Philosophical Well-being

Kappa Omicron Nu Human Sciences Working Paper Series

Sue L. T. McGregor PhD Mount Saint Vincent University

2004

Preamble

In a recent graduate course, I had an epiphany and conceived of the idea of ***philosophical well-being***. I searched the web for articles on this idea and found very few so I decided to write this one. I did find a note in a chat room related to this topic. Kathy Short (2001) had collected the sayings that people attach to their e-mail tags (signatures) and sent them to her friends as a Christmas present with the note "I would like to offer my appreciation to all of you who contribute to our *philosophical well-being* by attaching 'tag-lines' to your messages." If I could present this paper in a tag line... I would. So bear with me as I try to develop this idea for your consideration.

Dare I say that the modern profession of family and consumer sciences (FCS) is "unwell?" It is philosophically deficient and impoverished and something must be done about this situation. The basic premise of this paper is that, although a collection of scholars is chipping away at codifying the philosophy of the profession, it is the responsibility of individual family and consumer scientists to clarify, and continually refine, their own philosophical well-being. "For any set of philosophical ideas to make a difference in human well-being, it must '*aspire* to inspire'" (Pietersen, 2001, p.8). Nonetheless, no matter what the scholars come up with for philosophical underpinnings of the profession, there will not be a good fit between their rhetoric and individual practice (it will not *inspire*) unless practitioners prepare themselves to receive and reflect upon it. Once one starts to clarify and refine one's philosophy of life, concurrently with what it means to be professional, it can become a regular part of one's daily reflection—leading to philosophical well-being. Then, when this happens, professionals can more consciously strive to facilitate individuals and families as they build their own philosophical well-being, leading to a more critical and reflective citizenry. Knowing what this concept means brings us all closer to this professional ideal.

Developing the Concept of Philosophical Well-being

Let us start with the familiar notion of well-being before we bring in the notion of philosophical. It is a given that family well-being is the focus of our profession, although Smith (2003) and others suggest that we have not reached consensus on what it means. Well-being has many definitions because it does not have a very precise meaning. Tiberius (2003) agrees, noting that some believe there is no common notion of well-being. Others contend that a universal notion of well-being does exist, despite cultural variations. But, it is generally defined as *something in a good state*, with the something being humans or social systems, but what is meant by being *good* is still unclear (Veenhoven, 2003).

The conventional approach in the family and consumer sciences profession is to conceive well-being as comprised of seven dimensions: emotional, social, economic, physical, spiritual, environmental, and political (personal autonomy) (McGregor, forthcoming; McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998). Veenhoven (2003) approaches well-being from a different perspective, adding

four “kinds of things that are well” with overtones of the approach used in FCS. The first thing that can be well is one’s living conditions, standard of living, and social equality. Second is one’s ability to cope with the problems of life (inner life chances, capabilities, fitness). Third is personal enjoyment of one’s daily life (happiness and satisfaction—similar to our concept of quality of life). The fourth area has a moral focus and relates to the meaning of life such that the *good life* is good for something more than itself (e.g., some higher value than self interest—ecological preservation or social equity and justice).

But what of *philosophical well-being*—the healthy state of our intellect, with intellect referring to our ability to think, reason, acquire, critique, and apply knowledge and paradigms? The Wikipedia Encyclopedia (2004) defines philosophy as the act of constantly improving one’s understanding by way of thinking and discussion. The Philosophy Dictionary (2002) defines philosophy as, literally, a love of wisdom. Philosophy is careful thought about the fundamental nature of the world, the grounds for human knowledge, and the evaluation of human conduct. These sources did not, however, marry the concept of philosophy with well-being. Plato did define *philosophical well-being* as the preservation of one’s soul, claiming that it is better to be at odds with the whole world than to be at odds with, and contradicted by, oneself (Folks, 2002). In order to be in a state of harmony with oneself, one has to question one’s life on a regular basis, asking “*what’s it all about*, *Alfie*?” A professional needs to ask herself, “Why am I doing what I do and what is the impact of those actions? What are the underpinnings of my practice? Am I philosophically sick or well?”

