

## An Unsettling Perspective Within Home Economics

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### Abstract

*Home economics is a field that was initially established to support women effectively manage the home to ensure healthy living. Launched during a time of social change that included migration, increasing urbanisation and ongoing colonial practices home economics offered possibilities for managing the perceived social chaos using scientific and rational processes lauded at the beginning of the twentieth century. In all of the shifting debates and discussions about home economics, its name and philosophy since its inception there has been limited thought given to how the field may perpetuate colonial perspectives and exclude knowledges that predate White settlement.*

*This paper explores the concept of unsettling home economics within the Australian context. This is done through four moves. Firstly, a brief exploration of the name home economics through some beliefs and knowledges associated with the field and profession is offered. Secondly there is a discussion of four epistemological positions that provide varied world views and what human activity and knowledge is privileged over others. Thirdly the idea of home economics needing to be de-colonised is considered. Lastly the idea of epistemic lives where we come to know the world through our everyday actions becomes a way to begin to think about home economics as a field and profession that is inclusive and respectful.*

**KEYWORDS:** HOME ECONOMICS, DECOLONISATION, EPISTEMIC LIVES, PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, PRAXIS

The home economics profession focuses on strengthening homes as the basis of society. It is the space where “equality starts and everyone can develop their full potential” (emphasis added, IFHE, n.d.-a, para. 3). This focus is a moral stance and is a commitment that requires moral practice or praxis. Kemmis and Smith (2007) describe praxis as being not only being morally committed action but it is also orientated within and informed by the field’s traditions. Understanding home economics practices using Kemmis and Smith’s understanding provides an invitation to consider what actions define the profession. Thought needs to be given to not only what actions should the profession engage but also a conscious understanding of who benefits from those actions.

This leads to some consideration about the possibility that home economics needs to think about how it needs to decolonise its practice. What follows is a brief review of the history of the profession when home economics began at the beginning to the twentieth century to respond to hygiene and health as social issues of that time. While scholars in Canada and US are referenced examples from Australia as a country colonised in 1778 are used to contextualise the arguments. Drawing on different ways of knowing or epistemologies it is possible to understand how some ways of knowing can be privileged over others. Understanding the positionality of each epistemology is important in this paper. It possible to know something

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without understanding however understanding something we need in order to be able to think about our world. Discerning the field of home economics, our professional world is explored through the ongoing debates about the naming of the profession and how it has been framed within epistemologies associated with science, patriarchy and colonialism. A different possibility for knowing is offered through an Indigenous perspective that offers a relational world view.

The ways in which the world is understood is directly related to our social connection and interactions with others (Barker et al., 2018; Vaines, 2004). These engagements shape our epistemic lives and how we can know in particular ways (Johnson, 2019; Stichter, 2018). Through its history the field of home economics has been buffeted by constant need to change especially by external attitudes. This constant churn has meant that there has been very little thought about looking forward, given the perception of an unending need to respond. Instead reorientating such efforts towards rethinking the epistemic lives of home economics professionals offers possibilities for everyday practice that is respectful and inclusive.

### What is in a Name?

Epistemic logic utilises rational approaches to knowledge, belief and related ideas. This approach engages with understanding how knowledge is structured, its boundaries and properties, both inert and dynamic (Holliday, 2018). According to Wang and Seligman (2018) a standard epistemic logic holds implicit assumptions that the names of an agent, as an individual and groups of agents, are inflexible labels so that it is common knowledge for those being labelled.

The debates over naming the profession at the Lake Placid conferences are well documented (Gentzler, 2012; Kay, 2015; Stage, 1997; Vincenti, 1997). Pendergast and McGregor (2007) note that home economics and human ecology amongst other designations were proposed (Brown, 1985; Bubolz & Sontag, 1988; Vincenti, 1997). However, human ecology and its intention to include people and their social dimensions as a way to create healthy lives was vetoed by men within the biological sciences. Through the twentieth century the name home economics was utilised by the field but in a way that continued to create discomfort, and an experience that still continues. In 1979 Brown and Paolucci had been commissioned by the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) to develop a position paper entitled *Home Economics: A Definition*. Based on the work of Jorgen Habermas, Brown and Paolucci's paper argued for the profession to realign towards engaging with critical theory and inviting reflection on the apparent acceptance of social norms and reliance on technical practices.

Pendergast (2001) recognised the changes to the profession in response to what has been seen as important and legitimate work within studies of home economics. Changes are wrought in reaction to external pressures to manage the field (Gentzler, 2012) and its presence as a viable subject in schools is frequently contested. In her presentation to AHEA in celebration of the Association's 75th anniversary Brown (1993) reflected on how the profession was individualistic rather than communal in its orientation, its excessive reference to science and technology. Amongst other criticisms was a concern that there was a narrow understanding of the field (Vincenti, 1997).

