
**Keywords:** home economics, human ecology, integrated, holistic system, Lake Placid, spider plant metaphor

**Dedication** - This paper is dedicated to my mentors, Ellie Vaines, Doris Badir and Margaret Bubolz

**Abstract**

This article explores how Bubolz and Sontag’s (1988) seminal work on integration in home economics and human ecology can inform contemporary home economics practice. They argue that the human ecology perspective can be used to view the whole of home economics, and the subprofessions (specializations) within the whole, as diverse yet unified. This article employs a spider plant as a metaphor to illustrate the value of embracing the notion of home economics as an integrated, holistic system.

**Introduction - Home Economics’ Hyperspecialization**

For decades, many critical and constructive publications in home economics, including Bubolz and Sontag (1988), have lamented that the profession is too fragmented, that there are too many specializations, which are too removed from any common home economics philosophical core (Brown, 1985, 1993; McGregor, 2009a; McGregor & MacCleave, 2007). Von Schweitzer (2006) characterizes this as “the increasing variety of professional specialities and task areas for home economics and their specific job titles” (p.15). Within this fragmented context, Turkki (2005) affirms that home economics programs and curricula, and by association the entire profession, are in transition in many countries. Pendergast (2006, 2009) asserts that home economics is at a convergent moment, and that what we do now will affect the entire future of the profession.

Any professional movement is most constructive when it is reflective. In that spirit, this article revisits Bubolz and Sontag’s (1988) work on integration in home economics and human ecology. They also were concerned with the fragmented nature of home economics practice, calling for a higher level of integration to respect profession-wide diversity from a position of strength and unity. Predicated on the principle of reciprocal relationships, which is central to the human ecology perspective, they develop an approach to practice that focusses on the relationships between the subfields of home economics and the holistic home economics system. Instead of discussing how home economists can use the human ecology perspective in their daily practice, they suggest that we can use human ecology as a lense from which to view the whole field of home economics, and the many subprofessions within the whole (i.e., the specializations), as diverse yet unified - an integrated discipline (akin to Turkki’s (2005) subsequent notion of integrated home economics wholes).

This article explores how Bubolz and Sontag’s (1988) approach can inform
contemporary home economics practice. First, there is a brief discussion of why it is necessary that home economics be reintegrated with its subdisciplines, and why a metaphor is a useful tool to facilitate this discussion. Then, after explaining how human ecology has been an integral part of home economics from its beginnings, the discussion turns to an overview of their suggestion of reconceptualizing home economics through the human ecology lens. The article concludes with the application of a spider plant metaphor to illustrate the value of embracing the notion of home economics as an integrated, holistic system.

**Intrinsic Value of Home Economics**

The intrinsic value of home economics as a discipline that integrates its sub-disciplines with a shared philosophical core is a given in this article. Without this integration, the knowledge base remains too fragmented and practitioners are unable to adequately deal with the complexity of the issues faced by families (e.g., health, economies and political systems in transition, labour markets in transition, changing family forms). The dimensions of families’ daily lives are interrelated. Child rearing issues mingle with housing issues, which are shaped by financial integrity and access to health care plus the presence of nurturing family relations. The knowledge base can become stagnant and unable to accommodate this complexity if steps are not taken to weave together specialization-specific information.

As well, without a common philosophical core, home economists cannot stand in solidarity around the world, regardless of the context within which they are working. A common voice, shaped by shared value premises, principles of practice and competencies, is missing. The public does not hear the profession speaking in unison and may even hear sub-disciplines maligning sister specializations and the profession at large. This article argues that home economics needs to reconnect with its sub-specializations, and it employs a spider plant metaphor to make this point.

