Placid beginnings/turbulent times:
Re-thinking home economics
for the 21st century

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Abstract

Home economics, as a profession, emerged out of the Lake Placid conferences in the first decade of last century. Celebrations to mark a century of home economics are no doubt on the agenda of many around the world. But the century has not been plain sailing, with the profession and field of study weathering many storms along the way. Indeed, in some countries/institutions/schools/businesses, home economics has become Titanic in its behaviour, plunging violently out of sight after horrendous voyages in rough seas. Regardless of these setbacks, home economics has rarely been out of the minds of those who are committed to the profession. Like the Titanic, home economics has been re-discovered and retrieved, if sometimes only in part, and re-treasured and re-explored again. This renewal—like that of the legendary Phoenix bird that rises from the ashes of fires to live again—is an important aspect in re-thinking home economics. The re-thinking of home economics in ways that are useful and new to the field for the twenty-first century, will be shared and future possibilities explored.

Making my point—the need to re-think home economics

Using a kind of watery, fluid theme for my paper, I am purposely setting out to 'rock the boat', probably making some a little seasick at my suggestions. It is my contention that home economists have, for too long, been compliant in their positioning as a cultural practice in the margins of society. This seemingly 'inevitable' positioning comes from an understanding of ideology using a modernist framework, an era of thought, thinking and research approaches that has been surpassed by the more dynamic understanding of the world, made possible through a postmodernist perspective. If home economists are to take advantage of postmodernist innovation in thought, research and transformative possibilities, now is the time.

Professionally, I am a home economist. I am also an academic. Which one of these titles carries respect in these conference walls, which one outside? The problem with being a home economist is that very few people have an understanding of the term and what it encompasses, apart from those within the profession. Fundamentally, within patriarchal society, it lacks prestige and power—regardless of whether it is understood by others. This is essentially what home economists and the home economics professional bodies around the world must accept as a starting point, if they wish to come to an understanding of, firstly, the problems that home economics must address, and secondly, how home economics can be re-thought to escape this inevitable positioning in society.

When I chose home economics as a career, I realised there were problems attached to it. I knew about the problems as a student in school, when fellow students scoffed at our classes while they attended the supposedly highly prestigious mathematics/science classes, which were assumed to be intellectually more rigorous. I knew about it at university when the home economics group was isolated in the canteen, and was stigmatised for the much longer hours we spent in class and in the library. In my first year of teaching, I was asked to be involved with the school rugby team. I did not realise until the first game that, for me, the home economics teacher, that meant washing the dozens of football jerseys after the Saturday game. Home economists were and are still known as 'cookers and sewers'; 'stitchers and stirrers', and in many ways we have learned to become compliant in this positioning. Home economists have learned how to avoid 'rocking the boat'. It could be argued that this is not your personal...
experience. But I have strong research evidence to suggest that the experience of home economics teachers is often very similar to that described and, often, compliance is acknowledged as the path many take in order to survive. The constant need to validate, justify, 'soapbox', redefine, redescribe, redevelop and so on, takes its toll on people. Several quotes from my doctoral research demonstrate this, with teachers making the following statements about 'their lot' as home economics teachers:

Being a so-called 'woman's subject' means that people view it as unimportant, so we are continually having to prove the importance and get rid of the myth of 'just cooking and sewing'. We are often asked to do trivial work.

(Pendergast, 1999, p.111)

The principal in my current school constantly denigrates home economics and refers to it as the 'dying art of cooking and sewing'—my status in the school suffers greatly as a result. There is a real stigma because of this. I feel that I am constantly having to justify home economics' continued existence. I'm always 'soapboxing' and they see me as a dragon who is only good for doing the catering for all the functions and sewing costumes for the play.

(Pendergast, 1999, p.113)

So, working in this environment and yet knowing that all of this was somehow 'wrong', the issue of how to understand it and re-think it, became my personal agenda. I have now completed my Masters (Pendergast, 1991) and Doctoral (Pendergast, 1999) studies trying to understand home economics and its marginalised position in schools, workplaces, communities and society. I have come to understand that in seeking legitimation within the existing structures of patriarchy, home economists have failed to understand the complicity of home economics reform with the very rationality that they have struggled against (Pendergast, 1995). Home economists have changed the name of the profession, the focus, the terminology, the purpose, all in the hope of gaining legitimacy. Unfortunately, these tactics do not and cannot succeed. Being compliant and, by that, I mean accepting the rules of the system and trying to adjust to gain power from within, actually reinforces power structures in society, making them embedded in our reality and assumed to be the ways things are and maybe even should be. The ultimate effect of this, as Maidment (1990, p.47) explains, is that 'all institutions in society, no matter how powerful, obtain their legitimacy from the perceptions of people'. Quite simply put, in traditional society, home economics and those who engage in its pedagogy are inevitably marginalised within patriarchal relations in education and culture because home economics is characterised as women's knowledge, for the private domain of the home, and this is not a powerful regime in modernist conceptions of understanding. The strategies that we, as a profession, have used to address this have worked within these very assumptions about power and cultural practices in the world, serving to reinforce them.

