What does "Bring Back Home Ec" Mean for Us? 
Challenging the Discourses of Obesity and Cooking

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Introduction

In 2003, Jennifer Grossman wrote an opinion piece for The New York Times titled *Food for Thought (and for Credit)* with the opening sentence “Want to combat the epidemic of obesity? Bring back home economics.” That thought seemed to simmer for a while and then in 2011, Professor Helen Zoe Viet wrote another opinion piece for the same paper titled *Time to Revive Home Ec*. In between, in May 2010, a commentary appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association titled “*Bring Back Home Economics Education*” (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010). Since that time reaction to these articles and additional articles have appeared in the popular press and on the Web arguing for the return of home economics as a school subject.

To “bring back” implies that there is no home economics education in schools at present that is not necessarily the case. In Canada, it is still present in most provinces and territories with the exception of Quebec where it was removed from the school curriculum in 1997 (Deschambault, 2007). It is variously known as Home Economics, Family Studies or Human Ecology. In the United States, the national association changed its name from Home Economics to Family and Consumer Science in 1994 and since that time the name of the school subject in most states has changed to match the national association and is commonly referred to as FACS. In Britain, it has been taught under a Technology banner. In other parts of the world it is offered as Home Economics, Home Science, Domestic Science, and similar descriptors. So it hasn’t disappeared but the public perception is that it has. This may be due a variety of factors such as the name change, or the non-compulsory nature of the courses, or the change in what was considered the typical curriculum content due to reduction of facilities and/or financial constraints, or the gradual decline in enrolment due either to the emphasis on academics or competition from other elective subjects, to name a few. It may also be due to the struggle that Home Economics has had to maintain a presence in higher education. The demise of university level programs has been well documented (see for example, Abe 2006/7; Nerad, 1998; Smith & deZwart, 2010) and often the lack of strong public support was a factor. So the question arises, “why now, is there support for the field?” and “is this a good thing?”

The purpose of this research is to critically examine the calls for “bring back home economics education” to determine a) what arguments are presented for this claim? b) What should the curriculum of the “new” home economics include (according to these authors)? Then discuss the findings in light of what it means for home economics/family studies/human ecology/family and consumer science education.

Methodology
Using various search engines, including Google Scholar and Google, and the
search words, Home Economics, Home Ec, Bring Back, and the time period of 2010 to
present, 39 articles were found (see list in Appendix A) with titles that either:

a) used both Home Ec or Home Economics and “bring back”; or

b) included Home Economics, Home Ec, or a home economics related course, e.g.,
Food Studies and a term that indicated that the intent was to advocate for the
subject area, e.g., “mandatory” (D’Amato, 2014; Phillpot, 2013; Watson, 2013;),
“revive” (Graham, 2113; Okanagan Institute, 2013; Veit, 2011), “relevant”
(Rhodes, 2011); or
c) argued for a return of home economics that was different from the stereotypical
view often held by the general public, e.g., “make Home Ec rad(icle)” (Blackmore,
the new Home Ec.” (Grayson, 2013); or
d) included Home Economics, Home Ec, or a home economics related topic, e.g.,
Food literacy and the article included “bringing back” or argued for the return of
home economics classes (e.g., Grossman, 2003).

Most were American (32), with five Canadian and two from the United Kingdom.
Most were from the popular press, for example, national and regional newspapers,
internet publications such as magazines, newsletters or blogs. Two journal articles
(Lichtenstein, & Ludwig, 2010; Peregrin, 2010). and one research paper (Eaton, 2013)
were included. The articles were analyzed using a combination of content analysis and
discourse analysis.

**Content Analysis**

Two levels of content analysis were used. One was a surface level visualization
using word clouds and the other was deeper analysis involving analyzing the text at a
deeper level related to conceptual framework of the research.

