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# Resisting Schools, Reproducing Families: Gender and the Politics of Homeschooling

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RESISTING SCHOOLS, REPRODUCING FAMILIES:  
GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF HOMESCHOOLING

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRIAN P. KAPITULIK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Sociology

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ABSTRACT

RESISTING SCHOOLS, REPRODUCING FAMILIES:  
GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF HOMESCHOOLING

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The contemporary homeschooling movement sits at the intersection of several important social trends: widespread concern about the effectiveness and safety of public schools, feminist challenges to the patriarchal family structure, anxiety about the state of the family as an institution, and challenging economic conditions. The central concern of this dissertation is to make sense of homeschooling within this broader context.

Data were gathered through interviews with forty-five homeschooling parents, approximately half of whom are religious and half of whom are secular. The interviews were organized around three central questions: 1) What are the frames that parents use to justify homeschooling? 2) What are their particular tactics or methods for homeschooling? 3) What are the components of homeschoolers' collective identity?

I argue that homeschooling bears the imprint of broader changes regarding the gender system and contemporary family life, as well as other economic and cultural changes. Both religious and secular parents come to homeschooling out of shared concerns about schools being ineffective and incapable of catering to their children's individual needs. They also share concerns about the state of the family and the general

moral decline of society. Religious and secular parents differ in their actual practice of homeschooling, depending on their particular conceptions of childhood, but they are alike in the fact that it is women who do most of the homeschooling work. These parents are also different in their collective identities. Religious parents regard homeschooling as just something they do. However, secular parents characterize homeschooling as part of who they are as moral people and this compels them to employ various strategies of identity work.

In the end, I argue that this movement is unlikely to contribute to meaningful social change. I base this conclusion on the fact that the homeschooling movement contains two major contradictions: 1) This movement is simultaneously resisting one alleged failing institution – schools - while reproducing another highly criticized institution – the patriarchal nuclear family. 2) This movement offers individual solutions to social problems. While the participants have many concerns about social institutions, their answer is to withdraw their participation and retreat into their own families.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

We live in an era of discontent over the quality and efficacy of compulsory public schooling. Concerned about the education and safety of their children, an increasing number of parents are seeking educational alternatives. The options include private schools, charter schools and school vouchers. A small but growing number of parents are foregoing institutionalized schools altogether in favor of homeschooling. Estimates of the number of children currently homeschooled in the United States range from 1.5 to 2 million (Ray 2006). Though parents vary in their justifications for teaching their children at home, they share a common family structure: most are white, middle-class, with at least two children, a breadwinning father and a stay-at-home mother. In virtually all cases, the mother is responsible for the daily operation of the homeschool.

We are also living in an era marked by considerable debate about the state of the family. Some observers claim that the family is in crisis. The importance of the family is being eclipsed by other institutions and roles within the family are no longer clearly defined. While the validity of the family in crisis claim is debatable, the fact that gender norms within families have changed is undeniable. Compared to previous generations, women now have greater opportunities in education and employment and social expectations for appropriate parenthood have changed. Although the primary responsibility of childrearing is still thrust upon women, they are also expected to be more than “just a mom.” Contemporary women, especially in the middle-class, go to college and pursue a career of their own. If they do choose to have children, then they juggle both paid work and childcare. In fact, more than three-quarters of mothers of

school-age children are employed. More is also expected of contemporary fathers, at least on the home-front. The “new fatherhood” model urges men to be more involved in the daily activities of childrearing. They are expected to do more “sharing and caring” than their own fathers did.

Given the broader context of discontent about public schools, shifting meanings of mothering and fathering, and concerns about the family as an institution, how do we make sense of this burgeoning social movement? Does it represent a rejection of new parenting norms? Is it a statement about the place of the family in modern society? What do the participants in this movement think about gender, family and education? Why are these families, who are rejecting conventional schools, also reproducing conventional families? Due to a lack of in-depth sociological research, we do not know enough about homeschoolers to answer these questions. This dissertation addresses this gap in our understanding by placing homeschooling within the broader social context and then considering the implications.

This introduction provides the analytical framework of this dissertation. First is a review of the literature on homeschooling covering its recent history, the scope, characteristics and motivations of homeschoolers. The next section begins to put homeschooling into context. There is a review of some of the major concerns about the current state of public education. Then there is a discussion of feminist critiques of family and how they have led to changes in contemporary family life. After considering the implications of some of those changes, the introduction then turns to social movement theory to articulate a lens for understanding the implications of this growing movement.

Finally, there is a discussion of the overarching research questions and general organization of this dissertation.

### **A Brief History Of Homeschooling in the United States**

Homeschooling, defined here as educating children primarily at home rather than in schools, has been practiced in the United States as long as public schools have existed. The modern-day American homeschool movement has emerged out of two historical strands, both beginning roughly four decades ago: one counter-cultural and leftist and the other conservative and religious. Education researcher Jane Van Galen (1988) refers to these groups as “pedagogues” and “ideologues,” respectively. In general, pedagogues promote homeschooling because they view public schools as inept and incapable of catering to the specific needs of each child. Ideologues, on the other hand, fault schools for not teaching the conservative social values and fundamentalist religious beliefs that their families espouse at home. Understanding the varied origins and ideologies of these *two movements within a movement* provides some insight into the characteristics and beliefs of the current generation of homeschoolers.

#### **Pedagogues and Radical School Reform**

Early proponents of the modern homeschool movement were initially more interested in keeping children in public schools than taking them out. During the 60s and early 70s, countercultural scholars and social critics focused their energies on reforming public schools. Radical scholars such as Herbert Kohl (1969), Jonathan Kozol (1972) and Ivin Illich (1971) criticized public schools for their one-size-fits-all curricula and their hierarchical structure. They opposed the unequal power dynamics between the

teachers and administrators who ran schools and the students and families they served. These critics saw schools as factories that reproduced unequal social relations.

Their first impulse, however, was not to abandon schools altogether but to work to change them. Radical school reformers sought to wrest control of educating American children from the state and give it to parents and local communities. They envisioned schools that would provide high quality education for all children. In their view, schools could, if properly reformed, promote democratic principles and ameliorate race and social class inequalities. For many, this optimism quickly faded as efforts to change school were thwarted by conservative politicians and non-sympathetic parents and educators. A number of these reformers gave up on schools and began to promote a new way of educating young children: homeschooling (Miller 2002).

The most prominent and influential radical school reformer turned homeschooling advocate was the late John Holt. Holt, himself a former teacher in private schools, wrote extensively about the inadequacies of public schooling and, at the end of his career, the promise of teaching children at home. In *Why Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1967) Holt synthesized his theories on the failure of compulsory public education. His main criticism was the schools squash children's natural curiosity with standardized testing and inflexible curricula. Holt opposed formal instruction of any kind, and thought that children best learned when left to their own devices. In *Teach Your Own* (1981), his only book on homeschooling, Holt advocated a pedagogy of "unschooling," which is a child-centered, self-directed, informal approach to education. By the late 70s and early 80s, most homeschoolers in the United States identified with Holt's counter-cultural philosophy.

## **Ideologues: Religion and Authority**

What John Holt was to the pedagogues, Raymond and Dorothy Moore were to the ideologues. During the 1970s, the Moores were well-known across the U.S. for their controversial views on early childhood education. Trained educational researchers and Seventh-Day Adventists, the Moores challenged the taken-for-granted assumption that schooling was good for young children (Stevens 2001). Working with a team of like-minded colleagues, the Moores surveyed thousands of studies and consulted with over 100 family and child development specialists. They concluded that placing young children in institutionalized schools before the age of 10 could negatively affect their normal development (Moore and Moore 1975; Moore et al. 1979).

Though they initially supported school reform, the Moores eventually shifted their focus. Like Holt, they became advocates of taking children out of public schools and teaching them at home. While they shared Holt's commitment to home education, they developed a different pedagogy of homeschooling. Whereas Holt and his followers rejected hierarchical, authoritative relationships of any kind, the Moores presumed the God-given authority of parents over their children (Stevens 2001). In their widely read books *Home Grown Kids* (1981) and *Home-Spun Schools* (1982), the Moores advocated a model of homeschooling that was based on parental authority, formalized curricula and Christian values. The unabashed religious conviction of the Moores' message appealed to scores of conservative Christian families who were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the secular social institutions of the state. A new wave of homeschooling had begun. By the mid-80s the countercultural pedagogues, the first

homeschoolers of the modern movement, were eclipsed in size and visibility by the fundamentalist ideologues (Lyman 1998).

Twenty years later, religiously oriented homeschoolers are the best organized, and some believe the largest, segment of the movement (Stevens 2001). However, some observers suggest, this initial distinction between counterculturalists and conservative Christians is no longer completely accurate (Collom and Mitchell 2005). A broader range of families is choosing to homeschool than was true two decades ago and their motivations sometimes blend both pedagogical and ideological concerns (Nemer 2004).

### **Inside Homeschooling: What We Know**

What follows is a focused review of the literature about current patterns within homeschooling. The bulk of the available literature is descriptive, failing to relate homeschooling to broader social trends. Nevertheless, it is useful insofar as it provides a glimpse into the growing movement. I reviewed the literature to address three questions: 1) How many children are being homeschooled, 2) Why do parents make this choice, and 3) What are the characteristics of homeschool families?

It is important at the outset to note the limitations of the literature on homeschooling. Foremost, there is currently no mechanism for locating and identifying all homeschooling families in the nation. Though currently legal in all fifty states, the extent of state oversight of homeschooling varies. In some states parents are required to register their children with the local school board and to keep meticulous records of their children's educational goals and achievements. Other states have no such requirements and some parents choose not to register their children. Hence, statistical accuracy varies by state. There is also an ideological dimension to the difficulty in studying



homeschoolers. Many hold alternative world views and are reluctant to participate in studies conducted by unfamiliar researchers (Collom and Mitchell 2005). This makes it less likely for them to voluntarily offer information about their activities.

### **How Many?**

There are conflicting estimates of the number of homeschooled children in the United States. Homeschool advocacy groups, such as the National Home Education Research Institute, have estimated the current population to be 1.5 to 2 million (Ray 2006). Meanwhile, the federal government has generated slightly more conservative estimates, ranging from 1 to 1.1 million (Lines 1999; Princiotta et al. 2004). Whichever estimate we accept as most accurate, two things are certain. First, the homeschooling population has grown significantly over the past 30 years and it continues to grow. One researcher for the United States Department of Education estimates that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 homeschoolers in the early 1970s, as many as 244,000 by 1985 and up to 300,000 in 1988 (Lines 1991). According to some researchers and homeschooling advocacy groups, the number of homeschoolers grows annually by 15 to 25 percent (Bauman 2002; Lines 2000; McDowell and Ray 2000). Second, homeschooling may be the largest of the current educational movements yet receives less public attention than other “school choice” options. Charter schools, for example, receive far more scrutiny by both scholars and mass media (Bauman 2002). Yet the number of students enrolled in charter schools is slightly less than the number of children who are homeschooled (Center for Educational Reform 2009). This is clearly a formidable alternative to mass schooling.

## **Why Homeschool?**

According to Collom and Mitchell (2005) there are four sets of overlapping frames that parents use in explaining their decision to homeschool. First, there are religious motivations. Between 30 and 38% of homeschooling parents choose to teach their children at home in order to provide religious instruction (Princiotta et al. 2004). Other parents claim that public schools have an anti-religious bias which they wish to shield their children from (Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Lines 2000; Ray 1997; Stevens 2001). Second, there are families who are primarily motivated by academic and pedagogical concerns (Hern 1996; Lyman 1998). Nationwide about a third of homeschooling parents feel that the academic quality of schools is lacking (Princiotta et al. 2004) and about one-half feel they can do a better job of teaching their children than schools can (Bielick et al. 2001). A third category includes general concern about the school environment. For these parents, concerns about the safety of their children and negative peer influences are paramount (Bielick et al. 2001). Finally, there are some families who cite “family lifestyle” reasons (Collom and Mitchell 2005). Included in this category are families who homeschool because it provides a source of family cohesion and unity (Knowles 1992; Marchant and MacDonald 1994; Mayberry and Knowles 1989).

## **Who is Homeschooling?**

Despite the methodological issues mentioned earlier, researchers have produced a demographic picture of what homeschooling families look like. Based on socioeconomic variables, most are middle class. Homeschooling parents have higher than average incomes and levels of education and the fathers tend to be employed in professional

positions or are self-employed (Mayberry et al. 1995; Muncy 1996; Wagenaar 1997). In most cases, the father provides the family's main source of income and the mother does not work outside of the home. When mothers do work, it tends to be part time (Lyman 2000). The vast majority of homeschooling families are comprised of married couples with two or three children (Bielick et al. 2001; Ray 1999; Wagenaar 1997). Research also suggests that although increasing numbers of people of color are choosing to homeschool, this remains largely a white phenomenon. Between 75 and 90 percent of homeschooled children in the United States are white (Bielick et al. 2001; Ray 1999). Ideologically, these families tend to be more religious and politically conservative than the general population. The largest segment of religiously motivated homeschoolers is Fundamentalist (Lyman 2000; Nemer 2004; Wagenaar 1997).

Researchers have also shown that the overwhelming majority of the day-to-day work of teaching children at home is done by mothers. Some estimate that mothers are the primary teachers in 90 percent of families (Lines 1991; Mayberry 1988; Stambach and David 2005). As I mentioned above, most of these women are financially dependent on their husbands. In one large scale study of homeschooling families (Mayberry et al. 1995), 78% of women listed "homemaker/home educator" as their primary occupation, while most of their husbands worked in professional, technical and managerial positions. What's more, women are also responsible for the bulk of local and national organizing on behalf of the movement (Stevens 2001; Stambach and David 2005).

In summary, homeschooling is a burgeoning alternative education movement. This is a movement comprised mostly of white, middle-class families who choose to educate their children at home for a variety of reasons. As I explain in the next section,

these parents are not unique in their critiques of public education. What sets them apart are two things: 1) how they express their critique and 2) how this critique is translated into a gendered division of household labor. Homeschoolers pull their children out of schools or never send them in the first place. Other disillusioned parents choose to send their children to charter schools, private schools or use vouchers to find schools that better suit their needs. Their children still participate in institutionalized forms of education. Homeschoolers do not participate in the “system.” Second, as the research demonstrates, most homeschooling families resemble the idealized 1950s family with a stay-at-home mother and a breadwinning father. The commitment to homeschool requires someone to be at home teaching the children and it is almost always the mother. I explore the significance of the gender dynamics of homeschooling in the subsequent section.

### **The Problem With Schools**

There has been no shortage of debate about the current state of public education in the United States and it is not just parents who are concerned. A recent poll suggests that only 18 percent of Americans would grade the public schools in the nation with an A or B and more than one quarter would give a grade of D or Failing (Bushaw and Lopez 2010). Nor is this criticism limited to one particular political group. People from all points on the political spectrum levy criticisms against public schools. Some of the more common critiques of schools can be grouped into three categories: school environment, formal curriculum and “hidden curriculum.” Below I offer examples of each.

There are at least two main areas of concern regarding *school environment*. First, parents are concerned about school safety. Over the past fifteen years there have been a

number of highly publicized cases of school shootings, including Littleton, Colorado and Jonesboro, Arkansas. These incidents have served to heighten parents' concerns about their children's safety. After all, if schools cannot protect children from being shot, then how can they protect them from less lethal physical attacks? Researchers have shown that schools are especially dangerous for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth (Bochenek and Brown 2001). Recently, there has also been increased attention paid to the issue of school bullying including "cyber-bullying" or the use of the internet or cell phones for the purpose of harassment or intimidation. Following several high profile cases where bullying allegedly resulted in the victims committing suicide, concern about this problem has arguably grown into a "moral panic" (Tettegah et al. 2006).

Second, some groups regard schools as anti-religious, especially to Christians. They feel that children should be allowed to have prayer groups, to say "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and to pray before school events like football games (Lee 2006). Political correctness, they argue, has created a hostile environment for Christian students and their moral virtues. While this group may be a minority of Americans, they are certainly a vocal minority that garners significant public attention.

The *formal curriculum*, which describes what students are actually taught in schools through direct instruction, is another area of debate and concern. The formal curriculum in schools has been criticized on a number of fronts. First, concern that U.S. students are falling behind their peers in other countries, particularly in math and science achievement, has led to a push for schools to produce better "results." Nowadays, results are measured in the form of high-stakes standardized test scores. This has led some critics to chide schools for stripping their curriculum down and "teaching to the test"

(Meier and Harman 2008). This particular concern has intensified recently as schools deal with the mandates of the Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind" act. Among other provisions, this act requires schools to perform well on standardized tests and if they fail to do so, they risk losing federal funding.

We have also witnessed intense debate over sex education in our schools (Irvine 2002). While the overwhelming majority of parents support comprehensive sex education, a small but vocal minority argues that all schools should teach children about sex is to remain abstinent until marriage (Bleakley et al. 2010). Other constituencies feel that topics like sex should not even be covered in schools. They feel that the form and content is a decision best left to individual parents within the confines of their own homes.

For some parents and policymakers, it is the implicit lessons that students learn in school that are most problematic. The *hidden curriculum* in schools describes the values and beliefs that schools transmit is less obvious, and sometimes unintended, ways (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977). For example, the intense pressure to perform on standardized tests, the importance of grades and class-rank teach children to compete and to focus on individual achievement. Also, some critics argue that the mandatory recitation of the "Pledge of Allegiance" teaches children to be blindly patriotic conformists. This controversy has gained even more significance lately, as our country finds itself bogged down in two unpopular wars.

In light of this review of some of the major concerns about the public school system, it is not surprising that some families pull their children out of public schools or never send them in the first place. Some parents exercise "school choice" options,

including private schools, magnet schools and voucher programs. For a small but growing number of parents this means teaching their children at home. The actions of these parents do differentiate them from most other parents. While they may share similar concerns about public schooling, they are the only parents that go so far as to withdraw their children from institutionalized education altogether. That is indeed a rebellious act. However, as I explain in the section below, they seem to reject criticisms of another important social institution, the “traditional family.” As others seem to be moving away from this conventional family form, homeschoolers seem to be embracing it.

### **Gender and Family: A Liberal Feminist Critique**

Researchers are clear that most homeschooling families are organized in a manner that has been heavily scrutinized in recent history. Since the 1960s, a second wave of feminist scholars has been insisting on the need to rethink dominant notions of the family (Ferree 2010; Fox and Murry 2000; Friedan 1963; Stacey 2011; Thorne and Yalon 1992). Central to a feminist perspective is a critique of the ideology of “the monolithic family,” which Barrie Thorne (1992) describes as the assumption that the patriarchal nuclear family is the only desirable and legitimate family structure. This idealized family form assumes a gendered division of household labor characterized by “...a breadwinner husband, freed for and identified with activities in a separate economic sphere, and a full-time wife and mother...”(Thorne 1992:7) who is relegated to the domestic sphere of housework and childcare.

Feminists criticize this monolithic view of “the family” because it invalidates and delegitimizes the myriad forms that families actually take. Most families do not look like

the nuclear family. More importantly, feminists link this myopic view of the family as both an ideology and a household arrangement that subordinates women. Since women are economically dependent on men in this conception of the nuclear family, they lack access to income, social status and the political power associated with participation in the male dominated public sphere (Thorne 1992:4). In this arrangement, women's unpaid domestic labor (housework and childcare) is devalued and largely invisible.

As an ideology, the monolithic family also legitimizes women's inferior position in the paid labor force. Because this ideology assumes that women's primary calling is motherhood, and men are naturally the primary breadwinner, women's participation in the workforce is devalued and their economic exploitation is justified (Ferree 2010). Hence, the gender gap in pay, the "glass ceiling" phenomenon and the relatively low pay of pink collar occupations like schoolteachers and social workers are all rationalized on the grounds that women are mothers first and workers second.

This perspective, which presupposes the naturalness and superiority of the nuclear family, is bolstered by hegemonic ideals of parenthood. At the core is a version of motherhood that Sharon Hays refers to as the "ideology of intensive motherhood." This white, middle-class model of mothering is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive..." (1996:129). This ideology assumes the natural abilities of women to care for their children and insists on mothers' complete and total devotion to meeting all of children's psychological, emotional and material needs. Nothing should come between a mother, her children and her family: not demands from the workplace, personal ambitions or social commitments.



Feminists have not only focused their criticism on the ways in which women are oppressed by the patriarchal nuclear family. They have also interrogated conventional notions of fatherhood. Beginning in the early 1970s, feminists began to articulate a critique of the breadwinner role as "...anachronistic, dysfunctional, and a symbol of outmoded patriarchal prerogatives" (Griswold 1993:247). They have argued that this ideal is problematic for mothers, fathers and their children. The obvious implication for the women is that this notion cements women's role as intensive mother. So long as the father is consumed with providing for the family, the mother is exclusively responsible for childcare. Feminists argued that the "breadwinner" version of fatherhood is bad for children because it cheats them of the opportunity of having two adults to provide attention, guidance and nurturance. It also sets a bad example for male children, who may grow up to be the type of father that their father was. For men, being just a breadwinner consigns them to a limited role of providing financial support, without the emotional and psychological rewards of intimacy with one's children (Townsend 2002).

### **Contemporary Family Life**

The feminist critique of the patriarchal nuclear family has had a complicated and contradictory effect on contemporary family life, especially for mothers. The feminist movement has been successful in crafting a vision of ideal womanhood that stands in sharp contrast to the stay-at-home mom of 1950s lore. The contemporary ideal is a woman who has choices and agency. She may or may not get married and if she does, she is likely to expect equitable gender relations. She has access to higher education if she desires. She is expected to work outside of the home and she may or may not choose to have children. From this perspective, a woman who is a full-time, stay-at-home

mother is an anachronism. She is turning her back on the victories of the women's movement. The ideal woman is more than "just a housewife."

However, when contemporary women do have children, the result is a contradiction that impacts most mothers' lives. There is a competing cultural ideal that suggests that women's primary vocation should be childrearing first, and all else second. Ironically, women's participation in paid employment, touted by liberal feminists as a key to women's liberation from the patriarchal nuclear family, has not lessened the demands of motherhood (Hays 1996). If anything, it has served to heighten these unrealistic demands. A "good" mother is still one who fully devotes her emotional, physical and intellectual being to her children (Douglas and Michaels 2004:4). The fact is, however, that most mothers, especially those with small children, are working outside of the home. In 2004, the vast majority of women with school-aged children, 73.4 %, were employed (United States Department of Labor 2005). Therefore, most mothers are trying to balance their need and desire for employment with the impossible demands of intensive mothering.

However, mainstream U.S. culture is ambivalent about what the ideal mother should be. Within the so-called "mommy wars" the Super Mom, who combines her challenging career with devotion to her children, competes for social acceptance with the "traditional" mom who stays home full-time and practices intensive mothering to the fullest (Hays 1996). According to media reports, Super Moms criticize traditional mothers for being throwbacks and accommodating male privilege and traditional moms accuse Super Moms of being selfish, money-grubbing and materialistic (Douglas and

Michaels 2004). Either way, it seems that contemporary mothers are in a bind (Blair-Loy 2003).

Contemporary motherhood rests on the uniquely modern notion that children are “priceless,” innocent beings who need to be nurtured, guided and protected from harm (Nelson 2010; Zelizer 1994). Among middle-class families, this conception is manifested in a style of childrearing which Annette Lareau (2003) coined “concerted cultivation.” The central premise of this approach is that children are malleable and require virtually constant stimulation in order to reach their full potential. She describes middle class mothers whisking their children from one enrichment activity to another at a dizzying pace. Parents negotiate with their children, explaining why something must be done as opposed to just telling them to do this. The result of this approach, Lareau contends, is an “emerging sense of entitlement” among middle-class children. That is, these middle class children develop a sense that they are entitled to individualized attention from their teachers, doctors and other significant institutional representatives. This conception of childhood requires intense commitment on behalf of parents. In most families, including homeschoolers, most of this burden falls onto mothers.

