

Existential Family Well-being

Sue L.T. McGregor
McGregor Consulting Group

Abstract

Can a family experience angst about its life, wondering about its existence, purpose and meaning? Can a family embark on a philosophical quest to understand its existence? Can a family experience existential well-being? Or are angst, quests and inner searching limited to individual humans? Using the conceptual integration research process, this paper intermixed previously segregated abstract ideas about existentialism and existential well-being as applied to individual humans and then extrapolated them to the family (a group of humans). The intent was to begin to conceptualize existential family well-being. In the process, many as yet unanswered questions were raised. Some extrapolations were more fruitful than others. But emergent avenues for future conceptualizations and research supported the conclusion that there is merit in pursuing this line of intellectual inquiry in home economics.

KEYWORDS: EXISTENTIALISM, EXISTENTIAL WELL-BEING, EXISTENTIAL FAMILY WELL-BEING, EXISTENTIAL FAMILY SELF, HOME ECONOMICS

Family has many definitions: structural and functional (McGregor, 2009). But fundamentally, a family is a group of two or more people sharing *a life* together. This definition implies that families (a group of people) *have a life* with degrees of being purposeful, worthwhile and meaningful (“Have a life,” 2020). Sometimes, life can bring angst, which is an acute but unspecific, generalized feeling of anxiety, dread and fear. Normally, people cannot link this feeling with any one thing, but it is a pervasive sense of unease in and discontent with their life (Solomon, 2005). Can a family experience *angst* about its life, wondering about its existence, purpose and meaning? Or is it just individual family members who experience existential angst and wrestle with the meaning of their life—a process influenced by their embeddedness in the family unit?

If the philosophical concept of existentialism refers to understanding the human experience (Burnham & Papandreopoulos, ca. 2012), can it be used to understand the family experience, a group of humans? As a caveat, when discussing existentialism, *experience* means to either (a) directly perceive or be aware of something or (b) actually participate in or live through something. The better people can describe their life experiences, the better they can be true to their *self* with less existential angst (Bakewell, 2016; Nilsson, 2018). Do families have a *self*, which is conventionally defined as a person’s essential being (nature or personality) that distinguishes them from everyone else (Anderson, 2014)?

Reference to families and existentialism is scarce in the literature (found in social work, nursing, family therapy, gerontology) and usually concerns families with chronically ill, aging or terminal members. To illustrate the nascent literature using the term, Albinsson and Strang (2003) referred to supporting “families in existential crisis” (p. 225), but they interviewed individual family members. Veach, Nicholas, and Barton (2002) referred to “the family’s existential crisis” (p. 78), but they drew on comments from a terminal cancer patient and his wife. Lantz (2004) referred to “the goals of family existence” (p. 169) but in reference to working with respective family members in therapy. In short, the family *is* a group of humans, but it is not *a* human. So, can a family *experience* existential well-being?

McGregor, S.L.T. (2020). Existential Family Well-being. *International Journal of Home Economics*, 13(2), 42-51.

The home economics profession¹ assesses family life through dimensions of well-being (Kihm & McGregor, 2020; McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998). Should home economists develop the concept of *existential family well-being*, so they can help families figure out what is really going on (or not) in their lives (daily existence) and what it means for them? McGregor (2020) contextualized *family well-being* relative to individual well-being, reasoning that it comprises eight dimensions: “financial, relational, group dynamics and cohesion, family autonomy, collective health, community connection, spiritual health, and ecological well-being” (p. 11). What might emerge if our attention turned to *existential family well-being* with its focus on the meaning and purpose of existence in family life? Can this become an additional dimension of a family being well for home economics?

Should the profession address such issues as what meaning does a family’s existence have in the scheme of things? How significant is it to their well-being that families feel connected to their existential self and the world? What is the true essence (existential self) of a family experiencing existential well-being? Can a family embark on a philosophical quest to understand its existence? These and other unanswerable questions guided this inquiry. Can there be such a thing as *existential family well-being*, when existentialism ostensibly pertains to individuals?

Individual Existential Well-being

As a strand of philosophy, existentialism deals with “questions of life, its origin and its conditions, and the basic condition of being human” (Ablinsson & Strang, 2003, p. 226). This paper links existentialism with well-being. Existential is Latin *existere*, ‘to cause to stand, exist, to be’ (Harper, 2020). The word well-being has its roots in Old English *wel*, ‘abundance, in a satisfactory manner’ and *beon*, ‘to be, exists’ (Harper, 2020); in effect, a good or satisfactory condition or state of existence (being). When applied to an individual, *existential well-being* “refers to a person’s present state of subjective well-being across existential domains, such as meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life, and feelings of comfort regarding death and suffering” (Ownsworth & Nash, 2015, p.1).