But this very familiar tale can be comforting for those in the field. It further encourages compliance. There can be a strong sense of camaraderie that comes from constantly fighting battles together, even if those are inevitably losing battles. Home economists know the field of study is marginalised; know the field is devalued; know this positioning is the result of the history and origins of the field; know that it is recognised as 'women's work'; and know that home economics will always struggle for legitimation in a world of narratives that favour certain structures. Home economics teachers know they will be called upon to cater for school functions; know they will be seen as the 'cookers and sewers', and know that they will continually struggle for it to be otherwise. This is the familiar tale of home economics. But understanding this is not enough. My study sought to consider ways forward for the profession, ways of re-thinking the profession, and I hope to share some of that in this paper.

History

One of the reasons why I have stuck by this profession is that I am convinced that the thinking inherent in home economics, that is critical thinking, decision making, management, design processes, empowerment, social critique, and so on, are the tools of thinking required by our future work places and living places. Much of what I say will be about home economics teachers and home economics in schools, and I will explain why I have taken that approach. However, I would like to re-visit our past first.

A useful way to look to future possibilities is to re-consider the past. My entrée into the past comes by way of a newspaper article. Towards the end of last year I was reading the Weekend Australian. The feature in the
Weekend Australian Magazine immediately caught my attention. The title was ‘Millennium Women’ (Cosic, 1999). The story promised to list one hundred exceptional international women who have made a lasting impression on the world in our previous millennium. I was intrigued, and I started nipping through the pages with interest. I expected to see names like: Marie Curie, Florence Nightingale, Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Margaret Thatcher, Princess Diana, and they were all there. It was interesting to see who was in and who was out. Then I saw her name. The person considered to be the founder of home economics—Ellen Richards. Her brief summary read:

Ellen Richards (1842–1911)

Richards invented the science of ecology and was the first woman admitted to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first to graduate in chemistry, its first female faculty member and first science consultant to industry. Yet she was refused a doctorate in 1873 on the grounds that she was female; at one stage, to remain in the scientific realm, she was forced to accept an unpaid role as assistant professor in charge of the women’s laboratory. Her analysis of pollution in air and water inspired the US Public Health movement and her Food Materials and Their Adulteration influenced the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Acts.

(Cosic, 1999, p.23)

The founder of home economics had been acknowledged as one of the past millennium’s exceptional international women who have made a lasting impression, but ‘home economics’ was not made visible and explicit with her. The time when Richards was fighting to be recognised, that is during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a period in which women sought to win political equality with men in many arenas. Advocates of women’s rights revolted against the restrictions that were placed upon women in education, professions and politics. This era became known as the ‘First Wave of Feminism’. Ellen Richards had been a victim of discrimination, based solely on gender.

At the same time, there was growing concern for the future of the home and family (Carver, 1979). This stemmed from the impact of industrialisation that manifested itself in increased divorce, perceived irresponsible social behaviour and the like. All around America and Canada, courses of study in schools were being introduced to address these concerns. What was becoming evident to Ellen Richards, was the need for someone to coordinate these fragmented courses into a combined force. So, in 1899, Ellen Richards called together a group of women to discuss ‘the need and purpose for a new field of study in education that could help the home and family’ (Jax, 1985, p.23). This was the first of a series of ten consecutive annual conferences held at Lake Placid, where home economics was subsequently crystallised into a field of study. The term ‘home economics’ came out of the 1901 conference.

The emergence of home economics was the culmination of Ellen Richards’ struggles to be valued in a masculinised sphere of study. She defined a new field of knowledge, that is, she scientised what was traditionally seen to be ‘women’s work’. In doing so, she used a masculinised framework for legitimising women’s knowledge. In postmodern terms, she is said to have relied on ‘the master’s tools’ (Lorde, 1984). That is not the type of rethinking that I will be advocating today. Indeed, as I have already made clear, this approach can never succeed. However, for the First Wave of Feminism at the end of the nineteenth century, this strategy was considered to be extremely revolutionary. It followed the philosophy of conforming to, and thereby privileging, masculine traditions by agreeing to play by the rules set by males—in this case the academy of the university. One hundred years of experience later, we know that using ‘the master’s tools’ reinforces their legitimacy and their value, making them increasingly powerful and forcing the others into the margins. To understand this concept is to have a powerful understanding of the social construction of patriarchy, which is the foundation of modernist thinking.

