

THE THINKING PROFESSIONAL

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE



BY SUE L. T. MCGREGOR

The Thinking Professional: Transformative Practice

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By

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan –
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1
4DL

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83708-526-2 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-527-9 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-528-6 (EPDF)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-529-3 (EPUB)

CONTENTS

Preface vi

**PART I:
WHAT TO THINK ABOUT**

1. Paradigm Shifts and the Thinking Professional 3
2. Postmodernism 23
3. After Postmodernism 55
4. Recognizing Transdisciplinarity 69
5. The Human Condition 91

**PART II:
HOW TO THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT OR VIEW PRACTICE**

6. Holomovement Principle: Sustaining a Profession's
Life Energy 115
7. Philosophical Well-Being and Professional Wisdom 129
8. Communities of Practice 147
9. Transformative Change Agents 165
10. Perspective Transformation and Reflective Inquiry 183
11. Intellectual Curiosity and Skeptical Thinking 197

**PART III:
HOW TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY TO TRANSFORM PRACTICE**

12. Transformative Leadership	211
13. Reflective Human Action Leadership	221
14. Critical Science Approach	243
15. Critical Discourse Analysis: Exposing Power	265
16. Productive Pedagogies	281
17. Knowledge Management	293
About the Author	309

PREFACE

In 2006, *Kappa Omicron Nu* (a home economics honor society established in 1912) published a book that I had written titled *Transformative Practice: New Pathways to Leadership*. Confident that most of the ideas are still relevant, this is a second edition of that book but with a revised title and focus: *The Thinking Professional: Transformative Practice*. Unlike the first edition, the ideas in the second edition pertain to more than just home economics. They concern any progressive discipline and human profession looking to transform its practice via the cultivation of *thinking professionals*. When relevant, home economics¹ is used as a working example to bring the ideas alive.

Why the home economics discipline and profession as a working case? As a nearly 175-year-old profession, it is a good example of a *human profession* (Turkki & Vincenti, 2008) whose members dedicate their lives to humanity whether it is human growth and development, transitions, life enrichment, life preservation, or multifaceted health and multidimensional well-being (Reynolds & Stone, 2001). Other human professions include social work, medicine, nursing, teaching, clergy, counseling, engineering, and architecture.

The notion of a thinking professional will also resonate with all *helping professionals* engaged in human services (e.g., home economics, community development, education, healthcare, social work, counseling and therapy, criminal justice, and police and peace work). Helping professionals use their skills to help people grow or face hard times. They offer strength and support, so people can choose to learn, change, and mature (Geroski, 2017).

The Thinking Professional: Transformative Practice,
pp. vii–ix

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To develop the second edition, I used both the *thinking professional* and *transformative practice* as hooks and threads through the entire collection and as chapter anchors. The premise is that thinking professionals are preferable to unthinking professionals who may be inattentive, unphilosophical, or not inclined or not know how to think deeply and profoundly. Thus, they may fail to give due consideration to an issue or the consequences before acting. Thinking professionals have a complete and accurate image (mastery) of their professional identity and reality, and they can reflect on, reason through, and justify any decision to act (Gilmanov, 2017). Members of any human profession engaged in service to the public (including home economics) must have *thinking acumen* (i.e., able to make good judgments and shrewd decisions), which requires a rich repertoire of contemporary perspectives and lenses, ideally with a critical bend (exposing and challenging power).

To that end, I retained and updated 15 chapters original to the first edition (affirming their continued relevance) and added two new topics (the human condition, and after postmodernism). This second edition represents a 17-chapter collection organized into (a) what thinking professionals could think about in the abstract as well as more concrete ideas including (b) how they could think about or view their practice differently and (c) how they could transform their practice and do things differently (see Table of Contents).

Thinking in the abstract makes people feel more powerful, and it bolsters their thinking acumen. It also increases a thinking professional's tendency to prefer high-power roles, and it augments their sense of control over their environment. By engaging abstract topics via abstract thinking, thinking professionals are better able to focus on the forest (abstractness) while attending to the trees (concreteness) (Smith et al., 2008). All concrete ideas in the second edition depend on and are couched in the abstract ideas, and there is intentional overlap among the concrete ideas.

