A framework for investigating spiritual health and wellbeing in Home Economics

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Abstract

Spiritual health and wellbeing are accepted as foundations of Home Economics and health education, yet they remain elusive in terms of conceptualisation. This paper explores synergies between Home Economics and contemporary health and education literature to provide a new and unique perspective for exploring spiritual health and wellbeing in research and practice. The purpose of this work is to clarify spiritual concepts so that home economics professionals might have a framework for better understanding taken-for-granted foundations of the field.

Keywords: spiritual health and wellbeing, home economics, social enactment, sustainable development, diversity

Informing literature

‘Spiritual health and wellbeing’ is a phrase often used in the field of health and home economics, yet it is an elusive, slippery concept. Professionals may be unaware when they read the words spiritual, spiritual health and wellbeing in health and education policy and literature the extent to which the terms (intended or unintended) convey with them an extraordinary amount of diverse, yet taken-for-granted meaning. As an internationally recognised curriculum subject, home economics offers a unique and multidimensional platform (Walker, 1971) from which to study spiritual health and wellbeing, and the subsets of this phrase. The purpose of this article is to clarify how spiritual health and wellbeing is positioned within home economics by developing a diverse and inclusive framework for use in home economics research and practice.

Various terms and concepts convey similar meaning

There is considerable issue with the number of terms that are used within the field to describe and define similar health outcomes for people. A search of the literature from within the fields of home economics, education, health education, public health and health promotion finds many different terms that convey similar notions. To illustrate how terms vary, an Australian education example can be taken from the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (December 2008) (MCEETYA, 2008) where the terms spiritual development and wellbeing (p. 4), spiritual wellbeing (p. 9) and the spiritual dimension of life (p. 13) are all used as aspects for consideration in the overall goals for teaching and learning in Australian schools. These are separate concepts with similar intent. It is understandable that educators may become confused.
Furthermore, within the selected literature reviewed, other terms and concepts used include holistic health, spirituality, spiritual health, spiritual wellbeing, (Bensley, 1991; Fisher, 2008; Hawks, 2004), the spiritual health dimension (De Souza, 2006; Hettler, 2009; McGregor, 2010; O’Connell & Skevington, 2007), spiritual intelligence (Hyde, 2004), spiritual literacy (Burrows, 2006; Watson, 2006), spiritual development (Crossman, 2003; Hill, 1989; Petersen, 2008; Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2009), wellbeing, wellness, the human condition (Fisher, 2008; Henry, 1995; McGregor, 2010), happiness, harmony, meaning and purpose in life, quality of life (Baldwin, 1996; World Health Organisation, 1946, 1998), connectedness, supportive environments (Chuengsatiansup, 2003; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; De Souza, 2009; Hawks, 2004; Hyde, 2004; McGregor & Chesworth, 2005; World Health Organisation, 2011) and so forth. Each of these terms and concepts has its own internal arguments, underpinning bodies of knowledge and championing authorities.

Taking this diversity into consideration, hyper-specialisation holds dangers. Within these fields of literature, however, the terms and concepts generally stem from the same pragmatic purpose. Home economists, social scientists, and educators who work with people are investigating and acknowledging the intricate ways that human life intertwines on the planet and the delicate balances needed to ensure sustainable human existence (Delors, 1996; Raskin, 2008; World Health Organisation, 1946). Therefore, for this paper, *spiritual health and wellbeing* is used as the centrally organising construct because it encompasses many of these current ideologies that are informed by existing theory. Furthermore, this triadic concept (that is, spiritual, health, wellbeing) is a culmination of suggested terminology used within home economics (McGregor, 2010; McGregor & Chesworth, 2005). As an overarching concept, using spiritual health and wellbeing as a whole construct has the potential to unite these three fields of research into human and planetary health (Chuengsatiansup, 2003; Fisher, 1998, 2008; Hawks, 1994, 2004; Hawks et al., 2007; McGregor, 2010; Varder, 2006). *Spirituality* and *the spiritual health dimension* are also used as general terms in this article. The next task is to set out how to conceptualise spiritual health and wellbeing so that we can then move to its positioning within home economics contexts.