Whilst home economics has come a long way since 1901, we find similar dilemmas and concerns today to those Ellen Richards noted. There are still questions about the future of the family, about the effects of progress, about the invisibility of women, and about what is valued and valuable knowledge.

Over the century that separates the creation of home economics as a field of study and today, there has been considerable change in the profession, and in what is seen to be important for students to learn in our classrooms under the banner of home economics. In many cases, this change has been thrust upon the profession by systems
and powerful groups, reactionary change rather than proactive development. I have no doubt you can recount the unique story of your own state’s or territory’s history of home economics. This history informed my Masters (Pendergast, 1991) research, which located home economics as condemned to a marginal position in the education system. I argued that this was principally due to widespread perceptions (by home economics students and teachers, along with school sector principals, administrators, non-home economics teachers, parents and the community) of the nature of the subject as gender-specific, and that this was the product of a male/female duality that devalued the home economics knowledge base, given the hierarchical, gender-based construction of knowledge (see Pendergast, 1996). When we think back to Ellen Richards and the defining of home economics, we can see this easily. The men of the academy rejected her until she defined something new using their scientific framework as the measure of value. Women did not compete in men’s knowledge fields, and subsequently there was no threat to the power structures in society. So, home economics would always be relegated to the margins as women’s knowledge. As Attar points out:

*There were benefits for male scientists in supporting a separate science for women, which would avert the prospect of female competition.* (Attar, 1990, p.102)

Ellen Richards was given entry into the boys club, but she never drank at the bar. Where does this understanding of our history leave us now?

**Home economics teachers**

It is my belief that in order for there to be home economists in the commercial worlds of business, commerce and industry in numbers such that the phrase ‘home economist’ does not raise a questioning eyebrow, home economics must first occur in schools. In this way, teachers of home economics play a pivotal role in ensuring the maintenance of the home economics profession, beyond merely teaching the subject.

You might argue that many high-status professions such as law, architecture and medicine do not have a subject precedent in the classroom. However, these professionals have benefited from the privilege and power of patriarchy. That is, they have been positioned in society as powerful professions, privileged by the orthodoxy of patriarchy, with the work historically performed by men, with high monetary reward. They are the mainstream professions that serve to marginalise professions such as home economics. All of these things work together to reinforce prestige and power in our society and to reinforce it as ‘the way it should be’, that is, to retain the status quo. So, in my view, teachers of home economics hold a key to the future of the profession. But there does need to be some radical shifts, some re-thinking of the home economics teaching profession, to escape the marginalising practices to which I referred.

This avenue of approaching home economics through teaching is potentially extremely powerful. There are currently fifty-seven million teachers in the world’s formal education systems, compared to sixteen million thirty years ago. In a majority of countries, schoolteachers are the largest single category of public sector employees (UNESCO, 1998). At the 1999 International Conference on Teacher Education, Maclean explained that there is an expectation that teachers are and will be transformers of society as they prepare young people to deal with an ever-changing world. While this transformative role of teachers has never been greater, the status of teachers has declined over the past 30 years (Maclean, 1999). Within this general demise of status of teachers, there is a further demise of those teachers of ‘low status’ subjects, such as home economics.

Given the increasing demand and perceived importance of teachers, along with the rapidly diminishing status, it is not hard to predict that there may be a shortage of teachers looming. Indeed, in Preston’s national study of the supply and demand of teachers in Australia to the year 2004, it was found that there is a ‘variable but consistent trend across Australia towards a significant period of under-supply of appropriately qualified graduates’ (1998, p.1). But what of the home economics teacher situation? A study recently released called *Home economics teacher supply and demand to 2003—Projections, implications and issues* (Pendergast, Reynolds & Crane, 2000), conducted on behalf of the Home Economics Institute of Australia, paints a devastating picture for home economics teachers. There are few remaining institutions in Australia that prepare home economics teachers or home economics professionals. There are simply few courses in existence. This is often the result of university course rationalisation and cutbacks to staff numbers.
and expertise to meet economic agendas. The 1990s decade of economic rationalism has had a profound effect on home economics and on home economics teacher training. Students are opting out of all areas of teaching generally because of the relatively poor pay and high stress associated with the job. It is simply not as attractive as it could be. Compounded with these factors, students are not electing to be home economics teachers because of the uncertainty of the future of the subject and because of lack of encouragement by friends, teachers and parents.