Word clouds, also called tag clouds or weighted lists, are a visual depiction of the
frequency tabulation of the words in any selected written material. Pendergast (2010)
used this technique to analyze home economics documents. It is considered a
supplementary (McNaught & Lam, 2010) or exploratory (Cidell, 2010) visualization
technique. Font size is used to indicate frequency, so the larger the font size, the more
frequently a word is used (note: not necessarily their importance). The advantage of word
clouds is that they create a simple visual image, the disadvantage is that key concepts
may be excluded because the words used to describe a concept appear infrequently, it
neglects the semantics of the words, and the context is lost so you lose the meaning of the
narrative of the text (Cidell, 2010; McNaught & Lam, 2010; Ramlo, 2011; Viégas &
Wattenberg, 2008). In this case it was intended to be a simple strategy for me to obtain a
quick but brief overview of the data. I recorded the most frequently occurring words for
each of the 39 articles and then did a word cloud of them as well.

Next I conducted a more thorough content analysis. Krippendorff (1980) defines
content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from
data to their context” (p. 21). It involves making inferences from the words, illustrations,
and pictures. For example, the pictures in textbooks have been analyzed for the
frequency of women or men and the typical roles portrayed to determine if there is
gender balance or gender stereotyping, agism, cultural bias, and so on (e.g., Wong, 2013). The content in journals has been analyzed to determine what topics are most common (e.g., McGregor, 2007). The content of two curriculum documents can be compared to determine if there is duplication, for example, a comparison of home economics and health (e.g., Thomas & Arcus, 2007). In this case I was interested in determining the reasons authors were giving for bringing back home economics and what topics they thought home economics should include.

Krippendorff also explains that in order for the process to be replicable, “the rules that govern it must be explicit and applicable equally to all units of analysis” (p. 21). According to Krippendorff (1980), six questions must be addressed in every content analysis:

1) Which data are analyzed? (39 articles)
2) How are they defined? (see above)
3) What is the population from which they are drawn? (largely journalists or bloggers)
4) What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed? (how the public views home economics education and why do they want it “back” – mainly in North America)
5) What are the boundaries of the analysis? (content and discourse of the articles related to home economics)
6) What is the target of the inferences? (to answer the research questions)

First I read each article carefully recording in a chart with these headings: citation; type of publication; key arguments; comments about what home economics courses could/should include; main concepts using word clouds; images accompanying the article; other authors if cited; and, whether there was a section where readers to comment on the article. I used exact quotes to fill in the two columns: key arguments; and comments about what home economics could/should include. After this preliminary examination of the data I created emergent codes that were used to categorize the data. Using coloured highlighters I coded the data in the key arguments section of the chart (i.e., why are the authors advocating bringing home economics back into the schools) according to these categories:

- Obesity and Related Health issues
- Lack of cooking skills
- Lack of financial literacy
- Lack of a wide range of basic, practical life skills related to home and family life (i.e., more than just cooking or financial education)
- Lack of understanding of the influence of the obesogenic environment
- Environment and sustainability issues

I used similar codes for the data in column on the chart where I recorded information on what the authors thought home economics could do or what a “new”, “revised” home economics should include:

- Cooking
- Financial literacy
- Practical life skills (more than just cooking or financial literacy)
- Understanding the food system and the influence of multinational corporations on what people eat
• Environmental/sustainability education

I recorded whether or not the articles were accompanied by images or photographs and if so included a description of the them. I then analyzed them for what image of home economics they presented which for the sake of brevity I have not included in this paper. I also noted whether the articles cited other articles so I could determine whether there were articles that were considered more significant. I used frequency counts to portray the data. Krippendorff (1980) recognizes frequency as the most common form of “representation of data, serving primarily the summarizing function of analysis” (p. 109).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become an umbrella term for widely recognized approaches to the study of oral or written texts. It is an eclectic research strategy with epistemological connections to critical theory, post-structuralism, and social constructionism. It focuses on the social and political issues related to the texts and textual production, examining both the subject matter but also the social relations, assumptions and ideologies that inform it. It is concerned with analyzing how social and political inequalities as well as power relations are embedded and maintained in discourse. It involves a critical reading and interpretation of the text that allows for the underlying arguments to be understood and studied. In home economics, it has been advocated by Brown (1994) and McGregor (2003).