In spite of the professional continually re-imaging itself its pragmatic responses to ongoing shifting the profession has been muted and positioned out-of-sight allowing other professions to claim the field's focus. Brown (1993) further developing her presentation to AHEA argued that the profession was too prone to social shifts and movements on the basis of expediency rather than philosophical intent and agency from within the field. Home Economists working in education contexts represent the largest number of the profession and yet Williams (1994) notes that home economics curriculum has always had a fragile presence in school because of limitations promulgated by those outside of the profession. The editing out of home economics as a subject in school curricula and closing of departments in higher education is, according to

Renwick (2017), a continuing practice. Vincenti (1997) has argued that the use of different names for the profession has “exacerbated identity confusion rather than alleviating it” (p. 305).

Why do names matter? Names are labels that are associated with an individual’s or a group’s identity. They also provide ways for connections from one person or group to another. These relational knowings are dependent on others, on affiliations and associations, commonalities and connections to create a sense of belonging. Since its inception the field of home economics has been in what seems to be perpetual motion about what to call itself and how others have viewed the profession and its work. Others have argued that the frequent name changes have undermined the profession’s public identity and, in some case, has made the field invisible (see for example Gentzler, 2012; Kay, 2015; Stage & Vincenti, 1997). However, through all of this de Zwart (2005) contends that practices within the profession have served to maintain hegemonic positions—colonialism and the superiority of Western-Eurocentric culture over others.

### **Professional Practice Through a Praxial Lens**

For home economics to be defined as a profession there are specific practices that are used to determine if such a categorisation is possible (Renwick, 2015). Drawing on a definition of a professional as one who has an explicit concern for others, Renwick (2015) affirms home economics as a profession. Renwick argues for recognition of home economics with this categorisation because of its pragmatic approaches and commitment to action through its “focus on the wellbeing of others” (2015, p. 21). Within home economics peak professional bodies provide statements that frame the profession as being focused on “the wellbeing of people in everyday living in households and families” (HEIA, n.d., p. 2) and with an aim “to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities” (IFHE, n.d.-b). These ideas coalesce into a proposition seeking to understand “how should one live well?” (Smith, 2004, p. 124) an intention that is infused with specific values and moral stances that have largely gone unheeded (Brown, 1985). Such beliefs have been justified within the profession for over 100 years. In doing so these beliefs, according to Barker et al., (2018) have become ways of knowing that infuses our practices, and the “choices we make about how to act or about what steps to take” (p. 1).

The home economics profession includes specific content that is framed in educational contexts as family, food, textiles and financial studies. These content areas are both inter- and trans-disciplinary requiring the professional to utilise an integrative approach. There are also claims for practices to be transformative (Brown, 1985) in that individuals and families are able to engage in action within their everyday experience because they are empowered to do so (Hodelin, 2008). However, it is necessary to pause here to consider—does the profession need to concentrate on only pre-determined actions to produce specific outcomes? In part this is the case as some of the work is technical—financial planning, application of heat and cold or utilisation of particular techniques to transform food and fabric. Such knowings are not sufficient in and of themselves given that these technical practices can only be evaluated only in the light of their consequences—in terms of how things actually turn out. This positioning opens up possibilities for thinking about the skills and understandings (Williams, 1994) alongside considerations about how does such content and practice make for a better lived experience in the everyday.

Engaging in practices that enable quality of life requires a moral judgment. Such practices are definable as praxis according to Kemmis et al. (2014) in two ways. Firstly, that praxis is a morally committed practice informed by, in this case the home economics, profession (Kemmis & Smith, 2008); and secondly that praxis is both for the good of those involved in the practice as well as being for the good of mankind (sic). Home economics practice as education is therefore seen as action that is morally committed to and informed by the profession—to enable

living well. In doing so there is also possibilities for generating a history through transformative action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Home economics professionals and practitioners explicitly position themselves as co-habitants of the classrooms and community settings where they work. The nature of the work creates relationships between those sharing the space. Identities are shaped and formed because of these relationships and through the practices that are being enacted (Barker et al., 2018; Kemmis et al., 2009). Coming to understand “what does it mean to live well?” leads us as professionals to think about whether or not we have done anything or enough to create inclusive and decolonized spaces where we practice.