According to Preston's study (1998), the major factors in the projected shortfalls of the general supply of teachers include:

- insufficient supply of graduates;
- aging of the teaching workforce;
- projected increases in student enrolments; and
- loss of 'pools' of reserves of teachers seeking re-entry, some due to changing professions.

Why these trends? Across all disciplines, including home economics, Hargreaves (1999) argues that one of the most profound reasons for a shortfall of teachers is the shift away from teaching as a desirable job. Teaching is seen publicly as not particularly complex or challenging, yet in reality, 'teaching is becoming more demonstrably complex than it has ever been' (p.1). Indeed, according to the Technical paper for the New Basics Education Queensland (2000), 'Many teachers are fatigued by waves of reform' (p.5), with teachers working in a constant 'climate of change fatigue' (p.104). This has taken a severe toll on the appeal of teaching as a potential career option. So, one of the great challenges for teachers today and in the future is to be acknowledged as professionals (Hargreaves, 1999).

Just to give an idea of the increasing complexity of the job that teaching will be in the future, Queensland State Education 2010: (Education Queensland, 2000) identifies the 'new times' for which students must be prepared as being characterised by the following:

- New student identities
  (e.g. issues about identity, family structures, poverty, social dislocation)
- New economies
  (e.g. globalised economies, communication across different media)
- New workplaces
  (e.g. new work order—shift to 'expert novice' (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996);
- new sectors of employment; employment insecurity)
- New technology
- (e.g. digital and mediated communications technologies)
- Diverse communities
- (e.g. Increasing stress on sense of neighbourhood, community and identity—end of 'enclosure')
- Complex cultures

If this is what our future students need, what place does home economics have? Where does home economics fit in all of this?

Futures scenario

Earlier this year I was invited to present a speech about home economics and the future. My story was a futuristic tale set in the year 2019 about a global tragedy that emerged out of a chain of events associated with the food outlets 'Pendy's', which revolutionised the way we prepare and sell fast food (Pendergast, 2000). Pendy's is an extrapolated version of McDonalds, a company that has had an enormous impact on food and eating in the world. McDonalds claims to be the largest and best known global food service retailer with more than 25,000 restaurants in over 100 countries. As market leader, McDonalds currently serves just less than one per cent of the world's population. That's one per cent of six billion people(http://www.mcdonalds.com).

In my scenario, home economics had been abolished from the Australian education curriculum for a series of reasons, including: the shift towards vocational education and particularly studies related to hospitality; and a lack of teachers because of a national home economics teacher shortage. Institutions no longer believed home economists were important.

In my scenario, Pendy's, the most prolific food chain in the world, had decided to remove the last remaining humans from their operations. The proposed new shift to full automation from Pendy's was through the replacement of remaining food preparation staff with monkeys that had been genetically modified by inserting human chromosomes into their genetic make-up, and then mass cloning the modified monkeys. Since Pendy's was one of the largest employers in the world, there was considerable revolt. A crisis with millions of street protesters occurred worldwide. One of the strategies used to reject the attempt by Pendy's to implement their ideas
was a mass refusal to buy their meals. However, because of the effectiveness of the creation of dependence on the food giant as supplier of over one third of the world’s daily meals, people who refused to buy from Pendy’s began to starve. There were several reasons for this. The first was that people could not prepare their own food. These skills had been seen as superfluous, and over the generations, the techniques and processes had been lost. Few people knew how to prepare food and fewer people understood the relationship between nutrition and food preparation. No one valued these practices any more because companies like Pendy’s were doing a great job of providing our food. Other factors such as the loss of kitchens in homes, and the inability of consumers to purchase raw ingredients added depth to my scenario. Eventually, Pendy’s succeeded in having its innovations introduced, or there would have been mass starvation. So, people started eating the food prepared by monkeys and distributed in dispensing machines. Unemployment rates rose.

In my story, this event prompted curriculum decision-makers to determine that the knowledge, processes and skills presented in home economics were essential to empower individuals and families to make informed choices in their lives in the most basic of ways. It provided skills that were transferable between the home and work; it provided depth, not just basic knowledge and not just basic skills. It also gave individuals choices about whether or not they HAD to be dependent on others for their daily living. So, it was agreed that all students should have as their core of learning a home economics course of study. They would focus on how various factors influence the wellbeing of individuals and families, and how students can be empowered to optimise their wellbeing with regard to these aspects. In this way, people could take control of their lives in both paid and unpaid spheres, removing their dependence from others, if they chose. They could be self-determining. The scary part of my story was that it was not far-fetched and ludicrous, but in fact almost all I incorporated into this story had a firm basis in reality.