Findings

Content Analysis

a) Word Cloud Visualization

For the word cloud visualization I chose to use a freely available website: http://tagcrowd.com/. I chose it because it was very basic and it portrays the data in typical text form (horizontal, left to right) and gives a numerical value for the word counts in addition to using the size of the font to indicate the words used most frequently. I created a word cloud for each article and recorded the main concepts. For example, the Lichtenstein and Ludwig, (2010) article from the Journal of the American Medical Association, the most cited article, is shown in Figure 1.
Often it was possible to state the key argument by combining the main words: [Learning] food preparation [and] cooking meals [by] children [and] adolescents [in] schools [will reduce] obesity. The second most cited article by Viet (2011) is shown in Figure 2.

The main argument then is, Home economics [teaches] cooking food [at] school [that can help in the fight against] obesity.

After creating a word cloud for each of 39 articles and recording the most frequently occurring words, I did a word cloud of all the main concepts that appeared in the word clouds, creating a word cloud of all the word clouds in Figure 3.

The purpose of word-clouds is to summarize the most important terms in a visual presentation. The main argument for bringing backing home economics that runs
throughout the articles revealed using word cloud visualization to summarize the content, appears to be: *Home Economics class* [teaches] *food cooking* [and] *preparation skills* [at] *school* [which is needed to prevent] *obesity*.

b) Content Analysis using Emergent Codes

The second level of analysis was a more thorough content analysis. Using absolute frequencies (the number of articles that mentioned them) the arguments presented for why home economics should be brought back into the schools are displayed in Figure 4.

![Reasons for Bringing Back Home Economics](image)

**Figure 4. Reasons for Bringing Back Home Economics.**

Obesity and related health issues related to obesity received the most attention. Thirty-one of the articles reiterated the sentiment expressed by Grossman 2003, that home economics could combat obesity. These articles were consistently accompanied by statistics that show the rise in the percentage of children and adults who are overweight and obese and the host of diseases that are linked to obesity such as diabetes, and heart disease. This was often referred to as the “obesity epidemic.” Some of the articles made strong claims using terms such as home economics could “cure obesity” (e.g., Leschin-Hoar, 2012) or “save a generation” (Lobello, 2013). The Gross-Low (2013) article suggests that Japan’s low obesity rate is related to the fact that they have compulsory home economics education from fifth grade through high school. But none of the articles provided empirical data supported these strong claims.

The second most common rationale given for “bringing back” home economics was the lack of ability in the general public to cook. This was given as the reason for the current obesity rates therefore the argument was “put the tools of obesity prevention in the hands of children themselves, by teaching them how to cook” (Veit, 2011). Twenty-
four of the articles mentioned that cooking was a lost skill and home economics courses were needed to teach young people to be able to prepare food for themselves and/or their families.

Rather than focus mainly on cooking skills a little less than half of the articles (15) identified the need for a broader understanding of home economics as providing practical home making and life skills. “It is not just about teaching them [students] how to make salads and fruit smoothies” (Peregrin, 2010) but “how to cope with the ups and downs of family life (Allen, 2014).

Another reason for bringing home economics was “the current food environment” (Peregrin, 2010; Sharma, 2010) with “diets consisting of highly processed foods made cheaply outside the home thanks to subsidized corn and soy” (Viet, 2011). It is argued that “a stronger home-ec curriculum also could rebut the myth that heavily processed foods are cheaper” (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010), address the modern, industrialized food world (Blackmore, 2013), understand corporate involvement in the food supply (Mann, 2014) and avoid pitfalls in the marketplace (Dannelke, 2011). Carroll (2013) went so far as to say that students could “repair, reinvent and renew” a “broken food system”.

