

**What Happened to Home Economics? An Essay on Households, the Economy and
the Environment**

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in the midst of all the abstract and inconclusive debates about the limitations and potentials of modern economies, it is still the original meaning of the word economy—the ordering of the household—that needs to be recalled today.... (1986, page xv)

These words were written almost two decades ago by the Vanier Institute of the Family in an effort to include the household as an important, but overlooked, component of economic development. Today, the household is becoming an increasingly significant unit of analysis for those seeking to understand and address a related but distinct issue, that of environmental sustainability. For example, a broad range of critical economists have invited the neo-classical version of the discipline to become greener by adopting holistic and inclusive concepts including social capital and notions of family and community (see, for example, Daly and Cobb, 1989 or Ekins *et. al.*, 1993). But what of home economics itself, the traditional discipline for examining the economic dimensions of household life? To what extent has it incorporated green thinking in its analysis of the household?

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how home economics contributes—and fails to contribute—to our understanding of environmental sustainability. The paper will begin by providing a definition of home economics and a rationale for the focus on households. It will then review and critique the mainstream framework used to understand the economic organization of the household, particularly in the areas of household production and consumption. Finally, the paper will conclude by offering greener alternatives to home economics thought.

Why Home Economics?

These days, anything with the word “home economics” in it gets short shrift. Many educational institutions have thrown the discipline into the dust basket, opting to

adopt more acceptable frameworks than the household. Meanwhile, other institutions have tried to re-invent the discipline with new names such as “family and consumer studies” or “human ecology.” But while there are some good grounds for discounting the contributions of home economics as an area of inquiry¹, there are also many reasons to embrace it. Some, for example, have proposed that home economics education be used as a platform for promoting critical thinking. In other words, instead of teaching households about issues such as consumer rights and financial literacy, the curriculum could focus on helping North American households understand the linkages between their behaviour and the health and welfare of the rest of the world (McGregor and Bourbonniere, 2002). This could involve acknowledging the labour practices used by corporations which make goods available to North American consumers, and the natural resources used in manufacturing. Others, recognizing the role that home economics can play in addressing the tremendous social, economic and environmental challenges that communities face today, are suggesting ways for “radicalizing and renewing” (Peterat, 2001, pg. 30) the discipline by adopting theoretical frameworks from fields such as community economic development, feminist economics and eco-feminism.

Home economics, however, is a broad term. It represents an interdisciplinary field that encompasses the theory and practice of areas such as family and human development, nutrition, textiles, consumer education and the economic organization of the household (also called household economics). It is the theories that explain the economic organization of the household which will be the main focus of this paper, and

¹ One of the most common critiques of home economics is that it served to preserve the household as a women’s sphere. Some scholars of history and women’s studies have disputed this criticism by arguing that home economics provided one of the earliest opportunities for women to establish careers within industry and academia (see, for example, Stage and Vincenti, 1997).

how these theories, particularly with regard to production and consumption, contribute to our understanding of environmental sustainability.

The economic organization of the household started gaining serious attention in the 1960s (Peterat, 2001) when economists began applying a neo-classical framework to the functioning and organization of life beyond firms and the market. A classic example of this work is Gary Becker's *A Treatise on the Family* (1981) which provides economic interpretations for decisions about household activities ranging from child birth and marriage to divorce. According to W. Keith Bryant, author of a well-used textbook on the subject, households can be considered similar to the firms, non-profits and governmental organizations analyzed by economists in that they use a combination of inputs to maximize utility. For example, firms, subject to technical, resource and legal constraints, use combinations of labour and capital to maximize profit, while households use a combination of human and physical resources to maximize their own utility. These human resources include elements such as time, skills and energy, while physical resources include capital and assets. Similar to firms, households are bound by constraints, including the physical ability of members, available finances, hours in the day, and socio-cultural values (1995). To be fair, however, profit maximization is not considered to be the singular goal of households as it is with firms. While household economists agree that much behaviour within the home can be explained by the financial benefits it brings to members, maximizing utility can also include seeking happiness, health and comfort (Bryant, 1995). But while that acknowledgement makes household economic theory more holistic in its outlook than its conventional neo-classical counterpart, is it able to fully incorporate an ecological framework into its analysis?

Why Households?

An increasing number of scholars, activists and think tanks are acknowledging the detrimental ecological impact of most Western households. Indeed, despite public education programs, social marketing campaigns, and the vernacular adoption of sustainable development discourse, households continue to pollute. The average Canadian household generates approximately 4,000 pounds of garbage per year (based on figures in Godbey *et. al.*, 1998) and North Americans are purchasing more fuel inefficient vehicles than ever before. Moreover, we continue to spend more money on superfluous consumer goods despite the fact that our closets are full to overflowing (Schor, 1998). As a result, the attitudes, behaviours and motivations of household members are becoming an increasingly important focus for research.

