

## Decolonising Home Economists' Minds: A Commentary

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### Abstract

*In this commentary, I recount my personal reaction to the International Journal of Home Economics' recent call for papers for a special issue about "decolonising of the home economics profession". After acknowledging my knee-jerk reaction that this accusation was unfair and unjust, I explored why I felt this way, which involved understanding colonisation, imperialism, and decolonisation as constructs. I explored what others in the profession were saying about this phenomenon and concluded that IHJE's editors were right—we must come to our truth that the work we do can be colonial in nature whether we know it or not. We are thus obligated to approach our practice with a clear conscience and astute colonial awareness. This can lead to the decolonisation of (a) the home economics profession and discipline and (b) individual home economists' minds.*

**KEYWORDS:** HOME ECONOMICS, IMPERIALISM, COLONISATION, COLONIAL AWARENESS, POSTCOLONIALISM, DECOLONISATION

In the *International Journal of Home Economics'* recent call for papers for a special issue about "Decolonising of the Home Economics Profession" the guest editors intimated that the profession is complicit in colonisation (Renwick & Pendergast, 2021). I must admit that I was not comfortable with this idea ... *not comfortable at all*. My knee-jerk reaction was that it is not fair to tar the profession with this accusation. Colonisation, and its partner in crime, imperialism, is akin to immoral, even illegal, behaviour (respecting that other home economists may not see it this way). Witness the ongoing Canadian trauma of using ground-penetrating radar to unearth thousands of unmarked graves of First Nations children who died or were killed in residential schools all in the name of colonisation by imperialistic powers (Deer, 2021).

Surely, labelling our profession as complicit in colonisation *must* be unjust, especially a profession that prides itself on using moral judgements and practical reasoning in its work with, through, and on behalf of individuals and families—always asking ourselves what *should* be done not what has always been done or can be done (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Nickols & Kay, 2015; Smith, 2019). So, why were my hackles initially raised when I read this call for papers? What did I *think* we were being accused of?

I will try to explain the evolution of my thinking in this commentary. "Commentaries are short, narrowly focused articles of contemporary interest and [are] more editorial in nature and cover an aspect of an issue that is relevant to the journal's scope" (Biomedical Central [BMC], 2022, para. 1, 3). As scholarly contributions, commentaries share in-depth opinions of knowledgeable and experienced scholars who are interested in advancing a field by stimulating dialogue on a topic (Berterö, 2016). As a caveat, this personal commentary is an account of my experience with understanding the necessity of and possibilities for decolonising our practice. Each home

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economist must look inside themselves around this issue and decide what to do. If we all do this, the profession will be in a stronger position to understand unacknowledged philosophical positions that guide its work. We can thus come to our truth that the work we do can be colonial in nature with possibilities to decolonise it.

## Colonialism and Imperialism

*Colony* is from the Latin *colonia*, “settlement” (Harper, 2022). Harper (2022) described a colony thus: “a body of people who migrate from their native country to cultivate and inhabit a new place while remaining subject to the mother country” (para. 2). A colony is under the control of and occupied by settlers from another country who invaded a space where people already live (Anderson, 2014). *Colonisation* (verb) is the practice of acquiring control over another territory, occupying it with settlers, and economically exploiting the territory and its Indigenous people. For example, the Americas; the African continent, and Australia were colonised by Europeans (Kraidy, 2005).

More specifically, colonisation entails the acquisition, establishment, maintenance, and expansion of power by an occupying force that exploits people in another territory. The colonising nation (occupying power) subjugates the other nation (regarded as culturally, racially, or religiously inferior) usually to acquire natural resources (e.g., land, wood, oil, water, native species, precious metals). The result of colonisation is an uneven, exploitative power relationship and the domination and suppression of a once-free people (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021; Kraidy, 2005; Merryfield, 2002).

For clarification, colonialism is not the same as imperialism, which is a policy of extending one country’s political and economic power and influence into another without significant settlement. This happens through establishing a colony, the use of military force, or some other means. The intent is some combination of maintaining a military presence to their own advantage, ensuring a flow of resources, or exerting cultural influence. Imperialism does not have to involve colonialism (e.g., Rome did not colonise Britain; Britain did not colonise India) (Barth, 2015; Gunner, n.d.; Kraidy, 2005; Merryfield, 2002).

Imperialism can be exerted in one of three ways. As noted, the imperial nation can establish a colony. Second, it can establish a protectorate to indirectly rule inhabitants of nations that maintain their sovereignty (e.g., French Morocco, and the Chinese Protectorate). Third, countries can maintain cultural links with nations where their power is waning. These are called spheres of influence with examples including the Roman sphere of influence (e.g., I used Latin to define colony, which tells you the lingering influence of the Roman empire) and the modern American sphere of influence. For example, most nations privilege the English language, and many value American democracy (Barth, 2015; Gunner, n.d.).

## Postcolonialism and Decolonisation

In my heart of hearts, I am pretty sure that the home economics profession should not be branded as guilty of colonisation and imperialism. But, with some distance from my initial reaction, I think I can agree with Renwick and Pendergast’s (2021) other assertion that our minds may have to be decolonised, which is a very different thing all together. Home economists may unknowingly be complicit in perpetuating the colonialism legacy and narrative. Perhaps a better title for this special issue would be “Decolonising the Minds of home Economists”. Let me tease out this thought.

