

# Globalization, Family Life, and the Future Research Environment in Home Economics and Human Sciences

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**Abstract :** This paper identifies trends in research methodology due to globalization. Context in both research and in practice and forms the key perspective for modern methodology and theory. Ecological perspectives are a necessary condition for quality global research. Human ecology researchers must advance the role of interdisciplinary and inter-functional perspectives and be open to collaborative relationships. These researchers must work in teams across disciplinary and functional boundaries. The paper discusses directions for research within the context of trends at U.S. federal agencies with applications to globalization and family life. Trends include: (a) use of diverse but rigorous methodologies; (b) recognition of the research-practice-research feedback loop; (c) primacy of context and diverse sampling; and (d) connections of research to problem solving. The terms promoted recently such as “relationships”, “diversity” or “problem-based” are ingrained in human ecology. Key aspects for research in the next decade will be: (a) seeking diversity in sampling; (b) seeking colleagues with different perspectives; (c) incorporating meta-analysis into our work; (d) seeking meaningful results; (e) utilizing varieties of research methodologies to address our problems; and (f) understanding that practice must continually change as a function of research.

**Key Words :** Globalization; research methods

Over the past several decades the context of research within home economics has changed considerably. Over the next decade we will see even greater demands on scholars to both return to the roots of our profession and make rather profound and significant shifts in the research process and our expectations for research. Friedman (2000) notes the significance of electronic banking with instantaneous marketplace fluctuations in eliminating the concept of “the markets are closed” and that events that occur in

any part of the world now have significant economic and thus political ramifications everywhere.

Media influences, as we all know, also know no geographic or even time boundaries as downloading on the Internet means opportunities to see and hear music, movies and news abound. A sixteen-year-old living in Tennessee and struggling with a French homework assignment gets her question answered by a woman in Paris browsing the Internet. Recent mergers among media conglomerates set up global

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markets and spheres of influence clearly indicative of the “one world, one market” mentality. Such activity brings us together but runs the risk that rather than encouraging exposure to diversity and expanding opportunity, we may be narrowing the accepted range of behavior and values. For our researchers and practitioners, family life must be considered within the complexities of the both the small community and the larger global context.

## I. The Global Context

What does all this mean for families and for research in home economics/family and consumer science? Sensitivity to these issues must become part of our methodical and theoretical base of research. Global, cultural and contextual perspectives must not be an “add-on” to our thinking but part of our base theory. Moreover, based on the trends emerging across the globe, the need for what we do in home economics and consumer and family life is growing. However, we must realize that the ecological perspective, once considered unique to our profession, is becoming more and more critical across a variety of sciences and we must evolve with changing nature of science in a global environment. The caveat we need to apply, however, was well articulated by Dr. Ki Young Lee (2000) in a paper presented a few years ago. Dr. Lee noted that restructuring our science to address the common ground of global studies does not mean adoption of dominant (i.e., most often Western or Occidental) paradigms, theory and research methods but rather demands a

sensitivity to the role of context and culture. The late Edward Said noted that there is an obsession even in the Arab world exists with the West and the United States “but very little attention to India, Japan, china, the great civilizations of the rest of the world” (pp. 19-20) and we could easily add Korea to this list.

Context has always been at the root of ecological perspectives in both research and in practice and thus forms the key perspective for modern methodology and theory. As one looks to recent advances in general theory, the relevance of context emerges over and over again. Whether in natural or social science, the driving force for 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars was often to find the “universal” laws that underlie interactions no matter where or when such interactions occur. Perspectives emerging from an understanding of Chaos Theory (see Gleick, 1987 or Wheatley, 1999) provide us with a much different orientation. Order evolves not from a few single laws. Rather, if one can take a more distant perspective, order emerges from the diversity of what appears to be unique and distinct interactions. Chaos theory demonstrates the connectedness of context. Physicists now recognize that a butterfly flapping wings in Korea may indeed affect the weather in Knoxville; grocers surely know that the power outages in either Milan or Milwaukee have impact on global marketplaces; and we all know the world trade, political, economic, social, and emotional effects of the event of 9/11, whether in Dubai, Bangkok, Monrovia or in Seoul.