**It is no longer useful to teach a set of skills or processes or knowledge, because they will become redundant or limited within a short period of time.**

The need for home economics—globalisation and new work order

So, does society of the future need home economics? Do students need home economics? If we have to accept the problems of home economics as a given, are we better to start with something completely new? In my scenario, I created a need. And, though it may well be an extreme scenario, I believe that the removal of the empowered individual and replacement with a consumer who is dependent on others for providing their basic needs is a pattern that underpins the philosophy of much of the globalisation of products and services in this day and in the future.

I think it is important to look at globalisation to explain why I believe home economics will be important for today’s and tomorrow’s members of society. The way we learn, the way we work, what type of jobs we do and for how long we have them has changed with globalisation. In the old days, my parents and those before them, existed in what was known as the ‘old work order’, the traditional, assembly-line approach to mass production. There were standardised products with no flexibility. For example, the FJ Holden was a pretty standard commodity. So too was the typing class. These days, with the ‘new work order’, the approach is towards forms of production that employ new ways of making goods and commodities (for example, my electronic hamburger dispenser and chromosome implanted monkey), and to serving more differentiated markets or niches through segmented retailing strategies (just go looking for a car, you will find that there seem to be endless versions of what you thought were the same car). So, from an education point of view, it is no longer useful to teach a set of skills or processes or knowledge, because they will become redundant or limited within a short period of time. Progress and change are fundamental to the twenty-first century, so the capacity to constantly modify also will be essential. In the ‘old work order’ and the traditional approach to education, we developed specialist points of view so that eventually the students were able to function as particular types of experts. We focussed on enabling students to reproduce facts and figures. Students learnt how to handle knowledge and language in ways limited to their particular disciplines. But we are no longer there, we no longer need people with just those capacities. We now live and work in a global community in the ‘new work order’. What does this mean for education? It means creating in students thinking which is like an ‘expert novice’, that is, someone who is expert at continually learning anew and in-depth. Students will no longer become an expert at any one thing. The tools for education are those that give students access to communication and technical processes. We will be encouraged to produce and reproduce in our students a
community of practice that values the visions of globalisation, and is not linked with specific academic disciplines. We must teach students how to learn and how to change, and how not to be stressed by this environment.

We can see this influence coming through with the shift towards key learning areas and away from individual subjects. The new work order stresses the role of education and learning as a life-long enterprise. And this is where I think home economics was almost before its time. It has these attributes. It is multi-disciplinary, it does not teach a skill for the sake of that skill, it teaches for application, it teaches informed decision-making in endless scenarios, it teaches evaluative and critical thinking skills, it empowers individuals—no matter what their context.

Perhaps it is beginning to become clear as to how I imagine home economics will play a pivotal role in the future. The students of the future will need flexibility in their capacity to learn. There is an essential place for metacognition, and empowering individuals will be paramount for them. As Symes and Preston (1997, p.287) clearly state:

*Given the problems, both social and ecological, which are more likely to become commonplace in the twenty-first century—we need citizens with a critical outlook, who are able to combine technological skills with political and ethical responsibility.*

That is what we do in home economics. And we do so in what might be considered by some as the most mundane way, that is, in factors that are relevant to everyday life and survival.

What are the implications for teacher education, and particularly for home economics teacher education, given the situation outlined? There has been considerable change in teacher education and professional development in the last five years. As Blackmore (1999, p.ii-iii) notes, key foci in the last five years, as responses to a period of intense reform in education systems throughout Australia and the world, have been: learning new technologies; multiple intelligences; and metacognition. Meadmore, Burnett and O’Brien (1999) note that new times require new minds and new kinds of people for new kinds of work. Hence, new ways of teaching are required. In support of this argument, Symes and Preston (1997) believe there is a need to make a shift from discipline to emancipation in the classroom.

They argue that:

> The emancipatory teacher’s fundamental role is to empower students to become their own teachers, by revealing to them the questions and problems which beg interpretation in their own experience and to engage in critical dialogue between self and society (p.276).