**Positioning the issues: Spirituality, religion, globalisation and technology**

Educators may read about spirituality in official policy or unofficial literature only to gloss over it with *Apathy, Acrimony or Accord* (Hill, 1989). Depending on the reader’s underpinning assumptions, this may inadvertently devalue its purpose or aim within the context in which it is written. By way of an Australian education example of this uncertainty in terms, Crawford and Rossiter (2006) note that:

"... for many educators, the terms [spiritual health and wellbeing, spiritual development, the spiritual health dimension] are obviously significant, but still somewhat ambiguous as regards their relevance to public education. This is because spiritual and moral development have not yet been conceptualised clearly enough to be accepted as more than a nominal goal (p. 13)."
Spiritual health and wellbeing is a complex notion. Spirituality in health and education has a history of inciting passionate and divisive argument. Discussion can swing from reticence to strong opinion. Yet, if the concept remains differentially understood and endorsed, human spirituality and its relationship with education and the human condition will remain tenuous. One reason for the challenge of understanding and adoption is the possible connection between traditional religion and spirituality. For the purposes of this discussion, there are distinct differences between these concepts. An emphatic distinction between spirituality and religion is necessary “not to discredit one and privilege the other but rather to provide a context for a discussion of spirituality and education that is not confused by the discussion of religion and education” (Burrows, 2006, p. 3). Within the proposed framework presented in this article, religion is situated within communal and transcendental aspects of human experience. This will be discussed at various points within this paper. Significant concepts such as religion cannot be ignored in social science, but rather need to be respected, rendered accessible and applicable to all human participants, socially and culturally diverse and inclusive of all and any belief systems.

Globalisation and technology are substantially identified as having major impacts on understandings of spirituality in health and educational contexts. Impacts are occurring across secular and government-funded schools, religious and non-religious institutions within western and eastern cultures (Best, 2000; Crossman, 2003; Deagon, 2009; Fisher, 2001; Fleming & Evans, 2008; McGregor & Chesworth, 2005; Nickols et al., 2009; Wong, 2005). Spiritual concepts in education can mean many different things (Fisher, 2008; Hill, 1989; McGregor & Chesworth, 2005; Tacey, 2003). Furthermore, multiculturalism also impacts on understanding the term spiritual within local, national and international contexts (Agnello, White, & Fryer, 2006; De Souza, 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2001; Watson, 2006; Yates & Young, 2010). As a result, specialised content knowledge contained in curriculum or policy may not be easily interpreted or amenable to all situations. We need a clear direction to ensure that interpretation is trustworthy, and not misunderstood, glossed over or ignored.

To illustrate historical and hegemonic influences, spiritual concepts may once have been more simply understood and interpretable within societies governed by a dominant religious or political agency, for example, patriarchal, primarily Christian, postcolonial, British-ruled Australia (Hickling-Hudson, 1999; McGregor, Pendergast, Seniuk, Eghan, & Engberg, 2008; Nickols et al., 2009; Pendergast, 2001). However, because of the contemporary capacity to move people across national and international borders (geographic and conceptual), access to unrestricted information and opinions on the Internet, together with an awakening of social conscience about respecting and embracing the diversity of different cultures (Delors, 1996), people may have considerable difficulty accommodating and comprehending the vast array of new and complex meanings of the way the word spiritual is being recontextualised.

Recontextualisation is an important concept because it explains how spiritual concepts produced in ‘the real world’ (for example, dominant discourses on religion, or nursing
terminally ill cancer patients or ‘new aged’ spirituality) are altered for specific purposes by specific audiences (Gee, 2005; Tacey, 2003). Singh (2002) explains that:

... a discourse is moved from its original site of production to another site, where it is altered as it is related to other discourses. The recontextualised discourse no longer resembles the original because it has been pedagogised or converted into pedagogic discourse (p. 573).

Singh (2002) is specifically referring to education but this knowledge has been recontextualised here to apply to a home economics site. However, the rules still apply. Recontextualised knowledge is synthesised, manipulated, politically compromised and individually expressed until it has been altered from its original source and possible meaning or intent. Generalised meaning may still apply but because knowledge has been recontextualised to apply to contemporary discourses its meaning may become obscured. It was necessary to seek clarification from the real world (for example, the United Nations) and examine overarching policy to see where in practice human spirituality was included and why.

Rationale for situating spirituality within global population health

The framework for spiritual health and wellbeing constructed and presented here directly addresses the United Nations’ (UN) Decade for Education for Sustainable Development 2004-2014 (ESD) directive. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) goal is to “help people to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions” (UNESCO, 2009, para 3). The International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) make a similar call to action and state that the purpose of home economics is “to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities” (IFHE, 2009, p. 1). If we are to develop the skills, attitudes and knowledge to achieve optimal and sustainable living for all people, then this urgent call for “mass social learning” (Sterling, 2004) asks us all to (re)consider what it means to be a human being living on the planet Earth. How is spiritual health and wellbeing to be positioned within this directive? This paper maps the knowledges that provide a rationale that draws spiritual health and wellbeing into a more comprehensive picture of health and education. By examining the reasons why spiritual health has been neglected as a research subject this paper proposes ways to move forward.

