

The Home Economics Movement:

Discrepancies between founding intentions and contemporary internalizations

Leah Butler

English 315

Dr. Gold

University of Michigan

Since its inception in 1909, The American Home Economics Association (AHEA) founded by Ellen Swallow Richards strived to actualize its purpose of “the improvement of living conditions in the home, the institutional household and the community” (Spring, 2018). To the founding home economists, the word “home” seemingly encompassed more than just a physical place of residence. Contemporary discourse on the home and home economics education in the early twentieth-century by these pioneers suggests much broader definitions of these terms than historians have previously acknowledged, definitions that truly aimed to provide a vehicle for women to enter the public sphere and acquire careers in academia and social reform. Many scholars have been rather dismissive of the home economics movement as an expanding force in women’s freedoms. It has long been contended that home economics curricula solidified women as housekeepers and housewives, preventing them from participating in public affairs. Other scholars have recently urged a reconsideration of the movement’s progressivism (Stage, Elias, Seifrit Weigley). These scholars assert that although women’s activities were often ascribed to their femininity, domesticity, and morality, these attributes were not antithetical to women’s involvement in the public sphere. Women’s political activity was actually deeply rooted in domesticity. These scholars contend that the AHEA worked to integrate education on the domestic sciences with professionalism in order to extend women’s reach into public affairs.

Although the intentions of the home economics movement and its leaders may have been progressive, contemporary public discourse and popular press representations of the movement, which are largely understudied, had a large impact on its circulation and legacy. Thus it is important for us to investigate as they can provide insight into why the

movement did not propel successfully in the direction it intended. I contend that the home economics movement did aim to extend women's reach into the public sphere, but was misinterpreted and misrepresented in contemporary discourse. Therefore, the movement suffered in gaining popularity and did not reach its full potential. In this paper, I first analyze the events driving the creation of the home economics movement, including Ellen Swallow Richards and the founding of the AHEA. This information provides background and insight into the exigency of the movement, commenting on its purpose and intentions. I validate scholarly opinions of the movement asserting its progressivism through contemporary anecdotal pieces communicating the missions of founding home economists. Next, I analyze speech proceedings of the Lake Placid Conferences and the AHEA founding and debates on the inclusion of home economics courses in women's colleges that depict how the home economics movement was contemporarily understood. This will demonstrate a vital element of the movement that greatly hindered its trajectory and created a slanderous connotation. I also analyze published home economics curricula to demonstrate courses were not limited to traditional domestic activities, but truly pursued the municipal housekeeping missions of early advocates of home economics. Finally, I compare the founding intentions of the home economics movement with the realities of what home economics manifested as in schools throughout the twentieth-century, further illustrating public divergence. I argue that this miscommunication of intention between founders and the public may have been responsible for popular dismissive claims of the home economics movement's progressivism. Because of this, the movement was not appropriately recognized as an empowering force, politicizing domesticity and emphasizing education and professionalism to expand women's options.

Ellen Swallow Richards and a Municipal Housekeeping Mission

In 1899, a decade before the founding of the AHEA, a handful of trailblazing heads of home economic theory held a meeting called the Lake Placid Conference to organize a formal home economics movement. Records of this conference demonstrate that this movement was founded upon quite the opposite of solidifying women's role in the kitchen. Home economics was confidently promoted as "nothing less than an effort to save our social fabric from what seems inevitable disintegration;" this social reform outlook continued to influence the calls for home economics education throughout the next decade (McClellan & Reese, 1988). Additionally, these women held careers and were active in public affairs themselves; their success in the public sphere served as an example of the expansive possibilities educated women could attain with the help of home economics training. The most prominent home economist that masterminded the Lake Placid Conferences was Ellen Swallow Richards. Being a member of the first generation of college-educated women in the United States, she envisioned the home economics movement to appeal to the needs of similarly educated women to utilize their talents and energies (Elias, 2008). The inception of this movement occurred at the intersection of Richards's passion for science, commitment to furthering women's education and careers, and belief in the home as a source of social change. She continuously underscored the connection between domestic science and municipal housekeeping through the professionalization of domestic values. Her career and interests not only make her a qualified founder, but also provide insight into the exigency Richards perceived there to be in creating a home economics movement and further explains its focus and direction.