The modern conception of fatherhood also bears the imprint of liberal feminism. Over the past three decades, the culture of fatherhood has changed significantly. Whereas the 1950s ideal suggested that a father’s responsibility was limited to financial support and the disciplining of children (Amato 1998), the “new fatherhood” of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges men to be more than just breadwinners. According to this middle-class ideal, fathers are expected to be more nurturing, involved and active in the work of raising children. Researchers have demonstrated that there is relatively wide

social support for expanding their role within the family (Bianchi et al. 2006; Shows and Gerstel 2009; Wilkie 1993).

However, there persists a gap between the culture of fatherhood and the conduct. A considerable body of research has demonstrated that unpaid household labor continues to be heavily gendered (Kroska 2003; Shelton and John 1996). Although, on average, men today do more around the house than 50 years ago, they still are not sharing equally (Coltrane 2000; Hochschild 1989). Women continue to do two or three times as much housework as men and they are responsible for the majority of childcare (Coltrane 1996; Hays 1996; Sanchez and Thompson 1997). Many men still cling to the breadwinner role as an ideal even though the structural and ideological support for its enactment is eroding (Townsend 2002; Wilkie 1993; Zuo 1994).

### **Backlash Against Family Change**

Recent changes in family life have been met with a cultural and political backlash (Faludi 1991). Some contemporary social critics and scholars claim that “the family” is in crisis (Popenoe 2005). About one-half of all marriages end in divorce, rates of births out-of-wedlock are climbing, as are rates of cohabitation and single parent households (Cherlin 2004). These dramatic shifts in family life, the reasoning goes, are to blame for a whole host of social ills, including poverty, crime and juvenile delinquency (Coontz 2000).

The root of the problem is the alleged demise of the “traditional family,” which is code for the patriarchal nuclear family. The underlying assumption is that the married, heterosexual, two parent household is both the ideal setting for raising children and the bedrock of a healthy society. Critics often blame liberal feminists for the downfall of the

traditional family. They suggest that the feminists' insistence on women's increased participation in higher education and paid employment has blurred gender lines and contributed to a cultural devaluation of families in general, and motherhood in particular. As a result, they claim, marriages are less stable and it is becoming more common for people to live together without being married.

Another dimension of the family in crisis discourse is the fear that the family as an institution is losing its symbolic place of importance in the lives of children. They are concerned that some of the basic functions of the family, including socialization, emotional support, and the transmission of values, are being taken over by other social institutions. For example, some feel that the influence of schools and mass media is reaching inordinate proportions compared to the role that families play in children's lives.

In response to the perceived crisis in the family, there have been movements to restore the traditional family to its proper place within society. Groups like the "Promise Keepers" have worked to restore conventional, patriarchal gender roles within the family (Newton 2005; Schwalbe 1996). There has also been a "post-feminist" backlash (Faludi 1991). This perspective suggests that feminism, as a movement, is dead or at the very least has outlived its practical significance. According to some observers, women nowadays are free to do whatever they want and the idea that the only way to be a "real woman" is to have a career and a family is misguided (Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Williams 2000).

The homeschooling movement sits at the intersection of these current developments in U.S. society: broad social concerns about public schools, the legacy of the feminist critique of the patriarchal nuclear family, a backlash against that critique, and

general anxieties about the state of “the family.” In this dissertation, I examine the beliefs, motivations, activities and identities of homeschooling parents with an eye toward this wider context. By exploring the ideas and intentions of the participants, I hope to better understand the potential implications of this burgeoning movement. I use social movement theory to frame this analysis. In the following section, I discuss what makes homeschooling a unique type of movement and then the next section develops the conceptual and theoretical frame that guides this dissertation.

### **What Kind of Movement is This?**

For years, social movement theory had been dominated by two main approaches: resource mobilization (RM) and political opportunity (PO). The RM perspective focuses on importance of financial and human resources in social movements, whereas PO emphasizes elements of the political process as key to understanding collective struggles. Both of these perspectives tend to focus on the role of social movement organizations in challenging formal authority structures and advocating for political change. Critics of RM and PO perspectives fault them for overemphasizing organizations and structural factors, while ignoring the importance of ideology and cultural characteristics of movements (Haenfler 2004). By contrast, New Social Movements (NSM) scholars argue that there is much to be learned from examining the non-institutionalized aspects of movements. Further, they argue that many contemporary movements are fundamentally different than earlier forms of collective protest and those differences need to be accounted for. In this dissertation, I argue that homeschooling is an example of a new social movement

Haenfler (2004) suggests that there are several features that differentiate NSMs from earlier class-based struggles. First, NSMs tend to be diffuse, lacking a formal organizational structure. Rather than coalescing around social movement organizations, they are comprised of loosely connected groups and individuals. Second, these movements entail modes of protest that are outside of conventional political arenas. Rather than taking political action through conventional channels, like legislatures and corporate boardrooms, or demonstrations and strikes, activism in NSMs takes place in non-institutional contexts. Finally, these movements are unique in their goals. Rather than focusing on instrumental goals like passing new laws, these movements are more concerned with lifestyle, identity, or ethical issues. Examples would be the gay and lesbian movement, peace movements, and the “green” movement (Calhoun 1993).

Homeschooling can be considered a NSM on all three levels. Although there is a formal institutional structure within the homeschooling movement (Stevens 2001), there is reason to believe this is actually a diffuse movement. While there are some homeschoolers who actively participate in local and national organizations, there are many, like those described in this dissertation, who do not (Collom and Mitchell 2005). Second, in a related point, the political action of homeschooling takes place outside of the purview of social movement organizations. For the typical participant, homeschooling activism takes place primarily within their own homes. Teaching their children at home is their primary, if not singular, form of activism. Finally, the goals of this movement have little to do with achieving instrumental aims. Most participants, except for a handful of national advocates (Stevens 2001), do not seem to be concerned with passing laws, reforming the school system, or changing the society. Their primary goal is to

provide their children with a quality educational experience where children reach their full potential. This goal is buttressed by a curious mix of cultural beliefs, lifestyle practices, and identity politics. This is a point I develop in this dissertation.

In sum, homeschooling is a new social movement because of its peculiar form, mode of participation, and non-institutional goals. There is another sense in which this is a unique movement. As Stevens (2001) describes it, homeschooling is actually a *movement within a movement*. In general, there are two large factions of homeschoolers: one religious and one secular. Stevens demonstrates that there are support groups, publications, and internet resources that cater to the two groups. Moreover, he argues that these two groups have distinct reasons for participating and styles of home education. These differences are based on the unique ideological perspectives of these groups. In general, religious homeschoolers are guided by their beliefs about God and God's will, whereas the secular families follow the wisdom of nature. The families in this dissertation represent these two general types of homeschoolers and I discuss the implications of their different perspectives later in the dissertation.

### **Family, Gender, And Social Movements**

Until relatively recently, the study of gender and social movements remained largely separate. This has changed, however, and researchers have begun to theorize about the ways in which social movements are influenced by conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity and, conversely, how social movements impact how we think about gender. These studies address such diverse topics as women's self-help, toxic-waste, animal rights, and the voluntary simplicity movement (Einwohner 1999; Grigsby 2006; Krauss 1993; Taylor 1996).



Within the growing range of scholarship on gender and social movements is a specific emphasis on families. This perspective focuses more narrowly on how gender and family relationships interact within the context of social movements. There are two overarching questions addressed by this research, “First, how have changes in gender and family arrangements affected the rise and development of social movements. Second, how have social movements altered gender and family arrangements” (Staggenborg 1998; xii)?

In this dissertation, I use this lens to make sense of the homeschooling movement. I consider both how major changes in family life contribute to the development and growth of the homeschooling movement, and I theorize about the potential consequences of homeschooling for gender relations within families and beyond. To analyze how changes in gender and family have affected the development and growth of homeschooling I focus on three related dimensions of social movements: *frames*, *tactics*, and *collective identity*. To discern the extent to which homeschooling may contribute to changes in gender and family, I consider the *outcomes* of the movement.

### **Frames**

Social movement scholars use the concept of frames to describe the shared concerns, beliefs, values and ways of thinking that people use to understand their situation and legitimate their collective actions (Taylor 1999). Frames are cultural products that are simultaneously objective and subjective. They are objective insofar as they are shared and publicly available. They are part of social structures that govern and shape social life, including government, mass media and education. Frames are also partially internalized, affecting people’s identities, aspirations, and actions. People draw

from macro-level cultural models to make micro-level decisions (Blair-Loy 2003, p.5). For example, when people make decisions about how they want to parent their children, their choices reflect broader cultural messages about who children are, what they need, and how a “good parent” should behave (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003).

Analyzing homeschoolers’ frames from this perspective means considering parents’ decision to homeschool within the context of contemporary family life and evolving gender roles within families. What do they think about the current state of “the family?” What do they think about cultural challenges to the conventional gendered division of labor within families? How do these beliefs coincide with their decision to homeschool? As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the literature provides us with only a superficial view of parents’ frames for homeschooling. Since much of literature relies on survey research, it is hard to know with specificity what parents mean by such things as “negative peer influences” and “family cohesion.” Through extensive interviews with parents, this dissertation fills this void in our understanding about this growing, dynamic social movement.

### **Tactics**

While the frames of a social movement answer the question of why people choose to participate in a particular movement, the tactics of a movement describe how individuals participate. Social movement scholars use the term tactics or “tactical repertoires” (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004) to refer to the protest activities of social movements. Tactical repertoires are distinctive in that they share three elements: contestation, intentionality and collective identity. These activities take many forms ranging from strikes, marches and leafleting, to drag shows and public guerilla theater

(Rupp and Taylor 2003; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). The tactics of a particular movement are informed by the goals of a movement. In the same-sex marriage movement, for example, one goal is to convince legislators and the general public to create public policy allowing gay men and lesbians to get married. Therefore, their tactics include lobbying legislators, holding rallies, and picketing. Since their goals are public policy and culture change, their tactics are public and involve interaction with other constituencies.

The homeschooling movement is a bit different. Since homeschooling is currently legal in all 50 states, there is no significant public policy agenda. While some may fret that they are misunderstood by the general public (Stevens 2001), there does not appear to be a widespread campaign to change the public's perception of homeschoolers. For most participants in this movement, the goal is simply to give their children a quality educational experience at home. On a basic level, they are criticizing and resisting public schooling. How they choose to express that resistance is not through direct interaction or protest with schools or other officials, but by withdrawing from schools altogether. Therefore their tactics, or form of protest, is the private act of teaching their children at home.

We know from a review of the literature that there are different forms of homeschooling and, hence, different forms of tactics. Stevens (2001) suggests that religious and secular parents each have a unique approach to educating their children at home. As these differences mirror the findings of this dissertation, I describe each group's particular approach to homeschooling in detail in the tactics chapter. The literature also suggests that, regardless of the particular style, the practice of

homeschooling is heavily gendered – mothers do most of the work. What we do not know is why, exactly this is. How does this gendered division of labor relate to their beliefs about motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood? How does their mode of homeschooling fit with their ideas about family life? My research addresses these questions.

### **Collective Identity**

The concept of collective identity describes “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experience and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier, p. 105, 1992). Collective identity answers the question of how social movement participants think of themselves as actors within a particular movement. Scholars interested in identity and social movements have explored how participants’ sense of identity influences movement dynamics on a number of levels: on the emergence of movements, recruitment of participants, tactical choices, and movement outcomes (Reger et. al 2008; Polletta and Jasper 2001). At each of these levels, identity is understood not as a fixed and static entity. Rather, collective identities are constructed through processes of negotiation, resistance, interpretation and interaction. In other words, the creation and maintenance of identities involves significant “identity work” (Reger et al. 2008).

Identity work involves our attempts to “...establish, change, or lay claim to meanings as particular kinds of persons” (Schwalbe p. 105, 1996). As individuals, we do this work every day through our styles of speech, the clothes we wear and our personal demeanor. We use these markers to communicate to others what kind of person we are, or at least how we want to be seen by others. Identity work is also undertaken at the

group level. In the case of social movements, this work describes any activities designed to construct and maintain a collective identity. Collective identity work is expressed in formal ways through social movement literature, media campaigns, political speeches and in less formal settings, such as interactions among movement participants and between participants and the general public (Reger et al. 2008).

Within the context of social movements, collective identity work serves strategic purposes: “Collective identities are articulated, manipulated, packaged, and deployed by movement actors to maximize resources and support from constituents” (Dugan, p. 21. 2008). Collective identities can be constructed in ways that either differentiate participants from the general public or highlight their similarities. Strategically, this is a choice of emphasizing “sameness” or “difference.” In movements for gay, lesbian and bisexual rights, for example, it has been politically successful to convince the heterosexual public that sexual minorities are more similar to them than different (Bernstein 1997; Dugan 2008). In other instances, participants stake their claims on some unique aspect of who they are (Reger et al. 2008).

While researchers have shown that many homeschoolers do consider themselves to be part of a larger social movement (Collom and Mitchell 2005; Stevens 2001), it is not clear if this awareness includes the drawing of boundaries of who is part of the movement and who is not. Do homeschoolers have a sense of what a “homeschooling family” is and how it differs from other families? Further, is homeschooling part of the parents’ identities as mothers and fathers and how are they different from mothers and fathers who do not practice home education? If they do have a collective identity, does it entail identity work? If so, what form does that work take? The homeschooling

literature, at present, is inadequate to address these questions; the analyses I present here address precisely these questions.

### **Outcomes**

Assessing the consequences of social movements is a difficult proposition. Some movements have clear goals and discernable consequences, especially those movements intent of passing laws or changing institutional practices (Gamson 2006). Other movements have less measurable goals, particularly those intent on cultural change or “identity politics” (Gamson 1996). Furthermore, movements can achieve some goals and not others. Another complication is that some of the consequences of a movement can be intended, yet others are unintended. Therefore, it is not always possible to decisively say whether or not a particular movement has been a success. Accordingly, movement scholars have begun to talk in terms of “outcomes,” rather than success or failure (Goodwin and Jasper 2003).

The literature on homeschooling outcomes tends to focus on how effective homeschooling is for the children. In general, much of this research suggests that homeschooling is a success in terms of academic competence and psycho-social development (Ray 2000). Several studies have discussed the consequence of homeschooling for the mothers who do the work of homeschooling. Not surprisingly, these studies show that the added burden of homeschooling leaves mothers feeling stressed out and frustrated that they do not have enough time for themselves (Lois 2010; 2006). Much less is known about what outcomes homeschooling, as a movement, may have on a broader scale. For the purposes of this dissertation the question is how might this movement affect or contribute to ongoing debates about the state of the family, and

struggle over changing gender roles within families? Does this movement advance and support more gender egalitarian modes of parenting? Might this movement promote new ways of “doing family,” or might it push us toward the past?

### **Research Questions and Organization of the Dissertation**

The overarching research questions that guide this dissertation are drawn from the literature review of homeschooling, contemporary parenting and family life, and family, gender and social movements. The questions are as follows:

1. How do these parents *frame* their commitment to homeschooling and how do these frames relate to broader social changes regarding gender and the family?
2. What are the particular *tactics* employed by these homeschoolers? In other words, how do they homeschool their children? How are their tactics related to contemporary ideas about motherhood, childhood and family life?
3. What are the components of homeschoolers’ *collective identity*? How do they think of themselves as homeschoolers and how do they differentiate themselves from people who do not homeschool? What sort of identity work do they engage in? Is homeschooling part of parents’ identities as mothers and fathers?
4. Finally, what are the potential *outcomes* of this movement for contemporary debates about gender roles within families and the current state of the family? Does this movement signal a rejection of the feminist critique of the family and a push toward more equitable parenting arrangements? If so, what sort of vision of gender and family life does it put in its place?

The second chapter of this dissertation describes the methods and overall research design. I explain the process of arranging interviews, the content of those interviews, and the challenges of trying to interview both parents. I also include a summary of the descriptive characteristics of the families included in the study including income, education, occupation and other variables. This chapter also includes an account of the data analysis techniques I utilized as I transcribed and coded the interviews.

The rest of the dissertation is organized around the research questions. Chapter 3 examines the frames utilized by homeschooling parents to justify their choice to homeschool. I argue that the two groups of parents, one religious and one secular, share common concerns about schools and family. Yet, they have divergent views about who their children are and what they need from schools. I show that these two groups of parents make the same educational choice for their children, though not for the same reasons.

Chapter 4 explores the tactics of homeschooling parents. I argue that religious and secular parents have different approaches to teaching their children at home. These differences stem in large part from competing perspectives on who their children are and what they need to learn. One common element of these parents' homeschooling tactics is that women do essentially all of the work. However, secular and religious parents justify the gendered nature of homeschooling work in different ways. Hence, a part of this chapter explores these differences.

Chapter 5 examines the collective identities of homeschooling parents. While both groups have a general sense that they are part of a broader movement, neither group really identifies with the movement per se. They are not active participants beyond what



takes place in the privacy of their own homes. A key difference is that secular homeschoolers regard homeschooling as part of who they are, whereas religious parents suggest it is just something that they do. I examine the implications of this differences in this chapter.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents a summary of the findings presented in the previous chapters of the dissertation. I draw these findings together in an attempt to make sense of the homeschooling movement in the current social, cultural, and historical context. I theorize about the potential outcomes of this growing movement within a context of changing gender norms, particularly within families. I examine the extent to which this movement may contribute to the social construction of gendered family roles, and different ways of “doing family.” This chapter also offers a discussion of how the findings in this dissertation might inform a more critical public discussion of the significance of this growing movement. I also reflect on the limitations of this dissertation, and offer suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH METHODS

Work for this dissertation unofficially began sometime during my third year as a graduate student. My daughter was three years old and my wife and I began discussing our options for schooling. My wife and I had both been through the public school system in our respective hometowns and we remembered our experiences as mostly good, though not entirely positive. So our first inclination was to enroll our daughter in the local public school.

Meanwhile, my older brother lived with his family in a nearby town. He and his wife were talking about how to educate their son, who was three months older than my daughter. Both my brother and sister-in-law attended public schools and, for a variety of reasons, felt that schooling their child at home would be a better option. For about a year and a half, we had many discussions about why homeschooling was superior to conventional schooling. They argued that schools were too rigid, forcing children to sit behind desks and walk in straight lines when all they really wanted to do was to run around and learn “naturally.” After a while, these arguments wore off on us, and we began to consider homeschooling.

We started to attend potluck dinners and play groups with other families who were considering homeschooling. Later, I would come to recognize these families as “unschoolers” who had a particular commitment to and affection for the natural world. During one spring, we attended a weekly half-day program at a local farm school. We would spend about four hours at the farm making crafts, singing songs, and roaming through the woods with our children. While the children were having fun, it did not take

long for me to become uncomfortable. The conversations among the adults often revolved around the virtues of buying organic food, the evil influence of the television, and the superiority of homeschooling. From my perspective, these conversations seemed pat, self-serving and decidedly not critical. These parents seemed to think they had all the right answers about the world, and everyone else was wrong.

I began to have similar reactions at other homeschooling events. I remember distinctly being at a meeting of families, some of whom were considering homeschooling and some of whom had already begun. I attended this meeting under the pretenses that it was going to be a forum to help people make a decision about whether or not they should homeschool. I left the meeting completely discouraged. My impression was that everyone there had made up their mind. For most of these parents it seemed like a black and white issue: schools are bad, homeschooling is good. I also sensed an implicit undertone of the message that parents who homeschool were good and those who did not were bad. I had hoped to use this meeting as an opportunity to sort out my own feelings about the issue but instead left turned off by the whole tone of the event.

As a sociologist and a parent, I had questions about homeschooling that I would have liked to discuss with these parents. First and foremost, I noticed that in virtually all of the homeschooling families I met, mothers were doing all of the work of homeschooling, while fathers worked jobs outside of the house. Why was this? Was this the result of a conscious decision? What did it mean? Also, a lot of these parents seemed political to the extent that they talked about resisting consumerism, the importance of buying local products, and saving the planet through reducing energy consumption and

recycling as much as possible. But what about public education? Clearly they felt something was wrong with this major social institution, why not try to fix it?

Eventually, I started to conceive of this dissertation as an opportunity for me to address questions that were both sociologically and personally relevant. On a personal level, I wondered if homeschooling was the right option for our family. If so, how would it happen? Who would work outside of the home and who would handle home education? How would this decision fit within our own ideas about parenting and gender relations within our family? From a sociological perspective I began to wonder more about the broader implications of this alternative education movement. Why were increasing numbers of parents making this choice at this particular historical moment? What does this say about parenting, family, and schooling in the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The setting for this dissertation is the western part of a northeastern state. The locals affectionately refer to this area as “the valley.” The valley is unique because within an hour drive there are four elite private schools and one public research university. The area is comprised of approximately ten rural towns and several small and two large cities. Most of the inhabitants of the valley, as well as the state, are white. The cultural climate is typical of many northeastern college towns. Most of the inhabitants are politically and socially liberal and the valley is home to many art galleries, bookshops and restaurants. It is also home to many homeschooling families.

That this dissertation is set in the valley is significant. Virtually all of the parents I talked to described the valley as a relatively easy place to homeschool. Few parents

reported encountering opposition from local school officials and most indicate that their local communities are generally accepting, if not supportive, of their decision to homeschool. By comparison, some parents talked about knowing people who homeschool in other parts of the state, region, or country and the additional obstacles those families face. Most agreed that the counter-cultural ethos and progressive politics of the valley contribute to the supportive atmosphere.

When it came time to decide how to formulate my sample for this dissertation, I took a cue from the literature. Researchers have suggested that the homeschooling movement is comprised of two main sub-groups. Van Galen (1988) first differentiated between “ideologues,” who choose to homeschool for religious reasons, and “pedagogues,” who are primarily motivated about instructional methods and philosophy. Similarly, Stevens (2001) describes religious homeschooling families as “believers” and liberal, counter-cultural types as “inclusives.” According to several informants, including the manager of a large, eclectic homeschooling web site and two members of religious home education groups, the valley is home to both “types” of families. They assume that there are more counter-cultural types in the area, though it cannot be said for certain.

Therefore, this dissertation includes roughly equal samples of both religious and counter-cultural families. There are two main reasons for approaching the project this way: First, such a sample approximates the broader homeschooling population. Although generalizability is not a main concern of this study, it strengthens the analytic contribution of this dissertation to capture some of the diversity of the movement’s participants. Second, this perspective allows for a number of interesting comparisons both within and across families. Most notably, this allows me to compare the

homeschooling experiences of families who may or may not share similar ideas about gender and the family. It also provides the opportunity to explore the gendered experiences of men and women in their particular roles as homeschooling parents. In what ways are they different and in what ways are they similar?

### **Data Collection Part One: Locating Families**

To gain a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and experiences of homeschooling parents, I designed a qualitative study. My intention was to collect data through three sources: 1) semi-structured interviews with homeschooling parents, 2) analysis of homeschooling literature that these parents read, and 3) observation of homeschooling support group meetings. The strategy changed, however, when it became clear very early on that the majority of these parents neither read homeschooling literature, nor attended formal meetings with other homeschoolers. Therefore, the data in this dissertation is based primarily on the interviews with parents.

The first major challenge was to locate homeschooling families to participate in this dissertation. I queried the state's department of education website and spoke with several local school officials and homeschooling advocates to figure out how to best locate participants. One thing became clear – neither the state nor local school officials maintain detailed information about homeschoolers. Since the state does not require local districts to make specific reports about homeschoolers, most districts do not. However, I did discover that there are dozens of internet sites for homeschooling groups around the state. I decided to turn to them for help.

Over the years, I had developed some loose connections with homeschooling families. One of the most useful was with a woman who maintained a website and online

directory for “Valley Homeschoolers,” which she described as the largest “eclectic” group of homeschoolers in the valley. At the time there were about 100 families listed in her directory. I emailed her and asked if she would allow me to post a message on her website seeking participants. She agreed. I wrote a message in which I said that I was a local graduate student and parent of school-age children, and I was interested in homeschooling. I indicated that I wanted to know why parents chose to homeschool and how they managed homeschooling along with all of their other family duties and obligations. I received about ten responses from my posting. Though this was described as an eclectic group website, all of the respondents came from secular parents.