Those advocating for home economics to address financial literacy generally referred to the current economic crisis as a rationale and concern about the debt load faced by college and university students and many families.

Only three articles mentioned environmental concerns and sustainable lifestyles as a priority for bringing back home economics in the schools highlighting food and water waste and energy consumption (Grayson, 2013), “understanding the triple bottom line which includes people, prosperity, planet; to live in a sustainable way” (Eaton, 2013) and sustainable eating, frugality and the ethics of industrial agriculture (Martinko, 2013).

Generally the “old” home economics is perceived as “old fashioned”, and focused on “women’s work”. Grayson (2013) claimed that “home economists, including teachers had…become hopelessly entangled with the interest of food and appliance companies, promoting convenience foods and consumerism.” Most agreed that “home economics must be modernized” (Cunningham-Sabo & Simons, 2012) using terms such as “revive”, “rebrand”, “reevaluate”, “retool”, “revitalize”, “rebooted”, “tweaked”. What should be included in the “new” home economic parallels the rationale for bringing it back (see Fig.
The highest priority is given to learning to cook with the main focus making meals from scratch. For some, this was not sufficient on its own and they advocated for broader life skills such as “basic household management” including nutrition, shopping, reading labels, media literacy, hygiene and safety, taking care of children, and even sewing, plumbing and car repair. Those who were concerned about the current food environment, for example Carroll (2013) argued, the new home economics should equip students to better understand and engage with the larger food system. Where food comes from, how it is processed and distributed, and what policies have helped shape the foodscape we inhabit.

The articles for financial literacy suggest budgeting, wise shopping, debt management, and how to buy a house should be included taught in home economics. A small number of articles mention such topics as greener habits, sustainable eating, growing your own food, and sourcing local ingredients.

Critical Discourse Analysis

There are two main discourses that I find troubling - those related to obesity and those related to cooking. As I mentioned above obesity was given as the main reason for "bringing back”, reintroducing, or making home economics mandatory in the schools. The inability to cook was the second most common reason and learning to cook was identified as the most important taught topic to be taught in home economics.

Obesity Epidemic

According Wright (2009), the “obesity epidemic” has become “one of the most powerful and pervasive discourses currently influencing thinking about health and bodies” (p. 1). Based in the epidemiological literature, that has been described as founded on shaky science, faulty assumptions and tenuous correlations, this discourse has instigated a
public health war reliant on moral and cultural ideologies that mask the uncertainties of the biomedical knowledge (Gard, 2010; Monaghan, Colls, & Evans, 2013; Raila, Holmes & Murray, 2010). Labelling it as an “epidemic” has evoked a “moral and economic panic” such that tactics of surveillance and regulation appear to be justified (Wright & Harwood, 2009). Labelling obesity a “disease” means that experts can prescribe a treatment. Informed by Foucault’s notion of biopower and governmentality, critical scholars (e.g., Wright & Harwood, 2009) have argued that governing bodies in the name of health is the result. Governmentality in this case generally means the government of one’s self but also includes the government of others. There is a particular emphasis on the position that individuals are primarily responsible for their health. This is a blame the victim approach that is underpinned by a neoliberal economic agenda of individualism telling people – “You are responsible” – “It is a moral imperative that you do not cost us health care dollars”. It amounts to fat shaming. The discourse gives rise to biopedagogies, an apparatus of governmentality that centers upon controlling and regulating bodies to reduce obesity or to protect populations and the state from the ‘risks’ of obesity using various strategies for intervention, at multiple pedagogical sites [schools being one] (Wright & Harwood, 2009).