Richards's life experiences molded her into the ideal candidate to spearhead the home economics movement. Both of her parents were schoolteachers who highly encouraged her intellectual growth, sending her to an academy that accepted female students. Soon thereafter, Richards's mother grew sick, forcing her to take over management of the household at a very early age. She then entered Vassar College for Women in 1868, studying analytical chemistry. Upon graduation, the newly founded Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was looking for qualified students but was reluctant to accept a woman. The institute admitted her as a "special student," which allowed them to exclude her name from its roster and avoid the precedent of coeducation. At MIT, Richards was segregated into a corner of the chemistry laboratory, often making herself useful by sewing buttons for her classmates and cleaning the laboratory. Richards, throughout her life, found success in masking her progressive women's initiatives with domesticity. Richards received her B.S. in 1873, becoming the first woman to hold a degree from MIT. Richards married her husband in 1875, quickly immersing herself in the new role of wife and homemaker; she had no intention, though, of giving up her career and prided herself on her ability to manage her home and continue her research. She simultaneously led several social initiatives to further the cause of women's education and domestic science experiments that resulted in publications (Lippincott, 1999).

Richards's interests in home economics coincided timely with the social and economic changes resulting from the rapid growth of industrial capitalism following the Civil War. Educational reform became popular as critics demanded more practical courses to prepare students for work in industries and on farms. Men were provided courses in manual training, industrial education, and agricultural colleges. Training in domestic skills

was considered the equivalent practical education for women, gaining traction over the next decade. Richards considered these “professional schools for home and social economics” vehicles to further careers for women in institutional management and academia. This belief, though, clashed with the ideas of those who viewed home economics in more traditional terms. The success of the home economics movement was hampered by its confusion in the public mind with household skills, which were considered nonacademic (Stage, 1997). This challenge served as the impetus for Richards to organize the Lake Placid Conference in 1899 with a mission to standardize and professionalize a national home economics movement.

The records of the Lake Placid Conference clearly demonstrate Richards’s emphasis on improving women’s education and professionalizing the field of home economics. She called for “provision for the higher education of some selected young women who shall be fitted by the best training for a higher leadership” (Lippincott, 1999). This early proclamation depicts the movement’s intentions to educate women not for permanent roles in the home, but for leadership roles in society. Richards highlighted the scientific nature of the home economics movement by inviting well-respected leaders in science fields to attend the yearly conferences and contribute to the movement’s planning. This emphasis on professionalism and education proved worthwhile in 1909 when the AHEA was officially founded and elected Richards as its first president. The connection between domestic science and municipal housekeeping was continuously underscored at AHEA conferences with declarations like, “Obligations of home life are not by any means limited to its own four walls, that home economics must always be regarded in light of its relation to the general social system...which make the home and family effective parts of the social

fabric” (Proceedings, 1902). The movement conspicuously called upon women to move out of the home and to participate in social activism and progressive reform. Richards urged women to conceive of housekeeping and the home in their broadest senses and to make careers of carrying their values into the community. It is clear that, at minimum, all intentions of the home economics movement and its founders were to provide the necessary resources and education for women to utilize their domestic skills and values to better the public sphere.

Contemporary Dual Discourse on the Home

To understand how the public interpreted the home economics movement at the turn of the century, it is imperative to closely examine how the inclusion of home economics curriculum was supported or opposed in contemporary discourse. The term “home” carried a heavily loaded meaning, which varied to different people. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, the word stood for a complex web of values and beliefs, a potent response to the threat to traditional lifestyles imposed by the rise of urban industrialism. As industrialism separated workspace and living space, home came to mean more than simply a residence, but additionally an emotional state where the chaos of the marketplace was muted by the nurturing presence of the wife and mother (Spring, 2018). Home represented the separate woman’s sphere while the public, competitive domain of the market became the “man’s world.” This understood bifurcation of the world served to empower women at the same time it circumscribed their activities. Women like Ellen Richards appropriated this moral superiority ascribed to women to challenge the values of urban industrialism and expand female moral authority into the public sphere through municipal housekeeping. Richards’s conception of the social significance of home

economics drew its force from this gendered nature of the discourse on the home. By stretching the definition of the home to encompass “that larger household, the city,” she was able to broaden the woman’s sphere into municipal housekeeping without directly challenging the doctrine of femininity (Journal of Home Economics, 1909). Home, as Richards understood the term, became a symbolic code word for woman’s moral authority. Women’s moral authority coupled with their domestic skills allowed them boldly to “move into a male world and clean it up, as if it were no more than a dirty house” (Stage, 1997). Home economists cleverly utilized the gendered nature of the home to garner support through its traditional values but also through progressive empowerment of women.

