

**Pie in the Sky? Reaching Consensus on a Political/Moral Focus**

Frances M. Smith, Professor Emeritus

College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Iowa State University

2159 Country Club Blvd

Ames, IA 50014

515-292-9295

[fmsmith@iastate.edu](mailto:fmsmith@iastate.edu)

### **Abstract**

This paper posits that an agreed-upon central political/moral focus is needed to enhance the work of professionals in the field of family and consumer sciences. Communicative action involving dialogue as a means to finding consensus on common ground is suggested. A possible scenario for initiating and sustaining the dialogue necessary for this concerted effort is given. The scenario is based on the assumption that professionals in family and consumer sciences are willing to commit to a long-term effort that is not without risk.

Family and consumer sciences professionals have made many worthwhile contributions to the well-being of individuals and families. These contributions have been varied and often viewed as value neutral. The author believes, if all family and consumer sciences professionals (e.g., academics, business persons, subject matter specialists, secondary educators, and service providers) were able to definitively agree upon, and work toward, a clear central political/moral focus (what ought to be based on a critical science approach), over time a strong picture of a profession working toward a free and just society would emerge. The long-term gain would be recognition of the importance of the work of family and consumer sciences professionals by the wider community.

Presently, some family and consumer sciences secondary programs are cut as budgets become tight or teachers are not available. Sometimes, other teachers at the secondary level (e.g., health, physical education, economics, social studies, science) are viewed as being able to teach concepts in traditional family and consumer sciences areas with little or no preparation in a holistic and integrative approach to family life. In some colleges and universities, family and consumer sciences content is dispersed to other areas of the university, as the unit is contracted or closed. Business and subject matter professionals are identifying themselves less and less with the field of family and consumer sciences. Membership is declining in national and international organizations of family and consumer sciences. A clearly articulated focus with the endorsement of all family and consumer sciences professionals could generate the enthusiasm to turn this around. Such a focus need not be pie in the sky. How to begin?

As early as 1984, Marjorie Brown encouraged the profession to accept a critical science perspective (for more information on critical science see Gentzler, 1999; McGregor, 2003; Vincenti & Smith, in press). Although critical science has been portrayed by these writers as having three elements (human interests, communicative action, and moral consciousness), the element of communicative action (Habermas, 1987; Honneth & Joas, 1991) furnishes the most succinct guidance for reaching consensus on a central political/moral focus for family and consumer sciences. This paper will first establish the basis of communicative action as it involves dialogue (conversation with elements of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing) that encompasses the concept of finding consensus from a common ground.

Then, the paper will provide a possible example for beginning this type of dialogue among professionals at the national and international level.

### *Communicative Action as a Part of Critical Science*

Communicative action, as a centerpiece of critical science, involves individuals with similar or diverse views on an issue using dialogue to reach an agreed-upon action to improve a given situation. The defining features of communicative action are communication, cooperation, and mutual understanding, not control and prediction. As Habermas (1990) viewed it, this type of communication leads to action in the lifeworld (everyday life); it would begin with a special type of argument in which participants defend or critique truth claims (e.g., the way we define family relations, education, old age, and other family life topics) through dialogue. Consensus is based on insight. To achieve consensus everyone involved commits to seeking agreement about the definition of the specific situation, justifiable valued ends (what ought to be) for that situation, the best prospective alternatives, and a plan of action (Habermas, 1987). The discourse should be based on openness, honesty, and continuity over a period of time sufficient for consensus building.

When engaging in communicative action, the participants might embark on a four-step process. First, they would agree upon the definition of the specific situation (the context of the problem). Second, they would agree on the desired outcome or valued end or what ought to happen to alleviate or solve the problem. Third, the best possible alternative actions would be identified. Fourth, an agreed-upon action would be implemented.

Habermas (1990, p. 89) borrows the following rules for the above discourse (dialogue) from Alexy (1978):

1. Every participant affected by the situation with the competence to speak and act is allowed (encouraged) to take part in the discourse, expressing his/her attitudes, desires, and needs.
2. Everyone should feel free (maybe even obligated) to introduce any idea or question any idea put forth by someone else.

3. The better argument wins. Expert and novice input is treated the same. Experience or lack thereof is only important as it relates to the argument, not the person involved.

### *Dialogue*

In writing about dialogue, Isaacs (1999) indicated three distinct and different languages—the voices of meaning, feeling, and power. He defines dialogue as conversation in which people think together in relationship. He identifies four behaviors as essential for both individuals and groups (families). They are listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing.

Listening is the key to this type of dialogue. Listening means listening not only to others but also to ourselves and our own reactions. Listening from silence means listening for and receiving the meanings that well-up from deep within us.

The act of respecting asks us to see others as legitimate. When we eliminate categories and stereotypes, we see each other as interesting individuals. As our respect grows, we find others have things to teach us.