Hence, they argue for critical pedagogy, delivered by transformative intellectuals (teachers). Transformative teachers *advocate and actively work for emancipatory change and cultural transformation* (Symes & Preston, 1997, p.284). So, in terms of teacher education, whether undergraduate, postgraduate or inservice:

> Teachers need an intellectual education of the broadest sort, embracing sociology, ethics, philosophy and history, which places them in contact with the social origins of education, with the range of ideologies and discourses that are governed and are governing, and will likely govern, Western society and its institutions like education. ...Teaching requires a synthesis of action and reflection (p.287).

What I am saying is that students will understand why certain groups are privileged in society and others are not; there will be a re-thinking about what is valued and why. This is happening now; this is happening in some home economics classrooms. Many home economics teachers ARE transformative teachers, well suited to the future needs of our students. This is the means by which the undoing of the inevitable marginalisation of home economics in education, work and society will ultimately occur. Our future society, shifting finally from modernist patriarchy to postmodernity, will be facilitated by these types of changes in our education system. This is the opportunity for home economics to find a place where there are no assumptions about its value. Transformation is a fundamental idea for re-thinking using postmodernism.

**Re-thinking home economics**

There is no doubt that within orthodox, modernist patriarchal society, home economics is located in a gendered regime of power/knowledge that can and does have repressive effects. Because of this very fact, it is the site of a constant legitimisation struggle and hence the constant remaking of the field. The result has been increasing marginalisation because home economists have sought to gain legitimation within and through the very logic that ensures its marginal status. How do we
go about re-thinking this? As I have already
intimated, our education system is quite
rapidly heading down the path of postmodern
thinking. There are challenges to traditions,
which were thought to be givens in the past.

Let us consider the beginnings of the home
economics profession. Our history can never
change, however our understanding of that
history can, and an understanding of the social
contexts of that history can offer an
interpretation that is not disempowering and
marginalising. If the history is interpreted
within the historical, social, political milieu of
the day, it serves to enlighten us as to the
power issues of the day. The problem with
the historical legacy of home economics
origins is that in order to escape this
marginality of positioning, we need to open
our minds to new ways of thinking about what
is valued and valuable. We need to look to
new ‘tools’, rather than relying on the given
‘master’s tools’. We, as a professional
community, must learn to re-think and
challenge long entrenched assumptions about
thinking itself, not just for ourselves, but also
for others around us. This is a tough job, but
that is what it will take. That is what my Doctoral
study set out to do. In this way, the inevitably
marginalised location of home economics as a
cultural practice could be challenged.

What is postmodernism and is this the
phoenix we have been looking for?
Postmodernism serves as a broad category that
is characterised by a general critique of
contemporary society. It is acknowledged as a
fundamental turning point in social thought
(Flax, 1990; Hatcher, 1993). That postmodernist
thought exists is no longer contentious, and
the many aspects and versions of its existence
have been debated on the philosophical front
for some years now (Simon, 1988). Jencks
(cited in Bordo, 1992, p.160) suggests that
‘anything resisting or deconstructing common
assumptions of culture’ is post-modernist,
while Squier (1995, p.119) suggests that the
dominant feature of postmodernism is its:
... challenge to the master narratives of
Western metaphysics and philosophy,
with their bases in binary oppositions:
mind/body; male/female; self/other; first
world/third world; human/non-human.

My doctoral study juxtaposed modern and
postmodern research paradigms. I conducted
a study of the cultural production of over 300
home economics teachers within the familiar
landscape of modernist research. I was looking
for binaries such as male/female; public/
private; paid/unpaid. The orthodox tools of
surveys followed by orthodox readings of the
data using orthodox statistical analysis
provided a predictable reading. That is, that
the familiar exists, at least in the perception
of many home economics teachers.

In one of my modernist studies, I asked 199
home economics teachers to list up to five
words they would use to describe a home
economics teacher. The findings revealed the
words most frequently used by home
economics teachers to be (in brackets are the
percentages of the respondents): multi-skilled
(70%); professional (43%); organised (39%);
resourceful (35%); practical (30%); hardworking
(27%); caring (26%); and creative
(26%) (Pendergast, 1999).