The process of locating religious families was quite similar. The same contact who granted me access to Valley Homeschoolers’ website, provided me with the name of the biggest group for religious homeschooling families in the valley, “Christian Homeschool Network.” I located the group’s website and emailed the contact listed online. I explained who I was and that I was interested in speaking with parents. She asked me to write an email which she would later forward to all of the families in her directory, which she estimated to number about 100. Within a week of the administrator sending out my email, I received about eight positive replies.

I used these initial contacts to create a “snowball sample.” In other words, once these parents agreed to participate, I asked them if they knew of anyone else who they thought would be willing to help. I made these requests both through email and at the end of each interview. About half of the time, parents would offer other contacts that turned out to be useful.

It is important to note that all of the initial respondents from both groups were mothers. As I communicated with these women, either through email or phone, I told them of my desire to interview them as well as their husbands (assuming they were married). However, it proved to be difficult, in many cases, to get fathers to agree to be interviewed. In all cases, I would first interview the mother and then told her that I would like to interview her husband as well. In most cases, the mother agreed to help and either got her husband to call or email me or she gave me his contact information. In other cases, mothers laughed or asked why I wanted to talk to their husbands. After all, they suggested, their husbands probably had little valuable information about homeschooling since they did not do any of the work. In a few other cases, I was in contact with fathers and they said they were just too busy or simply not interested in participating.

In the field of family sociology, it is not uncommon for fathers to be reluctant, if not unreliable, research participants. Laureau (2002) suggests that there are practical reasons for this. Namely, fathers oftentimes are not the parent responsible for the daily activities of family life, especially when those activities include children. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that fathers would be less than reliable sources of information about those activities. Lareau notes that fathers are better suited to either speak in general terms about their beliefs about family life, fatherhood, childhood, and about their own work experiences and leisure activities (p. 51).

In all but one family in this dissertation, fathers were not responsible for homeschooling the children. All of the fathers were supportive, to varying degrees, and all had ideas about why it is good to homeschool. That some fathers chose not to



participate is not entirely surprising, though it does have implications for this dissertation. It means that I am unable to draw systematic comparisons between husbands and wives both within and between the two groups of homeschoolers. Nevertheless, since I was able to include 18 fathers, I am confident that I can draw reliable conclusions about fathers' perspectives and experiences regarding homeschooling and family life.

### **Data Collection Part Two: The Interviews**

Most of the interviews in this dissertation took place in the families' homes. The types of homes and neighborhoods where the interviews took place varied. Some of the families lived in older homes in rural areas, including one family who lived on a dairy farm. Many of the families lived in modest single family homes in suburban developments. Only one family lived in a multiple family dwelling and that was in a medium sized city. The interviews that took place outside of homes included four at coffee shops, one at a parent's office at work, and one at a public park.

All of the interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format. That is, I never interviewed both parents at the same time. I reasoned that I would get more candid and thorough responses if parents were not constrained by having their spouse present. However, I was rarely alone with a respondent for an entire interview, especially if it was a mother and we were in her home. Most of the time, the children, especially if they were older, would be playing in a nearby room. Sometimes, a child would interrupt the interview for a request for craft supplies or a snack. In those cases where both parents were home, the parent who was not being interviewed was usually successful at keeping the children at bay.

We were less likely to be interrupted during the interviews in public places, though background noise often presented a challenge. This was especially true of the interviews that took place in coffee shops. I audio taped each interview and took sporadic notes throughout the conversations. After each interview, I took more extensive notes about the interview including emergent themes and lingering questions. Oftentimes, I took these notes in my car directly after an interview or I would stay at the coffee shop and take notes once the respondent would leave.

At the start of each interview, subjects filled out a survey (see Appendix A). The survey covers some basic demographic information, such as income, family size, level of education, and employment status. The families in this study are typical of homeschoolers in a number of important ways (Bielick et al. 2001; Stevens 2001). First, the families in this study are from the middle class. All of the parents have at least taken some college courses and 82 percent (37 out of 45) have earned at least their bachelor's degree. Slightly more than a third of these parents, 35 percent, have earned advanced degrees. The average family income of the participants is nearly \$66,000. All but three of the fathers were employed full-time in occupations such as accountant, college professor, general contractor and several men are small business owners. Two of the three fathers who did not work full-time were college students. Among the mothers, only three worked full-time while the majority, nearly 60 percent, worked-part time in positions like assistant teacher, volunteer coordinator and store clerk. A little less than one-third of these women was not employed at all. All of the respondents in this study were white and on average they have 2.6 children. In all of these measures, the families in this study are typical of the general homeschooling population.

There are two notable differences between religious and secular families (see tables in Appendix B). First, the average household income of the secular families was \$76,000 while religious families averaged \$50,400. Since there are no significant differences in employment status between the two groups, it appears that the household income disparity is explained by the types of jobs held by parents. Several secular parents, especially fathers, had higher status and higher paying positions compared to the religious parents. Second, there were differences in educational attainment between these groups. Approximately 60 percent of all secular parents who reported their level of education have earned a graduate degree, compared to just 10 percent among their religious peers. These moderate differences in education and income may, in part, explain the two groups' varied approaches to homeschooling. I explore these differences in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

It is difficult to make a precise estimate of how long these families have homeschooled or how long they plan to educate their children at home. One family had only been homeschooling for six months when I met them, while at least three other families were no longer homeschooling. These families had older children who had since either moved on to high school or college. In general, most of the families in this dissertation committed to homeschooling their children for their elementary and middle-school years and most discussed the possibility of enrolling their children in school once they were older.

In total, I interviewed both parents in 18 families and only mothers from nine other families. These 45 interviews gave me insight into homeschooling in 27 different families. The average interview lasted about one hour, though they ranged from just

thirty minutes to two hours. The interviews were semi-structured, organized around the main research questions of the dissertation (see Appendix C). I asked questions about why they homeschool, what they do on a day-to-day basis, and how homeschooling affects their family. I also asked them about their participation with other homeschoolers in formal and informal settings as well as the extent to which they utilized homeschooling literature, websites and similar resources.

Most of the time, the interviews unfolded more like conversations than formal interviews. I would usually start by saying something like, “Tell me about the biggest challenge of homeschooling,” or “What is the best thing about homeschooling for you and your family?” From here I would let the conversation flow while paying attention to the main questions I had in mind. Occasionally, I would have to redirect the conversation to address a particular question.

For the most part, these mothers were enthusiastic in their answers to my questions. It was evident to me that they were confident in their commitment to homeschooling and were quite willing to tell me about it. However, there were two topics that seemed more difficult to discuss than others. One of my interests was to learn more about how homeschooling parents thought about themselves as mothers and fathers and what role, if any, homeschooling played in their sense of self. So when I asked them directly if homeschooling parents were somehow different than non-homeschooling parents, most said no. However, when I probed a bit, and parents appeared more comfortable, they would be more forthcoming. They would describe themselves as being more patient, more committed to their children, and less materialistic than non-

homeschoolers. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, “Collective Identities.”

I suspect that one main reason that parents were initially reluctant to compare themselves to other parents was that they were unsure about my status as a homeschooler. With the exception of two secular families, none of the other families knew prior to the interviews whether or not I homeschooled my children. My impression is that they avoided these comparisons because they did not wish to offend me if I was a non-homeschooling parent. This impression is informed in part by my experience with my previous experience with homeschooling parents. As I mentioned earlier, in years past I spent some time attending playgroups with homeschooling families. I found these parents to be much more candid in their criticism of other parents. They were very open about their disdain for “working mothers” and greedy parents who value their material possessions over spending time with their children. For the most part, the unambiguous theme was that homeschooling parents made better choices and were, in many ways, better parents. While this is just an anecdotal observation, the overwhelming extent to which I heard these themes leads me to believe that many of these parents held similar beliefs.

A second topic that seemed hard to talk about was the difficulties of homeschooling. When the issue came up, parent often skirted the issue or used humor to avoid talking specifically about it. For example, one mother joked that she was so busy with her children that she had not had a chance to wash her hair in three days. Another common response was that since there were always people at home, it was hard to keep the house clean. I had to probe extensively to get parents to discuss the non-trivial

challenges of homeschooling, and even then, they were not especially forthcoming. One rare exception was one secular mother who spoke of feeling her life was out of balance because she does not have enough time to focus on herself. Much of her life revolves around her children and her husband. When pressed on the issue, a couple of fathers discussed the economic implications of having one parent at home instead of in the workforce. Some spoke longingly about being able to replace an aging automobile or to pay for some deferred home improvement project. Most, however, dismissed these challenges as insignificant compared to the importance of educating their children at home.

As a parent of two school aged children, who happen to attend school for seven hours each day, it seems implausible to me to suggest that homeschooling presents only trivial challenges for parents. I assume that most parents would admit that rearing children, even those who attend school, requires vast amounts of energy, patience, creativity and compassion. Most parents could not even imagine how much work it must be to have the children home all day every day. That these parents downplay the difficulty of homeschooling is also likely due to the fact that they were unaware of my homeschooling status. Perhaps they felt obligated to present homeschooling to an outsider in the most favorable light possible.

Although homeschooling is growing in terms of prevalence, there are still a lot of critics. Many of these parents told me that they had to defend and justify their choice to homeschool, especially to family members and close friends. Perhaps they were reluctant to discuss the negative aspects of homeschooling since they feel like their choices are already under attack by some sectors of the public. I had an experience early on that

illustrated this notion. I met with a local homeschooling advocate for teenagers. I told him about my desire to explore the gender politics of homeschooling. He sighed and said that last thing we need is to read another study, or story, that is critical of homeschooling. I think it is reasonable to assume that some of the parents in this study shared his sentiment.

At the outset of the dissertation, my intention was to ask the same questions of both mothers and fathers. This strategy changed, however, once I realized that asking fathers about the specific tasks of day-to-day homeschooling was not yielding useful information. The obvious reason for this was that most of these fathers had little to do with these daily activities and, hence, had little idea about the specifics of what would happen. The first few fathers I asked about this would smile and say something like, “You would have to ask my wife about that.” They would go on to justify their lack of knowledge about the daily routine by explaining that they simply were not around during the day when most of the homeschooling takes place. Most of the fathers were away at work. I chose to shift the question away from the details to focus more on general types of things that went on in the home and why. For example, a father would be able to tell me that his wife takes the children to the library to borrow books and films to supplement home lessons, but he might not be able to describe exactly what those lessons were.

Aside from questions about daily activities, there were no significant differences between interviews with mothers and fathers. I found fathers to be forthcoming about why they think homeschooling is a good idea for their families and why public schools are not a good option. They had strong convictions about who their children are and what they need. Despite the fact that most fathers say that the initial idea of

homeschooling originated from their wives, most are now just as confident in their family's commitment to homeschool.

I decided to stop conducting interviews once I hit a "saturation point." As I approached 40 interviews, I heard the same themes repeated time and again. The answers were getting predictable and I was not gaining new data. Once I hit the mark of 45 interviews I felt as though there was not much to be gained from including more subjects and I was confident that I had a large enough sample from which to draw reasonable conclusions.

### **Data Analysis**

I utilized an inductive analytic strategy as I read through the individual interview transcripts. That is, I began by considering individual responses to particular questions and then began to detect patterns and regularities among all responses to the same question. Once I became confident that these patterns were consistent across the interviews, I created a list of themes. My analytic focus was guided by the research questions of this dissertation. As I read subjects' responses to questions about why they homeschool, how they do it and how it affects their family life, I did so through a gender lens. That is, I paid particular attention to the implicit and explicit messages about gender in parents' descriptions of their motivations, experiences, and beliefs.

Next, I coded the interviews using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program. I imported digital copies of the transcripts into the NVivo program. I read through these transcripts looking for statements that were representative of one of the broad themes that I identified. When I found a useful example, I copied the text and placed it in the proper file under the appropriate theme. For example, one religious mother talked about having



a poor opinion of public schools because they teach about things like homosexuality and evolution. I copied this particular excerpt of her interview and placed under them the theme “Reasons for homeschooling: religious objections.” My list of themes expanded and contracted slightly throughout the process. At the beginning of the process, for example, I began to think that parents had different homeschooling agendas for their sons and daughters. That turned out not to be the case and so I dropped it. On the other hand, the theme that most homeschooling parents believe that “anyone can homeschool,” was not initially one of the main themes. As it started to emerge on a regular basis, I included it as a theme and went back and recoded the interviews I already had coded. In this sense, the coding process was dynamic, involving periodic modifications.

## CHAPTER 3

### WHY HOMESCHOOL?:

#### THE CULTURAL BELIEFS OF HOMESCHOOLING PARENTS

Social movement scholars use the concept “frames” to describe the shared concerns, beliefs, values and ways of understanding that people use to understand their situation and legitimate their collective actions (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). Frames are cultural products that are simultaneously objective and subjective. They are objective insofar as they are shared and publicly available. They are part of social structures that govern and shape social life, including government, mass media and education. Frames are also partially internalized, impacting people’s identities, aspirations, and actions. People draw from macro-level cultural models to make micro-level decisions (Blair-Loy 2003, p.5). Sometimes, people can draw from the same frame, yet arrive at different conclusions. Conversely, groups of people can engage in the same behavior, but for different reasons. In other words, this perspective regards culture as an active phenomenon, which people interpret and use for their own means, rather than viewing culture as a force that determines our behavior.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is concerned with identifying and then analyzing the frames of homeschooling parents in the western part of a northeastern state. The frames of these parents, half of whom are religious, half of whom are secular, are analyzed from a “gender perspective.” This means paying particular attention to the ways in which gendered meanings and assumptions are part of the story that movement participants use

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<sup>1</sup> Blair-Loy (2003) uses the concept “cultural schema” in a way that is virtually synonymous with my use of “frames.” I chose not to use cultural schema, and instead use the generic “frames,” so as to avoid unnecessary confusion about terminology.

to frame their concerns, legitimate their claims and suggest the appropriate course of action (Einwohner et al. 2000). In this study, this suggests exploring the role of gender in the worldview or cultural understandings of homeschooling parents.

The general consensus among parents in this study was that schools are not a good match for their children. When I asked parents to elaborate, the picture got a bit more complicated. I found that parents viewed and assessed public schools through three related sets of ideas: precious childhood/intensive mothering, decline of the family and moral decline. Parents' ideas about childhood, family and morality overlap. It is difficult, if not impossible, to parse out views on what children need, for example, and what family priorities should be. Furthermore, each of these components, to varying degrees, rests on particular ideas about gender. By examining the point at which these ideas intersect, and the assumptions on which they are built, we can gain a better appreciation for the reasons why a parent would choose to homeschool.

### **Precious Childhood/Intensive Mothering**

The first strand of homeschoolers' cultural worldview is an implicit definition of childhood. Both groups of parents share a view of childhood that is common in the broader culture, especially among white, middle-class families. This model, which I refer to as "precious childhood," suggests that children are fragile, precious, and worthy of parents' whole-hearted attention. Each child has a unique self and requires individualized care in order to reach his or her full potential. This particular version of childhood is socially and historically constructed. In centuries past, children were viewed as economic assets whose value to the family derived from their ability to contribute to the household economy. By contrast, contemporary children are viewed as economic

liabilities who, in return for parents' investments, promise emotional but not necessarily financial rewards (Hays 1996; Mintz 2004; Zelizer 1985).

The precious childhood ideology is bolstered by a historically specific notion of motherhood, which Sharon Hays describes as the "ideology of intensive motherhood." This white, middle-class model of mothering is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive..."(1996:129). Mothers should be completely devoted to their children and their families. Nothing should come between a mother, her children and her family: not demands from the workplace, personal ambitions or social commitments. Under the ideology of intensive mothering, the care and development of children is primarily the responsibility of mothers. This includes children's education.

Taken together, these beliefs suggest that precious children deserve the individualized attention of a devoted mother. Most parents in this study felt that schools were structurally incompatible with these beliefs. They suggest that public schools are designed to deliver a one-size-fits-all educational experience, where teachers "shoot for the middle" in terms of students' needs and abilities. A few parents conceded that schools may actually work for some students. Jerry, who works as a schoolteacher, explained:

But I do think that there are limits. The way that our school system is set up, there are certain limitations...I mean, I've seen, I have students every year who really respond to the school environment and they love it and they do really, really well and they're learning a tremendous amount every year. And it just really works for them (Jerry, secular father of two).

As Jerry indicated, aiming for the middle has its limitations. Another father, Jack, assessed the situation by dividing the student population into thirds: those at the bottom

with special needs, those in the middle with average needs and skills and those at the top, the highest performers. He argued that in effect, schools don't work for two-thirds of the population – those at the top and those at the bottom.

The experience of Joe and Pat, a secular couple with two children, illustrates both ends of this spectrum. Eleven year-old Johnny, their eldest child, was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at age seven. Pat says that Johnny had considerable trouble in school. He had a hard time following instructions, especially when he was required to do things he did not excel at. Johnny felt like an outcast and the stress he experienced became a burden for the whole family. Finally, after three frustrating years in the public school system, Joe and Pat decided homeschooling Johnny. Pat reports that the transformation in her son has been remarkable.

He looked very strange when he was in school. He would have had to go on medication for the amount of stress he was under. And he seemed odd. You'd know. If you met him you'd say, something's up with that guy and now, he's just...the only thing you would say is oh my gosh, that kid's really incredible.

Since taking him out of school, Johnny has flourished both academically and socially. He is an avid reader who enjoys spending time with many friends.

Johnny's sister Missy went to public school for two years, kindergarten and first grade. Her parents describe her as having above average intelligence. School, for her, was boring and not much of a challenge. They tried to get the school to give her more enrichment activities but it did not work out. Missy would occasionally be held out of school to participate in homeschooling activities such as field trips and playgroups. It got to a point where Missy had "a foot in both camps," public school and homeschool. Eventually, Missy asked her parents if she could be homeschooled too. Since, as Pat describes it, the family was already committed to a homeschooling for one of their

children, it seemed logical and desirable to teach Missy at home with her brother. Pat reports that Missy has just finished her first year at home and she is doing well. Joe and Pat's experience with their children confirms their belief that schools, with their focus on educating large groups of children, are incapable of meeting the unique need of each child.

Secular and religious parents also agreed that the poor organization of mass schooling results in teachers spending a lot of time on unimportant issues. At the top of this list was classroom management. Many parents believe that teachers waste too much time teaching students how to behave and follow orders. One religious mother, Donna, used to spend a few hours each week volunteering in her daughter's first grade classroom. She remembers vividly the day that it became clear to her that a lot of classroom time is misspent. She explains:

And it just didn't seem like they were getting much accomplished. Nor did they have time, you know, I'm not faulting the teachers. I think they did as best as they could. But I kind of felt like I was watching my children kind of, um, get pushed by the wayside in class of eighteen...My daughter, who was kind of excelling, was sitting there very quietly, not saying a word and getting all this praise for just sitting there and being quiet. And I kept thinking, shouldn't there be more and why are my kids having to sit at a circle for forty minutes to get ten or fifteen minutes worth of work done? (Donna, religious mother of five).

Similar to Donna, most parents did not fault the teachers for spending time teaching students how to walk in a straight line, sit in a circle or to wait quietly at their desks. They felt that it was an inevitable consequence of trying to teach large groups of students with a small number of adults. Attention to individual growth and development is sacrificed in the name of group management.

Another reason parents felt schools were incompatible with their views of childhood relates to the dictates of standardized testing. In 2001 the U.S. government

passed the “No Child Left Behind Act.” According to this legislation, in order to qualify for federal funding, each state has to maintain a system of standardized tests for public school students. Schools whose test scores fail to meet performance standards, set by the federal government, risk losing federal funds (Meier and Wood 2004). In Massachusetts, where this study takes place, students take the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Test (MCAS). Since its inception a decade ago, MCAS has been roundly criticized by parents and teachers across the state. Many people feel that it places undue burdens on teachers and students and changes the character of public education. The homeschooling parents I spoke with share these concerns.

You know, maybe there are some adjustments that need to be made. Well all of a sudden, you know, we started seeing curriculum change. We started seeing the whole teaching method change to now, quite literally in our high schools, um, it’s MCAS from day one to graduation. They learn the test, they teach the test, they study the test, they take the test. And that’s what their high school has become. And that’s, absurd, really. I mean it’s, it doesn’t make any sense to me. You know what I mean? (Bruce, religious father of four).

Another father, Tim, had a similar criticism of MCAS. He suggested that it completely warps the learning experience for children. He explained:

I think the MCAS testing alienated a lot of parents...they realize...they’re educating for a test. They’re educating very narrow, and very narrow lines. Um, they’re trying to move ‘em through the system, pass these tests and it’s a question, I guess of, what is education? What is real learning? What do you want for your kids? Do you want ‘em to know the gross national product of Honduras or what the number one import/exports are, or, what, you know, those kind of facts that you can get in any book? Or do you want to foster real learning, real education, love of learning, love of, love of books, uh, desire for knowledge? (Tim, secular father of three).

Yeah, the president’s policies, um, this No Child Left Behind is baloney. You know, and the national tests, MCAS or the statewide, or national, whatever competency, standards. They’re asking these kids to get these kids to pass this test, but not providing funds. So schools are broke, they’re focusing solely on academics. They’re not focusing on the whole child. They’re not teaching

holistically. They're totally ignoring significant parts of the child (Pat, secular mother of two).

Parents from both groups were critical of MCAS because they view it as expensive and a misuse of public resources in a time when schools, and other public services, are seeing their budgets slashed. The county where about three-quarters of the families in this study live has been especially vulnerable over the past five years. For example, in the town where Tim and his family lives, there had been an ongoing debate about closing one or more of the middle schools due to low enrollment and funding issues. Tim laments,

Uh, you know, thrown into a public school system, especially our public school system here, which is in total flux from year to year, whether or not they're gonna close the school, whether or not they're not gonna have funds to fund certain programs or to keep certain teachers on. It's just changing constantly so, here in [our town] they don't know whether the schools are gonna be open one year to the next.

In such a climate, where the stability and longevity of schools is in question, these parents were not willing to involve their children in an institution that may be here one year and gone the next. This instability is not, in their view, due simply to local politics. Many homeschooling parents complained that as a nation we have our economic priorities out of order. They criticize the federal government for spending billions of dollars to wage two wars, while public schools struggle to survive from year to year. This criticism is mildly ironic since these parents do not participate in the public school system anyway.

### **Kids Need More, Kids Need Less**

So far, I have argued that both groups of parents agree that schools fail to meet the particular needs of their unique children. When we dig beneath the surface, however,



there are subtle yet significant differences. These differences have to do with slight variations in the overall ideology of precious childhood. The religious parents I spoke with were similar to those Stevens (2001) interviewed. These parents had a view of children as needing more parental guidance. They needed to be instructed. So they felt MCAS and learning to sit still were a waste of time. They felt that students needed more instruction on learning the basics – Kristy calls them the three R’s. She was shocked at how much less students were accomplishing in the local schools, compared to what her sister’s kids were getting in New Hampshire.

Seculars’ take on precious childhood was a little different. They suggested that what kids need to develop to their full potential is less structure. They believe in nurturing children’s innate sense of curiosity by not imposing a set curriculum or forcing them to learn things they are unwilling or unable to do. A couple of parents said it was bad that young kids, especially boys, were forced to learn how to hold a pencil or scissors properly before they are ready. Another family thought it was absurd to “force” children to read when they are five or six. They believe that each child is unique and will learn in her or his own time. Cherri and Doug’s daughter, for example, could not read well until she was nine. This seemed perfectly normal to them.

When I asked parents what they hoped to accomplish through homeschooling their children, their answers reflected a core element of the precious childhood ideology: individualism. No parent, from either group, had aspirations for creating social change through engaging in homeschooling. Instead, their focus was what was best for their child. The two groups had different ideas about what that meant. When I asked parents

what they hoped to accomplish by homeschooling their children, they responded in predictable patterns:

Like I said a better education level than they might get going through the public schools. And uh, you know, a little more involvement on our part so that they see that we care about their education (Kristy, religious mother of 3).

