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The home: Multidisciplinary reflections (book review)



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This edited collection titled *The Home* was spearheaded by the Home Renaissance Foundation (HRF), which markets itself as “taking the lead globally in telling the story of the home [because] academic research [has] often failed to see the home as an essential lens through which to understand human flourishing” (p. xii). At the book’s website, it is lauded as the “first major work to take the home as a center of analysis for global social problems.”

It was very challenging to remain objective when reading this book because it seemed to dismiss (i.e., regard as unworthy of consideration) the home economics discipline and profession, which has existed for over 100 years, while the HRF has existed for 12 years. The name of our discipline is *home*; yet, somehow, the editor of a book about *The Home* excluded our theoretical, philosophical and pragmatic contributions. In Chapter 1, Argandoña, the Editor, acknowledged that “the home has been a subject for study for philosophy and social sciences” (p. 10), but he did not reference home economics. This glaring omission initially tainted my judgement, although I tried to be as objective as I could, given the circumstances. I resisted pushing back as much as I could but admit to feeling compelled to educate readers to our contributions when it seemed appropriate.

Subtitled *Multidisciplinary Reflections*, this edited collection about *The Home* contained seven chapters from ten authors housed in seven disciplines (philosophy, economics, banking and finance, sociology, medicine/health, law, and human geography). It is 182 pages in length, contains bios for the ten contributors and has an index as well as a list of tables. There are two Forewords, one from the Editor, the Chairman of HRF, and one from Carlos Cavallé, Chairman of the Social Trends Institute. Dr Cavallé perpetuated the ostensible dismissal of home economics by claiming that “the home as a direct subject of study has not received its due of late.” Based on this erroneous assumption, he endorsed this collection because it “focuses the spotlight on the home itself... treat[ing] the home with the respect and seriousness it merits” (p. xvi). Feeling professionally slighted, my knee-jerk reaction was that home economics has always valued the home to the point of launching an entirely new discipline in the late 1800s and early 1900s called *home* economics.

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In the Introduction to the book, the editor says the book *uniquely* “studies the home as a multidimensional and multidisciplinary concept” (p. 1), using three examples: the relationship between work and family, the issue of housing, and the condition of poverty. Relative to our discipline and profession, which has historically been multi- and interdisciplinary, these are not unique given that they have been the mainstay of home economics for over a century. We call them practical, perennial problems and use a system of actions approach to address them. We have developed an entire philosophy to undergird our interdisciplinary, integrative, holistic approach to practice, which focuses on the home for the good of humanity (East, 1979).

After explaining that nearly everyone belongs to a family, Argandoña called this unit of analysis the home. I view this as serious conceptual slippage because family and home are two different things, both a challenge to define. I think *home* is the place where people live alone or in *families* and find meaning in their lives. He defined home as “both the people and the place, their joint action and their objectives, performing both an internal social function, often without being aware of it, and a function toward the rest of society” (p. 3). If he had availed himself of our body of knowledge and that of the UN International Year of the Family (spearheaded by home economists), he would have appreciated that we have already defined families’ functions and structures and differentiated family from home, acknowledging they are intricately interconnected (see McGregor, 2009).

To be fair, a detailed conceptualization of home is provided in Chapter 1 and it is worth reading. It aligns with the nascent conceptualizations I found in the literature when researching the concepts of home and household (McGregor, 2016). The author, Argandoña, identifies seven features of home that must be considered when studying the home (including multidimensionality, multidisciplinary, an openness to many perspectives, a descriptive and normative discourse, and an integrative and global approach). These sound so very familiar; especially if one is aware of Marjorie Brown’s philosophical musings about home economics (see McGregor, 2014, for an overview). Argandoña discussed the role of people and family in the home and the role of home in society, ending the chapter with five dimensions of home: temporal, spatial, economic, ethical and other (e.g., legal, cultural, political). This chapter is a useful conceptualization of home, affirming and augmenting the few existing in the literature.

There are other valuable contributions in this volume from which we can learn. Much like I did in a recent paper about home and household (McGregor, 2016), Chapter 2 presents a critical reflection of the concept of home based on two philosophers, Heidegger and Marías, and a poet, Rosales. Those home economists interested in the phenomenological approach to home will appreciate this chapter. In a similar philosophical vein, Chapter 3 presents the home as the place where “the individual’s identity is formed from the relation with the family in the home” (p. 4). “Home is not primarily a physical, material place but the origin of human relationships [best understood by focusing on] the primacy of the other over the self” (pp. 58-59). Liking philosophy and how it informs home economics, I enjoyed this chapter especially because it resonated with Japan’s home economics philosophy (Sekiguchi, 2004).

The author of Chapter 5 poses that both a society’s marriage culture and “parental stability [play a role] in the evolution not just of behaviours but also of ideas about marriage and the home” (p. 5). “The home is a place for acquiring knowledge, abilities and values.” The author maintained that how people are socialized to the concept of marriage affects the intergenerational stability of the home. Again, this premise has been a mainstay of home economics for over a century, prompting some, including Ellen Swallow Richards, to advocate for a new discipline to study the home and family.

Faulting the limits of “the economic theory of the family” (p. 5), the author of Chapter 6 proposes grounding the study of family in not only economic and exchange concepts but also gifts, reciprocity and generosity. The author anchored this discussion in “the ‘genome’ concept of the family” (p. 130). By genome, he meant “the latent structure that gives rise to that specific social structure known as the family relationship” (p. 129). Again, home economics has long valued the production and non-production functions of the family as an institution and how it plays out in gendered dynamics. We lobby for this perspective at the UN level, often through the work of the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE), which has consultative standing at several key UN committees, most from the latter’s inception. Gendered notions of the family and home have anchored home economics practice for many years.

In Chapter 8, the author reasoned that because the home is formed by people, it makes sense to understand people through their home. To that end, he developed six, what he called, geographical dimensions of home: physical, economic, political, human, social and cultural. I became aware of this type of approach to conceptualizing home when researching the piece that I wrote on home and household (McGregor, 2016). It is not a novel contribution, but its inclusion does augment existing, like-minded scholarship that strives to understand the home within its context.

Chapter 4 broached the issue of the lifetime impact of poverty and deprivation, claiming that its unique contribution was the author's concern for the "subtler and more important" (p. 5) impacts on a person such as a sense of loss of control as well as loss of life's meaning and purpose, which can be perpetuated in the next generation, creating a vicious cycle. In a less-than-compelling contribution, Chapter 7 focused on pensions for the elderly and how they should be understood not just from an individual perspective but that of the home collective. This was not compelling in the sense that it has been a concern for home economics for decades.

I surprised myself by concluding that I can recommend to home economists this edited collection about *The Home*. Once I got over, what felt was, the dismissal of home economics, I realized that these ten authors have insights and conceptualizations that either (a) affirm our long-standing practice (which is a good thing) or (b) augment some aspects of it (also a good thing). I encourage all home economists reading the book and this review to reach out to the Home Renaissance Foundation, the Editor and the authors, introduce yourself and see if something interesting can emerge from melding our century-old understanding of home and family with their scholarship that also privileged home and family.

Reviewer

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