Others took a less expansive view of the definition of the home in contemporary discourse. The speeches of male dignitaries who addressed the AHEA at its founding in 1908 hint at the way much of the public adopted a more literal definition of the home that emphasized it being a physical space presided over by a woman yet under the control of male authority (Seifrit Weigley, 1974). Exemplifying this idea, the commissioner of education, Elmer E. Brown, rhetorically reduced the work of the AHEA to merely superficial, stating that the “work of making more attractive and wholesome homes is work that is going to uplift the moral life of our people” (Journal of Home Economics, 1909). Alfred True of the Department of Agriculture interpreted the purpose of the organization as to “make better homes” and asked rhetorically if they could “maintain them as the pure source and happy environment of a vigorous childhood; can we keep them as the satisfactory supporters and encouragers of manhood and womanhood? (1909). The literalness of the male speakers’ view of the home was perhaps most perfectly depicted by supervisor of farmers institutes in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, John Hamilton, who

urged home economists to “go and tell country people how to put a bathroom in every house in the United States” (1909).

Not only were men perpetuating contrasting significations of the home and the mission of the movement, but college educated women were also debating the necessity of including home economics curriculum in women’s colleges. Some women insisted that formal home economics courses were useless because they taught concepts better learned practically through experience. In the *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Florence Anderson Gilbert wrote, “Far more important and precious than any technical knowledge are the intellectual resources upon which one must draw in life...much more useful has been the general mental training which has enabled one to grasp the essential points in a domestic science lecture” (1913). These courses were written off by many as redundant and unnecessary by those who believed they were simply life experiences to be learned outside the classroom. This perceived lack of value in home economics courses was exacerbated by ill-informed conceptions of the boundaries of domestic science. Elizabeth Lewis Day posited that home economics courses generally just “prepare [women] for married life” through courses like “cookery, kindergartening, nursing, sewing” (1913). The public often associated home economics with professionalizing housework instead of valuable courses such as stenography that directly translated to popular female professions at the time like secretaries. Published home economics curricula from Carlton Street Higher Grade Board School also offered air and water purification, town and village hygiene, and public health legislation courses, clearly pushing the boundaries of domestic science outside the home (Ravenhill, 1901). These arguments represent common, popular contemporary understandings of home economics curricula as a force to circumscribe women to the

home through traditionally domestic values, despite the much broader, progressive intentions of the movement discussed previously. This discrepancy exhibits the incomplete understanding of the meaning of the home economics movement and its goals for women by the public, likely due to preconceived ideas of the home.

The literal notions of the home portrayed by many in opposition to the movement may be contrasted with the broader vision enunciated by Richards and her contemporaries. In her address at the founding of the AHEA, she insisted “home economics demands a study of ways and means to maintain a training school for good citizens at a cost within the reach of all” (Journal of Home Economics, 1909). Her own work, which emphasized women’s new role as consumers, focused on economic and social issues, not on housekeeping or decoration. She then went on to discuss not the betterment of individual homes, but improved public facilities for entire communities (1909). These comparisons expose the existence of a dual discourse on the home in the early twentieth century in which the term “home” contained an entirely different set of inferences from those Richards and other home economists drew upon to expand women’s opportunities. A more constraining interpretation of the home, one that equated home with traditional housekeeping functions and circumscribed female activity, was carried on alongside the progressive discourse on the home fostered by those like Richards. Those instances cited above clearly indicate the contradictory ways the gendered nature of the home was used to perpetuate a preferred or understood role of a woman in society.

Skewed Actualization of Home Economics

As a result of the misinterpretation of the founding intentions of the home economics movement, the more restrictive perception of its principles continued to

circulate and gain traction, leading to a distorted realized movement in perspective and content. Nearing 1920, one interpretation of home economics had evolved to mean an education for women to exclusively run the home and a salvage from the poor conditions of industrial work. Leaders of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, primarily middle and upper-class women, supported the incorporation of home economics in public schools to consciously rid their "less fortunate sisters" of the harmful physical and moral circumstances of employment in factories, shops, and offices. Home economics was presented as "salvation through scientific investigation and cooperation" to systematically remove women from working in the public sphere and repopularize homemaking (Apple, 1997). In the face of the Smith-Hughes Act, a federal bill proposing funding the training of teachers of home economics, a senator made an emotional speech in which he linked the decline of the American family, divorce, and infant mortality with insufficient training in homemaking. Similarly, Representative Horace Towner declared, "It will benefit the whole scheme of homemaking if you elevate the home in the mind of the girl who thinks too much about becoming a shop girl, or a factory worker, rather than of going to the home and becoming a mother" (Bernard-Powers, 1992).