People’s ability to confront or be comfortable with such issues speaks to their relative existential well-being (Friedman, 2016; Ownsworth & Nash, 2015). By ignoring the larger questions of life and being, people can experience existential angst (anxiety) and existential loneliness (i.e., disconnected from self, others and nature along life’s journey). Conversely, searching for answers to these questions, while respecting they are frustratingly unanswerable, can lead to a healthier life (Friedman, 2016; Nilsson, 2018). The search for meaning in life “is not pathological [unhealthy], but rather the surest sign of being truly human” (Nilsson, 2018, p. 68).

Four Domains of Existentialism

Yalom (1980) proposed four life conditions (i.e., domains of existentialism) that challenge humanity: (a) death, (b) existential isolation and its relationship imperative, (c) freedom with its attendant choices and responsibilities and (d) meaninglessness that drives people to find and often create meaning in their life. Regarding freedom, Bakewell (2016) explained that the freedom to *be* whatever one chooses can cause dizzying anxiety, because it comes with such responsibility. Heidegger (1927/2010) suggested that awareness of Yalom’s (1980) four challenges means people are *mindful of being*. Ignoring or suppressing these challenges in the course of daily life leads to *forgetfulness of being*. Both states can cause existential angst.

Existential Well-being and Spirituality

Existential well-being (of the *self*) is ambiguously linked with spiritual well-being (of the *spirit*) (Visser, Garssen, & Vingerhoets, 2017). Spiritual well-being is the “ability to experience and integrate meaning and purpose in life” (Srivastava, 2018, para. 2). It is about a person’s “inner life and its relationship with the wider world” (Srivastava, 2018, para. 3). Spiritual well-being “captures a layer of well-being, a sense of insight and ethereal, intangible evolution, hope and faith not readily imparted by either social or psychological well-being” (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 5). People with a lower sense of spiritual well-being have a poorer sense of meaning and purpose in life (Pearce, Coan, Herndon, Koenig, & Abernethy, 2012).

¹ The ideas herein pertain to home economics as well as human ecology, family and consumer sciences, home sciences, consumer sciences, family studies, home ecology, and household sciences.

Despite associating spirituality with meaning and purpose in life, it is a different construct than existential well-being, which has the added dimensions of angst, isolation, and freedom rife with responsibilities (Yalom, 1980). That said, eminent well-being scholars consider spiritual well-being as comprising both existential and religious well-being (Ellison, 1983; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982), but they distinguish among the three. Religious well-being is associated with a person's "relationship with a higher power within a particular religious system" (Ghaffari, 2015, p. 129). Existential well-being pertains to a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Spiritual well-being is not synonymous with religion (Deagon & Pendergast, 2012). And existential well-being is not dependent on religious well-being, although the latter can shape the former (Ellison, 1983; Ghaffari, 2015).

Owensworth and Nash (2015) posited that both spirituality and existential well-being are core dimensions of the health aspect of quality of life. They proffered that both are related to but different from other quality of life domains like physical, economic, emotional and social well-being. In effect, existential well-being is a unique aspect of human life, because it focuses on the *existential self* (Johnson, 1967). That is, the *self exists*, the person is aware of it and can appreciate that their self is constant through space and time. People's quest to "make sense of life can be depicted as the *existential self* trying to deal with [the uncertainties of life]" (van den Bos, 2009, p. 212).

Existentialism Applies to Individuals

By convention, existential well-being applies to *individuals*, because existentialism is about people "pondering the meaning of their lives, their existence as humans, especially in times of strife, tragedy, crisis, or major life transition" (McGregor, 2015, p. 1). It is accepted that the focus of existentialism is on human *existence* (Bakewell, 2016; Burnham & Papandreopoulos, ca. 2012). It deals with the "overarching human concepts of personal freedom, suffering and death, and the pursuit of meaning and purpose" (Owensworth & Nash, 2015, p. 1).

But humans live in families. Musings about how a family unit might ponder its existence and the meaning of its life inspired this paper. Brown (1978) and McGregor (2015) asserted that home economists must be familiar with existentialism per se, so they can help individuals and families confront life. Morris, Hadley, and Koehly (2013, p. 482) used the term "existential well-being in families" but did not define it. To address this home economics imperative and fill this conceptual gap, *existential family well-being* is the focus of this paper.