To illustrate, the notion of paradigm shifts is closely linked with perspective transformation and reflective inquiry. Appreciating what comes after postmodernism will inform critical discourse analysis of contemporary power arrangements. Viewing oneself as a transformative leader is a way to rethink one's practice in addition to actually practicing differently. Communities of practice are a venue for both thinking differently about practice and doing things differently. Viewing oneself as a legitimate skeptic with intellectual curiosity is a way to think about reapproaching one's practice, but it is also a tool to transform one's practice in real time. This book showcases thinking professionals who have transformative practice as their end goal.

NOTE

1. There is a global conversation about what the discipline and profession should be called for myriad reasons. All practitioners are aware of this and know that any book that targets home economics is also completely relevant for family and consumer sciences, human ecology, home sciences, home ecology, consumer sciences, family studies, household sciences, and human sciences.

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PART I

WHAT TO THINK ABOUT

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CHAPTER 1

PARADIGM SHIFTS AND THE THINKING PROFESSIONAL

This entire book is about shifting paradigms (i.e., personal thought patterns) because all professions must continually evolve (develop gradually) and transform; they cannot remain stagnant (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). When someone or something undergoes transformation, a marked change occurs in some combination of their/its (a) nature (essence and *raison d'être*); (b) form (a clearly defined, visible shape); (c) structure (underlying, internal organization and the relationship among parts within the form); (d) function (what it does); and (e) purpose (why it does it) (Anderson, 2014; McGregor, 2012).

The ideas in this book about *thinking professionals* who are striving for transformative practice are relevant for any progressive profession and professional. That said, the home economics profession is often used herein as a working case to bring ideas alive. In existence since the mid-1800s as domestic science and domestic economy, *home economics* was officially established and named as a discipline and profession during the 10-year Lake Placid founding conferences at the turn of the 20th century (1899–1909) (Cornell University Library Digital Collection, 2024; Dreilinger, 2021).

This makes home economics (by whatever name)¹ nearly 175 years old. Virtually every country has some form of home economics education and attendant programs in public schools, colleges, and universities with prac-

The Thinking Professional: Transformative Practice,
pp. 3–21

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4 *The Thinking Professional: Transformative Practice*

tioners working in all levels of government, business and industry, education, human services, research, civil society, and development. The practice of 200,000+ home economics professionals worldwide (conservative estimate based on 2% of 94 million teachers alone) ([International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024](#)) must continually transform to effectively engage the social, cultural, political, economic, ecological, and technological juggernaut that individuals and families face. Other thinking professionals face a similar imperative.

THE THINKING PROFESSIONAL

It is crucial that any thinking professional engaged in transformative service to the public (including home economists) has *thinking acumen* (i.e., the ability to make good judgments and shrewd decisions). Synonyms for acumen include discerning, penetrating, perceptive, discriminating, and profundity (i.e., keen, sharp insight) ([Anderson, 2014](#)). Thinking acumen depends on a rich repertoire of contemporary perspectives and lens, ideally with a critical bend (i.e., focused on revealing and challenging power). Thinking acumen is the foundation of any thinking professional who is striving for transformative practice.

The unthinking professional may be inattentive, unphilosophical, and not inclined or not know how to gain and apply thinking acumen. The result is undue consideration of an issue or the consequences before acting on the issue. This can lead to unaccountable and undefendable practice, and it can create and reinforce blinders to the reality of practice. Thinking professionals *think*. They reason through, justify, and reflect on any decision to act, and they have a complete and accurate image (mastery) of both their professional identity and reality ([Gilmanov, 2017](#); [Greetham, 2010](#); [Rutter & Brown, 2015](#)). A combination of cognitive skills, self-knowledge, emotional resilience, and personal drive creates “versatile, thinking professionals” ([Raynor, 2002](#), p. 158).

Of interest in this chapter is how paradigms (i.e., people’s inner thought patterns) deeply affect how thinking professionals view and think about reality and changes thereof. It is important that thinking professionals know about paradigms, how they impact practice, how paradigms shift over time, and how and why people resist paradigmatic change ([Belasco & Adams, 2007](#); [Breton & Largent, 1988](#)). This knowledge can help thinking professionals both transform their practice (i.e., change its nature, form, structure, function and/or purpose) and make it transformative in nature.