**The Value of Good Metaphors**

A metaphor is a way of thinking wherein individuals interpret one experience through the language of another; individuals are invited to view one thing as if it were another (Rigney, 2001). In this article, readers are invited to view the integration of specializations and the core of home economics as if it were a spider plant. Every metaphor has its limits, intimating that there are good and bad metaphors, not best ones. A good metaphor will make it easier to think about something and will make it possible to think about things in a new way. As tools, good metaphors explain and expand individuals’ understandings (Rigney). The spider plant is a good metaphor because it creates an image and explains the nuances of how to mitigate the fallout of a hyperspecialized home economics in a much clearer way than a direct narrative ever could. A good metaphor reminds people of how one thing is similar to another. Also, metaphors are inevitably shaped by the interests and circumstances of their makers (Rigney). The spider plant reminded the author of how a fragmented profession could be made whole again by respecting a biological system - plant, pot that holds/supports the plant, related species, plant regeneration. The careful use of a biological metaphor can add new insights (Kahali, 1998); and, this one did.

**Human Ecology Origins in Home Economics**

Since its beginnings, home economics has been linked to ecology (plant and animal sciences), an idea that is refuted by Brown (1993). Ellen Swallow Richards (in the early 1900s) originally wanted to call the new field *Home Ecology*. She borrowed the term from the word *oekology*, meaning ecology (i.e., the study of organisms in their environments). She interpreted *organism* also to mean humans functioning in and beyond their home and family environment
(Brown, 1993). However, *Home Ecology* was not the name for the new discipline that emerged out of the Lake Placid Conferences. Due to the natural science hegemony of the time, the notion of *oekology* was repossessed by plant and animal science practitioners and Richards and her followers were left to choose another name. In 1904, she considered calling the profession *euthenics* (better living), the science of controllable environments (Fields & Connell, 2004; Weigley, 1974). In 1909, after a decade of being plagued by semantics and issues of nomenclature, they settled on home *oikonomikos* or home economics (Brown, 1985, 1993; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Herrin & Wright, 1988; Vincenti, 1997; Weigley, 1974).

Bubolz and Sontag (1988) and Herrin and Wright (1988) explain that about 60 years lapsed before the profession again realigned itself with human ecology. Claiming a strong ecological heritage (refuted by Brown, 1993), many home economics programs and departments chose human ecology as a unifying philosophical perspective, explicitly changing their names, with some changing their identities, to human ecology, beginning in the late 1960s. This was a time in society “that emphasized holistic thinking and an emerging ecological consciousness” (Brown, p. 172). Andrews, Bubolz and Paolucci (1981) observe that a family ecological perspective provides a reconceptualization of the earlier home management approach conceived at Lake Placid. In the early 1960s, home economists felt that a holistic approach again was needed for investigating and solving modern problems of human societies. Apple and Coleman (2003) agree that human ecology is recognized as one of the historical transformations of home economics.

The intent of this article is to examine how Bubolz and Sontag’s (1988) approach to integration in home economics and human ecology can serve as a tool for mitigating the fallout from excessive overspecialization, absent the anchor of a home economics core. As a caveat, Brown (1993, Chapter 8) provides a critique of employing the human ecological perspective in home economics. She titles her chapter *Home Economics as Human Ecology*. She identifies six shortcomings of the human ecological perspective (p. 342-360), and then suggests that Ellen Swallow Richards’ understanding of what constitutes human ecology was very narrow, “devoted to management of the environment in the home” (p. 363), not beyond the home. “Home oecology was an environmental science of the home in the sense that the family was to create its own environment using knowledge from the empirical sciences” (p. 363). As well, Brown characterizes Richards as a controlling woman who was obsessed with empirical science, receptive of and deeply influenced by Social Darwinism, open to the notion of power as the ability to control and manipulate, and a believer of environmental determinism (there is no place for moral reflection in science) (pp. 364-367).