Method

A thorough literature review generated nothing that specifically dealt with *existential family well-being*. Both a June and October 2020 Google and Google Scholar search using this exact term yielded zero results. But conversations with home economics colleagues about this intellectual venture provided encouragement (cited with permission). "I think that you are onto something" (Kerry Renwick, personal communication, June 11, 2020). "I think existentialism and family well being would be ... a fantastic, timely contribution to the literature" (Peggy O'Neil, personal communication, June 16, 2020). Conversely, knowing that existentialism pertains to individual humans, another supportive colleague, whose serendipitous COVID-19 reading was Bakewell's (2016) book on existentialism, queried "whether a purely existential examination of *family well-being* is possible" (Mary Gale Smith, personal communication, June 6, 2020).

All said, I persevered. A protracted Google Scholar Boolean search was conducted using combinations of terms (*exist*, *existential(ism)*, *existential well-being*, *family*, *self*) and related concepts as they emerged. Alignment between individual and family-oriented existentialism was explored. Extrapolated insights were sought. Ideally, a literature review of this nature presents "a reasoned and organized argument that leads somewhere, not just an unfocused hodgepodge of literature that falls under the same keyword" (Rosnow & Rosnow, 2009, p. 33). At the risk of being perceived as a hodgepodge—a confused mixture of ideas—a collection of ideas is presented herein trusting that something will come of it in the future. This agglomeration of aligned ideas serves as a conceptual starting point. There are many questions but few answers, which is acceptable in the eyes of existentialists.

In effect, what is offered for consideration herein represents the first stage of developing a new construct through a research process called conceptual integration, which entails intermixing previously segregated abstract ideas (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). The intent is to develop arguments

for any imagined or proposed associations among the aligned ideas while leaving the completion and testing of the construct to future researchers (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). After explaining how a different aspect of existentialism is understood relative to an individual human, questions were raised about the merit and appropriateness of bringing *that* idea to the family as a human group. A guiding research question was ‘how useful are these ideas for eventually conceptualizing existential family well-being?’

Ruminations about Conceptualizing Existential Family Well-being

The rest of the paper presents ruminations about existential family well-being anchored in five contributory aspects: (a) *intersubjectivity* and how one’s existence is determined in relation to others, (b) existential self and *family body* (structure), (c) *family thinking* and dynamics, (d) *family personalities* and (e) *existential meaning* (found within a group) (see Table 1). This conceptual approach is followed with preliminary thoughts on how to measure existential family well-being if it can ever be effectively conceptualized and theorized.

Table 1: Contributory Aspects of Conceptualizing Existential Family Well-being

Existential Intersubjectivity	People develop their <i>existence</i> (how they experience <i>being</i>) in interactions with others; the <i>existential self</i> can only exist within a community of people. Families and existential self are thus mutually linked.
Family Body and Existential Family Self	Once people acknowledge their material, physical body, they de facto acknowledge their nonmaterial <i>existential self</i> . Perhaps <i>family structure (body)</i> could mirror the material body leading to acknowledgement of an <i>existential family self</i> .
Family Thinking and Existential Family Self	Gaining insight into one’s <i>existential self</i> requires thinking. <i>Family dynamics</i> affect how that group of people thinks perhaps creating an <i>existential family self</i> that can think.
Family Personality	To ensure existential well-being, individual personalities have to be protected from external collective pressures. The <i>family’s personality</i> (its unique <i>self</i>) is continuous over time, but it must be protected so it can adapt and adjust to life.
Existential Meaning	People feel a primal need to seek <i>meaning</i> and find <i>purpose</i> in life; this <i>existential meaning</i> making is not solitary. It happens in a group and is a process that provides self-identity and insights into the <i>existential self</i> and perhaps insights into the <i>existential family self</i> .

Existential Intersubjectivity

Drawing on French philosopher and existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), Roark (1982) explained that personal existence is intersubjective, meaning people develop their existence in interaction with others. “It is impossible to know oneself without the help of other people” (Roark, 1982, Chapter 13, Section 1). The way a person experiences *being* (existing) is informed by their relations to others. Without these relationships, people cannot be a *self* (see also Haldane & McCluskey, 1982). And, without relationships, people “can never be fully human” (Nilsson, 2018, p. 71). Perhaps the notion of intersubjectivity (between people) could be applied to how a family comes to know itself existentially.