Well, I think that after researching...educationally where we wanted to kind of go...I think that it became a lot about me just wanting her to waste no time...and to instill her with as many good things for her future as possible...just give her the best advantages in education (Rochelle, religious mother of 2).

I'm hoping that they'll be strong individuals and love learning and how are passionate about what they believe in and um, involved in their community (Lesley, secular mother of 3).

[I hope] my kids are, are happy on their own terms and they've developed a sense of self on their own terms...And that they can, that they have an interest in studying, or being curious about a lot of different things and, at different points...That they find their place and that they live an enriching life that has good points, formidable points of joy, they add more joy than suffering, they have more joy than suffering in their lives...And they bring more of that sort of sense to other people they meet. So, I would hope through this experience that they can appreciate themselves and hence will appreciate other people's humanity (Darren, secular father of 3).

Kristy and Rochelle's responses are typical of religious parents. Most wanted their kids to develop the practical, academic skills needed to survive in the secular world. This is not to say that religious parents were not interested in the character development of their children. Instead, it was a matter of emphasis. Secular parents, like Lesley and Darren, consistently emphasized issues like self-esteem, personal satisfaction, service to others, and positive identity development over the acquisition of academic skills.

Interestingly, we have two groups of parents who adhere to a similar, but certainly not identical, model of childhood. They agree that schools are not a good option for their children, yet the religious parents think their kids need more structure and guidance, while the secular parents think they need less. In the next section, I show that the parents

in this study also share a similar concern about the decline of the contemporary family. In this case, they were mostly in agreement with one another. Most families regarded homeschooling as part of their ambition to create more “family unity.”

### **Decline of the Family**

The second main component of the cultural frames of parents in this study is a perceived breakdown of the American family unit. This concern is not unique to homeschoolers, nor is it unique to this particular historical moment. Family scholars and historians have argued that virtually every generation for the past two hundred years has fretted over the state of the family (Coontz 2000). The modern version of “decline of the family” ideology centers partly on the composition of families. Hence, critics worry about the implications of the rising divorce rate, increase in the number of single-parent households and the growing acceptance and prevalence of cohabitation (Cherlin 2004). There are also concerns about the function of the family. On the one hand there is the concern that the family no longer serves as the focal point for people’s emotional lives: it’s not the primary location where people form their most intimate bonds nor is it where they have their psychological needs met. Moreover, there is a fear that the family unit has lost its purpose as the main source for childhood socialization (Popenoe 2005)

Most of the parents in this study shared this belief the family is somehow in decline. Many articulated a feeling that our society is not “family friendly” and there are forces bent on pulling families apart. Donna, religious mother of five, reflects this sentiment when she explains:

It just seems that from a younger and younger and younger age, this society or the state is pulling our children away. And now they’re talking about extending school days. Um, they’re talking about full day preschool. It just seems...when can you connect? That’s a very personal opinion but I just feel that it’s, the

families that I know that are really well connected, um, have to work really hard. They set aside days of the week that they don't schedule anything. I mean, it just seems like it's a huge chore, to kind of stick together.

There are two important layers to Donna's statement that need to be examined. First, Donna talks about the difficulty of families having time together to connect and "stick together." The theme of "time together" ran consistently throughout the interviews and it offers a hint as to what homeschoolers think is the key to establishing family unity. Second is Donna's perception that "society or the state" is driving a wedge between families. This answers the question of who or what is to blame for family decline. As I explain below, these two layers are intertwined.

Most of the parents interviewed for this study identified time together as one of the biggest problems faced by contemporary families and, consequently it is an important reason for choosing to homeschool. In fact, these parents are part of a broader trend in contemporary parenting. As Bianchi and her colleagues show in their time diary study (Bianchi et al. 2006), both parents – mothers and fathers- are spending more time with their children now than parents did a few decades ago. According to homeschooling parents, it is important to spend quality time with children in order to give them a solid emotional and psychological foundation. Kate and Jerry, secular parents of two sons, spoke of the importance of creating meaningful rituals and routines in their sons' lives. Having themselves grown up in single-parent households that were unpredictable and lacked a "real center," they are adamant that their boys have a different experience. They minimize the time that they are apart and turn even the most mundane activities into family rituals. Instead of one parent doing grocery shopping, for example, they do it together.

Time together is important because it allows for a level of intimacy to develop between family members that may not be possible if they are apart for six or eight hours each day. Pat, for example, described the evolution of her relationship with her daughter. Ursula attended public school until second grade. For the past year, Pat has been homeschooling her daughter and suggests that she and Ursula have grown a whole lot closer in a relatively short period of time. A number of parents also suggest that relationships between siblings are enriched by spending quality time together. Donna marveled that the relationship between her children, ranging from two to eleven years-old, is so close. Growing up, Donna had a sister four years older than she but felt like they were not very close. She attributes this difference to time together – her homeschooled children are together virtually all of the time, whereas she and her sister attended public schools and only saw each other for a few hours most days.

If time together is one of the biggest problems facing families nowadays, then what or who is to blame? Parents identify two main culprits for pulling families apart – work and schools. Regarding work, parents on both sides differentiated between what I call “need vs. greed.” On the one hand, many acknowledged that some families need two working parents nowadays. They recognize that it is difficult, if not impossible, for many families to survive on one income. For the most part they were not critical of these parents for not putting in time with their families. They recognized that the forces pulling these families apart were beyond their control. For example, when I asked Kristy about the biggest challenges facing contemporary families, she explained:

Probably financial issues would be probably the number one because you have to find creative ways to still end up having two incomes. In our society, with mortgages what they are and every, you know, um...I think that's probably the hardest thing on a lot of people. Because to even have a stay-at-home parent is

really hard today. I work part-time and my husband works basically two jobs and, you know, it's definitely not an easy accomplishment (Kristy, religious mother of 3).

Kristy talked about how the need to earn two incomes would prevent some families from making the choice to homeschool.

On the other hand, they did levy criticism against parents whose labor force participation seemed to be motivated by something other than need. First, they were critical of parents who worked for the acquisition of material things. Mike, a religious father of one, suggested that many modern couples are stuck in a work and spend cycle because they want to buy "toys" such as computers and motorized vehicles, or they yearn for a bigger house and a newer car. Most parents agreed that the materialistic impulses behind working greed instead of need were fostered by the broader culture. For example, Pat a secular mother of two, explains:

I think our society is really busy and doesn't as a whole value families. So you don't get time off for your families from work. It's just, you work crazy, crazy hours you know. And you have to, just to afford stuff. Um...I think the American family right now is in the process, and this has been going on in my mind since the late 50s, in the process of being torn apart, in an effort to make a group of consumers that live in the same house.

Although most parents acknowledged significant sociocultural pressures toward materialism and greed, they did not let these parents completely off the hook. Many felt that parents, as they themselves have done, could resist consumerist temptations and make better choices. The harshest criticism was reserved for women who chose to work for reasons other than bare economic necessity. Rarely was this criticism as blatant as Pat who stated tersely that she "does not think much of women who put their children into daycare." Instead, most parents were more circumspect. Consider Kate's explanation for why having a career is not one of her personal goals:

I think about my own childhood and feeling like women deserve to be in the workforce, women should be in the workforce. I think that's probably a piece that gets us in there, you know, gets women into the workforce. And then once you're there, it's hard to leave. Like, there's a lot of seductive, addictive things going on – I mean, just connection with other grown-ups, a decent salary, um, the respect that you get from being an MD or whatever it is. Um it's, and again, it's, I think that being a woman MD is much more valued in our society than being a stay-at-home mom, um so, so if you're someone who's at all concerned with that sort of status... And it's hard when you're in that world it's hard not to buy into it.

On the one hand, Kate acknowledges that being a stay-at-home mother is not as respected in U.S. society as being a doctor and she thinks there is something wrong with that. Yet, she also implies that women who are “concerned with that sort of status” are more vulnerable to the “seductive” lure of adult interaction and a paycheck. Therefore, women who work for reasons other than economic necessity, are buying into a set of values that are not consistent with what a family-centered homeschooling mother would choose.

Interestingly, though, virtually no parent raised the concern that husbands work too much. The labor force participation of men was taken for granted, whereas the participation of women, especially those who did not “need” to work, was viewed by most as a selfish act that is detrimental to family cohesion.

The second main culprit in the decline of family time is schools. Most parents felt that the school day is just too long. Hal, a religious father of five, described how hard it was for him to have his three eldest children in school. He explained that his wife, who was responsible for transporting the children to school activities, became overwhelmed:

She was tired of running around a lot, number one. She spent a lot of time just driving kids back and forth, to and from school and, um, I don't think she was real happy. And she just got tired. We kept having kids (laughs) and uh, she got tired of doing the running around and so we gave it [homeschooling] a whirl.

As a dairy farmer, Hal would be up before dawn to milk the cows. Then, if he was lucky, he would be back in time to eat breakfast with his children. More often than not, he

would miss breakfast and would only get to spend 15 minutes with his children while they waited for the school bus. The, he would not see them again for another eight or so hours and when he did it was often unpleasant. Hal explains:

You bring the kids to school and they come home and they're in a pissy mood and they're hungry and cranky. So you miss out on a lot of that, on the good parts of the day.

Hal attributed his children's malcontent to the hectic pace of their day: up early, thirty minutes on the bus, six and a half hours at school, maybe another couple of hours in an extra-curricular activity and then the drive home. Hal's wife Donna described this schedule as the "rat-race." Both she and Hal felt it was absurd for their family to be racing around so much instead of spending quality time together.

Not surprisingly, most parents bristled at the idea of expanding the school day in their state. Many felt that the state should not be putting more resources into expanding the school day but instead should be investing in ways of bring families together. One father explains:

I feel that people should be spending more time with their kids and families should become stronger. Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick...is putting money into this extended learning day program, which would make the school day longer...And I just feel like if we're gonna spend money on anything, you know, rather than making the school day longer, we should be paying parents to come to classes with their kid and learn how to spend time together. We should be providing exciting activities for parents and kids to be getting together, rather than keeping them in school for an extra two hours. Like, I think we should be encouraging the growth of family, rather than discouraging... And especially if, putting all of this money into it so that other people can sort of take care of kids. It seems very backwards to me. Kids should be in school less and now we're gonna make it more (Jerry, secular father of two).

Jerry's assessment is clear: children should spend more time with their parents and less time in schools. This is a common refrain among homeschooling parents.



Furthermore, it is not just that the daily school schedule is too long and hectic for these parents, but the school year is too. Many complained about the fact that kids are starting earlier and earlier and going later into the summer. This growing school year decreases the flexibility that some families wish they could have in terms of traveling and taking vacations. Following the school calendar means that when their kids are off from school, then so are most kids. Therefore, movie theaters, museums and vacation destinations are busier than if they could travel whenever they wanted. For many parents, this was an unanticipated, though entirely welcomed, benefit of homeschooling.

### **Family Unity**

I have shown that most of the parents in this study share a sense that the family is in decline. They feel that the family has lost its place as the center of people's lives, where parents and their children form intimate bonds. Forced apart by the demands of work and school, families do not have enough quality time together to create healthy bonds and strong relationships. Therefore, most of the families in this study engage in homeschooling as a way of reinforcing or reemphasizing the importance of family life. Mayberry and Knowles (1989) describe this as a "family unity" objective of homeschooling.

One part of the family unity objective is resistance. In this case, parents are resisting the forces that would otherwise pull their families apart: namely, schools and work. There is more to it. These parents are also resisting what they see as the moral decline of the broader society. Both religious and secular parents suggested that the morals and values of the broader society are destructive and headed in the wrong direction. Although they may agree that there is a problem, I will show in the following

section that they differ in terms of what, exactly, that problem is and what should be done about it.

### **Moral Decline (God and Nature)**

The third component of homeschoolers' cultural frames is a belief in the moral decline of society. Morality is a complex concept and people often use it interchangeably with other concepts like values and ethics. In the context of this study, I am using morality to describe a "code of conduct" that people use to make sense of their world and set priorities in their lives. Parents in this study consistently spoke of a society that has lost its moral bearings, where people's priorities and values are destructive and misguided. Religious parents were more likely to actually use the term morality, whereas secular parents would say things like, "the world is screwed up," or "there's something wrong with people today." In either case, parents felt like their own moral compass was at odds with the morality of the broader society and for both groups, schools are one place in which this conflict is played out.

### **The Word of God**

The majority of religious parents in this study identified as protestant or evangelical Christians. Their code of conduct, or sense of morality, is based on the word of God as represented in the Bible. Most of these parents believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, where rules about right and wrong are unequivocally stated. Maureen, mother of a ten year old son, explains that she discerns a fundamentalist bent in the homeschooling movement:

I think that there's a lot of Christians who believe like fundamentally, like I do, in the Bible, that really wanna protect their kids and to train them in a way that we believe and I don't know, there is a movement as far as that's concerned. For people who have fundamental beliefs, there's I think definitely a movement.

Maureen's husband Mike also considers himself a fundamentalist. This is evident in his explanation of his stance on homosexuality:

Yeah, but we have all kinds of problems. I mean...like people who are homosexual tryin' to push their lifestyle in the school, whether it's them saying you should be homosexual or you should accept homosexuality. Well, I'm a Christian, Bible says it's a sin against God. You know, we're wicked, we're sinful and we need to look at our sin and say...I gotta straighten that out, I gotta fix that. My desire to do these things, I gotta get it in line. And homosexuality is just another sin. So, if I'm sending him to a public school and they're saying well, it's an alternative lifestyle, they're going against what the Bible says.

A few of the religious parents, however, were more moderate in their beliefs. They felt that the stories in the Bible were more metaphorical, offering general guidance to believers. Pat and Dan are a good example of a moderate Christian family. They describe their faith as being an important part of their lives but it is not as all-encompassing as it is for the more fundamentally oriented parents. Pat and Dan say that that they want their children to embrace their Christian heritage, yet they also feel that their children should be exposed to other religions, cultures, and ideologies.

In either case, the religious homeschoolers shared a perception that U.S. society in general, and public schools in particular, are unfriendly to Christian morality. Mike lamented what he sees as a general secularization of society. He commented,

So, so now you take public schools. Public schools reject my daddy [God]. They're godless...you know, it used to be they taught God in public schools. Now, it's against the law, because the ACLU and things like that, they kicked God out. So, they're basically saying, we want, we wanna take your kid, and reject your daddy.

Mike argued that there are forces in this country determined to drive religion from the social, political and cultural spheres of society. The result is an "anything goes" mentality, where morality is relative and not absolute. There was a general sense among

these parents that this trend has had widespread negative consequences for the U.S. For example, Marianne explains,

And even...looking at the things that happen in schools, like horrible killings and things like that, or...even just the things that kids nowadays will get involved in at such an early age, you know it's almost scary to send your kids into these environments... You know, nobody wants to have their kids involved in sexual stuff at an early age. And nobody wants them to be molested by somebody, you know.

A central concern of parents like Marianne is that secular society is full of a whole host of potentially harmful situations for children. These include violence, murder, sex, and molestation. According to these parents, these risks are due in large part to the absence of God and morality within the broader society.

These parents view schools as both a source of moral decline and a context where religious intolerance is played out. Donna, a religious mother of five, described a story that illustrated her discontent with public schools. She remembers the day that her daughter came home and told her that in school that day they discussed the diversity of family formations. The message that Donna's daughter took away was that "anything makes a family." Donna protested, "But we don't believe that!" Like other religious parents, Donna feels that the proper and ideal family form is a married heterosexual couple.

There were other points of contention as well, a major one being sexuality. John and Rochelle, parents of two homeschooled children, decided not to re-enroll their daughter in school when they learned that their daughter's teacher for the next grade was a lesbian. Their complaint, which they shared with other religious parents, was that the presence of openly gay teachers "promotes" or at least naturalizes the "homosexual lifestyle." Further, most parents felt that sex education is a topic that is best left to

parents to discuss with their children at home. They were uncomfortable with the prospect of schools teaching their children about contraceptives and std's. Bruce, a full-time pastor, part-time real estate agent and father of three, clearly felt that the role of the school should be to teach his children basic academic skills not to instruct them on moral principles. Bruce stated,

I believe that the...social values that are being taught in the public schools are being taught as: "you must accept this, or you must think this way" – has crossed the line into the parents' role versus the teachers' role. In other words, the teachers' role is education. The teachers' role is not moral values. You know, that's the parents' role. And, and, as for my biblical perspective, I would say that that's a God-ordained commandment for parents to be moral educators in the home. And, I don't have a problem with somebody else teaching my kids um, basic arithmetic, English, grammar, history, you know as long as it's accurate history. And, and things of that nature. But when we cross the line to say "this is socially acceptable, this is morally correct," you know you're really crossing a line, where that's the parents' obligation. And vice-versa...That's not, that's not the school's responsibility, to morally educate your kid. That's yours.

There were a number of other lesser grievances identified by a few parents, including evolution and global warming. Regardless of the specific point of contention, the general view of religious parents was that schools do not honor and respect their religious beliefs. It is not the case that these parents wanted to completely shelter their children from ideas that they did not agree with. They realize that is virtually impossible. Instead, most felt like this was an unfair burden that they did not want to deal with. After all, if it is not alright to discuss God in school or to pray in school, why should we allow "politically correct" discussions of same-sex marriage, abortion and Darwinism?

### **The Wisdom of Nature**

Whereas religious parents looked to God for guidance on how to live their lives, most secular parents had a different source of inspiration: nature. Many had a reverential stance toward the natural world, comparable to religious parents' reverence for God.

They felt that nature, for the most part, answered many of life's questions, particularly when it came to parenting roles and the household division of labor. Moreover, many parents felt that most people don't care enough about the natural world. Therefore, we have all sorts of problems, including global warming, too much trash and a population of people disconnected from the world around them.

Secular parents tried to base their lives on the wisdom of nature. This, for many parents, manifested in a general mistrust of mainstream social institutions and experts from a variety of fields. For example, when it came to making decisions about child-rearing, many secular parents practiced "natural parenting." In her study of "natural mothers," sociologist Chris Bobel (2002) describes natural parenting as a set of practices and related beliefs. In terms of practice, natural parenting includes homebirth, extended breastfeeding and a "family bed." Kasey, mother of three children explains that her natural parenting practices began when she was pregnant and she and her husband dared to question the conventional wisdom of childbirth and childrearing:

So, everything we did, we questioned everything. We questioned doctors, you know, our daughter was born at home. And being pregnant, I questioned everything. My daughter coming out, that whole year was like, "Whoa." So, why should I only breastfeed 'till a year? So, I just questioned everything, and so the whole lifestyle changed, for me personally. And...even what I thought I was supposed to do as a parent was way different than what I experienced. I was doing what felt natural to me. Like, "No, I'm not gonna give my kid lots of shots."

Many of the secular parents shared Kasey's questioning attitude. They felt that their choices about parenting were more in tune with nature. They chose to follow the wisdom of nature, rather than the dictates of mainstream culture or the advice of "experts."

A number of these parents also reject mainstream ideas about medical care and instead rely on homeopathy, herbal remedies and other homespun treatments. Lesley

told a story about the time that her son had an earache and she took him to the doctor. The doctor insisted on treating what her son with antibiotics. Feeling that antibiotics were an unnecessary intervention the body's natural ability to heal itself, Lesley ignored the doctor's advice. Instead, she concocted a home remedy which she claimed worked as well as any prescription drug would have. This general mistrust of medical experts also explains why most of the secular parents have chosen not to vaccinate their children as most parents do.

The choice to homeschool also flows, in part, from this belief. Secular parents identified a number of ways in which schools contradict their beliefs about the natural world. For example, many parents commented on the quality of food that is served in schools. For parents like Tim and Lesley, it is important to eat as much organic and locally-grown food as possible. They believe that it is better for the environment to eat this way. Tim explains:

We buy a lot of bulk foods. So, we always tell them why we're buying bulk foods, you know, we don't want to make the waste, and you know, how it's good to recycle and we tell them about the environment. And sometimes when we sit down at a meal we'll look at the food we have and we'll try to say well this came from Jim's garden, or this is our own, these are our berries, you know. They know where all their food came from.

Many secular parents indicated that it is important to minimize waste in food packaging and to support local agriculture. They feel that this perspective on food is not supported in schools. They regard school food as over-processed and unhealthy.

Another parent, Kate, told a story about the time that her son was in a preschool program. Parents would each take turn bringing in a snack. She was appalled when one mother brought in "Cheez-Its," a snack cracker that Kate says is loaded with chemicals and artificial ingredients. This is not the type of food that she would ever serve to her

own children. Parents also objected to schools' lax efforts at recycling, composting and their use of harsh cleaning chemicals.

Beyond the problems of school food, secular parents embracing the "wisdom of nature" perspective find schools objectionable because they are organized around experts and authority figures and not around children. Most secular parents argued that children are naturally curious and should not be forced to learn something before they are ready. Instead, children should be allowed to develop at their own pace, acquiring skills and competencies as they naturally arise. The whole idea of a state-imposed curriculum, which imposes arbitrary performance goals based on a student's age rather than her individual needs, is absurd to most of these parents. Jerry, father of two sons, explained that true learning will take place as soon as adults get out of children's way:

Humans are programmed to learn about the world and they just do it naturally and they do it by, you know, by seeing what the adults around them are doing and, and just by being out there in the world. And they have a tremendous capacity for learning.

Dan, father to three homeschooled children, echoed Jerry's sentiments when he described the ideal environment for children to learn:

The main thing is we want our kids to discover. You know, it worked with [our daughter], who knows how it will work with the other two [sons]. You know, but we want them to really just be in control of their destiny and...it's important for me that they can say no and they can make good choices for themselves and feel right about it and trust that instinct. Self-directed learning is part and parcel with that because they find something they're into and they get into it and then decide if they're really into it or not.

Dan described an environment in which children are free to choose the topics they want to study and adults provide gentle guidance and support. According to Dan, this model of teaching and learning is not present in public schools.



Finally, secular parents felt that typical school-day itself does not promote a connection with the natural world that they think is so essential to the development of their children. More than one parent expressed disbelief that children are only allowed outside for forty-five minutes on a typical day. Tim, for example, contrasted his children's experiences with those of average schoolchildren. Whereas other children are indoors most of the day, Tim's children are "outside all of the time." Tim explained:

Where we live, they have access to, just beautiful land...And um, it's spurs the imagination, you know. It spurs the imagination. A lot of playing outside...some could be discovery, some could be on hikes. I mean, we do some family hikes, you know, during the day we'll say, "Oh, let's go to Sugarloaf, and climb Mt. Sugarloaf and we'll climb that and we'll have a picnic at top," and we'll run around on top, we'll run around and we'll walk back down...Spending a couple hours...this is a big difference with home schooling, is you can go out for a couple hours, go on a hike, you can spend the whole afternoon if it's going well, you can go with it. Whereas you couldn't do that, you know when you're set to those 40, 45 minute time periods.

Most secular parents felt that it was important for their children to have ample amounts of "outside time" for two reasons. First, as Tim explained, being outside can be educational, in the general sense of spurring one's imagination. Children also learn practical lessons about animals, plant life and forest ecology.

The second reason it is important for children to be outside is that it is consistent with their nature. In other words, children *need* to be outside and run, climb and play. Many secular parents criticized schools for their passive approach to education, where students sit still and do what they are told, as opposed to being more active. For example, Katie explains:

I see kids in public school, based on my experience and based on just watching...kids get demoralized. First of all, they're sitting in desks. And they're sitting in an unnatural way. Kids should be playing, kids should be hands on...I believe that public education is an institution that does not serve kids. And

I don't want my children to be part of that if they don't have to. I think it dampens spirits.

This sort of criticism is consistent with secular parents' belief that schools are ineffective and misguided because they are not organized around children's interests and needs. The result is that children become "demoralized" and their spirits are dampened by a system that does not allow them the freedom to act out their natural inclinations toward exploration and physical movement.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown that homeschooling parents' negative assessment of schools and decision to homeschool sits at the intersection of three overlapping ideologies: precious childhood/intensive mothering, decline of the family and moral decline. By not focusing on the individual needs of their precious children, schools violate homeschoolers' beliefs about who their children are and what they need. Along with the workplace, schools pull families apart and undermine their unity. Schools are also disruptions to the vision of family life held by homeschoolers: where children get the individualized attention of a devoted mother and the whole family spends quality time together. Finally, schools are settings where parents' values are challenged. Whether it is religious ideals or a reverence for nature, homeschoolers feel like schools do not support their values.