When suspending we are asked to change direction, stop, step back, see things in new ways. To suspend something is to spin it out so that it can be seen, like a web between two beams of a barn.

Voicing asks each of us to believe our own thinking is valid and fits. It also requires a stillness, a trust of the emptiness, a sense of not knowing what to do or say. It gives time to find the right words.

Wheatley (2002) promotes simple and truthful dialogue as conversations where there is a chance for all to speak, to be heard, and to sit together to listen, to worry, and to dream together. She gives these principles for a formal conversation process.

- Accept that we are all equals by our actions, not just our words;
- Be interested in others, their worth, and what they have to offer;
- Practice listening in pairs, in groups;
- Slow down to take time to think and reflect;

- Recognize that conversation is how we learn about ourselves, each other, and how we live together; and
- Be willing to retain conversational relationships even through "messy" (seemingly hopeless) times as well as satisfying times (pp. 29-34).

### *Consensus*

Dialogue is the key to the process of reaching consensus for a central political/moral focus. The Quaker model calls the secularized term consensus "sense of the meeting." The method requires that all involved share a desire to find the way through a problem. The Quaker process involves a prolonged silence (i.e., ten minutes or more). The discipline of silence (Punshon, 1987, p. 96) is required before a formal proposal (distributed ahead of time or given orally at the gathering) is contemplated and weighed individually.

Quakers make a clear distinction between unity (oneness, singleness), which is necessary, and unanimity (like-minded, of the same opinion, general agreement or consent), which is not. Consensus or "sense of the meeting" begins to emerge when most of those present can agree on a course of action. But there still may be those who continue to have reservations. They have three options open to them. First, they may withdraw their objection and ask that the decision go forward, thereby reassessing their position and withdrawing objections so unity can be reached. The second option is not to agree, but to stand aside, asking to be recorded as being outside the sense of the meeting. Often this compromise is made in deference to time considerations. When the dissenters refrain from blocking action and act in a way to make a decision possible, they cannot be cast as a disgruntled minority. The final option is to block a decision so a decision cannot be made. In dialogue for reaching consensus, individuals understand that ideals of the organization make consensus preferable to majority rule (Cary, 1979).

Reaching consensus will require a deep commitment to listening, a clear trust in each member's contribution, a willingness to deeply examine one's own point of view, and a commitment to actively support a consensus decision (Sheeran, 1983; Wells, n.d.). For persons to express similar views does not necessarily add weight to a point. What is important is the rightness of the view, not how many people

support it (Punshon, 1987). Rightness is seen as an action in the best interests of all those affected by the thing to be done.

To be a leader for this type of group-centered action one must be a person who feels passionate about the potential of the liberated action of reaching consensus. These leaders are good listeners, can handle discussion of issues, and have faith that each person who is part of the organization can add fresh insight into arriving at a decision. These leaders refuse to be hurried; they can return to the discussion again and again; they believe a proper decision can be reached (Sheeran, 1983).

Skills as a diplomat are also important on occasion. A leader must be able to handle a chronic objector, a shy person, and a constant talker. S/he must be able to judge what is important. The leader has to gauge when consensus is near. It is the leader who then states the consensus clearly and accurately.

The type of dialogue described here is best begun in small groups. And it is time consuming. An example given by the Quakers is that it took more than 25 years for them to agree that holding slaves was incompatible with membership in the Society of Friends. But it was reached in 1776, nearly 100 years ahead of when other Americans reached that decision.

In summary, ideal consensus is a commitment of consenting individuals to like-minded goals and interests (Lehrer, 2001). If there were a consensus by professionals, the work of all could be more focused and the impact of that work greater.

### ***Common Ground***

To reach consensus we begin by identifying our common ground (Community Mediation Center, 1997). First, we clearly define the problem before contemplating action. Then, we establish the common ground on which to begin to build the conversation/dialogue about the problem. Traditionally our common ground as a profession has been verbalized as optimal well-being of individuals and families (AAFCS, 2003, p. 9). But there are two problems arising from assuming that as common ground.

First, observation of our work and our writing does not present a clear and precise picture of the shared meaning of this statement by professionals within the organization. Family and consumer sciences (home economics) professionals as a whole have not clearly identified the meaning of the well-being of

individuals and families, although a recent think piece tendered by McGregor and Goldsmith (1998) challenges readers to think about how they conceptualize well-being, quality of living, and standard of living. Brown and Paolucci (1979) proposed a mission statement that has been endorsed by many professionals. But in 1993 Brown wrote that writings of family and consumer sciences professionals conveyed several themes but no clear meaning of the field. One theme, family well-being, was equated with household work, managing and controlling things, with no consideration of the social and psychological environment within the family and the cultural environment in the larger society.