Existential family therapists tend to agree. They view existential family therapy as a dynamic approach grounded in human existence. It is concerned with a person’s being, existence and their current life experiences instead of what happened in the past or what he or she wants in the future. That said, the intent of existential family therapy “is neither to deny the importance of past experiences (which ‘live on’ in our present existence), nor to see as unimportant, hopes, fears and expectations about the future” (Haldane & McCluskey, 1982, p. 124). But when working with families, existential family therapists assume that “personal existence is constituted by the relation of persons’, and further, that self ‘can exist only as a community of personal agents’” (Haldane & McCluskey, 1982, pp. 118-119; see also Roark, 1982).

Maybe helping each individual family member enhance their personal existential well-being is the best way to ensure existential *family* well-being. Existential family therapists take this approach when “helping family members change” (Lantz, 2004, p. 166). They assume that families are more likely to change when respective family members can find meaning, reason and/or a purpose for engaging in the proposed change. Rather than identifying a problem and disrupting things that perpetuate it so that people can cope with life’s limitations, existential family therapists help family

members use strategies to creatively respond to the essence of life, so there is more meaning to their existence in *that* life (Lantz, 2004).

Existential Self and Body

Still drawing on Gabriel Marcel, Roark (1982) explained that, per intersubjectivity, people confront others through their physical body. To explain, once people acknowledge their own physical body, they have in effect also acknowledged a nonmaterial existence—the self. Conversely, to live on a higher level of self, people have to sustain and respect their physical body within which their existential self exists (Nilsson, 2018; Roark, 1982). Can a family acknowledge its physical body (does it even have one?), so it can acknowledge its existential self—*an existential family self*? There is a collection of human bodies in a family, but is there a family body? Perhaps.

Families do have a *structure*, in that they are made up of a collection of people varying in sex (also gender), marital status, sibling mix, and power. To illustrate, a single parent family has one parent raising the child(ren). A nuclear family is a heterosexual married couple with children. A cohabitating, unmarried couple (varying sexuality) live together with or without children. A blended family is a combination of adults and children from previous arrangements. Whatever the structure, it “reflects relationships at the juncture of biological relatedness, marital and partnership status, and living arrangements [i.e., sibling and adult mix]” (Pasley & Petren, 2016, p. 1). Would a family’s structure (i.e., the body of the family), once self-acknowledged, affect its existential family self?

Family Thinking and Existential Family Self

In addition to a body and a self, dealing with existentialism requires people to *think* (Roark, 1982). That said, he advised that a person’s thinking ability refers to more than mere thought. The other concern is that people exist as a personality, which also requires thinking through self-dialogue. Nilsson (2018) concurred, claiming that self-discovery dialogue, to gain insights into one’s personality so one can grapple with existentialism, entails thinking. This raises the question ‘Can a family think?’ Perhaps. The way a group thinks is called group dynamics (Forsyth, 2009). Each family has its own group dynamics called *family dynamics* (Rivera, Guarnaccia, & Mulvaney-Day, 2008), intimating that a family *can* think.

The family unit does not have a brain, but its respective members do, and they can think together like a team. Having agreed to a family mission (now), vision (future) or both for the family’s life, people would put the family before their own personal agendas. They would be willing to change their personal views on life to benefit the family, making it stronger as a whole. Family members would try not to resist change at every turn instead being open to new ideas and decisions that might benefit the family’s life. In the family thinking process, family members would hold each other accountable and support and respect each other for the good of family life. Effective family thinking would require delegation, motivation and recognition (extrapolated from Gregory, 2012).

Generally speaking, the way a group thinks depends on its properties: (a) expected role behaviour, (b) accepted and expected standards of behaviour (norms), (c) status (standing) with others, (d) size and (e) willingness of each member to be a part of the group (cohesiveness). A group can think together as a *work group* or a *work team*. A work group requires no joint effort. People share information, so other members can perform within their respective roles to anticipated standards. In a work team, a collective performance unfolding through a coordinated effort generates a positive synergy, wherein the end result is much greater than the individual efforts that created it. People are accountable to each other and the group (Forsyth, 2009).

All family units have a set of patterns for relating to and interacting with each other called *family dynamics*. Dynamics are forces that stimulate activity (physical and mental), development or change within the family system or some combination of the three. Family dynamics (i.e., the way a family thinks) are influenced by several factors similar to a nonfamily group: family type (structure) and size; the particular mix of people living within the group; the power dynamics (level and type of influence on each other and the group); and the family’s culture, ethnicity and values (Becvar & Becvar, 2002; Rivera et al., 2008).