Interestingly, these two sets of parents, one religious and one secular, appear to be more similar than different. They draw from similar macro-level frames about childhood, family and morality, interpret them in a similar manner and then make the same decision – to teach their children at home. Given these parents' particular cultural beliefs, how do they put them into practice? How exactly, do they attempt to create family unity, attend

to their individual child's needs, pass on their particular moral beliefs and what role does gender play in all of this? The next chapter addresses these questions. It addresses the "how" of homeschooling.

## CHAPTER 4

### HOMESCHOOLING TACTICS

Social movement scholars use the term tactics or “tactical repertoires” (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004) to refer to the protest activities of social movements. Tactical repertoires are distinctive forms of action insofar as they are part of intentional efforts to contest some social arrangement, public policy or event that participants deem to be unjust. These activities take many forms ranging from strikes, marches and leafleting, to drag shows and public guerilla theater (Rupp and Taylor 2003; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). In the case of homeschoolers, we can think about their daily homeschooling activities as constituting their tactics. As we learned in the previous chapter, these parents have a list of criticisms against cultural, economic and spiritual forces that they see as damaging to society as a whole, and to their families in particular.

In this chapter, I describe and analyze the tactics of two groups of families. First, I discuss “unschooling” among secular families. This is an unstructured, child-centered form of homeschooling. Then I examine the hierarchical and structured “schooling at home” approach of religious families. I consider each approach in the context of a broader discussion about childrearing techniques. Finally, I analyze these tactics through a gender lens. That means paying attention to the ways that these tactics are imbued with gendered meanings or ways in which these tactics either reproduce or challenge the gender system that characterizes the broader society. What I argue is that these tactics reproduce the gender system to the extent that it is women who do virtually all of the daily work of homeschooling while fathers leave the home to earn a family income. This is true of both secular and religious families. They all view homeschooling as women’s

work. As I explain at the end of the chapter, these parents offer different types of explanations for their gendered division of homeschooling: religious parents talk about the will of God and secular parents invoke the wisdom of nature.

### **Putting Ideas into Practice**

Homeschooling parents share the conviction that their children are special, unique and worthy of individualized attention. This belief is not exclusive to homeschoolers. These parents draw from broader understandings of childhood common among their middle-class American peers. In her compelling study of class-specific parenting styles, Annette Lareau (2003) identified two discernable patterns. She found among middle-class parents, regardless of race, a style she coined “concerted cultivation.” The central premise of this approach is that children are malleable and require virtually constant stimulation in order to reach their full potential. She describes middle class parents whisking their children from one enrichment activity to another at a dizzying pace. Parents negotiate with their children, explaining why something must be done as opposed to just telling them to do this. The result of this approach, Lareau contends, is an “emerging sense of entitlement” among middle-class children. That is, children develop a sense that they are entitled to individualize attention from their teachers, doctors and other significant institutional representatives.

On the other hand, Lareau (2003) identified a strategy among poor and working-class parents that she called “the accomplishment of natural growth.” This perspective assumes that children will grow and change in their own time. What they need is a lot of room for unstructured play and interaction with their peers. Hence, these children spend more time “hanging out” with neighborhood kids and nearby relatives. Parents tend to be

more direct in their communication. Rather than explaining why something has to be done, poor and working-class parents were more likely to just tell their children that they had to do it because they, the parent, said so. These children developed an emerging sense of constraint. They tended to accept the authority of adults in positions of power and, like their parents, did not push for individualized attention.

The homeschoolers in this study represent a curious mix of these two approaches. On the one hand, secular parents' orientation appears child-centered, "hands-off" and unstructured. However, most secular homeschoolers' days are filled with enrichment activities, classes and play-dates. Religious parents, on the other hand, rely on a highly structured, parent-drive routine, where the children themselves have little input. As I will explain, neither group of parents fits neatly within either model – concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth . Instead, both groups draw from these models to create their own unique childrearing strategy.

### **“Unschooling” in Secular Families**

Almost without exception, when I asked secular homeschoolers to describe a typical day of homeschooling, they laughed. One mother remarked, “There is no such thing. Each day is different.” When pressed on the issue, though, most parents could sketch out what would be considered a usual homeschooling day in their family. Take Cherri and Doug’s family for example. There are three children in the family, ages 17 months, 4.5 years and 10 years. Though they consider all of their children to be homeschooled, Cherri decided to focus on her eldest, Izzy, as she described their routine.

Cherri was quick to point out that they are not the type of homeschoolers who say, “Ok, from eight until noon, you sit down and do your lessons. We’re more loose than

that.” Their days are not highly structured. Typically, Izzy will wake up and do her chores. These chores, which Doug and Cherri consider to be part of the homeschooling experience, may consist of caring for her pet rabbit, tidying up her room, putting away the clean dishes and then possibly some housecleaning. Then, after breakfast with the family, Izzy focuses on her workbooks. Cherri says that Izzy became interested in cursive writing so she bought her a workbook to practice with. Other workbooks they’ve used include spelling and mathematics. Cherri was not clear on how long Izzy would practice with her workbooks but she was always done before lunchtime.

Cherri describes the time after lunch as “kind of loose free time.” Afternoons might be spent playing with her siblings, working on a craft together or having a play date. Often, free time is spent outside of the home in a variety of enrichment activities. According to Cherri, Izzy’s favorite activity is Circle of Life School. Circle of Life is a local farm-based educational program. For a fee, parents can drop their children off to participate in a host of farm related activities. Children learn about agriculture, livestock and ecology as they help to feed the animals, create crafts out of objects found on the farm and take long hikes through the woods. In addition to Circle of Life, Izzy typically takes three other classes over the course of a week. Other classes include art, musical theater and tap dancing. According to Cherri, Izzy has more freedom to explore her interests, than if she was in a conventional school setting. Cherri says she is happy to facilitate those experiences, “as long as I am willing to drive and we can afford it.”

In most ways, the routines in Izzy’s family are typical of the homeschooling that takes place in other secular households. This particular approach to homeschooling is consistent with the philosophy of “unschooling.” Credit for coining the term

“unschooling” is usually attributed to the late author and educator Jack Holt (1964, 1967, 1981). Holt’s unschooling philosophy is premised on the assumption that learning is an organic process that naturally emerges from a child’s innate sense of curiosity. He believed children learn best through their everyday life experience, social interactions with adults and other children of all ages, and self-directed play. Holt criticized conventional schooling for its reliance on one-size-fits-all curricula, hierarchical structure and lack of individualized attention. Therefore, Holt advocated home as a superior learning environment to schools.

In the following section, I will refer back to Cherri’s description to highlight the common themes of secular homeschooling. These themes, I will suggest, are consistent with the pedagogy of unschooling. First, secular parents stress the importance of self-actualization over developing academic skills. Second, they create a child-centered, non-hierarchical learning experience. Third, their overall approach is, for the most part, unstructured. Finally, at the end of this section I will show that the childrearing techniques embedded in secular homeschooling represent a unique mix of both the working-class and middle-class techniques described by Lareau (2003).

***The Goal of Self-Actualization.*** The philosophy of unschooling is reflected in the goals of the secular homeschoolers in this study. When they were asked what they hoped to accomplish by homeschooling their children, most parents talked about nurturing children’s innate goodness and intelligence and hoping that they grow into competent adults who love to learn. Cherri, mother of three children, described her goals this way:

I guess really my goal is that the children grow up to be just really authentic individuals that are free inside of themselves and not hung up on any kind of



stigma or, you know, that a school or grading system or testing has made them feel bad about themselves. I just want them to really be, like truly free within. So I guess just really raising happy, confident, loving...smart children is my goal. Like, they don't need to go off and be straight- A students in college...I mean that's wonderful if that's what's there for them but I just really want them to be authentic and happy and be able to make wise decisions for themselves.

Cherri's comments are typical of secular parents in this study. Their primary interest is that their children develop a strong sense of self and the confidence that they can accomplish whatever they want in this world.

Of course, secular parents also intend that their children develop those skills typically associated with formal education – namely, reading, writing and arithmetic. It just was not the first concern. For example, Cherri and Doug's oldest daughter, Izzy, still was not a proficient reader by the age of nine. Doug was well aware that this fact may be seen as problematic among non-homeschoolers. In fact, some members of his extended family have given him grief about it. He and his wife were not worried about it, though. They were both confident that Izzy would pick up reading in her own time and they were not about to force it on her. Both Cherri and Doug fear that forcing her to read is senseless as it could transform learning into something painful and frustrating as opposed to the organic and joyful experience they feel it should be. As I explain later, this emphasis on self-actualization over academic skills development stands in contrast to the pedagogy of religious homeschoolers.

*Child-Centered.* From setting the pace of learning, choosing activities to participate in and identifying interesting topics, secular parents tend to follow their children's lead. Rather than a hierarchical model where parents choose the topics to be studied, most parents describe a process whereby they sit back and wait for their children's interests to naturally emerge. Once those interests emerge, most secular

parents describe their job as one of facilitator of learning. Recall that Cherri got Izzy a workbook to practice cursive only after she expressed an interest. Lesley, mother to three children ages 9, 6 and 3, tells a story of how her eldest son, Greg, became interested in knights. To encourage his interest, Lesley brought her son to the library to get books and a video about knights. They also spent time together making a knight costume out of craft supplies they had around the house. Lesley says that eventually Greg's interest in knights waned and they moved onto something else. This pattern is typical of secular families: the child identifies an interest and then the parents (especially the mother) will encourage that interest by providing resources for the child to learn more about the topic.

What secular parents describe is a non-hierarchical model of learning. These parents are not positioning themselves at the center and unilaterally making decisions about their children's education. Instead, they negotiate with their children, actively seek their input and follow their lead. This reflects the secular parents' desire to cultivate life-long learners with a strong sense of who they are. They feel that telling their children what to learn and when to learn it will stifle their natural development and will only serve to teach them to follow someone else's directions. It is important to note that what I am describing here is a general pattern. There are certainly unschooling parents who set parameters for when children must do their work (like Doug and Cherri) and parents certainly do nudge their children toward some interests while subtly discouraging others. The point is that, in general, secular parents put their children's interests at the center of their homeschooling experience and build out from there.

*Unstructured.* When I asked them about structure or formal curricula, most secular parents recoiled and grimaced as if I had said a dirty word. Consistent with

unschooling pedagogy, most of these parents resented the idea of there being a uniform set of learning materials and a set time and place learning occurs (as in conventional schools). Kate tells a story of being at the local library with her boys. Her eldest son, Jerry, pointed out a sign that read “Keep Reading this Summer.” Kate recalls with a sense of pride that Aaron looked up at her and asked, “Why would you stop reading during the summer time?” According to Kate, this story illustrates that her homeschooled son is able to see the absurdity of thinking about education as something that only takes place in the classroom during the school day.

Secular homeschoolers have a different perspective from conventional schooling families. They feel like learning is something that can take place anywhere, at anytime. Kate explains, “I just see our lives as homeschooling and homeschooling as our lives.” This notion is exemplified in the virtually limitless list of activities that secular parents regard as part of homeschooling. Darren, father of two boys and a girl, talks about everything from poking at the excrement of a worm with a stick to playing a pickup game of soccer as educational opportunities. Another father, Tim, speaks wistfully about the educational benefits of wandering through the woods, playing tag with friends and exploring the pond in their backyard. A mother of two talks about cooking with her children as an opportunity to teach about fractions and gardening together as a potential science lesson. What all of this suggests is that secular parents have little use for formal curricula and rely instead on their daily lives for learning opportunities. A few, like Doug and Cherri, would purchase or borrow workbooks for some difficult topics, like mathematics, but most did not use any mass produced materials.

So far, the homeschooling tactics of the secular parents sound quite similar to Lareau's (2003) conception of the accomplishment of natural growth. Like the working-class and poor parents in Lareau's study, these middle-class parents create an environment where children are free to pursue their own interests, with little interference from adults. However, there is a sense in which what they do is more like the middle-class strategy of concerted cultivation. Namely, many families vacillate from days that are completely unstructured and the children are left to their own devices, to days that are chock-full of enrichment activities.

One of the hallmarks of concerted cultivation is a devotion to individualized attention and personal enrichment (Lareau 2003). Most of the secular families in this study had their children involved in multiple classes and group activities. Recall Izzy's story from the beginning of this section. She spends one full day per week at a farm school and attends at least two other classes. Some weeks it is musical theater or tap dancing and sometimes it is art class. The range of enrichment activities described by other parents is vast. It includes Spanish class, soccer club, swordplay class, swimming lessons, nature clubs, circus class, outdoor adventures, singing lessons and gymnastics. For example, Jerry went through such a long list of activities that after he was through I quipped, "Seems like a lot of your homeschooling takes place outside of the home." He laughed and conceded the point. He told me that his wife tries to save one day per week when the children can rest and rejuvenate at home without leaving for any classes or activities.

In sum, the unschooling tactics of secular homeschoolers have three common characteristics: 1) An emphasis on self-actualization over academic skills, 2) Child-

centered focus and 3) A relative lack of formal structure (except, of course, for the enrichment activities outside of the home). Insofar as they have a hands-off approach to their children's learning, these parents seem to be practicing the accomplishment of natural growth. However, with their child-centered, non-hierarchical relationships and their litany of extra-curricular activities, they look a lot like they are practicing concerted cultivation. In the next section, I describe the tactics of the religious homeschoolers and argue that their approach also draws from both of the strategies describe by Lareau (2003), yet in a decidedly different way from the secular parents.

### **Schooling at Home in Religious Families**

Similar to their secular peers, religious parents are not monolithic in their approach to homeschooling. Nonetheless, there are common features to how religious parents educate their children and these commonalities stand in contrast to secular home education. The daily routines of Bruce and Kristy's family illustrate these common elements. Kristy says that on a typical day, all three of her children, ages 2-7, have dressed and eaten their breakfast by 8:30am. At that time, the children begin their formal homeschooling activities. For the past two years, this family has been using a Christian inspired homeschooling curriculum. This particular curriculum is a DVD collection of interactive lessons on Christian theology and conventional school subjects, like math and history. Each DVD has an adult teacher talking to the audience about the subject matter. From time to time, the children pause the DVD to do assignments in the workbooks that correspond with the DVD lessons. At the end of each unit (roughly equivalent to one half of a school year), the children take exams on the material and Kristy sends the work

off to the company that produces the DVDs. There, the exams are graded and the children are mailed “report cards.”

Kristy says that morning session typically consists of two classes. The two older children are currently focusing on math and the bible. The younger has been doing units on counting and basic reading. After this session, which usually lasts about two hours, the children take a fifteen minute break. During break time, all of the children usually congregate in the kitchen for a snack. Then it is back to their respective rooms to continue with their lessons. The second session typically consists of two or three shorter lessons on a variety of topics. Then all of the children take a one hour break for lunch and “outside time.” If the weather is good, the children will play in the yard. If it is raining, they like to watch Richard Simmons exercise videos and jump around the living room. Kristy says it is hysterical to watch them do this.

Following lunch and outside time, the children return to their rooms for more DVD instruction. The first lesson after lunch usually lasts about an hour and then there is another fifteen minute break. After break, the children complete two more lessons. Kristy says this could usually take an hour and a half, longer if they are working on something harder like math. Then, the children’s homeschooling lessons are typically complete by about 3:30 in the afternoon. Technically, there is no homework for the students in the evening. The curriculum, which is designed to be used in schools, does have homework with each lesson. Kristy reasons that it is best for her children to do the assignments when the material is still fresh. So, they complete the “homework” before one lesson ends and the next begins. At the end of the day, Kristy collects and grades the

children's homework. Most evenings, she gives a summary of how well the children do to their father, Bruce.

Bruce and Kristy's approach to homeschooling is, for the most part, typical of other religious families. Their assumptions and practices represent a vision of homeschooling that seeks to take what they see as some of the best virtues of conventional schooling and replicate them in the home. Hence, it is useful to think about what religious families are doing as "schooling at home." The schooling at home ethos of religious homeschoolers has three common characteristics: 1) Stress on academic skills, 2) Adult authority, and 3) Structured education. As I report on each theme in the section that follows, I will draw comparisons to the secular homeschoolers. At the end of this section, I will discuss religious homeschooling pedagogy in relation to Lareau's typologies, showing that religious families do not fit neatly into either category.

*Skills First.* It would be inaccurate to say that religious parents were only concerned with academic skills development. It is fair to say, however, that compared to the secular parents, religious homeschoolers placed greater emphasis on basic academic skills. Debby, mother of five homeschooled children, explains it this way, "I guess what I'm hoping to accomplish is to do, to give my kids the education that the schools would have given them in the best atmosphere to foster their self-esteem, I guess would be my biggest thing." Those skills, Debby suggests, are the core skills of reading, writing and mathematics. Jack, father of three, echoes this sentiment. His hope is that his children will get a solid education in a nurturing environment.

Recall Kristy from the description at the start of this section. She has a much younger sister, Casey, who is kindergarten age and lives in a nearby state and is a student

in a “good school district.” When Kristy first moved to where she lives now, she remembers comparing where her sister was in school to what her daughter, Madeline, was doing in their homeschool curriculum. In reading and math Madeline was way ahead of Casey. From what Kristy was able to gather from other parents, the local public school students of the same age were also far behind Madeline. Kristy and Bruce were determined to do even better than a school could do for their children. It was important that they meet and exceed the conventional educational benchmarks of the peers. This is quite different from secular parents like Doug and Cherri who were not concerned that their daughter was not a prolific reader by the age of nine. Kristy would probably be shocked to hear this.

***Adult Authority.*** In general, religious homeschoolers are not opposed to the ideas of hierarchy and authority. They tend not to criticize schools for being arranged in a top-down model, where adults make most decisions and children do what they are told. What they do object to is the particular expression of authority (Stevens 2001). In schools, they see adults making heavy-handed decisions based on a one-size-fits-all model of education. Teachers do not have close, personal relationships with students due to the sheer numbers of young people in their charge. Hence you have directives and discipline without love and compassion. Parents, on the other hand, are better suited to exercise authority over their own children. They have the emotional bonds and intuitive understanding of young people that no paid bureaucrat could ever have.

Therefore, the schooling at home model of religious homeschoolers tends to replicate the hierarchical relationships of schools. At home, it is parents who act as administrators and teachers. Parents set the agenda and create the curriculum. Maureen



explains that she would usually create a daily schedule for her son, Eric, to follow. She has expectations for what Eric should accomplish by the end of the homeschooling day. Some days, he would be finished by 1:30, but on days when he is “not staying on track,” he might not be done until four in the afternoon. Maureen is willing to give her son some leeway in finishing his work but it is clearly understood that he must complete his assigned tasks and he would not have “free time” until he is finished.

Mike, Eric’s father, supports this format of his wife setting the schedule and his son following suit. He, like many other religious parents, feels that ultimately his son does not know what is best for him and, left to his own devices, he may end up spending much of the day playing video games. Mike remembers that when he was a kid, he would have preferred to spend all of his time tinkering with lawnmower engines and dirt bikes. He did not realize at the time that it may have served him better to apply himself more in school. Now, as a parent, Mike feels like parents simply know what is best for their children and it is part of their duty to guide their children in the best direction possible. Sometimes that means forcing children to do things they may not wish to do, such as working in a math book instead of surfing the internet. This hierarchical model where “parents know best” is contrary to the secular unschooling notion that children will naturally discover what they need to know given adequate space and encouragement.

***Structured Education.*** The third common feature of religious homeschooling is structure. Compared to their secular peers, religious parents are much more likely to use store bought homeschooling curricula. Recall that Bruce and Kristy, described at the beginning of this section, used a DVD based curriculum that completely gave structure to their day, almost like they were running a school in their home. Most religious families

were not quite as regimented. Many used parts of a popular Christian curriculum called Abeka. It is typical for a family to use Abeka for one or two subject areas but none adopted it wholesale. The use of a formal curriculum reinforces the idea of schooling at home because it relies on the expertise of adult authorities to articulate what is important to learn and when.

For many of these religious families, homeschooling is not confined to the home. About half of them supplement their formal home instruction with extra-curricular enrichment activities. Kristy brings her children to at least one event outside of the home each week. Sometimes they bowl with homeschoolers and other times they meet in a local gymnasium for structured and semi-structured play. Compared to their secular peers, religious homeschoolers were involved in fewer activities outside of the home and many of those activities were free – such as going to the library or organized play dates. It was more common for secular parents to pay for classes for their children.

Much like the secular families in this study, the religious families do not fit neatly within Lareau's (2003) classification of childrearing techniques. On the one hand, their relationships with their children are hierarchical, especially when it comes to their education. Parents select and implement the curricula with little input from children. They tell their children what they need to do instead of negotiating with them. This type of unilateralism sounds like the accomplishment of natural growth. However, religious parents reject the idea that children will naturally develop and grow if you just leave them alone. Indeed, they are intimately involved in crafting their children's educational development. In this regard, they are more like parents who practice concerted cultivation.

In summary, this preceding part of this chapter presents an account of the homeschooling tactics of the two groups of families in this study. For the most part, they go about homeschooling in different ways. Focused on self-actualization, seculars create a child-centered, relatively unstructured experience, supported by a slew of enrichment activities. For their part, religious parents stress academic skill and create a top-down parent guided experience that has considerably more structure. The next section focuses on one element of homeschooling tactics that is consistent across virtually all of the families in this study, religious and secular alike: homeschooling is women's work.

### **Homeschooling as Mothers' Work**

In terms of style and philosophy, the tactics of the two groups of homeschoolers in this study are more different than similar. There are two points, however, on which they all agree: first, homeschooling is an enormous undertaking requiring copious amounts of time, energy and commitment. Second, these parents also agree that the commitment to homeschooling requires the full-time attention of one parent and, with only one exception, mothers are the ones to take up this responsibility. Most fathers, on the other hand, participated very little in the daily tasks of homeschooling, yet provided most of the family's income that made homeschooling possible.

Daniel and Kelsey's situation is a typical. Daniel, a secular parent of three, is employed full-time as a computer technician at, "Bookhouse," a nearby publishing firm. He has worked at Bookhouse for almost seven years and held a handful of positions. Though he doesn't exactly love his job, Daniel says he enjoys it enough. It was never meant to be a long-term gig. Kelsey (Daniel's wife), was pregnant with Sarah (their first child) and he needed to find a steady job: "This thing at Bookhouse came up, I went for

it, and here I am.” Daniel’s participation in homeschooling is limited to reading to his girls at bedtime, on nights that he is not too tired. Kelsey’s employment history is sporadic. Since the birth of her first child, Kelsey has occasionally been employed part-time, mostly waitressing. Her first priority, she suggests, is raising her children. Therefore, educating the children is something she does virtually on her own.

That homeschooling mothers are highly committed to their children is not, in and of itself, remarkable. The ideology of intensive mothering encourages all mothers to place their children’s needs in front of their own. What is unique is the extent to which homeschooling mothers express their devotion. Virtually all of the women in this study are middle-class and college educated, the very women who are typically expected to “have it all” – a family and a meaningful career. Historically, this liberal feminist imperative has been a source of conflict for women in the United States. They have been stuck between the demands of work and responsibilities at home (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996; Williams 2000). In this context, these women have clearly come down on the side of home. They have “opted out” of employment but for reasons very different from those Pamela Stone (2007) finds among the executive women she studied. Unlike the women in Stone’s study, most of these homeschooling mothers never entered the professional world in the first place. They did not run into structural barriers that pushed them toward home, rather they decided to stay home in the first place. Understanding this decision requires a bit more explaining. Through these explanations, we see another example of how two sets of people are making similar decisions, yet for very different reasons.