Brown (1993) intimates that present-day home economists should not trust the thinking of a woman so entrenched in the scientific ideology. She felt that 20th century home economists should not adopt the human ecological perspective in its, what was then, emergent, incomplete conceptual state. Brown believed that much more self-reflection amongst home economists was necessary before the profession could opt to perceive itself as human ecology. Despite this critique, many higher education units world-wide still use the name human ecology, obviously finding some benefit from this moniker and perspective. Furthermore, nearly twenty years have passed since Brown’s critique of human ecology, during which time the construct has evolved and become more sophisticated and intellectually robust. For example, the first issue of *Human Ecology Review* (the official academic organ of the Society for Human Ecology) was published in 1993, the same year as Brown’s critique. Borden (2008) affirms that this journal remains a
mainstay of human ecology-related scholarship and academic, intellectual achievements.

Bubolz and Sontag (1988) developed their position before Brown’s (1993) critique of human ecology’s relevance to home economics, titling it integration in home economics and human ecology (Brown uses the phrase home economics as human ecology, a very different perspective). Their intent was to stimulate discourse about how to achieve a higher level of integration in home economics so as to mitigate the fragmentation and overspecialization that Brown claims characterizes the profession (see also McGregor, 2009a). In the same year, Touliatos and Compton (1988) propose that human ecology is a perspective for home economics (again a subtle but significantly different tact than in home economics and as human ecology). They tender the idea that human ecology can be a unifying framework for the specializations within the field. In 1993, Bubolz and Sontag frame human ecology as a conceptual approach for home economics. They were addressing their concern that “over the years, various components of home economics developed into specialized fields and professions with distinct conceptual frameworks” (p. 422).

Brown (1993), who held similar concerns, did not cite any of these contemporary works in her critique. This omission is unfortunate because these approaches to human ecology address many of her assertions that human ecology is inappropriate for home economics, or at least premature in its adoption. To be fair, while Brown took issue with home economics calling itself human ecology, the other initiatives considered human ecology as a perspective for, a conceptual framework for, or an approach to integrate, home economics practice.

Bubolz and Sontag’s Approach to Integration in Home Economics and Human Ecology

Nearly 25 years ago, Bubolz and Sontag (1988) convincingly argue that we can use the human ecology perspective to view the whole of home economics, and the subprofessions (specializations) within the whole, as diverse yet unified. Human ecology enables them to argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between the subfields of home economics and the home economics system. Vaines (1983) and Kieren, Vaines and Badir (1984) also conceptualize home economics as a holistic system comprising three sub-systems: (a) philosophy, mission, goals and principles; (b) knowledge, content and theory; and, (c) competencies and practice (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1 - Home Economics as a holistic system (adapted from Kieren et al., 1984)](image)
Bubolz and Sontag (1988) propose that, from a human ecology perspective, balance within the home economics system entails integration among six system levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, practice, programs, organizations, and theory. For this article, a seventh level has been added, that of philosophy (see Figure 2). They believe that within each kind of integration, there are degrees of integration, likely requiring different forms of integration. As well, they clearly articulate that there must be specialization; “a division of labour is essential” (p.5). What is significant, in their opinion, is that this integration of specializations within a home economics core is bound through coordinated interaction and reciprocal relationships (a central tenet of the human ecology perspective). This way, the whole and the parts are interconnected holistically as a complex system of interdependent parts; that is, the specializations are connected with the home economics philosophical core and vice versa, along all system levels.

Figure 2 - Modified version of Bubolz and Sontag’s 1988 approach to integration in home economics and human ecology

Bubolz and Sontag (1988) explain that their intent was not to develop a blueprint for integration but to stimulate discourse about integration as a concept. They envision this discourse leading to a higher level of integration among the subdisciplines (specializations) and the core of the profession. Their proposal is based on their analysis and synthesis of assumptions, concepts, competencies, values, philosophical perspectives and a review of historical traditions of the fields of home economics and human ecology. In addition to proposing multiple levels of integration, they present three models designed to foster professional dialogue about integration in home economics: (a) a critical path flow chart of a metasystem of human ecology, (b) a
systems-flow model of human ecosystems, and (c) a nested-cup model for integration in human ecology. They also offer beginning lists for each of: (a) five core concepts, (b) six core competencies and (c) 14 or more core values, summarized as a concern for human betterment. They foresaw this intellectual package as the basis for future discourse, decision and professional action.