These factors mirror the aforementioned aspects of a family structure, which also included cohesiveness (Pasley & Petren, 2016). Family dynamics affect family cohesion and vice versa with the latter concerning emotional bonding among family members (Rivera et al., 2008). These dynamics

affect how the *family thinks* as a group of humans. Given that family dynamic theory holds that a family *can* think as a team, a logical conclusion would be that a family can think its way through existential crises and angst. There might just be such a thing as an *existential family self* (beyond existential individual self).

Family Personality

Roark (1982) further explained that individual personalities must be protected, so they can find their authentic self and meaning and purpose in life (i.e., enhanced existential well-being). For this reason, existentialists reject collectivism or anything that denies or degrades an individual's personality. Personality is French *personnalité*, 'sense of a distinctive essential character of a self-conscious being' (Harper, 2020). A personality is a set of behavioural (temperamental), emotional and cognitive (mental) patterns that is shaped by biological and environmental factors (Corr & Mathews, 2009). This complex set of attributes makes each person's character (personality) unique—one of a kind.

Roark (1982) asserted that personalities (i.e., each unique person) can become submerged beneath collectives: global production and consumption systems, urbanization and asphalt cultures, and the military-industrial complex that ensures war and hegemonic domination. This external pressure on a personality can lead to existential angst (Lantz, 2004; Newberry, 2012). How would the principle of rejecting collectivism apply to conceptualizing existential family well-being? Would individual family members need protection from the family collective, so their personality is not denied? Conversely, would the family's personality need protection from individual members, so it cannot be denied? Can a family (as a group) even have a personality that is impacted by existential angst? Perhaps.

In the only article found on family personality, Brody (1974) defined it as "what the family is like at the aging phase of [its] life" (p. 23). Although she did not use the word existential, she was concerned with how families deal with aging-related crises such as disintegrating family relationships, separation, loss and death. She proposed that "the basic family personality is continuous over time" (Brody, 1974, p. 25), but families must adjust and adapt to crises, so the family can mature as a whole within its already established personality.

The family is a group. Perhaps insights can be gained about *group personalities* from other disciplines, for instance biology. In his work with fish and animals, Herbert-Read (2017) referred to "the personalities of groups" (p. R1015), which he said are predicted by individual group members' personalities. Another study about gregarious (sociable) insect species explained that group personality "arises from the synergy between [individuals' personalities] and social amplifications [and interactions]" (Planas-Sitjá, Deneubourg, Gibon, & Sempo, 2015, p. 1).

Extrapolating from biological insights on group personalities integrated with Brody's (1974) notion of family personality, it can be suggested that a family's personality emerges from the synergy arising from interactions among family members (i.e., family dynamics and thinking) and can be predicted by each member's respective, unique personality. The latter matters from an existential stance. In the human realm, existential well-being has emerged as a powerful protective factor. A person with a high level of existential well-being (reflecting their personality) is far less likely (by > 70%) to have a massive depressive episode (Maselko, Gilman, & Buka, 2009; see also Morris et al., 2013). Fischer et al. (2016) found that existential well-being served as a protective role in reducing suicidal ideation of abused intimate partners. Would this principle apply to a family's personality—ensure individual existential well-being to protect the existential well-being of the family as a group?

Existential Meaning

When dealing with existential aspects of their lives, people search for meaning—Latin *meninge*, 'that which is intended to be expressed' (Harper, 2020). *Existential meaning* refers to people feeling a "primal need to seek meaning in all circumstances [and] find meaning and purpose in life" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 66). But existential meaning making is not a solitary affair. Within a group setting (perhaps a family), meaning is actively constructed by group members. Some suggest that when an individual loses their group identity, their sense of meaning is also compromised, and they experience existential angst (Nilsson, 2018). This suggests that the group gives them meaning. Does a family give individual members meaning in their life? Do people lose meaning in their life, if they lose the connection with their family group? Or reversed, does the family lose meaning in its life (experience angst) if a family member severs connections or passes away? (see Brody, 1974). More questions.

Measuring Existential Family Well-being

If home economists forged ahead with the existential family well-being construct, how might they measure it? How would they determine the current state of a family's existential well-being? The most common approach for measuring an *individual's* existential well-being is Paloutzian and Ellison's (1982) spiritual well-being instrument, which comprises two parts: religious well-being (RWB) and existential well-being (EWB). The EWB aspect includes 10 items rated using a 6-point Likert scale (1—strongly agree and 6—strongly disagree). The instrument queries people about the extent to which their “life is pleasurable, gratifying, healthy, enjoyable, good, conflicting in nature, meaningful, and anxiety provoking with reference to the future [and if they have] a life direction and some life goals” (Shek, 2012, p. 337). The higher the score (ranging 20-120) the higher their level of existential well-being at that time.