In health education, the most widely acknowledged model for understanding holistic health and wellness is Dr Bill Hettler’s Six Dimensions of Wellness model, represented as a hexagon covering social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, emotional and physical health (Hawks, 1994; Hettler, 2009; McGregor, 2010). In later years Hettler (2010) added an environmental dimension to his model and on his website he reflects:

[O]ne of the common modifications to my original hexagonal model is a seven dimensional model in which the environmental focus, which was always part of the social dimension, has been added to the original six as a separate dimension... years ago, I proposed that the environment is so important to the
survival of all species that we should really create a six dimensional model focused on the environmental wellness of the planet.

Contrary to Hettler’s altruistic vision of holistic health and wellness of whole persons, families, communities and the planet, past separations of health into dimensions has left a wide gap or lacuna in research into spiritual health and wellbeing (Hawks et al., 2007, p. 3). Hawks and colleagues (2007, pp. 2-3) report that in a six-year period from 2000 to 2006 only 1% of academic literature referred to spiritual health as opposed to 79% of research attention on physical health. This stark contrast has been attributed to the biomedical model of health and its ease of measurability which dominates health literature (Hawks, et al., 2007). The more measurable may drive out the more meaningful.

Science and disconnection are the important concepts here. In the past science has been mistaken as the genus rather than as a species of research. “Science, as the vehicle through which to investigate and explain existence over the last four hundred years, disconnected humans from their natural, holistic, and spiritual belonging” (Agnello et al., 2006). Crawford and Rossiter (2006) make the observation that scientific practices have reduced the human being into measurable packets of knowledge to the point where we have lost sight of natural, holistic and spiritual knowledges.

Power and control

Rabinow and Rose (1994) compiled and edited a collection of Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) Essential Works between 1954 and 1984. Using their book as a reference, essential ideas have been synthesised to give a brief overview of why Foucault’s philosophy is pertinent to this paper. Foucault provides a method for exposing how events and philosophies continue to influence human spirituality in contemporary society. Specifically useful for this paper is Foucault’s belief that, through the centuries, politics and religion have exercised power to structure and control population health and education systems (Foucault, 1974 as cited in Rabinow & Rose, 1994). Foucault suggested that these governing bodies played a significant role in directing population health and education interventions (Foucault 1974, 1978 as cited in Rabinow & Rose, 1994).

According to Foucault, medicalisation of the human condition was necessary for both individual and population health because standardisation in measurement and observation could then fix social health issues. These measurement and observation methods reduced human health issues into categories of “fixable problems”. Importantly, Foucault recognised then, that now is the time to synthesise knowledge that is available to us through contemporary means and put whole human beings back into their relative contexts.

Accordingly, there has been a shift away from compartmentalised versions of health. New ways of assessing health that include the spiritual health dimension as a population health phenomenon are now being investigated (e.g., Chuengsatiansup, 2003). The World Health Organisation (WHO), for example, recognises that health takes place in a wide variety of contexts. The spiritual health dimension caught the attention of the WHO for its potential to empower and motivate individuals, families and communities into addressing health inequities by specifically targeting the spiritual needs of populations (Varder, 2006). This
present paper uses WHO's definition of health as “a state of complete physical, social and mental wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946, p. 1). Use of the phrase “a state of complete... wellbeing” is often criticised for its narrow informing view and unattainable ideological aims. However, this still remains the WHO's definition and for this article, “a state of complete... wellbeing” denotes a holistic vision of health.

The WHO also acknowledges that the spiritual health dimension is increasingly recognised as an important part of holistic good health (WHO, 1998, p. 1). As contained within the WHO's Health Promotion Glossary (1998), the spiritual dimension is considered a part of the “personal beliefs domain” to “quality of life.” Quality of life is defined as an:

...individual's perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value system where they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standard and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept, incorporating in a complex way a person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and relationships to salient features of the environment. (WHO, 1998, p. 17)

There are six domains recognised in this quality of life definition. They are physical (e.g., energy, exhaustion), psychological (e.g., self-efficacy, positive or negative feelings), level of independence (e.g., freedom of movement, mobility, co-dependency), social relationships (e.g., inclusion in positive social support), environment (e.g., accessibility to health care, geography, sustainability and pollution) and finally personal beliefs/spirituality (e.g., meaning in life). The WHO Constitution asserts that there are nine principles that are “basic to the happiness, harmonious relations and security for all peoples” (WHO, 1946, p. 1). Of particular interest to this paper are the first two principles; namely, the definition of health as discussed above and the second principle that states “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition”. By extension, the WHO is acknowledging that the spiritual health dimension is distinct and separate from religion, but still an important aspect of the health of all peoples.