During the debate over the Smith-Hughes Act, very different definitions of home economics were still being used, though opponents often seemed unaware that they were using the same terms for diverging goals. Those who promoted vocational home economics as technical training for future gainful employment emulated the mission of Richards and other founders, hopeful women could move into the public sphere. Others envisioned vocational home economics as preparation for women's life work in the home. The curricula institutionalized following the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act combined

elements of both viewpoints, merging the emphasis on technical skills with the belief that every woman would run her own home. As a result, home economics education federally funded for schools stressed the preparation of women for their future occupations as homemakers (Apple, 1997). This view of vocational courses subsequently permeated college campuses. Rather than the social reform orientation of early home economists, this housewife skills-oriented curricula emphasized “information and technique rather than powers of thinking and judgment” (Trilling, 1920). A focus on bettering the public sphere through the expansion of domestic values by the movement’s founders were replaced with instruction in techniques of operating a home within a middle-class lifestyle.

In addition to legislative constraints on the reach of home economics, a social evolution also aided the regression of its progressivism around this time. In 1930, the AHEA announced its mission with an emphasis on “standards of home living...satisfying...to the individual...and profitable to society” (Stage, 1997). The organization clearly shifted away from its original goal of municipal housekeeping to the more traditional focus of upholding the home. This deviation indicated the changing position of women in society and the weakening of the ideology that women served a special mission to better society. The principles of femininity, morality, and domesticity and the authority they commanded at the beginning of this movement gave way to the rise of efficiency, expertise, and professionalism valued in women. Much like the home, “professionalism” proved to be a very gendered term, forcing the public to view the “female professional” as a contradiction. To exist at all, female professionals had to fight for footing on male ground and separate themselves from movements such as home economics. In that process, home economics became less of an effort to expand women’s opportunities toward a professional career and

regressed to training women whose job it was to remain in the home. This shift marked the beginning of a backlash against women's reform work outside the home; by 1920, politicized domesticity with its emphasis on volunteerism, reform, and uplift, the original goals of Richards, had no place in home economics discourse.

Consequent Dismissal of the Movement and its Rehabilitation

Early leaders in home economics envisioned the field as liberating, extending the boundaries of domesticity beyond the individual household. They believed women could and should use their education to improve their community. Unfortunately, the internalization of their missions were misconstrued by the contemporary public as a result of dual discourses on the home, perceived meanings of the movement, gender stereotypes, patriarchal attitudes, and legislation mostly beyond their control. Home economics curricula in schools consequently equated the movement with more or less than cooking and sewing. Rather than training women in critical thinking and urging women to reach outside the domestic sphere, twentieth-century home economics ended up teaching a narrow spectrum of domestic tasks. To remember the entirety of the home economics movement and the great strides of founding home economists for the regression it took in the 1920s and 1930s would be to completely minimize the movement's significant role in the Progressive Era. Far from cementing women in the home, the home economics movement led by Ellen Swallow Richards empowered educated women to apply their knowledge "not only in her own home" but "in all work for the amelioration of the condition of mankind" (Lippincott, 1999). Richards's politicization of domesticity encouraged women to undertake municipal housekeeping and enabled them to partake in

Progressive reform. As early home economics advocates insisted, “Home is in the mind and the heart, not in the kitchen” (Proceedings, 1902).

Today’s situation is strikingly different in several notable respects. Though the curriculum today is not a manifestation of the one proposed by founding home economists, it also is no longer the skills-oriented technical training reminiscent of just twenty years ago. These courses are no longer directed exclusively at women while men take woodshop or physical education, but are taken by all students when they are offered. The curricula are now much broader than cooking and sewing, now educating students in consumerism, environmentalism, and family and community relationships. Often, these courses are not referred to as home economics, but as family and consumer education, consumer sciences, human development, or human ecology. Emulating this evolution, in 1994 the AHEA renamed itself to the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS). Modern home economists are still fighting for a more comprehensive view of home economics education, which continues to be a dynamic component of American schools; its courses are constantly reflecting and responding to societal progressions and shaping educational opportunities for American students.