Households are also an important unit of demographic analysis, and government agencies look to track the number and size of dwellings so that important trends can inform policy issues. Statistics Canada has demonstrated that while the total amount of household units has increased dramatically since the Second World War, the category of household currently showing the most growth is that of single occupant (Friedman and Krawitz, 2002). As a result, the rate of housing construction is increasing at a faster pace than the population, as there are now more homes, apartments and other dwellings being built or retrofitted to accommodate the demands of single or widowed adults. This, in turn, feeds into the first concern about the ecological impact of households since a higher number of single occupant dwellings usually results in less efficient land use and greater demand for consumer durables such as refrigerators, cars and washing machines. Further, this trend is exacerbated by changing standards of living and an emphasis on

material wealth which has resulted in the threefold increase of the size of homes over the past fifty years and amenities for each member of the family including multiple bathrooms, computers, and television sets (Godbey *et. al.*, 1998). This trend both increases the number of consumer “durables” which ultimately find their way to landfills and boosts the amount of energy used in the home.

The Economics of Household Production

According to those who study home economics, households devote time to both production and consumption. Household production involves the generation of goods and services by household members, for household members, using combinations of labour and capital. The capital could include land (such as garden space) and appliances, while the labour contributed to the process is unpaid (Ironmonger, 2001). Examples of household production include meal preparation, cleaning, home repair, caring for children or the elderly, and providing transportation. Of course, households can also purchase goods and services through the marketplace, and indeed maximize their utility by choosing combinations of market goods and home-produced goods subject to both available technology and time constraints (Bryant, 1995). As a result, the theory of the allocation of time (Becker, 1965) is useful here. In short, household members have three decisions about where to devote their time: to leisure, wage labour, or household production. Because families, like firms, are utility-maximizing, they make decisions about where to allocate their time based on the maximum amount of goods and services that can be attained through their work. When one’s wages are equal or greater than the marginal product of household labour, household work is substituted with market work. Stated differently, if a household member can acquire more goods and services through

an extra hour of market work than can be produced through an extra hour of unpaid work at home, the individual will choose to participate in the labour force and use the income earned to purchase the goods and services. This is known as the production substitution effect (Bryant, 1995).

Before examining the strengths and limitations of this theory, it is important to provide a context for household production. The activity is often associated with subsistence economies, and invokes images of activities such as marginal farming or hunting and gathering. Moreover, the weakening of household production is often lauded by conventional economists since, as Cogoy (1995) writes “It is a dogma of industrial society to believe that economic progress consists of a continual shift of labour and skills from household-based...[production]...to the commodity-based economy, since it is believed that do-it-yourself activities that can be efficiently substituted by goods and services which are delivered to the market by economically operative and therefore presumptively efficient enterprises.” (pg. 172) Canada’s market economy is also strong and pervasive, even swallowing a number of facets of every day life such as celebrations, cultural events and public space. The household, of course, has not been excluded from this ‘marketization.’ It is therefore legitimate to ask the question: Does the typical household in Western society still produce? A number of indicators suggest that the answer is yes.

First, a look at data on consumer expenditures and household dwelling characteristics reveals that households devote a portion of their annual budgets to resources used for production (Statistics Canada, 2003a; Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2003). Examples are appliances, tools, and raw materials such as utilities and food.

Second, statistics on time use also point to household production. The 1996 Census demonstrated that of the approximately 22 million Canadians aged 15 or older, only 8.6% devoted no time to housework (defined as unpaid house, yard or maintenance work) while almost 30% committed 15 hours a week or more (Statistics Canada, 2003b).

Third, much attention has also been paid to whether and how household production should be counted. A common critique of the Gross National Product (GNP) is that it only includes market transactions (Ironmonger, 2001); as a result, an activity such as childcare is only included in the GNP if someone is hired to do it. To counter this omission, some critics have proposed calculating the economic contribution of household production based on the market value of the unpaid work while others have proposed providing a wage for those who contribute to household production. This movement is ongoing: for over a century, feminist thinkers have critiqued neo-classical interpretations of labour, but as late as 1995, women's groups from around the world were calling upon governments, international organizations and agencies that gather statistics to develop "...methods...for assessing the values, in quantitative terms, of unremunerated work that is outside national accounts, such as caring for dependants and preparing food...with a view to recognizing the economic contribution of women..." (Ironmonger, 2001, pg. 9)