### **Epistemological Positioning of the Profession**

The need to understand the world, to have knowledge of it is a fundamental human activity, what is called epistemology. What constitutes knowledge, understanding, to understand why something comes to be and the associated cognitive engagement (Baumberger et al., 2017; Barker et al., 2018; Bird, 2010) might be a universal human enquiry, how understanding is shaped and considered is very diverse. In this section I consider various ways that the home economics profession has been called to both view and justify itself. What follows is a consideration of four ways of viewing the world—scientific, patriarchal, colonial and indigenous. Each generates different knowings and understandings and thus everyday epistemologies. It is possible for there to be alignment across these and leaving other epistemologies and experiences to be ignored or even negated.

#### **Knowing Through a Science Perspective**

Ellen Swallow Richards is recognised as foundational to the development of the home economics field (McGregor, 2020; Meszaros, 2015). With a background in chemistry and experience in sanitary chemistry and provision of nutrition programs, Richards was driven by a “passion for bringing applied scientific knowledge into the home for the betterment of society” (McGregor, 2020, p. 37). According to Greene, science offers a way to think about and understand the world in way that changes “confusion to understanding ...[through] ... precise, predictive and reliable” methods (2008, as cited in Baumberger et al., 2017, p. 3).

The changes being wrought at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century both positioned and utilised science through industrialisation and urbanisation (Meszaros, 2015; Williams, 1994). In a world undergoing significant social change due to factors such as immigration and industrialisation, the scientific approaches offered explanations (Baumberger et al., 2017) for how to live in this new world. Changing patterns of living and technologies inevitably flowed into the domestic sphere where Williams (1994) posits that the principles of science create the modern and efficient housewife and enable the management of relationships using technical rationality.

The use of science as a pivotal concept for home economics as a field emerges from a positionality evidenced within Richards’ efforts to “extend the science professions to women and to use science to improve the quality of home life” (Meszaros, 2015, p. 197). Smith (2009) notes that while Home Economics has been concerned with well-being and the quality of life for families the profession has given “emphasis to disseminating scientific knowledge and practical know-how” (p. 50). Thus, home life is equated with technical skills, standardised products, appropriate use of material resources and family management through rules (Williams, 1994).

#### **Knowing Through a Patriarchal Perspective**

According to Miller (2017) the term patriarchy is associated with social relations particularly those evidenced within the family. They are evident within Ancient Greece and Rome, during

the Renaissance and through to the Enlightenment and thus have been carried through two millennia of Western history. Patriarchal families locate men in ways that they have organisational and legal dominance over women and children and these frames can extend to men who are racially different. Such family and social relationships are seen as being self-evident and universal shaping understandings of our world and daily life and thus our epistemic lives. Patriarchal arrangements are assumed in ways that they pervade social and political thought and as Moreton-Robinson (2004a) remarks on how the investment in patriarchal White sovereignty is maintained through a possessive logic. Moreton-Robinson discusses the ways in which patriarchal White sovereignty is positioned on exclusion and how it actively “denies and refuses what it does not own—the sovereignty of the Indigenous other” (p. 4).

The ideas of Western scientific thought have been actively applied within the family. Pendergast (2001) comments on how Richards was able to engage in science, a male dominated area of study in ways that were conditional. Richards was forced to develop home economics as a new field and utilised “a masculine framework for legitimising women’s knowledge” (Pendergast, 2001, p. 4). According to Meszaros (2015) home economics provided the basis for women to engage with science as long as it was applied within the domestic sphere. Code (2014) observes how during the twentieth century epistemologists utilised the scientific perspective to determine if a knowledge existed was through empirical certainty and silencing the sceptic. She goes on to reason that any relative position such as gender or race would not be germane to understanding knowledge under such conditions as it would challenge assumptions about human homogeneity. Fricker describes this homogeneity as the “politics of epistemic practice” (2007, p. 7) since acknowledging the gender or race of the knower offers new possibilities for what knowledge is and a subjectivity that is undesirable.

Home economics has been described as a profession that has worked to maintain societal roles through sexist, racist and heteronormative activity (see Darling, 1995; Eyre, 1991; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Pendergast (2001) has argued that the field of home economics is inevitably in tension with patriarchal social contexts. The ongoing effort to define itself and be suitable for legitimation within gendered knowledge and epistemological practices inevitably leaves it to be considered as less. The profession’s focus on family and home is gendered because the patriarchal position cast it as women’s work while reinforcing family as the space for having children. The “insider” male, patriarchal gaze is inevitably White, different gendered and racial perspectives are “outsider” knowings. Thompson (1986, 1988) challenges ideas associated with male defined elitism. To do this Thompson utilises a metaphor for the two domains—Hestian/private and Hermean/public. Thompson maintains that these social spaces are inherently relational and argues for a relational analysis of social spaces as public and private. It is this relational aspect that leads Thompson to observe how the Hermean domain is associated with control has come to dominate and silence the Hestian domain. As a result, the activities associated with everyday life (and Home Economics) are viewed as being trivial and lesser.