The second hindrance for finding common ground based on family well-being has arisen within the profession itself. As the profession has become more and more focused on specialized careers, all professionals no longer endorse affecting the well-being of individuals and families as the desired outcome or valued end of their work. An Australian study (Henry, 1995) noted that less than half of her interviewees said that individual and family well-being is the focus of home economics (family and consumer sciences), although more than two-thirds said it should. Where “(h)ome (e)conomics writers claim[ed] well-being of individuals and families is the focus of home economics . . . few, if any, explain what they understood by well being” (1995). McGregor and Goldsmith (1998), taking direction from Brown (1993) and Henry (1995), provide detailed discussion of the distinction among seven facets of well-being and compare well-being to quality of life and standard of living. They challenge the profession to continue the dialogue about this fundamental political/moral focus for the profession. But, there is little written evidence that this dialogue has continued, nor does it seem that professionals have agreed upon a political/moral meaning of family well-being.

In 1993, papers were commissioned in preparation for a conference in Scottsdale, in which the name of the field was changed to family and consumer sciences (American Home Economics Association, 1993). But, subsequent writings and meetings do not show a sustained effort to identify the meaning of this name change for the field. Some would argue that the name change, adding a consumer and family focus, has given us a new opportunity to search for common ground in our dialogue about our work.



Brown (1993) urges us to look at our specializations as determined by the nature of human problems. She further emphasizes that “specialization and integration of knowledge are not mutually exclusive. [Specializations need] a frame of reference that can encompass them and give form and shape to a conception of the whole” (p. 260). Baldwin (2002) asks what would happen if we were to embrace an integrative, holistic organization with specializations and integrationists addressing real human problems.

The common ground approach to conversation would begin with a synergistic approach emphasizing what is shared rather than what is different. It is an effort to reach an understanding about each other's point of view (both among specializations and among individual members). The goal is to build a professional agenda to address what *ought to be* in relation to one or more family issues, e.g., consumerism, globalization, family stability, etc. In time coordinated action by all professionals could impact the field in very positive ways.

### ***A Possible Plan of Work***

Consensus might have merit, but is it just pie in the sky thinking? This type of dialogue involves a new way of thinking and a “big” time commitment. It can be exciting. It might begin with members of a national student organization, e.g., honor society or student club who is willing to reach a goal, even against great odds. Other examples of small groups might include members of state professional organizations, college faculty, public educators, or personnel in corporations or non-profit organizations. To obtain a “sense of the meeting” or consensus requires a cadre of committed persons willing to work together, even against great odds. From the beginning, these persons believe that what they are attempting can be done.

The remainder of the paper will focus on a possible plan of action beginning with pre-service professionals (student members of an honor society), assuming that preparing the current generation of family and consumer sciences professionals is one effective means to pave the way for a consensus on a political/moral focus for the profession in the future. A chapter of the national honor society would sponsor a for-credit seminar that would give members a chance to try the process. The chapter adviser or another interested university faculty member could teach the course. Students from the local chapter

would sponsor the course, take the course themselves, and recruit other interested students in the college and other organizations across campus. The course enrollees would be limited to 12 to 15 students, hopefully with diverse majors.

The non-graded one-semester-credit course would consist of 15 weekly meetings of 50 minutes (12.5 hours). The curriculum would involve reading about the consensus building process in philosophical and Quaker literature and possibly interviewing persons who have engaged in this type of dialogue. Approximately 5 of the 15 weekly class periods would be devoted to discussing the readings and the information gleaned as well as outlining the process to be adopted. During these class periods of discussion a tentative list of “rules of practice” is undertaken. The rules could be altered as the semester progresses. An example of a rule of practice relates to commitment, e.g., all students are required to attend all classes and to read all assignments in the appropriate time frame. There will be a need to clarify how non-attendance or lack of preparation for a particular discussion will be handled. Each class member must believe in the importance of the dialogue and be committed to a successful outcome.

In a non-graded situation, other motivational factors play a large role. Students need to view learning as beneficial now and in their future work. The particular question to be answered or issue to be addressed in the subsequent discussions is of particular importance. It could be a question pertinent to the chapter, an issue getting much campus publicity, or one known to be pertinent to a number of students in the group. The selection of the question or topic for dialogue will influence the success or failure of the endeavor. The answer to the question will require an action by the members of the group.

As the practice sessions begin, two or more of the class participants during each class period serve as observers, rotating until each class member has served as an observer. The remainder of the class members are involved in the actual process of consensus building related to the question and to the desirable action. The observers take notes on the operation of the group and report their observations at the beginning of the following class period. A brief discussion about their report follows. What strengths were observed? Weaknesses? How do the participants feel? How did the observers feel? New observers

are then selected for the remainder of this period. The original dialogue continues. This format for the class continues until consensus has occurred, all members have served as observers, or both.