What was further interesting was the dualities
or binary positions the teachers constructed of
themselves. For example, one teacher
suggested a home economics teacher is
recognisable by:
... the bags under her eyes, dispan
bands, varicose veins, and a great sense
of humour (they need it). The home
economics teacher can leap a stove in
a single bound and wears a

and another:
Home economics teachers are seen as the
school’s general cook and bottle washer,
the stitch and stir lady, the expert cooker
and sewer, involved in and expected to
do the dishes, washing up and the
laundry, fridge cleaning, kitchen
checking, washing and drying and
folding, cleaning, housekeeping,
shopping, budgeting chores, equipment
maintenance and mending kids shirts.
Moreover, there is an expectation that they
will cater for functions in the school and
make costumes for musicals, give up all
lunch hours and starve and lug sewing
machines around. This leads to the home
economics teacher being exhausted,
stressed and in poor health (Pendergast,

The studies parallel others that reveal that
typical home economics teachers can be
produced as what I have called the binaries
of skilled (unskilled) and suffering (not
suffering). These work together to produce
the normalised home economics teacher. To
be a normal, ‘proper’ home economics teacher
is to possess what I have termed the ‘ideal
teacher’ and the ‘real

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body' (stooped shoulders, exhausted ...). The 'ideal' home economics teacher is a gendered and disciplined body, a member of a profession that is also organised, hardworking, caring, multi-skilled, resourceful and creative. She is assumed to be a positive role model, with the 'right' weight, willing to perform as the redemptive saviour, to produce quality products, and so on. The 'real' is the ruined body who is cleaner, cook, and martyr, with dishpan hands. She has black rings under her eyes, is starving, stressed, in poor health, exhausted and wrecked from home economics work. These two bodies of home economics are in some senses both symbolic and irreconcilable, as dualisms always are. The real, ruined body of the home economics teacher is the physical effect of 'normalising', the sight of the 'good' home economics teacher at work.

These ideal and real bodies are the disciplined bodies of home economics that are produced (and reproduced) out of the textual data from the research. The ideal I have described as a skilled body and the real as the suffering body. The social production of the two bodies of home economics derives from, and adds to, myths and folkloric value, and this is part of the normalising tradition of home economics teaching, where seemingly irreconcilable parts remain in tension in the enactment of pedagogical events.

It is not surprising that these studies, utilising familiar, orthodox and rigorous frameworks, would produce such a predictable outcome. Thinking about home economics teaching is overwhelmingly dualistic, and this condition is seen as 'normal'. It would have been easy to simply conclude my research having conducted these studies, and endorsing this picture. I would have reaffirmed familiar stories and covered familiar terrain as the modernist studies and ways of understanding about home economics, that have preceded me. However, this dualistic thinking (real/ideal, suffering/skilled, typical/atypical) is a limited way of understanding the nature of home economics teachers. It is precisely this reductionist way of thinking about home economics that stimulated me to push further. For me, this 'known' position of 'truth' became a starting point for engaging in new ways of thinking about home economics teaching (Davis, 1997).

Brown (1993) has urged researchers to recognise the need for a re-thinking of the thinking that has been done about home economics, arguing there is a need to disrupt these familiar tales about home economics. I have taken this challenge seriously, with all the theoretical and epistemological difficulties this entails. This was undertaken by a shift to unorthodox tools that seek to dismantle the familiar. That is, a shift to posthumanist body theory. My argument has already been stated. It is that thinking reliant upon orthodox frameworks is complicit in the relegation of home economics and home economists to the margins in the pedagogical culture of schools. In modernist research projects, no matter how much they might advocate otherwise, home economics continues to be located in the margins. Thus, its positioning 'continually defeats us, pulling us back to [what] ... we wish to imagine beyond' (Davies, 1989, p.12).

The task I set for my postmodern research was to reconfigure how to think about home economics as a field of study and home economics teaching as a cultural practice. I explored how the culture of home economics is contested from within, by looking to four 'atypical' home economics teachers, arguing that their embodied pedagogical performances constitute the site/sight of pedagogical practice (Pendergast, 1999b). In taking this approach, my argument is that the culture of home economics is constantly being challenged from within by home economics teachers performing as body subjects, always engaged in a labour of reinscription of themselves and others. Thus, home economics pedagogy is never stable but is constantly being produced through such labour. To assert this is to challenge rational accounts of the inevitable marginalisation of the field.

The four atypical home economics teachers and their practices were interrogated through interviews and the collection of materials such as photographs, journals and videos provided by the teachers themselves, that are relevant to their embodied classroom practice. My reading of these practices in terms of their radical possibilities was undertaken by documenting and describing their pedagogical performances, then considering how the existence of such practices unsettles the idea of home economics as a monolithic culture. This was achieved by juxtaposing the 'disciplined body' of home economics teachers (produced out of the modernist research) against the atypical teachers corporeal performances. I attempted to unsettle the mainstream culture of home economics research by blurring the distinctions between 'orthodox' and 'marginal' practices. I went on
to investigate the atypical teachers as grotesque, carnivalesque performers, full of pleasure and even potential subversion, using the interpretive tools created by Bakhtin's (1968) carnival and Russo's (1994) grotesque body (Pendergast & McWilliam, 1999).