### **Knowing Through a Colonial Perspective**

Within the Western context scientific discourse is framed around racial superiority (Cunneen et al., 2017; Foley, 2003). Scientific knowings are based on Eurocentric determinations of what knowledge is and which knowledges are legitimate (Alcoff, 2017). Foley (2003) argues that these knowledge’s have been about Indigenous people but without their input, without reference to Indigenous language and other socio-cultural practices but created for the non-Indigenous spectator (Barker et al., 2018). The dismissing of Indigenous knowledges as inferior and the determination to ignore an Indigenous standpoint are significant contributors to the destruction of Indigenous people both culturally and through colonial violence and genocide (Alcoff, 2017; Cunneen et al., 2017).

The approach used by Western scholars means that Indigenous philosophies are measured according to Eurocentric sensibilities expressed as “we cannot know what we cannot make sense of, nor do we need to know from new sources what we already know” (Alcoff, 2017, p. 397). This positioning is located within what is described by Grincheva as an epistemic tradition that recognises “science or scientific enquiry as the most trustful source of knowledge” (2013, p. 146) leading to criticisms such as Alcoff’s calling out those using Western philosophical stances to judge “whether other traditions are worthy, but not putting themselves in the position to be taught” (2017, p. 397). Counter to this is a growing body of work about Indigenous epistemology that is demanding and receiving philosophical space such that there is greater understanding about differences in knowledge generation particularly around understandings of place and knowledge (Grincheva, 2013).

In the Australian context place and knowledge has been in a reciprocal relationship for over 60,000 years. Knowing about Indigenous food, different plants and animals and seasonality was critical for health and wellbeing of Indigenous people (Fredericks & Anderson, 2013). The arrival of colonial invaders shifted Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders’ way of life limiting and eventually separating them from traditional food ways. The use of rations such as dried beef, sugar, flour, jams and tea offer little nutritional value and created a diet that was energy-dense (Fredericks & Anderson, 2013). Within home economics classes the relationship between food and health and the development of preventable disease is a familiar topic. When attention is given to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders it is too easy to teach about their health as deficient and to ignore how they were healthier than the White settler population. Given the health statistics highlighting “the degree of sicknesses and disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians—including a lower life expectancy, elevated mortality rate, increased risk of cancer, and increased risk of chronic disease (including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disease, and kidney disease)” (Fredericks & Anderson, 2013, p. 4). In their consideration of cookbooks developed for Indigenous Australians, Fredericks and Anderson consider how such resources are heavily subsidised by governmental agencies and continue what they call “possessive logic of patriarchal [W]hite sovereignty that continues to subjugate Indigenous peoples” (2013, p. 7). It is this application of scientific knowing to a problem caused by colonialism (Andreotti, 2021) that ignores Indigenous wisdom generated over 60 millennia of being on land and the associated knowledge of traditional food ways.

### **Knowing Through an Indigenous Perspective**

While not unique to Australia the disregard for traditional knowledges is evident within the attempts to eradicate Indigenous traditions, culture and laws (Cunneen et al., 2017; Keddie, 2014) over the past 250 years. Such efforts are positioned within the settlers’ world views of possession, oppression and superiority (Foley, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004b) and as such are fundamentally different to Indigenous epistemology. Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders experience significant social disadvantage on their own country and Moreton-Robinson notes that Indigenous people are represented as subject or objects rather than as “knowers”. Yet Australian Aboriginal peoples continue to hold their Indigenous knowledge systems intact (Cunneen et al., 2017) and these continue to develop and adjust both in and through their relationships with kin and country. This is highlighted in Moreton-Robinson’s (2004b) description of Indigenous people as being “in relationship with the landscape ... capable of [new ways to understand traditional culture that are] expressive of our living traditions and changed circumstances” (p. 86). The Uluru Statement from the Heart reasserts the connection to land that has occurred over 60,000 years in Western terms and since Creation is Indigenous terms. The claiming of sovereignty by Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders

... is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or “mother nature”, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom,

remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. (*Uluru Statement From the Heart*, 2017, para. 3)

The discussion about Indigenous epistemologies is most obvious in an around approaches to research and criticism of the higher education experience for Indigenous students. Foley (2003) writes about the problems for Indigenous students undertaking higher education that demands a Western approach to research. This experience Foley argues, is in tension with an Aboriginal philosophy that is constructed around a sacred triangulation of “the Physical, the Human and the Sacred worlds” (2003, p. 47) and that life is not possible without land given that is the land that sustains all life in relationship. For Martin (2017) the importance of this philosophy lies in its clear standpoint where an Indigenous researcher acts according to their “space and place” (p. 49). This standpoint is not just grounded physically as the Indigenous researcher also needs to attend to being flexible across different Indigenous cultures; and most importantly the knowledge is recorded for the community as owners of the knowledge.