Finding ways that spirituality can inform population health assessment, Chuengsatiansup (2003) writes “spirituality is an emergent property of a complex living system and exists only when such a system is examined in a holistic manner” (p. 3). Quality of life and human spirituality are intricately and inseparably connected to holistic human health (Baldwin, 1996). For this reason, many organisations are being deeply challenged to research ways to rebalance human beings with themselves, each other and the planet and to recognise the impacts of their actions within larger realities and global consequences. This captures the essence here of spiritual health and wellbeing.

**Spiritual health and wellbeing: breaking down a complex construct**

To organise the framework into manageable packages of knowledge, Fisher’s (1998, 2008) four domains model and Deagon’s (2009) three Discourse models provide the conceptual framework for understanding the whole construct of spiritual health and wellbeing. Juxtaposed with the essence of meaning referred to above, simply, spiritual health and
wellbeing considers the quality of relationships a person has with themselves, others, the living and non-living environment, and a transcendental other or acknowledgement of a larger reality or set of realities (De Souza, 2009; Fisher, 2008).

**Fisher’s four domains model of spiritual health and wellbeing**

Developed across twenty years’ studying Australian and British primary school, high school and university populations, Fisher’s (1998, 2008) four domains model (See Figure 1 below) categorises these relationships into personal, communal, environmental and transcendental. *Progressive synergism* is proposed by Fisher (1998, p. 28) to explain the interrelationships between these domains as a means of understanding that spiritual health and wellbeing is developed over time and with life experience. As an individual develops within each domain the next domain is embraced. Caution must be taken with this notion because it does not claim to provide an absolute explanation of development for every individual. Fisher (2008, p. 13) clarifies this point as follows:

> [W]hen relationships are not right, or are absent, we lack wholeness, or health; spiritual dis-ease can grip our hearts. The quality of relationships in each of the domains will vary over time, or even be non-existent, depending on circumstances, effort and the personal worldview and beliefs of the person.

![Figure 1: Fisher's four domains model of spiritual health and wellbeing](image-url)

**Figure 1:** Fisher’s (1998, p. 28; 2000, p. 40; 2008, p. 12) four domains model of spiritual health and wellbeing that represents spiritual health expressed by an individual as they move in, across and between each domain of wellbeing represented as a process of progressive synergism. Used with permission.
The personal domain refers to self-knowledge. The process of developing self-awareness affects values, personal identity, meaning and life purpose. The communal domain refers to how an individual relates to and interacts with other human beings. The environmental domain refers to an awareness of other living creatures and non-living environments and includes a sense of awe and wonder in the natural world. The final domain is the transcendental domain. Transcendence is defined by Fisher (1998, p. 191) as meaning ‘a relationship with some-thing or some-One beyond the human level’ and includes ‘the universe as a source of Mystery’. Conceptualising spiritual health and wellbeing into these four domains provides a balanced framework that does not lean towards any specific religious or belief systems but that takes into consideration the multifaceted nature of health (Fisher, 2000, 2008). Religion and all other belief systems are engulfed within the communal domain (Fisher, 2008). This is important because using this framework to categorise spiritual health and wellbeing may be applied cross-culturally and across many different geographies, contexts and social situations.

Within the education and health academies specialising in the spiritual health dimension, child and adolescent spiritual development and spiritual wellbeing it is generally accepted that spiritual is not synonymous with religious (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Crossman, 2003; De Souza, 2006; Hawks, 1994; Hawks, et al., 2007; Tacey, 2003). According to Hill (1989) spirituality presupposes religion. Religion can be encompassed within dogmatic, faith-based and communal aspects of spirituality (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Fisher, 2008; Tacey, 2003). Religion cannot exclude notions of spiritual; however, spirituality is not dependent upon religion to give it meaning. Therefore, spirituality may be considered as an individual or existential concept whereas religion is a socially constructed artefact.

**Synergies between home economics and spiritual health and wellbeing**

Spiritual concepts informed home economics as early as 1902 at the Lake Placid conference (McGregor, 2010c, p. 12). Since then, human spirituality, the spiritual dimension, spiritual health, spiritual wellbeing and spiritual wellness have entered home economics rhetoric (Henry, 1995; McGregor, 2010c; McGregor & Chesworth, 2005; Nickols et al., 2009). However, library and databases searches reveal that there is minimal secularised education literature and even less home economics-specific evidence-based research on the concept of spiritual health and wellbeing. While the whole concept remains elusive, both Henry (1995) and McGregor (2010c) believe that spiritual health and wellbeing is worthy of research attention because of its implications for understanding a holistic approach to health and the human condition.