Perhaps home economists could arrange for individual family members to complete this assessment tool and then amalgamate their responses into some aggregate of existential family well-being. This would be a technical linear approach however, because it would fail to create or capture the synergy emergent within the whole (Forsyth, 2009, Planas-Sitjá et al., 2015). The whole would be equal to the sum of the parts (e.g., total cost of ingredient list to make a cake) instead of a reflection of the synergistic whole being greater than the sum of all the parts (e.g., the cake made from different ingredients in the list). Aggregating individual scores would generate an inelegant picture of existential family well-being, because each person completed the instrument alone instead of the family as a whole. That said, perhaps the family could go through the instrument together and collectively answer the 10 questions? The final score (between 20-120) would be that family's state of existential well-being at that time.

Maybe empirically measuring existential family well-being is shortsighted. Existential social workers, for example, eschew the empirical methodology in favour of interpretive. They draw on phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches. These research strategies, respectively, get at the essence of lived experiences and strive to understand (interpret) the meaning of people's lived experiences (Newberry, 2012). Existential social workers try to break down each person's shame, guilt, loneliness and hopelessness (i.e., existential angst) by situating their experience in the “ever-expanding web of human concerns” (Newberry, 2012, p. 2) that others also experience. Said another way, each person's existential angst is unique, but they are not unique in that they are experiencing existential angst. Seeking the essence of and then interpreting their life narratives is one way to discern their existential well-being. Phenomenological focus groups (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009) comprising the entire family might be an appropriate strategy for measuring existential family well-being.

When measuring existential well-being, Shek (2005) creatively used Paloutzian and Ellison's (1982) EWB instrument in conjunction with the construct of *family functioning* defined as “the quality of family life at the systemic level” (Shek, 2005, p. 518). By defining family as comprising subsystems, Alderfer et al. (2008) further explained that family functioning is affected by the social and structural properties of the whole family *system* (i.e., family environment). How well a family functions at the systemic level is dependent on interactions and relationships within and among subsystems as they are shaped by conflict, cohesion, communication, adaptability, roles and how well they are defined, and affect (regulation of emotions and behaviour) (Alderfer et al., 2008). These factors resonate with the previous description of family dynamics (Forsyth, 2009).

Shek (2005, 2012) reported that perceptions of how well a family is functioning depended on a family member's existential well-being. In his work with Chinese adolescents, the higher an adolescent's sense of a purpose in life, the better she or he said their family functioned. The passage of time also played a role; the higher the adolescent's existential well-being in time frame one, the more positive their rating for family functioning in time frame two. Shek's (2005) study examined “perceived family functioning” (p. 518), intimating that future studies should focus on actual family functioning and its affect on existential well-being.

Perhaps other lessons can be learned from existential social workers who proposed that people need some kind of existential framework within which to find meaning and purpose in their life (Nilsson, 2018). A framework is an underlying structure that provides support, in this case support in defining one's existence. An *existential framework* would comprise a combination of (a) people's actual experiences and their awareness of and relations with others (i.e., personal and social life that can

cause angst) and (b) the situated context within which their experiences are interpreted. This context would include (a) culture (norms, values, beliefs); (b) language and linguistics that so deeply shape how people interpret a situation and assign meaning; (c) a web of relational concerns; and (d) a complex of structural concerns (i.e., social institutions, ideologies and systemic social problems impacting daily life) (Mullaly, 1997; Newberry, 2012; Nilsson, 2018). If home economists embraced this idea, they could help families develop and take action to find purpose and meaning in their life while drawing on their self-constructed existential framework.

Conclusion

This paper represents an inaugural attempt to conceptualize *existential family well-being* within home economics. Using the conceptual integration research process, the results reflect the intermixing of previously segregated abstract ideas about existentialism and existential well-being as applied to individual humans that were then extrapolated to the family as a group (see Table 1). Preliminary thoughts were shared on how home economists might measure existential family well-being. In the process, many questions were raised with most unanswered. Some extrapolations were more fruitful than others. But avenues for future conceptualizations and research did emerge, which is conceptually encouraging.

Families face angst in today's complex world some of which is existentially based. More personally, existentialism assumes that people are free and responsible agents as they strive to understand their existence and find meaning and purpose in their life. Respectively, what does this external and internal pressure mean for a family's existence? What brings meaning and purpose to the life of a family? How does a family deal with existential angst (i.e., isolation, anxiety, fear, dread, uncertainty, unease, discontent)? The existential family well-being construct is presented in its infancy. The objective was to entice home economists to explore the philosophical, theoretical and pragmatic merit of using it to help families struggling with the purpose of their existence and what it all means.