**Spider Plant Metaphor for Integrated, Holistic Home Economics System**
To that inspired end, this article respects Bubolz and Sontag’s (1988) expectation that progress needs to continue toward ensuring integration in home economics along all dimensions (see Figure 2). McGregor (2009a,b) observes that the profession is still fragmented, that there is still too much specialization and too little integration or cross-fertilization. McGregor and MacCleave (2007) report a very low level of global agreement on home economics professional competency domains (less than 25%). They express concern for the impact of this lack of consensus about the nature of core professional practice, and the ability of the home economics system to fulfil its greatest potential. Recently, Wahlen, Posti-Ahokas and Collins (2009) provide empirical proof that home economists’ notions of what constitutes home economics vary according to geographic/regional location and age (generational cohort), further contributing to possible fragmentation, unless properly managed.

In light of this diversity, and in order to facilitate a global conversation about how best to ensure integration in the home economics system, this article employs a metaphor of the spider plant. With a twist of irony and whimsy, Touliatos and Compton (1988, p.18) suggest that when visually representing human ecology, people should choose an image that symbolizes dynamic plant-like relationships with interrelated parts that function as a whole. A spider plant fits that requirement. Figure 3 portrays home economics as a spider plant, with the graphic representation admittedly in draft form.

Figure 3 Spider plant metaphor of Bubolz and Sontag’s 1988 model of integration in home economics and human ecology (Graphic art work by Greg Doucett, 1993)
The mother plant is sitting on a table, along with six other plants, the aligned disciplines; it is interdisciplinary, after all. The container holding the mother plant contains dirt and fertilizer and sits in a tray. The mother plant has several offsprings representing the subprofessions or content-specific areas of specializations (called plantlets). Some of these have broken off entirely, representing entirely new disciplines that have evolved from or along with home economics. By way of conceptual validation, the recently revised standards for family and consumer sciences curricula in United States incorporate all of these content areas (National Association of State Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences [NASAFCS], 2008).

While exceptionally hardy spider plants will survive in less than perfect conditions, in perfect conditions, they are stunning (see Figure 4). The same can be said for home economics, if we can just find a way to find balance and integration in the holistic home economics system. Achieving this balance is deeply challenging due to hyperspecialization without the benefit of a unifying philosophical core. To apply the metaphor, under good conditions, the spider plant will bear a prolific number of offsprings. Home economics is no exception. As the profession evolved, many subfields also evolved, allegedly to meet the diverse needs of individuals and families. Although all may not agree on the specific label to attach to each of these subfields, in general, they include: consumer economics and resource management; family studies and human services; housing and facility management; clothing, textiles, apparel and fashion; and foods and nutrition. These subfields (specializations) are necessary because those practising in the field require specialized knowledge to serve the diverse needs of individuals and families. Specialized, in-depth knowledge of the component parts of any system is required in order to understand the functioning of the parts in relation to the whole (Bubolz & Sontag, 1988). Every subfield and specialization does make advances and contributions to knowledge (Borden, 2008).

Realistically, although no one practitioner can acquire adequate knowledge about each subfield, she can adhere to a common philosophy, value system and mission as she practices in her special area(s) (McGregor, 2006b). But, this approach tends not to be the case in home economics. As anyone who owns a spider plant knows, the offsprings can be left on the plant, or they can be replanted for regeneration as separate plants. In the language of home economics, this equates to generalization or specialization, respectively. The replanting of these offsprings (specializations severing ties with the profession of home economics) has resulted in a splintering off of specializations, carrying them further and further away from the mission of home economics; much like starting a new plant and giving it to someone else who takes it to his home. In the case of home economics, so many offsprings have left home that the profession is feeling drained and fragmented.