The need for application of a contextual ecological approach to events and conditions

around the world is evident. Our research related to family life will need to address:

- (a) the application of research findings to the context of real experience,
- (b) the continued evolution of the role of women,
- (c) the growing number of transitions from state-controlled economies,
- (d) new and emerging conceptions of the role of marriage,
- (e) connectivity across disciplines and functions,
- (f) understanding the process of translational research, and
- (g) the dominant exposure to Western perspectives to work, family and individualism.

As one looks at issues that emerge from a global perspective, we recognize that ecological perspectives seem to be a necessary condition for quality research. What we are finding, however, is the distinctiveness of home economics within this paradigm is dwindling. This perspective is no longer only the purview of home economics or family and consumer science research but will be required for researchers in all fields. We need to be the scientists developing the new insights on the implications of these changes. As we address the complex issues of the day, we will find ourselves interacting with colleagues that expose us to different perspectives and disciplines. Nutritionists will interact with public health and medical professionals as much as or more than they do with family economists. It will be our ability to bring the methodologies and perspectives of each together that will lead to new insights. Just as spatial and temporal boundaries are disappearing there is no doubt that disciplinary boundaries will

also give way in problem-base research. Thus it becomes incumbent upon home economics researchers to continue to advance the role of interdisciplinary and inter-functional perspectives and also to be open to even greater collaborative relationships.

The recent re-conceptualizations of the body of knowledge in home economics or family and consumer science frame the context of our work. That effort is directed at helping individuals, families and communities be able to make decisions that improve their relationships, health status and financial stability. The global environment provides a context of need that demands the attention of home economics and family and consumer sciences.

One need not look far to be confronted with major societal issues related to health, relationships or family economics. The list could include:

- (a) The life expectancy in parts of Africa such as Swaziland has dropped from 59 years to 39 years and is projected to fall to age 30 by the year 2010 as AIDS continues to devastate this part of our world (Lewellis, 2003; USAID, 2002).
- (b) In a world that still has significant pockets of starvation and food shortages, we are also confronted with a growing worldwide epidemic of obesity such that the United States is reporting that 15% of its children are overweight and at risk for long-term health problems.
- (c) The transition from state-run economies in eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall or China's acceptance into the World Trade Organization has been so rapid

that the knowledge that families have to cope with a new set of parameters is limited, often resulting in a bifurcation of rich and poor.

- (d) Emerging concern about access to credit and how people are educated about credit is growing not only in these regions of the world but also in more mature free-market economies.
- (e) The role of women within society and marriage, indeed the very concept of marriage itself, is being reconsidered as social and political boundaries evolve and erode (see Brooks, 1995). The role of women in Afghanistan society has undergone significant change since the presence of the U.S. military operations removed the Taliban from power. Another example of change can be seen in the United Arab Emirates where Zayed University was designed and built in 1998 with the commitment to providing quality higher education to female nationals and to helping young girls transition to the workforce.
- (f) The legitimacy of civil unions and domestic partnerships among gay and lesbian couples is gaining more credence in Europe and the civil rights of these persons appears to be becoming recognized within the United States.
- (g) These concerns, as have the civil rights of women in other cultures, have brought to the surface tensions among concepts of religious freedom, individual civil rights and the role of religion in determining national policy.
- (h) Indeed at issue is the very purpose of marriage. Is marriage a social contract

primarily for procreation, for population growth, for companionship, and/or for a form of legal protection?

We could certainly extend the list further but none of these situations are isolated to a single geographic region in scope or influence and all are at the heart of home economics/family and consumer sciences. All require global, interdisciplinary research-based answers.

Harry Dent (1998) suggests that today's society calls for "specialists-generalists"; people who are experts within selected areas but because of their perspective and abilities are able to work in teams across disciplinary and functional boundaries to solve complex problems. One could argue this is the very definition of a "home economist or family and consumer scientist". Margaret Wheatley (1999) has explicitly stated that the power in organizations or people lies in the capacity generated by relationships and that:

"For a system to remain alive, for the universe to keep growing, information must be continually generated. If there is nothing new, or if information merely confirms what already is, then the result is death" (p.96).