Nature of Transformative Practice

What does *transformative* practice look like? To answer this question, I draw on VanderPol's (2019) premise that "the work of transformation begins with who [sic] we choose to *be* and what we do from that place of being" (Center for Transformational Coaching, 2024, para. 1). By its very definition, transformative practice is deep practice involving a commitment to extended periods of time on intentional activity pursuant to empowering one's own transformation, so that one can help others transform as well. The intent is to become a "transformative presence.... Your transformation enables transformation. The more you [change] your 'way of being' in this world, the more your presence will enable others to ... grow into their highest potential" (VanderPol, 2019, p. 8). This sentiment should become a clarion call for all progressive, thinking professionals.

Transformative practice is based on a thinking professional's keen awareness of both (a) their habitual ways of thinking and behaving and (b) the role of professional gravity and personal gravity (i.e., gravity weighs things down and holds them back). Awareness of the effects of both negative habits and gravity paves the way for transforming self, practice, and the profession (VanderPol, 2019). This transformation necessitates new paradigms. "Beyond [self-awareness] lies a journey of transformation that takes us into the heart of the new paradigm.... It is a journey each of us must consciously choose to take" (VanderPol, 2019, p. 12). The result should be a collection of new perspectives, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and tools that become the core of transformational thinking, thinking acumen, and transformed practice.

This book's contents (see Table 1.1) are an example of new paradigmatic directions. Some ideas are considered to be abstract while others are more concrete. Thinking in the abstract makes professionals feel more powerful and bolsters their thinking acumen. It also increases both their tendency to prefer high-power roles and their sense of control over their environment. By engaging abstract thinking, thinking professionals are better able to focus on the forest (abstractness) while attending to the trees (concreteness) (Smith et al., 2008).

All concrete ideas in Table 1.1 depend on the abstract ideas with intentional overlap among the concrete. To illustrate, the notion of paradigm shifts is closely linked with perspective transformation and reflective inquiry. Appreciating what comes after postmodernism will inform critical discourse analysis of contemporary power arrangements. Viewing oneself as a transformative leader is a way to rethink one's practice in addition to actually practicing differently. Communities of practice are venues for

Table 1.1

Proposed Paradigmatic Directions (Key Book Topics)

<i>Part I: What to Think About in the Abstract</i>	<i>Part II: How to Think Differently About or View Practice (Abstract/Concrete)</i>	<i>Part III: How to Do Things Differently to Transform Practice (Concrete)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paradigm shifts and the thinking professional; • Postmodernism; • After postmodernism; • Recognizing transdisciplinarity; and • The human condition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holomovement principle; • Philosophical well-being and professional wisdom; • Communities of practice; • Transformative change agents; • Perspective transformation and reflective inquiry; and • Intellectual curiosity and skeptical thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformative leadership; • Reflective human action leadership; • Critical science approach; • Critical discourse analysis; • Productive pedagogies; and • Tacit knowledge management

both rethinking practice and doing things differently. Viewing oneself as a legitimate skeptic with intellectual curiosity is both a way to think about practice and a tool to transform practice in real time.

With this proposed paradigm shift and attendant transformation, thinking professionals (including home economists) can better stand in their respective profession’s authenticity (VanderPol, 2019). This is paramount because inauthentic practice is not transformative as it lacks the support of solid evidence, well-articulated philosophical beliefs, or both. Inauthentic practice may be uncritically repeated, outmoded, or unexamined. All thinking professionals must, therefore, engage in a truthful examination of all that is inauthentic within their realm of practice, decide if a paradigmatic shift is necessary, and then change accordingly (i.e., transform the nature, form, structure, function, and/or purpose of their practice) (VanderPol, 2019). But, like self-change and profession-wide transformation, paradigmatic change *itself* is fraught with its own challenges, which this chapter now addresses.

PARADIGM SHIFTS

The word paradigm is more than a thousand years old having been used in the English language since the 1400s. It is Greek *paradeiknynai*, “to show side by side” and *paradeigma*, “pattern” (Harper, 2024). Patterns are regular, discernible, and repeating forms or order (e.g., weather patterns,

or economic cycles). A pattern can also be a set of instructions to follow like sewing and knitting patterns (Anderson, 2014).

In this chapter, paradigm refers to *thought patterns*—how people think about, interpret, and reason through something. Lay persons’ terms for these thought patterns include mind set and worldview. These terms refer to a set of assumptions, beliefs, values, and experiences that profoundly affect the way people perceive reality and respond to that perception. When unspoken assumptions, personal belief systems, and value sets are challenged, people can experience a threat to their entrenched thought patterns—a wrenching paradigm shift (Belasco & Adams, 2007; Breton & Largent, 1988).