The home economics scholar who comes closest to this dimension of well-being is Henry (1995). She conceptualized “political well-being” and understood this to be *empowerment and autonomy* based on moral and ethical freedom. Political well-being, or an internal sense of power and autonomy, is construed as being: (a) in control of one's life; (b) able, and having the freedom, to make decisions; (c) aware of, and able to anticipate, the consequences of one's actions on one's self and others; and, (d) of having the skills to act on one's decisions. When this dimension of well-being is achieved, individuals no longer unquestioningly accept those practices in society that are frequently taken for granted, those practices which reinforce inequality and injustice.

Although Henry’s (1995) notion of political well-being brings us closer to *having a philosophy that is well* (isn’t that a nice turn of phrase?), it does not go far enough. Being politically well means one has a sense of personal and political freedom and control leading to the likelihood one will engage in reasoned political and social actions that take into account the impact on others and that strive for the greater good. At this point in time, her concept does not go far enough to capture the essence of having a healthy philosophy. Henry, and McGregor and Goldsmith (1998), also introduce the notion of spiritual well-being. The spiritual aspect of well-being encompasses the joy and sense of completeness associated with the holistic connectedness of the world, an appreciation of nature as a dynamic ecosystem, the pure joy of living, and peace and faith gained from insights and moments of growth and enlightenment. This concept definitely moves us closer to a better understanding of that nebulous concept of philosophical well-being.

Gulick (1998) takes us even further with his premise that people *using philosophy* can contribute to their own well-being. First, one needs to reflectively explore why one does what one does and what consequences these actions have. Second, one has to engage in critical reflection as well. Third, one has to pay attention to, and foster, experiences that make life worth

living (existentially meaningful experiences). Fourth, there is a moral and ethical dimension with a twist. The existential experiences one is involved with (that make life worth living) should involve benefits to the whole human community. Finally, one has to be radically open to things in the world so, when these expose themselves, one can determine their depth, weight, and complexity and appreciate the mystery of life. Although he does not use the term *philosophical well-being,* his ideas are useful in developing the concept. To bring Gulick's ideas to a discussion of philosophical well-being, one would reflect on why one does what one does (and the subsequent consequences), would foster community-focused meaningful experiences that make life worth living for everyone, and would embrace the mystery of life.

It seems that philosophical well-being is achieved by continually examining the world one lives in and one's relationship with that world. The objective is to always take morally responsible decisions that benefit all of humanity and nature. This entails questioning the prevailing world view and pondering the impact of practice using the theories and models stemming from that world view. Being *philosophically well* means one would always consider how one's practice might need to change to reflect the insights gained from constantly improving one's wisdom, defined as deep, thorough, and mature understandings of life. One becomes a philosopher, a person who seeks reason and truth, by thinking, meditating, deliberating about, and celebrating, life.

Philosophical Isolation: Breaking out of Our Intellectual Cage

Philosophers have an extraordinary rich repertoire of theoretical and paradigm perspectives at their disposal. Therefore, they are especially adept at seeing the implications and assumptions behind the thinking that guides their practice and the world within which they live and work (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2004). This is a standard of practice that family and consumer scientists could achieve if they cultivated their philosophical well-being. Are you endowed with a rich repertoire of perspectives beyond the prevailing world paradigm of capitalism, neoliberalism (free markets), corporate led globalization, consumerism, and Social Darwinism? Are you a philosopher or a just a practitioner locked in her intellectual cage built 30 years ago when you left the university? The world has changed. Have you? I know from personal experience that I was *philosophically isolated* for years after I graduated with an undergraduate degree in 1975. It took the actions of a few brave mentors to challenge me to break out of my *intellectual cage* so that I could free myself for intellectual and philosophical growth.

Question arise from this discussion: How is your practice affected if you are not sure of your life and professional philosophy (are you are philosophically ill)? How can you engage in critical practice if you have not given serious attention to clarifying your philosophical well-being? What happens to your practice if you cannot reconcile who you are with the new philosophy being espoused for the profession as a whole? How does this lack of congruency, if it exists, affect any actions you take to facilitate individuals and families as they strive for well-being, including philosophical well-being? Are you, for example, able to facilitate consumers' critical reflection so they can critique the world in which they live and make morally responsible decisions minimizing structural violence in the marketplace? Are you likely to help individuals and families see the merit of fostering community-focused, meaningful experiences that make life worth living for everyone instead of staying so self-centered? Are you open to helping people appreciate the benefits of embracing the mystery of life instead of craving certainty and resisting change (McGregor, 2003a,b,c)? If the three philosophical cornerstones of your

professional identity are not in sync—personal philosophy, professional philosophy, and the philosophy of the profession as a whole—you are less able to practice in such a way that truly improves family well-being and society at large (Vaines, 1990).