Building on Foley’s Indigenous philosophy particular knowings become evident. Martin (2017) argues that “in all Indigenous accounts Country, people, entities, kin and knowing is not passive” (p. 11). Again, there is reinforcement of how the people’s culture, spirit and land are in perpetual relation and interconnection. Thus, Indigenous knowing is not confined and held in stasis at the point of White settlement rather connections to land continue through memory and intergenerational story-telling (Foley, 2003; Keddie, 2014; Mylonas-Widdall, 1988). Drawing on these ideas leads Keddie to articulate Indigenous epistemology as a “focus on relationality where community, kinship and family networks are at the centre of all relations” (2014, p. 57). These are familiar areas of concern to home economics professionals and offer a possible insight for forward thinking the field.

Having considered three epistemologies that have been used to determine and manage the home economics field there is a need to keeping deliberating about how well these understandings of the world have served the profession. Over the history of the profession the dominant world views sourced from science, patriarchy and colonialist knowledges has kept the profession cloistered and restricted in ways that prevented home economics from being given the due consideration it deserves. Given the now widely accepted concerns for climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022), home economics as a field has an opportunity to embrace its position for sustainable living and well-being for everyone and therefore compatible with an Indigenous epistemology. There is a need to be careful of commandeering an Indigenous epistemology and Vaines’ *Spheres of Influence* (Powell & Renwick, 2019; Vaines, 1994) advances a possibility to avoid this. For an Australian settler population, Vaines’ spheres offer a companionable position to Indigenous ways of knowing that offers possibilities for walking alongside, listening to and being with Indigenous peoples in respectful ways.

### **Does Home Economics Need Decolonising?**

Home Economics developed out of the Lake Placid Conferences 1899-1909. The focus of the conversations was around family welfare. At the time, issues of health, sanitation and nutrition were closely aligned with social improvement (Gentzler, 2012; McGregor, 2020; Stage, 1997; Williams, 1994). Through the conferences a number of materials and resources emerged that were intended to provide a unified approach. These included curricula materials and a definition that expressed both the intentions, scoping and context of home economics as a new field.

Home Economics in its most comprehensive sense is the study of the laws, conditions, principles and ideals which are concerned on the one hand man’s [sic] immediate physical environment and on the other hand with his [sic] nature as a

social being, and is the study speciality of the relations between these two factors.  
(as cited in Meszaros, 2015, p. 200)

To place the emergence of home economics in historical context it was only 34 years since the end of the Civil War. The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century saw an influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe to America. Education at the beginning of the twentieth century was viewed as an extension of the liberal belief in opportunity and the potential for self-actualisation that in turn would drive social progress (Franklin et al., 1991; Urban et al., 2019). However, education was guided by insider sensibilities typified in White Euro-centric, Protestant and patriarchal worldviews. As outsider the “educational realities for African, Americans, native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans were greatly affected by the racist and [W]hite supremacist values that were integral to mainstream American culture” (Franklin et al., 1991, p. 48).

In the Australian context, the centring of White Australian and colonial perspectives were similarly privileged. Legislation for compulsory schooling was introduced during the 1870s so by the end of the nineteenth century Australia children it was a widespread experience, as it intended to build a literate (Theobald, 1996) and productive society. Green and Cormack (2011) have commented about public education being influential in fostering and shaping a national identity that had to contend with its colonial status, its unique geography and isolation from Britain. Since the arrival of White settlers “Australia has always been deeply linked to Britain not just economically and politically but also *culturally*” (emphasis in original, Green & Cormack, 2011, p. 246).

In both the United States and Australia, the social values of the time were made explicit through both the intention and content of education. The experience of schooling invited in and supported those with the political and cultural power to be *insiders* while concurrently excluding and thereby disadvantaging those deemed to be *outsiders*. In Australia, this exclusion effectively prevented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from contributing to the production of knowledge and in doing so generated epistemic oppression (Barker et al., 2018). The generation of human systems is the result of relations that are sustained over time. It is these relationships that form what are called epistemic lives, as people build understandings of how they are dependent upon and contribute to their environment and are a part of society as a larger human system (Banathy & Jenlink, 2013; Barker et al., 2018). Such understandings highlight those relations that are worked and re-worked into a system while also excluding or ignoring other relations so that they remain outside the system.