### ***Secular: Biology is Destiny...Sort Of***

Seculars' justification for homeschooling as mothers' work reflects an essentialist view of gender. Put simply, gender essentialism regards gender as a fixed category of personhood rooted in biology. All members of the category "man" or "woman" are believed to universally share certain, immutable traits, regardless of the context. Men, for example, are thought to be naturally aggressive, rational and independent. Women, on the other hand, are regarded as inherently nurturing, irrational and dependent on others. Men and women's different roles and unequal status in society, therefore, are simply a reflection of essential differences. From this perspective, attempts to rework gender relations are imprudent, as they go against nature. The secular homeschoolers in this study embrace a *soft gender essentialism* (Messner and Bozada-Deas 2009). That is, they firmly believe that men and women are, at their core, essentially different but they acknowledge that structural forces also affect their decisions and experiences as men and women in U.S. society.

When I asked Kasey how she and her husband, Darren, decided to homeschool, she described a process that was typical of secular families. For Kasey and Darren, homeschooling flowed from other choices they made about family life. Beginning when they first decided to start a family they have been committed to "doing family" in such a way that they are in charge. They give little heed to expert advice, mainstream cultural pressures and institutional dictates. Like most of the secular homeschoolers in this study, Kasey and Darren practiced a form of "natural family living" (Bobel 2002).

As the name implies, nature is the core element of the natural family living lifestyle. They believe that nature must be preserved, protected and obeyed and this ethos

infuses their decisions about family life. On the one hand, this means interacting with the natural world in ways which are responsible rather than exploitive. For example, most of the secular families had a strong recycling ethic. Little would go to waste in these houses. Kitchen waste was composted, discarded paper and plastic were brought to the transfer station and outgrown clothes were passed from sibling to sibling or shared with other families. Food was also a big issue. Skeptical of the quality of conventional food and leery of additives, chemicals and GMOs (genetically modified ingredients), many families were committed to buying mostly organic, minimally processed, locally produced foods. A large number planted their own organic vegetable gardens, canned their produce and a few kept chickens for their eggs and meat.

Beyond recycling and food decisions, secular homeschoolers' parenting essentialist philosophy encourages them to view homeschooling as mothers' work. Most of these families embrace the tenets of "attachment parenting" (AP). In general, this is a child-centered approach geared toward the natural needs of children and their parents. Core practices of AP include learning to read and respond to your baby's cues, wearing your baby as much as possible (in a sling or other device), co-sleeping with your baby and breastfeeding for an extended period of time (Sears and Sears 1993).

The commitment to extended breastfeeding is most often invoked by parents to explain the gendered division of household labor. The typical story goes like this: breastfeeding is what is best for children and to be a good mother is to be committed to breastfeeding. The act of breastfeeding creates a unique and enduring bond between a mother and her child. Therefore, when it comes to the question of which parent should

be the primary caregiver the choice is clear. By virtue of her biologically determined bond with her child, it is the mother who's responsible for childrearing responsibilities.

Such is the case for secular parents' decisions regarding homeschooling. With only one exception, most of these parents decided it would be the mother who would take responsibility for homeschooling the children. To hear these parents explain it, it was more like the decision was made for them. Take Kate and Jerry for example. Kate and Jerry, parents of two boys age 5 and 7, have similar backgrounds in terms of education and work history. Both have bachelor's degrees and teaching credentials. Jerry has worked as an elementary school teacher for the past 9 years. Kate had been employed as a full-time teacher and then as an elementary school librarian for a year. Once their first child was born, Kate stopped working outside of the house for two years and then began working part-time as a teacher's assistant.

Jerry and Kate decided to begin homeschooling their eldest son, Jerry, when he was 6. When I asked Kate how they decided that she would be the one homeschooling the children while Jerry worked outside of the home, she explained:

Um, by virtue of being the one who would be getting pregnant, and being the one who was breastfeeding and because we didn't have a six month or one year breastfeeding philosophy. We were just kind of letting it go as long as it went. And that wasn't a piece that Jerry could do (laughs). He claimed he could [breastfeed] but I never saw proof of it! Um, so, so by virtue of infancy and nursing and all of that, I wound up being home with the boys more and Jerry wound up working more...

In his interview, Jerry confirmed this explanation. They both suggested that the biology of child bearing and commitment to breastfeeding virtually predetermined their path. It is important to note that, like most of the other secular parents, their construction of homeschooling as mothers' work is bolstered by a belief in essential differences between

men and women. Kate explained, “I believe that there is a difference between men and women as well, and that women might um...would probably been more drawn to, um, the idea of being home all day with the kids and teaching them.”

The gender essentialism articulated by Kate and Jerry, like most of the secular homeschoolers is, in a sense, softened by other beliefs. In particular, most of these parents acknowledge that cultural factors come into play. For example, Cherri talked about the importance of “traditional” roles in her family. She acknowledged that it might seem “old fashioned” to admit it, but she and her husband both felt most comfortable in their respective roles as homemaker and breadwinner. It is how they were both raised and that is how they wanted to organize their own family. Therefore, biology is not the only determinant of their roles in life. In their view, culture and autobiography play a part as well.

Furthermore, most secular parents also identify structural factors. Most of these parents are aware of what sociologists refer to as the “gender-gap” in pay (Budig 2002). Though they may not use that exact term, they know full well that women in this society, on average, earn less than men. They understand that gender-gap is due not so much to essential, biological differences between men and women but is built in to the way the workplace functions.

Kate, for example, recognizes the economic consequences of being a stay-at-home mother. She explains “...when you choose to even take six months or a year off to be with your infant, what that can do to your career.” In total, Kate has taken about five years off to be with her boys. The decision to leave her full-time job had a snowball effect and now, “...because of the way the salaries are set up in the public schools, at this



point, you know Jerry has many more years under his belt, so he gets a much higher salary than I do...so, if I went back full-time it would be at a big pay cut.”

What Kate has discovered is that there is a “motherhood penalty” built into the workplace. The mommy tax is the economic opportunity cost that a woman pays by virtue of interrupting her career for childcare responsibilities. This cost results from the fact that most careers are not particularly family friendly. When a woman takes time off, she typically loses her seniority, is disadvantaged when it comes to promotions, and lifetime earning potential is curtailed. The motherhood penalty affects women across the social class spectrum but it is especially large for lower wage workers (Budig and Hodges 2010).

For women like Kate, the motherhood penalty and the gender gap in pay contribute to a cycle that reinforces structural consequences for choices couched in biological terms. Since men, on average, make more than women, why would a rational couple choose to keep the higher earner at home and rely on the earning potential of the spouse who will likely make less. This situation is complicated when a woman does take some time off after childbirth. The compounding effect of the mommy tax means that the longer a woman stays out of the workforce, the harder it is to get back into it and make a decent wage. Couples like Kate and Jerry and Kasey and Darren, who have discussed switching homeschooling and work roles, suggest that the main reason they do not switch is because the men can, at this point, make a lot more than the women. Therefore, the choice to follow the biological scripts of women caring for their children and men providing the family’s resources are reinforced by economic factors. In this sense,

secular homeschoolers sound more like rational actors making economic calculations than cultural dupes or slaves to biology.

There is one more interesting caveat that secular parents add to their essentialist explanations. About one-third justified homeschooling as mothers' work on the grounds that women are just better trained for childcare and homeschooling than men are. They were not talking about training in terms of socialization as women in this society, but in terms of actual academic credentials and paid work experience. Many secular mothers had degrees in either education or psychology and a large proportion had related work experience, such as classroom teacher, teacher's aide, librarian, coordinator of after-school program and facilitator of mixed-age play groups. Of all the secular families, there was only one in which the husband had such a background. He was an elementary school teacher.

In sum, secular parents' regard of homeschooling as mothers' work is based on a set of beliefs that I refer to as soft gender essentialism. While they believe that women are somehow naturally better suited to homeschool children than men are, they do acknowledge extenuating circumstances. In particular, they recognize the influence of cultural beliefs and economic factors on their decisions about dividing family labor. The following section focuses on religious homeschoolers. While their teaching practices and educational philosophy may differ from the secular parents, they share the belief that homeschooling is best left to mothers. Their justifications, however, are different from their secular peers.

## **The Godly Family**

Like their secular peers, religious homeschoolers suggest that factors other than individual choice explain the distinct roles and responsibilities of men and women. Whereas the seculars described themselves as followers of nature, religious couples answered a different call – God. By following conventional gender roles, including embracing the notion of homeschooling as women’s work, religious homeschoolers are satisfying the teaching of their religion and the wishes of their higher power. Similar to the “soft gender essentialism” of their secular peers, religious homeschoolers’ obedience to God’s will comes with a caveat: they acknowledge, to a lesser extent, the structural context of their decisions about family life. It may be useful, therefore, to characterize religious parents’ views as *divine essentialism*. According to God, men and women are essentially different and, according to these parents, those differences are played out in a broader context of structural constraints.

When I asked religious parents to describe the process of how they came to homeschooling their responses were a bit different from their secular peers. In general, secular couples talked about homeschooling as more of a family decision. That is, both parents arrived at the decision more or less together. It was part of how they both envisioned family life. In religious families, however, the overall pattern was that it was the wife who initially came up with the idea and then brought it to her husband. This is an important distinction that will be explored further in the dissertation. For seculars, homeschooling is part of who they are, whereas for religious families it is more like something they do.

While no husband was outright against homeschooling, their responses were varied. On the one hand, men like Noel were completely in support of their wives' ambitions and needed no convincing. He thought that homeschooling was a good option for his family and ceded the decision to his wife:

Well, Carrie actually made the decision. She was the one that would have to do the work...she would be home with the kids and it was up to her to try to decide if she wanted to do the work that it would entail.

Noel was never concerned about his wife's ability to educate their children or the soundness of their decision. For him the only question was whether or not his wife wanted to take on the responsibility of homeschooling.

On the other hand, there were a few husbands who were more skeptical. According to Rochelle, mother of three children ages seven, four and two months, her husband Jack did not really like the idea at first, but after they were doing it for awhile he could see the benefits and he came around. Jack and Rochelle's eldest daughter, Amy, went to a private Christian school until the third grade. The parents became increasingly concerned about Amy's experience at the school. She developed some behavioral issues and her academic development was below what they would have hoped. So, Rochelle introduced the idea of homeschooling. She explained:

I think we definitely agreed on it. I mean it was like...he didn't like it at first but the more stuff went on...I'm home anyway why don't we do it here and by the end he was like let's do it. The farther I went, like research and meeting other people, you know networks and stuff, he just became totally like oh just do it as long as you can. I think that I definitely had to convince him and then he also just kind saw the same stuff going on. So it was easier to do it at that point.

As Amy's behavioral issues faded and her academic skills increased, Jack became reassured about the decision to homeschool. They eventually decided to homeschool all

of their children. Like Jack, all off the fathers I interviewed ended up supporting their wives in their homeschooling efforts.

According to most of the religious couples, there really was never much of a discussion of who would do the work of homeschooling the children. Since the idea originated with the women, it was just assumed that it would be their responsibility. When pressed on the issue, most women said there was never any serious consideration that their husbands would have a substantial role in homeschooling. Donna, for example, says it was all her idea. She remembers joking with her husband, saying “You do the phys. ed [physical education], take ‘em outside and run ‘em around.” That is the extent of his participation. In the summer he plays wiffle-ball with the children and in the winter he takes them snow-shoeing. Donna, like the rest of the religious wives, handles the rest.

Religious parents offered several justifications for regarding homeschooling as women’s work, the most significant of which is obedience to God’s will. There are two dimensions to this argument. The first has to do with the essential differences between men and women. Simply put, most religious homeschoolers believe that God designed men and women differently. Maureen, mother of a 7 year old boy, explains it this way:

I think that women and men are created differently and have different strengths and I think that it’s more in the women’s nature, for most women, to be the one to be the home caretaker of children...men were more created to be the person going out there, you know...slaying the dragons or you know...farming the fields, whatever it is, they were more designed for doing that activity... Women are more relationship oriented. Men aren’t so much relationship oriented. They’re more task-oriented.

Similar to the other religious women, Maureen articulates a strong belief in the notion of “separate spheres,” where women are inclined to take care of private matters, including

housework and childcare, and men are best suited to the public world of productive labor and protection of the family. Furthermore, according to this ideology, women are more oriented toward interpersonal relationships than task oriented goals.

The second part of the argument is that since God created men and women with different endowments and inclinations then it is beholden upon a good Christian to follow God's will. In the first place, to go against God's will seems senseless, if not impossible, to many religious parents. Mike, Maureen's husband, explained it this way, "God...gave them breasts and equipped them to take care of children. That's what they're cut out to do. To take a women and give 'em a man's job, you're asking a fish to fly." According to Mike, a woman can no more be the breadwinner for her family, than a salmon can take flight. It is just not possible.

Perhaps more compelling, most parents felt that they were duty bound to follow what God expects of them and they feared the consequences of failing to meet those expectations. Most of the religious women I interviewed suggested that God's plan for them was to be supportive of their husbands and take care of their children. Being supportive of their husbands did not necessarily mean blind obedience. Rather, women felt that their duty was to take care of things on the home front, so their husbands could fill their duties as providers. Part of the home front responsibilities included the children's education. Kristy, mother of three under the age of six, explained that one day she knows she will be held accountable before God for her children's education. Hence, in this world, she is intent on fulfilling her duties to the best of her abilities.

For their part, most men suggested that they would be judged on the extent to which they satisfied their duties before God. It was common for men to mention that it

was important to fulfill their provider role. Men like Mike felt strongly that his sole duty is to provide economically for his family. Other men, like Bruce, Kristy's husband, linked his duties to the family's homeschooling efforts. Bruce described his role as that of a principal. Kristy gathered the curriculum and made sure that they children followed it and then Bruce would get the reports on the children's progress. If they were not doing what was expected, it was his job to discipline the children. Bruce justified the gendered vision of homeschooling labor as follows:

I think men and women are different for a reason. We're gifted differently, you know. We're made differently and our responsibilities, I think our accountabilities before God are different, you know. I think, as the father, I think I will be held accountable for the moral and spiritual life of my family, you know. And I think the wife, biblically is charged to be a good keeper at home...and maintain her home well. And, and the husband's role is to um, provide for that in both security and in, in discipline. Discipline really comes in, in a co-relationship with the husband and wife. But um, I mean I think that women are very gifted in that area of dealing with the home and with the children. I think...for my belief it fits because that's the way that they're designed.

Jack's belief is that men and women have different "accountabilities before God."

Regarding homeschooling, Jack said that ultimately he would be held accountable for his children's education. Although his wife did most of the actual work of homeschooling, the end result would be his responsibility.

Although the religious parents in this study rely primarily on the ideology of divine essentialism to explain homeschooling as mothers' work, they do recognize other relevant factors. Chief among these factors is economics. Akin to their secular peers, most of these parents recognize that there are economic pressures that pull men into the workforce and push women into the home. They believe that most families nowadays could not survive without two incomes and they recognize that men, on average, can

make more money than women. Therefore, in most of these families, men are employed full-time, while women work part-time to supplement their husband's earnings.

This type of arrangement means that women in these families are around the house more and are therefore the logical choice for homeschooling parent. For example, Jack has worked full-time as a retail manager while taking the occasional night course at a local community college. Rochelle, his wife, has worked sporadically, patching together child-care jobs. When asked how they decided that Rochelle would do the bulk of the homeschooling labor, both parents pointed out that Jack simply was not around the house all that much. His job required long hours and occasional night and weekend shifts. Interestingly, Jack and Rochelle have recently moved in with relatives so that Jack can finish his college degree. Now that he is a full-time student, Jack has reduced his working hours to part-time. However, this reduction in work has not resulted in an increase in Jack's participation in homeschooling the children. Instead, he spends more time on his studies. The couple justifies this as an investment in their future. They hope that this will allow Jack to someday get a better job.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described the ground-level tactics of participants in the homeschooling movement. I described two groups of families who are engaged in the same activity – educating their children at home. Their actual day-to-day practices vary depending on their understandings of who their children are and what their children need. They both see children as unique and precious but they part company from there. Secular unschoolers think children need freedom to discover things at their own pace, on



their own terms. Religious parents, who practice schooling at home, think their children need structure, guidance and discipline.

Theoretically speaking, the parenting strategies of homeschooling parents challenge the class-specific conceptualization created by Annette Lareau (2003). Both sets of parents draw from the middle-class strategy of “concerted cultivation” as well as the working-class model of the “accomplishment of natural growth.” Like their middle-class peers, secular parents involve their children in numerous enrichment activities, while encouraging their children’s input in a whole host of decisions about their education. On the other hand, the *laissez-faire* dimension of their unschooling philosophy, which stresses the importance of letting children just discover the world at their own pace, is more akin to a working-class perspective on parenting. Religious parents partly embrace the hierarchical, authoritative parent-child relationship of the accomplishment of natural growth model, yet they reject the idea that children should be left alone to develop at their own pace. Instead, they are intimately involved in crafting their children’s educational experiences. In this sense, they have more in common with their middle-class peers.

In spite of their different approaches to the day-to-day education of their children, these parents all agree that homeschooling is mothers’ work. They have different justifications for this belief. Religious parents invoke the will of god, whereas secular parents talk about the wisdom of nature. In spite of this difference, the outcome is essentially the same. Both the schooling at home approach of religious homeschoolers and the unschooling tactics of their secular peers reproduce conventional gender arrangements within their homes.

In previous chapters of this dissertation, I have talked about the particular beliefs that have led these parents to homeschool and then how they put these beliefs into practice. In the next chapter, I will explore the extent to which these beliefs and practices are related to a sense of collective identity among homeschooling parents.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES**  
**IN THE HOMESCHOOLING MOVEMENT**

The previous chapters of this dissertation have addressed several questions: why do parents choose to homeschool, how do they homeschool and who is responsible for doing the work of homeschooling? In this chapter, I turn to the question of who are homeschoolers? In particular, I discuss how homeschoolers think of themselves as a group and how they compare themselves to people outside of the movement. In other words, my focus in this chapter is on homeschoolers' sense of collective identity.

I argue that homeschoolers have a complicated collective identity. On the one hand, they have a collective sense of who they are, as homeschoolers. However, only one group in particular, the secular parents, embrace homeschooling as a core component of who they are as good and decent people. This is especially salient for how they conceive of their gendered identities as mothers and fathers. Meanwhile, religious parents regard homeschooling as strictly something they do with few implications for their identities.

**Identity Work and Moral Identities**

The concept of collective identity describes “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experience and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier, p. 105, 1992). Collective identity answers the question of how social movement participants think of themselves. Scholars interested in identity and social movements have explored how participants’ sense of identity influences movement dynamics on a number of levels: on the emergence of movements, recruitment of

participants, tactical choices, and movement outcomes (Reger et. al 2008; Polletta and Jasper 2001). At each of these levels, identity is understood not as a fixed and static entity. Rather, collective identities are constructed through processes of negotiation, resistance, interpretation and interaction. In other words, the creation and maintenance of identities involves significant “identity work” (Reger et al. 2008).

Identity work involves our attempts to “...establish, change, or lay claim to meanings as particular kinds of persons” (Schwalbe p. 105, 1996). As individuals, we do this work every day through our styles of speech, the clothes we wear and our personal demeanor. We use these markers to communicate to others what kind of person we are, or at least how we want to be seen by others. Identity work is also undertaken at the group level. In the case of social movements, this work describes any activities designed to construct and maintain a collective identity. Collective identity work is expressed in formal ways through social movement literature, media campaigns, political speeches and in less formal settings, such as interactions among movement participants and between participants and the general public (Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Within the context of social movements, collective identity work serves strategic purposes: “Collective identities are articulated, manipulated, packaged, and deployed by movement actors to maximize resources and support from constituents” (Dugan, p. 21. 2008). Collective identities can be constructed in ways that either differentiate participants from the general public or highlight their similarities. Strategically, this is a choice of emphasizing “sameness” or “difference.” In movements for gay, lesbian and bisexual rights, for example, it has been politically successful in some cases to convince the heterosexual public that sexual minorities are more similar to them than different.

Yet, in other cases, sexual minority activists stake their claims on what makes them unique (Bernstein 1997; Dugan 2008). I argue that homeschoolers engage in both strategies – stressing sameness in some cases, yet highlighting differences in others.

In some contemporary movements, participants engage in a particular type of identity work – the development of a *moral identity*. Mary Grigsby (2004) describes moral identity work as a process through which participants define themselves as “worthwhile and good people” (p. 53). In the “natural mothering” movement, for example, women struggle what it really means to be a good mother (Bobel 2002) and in the voluntary simplicity movement (Johnson 2004), participants negotiate the meaning of leading a good life in a highly competitive consumer-driven society. In movements like these, the sameness and difference rhetoric takes on special significance. Moral identities are based on a set of values and life choices that set participants apart from the general public. An identity based on morals and values may suggest that other identities and life choices are somehow inferior to one’s own. Natural mothers, for example, construct their identities on the grounds of women’s selflessness, anti-consumerism and an abiding trust in the wisdom of nature (Bobel 2002). What does this say about women who make other choices? Are they bad mothers because they are selfish, materialistic and overly reliant on experts to tell them what to do? Moral identity development, therefore, is fraught with potential conflict. Some homeschoolers are engaged in moral identity work and, as I demonstrate, they attempt to construct a moral identity without staking out a view of themselves as morally superior.

In this chapter, I describe and then analyze identity work done by homeschoolers. First, I discuss how homeschoolers think of themselves within their own boundaries. In

other words, how they characterize homeschoolers in general and how they fit within the homeschooling movement. Then I talk about how they conceive of themselves in relation to people outside of the movement. In both instances, I focus especially on the role of the sameness and difference rhetoric. I also return to a central concern of this research – the role of gender. What I argue is that secular homeschoolers, more so than religious ones, construct homeschooling identity as a moral identity. That is, their identity rests on the lifestyle choices they make and the values and beliefs on which these choices are based. These values and family practices set them apart from the broader culture. At the same time, they cling to a sense of sameness in an attempt to minimize any hint of moral superiority. Considered from a gender perspective, the moral identity work of these homeschoolers tends to leave unexamined contemporary ideals of fatherhood, yet wrestles with the idea of what it means to be a good mother in this contemporary society. Ultimately, the identity work of secular homeschooling parents, particularly mothers, is what I call a “quasi activist parenting.”

### **Homeschoolers’ Collective Identities**

To say that all homeschoolers share a coherent and salient collective identity would be somewhat misleading. Overwhelmingly, it is the secular homeschoolers who articulate a much more discernable collective sense of who they are as a group than do the religious homeschoolers. I suggest that the primary reason for this difference is that religious homeschoolers tend to view homeschooling as simply something they do, as opposed to part of who they are. I asked religious parents if they would consider themselves to be outside of the mainstream regarding choices they make about family life. The majority suggested that homeschooling is the only activity that sets them apart.

In other words, homeschooling is something they do that is different from most families, but otherwise they are just typical American families.

For the most part, that is exactly what they appear to be. Most of the religious families live in modest, middle-class neighborhoods. Men in these families have occupations like accountant, campus minister and building contractor. The women, if employed at all, work part-time clerical or retail positions. One religious mother works evenings as a cashier at Wal-Mart. They eat what they considered to be “typical” food: conventional groceries, fast food take out and microwaveable meals. They shop where they can get the best deal. Their children play with video games and there are usually plenty of plastic toys around the house. The fact that they are Christian families does not even seem, from their perspective, to set them apart from others. They talk about the importance of their faith but they do not place great emphasis on how it shapes their identities. It could be that living in a very liberal, secular part of the state, has conditioned these men and women to temper their enthusiasm for religion, especially when talking to a stranger. It could also be that, like homeschooling, it is just not a big part of their identity.

On the other hand, secular parents talk about homeschooling as part and parcel of many of the choices they make about family life. The jobs they have, the food they eat, where they choose to shop and what kind of toys they let their children play with are all part of the same package. They variously described themselves as “rebels” and “iconoclasts” who live their lives “outside the box” of mainstream American culture. Homeschooling, for these parents, is not just something they do, but it is part of who they are. It is woven into their entire lifestyle. As one mother puts it, “Homeschooling is life

and life is homeschooling.” Therefore, secular parents, unlike their religious peers, are engaged in the work of constructing a moral identity that embraces their status as homeschoolers.