Author biography

Sue L. T. McGregor (PhD, IPHE, Professor Emerita MSVU) is an active independent researcher and scholar in the areas of home economics philosophy, leadership and education; consumer studies; transdisciplinarity; and research paradigms and methodologies. She recently published *Understanding and Evaluating Research* (SAGE, 2018). Her scholarship is at her professional website: <http://www.consultmcgregor.com>

References

- Albinsson, L., & Strang, P. (2003). Existential concerns of families of late-state dementia patients: Questions of freedom, choices, isolation, death, and meaning. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 6(2), 225-235. doi:0.1089/109662103764978470
- Alderfer, M. A., Fiese, B. H., Gold, J. I., Cutuli, J. J., Holmbeck, G. N., Goldbeck, L., ... & Patterson, J. (2008). Evidence-based assessment in pediatric psychology: Family measures. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 33(9), 1046-1061. doi:10.1093/jpepsy/jsm083
- Anderson, S. (Ed.). (2014). *Collins English dictionary* (12th ed.). Glasgow, Scotland: Harper Collins.
- Bakewell, S. (2016). *At the existentialist café*. New York, NY: Other Press.
- Becvar, D. R., & Becvar, R. J. (2003). *Family therapy: A systemic integration* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Bradbury-Jones, C., Sambrook, S., & Irvine, F. (2009). The phenomenological focus group: An oxymoron? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(3), 663-671. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04922.x>
- Brody, E. M. (1974). Aging and family personality: A developmental view. *Family Process*, 13(1), 23-37. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1974.00023.x
- Brown, M. M. (1978). *A conceptual scheme and decision-rules for the selection and organization of home economics curriculum content*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- Burnham, D., & Papandreopoulos, G. [ca. 2012]. Existentialism. In J. Fieser & B. Dowden (Eds.), *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. Martin, TN: University of Tennessee at Martin. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/existent>
- Corr, P. J., & Matthews, G. (Eds.). (2009). *The Cambridge handbook of personality psychology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Deagon, J., & Pendergast, D. (2012). A framework for investigating spiritual health and wellbeing in home economics. *International Journal of Home Economics*, 5(1), 3-17.