Human systems are derived from human actors organising and engaging with collective actions towards a common goal or purpose. The Lake Placid conferences focused on education system practices in order to substantiate and shape the educative potential of the new field of home economics. The definition of home economics developed during the fourth Lake Placid conference invites conjecture about the insiders who are crafting the field based on their knowings, beliefs and understandings.

While Australian girls and young women were not excluded from schooling by the bureaucracy Theobald (1996) notes that their education of was explicitly linked to the private spaces of family and home in different ways depending on class and race. This association of gender with the private sphere continued as possibilities for further education and moving into employment in the public sphere (Darian-Smith, 2016). Women were permitted to work in what were defined as caring professions such as continuing their work with children as teachers (Theobald, 1996) which became “the largest and most visible group of women in professional employment” (Whitehead, 2007, p. 7). The fusing of women to domestic work and family related employment

is and continues to be an ongoing position within the patriarchal ideology in Western societies (Pendergast, 2001; Pendergast & McGregor, 2007).

Dermer (2018) writes how Australia's alignment with Britain constructed a public education system around "growing good, moral citizens, culturally aligned to the motherland which viewed Australia as both an extension of itself and essential to its future" (p. 30). Familiar discourses around race purity and health were evidenced in public intentions to create a White Australia (Ravenscroft, 2016). Education was also utilised to extend worldviews emanating from a distant Britain that was White, protestant and patriarchal. In doing so there were those who were left outside such as those immigrants who were defined as non-White Europeans, those from Asia and the Pacific region and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Setting aside what we would now see as sexist language within the original definition of home economics there is another aspect to explore. What collective action is being developed and for what purpose? Since the definition argues that home economics, is in part, a study of laws then the question that needs to be asked is "whose law?"

Within context of the Lake Placid conferences the family and home were perceived as the place to nurture citizens who were able to both contribute to and benefit from engagement in society. Inevitably social niceties and customs develop as does a need for citizens to be willing to abide by the rules and laws. In writing about the application of English law, Mylonas-Widdall (1988) posits that "colonisers began with their own image of customary society as, above all, unchanging and hierarchical" (p. 380) and that "the introduction of English law carried with it the power to define the scope of customary law" (p. 382). While there was initial recognition of Indigenous people having laws within context of their customary society there has been a preparedness to adjust, re-interpret and change settler laws to override customary laws.

In the Australia context Moreton-Robinson (2004a) writes about the Yorta Yorta people's case to determine native title over their homelands. The need to make a case, stems from the act of Britain claiming sovereignty and occupation of the Yorta Yorta homelands and has been argued that it negates pre-existing traditional laws and customs that has previously identified "entitlement and territory, allocate rights, interests and responsibilities within communal possession and regulate their exercise by community members" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004a, para. 20). The legal rights of Indigenous people are defined in ways that any pre-existing traditional law, continuity and connection to that land are wilfully ignored. Moreton-Robinson's account amongst others (see for example Buchan, 2002; Keenan, 2014; Pearson, 2003) provides an example of how patriarchal White sovereignty operates in ways that claim it is race blind while simultaneously setting judicial and legal blocks.

It is through these different epistemological positions that any references to law, living conditions and ideals in the definition of home economics are argued as being through a White, settler perspective.

In their discussion about home economics and its history Pendergast and McGregor (2007) acknowledge the critique that home economics has been implicated in the reinforcing gender stereotypes and status quo. The intention for this historical context is not to make any claims or assertions that home economics was set up as a colonial or racist project as such. However, the profession cannot ignore the historical context in which it was established. As Pendergast notes "our history can never change, however our understanding of the social contexts of that history can" (2001, p. 9). To do otherwise enables a form of ignorance or amnesia where possibilities for contributing to racist positions cannot be set aside whether through a lack of malice or informed by insider thinking, rather than outsider experience. However, for people whose culture and epistemological positions are not represented, for whatever the reason, will

experience a silencing, an othering that diminishes and trivialises their experience, knowledges and understandings.

### **Epistemic Lives**

Understanding how we come to know and how we learn to live well are the culminations of social interactions. Our epistemic positions arise and evolve because of our everyday lives and engagement with others. How we come to understand our world is inherently personal and connected to our social context and it is these knowings that create and shape our epistemic lives (Barker et al., 2018; Johnson, 2019). Everyday life is according to Vaines (1996), replete with complexities not the least when making judgments about praxial action that is morally informed and attends to the greater 'good' (Kemmis et al., 2014). The engagement in praxis requires a level of expertise to function under taxing situations while also holding to a high standard (Stichter, 2018). Engaging with praxis is something that is learnt (Kemmis & Smith, 2007) and as Stichter observes we learn by doing, and that we become better when we keep practicing.

