Hazel Kyrk was an important economist who focused on family and consumer economics. She was born in Ashley, Ohio. Her university education began in 1904 at Ohio Wesleyan, where she supported herself by working for the family of economics professor Leon C. Marshall. In 1908, Kyrk entered the University of Chicago and once again worked for the Marshall family, who had moved there previously. She graduated with a PhB in 1910 and began a PhD under the supervision of James A. Field. While working on her doctorate, Kyrk taught at Iowa State College (1911), Wellesley (1911-1912), and Oberlin (1914-1918). In 1918, she accepted an invitation from Field to do statistical work in England. She then returned to Oberlin and completed her PhD in 1920. Her dissertation won the prestigious Hart, Schaffner, and Marx prize, and a revised version was published in 1923 as *A Theory of Consumption*.

Kyrk left Oberlin in 1921. She taught summer school at Bryn Mawr (1922-1925), worked briefly at the Food Research Institute at Stanford (1923-1924), where she coauthored a book on the American baking industry (*Kyrk and Davis 1925*), and at Iowa State College (1924-1925) before being offered a joint appointment as an associate professor in the Departments of Home Economics and Economics at Chicago. She continued her work on consumer economics and published *Economic Problems of the Family* in 1933. In 1941, she was promoted to full professor. In 1953, a revised version of her 1933 book was published as *The Family in the American Economy*.

The key argument in *A Theory of Consumption* (1923) is that patterns of consumption behavior are largely determined by norms of the “appropriate and necessary” or by socially defined “standards of living.” In her view, a theory of consumption must take account of these standards and norms, explain how they came to be, how they relate to valuation and choice, how they develop and change, and indicate how they might be improved through policy (22). This led Kyrk to critique marginal utility theory as a basis for understanding consumption behavior and to develop an instrumental theory of choice. This institutional approach to consumption, built around the concept of accepted standards of living, was widely adopted in the 1920s and 1930s. Other women economists, such as Theresa McMahon and Jessica Peixotto, contributed, but Kyrk's work provided the central theoretical argument.

*Kyrk's Economic Problems of the Family* (1933) had a broader scope, discussing not only issues in consumption and standards of living but also issues in household production; the economic position of women; employment of married women; family incomes and their adequacy; family decision making; risks of disability, unemployment, and old age; savings; social security; and consumer information and consumer protection. This book was path breaking in many respects, emphasizing the family as a joint decision-making unit over the allocation of household resources. Although Kyrk's approach remained firmly within the institutionalist tradition, the issues dealt with anticipate much of the more recent neoclassical literature on the economics of the family by Gary Becker and others.

Kyrk also contributed to issues involving women, the family, consumption, and housing through her work for the Women’s Trade Union League of Chicago and for various government agencies. Between 1938 and 1941, she was chief economist of the Bureau of Home Economics, where she made major contributions to the Consumers Purchases Study, the foundation for calculating the base year prices for the consumer price index. Later, she worked for the Office of Price Administration on wartime price
controls and the Bureau of Labor Statistics on the Minimum Standard Budget and revisions to the consumer price index.

At Chicago, she mentored other women faculty and supervised a number of women graduate students, including Margaret Reid. Kyrk never married but took in and raised the teenaged daughter of a cousin. She died in 1957 at her summer home in Vermont.

See also:

Further Readings


Rutherford, Malcolm

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