- Ellison, C. W. (1983). Spiritual well-being: Conceptualization and theology. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 11(4), 330-338. doi.org/10.1177/009164718301100406
- Fischer, N. L., Lamis, D. A., Petersen-Coleman, M. N., Moore, C. S., Zhang, H., & Kaslow, N. J. (2016). Mediating effects of existential and religious well-being among abused, suicidal African American women. *Journal of Family Violence*, 31(3), 315-323. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-015-9771-1
- Friedman, M. (2016, May 12). Moby and existentialism: It's all in the family [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/brick-brick/201605/moby-and-existentialism-its-all-in-the-family
- Forsyth, D. R. (2009). *Group dynamics* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Ghaffari, M. (2015). Religious well-being, existential well-being, positive religious coping and family protective factors (family adaptation): A causal model. *IPA International Journal of Psychology*, 9(2), 125-147.
- Gilson, L. L., & Goldberg, C. B. (2015). Editor's comment: So, what is a conceptual paper? *Groups & Organization Management*, 40(2), 127-130. Doi:10.1177/1059601115576425
- Gregory, G. (2012). Why thinking like a team is so critical [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://www.thinkhdi.com/library/supportwork/2012/team-thinking.aspx
- Haldane, D., & McCluskey, U. (1982). Existentialism and family therapy: A neglected perspective. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 4(2), 117-132. doi.org/10.1046/j.1982.00581.x
- Have a life. (2020). In *Collins online English dictionary*. Retrieved from https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/have-a-life
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and time* [J. Stambaugh, Trans.]. Albany, NY: SUNY Press (original published in 1927).
- Herbert-Read, J. E. (2017). Social behaviour: The personalities of groups. *Current Biology*, 27(18), R1015-R1017. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2017.07.042
- Johnson, E. L. (1967). Existentialism, self theory and the existential self. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 46(1), 53-58. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-4918.1967.tb03132.x
- Kihm, H., & McGregor, S. L. T. (2020). Wellness and well-being: Decade review of AAFCS' journals (2009-2019). *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 112(3), 11-22.
- Lantz, J. (2004). World view concepts in existential family therapy. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 26(2), 165-178. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:COFT.0000031241.68493.de
- Maselko, J., Gilman, S. E., & Buka, S. (2009). Religious service attendance and spiritual well-being are differentially associated with risk of major depression. *Psychological Medicine*, 39(6), 1009-1017. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291708004418
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2009). Becoming family literate: A new construct and platform for practice. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 101(1), 60-66.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2015). Existentialism and home economics. *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM*, 19(1). http://kon.org/archives/forum/19-1/mcgregor6.html
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2020). *Conceptualizing family well-being* [McGregor Monograph Series 202001]. Seabright, NS: McGregor Consulting Group. Www.consultmcmgregor.com
- McGregor, S. L. T., & Goldsmith, E. B. (1998). Expanding our understanding of quality of life, standard of living, and well-being. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 90(2), 2-6, 22.
- Moberg, D. O., & Brusek, P. M. (1978). Spiritual well-being: A neglected subject in quality of life research. *Social Indicator Research*, 5(1-4), 303-323. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00352936
- Morris, B. A., Hadley, D. W., & Koehly, L. M. (2013). The role of religious and existential well-being in families with Lynch Syndrome. *Journal of Genetic Counselling*, 22(4), 482-491. doi:10.1007/s10897-013-9571-9
- Mullaly, B. (1997). *Structural social work* (2nd ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Newberry, A. M. (2012). Social work and hermeneutic phenomenology. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, 20, 2-18. https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v0i0.53219
- Nilsson, H. (2018). Existential social work and the quest for existential meaning and well-being: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 37(1), 64-76. doi:10.1080/15426432.2017.1382428
- Owensworth, T., & Nash, K. (2015). Existential well-being and meaning making in the context of primary brain tumor: Conceptualization and implications for intervention. *Frontiers in Oncology*, 5(96). doi:10.3389/fonc.2015.00096
- Paloutzian, R. F., & Ellison, C. W. (1982). Loneliness, spiritual wellbeing and the quality of life. In L. A. Peplau & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Loneliness* (pp. 224-237). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Pasley, K., & Petren, R. E. (2016). Family structure. In C. I. Shehan (Ed.), *Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of family studies* (1st ed.) (Vol. 3) (pp. 779-782). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons. doi:10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs016
- Pearce, M. J., Coan, A. D., Herndon, J. E., Koenig, H. G., & Abernethy, A. P. (2012). Unmet spiritual care needs impact emotional and spiritual well-being in advanced cancer patients. *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 20(10), 2269-2276. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00520-011-1335-1

- Planas-Sitjá, I., Deneubourg, J.-L., Gibon, C., & Sempo, G. (2015). Group personality during collective decision making: A multi-level approach. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 282(1802). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2014.2515>
- Rivera, F. I., Guarnaccia, P. J., & Mulvaney-Day, N. (2008). Family cohesion and its relationships to psychological distress among Latino groups. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioural Science*, 30(3), 357-378. doi:10.1177/0739986308318713
- Roark, D. M. (1982). *Introduction to philosophy* [e-book]. Emporia, KS: Dalmor. Retrieved from <https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppe/corino/roark-textbook/default.htm>
- Rocco, T. S., & Plakhotnik, M. S. (2009). Literature reviews, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical frameworks: Terms, functions, and distinctions. *Human Resource Development Review*, 8(1), 120-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484309332617>
- Rosnow, R., & Rosnow, M. (2009). *Writing papers in psychology* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Shek, D. T. L. (2005). A longitudinal study of perceived family functioning and adolescent adjustment in Chinese adolescents with economic disadvantage. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26(4), 518-543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X04272618>
- Shek, D. T. L. (2012). Life meaning and purpose in life among Chinese adolescents. In P. T. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning* (2nd ed.) (pp. 335-355). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Solomon, R. C. (2005). *Existentialism* (2nd ed). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Srivastava, R. (2018, March 14). Spiritual well-being at work: How to do it right [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.hrzone.com/lead/culture/spiritual-wellbeing-at-work-how-to-do-it-right>
- van den Bos, K. (2009). Making sense of life: The existential self trying to deal with personal uncertainty. *Psychological Inquiry*, 20(4), 197-217. doi:10.1080/10478400903333411
- Varner, J. E. S. (2009). *Effects of spiritual well-being, religious coping, and hardiness on parenting Behaviors in low socioeconomic status families* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi).
- Veach, T. A., Nicholas, D. R., & Barton, M. A. (2002). *Cancer and the family life cycle*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Visser, A., Garssen, B., & Vingerhoets, A. J. (2017). Existential well-being: Spirituality or well-being? *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 205(3), 234-241. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000617>
- Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.