What the analysis of these pedagogical performances generated was the proposition that while the disciplined bodies of normal and proper (typical) home economics teachers could be produced as skilled and suffering, the atypical teachers were skilled, but did not appear to suffer. Rather, the atypical bodies were engaged in the giving and taking of pleasure and fun, rejecting the constraints on pedagogy imposed by the suffering typical of 'proper' home economics teachers. There was no indication that these 'atypical' teachers who refused to suffer were unprofessional. Indeed, indications suggested otherwise, with students acting as strong advocates for these teachers, not only in terms of their pedagogical performances as teachers, but in terms of the student's capacity to achieve meaningful academic outcomes (Pendergast & McWilliam, 1999).

Until now, home economics as a lived culture has failed to recognise possibilities for reconstructing its own field (Pendergast, 1999b). This research works to present home economics teachers and the profession as a reconfigured cultural practice, as an instance of the 'otherness' of the Other, and a refusal to collapse difference into the familiar. This is a space for re-thinking about home economics other than as a monolithic culture. My research does not solve the 'problems' of the field, such as those outlined earlier. That is not the purpose of this work. Instead, it argues that these 'problems' are symptomatic of understandings of home economics that are not simply a product of a gendered hierarchy of knowledge, but are also a product of the very research that seeks to change this state of affairs. It is in this way that my project seeks to raise new issues for the field and for the theorists engaged with it.

Questions
There are many questions that emerge out of this postmodernist reading of home economics as a body of knowledge. These questions can be regarded as being equivalent in traditional research genres to 'recommendations' that emerge from a more mainstream piece of work. However, in this and other postmodernist projects, there is no truth discovered from which recommendations for progress can be developed. Instead, only more questions are raised. These questions serve as pointers to remind us of the ongoing need to re-think the thinking that has already been done.

Some of the questions that my research raises for future research about home economics teaching as a profession, relate to the epistemology of future analyses. These include:

- **What is a home economics teacher?**
  This research reveals that it is not a simple matter of looking to binaries such as typical/atypical or professional/unprofessional as a means of producing home economics teachers. Traditional conjecture about what a home economics teacher is, has been revealed to be deficient and misleading and has, in the past, led to compliance and suffering.

- **What further research work could be done?**
  The importance of the need for a shift in thinking from conspiracy theories of modernism to postmodernist conceptions of understanding and epistemology, and hence of re-membering home economics, have been articulated in order to inform future research in the field of study. Home economics researchers should be encouraged to look to their practitioners, and particularly to those 'atypical' practitioners as the sight/site of home economics, to re-think the thinking in the field.

- **How does this research inform the work of professional associations?**
  This project encourages a challenge to mainstream advocacy practices that have dominated the approach taken thus far. The home economics professional body (Home Economics Institute of Australia), and the tertiary and secondary contexts that are the site of home economics education, can benefit from utilising postmodernist approaches and challenging heterosexual normativity of home economics practice for transformative possibilities, rather than being stifled by their current goals of 'seeking legitimation' within grand narratives that drive current agendas.

Based on this current research, home economists need only look within their field for signs of transformation, especially in escaping the traumas of suffering which typify the 'proper', 'typical' and 'normal' home economics teachers.
economics teacher. Home economics as a field of study and home economists as practitioners, need not be inevitably marginalised, unless there is no recognition of new possibilities that might seem to be outside of traditional ways of conceptualising thinking. This is about how such thinking can be done within the field as a site/sight of cultural practice, including research practice. As a result of such work, home economics teachers and students, and home economics professional bodies who are complicit in the positioning of home economics as devalued and marginalised, may well be encouraged to re-think their thinking, looking again to the culture and the transformative opportunities that contest the inevitably marginalised status that has dominated the field to date.

Furthermore, the time is right for this transformative opportunity. With the call for transformative teachers (Symes & Preston, 1997) as the key to the future of effective teaching, in an educational environment that is recognising the benefits of re-thinking curriculum and pedagogy using postmodernist thinking, home economics is at the crossroads. The waters in which home economics travels will never again be placid, nor indeed were our beginnings or the route since charted. However, there is a Phoenix that has risen and which thrives on these turbulent waters, offering renewal through re-thinking. My advice to individual home economists and the home economics profession is—don’t be compliant and miss the boat.

References


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