Said (1978, 1993) took issue with the fallout of both imperialism and colonialism and coined the concept *postcolonialism* to refer to the critical academic study of their cultural legacy. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, 1993), a Kenyan scholar, encourages African writers to use their own

language rather than their colonised language (e.g., English, French, Dutch). He called this *decolonising the mind*. In short, colonial assumptions and worldviews (usually unstated) continue to shape today's citizens, including both those who experienced the colonisation process and those influenced by this process (Said, 1993). Merryfield and Subedi (2006) called this "the baggage of colonialist assumptions" (p. 284).

Decolonising minds can happen when people living with this lingering baggage finally become conscious of the fact that colonisers have imposed their world view so deeply that ensuing generations cannot see that their present-day decisions and actions are shaped by the past. Their colonised identity is embedded and deeply entrenched in their mentality and collective psyche (Merryfield, 2009; Merryfield & Subedi, 2006). I feel confident when claiming that, for the last century, many home economists have been dragging around the baggage of colonialism and imperialism and not even known it; *that* we might be guilty of rather than being directly complicit in colonisation itself. Instead, home economists may unknowingly perpetuate the colonial narrative and its suppressive power.

### Decolonising Home Economics and Home Economists' Minds

If that is the case, then Renwick and Pendergast (2021) were right, and home economics must be decolonised, or else we cannot be accountable for our practice. Indeed, this may be one of those times when home economists are guilty of the "self-glorification of home economics as a profession, which is blind to the many challenges facing the field" (Christensen, 2019, p. 76). With this 360° turnabout from my original knee-jerk reaction, I turned to the home economics literature to see if we were already writing about this compelling issue.

How I missed it I am not sure, but the only explicit home economics paper I found was by Smith (2019) titled "Re-visiting Vaines: Toward a decolonising framework for home economics". Smith concluded that decolonising the profession will not be easy because, like the rest of the world, home economics is implicated and complicit by its uncritical (blind) participation in systems that privilege imperialistic nations who engage in colonisation. She actually said we should either practice in ways that respect this reality or "relinquish our roles as researchers ... and make way for [others who do]" (Smith, 2019, p. 20). Many home economists are privileged, and they do not even know it. Renwick and Pendergast (2021) challenged us to remove our blinders, to decolonise, despite this being "a difficult history for the profession to acknowledge" (p. 1) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Decolonise Minds

Renwick and Pendergast (2021) and Smith (2019) were not alone in their admonishment. Not only home economists but anyone benefiting from colonialism and imperialism has a moral obligation to push back against the enduring colonial narrative and deeply entrenched systemic power imbalance. They should not claim *historical amnesia* or *settler innocence* to absolve themselves of their accountability. Neither should they blindly adhere to *settler privilege* (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021; Sanchez, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In fact, home economists must do more than decolonise their minds. They must also take action to decolonise home economics (Renwick & Pendergast, 2021; Smith, 2019), which involves “deconstructing settler-imposed systems that continue to oppress Black, Brown, and Indigenous people” (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021, para. 9; see also Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Our professional rhetoric has sensitised us to this decolonisation imperative. “Throughout its history, the mission of home economics has been inclusive and universal” (Nickols & Kay, 2015, p. 159). For the last 45 years, our philosophical leaders have consistently directed us to engage in moral reasoning while addressing practical perennial problems using three systems of action. This approach ensures that we refrain from doing what we have always done in an expert role and instead critically examine each situation with those affected by our actions to ensure their needs are met whether these actions are technical (how to), interpretive (feelings), empowerment (liberative action), or some combination (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2014, 2022; Smith, 2019).

That said, given the world’s enduring penchant for uncritical, quick-fix, expert-driven approaches to practice, I remain unconvinced that every home economist wears a critical, consciousness-raising hat in their practice. Such is the nature of colonialism—it robs *everyone* of the ability to see clearly until they realise they can *consciously* choose to decolonise their mind and take appropriate, liberating action (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1993; Said, 1993). Smith (2019) suggested that these actions unfold over time rather than all at once with home economists “beginning with self-work; seeking methods to decolonise curriculum and pedagogy; and decolonizing research” (p. 19).

## Conclusion

Decolonisation will be deeply challenging because home economics practice unfolds in an “inherently colonial project” (Renwick & Pendergast, 2021, p. 1), “a shared colonial condition” (Martin et al., 2020, p. 312). It will be hard to dig out from this quicksand, from under this mire. Paradoxically, breaking out of the confining box of the colonial legacy requires outside-the-box thinking with the first step being home economists’ acceptance of being a victim, a beneficiary, and an unknowing perpetrator of colonisation and imperialism. Home economist must contend with both the colonial legacy and imperialism, which, in some formats (e.g., mass media), promotes a local social norm as a global norm thereby self-perpetuating itself and further entrenching itself into our collective psyche.

The International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE), through its official organ, the *International Journal of Home Economics*, is to be commended for challenging us to embark on this journey. This special issue is an attempt to raise our consciousness. Be forewarned, however. Decolonisation is unsettling because “decolonization is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 36). Home economists will have to engage in some very uncomfortable soul searching to transcend to a new place of practice—the elsewhere. Nonetheless, in good conscience, we cannot turn away from this call to action—whether it is to decolonise home economics, decolonise the minds of home economists, or both. Individuals, families, and communities can benefit from our efforts to help them optimise their wellbeing and quality of life. Meeting that obligation demands a clear conscience and astute colonial awareness.

## Biography

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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* with SAGE in 2018. Her scholarship is at her professional website: <http://www.consultmcgregor.com>

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