Although it is difficult to discern when a shift in paradigms has occurred, it is often described as stepping away from, transitioning to, overthrowing, overturning, or leaving behind. The replacement of one mind set with another is a very complex process worsened when several paradigms are competing for attention. Eventually though, anomalies occur; that is, *so* many things happen that cannot be explained using existing thought patterns (paradigms) that everything is thrown into a state of crisis (Belasco & Adams, 2007; Breton & Largent, 1988) (see Table 1.2, adapted with permission from McGregor, 2005).

Once too many anomalies accumulate, most people capitulate and *finally* try new ideas. Hopefully, a different mind set will emerge that aligns with like-minded others. People will examine and think about reality from this new set of assumptions, beliefs, and values. Their differently informed introspection should provide evidence of the paradigm shift; that is, they should be experiencing alternate interpretations, drawing different conclusions about reality, and implementing revised insights and associated decisions (Belasco & Adams, 2007; Breton & Largent, 1988). They would do things differently because they are *thinking* differently using new thought patterns.

Stages of Paradigm Shifts

Per the example in Table 1.1, why can’t the PRSP lenders and majority world leaders (borrowers) change paradigms when facing so many anomalies? Because they cannot yet mobilize three key traits. Succinctly, “to successfully navigate this paradigm shift, we must have the courage to let go of what we know, the confidence to step up to what we don’t, and the conviction to hold on as we make the shift” (Freifeld, 2015, para. 5; see also Belasco & Adams, 2007). Freifeld (2015, para. 6, 7, 8) elaborated thus:

Table 1.2*Example of Paradigmatic Anomalies*

It is common practice for international and private lending agencies (e.g., International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank) to get Majority World countries (also called developing, and underdeveloped countries) to enter into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP; formerly called Structural Adjustment Programs) to address economic crises. PRSPs use monetary and fiscal policies to adjust a nation's economy while assuming that a market economy will lessen poverty. Unfortunately, these initiatives tend to fail miserably. All 54 Majority World countries that implemented these programs between 1995–2005 ended up poorer than when they started. PRSP and Structural Adjustment Programs advocates perplexingly cannot understand why their approach did not work. They fully believe that the assumptions behind PRSPs are sound—that the trickle-down effect of a free-market approach will lead to a stronger economy and more justice and equality. Failure must be the fault of the country they are trying to help get out of debt. Despite these atrocious paradigm anomalies still surfacing (i.e., the PRSPs did not work when they should have), PRSPs are *still* being used in 2024. Lenders continue to assume that too much state involvement in a planned economy, coupled with a nation's uncontrolled state spending on the *wrong* things (meaning health, social welfare, and education), leads to an indebted situation that can *only* be fixed by shifting from a planned to a market economy. In reality, when PRSPs are introduced, states severely curtail expenditures on basic services (e.g., health, education, welfare, and social programs) and instead use monies earned from selling exports to make payments on huge PRSP loans. While trying to impact market activities, capital investment, and production activities (guided by neoliberal values), they inadvertently worsen poverty, injustice, inequality, women's and children's rights, and human rights infringements. So many things happen that cannot be explained using the dominant paradigm's assumptions (i.e., paradigm anomalies) that things are thrown into an untenable state of crisis demanding a paradigm shift that *never* seems to happen.

When it comes to letting go of the status quo, we must have the courage to relinquish our reliance on orthodoxy [stop conforming to doctrines, and theories].... When it comes to embracing the unknown, ... it is better to act your way into a new way of thinking than think your way into a new way of acting.... When it comes to staying the course ... during the uncomfortable time in the “trough of disillusionment,” confidence wanes and courage is called into question. [It] is critical to maintain your conviction to hold on during the darkest hour.

Stage 1: Denial

People normally move through three predictable stages when shifting paradigms: denial, stretch things to fit, and release the old paradigm (Belasco & Adams, 2007). When in denial, people refuse to acknowledge an unacceptable truth. During this stage, something rattles their existing way of seeing the world, but they deny it is happening. They are not ready to face or accept the compelling evidence that familiar things are no longer working. Balking at challenges to long-held familiarity is a normal response. Embracing true evidence can be damning because it means