To regenerate the profession, we need something that can integrate diversity and unity, specialized and generalizations, offsprings and mother plant. Part of this something is the integrative human ecology perspective (Bubolz & Sontag, 1988). Turkki (2005) agrees, calling for integrative wholes if we are to strengthen the profession. The following section teases out a richer application of the metaphor to represent our striving for integration in the holistic home economics system.
The interdisciplinary nature of human ecology prescribes that home economists draw on the cumulative knowledge base of contributing root disciplines (the other plants on the table) in order to better meet the diverse needs of families and individuals. These disciplines have traditionally included the natural sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, the arts and humanities, the administrative sciences and, more recently, other professional fields. These root disciplines do not necessarily have familial needs in mind when they conduct their research nor when they theorize. Consequently, home economics practitioners are challenged to extrapolate the information generated from these root disciplines, synthesize it and convert it so it is applicable to the delivery of services to enable families and individuals to solve practical, perennial problems (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2008).

Home economics practitioners also draw on a knowledge base that they themselves are establishing (see McGregor, 2010). This knowledge deals exclusively with the solution of family and individual practical, perennial problems so as to enhance individual and family well-being (McGregor, Pendergast, Seniuk, Eghan, & Engberg, 2008). This home economics knowledge core is represented by the tray in which the pot is sitting. Combined with the knowledge from the root disciplines, a strong theoretical foundation is generated from which to practice (McGregor, 2008), represented by the sturdy table.

The pot that is holding the spider plant is the most important element in this discussion. It represents the philosophy, mission and values of the home economics profession (the agreed-to value-ends, see McGregor & Gentzler, 2009). The current mission of home economics is to enhance the well-being of families and individuals. McGregor (2010) tenders an extension of this idea to include the human condition. Bubolz and Sontag (1988) propose 14 universal values to guide the practice of home economics. This pot (mission, core values and guiding philosophy) literally supports the entire plant; without this core foundation, the spider plant (the profession) cannot long endure without progressively becoming frail and stagnant. Eventually, the core profession will subside, becoming unsustainable and ineffective, the sub-professions will continue on their own, and profession (the mother plant) eventually will perish. McGregor (2006a) applied a root metaphor to address this pressing concern.

The soil and the fertilizer in the pot can be thought of as the common concepts, competencies and skills needed by practitioners, regardless of their specialization. This soil nourishes the spider plant (core profession and sub-professions) and provides the nutrients necessary for maintenance and growth of the profession. To illustrate, the common nutrients found in this soil (common competencies) include: information processing, decision making and problem solving, critical thinking, value reasoning, resource assessment and transformation, communication, advocacy, policy analysis, and change management (McGregor et al., 2008). McGregor and MacCleave (2007) offer a more comprehensive listing of professional competencies.

Inherent in this soil is the fertilizer, which is taken to represent the system of three actions from which home economists can deliver their practice: technical, interpretative and
emancipatory actions, respectively, coping, adapting/participating, and taking control and affecting change (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2007; McGregor et al., 2008). Further, from a human ecology perspective, all subprofessions need common core concepts, the overarching ones being an appreciation of the meaning of family and individuals, the general systems concept, and the ecosystem concept (different levels of environments, coordinated interaction, and reciprocal relationships) (Bubolz & Sontag, 1988) (see also McGregor & MacCleave, 2007).

**Higher Education Programs and Professional Organizations**

The main body of the spider plant can be viewed as professional preparation and lifelong enrichment. The latter refers to home economics associations and organizations (international, regional, national, provincial/state, and local). They provide members with an organizational structure, access to a community of practice, and they advocate the requisite of such things as codes of ethics, registration of the professional title and/or practice, accreditation, and political involvement.

The former (professional preparation) refers to the higher education component of home economics - pre-professional socialization and subsequent professional development. It pertains to the collection of schools and universities that offer undergraduate and graduate programs of study in home economics and related programs (also called family and consumer sciences, human ecology, human sciences, and consumer sciences). These programs strive to expose prospective professionals to the skills of integrating the home economics knowledge base with the supporting interdisciplinary knowledge base (the other pots on the table) so as to deliver consciously justified practice. These higher education programs are also charged with instilling graduates not only with specialized knowledge but also with knowledge of the core values, guiding philosophy and mission of home economics (Cornelissen, 2006). Failure to do this in the past has lead to the splintering off of the subfields, due to a lack of reasons to stay attached to the core profession.