Finally, members of the class assess their knowledge of and comfort or discomfort with the process. Hopefully they can, then, plan a method for telling others about the process of consensus building. The teams make appointments to present what they've learned about consensus building to student groups across campus including their own organization. Other types of organizations to contact include departmental clubs, sororities, fraternities, professional clubs, honor societies, etc. At the end of this semester experience, each student enrolled for credit would be required to write a brief paper on her/his perspective of the semester experience. An additional option is to have the students keep a reflective journal to individually document the dialogic process.

Hopefully, after this experience a group of students from the sponsoring organization would take their new learning to a state, regional, or national meeting. The objective would be to initiate a continuing dialogue about a common organizational problem and at some point reach consensus on an appropriate action to be taken by the group. If time constraints do not allow this to happen in one meeting, which is likely, dialogue can continue in special chat rooms on the Internet and at other national meetings until consensus does evolve. Some consideration would have to be given to the nature of the role of the observer when engaging in chat room conversations because the dynamics of the operation of the e-group would be different than for an in-person meeting.

If the experimental process of building consensus is successful, it is envisioned that some former students who are now new professionals would take this form of dialogue to the meetings of their respective organizations. At this level the process involves four key steps indicated earlier. One, a problem and its context would be identified, e.g., identifying a statement of purpose of the national organization that is endorsed by all members. Two, the valued ends or purposes of the statements meaning are established. Third, the possible actions that could be taken will be named. Fourth, consensus is reached on one appropriate action to be taken. Other actions may follow.

The focus of the on-going conversation is sustained at each annual meeting of the national or international organizations, and by continued dialogue through e-mail and in chat rooms. The dialogue may continue for some time. Chosen issues, problems, or questions can take any form desired. Sample questions for a family and consumer sciences group might include:

- What is meant by strengthening individuals and families?
- What change was envisioned or should be envisioned now that the word “consumer” is in our name and “family” has been added?

Questions might focus on one of the areas of the body of knowledge to establish a position related to that area of knowledge. Possible questions related to the body of knowledge are set out in the following text (Baugher, Anderson, Green, Nickols, Shane, Jolly, & Miles, 2000):

#### *Wellness*

- What ought to be addressed in a definition of wellness?
- Who should define it?
- Why is wellness important to individuals, families, and to society?
- How much is individual and how much is societal responsibility?
- How does each of family and consumer science specialization, e.g., food, clothing, housing, art and design, human relationships, and resource management, relate to wellness?

#### *Appropriate Use of Technology*

- How is technology increasing and/or reducing the quality of life for individuals and families?
- How has technology affected our thinking about non-technological aspects of life and about humans in general?
- Who (in families, in schools, in workplaces) is being advantaged and who is being disadvantaged by technology?
- What should family and consumer sciences professionals do to prepare emerging professionals for responsible professional practice in relation to technology?

- What should family and consumer sciences professionals do about professional preparation to change uses of technology that are unfair and disempower individuals and families?

### ***Global Interdependence***

- What are the explicit and implicit, intended and unintended consequences of our present approach to global interdependence in the lives of individuals and families?
- Are our global actions as professionals consistent with our valued ends?
- What should family and consumer sciences professionals (including those in specializations) be doing to promote our valued ends within a globally interdependent society?

### ***Capacity Building***

- What should we do about creating an environment to promote optimal human capacity or individual self-formation in a rapidly changing world?
- How should we use the asset of diversity for the greater good in the family, community, society, and the world?
- What should we do to empower individuals, families, communities, and related social organizations to participate in enlightened critique and formulation of social change?

### ***Resource Development and Sustainability***

- ◆ What should we do to encourage responsible resource development and sustainability consistent with our valued ends?
- What should family and consumer sciences professionals do to prepare themselves and others to be critically reflective about managing resources from generation to generation?
- What should we do about unfair and unjust distribution of resources to people and places in the world?
- What are the consequences of consumerism on resource development and sustainability for individuals and families in the interdependent world?

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented some thoughtful reflections and possible actions that might help family and consumer sciences professionals of the future choose a succinct political/moral focus (what ought to be) to guide their work. It is suggested that this action be based on dialogue that finds a consensus from our common ground, always keeping in mind the value is not in the consensus but in doing what should be done. Initiating and sustaining this type of conversation will involve risk, but hopefully not 25 years.

Often we reflect on our differences. In the type of conversations suggested here, commonalities will surface that were not obvious before. The goal of family and consumer sciences professionals is to make the world a better place. It is suggested here that a focused action to further this goal be pursued in a concerted effort by all professionals in tandem. It will require a new way of thinking, consensus not majority rule. A succinct political/moral focus requires taking power and responsibility from the leaders and distributing it among all professionals. It will take time and patience.

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