Therein, she defines the role of a home economist scholar or family and consumer scientist. The task at hand is to provide new information about the relationships between systems that support individual, family and community lives. *Only by doing so will these systems thrive.*

This year, as we begin preparation for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, we might look back at the major family

concerns raised by the United Nations in preparation for the 1994 International Year of the Family (United Nations, 1991). Among the major family concerns identified at that time were:

- (a) changes in families as a result of economic modernization,
- (b) the rights of individual family members (especially women),
- (c) the role of the governmental or other external agencies in assuming the responsibility for meeting some of the basic needs of families, and
- (d) how to avoid promoting a single ideal image of the family (pp. 11-12).

These sound familiar. All of these issues appear to be as salient today as they were a decade ago. We need to ask ourselves: What has been done to advance social policy and research related to the family since that time? What research strategies must we employ to assure we bring new information to public awareness to address these vital issues?

## **II. U.S. Research Policy**

To begin this discussion my first comments will be structured around directions for our research in terms of design and methodology within the context of trends at U.S. federal agencies with applications to the issue of globalization and family life. These issues include:

- Use of diverse but rigorous methodologies to answer questions;
- The recognition of the research-practice-research-practice feedback loop;

- The primacy of context and diverse sampling; and
- The connections of research to every-day problem solving.

This discussion (which is derived from previous comments, Moran, 2003) utilizes personal interactions with program officers of various U.S. federal agencies and recent reports from the National Academies of Science on public health, on agriculture, and on the education of young children (IOM, 2003; NRC, 2000; 2001; 2003). Also relevant to the higher education community are the recent reports of the Kellogg Commission (2000) promoting a shift from the oft-used terminology of “Research-Teaching-Service” to “Discovery-Learning-Engagement”. This shift forms the basis for connecting scholarship to learning, to context and to community. This model of the outreach university, not necessarily common across the globe, appears to be to be vital to the spirit of scholarship within home economics and family and consumer sciences.

The universities that will prosper in the next decade will be those that make a difference in the social, economic and cultural life of their communities. Making a difference takes several forms but vital to that process is a collaboration strategy that brings the full range of scholarship to community issues and brings together the right expertise to address issues that are meaningful to the community itself. This requires a process of building collaborations across university systems and state or community agencies. A growing body of literature talks of the scholarship of university outreach (Lerner, 2003), utilizing the theoretical approaches of applied developmental (or human)

science (Lerner, Jacob, & Wertlieb, 2003; Lerner & Simon, 1998) and the holistic models articulated by family and consumer science (Meszaros, 2003). Collaboration across disciplinary and functional categories and involvement of community partners is a growing academic (and often financial) imperative in the nature of scholarly efforts over the next decade.

At U.S. federal agencies there has been a decided shift from inputs to outputs and shift to a focus on problem-based work that is interdisciplinary in both function and context. Friedman (2000) has talked about the changing metaphor of our society:

*From the Wall* (emphasizing division; exemplified by the Berlin Wall or the Great Wall of China or the Israeli barrier being constructed as we speak)

*To the Web* (emphasizing instant and complex connectivity; exemplified by the Internet). The strong emphasis on connections and on interdisciplinary approaches in method,

design and knowledge is now firmly rooted in the scientific paradigm of the next decade.

The emphasis on rigor of scientific merit is now matched with a move to consolidate research findings across a variety of disciplines and methods. Research must continue to exercise the appropriate controls but must also sufficiently reflect the context and experience of the population. Global research that simply measures differences in single instrument responses in different countries is no longer sufficient (especially, if reported as multiple studies). Theoretical and explanatory processes for understanding the influence of different cultures

are critical. Cross-cultural responses on an instrument that measure work ethic, for example, may not reflect differences in work ethic per se but only that such a construct expresses itself differently in different contexts. The same construct may need to be measured using different instruments. In my own scholarship on creativity in children, we recognized that, as children aged, you measured the expression of creative potential in different ways and thus inter-correlations on the same instrument across age were not to be expected even though creative potential as a construct may be stable within children. Such theoretical models, complex as they are, provide a basis for understanding culture as context.

Although specific federal research agencies all have their own agendas, fairly consistent themes seem to be emerging. Within the U.S. Department of Education, the demonstrated need is the use of the research knowledge we have developed over the past decade (e.g., on brain development) to inform and change practice. One asks: How have we used the knowledge gained from research over the past decade to change practice? For example, we have an early childhood education program at the University of Tennessee. Is our daily practice different as a result of the several research studies conducted in our facility last year? Curricula must incorporate the latest findings into practice. To do so, however, we must have confidence in the applicability of the research and the implications of that research must be conveyed appropriately.