Context is crucially important. The ways of interpreting spiritual concepts will vary from reader to reader and it is therefore important to give due consideration to situated meaning (Gee, 2005). This article is situated within a home economics context. As a curriculum subject, home economics is a vital “hands on” subject that develops valuable life-long learning attributes (Ma & Pendergast, 2010). There are valuable harmonies between home economics and spiritual health and wellbeing. Figure 2 represents these synergies and is adapted from key concepts contained in the IFHE Position Statement (2008) together with a simplified version of Fisher’s (1998, 2008) four-domains model for conceptualising spiritual health and wellbeing.
The IFHE (2009, p. 1) position statement clarifies the boundaries of home economics as:

- an *academic discipline* to educate new scholars, to conduct research and to create new knowledge and ways of thinking for professionals and for society
- an arena for *everyday living* in households, families and communities for developing human growth potential and human necessities or basic needs to be met
- a *curriculum area* that facilitates students to discover and further develop their own resources and capabilities to be used in their personal life, by directing their professional decisions and actions or preparing them for life

**Figure 2:** Synergies between home economics and an adapted summary outline version of Fisher’s (1998, 2008) conceptual framework for spiritual health and wellbeing
a societal arena to influence and develop policy to advocate for individuals, families and communities to achieve empowerment and wellbeing, to utilise transformative practices, and to facilitate sustainable futures.

To give an indication of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary topics that currently inform home economics practice around the world, Table 1 below (entitled Identifying the scope of projects available to students applying home economics curriculum, practices and principles demonstrating the significant contributions from interdisciplinary fields of knowledge) represents a selection of bodies of knowledge and topics available to home economics students worldwide as they relate to common curriculum, practices and principles. This is not an exhaustive but an indicative list of the bodies of knowledge represented in home economics globally (Nickols et al., 2009).

Table 1: Identifying the scope of projects available to students applying home economics curriculum, practices and principles demonstrating the significant contributions from interdisciplinary fields of knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food &amp; Nutrition</th>
<th>Textiles</th>
<th>Living Environments</th>
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<tr>
<td>- food security for all</td>
<td>- ecological sustainable futures for all</td>
<td>- human development and relationships</td>
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<td>- organics</td>
<td>- child labour law</td>
<td>- practical home making awareness</td>
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<td>- agricultural practices</td>
<td>- ethical choices</td>
<td>- community partnerships</td>
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<td>- quality of life</td>
<td>- eco-friendly agricultural practice</td>
<td>- family studies</td>
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<td>- body image</td>
<td>- technical machinist practices</td>
<td>- early childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>- healthy eating and exercise habits</td>
<td>- promotes creativity and aesthetics</td>
<td>- relationship and conflict management</td>
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<td>- consumerism</td>
<td>- chemical awareness used in making textile</td>
<td>- peace and cultural studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>- applies a critical thinking lens to media</td>
<td>- products</td>
<td>- economics of the home</td>
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<td>- cookery techniques for the home</td>
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<td>- how to shop for food</td>
<td>- cultural and religious awareness</td>
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Conclusion

Spiritual, health and wellbeing all have scientific and historical baggage. This article should assist in navigating the minefield. Clarifying the concepts may assist with removing the blindfold of religion and with seeing how spirituality fits within a more comprehensive picture of health, health education and home economics—all fields that have people as their core of concern. There are many opportunities in which we may observe and explore public expressions of spiritual health and wellbeing. It is the essence of spiritual health and
wellbeing theory that may provide us with some direction to address the mass sustainability challenges that we face. Home economics curriculum provides a rich platform for this exploration. As we move towards an increasingly interconnected and globalised world, it would be remiss of us to persist with taken-for-granted assumptions about spiritual health and wellbeing in research and practice. The conceptual framework presented in this paper provides an opportunity for us to explore spiritual health and wellbeing from a unique, diverse and culturally respectful platform.

Biography

Jay Deagon, Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, is the founder of HomeEcConnect where she is researching Home Economics and spiritual health and well-being as an aspect of health education, population health and sustainable development. Jay is a member of the IFHE and the Home Economics Institute of Australia and acknowledges the financial assistance provided by the King & Amy O’Malley scholarship fund. E-mail: j.deagon@griffith.edu.au

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