

Secondary school home economics curriculum

A family ecological approach does not require enormous redefinition of either the subject matter or the skills currently being taught in the secondary schools. Objectives, however, shift, and scope broadens. For example, money management could become resource management, and personal problem solving could become global problem solving. The skills presently taught are appropriate, but the *reasons for* the presentation of the skills would shift as the transition to a new definition of the term *quality of life* occurred. The *kinds* of projects students are encouraged to do would stress an awareness of the "family as an interdependent life support system" (6, p. 316), a support system dependent upon the natural environment for physical sustenance and social organizations for qualities related to our humanness. (6, P. 316)

Examples of curricular activities

A look into a home economics classroom using a family ecological approach might reveal that some subtle but important shifts such as the following have occurred:

Instead of this:

Foods-Students planning low-cost (\$) high-protein meals for the family.

This:

Students planning low-energy-consumptive, high nutritive meals for the family.

Instead of this:

Child development-Students writing a paper on "The Cost of a New Baby" focusing on prices of baby furniture and clothing, increased housing costs, etc.

This:

Students doing a paper on the costs to the global community of a baby born here as opposed to one born in an Egyptian village.

A shift toward a family ecological approach in teaching secondary school home economics is one way of becoming more accountable in the educational environment. It presents some challenges, but it also provides answers to a number of the criticisms currently being levelled at secondary school home economics programs.

References

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