The U.S. Department of Education seems keenly interested in knowing what works, why it works, and in what contexts it works. Growing recognition into the influence of context is critical

as is the inclusion of diversity in sampling. We know that “what works” is contextually dependent and formal incorporation of that variable (in terms of place, time, and people) appears critical to our understanding and translation of research into practice.

Related to this issue is the need for research and research methodologies to investigate how best to “scale up” from pilot project to community, from community to nationwide, from a nationwide to an international scope. The term being used by several agencies is “translational” research-how do we study the process of moving research from the lab to practice and from my context to yours? As we research into the practice process we know that limitations exist, especially with respect to contextual variables, and developing new methodologies to provide better understandings of that process is important.

Interestingly, whereas the U.S. Department of Education, more or less starts at the application level, the same concept is being advanced at the National Science Foundation, which has tended to start at the basic research level. The dichotomy of basic-applied research seems less relevant as does the separation of discovery and engagement. Expectations for scientific rigor, however, do not diminish. The key is using methodologies that allow for an emphasis on multivariate and multi-method strategies, on context, on diversity (esp. in sampling), and on applicability. *Complex modeling is required for simple understanding.*

When research is focused on problem solving, the questions posed grow in complexity and thereby necessitating interactions across disciplines beyond the scope of home economics or family and

consumer sciences. The U. S. National Science Foundation appears very interested in putting knowledge together from different disciplines to attack problems in innovative ways. The recent seminal volume *How People Learn* (2000) is an example of an attempt to do just that and to summarize the state of the field by searching the literatures from a wide variety of disciplines as those studies might inform our understanding of learning.

Efforts within the U.S. Department of Agriculture reflect similar trends. USDA research is noted for being problem-based and yet even more formal recognition has been given to the notion that problem-based research requires interaction across traditional boundaries. This has been formalized into policies that suggest that a minimum of 25% of USDA funded research must be multi-disciplinary, multi-functional (research-extension linkages) and even multi-state. The latter provides recognition to the importance of context and “scalability”. The National Academy’s (2000, 2001, 2003) recent volumes on frontiers in agricultural research, on learning, and on public health all provide challenges for more complex research designs, more sustained analysis and more attention to context and culture.

### **1. Applications for Home Economics /FCS Research and Practice**

Thus what appear to be the existing themes from the U.S. federal agencies in terms of research efforts sound fairly familiar to home economists and family and consumer scientists. Terms such as *interdisciplinarity*, *integrative* and *context* are part and parcel of the profession (Anderson and

Nickols, 2001; Baugher, et al, 2000; Nickols, 2003). The terms we have heard within these federal agencies recently such as “relationships”, “diversity” or “problem-based” as reflecting a shift in perspective for them are simply a matter of returning to our roots for us. Clearly evident in the connection between discovery and engagement, is the fact that our field recognizes that research and practice cannot operate distinct from each other and that our practice must be informed by scholarship.

The trend that emerges is “research” as part of everyday professional life and the life of an educated citizenry. Within the field of education, we are talking of the “teacher as researcher” model and noting that research-i.e., the observing and interpreting and acting on behavior-is part of that every day learning cycle of teachers (Tegano, 2001). Asking ourselves “What did we learn about how students learn today?” becomes the essence of good teaching. In our own work, we learned from the Italians in Reggio Emilia to look for “capacity” in children rather than utilizing the “deficit” model that has so dominated the American approach to assessment of children.

What we see in home economics research today is a solid foundation for understanding the connection between discovery and learning. Research cannot exist apart from practice and each informs the other. Complexity of design and multiple perspectives is becoming necessary. The value of applying methods of one discipline to a problem normally within the purview of another may yield interesting results and is a natural consequence of collaboration. An interesting

example that appears to be the emerging use of Geographic Information Systems in a myriad of research studies in our various fields. We need to begin to look for greater comprehensiveness in our designs and conceptualizations of scholarship. Such comprehensiveness includes the following.

### **1) Seeking diversity in all sampling.**

Recognize we live in a pluralistic society and that context whether a function of time, place, or heritage is an inevitable variable that must be considered for the research to have validity and applicability. The global perspectives that we confront everyday inevitably require us to begin to consider culture as a variable that is built into design of comprehensive studies rather than one that is addressed primarily in cross-experimental comparisons.