Fourth is the scholarly attention paid to household production. For example, in *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1985) offers several explanations for the ongoing presence of home production despite the apparent time-saving nature of technological advances such as indoor plumbing, washing machines and vacuum cleaners. These include rising standards of material wealth which have resulted in larger homes and more

clothes to wash, the gendered division of labour in the home coupled with the rise of women's participation in paid employment, and increasing amounts of time spent in the automobile driving to grocery or hardware stores located on the outskirts of urban areas. Marxist scholars have also acknowledged the significant presence of household production, some as proof that the capitalist economy is not as pervasive as it seems (for example, Gibson-Graham, 1993) and others to demonstrate that household work supports participation in the formal market system through the production and reproduction of labour (for example, Luxton, 1985).

Having described the practice of household production, the economic theory used to analyze it can now be considered in terms of its ability to help us understand households and environmental sustainability. Recall the theory of the production substitution effect states that household members will make decisions about how to allocate their time based on the maximum amount of goods and services that can be generated from each hour worked. From the vantage point of environmental sustainability, such a formula is entirely problematic, overlooking as it does the ecological impacts that result from trade-offs between household and market. Such trade-offs include the greater amount of energy and materials often required to produce goods and services in the market versus the home. For example, a study on the relationship between participation in the paid labour force and the adoption of time-saving strategies found that families with two working partners purchased a greater number of meals outside the home than families in which one adult did not participate in the paid labour force (Kim, 1989). Fast food restaurants and take-out were particularly popular strategies for replacing meals prepared in the home with meals served by the

‘McMarket’; these are also the eating establishments and styles which have been identified as generating the most waste (Godbey *et. al.*, 1998).

A reliance on market production can also have the impact of deskilling, or perhaps disengaging, household members. Home energy conservation is an example of this phenomenon. Although household members can become active agents in the use and flow of energy in the home by, for example, installing more insulation or fluorescent lighting and using more efficient appliances, participation in home energy saving initiatives is low. As a result it has been suggested that “...the present organization of household energy consumption transfers planning and organizing skills to market enterprises and reduces the skill of the consumer to turning on the switch whenever an energy service is required.” (Cogoy, 1995, pg. 176). Additional environmental impacts result from the distance that exists between households and the market. Households lose sight of environmentally unfriendly practices used to meet their demands for goods and services; those who engage in production do not have to make their personal lives where they work. Production processes that rely on the use of toxic substances, for example, are more easily tolerated in the impersonal realm of the market than in the intimate domain of the household. A shift from household to market production can also result in the perpetuation of waste-generating activities instead of the creation of new practices that reduce the amount of resources used in the first place (Cogoy, 1995). In other words, it is not common for firms to adopt input practices that minimize environmental damage unless it is a means to increase profit. Instead, consumers and governments are left to manage the waste created, including polluted lakes and air as well as toxic garbage. Researchers also anticipate a further set of impacts resulting from decreased involvement

in household production, including lower participation rates in waste management activities such as composting or recycling programs that require cleaning and sorting; the greater adoption of excessively packaged convenience foods; less time devoted to repair, meaning that goods are discarded and replaced rather than maintained (Godbey et al., 1998); and increased demand for time-saving appliances such as microwaves (Kim, 1989).

This paper does not mean to suggest that goods and services offered through the market economy are, by their very nature, unsustainable; nor does it wish to suggest that all productive work done within the household should be considered green. One can think of businesses such as diaper or personal chef services which allow working parents to trade their income for services which are ecologically sound. Still, the tendency for firms is to put profit as their single bottom line, and this profit often comes at the expense of the environment. The point here is that negative environmental impacts can and do follow the replacement of household production with goods and services offered by the market, and that these impacts are not considered in the theoretical framework used to understand household production. Further, this paper does not have as its goal to suggest that all goods and services now provided by the market be transferred back to the household. For one, our current economic system is structured so that participation in the labour market results in a wage, while working in the home is not. Income, however, is an important source of status and power in our society (Cogoy, 1995), and unless household production became a common and unified practice across all households (through, for example, a policy which mandated four-day work weeks), an increase in production among some households may exacerbate income disparities and deny access

to opportunities and power structures often available to higher income households. Somewhat related to this issue is the gendered division of labour within the home: time use studies demonstrate that women continue to be responsible for more unpaid work in the home than men, regardless of whether women are employed full-time, part-time, or not at all (Statistics Canada, 2003c). A shift to greater household production would likely exacerbate the challenges already experienced by women, including the stress of managing “double days” and the barriers to career advancement given the call of household responsibilities.