It is not the case that religious parents completely lack a sense of collective identity as homeschoolers. As I show in the section that follows, religious parents share with secular parents an awareness that they are part of something bigger than themselves. In the subsequent section, I explain that both groups also engage in similar identity work insofar as they stress their sameness with non-homeschoolers. From there, I will describe how secular parents’ collective identity is unique.

### **Who Are We?: How Homeschoolers See Themselves**

By definition, a collective identity implies that movement participants share a sense of solidarity. They feel connected to others with common interests, concerns and beliefs. These shared interests and emotions form the basis for collective action (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Sandlin and Walther 2009). Parents in this study, secular and religious alike, do have a sense of solidarity with other homeschoolers but they describe this connection as relatively weak and, in some ways, unintentional. For example, when asked if she felt like she was part of a broader homeschooling movement, Donna, a religious mother of five, describes it this way:

I don’t think I did in the beginning but it is starting to feel like that...Not actively, not purposely. I don’t feel like I’m driven by that. I think it’s perhaps an effect from our choice...it is an effect of what we’ve chosen to do – what works best for us. And I wouldn’t ever say anybody has to do it. I’m just saying what works best for us. I’ve actually helped another friend take her child out of sixth grade. He was having great emotional difficulties and she came to me and I helped her do the paperwork and all that sort of stuff. So, I think it is an effect of what I’m doing but I don’t think it was the purpose of what I was doing.



Donna did not become a homeschooler because she was drawn to the goals and aims of the movement. Rather, she started doing what she felt was best for her children and only later developed some connection, albeit a weak one, to a broader movement.

Donna's story is similar to most of her religious and secular peers and it reveals a critical dimension of these homeschoolers' collective identity. That is, these parents do not necessarily think of themselves as part of a mass effort to affect cultural or political change. I asked Lesley, secular mother of three, what she thinks the homeschooling movement is trying to accomplish. She explains

I don't know if it's trying to accomplish anything, 'cause I think...it's individual in terms of, I think a lot of that comes out of just wanting to spend more time with your kids. I mean, kind of wanting to be like a strong family. Wanting to be a part of what your kids are learning, and share that.

I followed up by asking if the movement is about affecting any large scale social change.

She said:

I don't think it is at this point. That might be, [laughs], that might change...maybe if I thought about it, but at this point...I mean, I think of who my sons may become as adults...that may be influenced by the homeschooling, so if you look at it that way, I mean, I'm hoping that they'll be strong individuals and love learning and are passionate about what they believe in and become involved in their community.

Lesley characterizes the movement as individualized in its focus. She sees that perhaps there will be social benefits to homeschooling – so long as her sons grow to be decent people involved in their community. However, social change is not the point and that is not why Lesley, or any other family in this study, got involved in homeschooling in the first place.

Therefore, homeschoolers in this study do not strongly identify as members of a homeschooling movement. They believe that a movement exists and they are part of it, if

only in an involuntary way. In fact, outside of homeschooling activities with their children, the participation of these parents in the movement is informal and infrequent. Unlike many of the homeschoolers Stevens (2001) studied, these families rarely attend conferences and very few belong to formal homeschooling groups that meet on a regular basis. Most families interact with other homeschoolers only through play dates and social gatherings. Furthermore, only a handful of parents read homeschooling literature on a consistent basis. This lack of formal participation in the movement may be either a symptom or a cause of the overall weakness of the solidarity these parents feel to a broader movement.

Nevertheless, the parents in this study do have a sense of who they are as homeschoolers. Although no other interviewee put it quite so crudely, it is worth considering how John, a secular father of two, describes his fellow homeschoolers “We’re like a bunch of kids on the playground. If we don’t like the way you’re playing then we say, fuck you! We take our ball and go home!” This statement is meaningful on a couple of different levels. First, there is the sense that homeschoolers are people who will not tolerate a “game” if they do not like how it is being played. Much like the child in John’s analogy, homeschoolers have decided they do not like the game of mass schooling, so they take their ball (their children) and go home to play a different game (teach them at home). This reinforces the idea that homeschoolers are not interested in reforming the rules of any game to make them more fair or effective. Rather, they want to do what is best for themselves and their own families. Most homeschoolers recognize that they share this individualistic orientation.

Second, John uses this analogy to suggested that homeschoolers as a group are an

empowered, confident lot. Bolstered by the experience of standing up to schools, one of the most revered and significant of all social institutions, homeschoolers are people who have the courage to contradict authorities and break with social norms. Many of the parents talk about the confidence that emerges from making the decision to homeschool. Cherri, secular mother of three, remembers how her initial decision to homeschool was met with some trepidation and outright criticism from her family members. She and her husband stuck by the decision, though, and are now educating their second child at home. In the long run, the confidence she garnered from this experience has fed her self-assurance in making other decisions about her work and family life.

Third, this analogy illustrates how homeschoolers conceive of themselves as an eclectic bunch who, for the most part, peacefully coexist. When I asked Donna, religious mother of five, to describe the “typical” homeschooling family, she told me about a lesson she learned early in her homeschooling years: “There was no one family that looks like a homeschooling family. You can do whatever you want, basically, within the structure of dealing with the schools and stuff like that.” The families in this study are well aware that there are a wide range approaches to homeschooling. In fact, among the ranks of these families there is everything from a religious family that uses a highly structured DVD based curriculum complete with tests and homework to the single secular mother of four whose “unschooling” methods mostly consist of letting her children have free play and occasionally reading to her older child. By in large, these families do not criticize other homeschoolers whose homeschooling practices are different from their own.

As John describes it, there is a potential downside when a group of individualistic, empowered adults try to work together. He tells a story about a handful of secular homeschoolers who recently came together to co-create an environmental education program for their children. Controversy erupted when two of the volunteer organizers discussed compensation for their labor (as trained teachers) as well as a pool of cash to buy supplies. Some of the other parents objecting saying this sounded too much like school. The ad-hoc coalition disbanded and the program never came to be. Interestingly, there were no similar stories among religious families. Perhaps they were more likely to compromise or maybe they did not attempt to collaborate in a similar way. My impression is that the latter is the case.

In sum, the secular and religious homeschoolers in this study see themselves as an eclectic group of people who share one common goal: to take care of their families and themselves first and foremost. They are independent, individualistic and emboldened to make choices that others may not regard as popular. Although they have a sense of solidarity with other homeschoolers, their identification with the broader movement is tenuous at best. This is how homeschoolers construct their collective identity internally. It focuses on how they think of themselves as a group and how they think of themselves in relation to other homeschoolers. In the following section, I turn my attention to how secular homeschoolers make external comparisons. In other words, I examine how they compare themselves to people outside of the movement.

### **Anyone Can Do It, But Homeschooling Isn't For Everybody:**

#### **The Moral Identity Work of Secular Homeschoolers**

For the secular parents in this study, the status of homeschooler has special

significance. For them, being a homeschooler is part of their moral collective identity. That is, this identity is based on strongly held values and beliefs that inform their lifestyle choices and constitute their sense of themselves as good people. Seculars' identity is defined and sustained in opposition to typical, mainstream American values. As such, it engenders a sense of tension between thinking of oneself as someone who has better values and makes better choices than other people, and not presenting oneself as a judgmental elitist. Therefore, the moral identity of secular homeschoolers requires significant identity work involving the rhetoric of sameness and difference (Bernstein 1997).

The identity work of secular parents is epitomized by a seemingly contradictory logic that is shared by these men and women. When it comes to homeschooling, most believe "Anyone can do it, but homeschooling is not for everyone." This contradiction describes secular homeschoolers' strategic use of claims of sameness and difference in the process of their collective identity construction. First, these parents see themselves as undeniably different from most non-homeschoolers in a few important ways. The following passage from my interview with Kate, secular mother of two boys, encapsulates these differences. Kate describes what it is like to be with families who are like her own:

I find it amusing when...we do the camping trip down on the Cape on Fathers' Day weekend, and it's a group of homeschooling families...all these families that are all, you know, growing their own organic food and choosing to spend a lot of time with their kids. And some are vegetarian and some are not but, um, it gives me this idea that I live in a world where everyone is recycling and everyone is drinking water instead of Coca-Cola, um and making these kind of choice for their families.

Embedded in this passage are a number of important components of secular homeschoolers' identity. The first is this idea that homeschoolers are people who value spending time with their children more than the average parent does. When I asked parents to explain why more people do not choose to homeschool, most offered explanations similar to Cherri's:

You know, a lot of people just don't want to spend that much time with their kids. And that's what I hear from a lot of people. A lot of my friends who send their kids to school tell me they could just never do it. They could never just spend that much time with their kids. So that is a commitment that you have to take on – you know, to want to be with your children.

Non-homeschooling parents avoid spending time with their children not just by sending them to school. They also hire baby-sitters, send their kids to camp and work long hours outside of the home. Homeschooling parents use all of these choices as evidence that non-homeschoolers lack the same commitment to their children that their fellow homeschoolers have.

A second main difference that secular homeschoolers see between themselves and non-homeschoolers is that they regard themselves as less materialistic. Much like members of the "voluntary simplicity" movement (Johnson 2004; Sandlin and Walther 2009), many of these families have chosen to forgo material comforts in exchange for more quality time with their family members. Kate explains that they do not drive new cars and they go camping on their vacation instead of flying to Hawaii like some other families she knows. Jerry, Kate's husband, explains "People are working...and have this idea in the society, I think, that you know, you're trying to make as much money as you can and that's sort of what it's all about. That's where the values are." By comparison, Jerry suggests that he and Kate have freely chosen to live with less income. In the first

few years, he says it was hard to figure out how to survive on one teacher's salary. Now that they have figured it out, they say that they are pretty satisfied with life. Other parents spoke without regret of postponing home repairs, shopping at thrift stores and sharing hand-me-down clothing with other homeschooling families. All of this suggests to secular homeschoolers that they are less concerned with material possessions than the typical American family.

Another distinguishing feature of secular homeschoolers' moral identity is a strong sense of environmental consciousness. That is, these men and women see themselves as stewards of the natural world. They appreciate how individual choices impact the planet. Therefore, they are highly committed to practices like recycling, shopping locally, and growing their own organic produce. One mother, Lesley, talked about how the cleaning products she uses are informed by her concern for the environment. She says that when she visits her husband's family in the suburbs of "Middle America," she sees people using products like Windex, something she would never use. Lesley explains that this is different from what she finds when she is with homeschoolers in her community, "Like I would, I would expect someone to have vinegar to clean with around here, and not bring out the bleach when someone pees on the floor, you know." Lesley, and others like her, would rather use vinegar instead of bleach and conventional cleaning products, as the latter contain harsh chemicals that are bad for the environment. As caretakers of this planet, seculars see it as their duty to make environmentally responsible choices about how to live their lives. From their perspective, this is crucial since most Americans do not choose to live this way.

Finally, there is a sense among these homeschoolers that they think more critically about the world around them than do most people. There are several layers to this belief. On the hand, it means that they do not blindly follow the pack and do what everyone else does. They feel like they have other options. Schooling their children at home is the most obvious example of this notion. Kasey, for example, suggested that other parents may not homeschool because they simply do not realize it is a viable option. She says that parents automatically send their children to schools because their parents sent them, their grandparents sent their parents and so on. Another level is that these people see themselves as conscious consumers. Most people do not think about how their choices of consumption are related to broader social, political and ecological factors. However, these parents try to make informed choices about the cars they drive, the food they eat, and how they dispose of their waste. In general, these parents see themselves as being too smart to fall for much of the “cultural brainwashing” that most others fall victim to in this fast-paced, materialistic, mass media saturated world.

To summarize and highlight the key features of the collective moral identity of the secular homeschoolers in this study, it is worthwhile to revisit my interview with Kate. After describing what it is like to be around other homeschoolers, she went on to tell me what happens when she spends time with people in the “mainstream world.” After her annual camping excursion with other homeschooling families, she visits her sister on the return trip. She explains:

And then I go... out into the more mainstream world and realize that, that it's a very different world out there...My sister lives in Plymouth, she lives there with her husband and two show dogs and they've made decisions not to have children and they just lead a very different life from what we lead. One of things that they do is every morning they, um, they go down to Dunkin Doughnuts for their coffee and they come back and have it at home pour it from Styrofoam cups to



household mugs. You know, I use cloth bags and, you know, it's just part of how we all in our family think about living in the world. I suggested to her bringing down a travel mug and she kind of laughed like "oh, you do enough recycling for the both of us." Um, and it just made me realize that it's really probably how most of the people in this country do live. It's just, every time I throw out something I always consider first if I can use it in a different way and most people, my sister included, just throw things out. Um, and so I think, in a lot of ways, yeah, we are kind of strange people.

When Kate compares her sister's lifestyle to her own, she highlights the key components of the identity she shares with other secular homeschoolers. This moral identity is based on a coherent set of values: children and family, anti-materialism, environmental awareness and critical, independent thinking.

So, what does this comparison say about Kate's voluntarily childless, show dog owning, non-recycling sister who lives in a big house and gets her morning coffee from a chain store instead of brewing a fresh pot of organic, fair trade coffee at home? By comparison, Kate implies that her sister does not value family, does not care about the environment, and does not appreciate how her actions impact others. Clearly, Kate thinks that the lifestyle choices she shares with other homeschoolers are better and more responsible than the choices made by non-homeschoolers like her sister. Yet, she does not come out and say it directly. Though they may well believe it, none of the secular parents in this study made direct and specific claims about the moral superiority of homeschoolers. To do so would be to risk being cast as judgmental elitists, thus tarnishing their collective sense of themselves as good people.

### **Preserving a Moral Identity**

In order to preserve their moral identity, secular homeschoolers engage in three specific strategies of identity work. First, they try to make it seem like what they are doing is nothing special – hence the popular refrain, "anyone can do it." Many parents

tell stories of having friends, family members or even strangers saying “Oh I wish I could that. That seems really cool but it must be really hard.” Typically, parents respond by telling the other person that they *can* do it. Secular homeschoolers sense some fear around homeschooling, especially when it comes to teaching particular subjects like math and science. Most parents are self-deprecating about their skills and abilities as teachers. If they do not know how to teach their children about math, then they ask another homeschooler or look for help at the library. The point is that they do not think about themselves as perfect or experts. They are just like every other parent who wants to do the best for their child. Though homeschooling is difficult, they suggest that anyone can do it so long as their heart is in the right place.

Second, secular homeschoolers tend to employ the rhetoric of choice. They position homeschooling as one of many options that parents have when they make decisions about their children’s education. They talk about their own process of arriving at homeschooling. For many, this meant weighing the options of public, private and charter schools. Cherri and Doug, for example, actually sent their eldest child to a private school for one year. While there some aspects of that experience that they liked, the prospect of paying at least \$7000 per year per child was untenable. Hence, homeschooling became a much more attractive option. A number of secular parents said they found appealing private schools but the cost was simply prohibitive. Additionally, many of these parents talk about leaving the door open to public schools. Darren and Kasey, for example, say they check in with their children each summer to see if they would prefer to be homeschooled or if they want to try conventional schooling. A lot of parents say that they are open to the possibility of their children going to public school

when they are older and can make an informed decision. By constructing homeschooling as one possible choice among many, these parents avoid creating a situation where their decision is right and all others are wrong. While they clearly feel like homeschooling is the best option, they do not say it directly. Therefore, when they account for someone choosing to send their children to school, it is simply a less desirable choice – it is not a bad person with bad values. In this way, they preserve their sense of self as good and morally just, and yet not judgmental.

Third, when comparing themselves to non-homeschoolers, these parents avoid using language that blames individuals. Rather they assign responsibility to social factors. For example, many seculars feel that more parents would choose to homeschool if only they could afford to. Living in uncertain economic times, in the midst of two wars, with the cost of living ever-increasing, they recognize that a lot of families cannot survive without two full-time incomes. In addition to blaming the economy, many parents blame “society” for exerting inordinate pressure on people to make choices other than homeschooling. Donna, religious mother of five, explained that “I think that society has pointed out that we need bigger homes and better cars and we need to go on vacation and in order to do any of that, two parents need to be working outside of the home, full-time.” And as secular father Doug explains, if both parents are going to work then “You send them off to school and the parents go to work.” Here we see this strategy go full circle. Rather than blaming individual parents for not homeschooling their children because they are inherently greedy or do not love their children, they acknowledge that some parents work full-time out of economic necessity or because they are compelled to

do so by cultural mandates that are part of society. Under these circumstances, it makes no sense to assign individual blame to these parents.

It is useful at this point to reconsider the phrase offered at the beginning of this section: “Anyone can do it, but homeschooling is not for everyone.” The tension of secular homeschooler’s moral identity work is embedded in this seemingly contradictory logic. The idea that “anyone can do it” downplays the specialness of homeschooling and the parents who do it. It emphasizes sameness over difference. To say “but it is not for everyone” has a mixed meaning. On the one hand, some people cannot or do not homeschool it because they are overwhelmed by economic constraints or they are overwhelmed by a culture that gives them the idea that they must work long hours and accumulate lots of material possessions. On the other hand, it is not for everybody because most people do not share the same values as these homeschoolers: family and children, anti-materialism, environmental awareness and critical, independent thought. This strategy emphasizes difference. What is clear is that secular homeschoolers’ collective moral identity requires important identity work. They see themselves as good people with high moral standards and they are careful not to taint that image with smugness or judgment.

### **Gender and Secular Homeschoolers’ Moral Identity Work:**

#### **Quasi Activist Parenting**

There is another level on which to examine the moral identity work of secular parents and this is gender. To consider secular homeschoolers’ moral identity work through a gender lens suggests paying attention to how gendered ideology, identities and experiences shape the processes of collective identity formation. In her study of the

voluntary simplicity movement, Grigsby (2004) explains the role of gender in moral identity work in the following way:

Rejecting...values of the dominant culture and adopting voluntary simplicity moral identities has different implications and requires different types of identity work for men than it does for women because men and women have different developmental experiences...These men and women as groups also experience different expectations and pressures from the dominant culture. And they occupy differing relative positions of power to dominant institutions (p. 60).

In other words, men and women in this society have different experiences and expectations and these suggest different forms of identity work. In Grigsby's case, she argues "Men and women in voluntary simplicity are in one way involved in trying to remake those aspects of masculine and feminine gender identity that they experience as negative. How they use voluntary simplicity reflects different unmet identity needs in men and women (p. 60)." These differing identity needs are present among homeschooler and they are manifested in the type of identity work they do.

Within the literature on gender identities and women's activism, there is a distinction drawn between activism emerging out of the *occupation* of traditional gender roles and activism motivated to *transform* traditional gender roles (Neuhouser 2008). The activism of parents in this study is a bit of both. It at once emerges out of their status as parents and it is partly geared toward challenging gender expectations, particularly for women. Therefore, I position secular parents' homeschooling as a form of "quasi activist" parenting. This is especially true for the women for whom homeschooling is, among other things, an occasion to struggle with what it means to be a good mother at this historical moment.

My use of the notion of quasi activist parenting draws from Nancy Naples' (1998) description of "activist mothering." Naples describes activist mothering as a process by

which mothers reshape their identities as mothers as they engage in political activism. She introduced the term to describe the experiences of low income Latina and African American community workers. These women felt compelled, as mothers, to take steps to combat the racism and poverty they saw ruining their neighborhoods. Along the way, they pushed the traditional expectations of motherhood by articulating the idea of “othermothering” – a reconceptualization of “good mothering” that includes caring for non-biological children, social activism and caring for the broader community. I regard activist parenting as a form of identity work, insofar as it emerges out of an individual’s sense of who they are as a parent and/or it includes a critical examination of what it means to be a parent. As I explain below, the identity work of secular homeschoolers is a quasi activist parenting because it differs from Naples’ activist mothering in a couple of important ways.

Secular homeschoolers are like activist parents in that they are motivated out of a sense of duty or obligation as parents. As mothers and fathers they have serious concerns about the world in which they are raising their children. As mentioned in an earlier chapter they believe that the importance of family is eroding in this society, this culture is overly materialistic and people lack a general concern for the natural world. As parents, they feel duty bound to take care of their children. They want what is best for their children and they are compelled to take action. Similar to activist mothers, these parents are clearly motivated by “concern for their children’s well-being (Naples, p. 114, 1998).” In this sense, it is reasonable to suggest that secular homeschooling *resembles* activist parenting.

However, it is their choice of actions that set them apart from other activist parents. The mothers in Naples's (1998) study channeled their concerns about their children's well-being into organizational and community based activism. They took jobs in social service agencies, joined community groups and raised awareness about the problems faced in their neighborhoods. They were motivated to change the conditions under which they and the families around them were living. This would benefit their children as well as others'. Secular homeschooling parents, on the other hand, make a different choice. They criticize schools as fundamentally flawed institutions where many of the "society's" problems converge. How, they wonder, could any child get a decent, meaningful education in such an environment? Their response is to keep their kids out of school altogether. Instead of working to improve the schools, which could potentially benefit many children, they focus instead on the immediate milieu of their family and their home. Beneath this choice to work for personal fulfillment instead of social change is a set of beliefs about mothering that further differentiate secular homeschoolers from activist parents.

As the previous discussion indicates, secular homeschooling can be viewed as activism motivated by parents' statuses as mothers and fathers. A second analytical point is to explore the extent to which homeschooling is also activism intent on transforming traditional gender roles. In the case of activist mothers, Naples (1998) describes women engaged in resistance and redefinition of conventional norms about mothering by expanding the definition of "good mothering" outside of the home to include caring for non-biological children and community needs. This challenges the predominantly white, middle-class ideal of expert-driven, all consuming, highly individualized "intensive

mothering” (Hays 1996). By challenging hegemonic notions of ideal mothering, Latina and African American activist mothers are engaged in a form of identity work. They are pushing the boundaries of what it means to be a good mother.

Secular homeschooling mothers seem to embrace the ideology of intensive mothering but they do so with a caveat. These mostly college educated, white, middle-class women devote a great deal of time, energy, resources, and individualized attention to their children. None of these mothers complained about being the parent expected to do the majority of the childrearing work. Most seemed to relish their position and in this way, they were embracing conventional gender roles. The caveat is that there is a dimension of resistance in their mothering. As discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, secular homeschooling mothers do not agree that having a career is a necessary part of being a good mother – quite the opposite. Many secular mothers told stories similar to this one to illustrate the point. In an exasperated tone, Lesley explained “I mean, like, like there’s a two week old down our street and she’s [the mother] at work. I couldn’t believe there’s no...I mean, there’s no time, and it’s like two weeks, and they’re back to work.” On the other hand, Lesley explained that she, and other mothers like her, either stop working altogether to care for their children or at least drop down to part-time. They would never even dream of leaving their children in the care of some stranger while they go off to work.

Secular mothers’ homeschooling resembles activist mothering insofar as they are resisting some externally imposed norms about gender. However, I characterize it as quasi activist mothering since their particular form of identity work actually reinforces conventional gender roles and the oppressive structures inherent to them. There is long



established link in the literature between women's employment status and their relative position of power within the family (Perry-Jenkins et al. 2000; Shelton and John 1996). Therefore, for secular mothers, homeschooling is an opportunity for them to defy expectations and reshape motherhood, albeit in a regressive manner.

For secular fathers, homeschooling is not clearly related to gender identity work and is much less like activist parenting. The moral identity work they do through homeschooling is much more concerned with creating a sense of self as a good person who lives according to his values. Unlike their female counterparts, parental status does not seem to be much of a factor for these men. As described in an earlier chapter, contemporary men are parenting in the age of the "new fatherhood." This new mode of fathering represents a break from the past, where fathers' roles were seen mainly as providers. The new father is expected to spend quality time with his children, to attend to their emotional as well as material needs, and to lessen the burden of care on his wife (Coltrane and Adams 2001; LaRossa 1998, 1997). Researchers have found that although many Americans embrace the idea of the new father, most men are out of step with the practice. That is, there is a cultural lag between what is expected and acceptable and what men are actually doing (Andrews et al. 2004; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Ranson 2001).