You do not have to strive to define and refine your philosophical well-being on your own. Schuster (1999) clarifies that philosophy means friendship (*philo)* and wisdom (*sophia*). What better way to develop one's understanding of their accumulation of wisdom capital and professional capital (aspects of their philosophical well-being) than in concert with friends, new and old? He notes that person-to-person exchanges in examining life have disappeared and been replaced with academic papers and scholarly work (of which this is one example . . . sorry). Our challenge is to keep a meaningful inner and interpersonal conversation going. He points out that "healing through meeting" serves to break the isolation capsule we tend to place around the self and can lead to transformation. Dialogue and encounters that shape philosophical well-being are not bound to a particular routine or to a specific place. The effort to become philosophically well is worthwhile because cultivating philosophical well-being can recreate, or change, lives in a positive manner. A *well-lived professional life* is contingent upon philosophical well-being. And, while technological and scientific knowledge and aesthetics can make life worth living, the art of philosophizing, engaging in skeptical intellectual curiosity, has to come first (Russell, 1987).

References

Folks, J. J. (2002). Remembrance and healing in Poe's narrative of childhood grief. *Queen: A Journal of Rhetoric and Power, Special Issue*. Accessed January 22, 2004 at http://www.ars-rhetorica.net/Queen/VolumeSpecialIssue/Articles/Folks.pdf

Gulick, W. B. (1998, August). *Philosophy as a contributor of well-being*. Paper presented at the 20th World Congress of Philosophy Paideia. Boston, MA. On line proceedings Accessed January 22, 2004 at http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducGuli.htm

Henry, M. I. (1995). Is well-being the focus of home economics? A report on an Australian study. *Proceedings of the Home Economics Institute of Australia Conference* (pp.79-84). Fremantle, Australia.

McGregor, S. L. T. (forthcoming). Beyond family well-being: The human condition concept. *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM*.

McGregor, S. L. T. (2003a). *Consumerism as a source of structural violence*. Online at https://publications.kon.org/hswp/archive/consumerism.html

McGregor, S. L. T. (2003b). Critical science approach: A primer. *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM, 15* (1). https://kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/mcgregorcda.html

McGregor, S. L. T. (2003c). Postmodernism, consumerism and a culture of peace. *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM, 13*(2). Online at http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/13-2/mcgregor.html

McGregor, S. L. T., & Goldsmith, E. B. (1998). Expanding our understanding of quality of life, standard of living, and well-being. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences, 90* (2), 2-6, 22.

Philosophy Dictionary. (2002). *Philosophy*. Accessed January 22, 2004 at http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/p5.htm#phiy

Pietersen, H. (2001). Philosophy and well-being. *The Examined Life On-Line Philosophy Journal, 2*(5). Accessed January 22, 2004 at

http://examinedlifejournal.com/articles/template.php?shorttitle=wellbeing&authorid=17
Russell, B. (1987). Moral standards and social well-being. In A. Seckel (Ed.), *On ethics, sex and marriage* (pp. 129-149). NY: Prometheus Books.
Schuster, S. S. (1999). Philosophy practices as alternative ways to well-being. *Radical Psychology, 1*(1) on line at http://www.yorku.ca/danaa/vol1-1/Schuster.htm
Smith, F. (2003) Pie in the sky? Reaching consensus on a political/moral focus. *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM 15*(1), http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/smith.pdf
Tiberius, V. (2003). *Cultural differences and philosophical accounts of well-being*. Accessed January 22, 2004 at http://www.tc.umn.edu/~tiberius/my_papers/wb%20and%20culture%203.pdf 28 pages
Vaines, E. (1990). Philosophical orientations and home economics: An introduction. *Canadian Home Economics Journal, 40*(1), 6-11.
Veenhoven, R. (2003). Subjective measures of well-being. In M. McGillivray (Ed*.) Measuring human well-being* at http://www.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven/Pub2000s/SWB-WIDERchapterRV2.rtf
Wikipedia Encyclopedia. (2004). *Philosophical counseling*. Accessed January 22, 2004 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_counseling