Despite the fact that the economic theory used to explain household production does not account for the environmental implications of trade-offs between market and non-market activities, the very fact that the theory *acknowledges* household production has positive environmental implications. Micro-economic theory generally considers firms to be the form of organization responsible for production, while households are considered to be solely focused on consumption. This assumption holds with it two negative insinuations. The first is that households are passive recipients of the goods and services made available to them by the market rather than important actors who have a certain amount of agency over how they spend their time and allocate their resources. In other words, the assumption denies households the power to step out of the market system and find alternative strategies for meeting their needs, and fails to acknowledge the ability of households to organize against the market through efforts such as boycotts or lobbies that pressure firms engaged in unsustainable practices. Second, it suggests that the market system is all encompassing, meaning in our society that capitalism dominates all aspects of day-to-day activity. The problem here is that this notion serves to

perpetuate the position of capitalism as the hegemonic paradigm used to understand and regulate society, a paradigm which incorporates environmental degradation in its pursuit of profit and accumulation of capital. A focus on household production, however, opens a window on economic activity which exists outside the market system, an opening that may give capitalism an “identity crisis” (Gibson-Graham, 1993) and help us think of other, and perhaps more sustainable, ways to organize all sectors of economic life.

The Economics of Household Consumption

So far, this paper has discussed the economic theory of production and the contributions it has both made and failed to make in terms of providing a framework for understanding households and environmental sustainability. But what of household consumption? In other words, when households decide to consume goods or services rather than produce them, how are their decision-making strategies understood by home economists? The theory, in fact, is similar to the rational model of consumer choice used by mainstream neo-classical economists, although it is not individuals but households which are the focus of inquiry.

Consumption, in short, can be understood this way: households make decisions about what products and services to buy based on combinations or bundles of goods that will maximize welfare, subject to financial constraints (Bryant, 1995). This model makes the following assumptions about households: that they are primarily concerned about satisfying their own welfare or utility rather than the welfare of the wider community; that consumption choices are based exclusively on the preferences of household members (in other words, they are not influenced by other households); that they are expected to exhaust all financial resources available on goods and services; and that they have perfect

information about what is offered by the market. Unfortunately, however, this rational model of household consumption does not bear well for sustainability:

If the world was populated exclusively by the self-interested and welfare-centered consumers postulated in the standard model of rational consumer choice, individual [or household] action would not appear to be a particularly appealing strategy for moving towards more sustainable consumption. No matter what the preferences of self- and welfare-centered consumer are, the alternatives she faces, and the budget within which she operates, she is always better off by exhausting her whole budget, either by consuming now or in the future, and it is best for her to spend her budget on a basket of items that maximizes her welfare—no matter what the effects of her consumption are for other humans and nonhumans.” (Paavola, 2001, pg. 231).

There are other elements of this theory which are not only discouraging, but seem to fall apart in the face of the complexities which are apparent in the consumption behaviour of households. For example, although households are held to be interested in their own welfare and in maximizing utility, there is evidence that they not only let environmental considerations guide consumption choices, but are also willing to pay more for greener products. The increasing popularity of organic foods serves as an example. Industry reports show that in 2002, 30% of households purchased organic food (The Packer, 2003), even though agricultural products without pesticides, antibiotics or hormones are consistently more expensive than conventional products. Yet organic food has become so popular that over \$8 million dollars was spent last year on organics in the U.S. alone, and demand for the product has become so widespread that more organic food is sold in standard grocery stores rather than retail outlets which specialize in natural foods (Dimitri and Greene, 2002). And while some households do purchase organic foods out of health concerns, research has also shown that consumers are motivated by the environmental degradation brought about by industrial agriculture (Goldman and

Clancy, 1991). In response to this shortcoming, it has been suggested that this theoretical tenet be replaced by the notion of value pluralism (Paavola, 2001), where it is understood that households make decisions about the bundles of goods and services they consume based on a range of objectives that can change over time or vary from good to good. In other words, sometimes households may make consumption decisions based on the theory postulated by neo-classical economists and be driven by mantras such as ‘more is better.’ Other times, households may make decisions based on what they feel is best for their neighbourhood or beyond.