Therefore, one of the most intriguing and controversial features of the spider plant is the offsprings (subprofessions of, and specializations within, home economics). As Figure 3 illustrates, the spider plant (home economics) has indeed generated many diverse and necessary offsprings. The emergence of the diverse specialities is represented by the long stems attached to the mother plant (baby spiders or plantlets). Each of these subprofessions has different dimensions (and career paths), which are represented by the cluster of leaves at the end of each stem. Practitioners in any subprofession can opt for careers within government, private enterprise, education, volunteer and non-profit organizations, international development, and family and institutional services (Sproles & Sproles, 2000) (see Figure 5).
Of major consequence is that the emergence of these diverse specialities frequently has occurred without the benefit of exposure to a core philosophy and mission. For indeed, some subprofessions (offsprings) have sprung further from the core profession than have others, represented by varying stem lengths. The length of the particular stems in Figure 3 was arbitrary, except for child studies, tourism and hospitality management, gerontology, and women’s studies. In some North American programs, and elsewhere in the world, these have become autonomous units. This detachment is indicated by a break in the stem. In many cases, these subprofessions still cross list each other's courses. In other universities, they remain part of home economics or related programs. Some sub-disciplines have their origins in and get inspiration and theory from many disciplines, including home economics. They are included in this metaphor because they have rich connections to home economics, and are still aligned with home economics in some university programs or countries.

**Intrapersonal and interpersonal levels**

Perceiving the profession from a human ecology perspective enables us to say that the offsprings of home economics are quite able to be diverse yet part of a unified whole. And, if those subprofessions, which have broken away from the central profession, should wish to embrace or re-embrace the home economics core, this in turn regenerates the soil (our practice). The adoption of a core home economics philosophy makes the entire plant (profession) stronger. More importantly, it provides philosophical nourishment for the subprofessions that might choose to rekindle relationships with the core profession.

To make the metaphor complete, picture a revitalized spider plant. Perceiving the profession of home economics as a group of subprofessions embracing a unified perspective allows us to be a regenerated, revived professional group (a future-proofing necessity, according to Pendergast, 2006, 2009). This renewal especially means that the subprofessions (specialists), as well as other professionals, will be less inclined to ignore, dismiss, malign or misunderstand the essence of home economics. But, this professional recognition and enhanced self-concept will not occur without personal introspection and reflection, collective hard work, and collective agreement on the future direction of the profession (McGregor et al., 2008; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). As a profession (and a group of subprofessions), we have to collectively (a) take the time to become familiar with the necessary concepts and competencies common to home economics; and, (b) ensure that the mission, philosophy and values are agreed-upon and adhered to by one and all home economics professionals.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Interpreting something from a common reference point is often a useful preliminary step towards future reflection and action. Consequently, the familiar spider plant was used as a metaphor to facilitate a basic understanding of home economics as a holistic, professional system. Mirroring the efforts of Bubolz and Sontag (1988), this article respected the need for balance and wholeness within the home economics system, a state that entails integration among seven system levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, practice, programs, organizations, theory and philosophy. The compelling and welcoming argument offered by their approach is that home economics practitioners, with political will, can adhere to a common mission, philosophy, and value system while drawing on common competencies, skills and concepts as they use a system of actions approach to practice in their special area(s). This way, the subprofessions (specializations) of home economics are able to remain diverse yet part of a unified whole.

We can achieve integration in home economics. The next steps include local, contextual
discussions of the pragmatic dynamics and nuances of home economics reconnecting with its sub-disciplines, ideally scaffolded with concurrent global conversations about the desirability and nature of a common philosophical core. “The third millennium calls for such bold thought and action” (Vincenti, 1997, p.320).

References


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