Such practice orientated work with intention is not new thinking for home economics professionals. Within the profession responding to (Kemmis et al.'s (2009) question of "how do we live well?" would be seen as obvious and central to its aims. Living well requires a relational stance within families and between family members, accessing food, clothing and shelter as resources to ensure living well. These relations are in turn linked to living on and because of the land through everyday acts. However, it is the attention to those knowings and how they are used that determines which practices and positions are privileged. What we chose to do in our day-to-day activities, what we gain from our experiences and how we know what we do and why we do particular things can be described as our epistemic lives (Barker et al., 2018).

The idea of an epistemic life is a concept that warrants exploration by the home economics profession. An epistemic life is guided by values that guide what we do and the choices we make in deciding how to act or problem solve. In the IFHE Position Statement (n.d.-b) the definition of the field focuses on achieving "optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities" (p. 1). In order to work towards and achieve such an outcome the profession needs to consider what underpin these ideas. Specific values that could be referenced include peace, trustworthiness, respect, justice, responsibility and fairness come to mind.

Barker et al. point out that epistemic lives also can be guided by vices such that "people are often harmed or wronged in various aspects of their lives" (2018, p. 2). Drawing from epistemological positions discussed earlier in this paper two examples are offered. Firstly, patriarchal knowings have resulted in a disregard for the domestic space and therefore home economics as a field is readily ignored; and secondly White Eurocentric, colonialist ideas that have wilfully ignored 60,000 years of living on land by Indigenous people in Australia. In both examples it is possible to extrapolate to not only epistemological harm but also as social, moral and political harm (Barker et al., 2018).

Epistemic ignorance is an example of practice where there is not only a lack of knowledge but also the result of an active and determined intention to believe otherwise (Barker et al., 2018; Mills, 2007). Some epistemic ignorance might be a deliberate choice due to a lack of interest or motivation to engage. However, another reason relates to a hegemonic understanding in that some knowledge is simply taken for granted based on assumption about something always having been or because a lack of understanding or attention to be able to imagine differently. Renwick (2017) discusses how ignorance about home economics has resulted in the field being disadvantaged in a number of different ways. The public sphere in Australia is dominated by a patriarchal and colonialists' perspectives. Thus, home economics is written out of hegemonic

consciousness and Indigenous knowledges and understandings have been deliberately oppressed and excluded. Further where home economics exists within Australian classrooms it is unlikely to have any nuanced engagement with Indigenous knowledges and understandings.

### **A Different View of the World and Knowledge**

If the home economics field is to claim wellbeing and concern for all families (IFHE, n.d.-b) then there is a need to rethink the profession's epistemological positioning if it is to truly engage with transformative practices (Smith, 2004; Vaines, 1994, 2004). Given the field's history then any transformation is only likely to come from altered understanding about how it has consistently been an outsider profession because of the patriarchal and colonial epistemologies. The history of the profession has been about accommodating, adjusting and tweaking according to external pressures trying to be accepted but without attention towards oppressive practices. The impact of all of this effort has forced the field to adjust and accommodate rather than contributing to changing the circumstances that is causing the profession to be oppressed (Cunneen et al., 2017).

To think how we come to understand our world and know in new ways requires something substantially more than personal and professional introspection. While such introspection is necessary there is also a need to identify the values that a profession that claims to have while in service of others. The IFHE Position Statement (n.d.-b) asserts that "Home economics professionals are advocates for individuals, families and communities" (p. 1). Such positioning means that home economics as a profession cannot claim to work for only some people. A view of family and everyday living that only reflects what the profession knows and defines invariably excludes. Where the profession normalises what we know and denies different life experience and diversity then our claims for advocacy can only function for us as insiders.

The difference between Western epistemology and Indigenous epistemology warrants some consideration. Foley (2003) posits that a part of the difference is that "Indigenous Australians already know the origin, nature, methods and limits of their knowledge systems" (p. 47). Given the interdisciplinary nature of home economics is it reasonable to claim relational knowledges and understandings. It is this epistemology that seems to lie closest to what the home economics profession has claimed as a central tenant of its profession and practice. It seems that the profession has something to learn from and in relationship with Indigenous people that offers genuine possibilities for inclusive practices.