Another problem with the economic theory of consumer decision-making is the notion that households are not influenced by the consumption habits of others. This is clearly questionable: in fact, ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ is such a common part of our idiom that this tenet appears to counter common sense. Indeed, there has been a long history within disciplines such as sociology and anthropology to both acknowledge and attempt to understand relationships between the propensity to consume and social relations. For instance, notions of conspicuous consumption and positional goods have been introduced to describe the phenomenon of displaying items that serve as signals of wealth and status in society (Bell, 1998). Examples abound, and include owning a large home, two homes, or expensive cars. The trend to use material goods to demarcate one’s position in society has also been exacerbated by the tendency for households to expand their notion of reference group. In other words, household members once compared themselves to neighbours living in the same community or to a small network of co-workers or friends. Today, however, households compare themselves to those they see in the media, and this propels the cycle of consumption (Schor, 1998). Others have talked

about the Diderot effect, where the consumption of one good or service triggers the consumption of another. For example, the purchase of a new coat may lead to the purchasing of new footwear or an entire wardrobe, while home renovations in one room may lead to new furniture or renovations in another (Schor, 1998). Anthropologists have suggested that we consume goods because they play an important meaning-making role in communities, symbolizing rituals and religious events, and distinguishing the every day from celebrations.

Of course, the sociology and anthropology of consumption aside, it would be an oversight not to mention the powerful role that the advertising industry plays stimulating consumption. And not only are firms spending billions of dollars advertising, they are finding increasingly pervasive ways to expose households to their products. Further, firms encourage consumption by reducing the durability of goods and the longevity of a product's lifecycle (such as that of computer hardware or software), and by developing specialized products such as footwear for every kind of sport (Ropke, 1999).

In all of these ways the rational model of consumer choice fails to encompass the complex nature of household behaviour. In the process, it tends to promote environmentally unsustainable consumption, overlooks factors which contribute to over consumption, and underplay the capacity of households to take environmental considerations into account when they make decisions about the goods and services to purchase from the market.

From the Household to Beyond: Exploring New Models

A final critique of the economic framework used to make sense of household consumption and production concerns how these theories contribute to an accurate

measurement of the household's impact on the environment. Because the theory delineates production and consumption activities by what occurs exclusively within the boundaries of the home, attempts to account for the environmental impact of the household translate into tallies of 1) the amount and kinds of goods purchased by household members as well as 2) the volume of water, electricity, fuel and other energy sources used by households over a fixed period of time. This system is problematic in that it fails to account for any environmental impacts that occur from either making available a good or service (such as creating and providing electricity by burning coal and emitting carbon dioxide) or disposing of it (such as the potential dangers of burying nuclear waste). As a result, the economic framework of household production and consumption and the accounting system on which it is based are not, as researchers in this area point out, "...capable of identifying or even measuring the influence consumers have on the overall environmental stresses." (Spangenberg and Loreg, 2002, pg. 131-132) In response to this shortcoming, these researchers suggest reformulating the unit of analysis so that the emphasis is not placed on households as such but on consumption clusters which include both household and market impacts on the environment. Examples of such clusters include food, transportation and housing construction. This would result in a blurring of the lines that divide our focus between households and the market, as these clusters would identify not only the areas in which households consume a significant amount of natural resources, but how much responsibility and influence households bear in the environmental degradation created by the production and supply of these goods.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss and critique how home economic theories contribute to our understanding of households and the environment. While the theories of household production and consumption exhibit few strengths and many weaknesses, it is perhaps by embracing expanded models of the household, rather than greener theories, that we will achieve greater sustainability at the household level. The critique of Spangenberg and Loreg, for example, invites other possibilities for expanding the very unit of the individual household to other models or initiatives that are perhaps more environmentally friendly. Cohousing is such a model, where households retain some autonomy and private space but also give up some aspects of their individuality for the common good. In such housing developments, kitchen, yard or garden space is communally owned and consumer amenities such as tools or small appliances are often shared. This model is not only interesting in that it challenges the standard understanding of the household as a unit of analysis, but also because it has implications for household production and consumption. For example, in a study of 18 cohousing developments across the United States, it was found that communal meal preparation was an important benefit to community residents not only because of the social ties it created but because it allowed them to save time. Because many people are available to contribute to meal making, individual families need only help with cooking and clean-up once every five to six weeks based on a system in which two communal meals are held per week (Gardner, 1999). As a result, households in which two adults participate in the labour force need not make the same trade-offs between household production and consumption, thereby avoiding the negative environmental impacts of convenience or fast foods.

A second example is the phenomenon of car cooperatives, in which one or more vehicles are jointly owned and shared by households in a given neighbourhood. Ironically, car cooperatives may present a more efficient economic model than private ownership given the fact that cars owned by individual households sit idle for 95% of their lifecycle while cars owned cooperatively go unused 70% of the time (Gardner, 1999). Moreover, not only does car sharing reduce the number of cars in our cities and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels, it also challenges the economic theory of household consumption through the concept of the inter-household ownership of goods. Other examples of cooperation and sharing exist in our communities, and home economics can do better to seek them out, embrace them, and help us understand the complex relationships between the world we live in and the places we call home.

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