**Discourse Related to Cooking**

The call for cooking skills is also part of the “moral panic” with cooking becoming linked to the well being of society and the ethical responsibility of all (Coveney, Begley & Gallegos, 2012). How to cook interventions appear to be a logical target for obesity prevention but this intervention is based on faulty assumptions. First of all there is no magic bullet that will cure obesity (if indeed it is a problem) and currently there is no strong evidence to support the assumption that obesity can be cured by simply learning to cook (Nelson, Corbin, & Nickols-Richardson, 2013). There is also no empirical causal evidence that trends in body weight are linked to the inability to cook. As well, education programs are based on the tenuous assumptions that people don’t know how to cook, that they are not knowledgeable, that they refuse to take responsibility for their own health (McPhail, 2013), that they actually have a home with kitchens that are equipped and safe (Bowen, Elliot & Brenton, 2014) and access to food and the time to prepare it. There is an assumption that people do have a choice (which may or may not be the case). Additionally there is little consideration of what constitutes “cooking” (Short, 2006). Meah and Watson (2011) challenge the discourses on the decline of domestic cooking and highlight the need to problematise claims regarding a historically recent ‘death’ of traditional cooking skills. Such narratives rest upon a simplistic framing of the complex processes, knowledges and skills involved in accomplishing the provision of a meal in any historical situation, and contestable assumptions about the dynamics of generational transfer of those attributes (p. 6).

Despite the questionable foundations, the obesity and cooking discourse has become so pervasive as to become hegemonic, an ideological belief system that cannot be separated from patterns of behaviour and practices. It has produced mistaken and misleading beliefs about the way people live and the relationship between people and their material conditions of existence. The language of individual choice and increased emphasis on personal responsibility are part of the neo-liberal discourse of individualism (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009) whereby it is assumed that each person has total agency
over his or her life and the capacity to assume responsibility for their basic needs. The role of government is economic growth and it is believed that economic interests should not be fettered by considerations of social equity such as health care and education (Ungerleider, 2006).

Prescriptive educational programs, cooking classes, become a form of biopedagogy focusing on the governance and regulation of individuals and population through practices associated with the body (Wright & Harwood, 2009). They press people toward increasingly monitoring themselves often through increasing their knowledge around ‘obesity’ related risks and ‘instructing’ them on how to eat healthy by cooking their own food. The role of the expert is key. They deliver authoritative discourses passing on the required knowledge about what to cook and the correct way to cook it, missing all the economic/social/cultural/familial connections people have to food (Coveney, Begley, Gallegos, 2012).

**Implications for Home Economics**

Being associated with these discourses is problematic. They place home economics as a form of social control and home economists as prescriptive ‘experts’ instructing (training not educating) students on what and how to eat, pressing them to increasingly monitor themselves. It seems ironic after all the years of trying to get away from the sewing/cooking stereotype we are placed right back in the kitchen.

**Conclusion**

I collected these articles in search of allies. Home economics has a long history of having to defend its position in both higher education and public schooling. Initially it was heart warming to see articles that were actually supporting our profession. Now I am not so sure. So many of the articles focused on bringing back home economics because of the “obesity epidemic” and on home economics as a cooking course, that it became somewhat discouraging. Granted there were some articles that seemed to understand the need to broaden the context to independent and family living skills for all students (not just women and girls) and a few that brought in the critical perspective of understanding the corporatization of the food system and the environmental aspects of food production and consumption. But on the whole many of the claims were based on simplistic understandings of home economics.

Physical activity is also often mentioned as a “cure” for obesity. Critical scholars in that field have been cautioning members to be wary (e.g., Gard & Kirk, 2007; Gard, 2011; Raila, Holmes & Murray, 2010). Likewise, dietitians have been alerted to the potential harm of obesity discourses and are encouraged to take a more critical approach to their practice (e.g., Aphramor & Gingras. 2011; Brady, Gingras & Aphramor, 2013). Home economist and home economics educators (by whatever name they go by, Family and Consumer Science, Human Ecology, Family Studies, etc.) must do the same. We simply cannot accept uncontested discourses. Paraphrasing Gard (2011), I ask the questions “what confidence can we have that home economics, even under ideal conditions, could make a discernable difference to population body weights?” Do we really want to be associated with the discourses of obesity epidemic and cooking?

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Appendix A: Articles Advocating for Home Economics