To come to terms with a need for epistemic change and to begin the process one approach is to look at ways to decolonise the profession. Decolonising work is necessary but it is not necessarily easy work. Bringing in the relational world view of Indigenous peoples is a decolonial act. As Manathunga et al. (2020) posit "Working on decolonisation requires a high level of reflexivity, self-critique, generosity and openness" (p. 4). The need to speak truth before any reconciliation in colonised countries such as Australia and Canada is necessary given the experiences of cultural and racial genocide in both countries and others because of colonisation. In 2007 the United Nations released Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It recognises that Indigenous people have inherent rights based on their social, cultural and political structures and that these should be both respected and promoted. This process is guided by an intent for reconciliation a process for looking forward and anticipation decolonised relationships (Rigby, 2001). In order to create new relations, there is a need for recognition of truth about power imbalances (Rigby, 2001) and the perpetrations of and complicity in violence and evil deeds (Corntassel & Holder, 2008) as Little and Maddison (2017) points out that this is not about ignoring or erasing the past rather generating a shared truth as a basis for reconciliation and moving towards a collective future.

Within home economics there has been minimal reflection of what decolonial work might look like. In the absence of any research in Australia it is useful to draw from the Canadian context and two scholars have begun the conversation to consider ways that the profession can begin to decolonise. de Zwart (2005) in her review of domestic science manuals used across Canada offered ways to understand both “race and class conflicts in colonial settings” (p. 130) offers a first step in telling a truth. de Zwart’s treatise argues that “The recipes used in the domestic manuals contributed to colonialism and the belief in White (British) cultural superiority” (2005, p. 141). Smith (2019a) echoes de Zwart’s findings when she reviewed a community cookbook developed in 1941. In her review Smith comments about an uncomfortable reality evident within the cookbook’s pages of being “complicit in colonialism” (p. 126).

If such cook books and recipes used within the Canadian context offer some ways to look for “truths” within home economics practice then there are possibilities for beginning to consider ways to move forward in reconciliation. Smith (2019b) in her framing of decolonial practice highlights three practices—self work, decolonise content and decolonise our research. By undertaking each of these steps there is opportunity to consider epistemological basis of the home economics field and profession. There is a challenge to engage in reflexive practice, rethink content and pedagogical practices with and facilitates research that genuinely aims to improve the quality of people’s lives. To draw in such practices would result in different epistemic lives informed by understandings of the world that move the profession closer to its aim of being morally committed to transformative action towards living well—for everyone.

The need to understand the complexities of everyday life is the basis of the work of Elenore Vaines (1994, 1996, 2004). She has argued that “there is a wholeness to everyday life that can be learned, identified and communicate” (Vaines, 2004, p. 133). In order to make sense of the complexities Vaines developed a series of maps that considered epistemological positions including ways of knowing and ecology as a unifying theme for home economics. The ideas, maps and metaphors developed by Vaines offer ways to transform the profession’s practice that leads to “an ecologically desirable and socially just society” (Vaines, 2004, p. 135) that align with the relational world view of Indigenous people.

## **Conclusion**

In her contemplation of both the visibility and relevance of home economics Gentzler (2012) wonders why a profession “dedicated to improving the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities is (considered to be) unrealistic, oversimplified, naïve, outdated” (p. 6). Gentzler offers an easy point to argue when the field is seen as being irrelevant. However, there is an opportunity if home economics professionals can engage with an epistemological position such as those offered by Vaines that informs the field in ways that are both ecological and inclusive (Smith, 2019c).

Home economics needs to move on from a patriarchal and colonial world view that is causing ecological systems to break down (Andreotti, 2021). Vaines’ position that “the world is our home” creates possibilities for aligning alongside Indigenous world views. There is an opportunity to understand everyday practices that work within ecological limits as Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders have done for over 60,000 years. Such insights would offer the potential to create new practices that are sustainable and desperately needed. In order to do this home economics needs to explore the ways in which professional practices have contributed to colonisation.

Our epistemic lives are the result of our interactions with others especially our colleagues in the profession. For the profession to make claim for morally committed practice that is in the interests of every family there is a need to consider how there was a focus of some families at

the expense of others. To engage with transformative practice the profession needs to look to possibilities for cultural healing in relationship with Indigenous people.

## Biography

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Kerry Renwick co-ordinates the home economics education program at UBC, a teaching specialisation whose content and practice are inherently linked to building and sustaining respectful relationships. Her research focuses on social justice in context of K-12 educational settings.

Kerry's previous research includes health promoting schools; exploring the relationship between school gardens and mental health in youth; and teachers' practice in health and food education. She is currently the Principal Investigator on a SSHRC Partnership Development grant focused on global food literacy education. The Food Literacy International Partnership (FLIP) includes Deakin University, Australia; Sweet Briar College, USA; and Gothenburg University, Sweden.

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