### **2) Seeking colleagues with different perspectives to a topic.**

Perhaps we are reaching the point in which single discipline research (and thus single investigator) research is becoming outdated or repetitive and redundant. As we begin to look at global research, scientists of one culture studying another run the risk of perceptual bias that means design and interpretation may be limited by cultural perspective. As we see decreases in communication barriers we will also see greater insight derived from interaction of scientists with distinct life views. Without such perspective our impact on improving the lives of individuals, families and communities will be limited.



### **3) Incorporating more meta-analysis into our work.**

We need to better understand what the state of the field for a given problem utilizing the literature from several different perspectives and disciplines. Too often literature reviews are “annotated bibliographies” simply recounting who did what when rather than analyzing the confirming and conflicting data to understand the nuances and interactions within the larger set of data obtained through the series of diverse studies. Good analysis integrates related work from disparate fields to yield new insight. This is especially related to the application of methodologies to different fields thereby yielding interesting results. Global perspectives will be served with the advent of translation software that will enable truly comprehensive literature reviews, which are now quite limited.

### **4) Seeking significant and meaningful results not simply more of the same.**

We need to consider the importance of larger scale studies or sustained bodies of work that include multiple cultural perspectives and diversity in sampling. We cannot understand support systems for “the family” as called for by the United Nations without incorporating multiple perspectives. Building theory about family functions has been limited by singular cultural viewpoints, especially in the United States. Problem-based research must deal with the complexity of the world and thus involves multivariate methods, multiple perspectives, and the attention to context, to values and to the

diversity of life. *Chaos theory provides us with the assurance that with perspective what may appear to be discordant data will eventually yield systematic harmony.*

### **5) Utilizing a variety of research methodologies to address our problems.**

Too often we stay within the comfort zone of what we were taught or what we know best rather than diversifying our own strengths or seeking out those who complement our strengths. We are past the silly debate on the merits of qualitative vs. quantitative research and on to the demonstration of scientific rigor within whatever method is most appropriate to the question at hand. Nor can we be simply satisfied with the disclaimer that this research is not meant to generalize or be used in another context. What we need to look at is how these data and insights can be used to address the problem at hand within different contexts. The inevitable questions are: How does context influence the behavior? How does behavior influence context? What is it about the context that is important? How do I, as a researcher, affect both context and behavior? And, if my interpretations differ from yours, why is that?

### **6) Understanding that practice must continually change as a function of recent research findings and new knowledge gained.**

If we assume we know more today than we did yesterday, we must ask how that knowledge changes how we practice or interact. If, for example, we know more than we did a year ago

about how children learn, how does that affect the practices in our early education centers? Indeed, as our journals are full of new research studies, we must assume we actually do know more. How do we utilize such information to organize new systems for supporting families? What influence does this knowledge have on policy? *New information only helps systems thrive if that information enters into practice.* We need to ask ourselves: What will we do differently next year as a result of what we have learned this year? Practice, policy and research are intertwined. New knowledge is the lifeblood of any learning system and the separation of functional units addressing family needs is rapidly disappearing.

### III. Concluding Remarks

Globalization has already changed each of us. Fears abound that one culture will be dominant over the rest. Some believe we will see a homogenization of culture, I see greater diversity within various cultures emerging. As a result, individual cultures will be less homogenous and that will bother some. However, it appears inevitable that increased exposure to various worldviews will increase “within culture” variability. Our task as scholars is to help others understand the complex process of contextual variation within the roots of cultural heritage. Thus we may end with more rather than less variation.

As we enter into the second decade following the U. N. declaration of the “International Year of the Family”, our task must be to bring to a realization the goals and principles espoused by

this global community over a decade ago. The issues of

(a) individual rights, (b) the definition of the family, (c) adequate health care and (d) access to financial resources and education are still issues that demand attention. We have access to new theoretical models and new methodologies that allow us to ask more complex and meaningful research questions. We have the charge to continually bring new information to light to sustain the systems supporting families. We know we must understand the role of context to build developmental assets. Through the discovery and engagement process, we must partner together to assure we are indeed helping families or as the U.N. has declared assure we are “Building the smallest democracy at the heart of society” (United Nations, 1991).

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