Some secular fathers say that they would actually prefer to be more involved in homeschooling and other household functions. I asked Doug if he and his wife ever talk about switching roles and he would take over full-time homeschooling duties and work part-time for pay, and his wife would work full-time outside of the house. He says,

We talk about it all the time...I've never said you gotta do that 'cause I don't want to work you know. You know, I'm happy to work...It takes a long time to build something up to where you can support a family and it takes years.

Likewise, Jerry says that he and his wife occasionally talk about altering their roles in a way that would allow him to be more involved as a father, but there are too many obstacles,

Well...I would like to be home with them and doing it [homeschooling] but she *really* wants to be doing it...Also, I make quite a bit more than she would if she was to go back to work. Um, and as things are working out nicely, definitely now it would be a bit of a stretch to have to, to take a 10 or 15 thousand dollar annual pay cut.

For both Doug and Jerry, economic constraints keep them from behaving like new fathers and instead relegate them to the role of primary breadwinner. Most secular fathers agree that homeschooling is a costly endeavor. It means that a family must learn how to survive on one income. In every family but one, it is the father's income.

However, it is not clear how committed they are to the idea of change. Both Doug and Jerry, as well as most of the other secular fathers, indicated that they always expected they would be the breadwinner in their family. Even before they were married and had children, these men imagined that one day they would be working full-time while their future wives took care of their children and their homes. Few complain about having to work or not being able to do more housework. Like Doug, most are "happy to work" and provide their family with material support.

Therefore, it would be difficult to characterize what these men are doing as a form of activist parenting. While their commitment to homeschooling may originate from their roles as fathers, they are not really resisting traditional gender roles. While they say they would like to be more involved as fathers, virtually none of these men act that way. What differentiates these men from their wives, who are openly scornful of the contemporary "supermom" who has a career and is the primary caregiver, is that they do

not verbalize contempt for men who parent according to the new fatherhood ideal. Instead, they pay lip-service to the idea of more involved fathering, and then quietly fall into a rather conventional father-as-breadwinner role.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown that homeschoolers have a sense of themselves that is complicated by the fact that they are only loosely tied to a broader movement. They say they are a diverse bunch of independent thinkers who want to do the best for their kids. For secular parents, homeschooling has much more salience for their collective sense of moral identity. Unlike the religious parents, who see homeschooling as something they do, secular parents regard homeschooling as part of who they are.

Secular parents walk a fine line in the process of their collective moral identity work. They clearly feel that they have a set of values – critical thinking, valuing children and family, and an environmental ethic – which sets them apart from the broader culture. Yet, they try to minimize their difference through strategies that stress their sameness with other people, including downplaying the difficulty of homeschooling, employing the rhetoric of choice, and avoiding blaming individuals for their bad choices. Moreover, I characterize secular parents' homeschooling as “quasi activist parenting.” Though their participation in homeschooling seems to be rooted in their particular gendered positions as mothers and fathers, they do not work for social change the way other activist parents do (Naples 1998).

It is clear that religious and secular families have different attachments to homeschooling and their sense of who they are. What is not clear is how this complicated collective identity affects the broader movement. It is possible that

homeschooling is growing precisely because it attracts a variety of people. Yet, it is also plausible that the growth and overall success of this movement may be limited due to a lack of a cohesive identity to unify participants and attract new families into the fold. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I address this as well as other looming questions.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The contemporary homeschooling movement sits at the intersection of several important social trends: widespread concern about the effectiveness and safety of the public school system, feminist challenges to the patriarchal family structure, anxiety about the state of the family as an institution, and challenging economic conditions. The central concern of this dissertation has been to make sense of homeschooling within this broader context. In particular, I sought to understand how changes in gender and family arrangements have affected the rise and development of the homeschooling movement and how this movement might alter gender and family arrangements (Staggenborg 1998; xii). I found that homeschooling certainly bears the imprint of broader changes regarding the gender system and contemporary family life, as well as other economic and cultural changes. However, I argue, that for a variety of reasons, this movement is not likely to contribute to any meaningful social change.

This dissertation was organized around four main research questions. First, how do parents *frame* their commitment to homeschooling and how do these frames relate to broader social changes regarding gender and the family? I argue that the cultural frames employed by the parents in this dissertation share several common themes. First and foremost, all parents, religious and secular, believe that schools are not a good match for their children. They used three interrelated frames to construct the problems of public schools and to justify their decision to homeschool: precious childhood/intensive mothering, decline of the family, and moral decline. Within these three general frames, there are subtle yet significant differences between the groups. For example, both groups

of parents feel schools are doing a poor job of educating children. However, secular parents fault schools for placing too much emphasis on academic skills while ignoring social development and free time, while religious parents tend to think schools do not focus enough on basic skills and knowledge. Ultimately, this difference, and others, stems from each group's particular worldview or cultural schema (Blair-Loy 2003).

Second, what are the particular *tactics* employed by these homeschoolers? In other words, how do they homeschool their children? How are their tactics related to contemporary ideas about motherhood, childhood and family life? This is an area where differences between religious and secular families are more evident. Each group has its own particular sense of who children are and what they need to grow, learn, and succeed in life. Religious parents describe their children as special, unique and in need of strong but loving adult guidance. Their version of homeschooling stresses academic skills, adult authority, and structured education. Most secular parents employed some variation of "unschooling." This child-centered approach favors self actualization over academic skills and flexibility over structure. Although they differed in how they characterized children's needs and how they went about meeting those needs, virtually all parents agreed on who should do the actual work of homeschooling the children. In all but one family, it was the mother who did the majority of the homeschooling labor. Parents justified this arrangement in different ways – religious parents made claims to the will of god, while secular parents discussed the wisdom of nature.

Third, what are the components of homeschoolers' *collective identity*? How do they think of themselves as homeschoolers and how do they differentiate themselves from people who do not homeschool? What sort of identity work do they engage in? Is

homeschooling part of parents' identities as mothers and fathers? I argue that all of these parents have a sense that they are part of a broader movement of homeschoolers but their connection to the movement is tenuous. Moreover, secular parents see homeschooling as part of who they are, while religious parents describe homeschooling more as just something that they do. Since homeschooling is part of secular parents' sense of who they are, they end up engaging in "identity work" (Reger et al. 2008). This identity work consists of simultaneously stressing similarities, while downplaying difference. This identity work is gendered insofar as secular women are engaged with what it means to be a woman and a mother in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Hence, I characterize secular mother's identity work as form of "quasi-activist parenting" (Naples 1998). Secular men, on the other hand, tend not to use homeschooling as an occasion to problematize contemporary norms of fatherhood and masculinity.

Finally, what are the potential *outcomes* of this movement for contemporary debates about gender roles within families and the current state of the family? Does this movement signal a rejection of the feminist critique of the family and a push toward more equitable parenting arrangements? If so, what sort of vision of gender and family life does it put in its place? Assessing the potential outcomes of the homeschooling movement is complex. I argue that at its core, this movement contains a series of contradictions which make it unlikely that homeschooling will lead to any meaningful change regarding gender, families or education.

## **Contradictions of Homeschooling**

### **Resistance and Reproduction**

The most glaring contradiction of the homeschooling movement is that it simultaneously represents an act of resistance and an act of reproduction. First and foremost, these parents are resisting schools. In and of itself, this is a radical decision. Consider that if the higher estimates are correct, then less than three percent of children in the United States are homeschooled (Ray 2006). While this number represents a significant number of children, as many as two million, the fact is that the other ninety-seven percent of children are in schools. Like other parents of school-aged children, homeschooling parents have reservations about the safety and effectiveness of schools. Yet, only a minority of parents is prepared to make the sacrifices of time, energy and resources and resist the cultural mandate and social tradition of sending their children to schools.

Homeschooling parents are also resisting a number of social changes and trends that may not have their origins in schools, but are played out there nonetheless. For example, most of the parents in this dissertation talked about the negative influence of living in a consumerist society. They do not want their children to get swept up in the accumulation of goods, or wearing the “right clothes” in order to fit in with their peers. Also, most parents talked about the waning importance of the family as an institution in this society. Secular and religious parents alike spoke of wanting to have more time to spend with their families. They criticized school schedules, work demands, public policy, and mass media as not being sufficiently “family friendly.” Their decision to homeschool can be read, in part, as resistance to mainstream cultural trends.



Most of these parents were also resisting changes in gender roles within families. This was especially true of women. The mothers I spoke with ostensibly rejected the liberal feminist ideal of simultaneously maintaining a career while practicing “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996; Williams 2000). Unlike current and former professional women (Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007), these women chose not to pursue a career in the first place. Though some have ambitions of semi-professional or professional work in the future, they have chosen first to devote themselves to motherhood. Although most women talked about feeling some external pressures to be “more than just a mother,” none really described their choice as anti-feminist. In fact, most characterized feminism in terms of choice: feminism means a woman is free to be whatever she wants – a housewife, an astronaut, a lawyer, or a homeschooling mother. In their view, since they are homeschooling mothers by choice, homeschooling is consistent with feminism as they understand it. They felt that those who characterize their decision as somehow antifeminist just have a different view of what women’s equality means.

For their part, most of the men in this study embraced the idea of the “new fatherhood” (Bianchi et al. 2006, Townsend 2002) although few actually practiced it. While they thought it was important for fathers to have close relationships with their children and for men to do their share of domestic chores most practiced fathering in a mode reminiscent of the conventional “breadwinner” role. Many men justified this on grounds of the accurate economic calculation that in most fields, men can earn more than women. Other suggested that they would be willing to share wage earning and family work equally with their wives, yet they could not say for certain why they have not done this. Still others admitted to harboring traditional views about men’s and women’s roles

within families. Regardless of how they justified it, most men, in practice, resisted the modern cultural turn toward the new fatherhood.

The obvious contradiction in homeschooling is that in the process of resisting schools and a number of objectionable social changes, participants in this movement are reproducing conventional forms of family life. For decades, feminist scholars and activists have criticized the patriarchal family structure and have fought for women's expanded access to education, employment, and political power. Critics have argued that the inherent inequities of the breadwinner/homemaker roles are oppressive to women, limit men's psychosocial development, and by being so rigid and gendered, these roles set a bad example for children (Ferree 2010; Fox and Murry 2000; Friedan 1963; Thorne 1992). Yet, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more homeschooling parents are arranging their families in this way. Therefore, while they are taking a stand against one allegedly flawed and misguided social institution, they are reinforcing another that has been equally challenged in public discourse.

### **Individual Solution to Social Problems**

The second contradiction of homeschooling is that this movement offers an individual solution to social problems. As I have argued, this movement is foremost about a critique of schools. Both religious and secular parents agree that schools do not do a good job of teaching most children, or catering to their children's individual needs and desires. Further parents fault schools for not representing their personal values, whether those are based on religious doctrine or the wisdom of nature. Most parents also regard schools as "greedy institutions" demanding copious amounts of time and energy from students and parents alike.

How do homeschooling parents address their grievances with schools? They withdraw and choose not to participate. When I asked most parents what they hoped to accomplish by teaching their children at home, religious and secular parents both spoke about the benefits of homeschooling for their individual children, first and foremost, and for their families in general. None of the parents I spoke with was intent on changing schools for the betterment of other children. They were primarily interested in doing what was best for their children. In response to the social problem of (from their perspective) ineffective schools, these parents chose an individual solution.

Recall that homeschooling parents' grievances are not just with schools as an institution. They also spoke at length about the difficulties they face in the workplace. Many parents spoke of the wage gap in pay and the "motherhood penalty" (Budig and Hodges 2010). In general, they criticized the workplace- in the abstract- as not being sufficiently family friendly. How do they these parents address their concerns about the workplace? For most homeschooling mothers, the answer is not to participate. Rather than pushing employers for better pay, flexible schedules, and more generous benefits, most of these mothers opt not to get into a career. Similarly, most fathers indicated that work demands in terms of time and energy are extensive, yet no father spoke of trying to negotiate a more family friendly schedule with his employer. In homeschooling families, the solution to the gendered, non-family friendly institution of the workplace is to organize themselves in conventional, gender-specific roles.

Another example is most parents decried mass media for being largely destructive force in contemporary society. They talked about movies and television glorifying violence and wanton sexuality. They spoke about unrelenting advertising

promoting rampant consumerism. For most parents, the answer to the problem of the institution of mass media was to turn it off. Many of these families choose to live without a television and rarely go to the movies. So, instead of addressing the structural problems of mass media through media literacy campaigns or working with lawmakers to change media policy, these parents, in essence, choose not to participate.

The larger point here is not to “blame the victim.” My argument is not that homeschoolers are responsible for failing schools because they do not work to change them. Nor am I faulting these parents for not becoming activists for workplace and mass media reform. I suggest that by focusing on individual solutions to social problems, the participants in the homeschooling movement, and hence the movement at large, are not likely to affect any meaningful social change. After all, social problems demand social solutions.

### **What Does This All Mean? Implications and Suggestions for Further Study**

One of the main overarching concerns of this dissertation was to ask how this burgeoning movement might contribute to social change regarding gender, families, and education. Due to the internal contradictions of the movement, I suggest that it will not lead to change in any of these areas. In fact, this does not even seem to be a movement with a social change agenda. Nevertheless, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of homeschooling and offers important insights for families, education officials, and scholars alike. The findings here also suggest areas in need of further study.

## **Families**

First, this dissertation suggests important implications for current or potential homeschooling families. One lesson for parents is to consider the consequences of their choices. In order to teach their children at home and have the type of family life they desire, these families organized themselves in conventional, gender-specific roles. What are the consequences for the children and parents in these families? Do homeschooled children grow into adults who live their own lives, and organize their own families, in ways that replicate the gender system? How are young boys and girls affected by seeing their fathers behave as breadwinners and their mothers as homemakers? How does this shape their aspirations and expectations for the future? How might children's experiences be different if their parents practiced more egalitarian modes of childrearing? Further research is needed to address these questions.

What about the adults? Do they ever experience regrets about teaching their kids at home? What are the long term economic consequences for homeschooling mothers who spend years outside of the labor force? In retrospect, how do they make sense of that decision? Once their children are grown, how do homeschooling fathers think about their parenting? Do they regret not being more involved, especially in homeschooling? Are they satisfied by providing the material support for their children's unique educational experiences? How are relationships between parents affected by long-term homeschooling? In what ways does it bring them closer together and in what ways does it pull them apart? Research exploring these questions would be invaluable to parents either contemplating or currently involved in homeschooling.

## **Education Officials**

In some school districts, especially smaller ones, the increasing popularity of homeschooling presents a challenge. For example, in the rural district where I used to live, student enrollment was on a steady decline. Operating costs for schools were rising, while state contributions were falling. There was considerable public discussion about the possibility of closing the local elementary schools and busing the students to one regional location. Meanwhile, the number of homeschoolers in the area was rising. From the schools' perspective, the growth of homeschooling threatened their very existence.

There is another sense in which the growth of homeschooling presents a challenge to some school systems. Researchers have demonstrated two important factors about parent-school relationships: higher levels of parental involvement in schools contributes to students' success, and middle-class parents are more likely to get involved than working class and poor parents (Lareau 2003, 2000). Since most homeschoolers are middle-class, it is reasonable to conclude that schools are losing out on precisely those parents whose education and resources would be most beneficial.

Consider what a school official would have to do in order to attract parents to schools. If the parents in this dissertation are representative of the homeschooling population at large, then this task may be impossible. To satisfy homeschoolers, schools would have to place greater emphasis on the development of academic skills, yet give students plenty of space to explore subjects at their own pace. Schools would need to account for Christian ideology in their curricula, and at the same time emphasize the sacred relationship between humans and their ecological environment. The cafeterias

would only serve locally grown, seasonal foods and the daily school schedules would need to be flexible, allowing students to come and go as they please.

Given the structural constraints of schools –including, but not limited to, budgets, the legal separation of church and state, and parents’ work schedules – it is unrealistic to expect schools to make these changes. The question is: are there *modest* and reasonable accommodations schools could make that would lure homeschoolers back or compel them to enroll their children in the local school? Would flexible schedules and more one-on-one attention make all the difference? What are other proposals? This type of research would be a valuable asset for education officials and policymakers alike.

### **Social Movement Scholars**

The findings of this dissertation may force scholars to think differently about homeschooling *as a social movement*. Since this is essentially a movement that lacks a social change agenda, it might make more sense to think about homeschooling as a *countermovement* (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Granted, their opposition to schools does not necessarily represent counterclaims against a particular education movement. They oppose schools because they do not do well by their children. However, their particular convictions about gender roles and family life do suggest resistance to feminist movements for greater gender equity and more egalitarian modes of parenting. In this sense, the homeschooling movement seems to be more about resisting than affecting social and cultural change.

Another question that scholars would do well to consider is how do we account for the growth of this movement? At a time when the global economy is in crisis, the cost of living is increasing, and the value of wages is declining, why are more people

making an education choice that entails such economic sacrifice? Though homeschoolers are typically middle-class (Bielick et al. 2001), they certainly are not all wealthy. They undoubtedly feel the economic cost of homeschooling. Have schools gotten appreciably worse over the past decade or so? Is the family really in crisis and more Americans are just now becoming more aware of it? Furthermore, how does this movement grow if most homeschoolers are not out there recruiting new members? Their tactics are largely invisible to the outside world, so how could this possibly inspire others to join the movement? Are there other movements that grow without despite the absence of active recruitment? How are they similar or different from this movement?

Finally, this dissertation raises important issues about the role of collective identities in social movements, especially identity based or “lifestyle” movements (Haenfler 2004). Here we have a movement which is thriving without a strong sense of identification among its participants. I argue that homeschoolers are aware that they are part of something bigger than what they are doing as individual families, yet their connection to and identification with other homeschoolers is tenuous at best. Moreover, only the secular parents regarded homeschooling as part of who they are. Religious parents talked about homeschooling as just something that they did. How might these different ideas about participation in this movement affect the movement’s long-term success? Are there other movements that contain multiple, tenuous collective identities and how does that affect their success?



## **A Note on Studying Privilege**

At the end of her insightful study of “natural mothers,” feminist sociologist Chris Bobel (2002) describes the personal and intellectual difficulties she experienced studying privileged women. She explains:

I struggled with the value of studying this privileged group of women. Many lived a life that looked difficult, certainly labor-intensive, and bereft of the material comforts we typically associate with class privilege. Yet the fact that they chose to live this way and could choose to live differently preserved their middle-class status. I wonder aloud, to friends and colleagues, What is the point of studying privileged white women? Do we...need this study? How can we use this information (p. 171)?

Admittedly, I had similar concerns throughout the research and writing of this dissertation. Like the natural mothers, homeschoolers occupy a privileged class position. The fact that most of these families survived on one full-time income speaks to their relative affluence.

That these parents lacked an awareness of their class privilege should not have surprised me. We live in a society where we are socialized to believe that we are all middle class. Nevertheless, this blind spot did bother me. When homeschoolers characterized their commitment to homeschooling, organic foods, spending more time with family, or “living with less,” they talked a lot about choice. Since these family and lifestyle practices were coded by these parents as a matter of choice, then these options are available to anyone if they are willing to choose them.

In the back of my mind I had moments of harsh judgments when I wanted to chide these parents for their lack of class awareness. I wanted to say, “Yes, homeschooling seems like a good option for your family. But what about all of the children whose parents cannot afford to either teach them at home or send them to private

schools? What about their education and what about their future?” Middle-class parents use the rhetoric of choice because they, in fact, have options and the cultural and material resources to exercise those options. To have confronted these parents would have crossed a line in terms of research ethics and betrayed any notion of sociological objectivity.

Eventually, I realized that my discomfort with the decisions these parents were making had more to do with personal and political beliefs than with the value of conducting this study. It certainly troubled me that this group of privileged white families was responding to widespread social problems by retreating into their own families and homes and largely ignoring the plight of those around them. That does not diminish the broader sociological significance of what they are doing. Their behavior is framed and constrained by social factors as much as their less affluent peers, though in slightly different ways – and to analyze social behavior in its context is at the heart of sociological inquiry, regardless of the subjects’ social class.

## APPENDIX A

### PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY

- 1) What is your sex? (please check one)  
Female\_\_\_  
Male\_\_\_
  
- 2) What race or ethnicity do you consider yourself to be? (please check one)  
White (non-Hispanic)\_\_\_  
Black/African American (non-Hispanic)\_\_\_  
Hispanic/Latino\_\_\_  
Native American\_\_\_  
Asian or Pacific Islander\_\_\_  
Multiracial (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 3) Do you consider yourself a religious person? (please check one)  
Yes\_\_\_  
No\_\_\_
  
- 4) What is your religious affiliation? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religions or none at all? (please check one)  
Protestant\_\_\_  
Catholic\_\_\_  
Jewish\_\_\_  
None\_\_\_  
Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_
  
- 5) How often do you attend religious services? (please check one)  
Never\_\_\_  
Less than once a year\_\_\_  
About once or twice a year\_\_\_  
Several times a year\_\_\_  
About once per month\_\_\_  
2-3 times per month\_\_\_  
Nearly every week\_\_\_  
Every week\_\_\_  
Several times a week\_\_\_
  
- 6) In general, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, Independent or something else? (please check one)  
Democrat\_\_\_  
Republican\_\_\_  
Independent\_\_\_

Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

7) What is your year of birth? (please fill in)

19\_\_\_\_

8) Are you married? (please check one)

Yes\_\_\_ (go to next question)

No\_\_\_ (skip to question x)

Live with another adult\_\_\_

9) How long have you been married? (please fill in)

\_\_\_\_\_ years

10) What are the ages of your children? (please fill in)

Child 1 = \_\_\_\_\_

Child 2 = \_\_\_\_\_

Child 3 = \_\_\_\_\_

Child 4 = \_\_\_\_\_

Child 5 = \_\_\_\_\_

Child 6 = \_\_\_\_\_

11) About how much is your TOTAL FAMILY INCOME, including both you and your spouse or partner, plus any investment income you have (over the whole year, before taxes)? (please check one)

Less than \$10,000\_\_\_

\$11,000 to \$20,000\_\_\_

\$21,000 to \$30,000\_\_\_

\$31,000 to \$40,000\_\_\_

\$41,000 to \$50,000\_\_\_

\$51,000 to \$60,000\_\_\_

\$61,000 to \$70,000\_\_\_

\$71,000 to \$80,000\_\_\_

\$81,000 to \$90,000\_\_\_

\$91,000 to \$100,000\_\_\_

\$101,000 to \$150,000\_\_\_

\$151,000 to \$200,000\_\_\_

\$201,000 or more\_\_\_

12) What is your highest level of educational attainment? (please check one)

Did not complete high school\_\_\_

High school diploma or GED\_\_\_

Attended some college\_\_\_

Associate's degree\_\_\_

Bachelor's degree\_\_\_

Graduate degree \_\_\_\_

13) Are you currently employed? (please check one)

Yes\_\_\_\_(go to next question)

No\_\_\_\_(skip to question x)

14) About how many hours do you work per week? (please fill in)

\_\_\_\_\_

15) What do you do for work? (What is your job title?) (please fill in)

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### TABLES OF SELECT CHARACTERISTICS OF HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES

**Table 1. Select Characteristics of Secular Families**

Family	Age of Children	Education	Occupation	Employment Status	Annual Household Income
Pat Joe	11, 8	Graduate Degree Bachelor's Degree	None Entrepreneur	Not employed Full-time	175000
Jerri John	20, 7	Graduate Degree Graduate Degree	Psychiatrist None	Full-time Not employed	125500
Lisa Bill	21, 19, 16	Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree	Teacher Mortgage Officer	Full-time Full-time	125000
Megan Mark	13, 10	Graduate Degree Not reported*	Special Ed. Teacher Financier	Not employed Full-time	125500
Kasey Darren	9, 6, 3	Graduate Degree Graduate Degree	Playgroup Facilitator College Professor	Part-time Part-time	95500
Stacey Sven	14, 10	Bachelor's Degree Not reported	Assistant Teacher Not reported	Part-time Not reported	95500
Sadie Sidney	11, 8, 5	Graduate Degree Not reported	Business Consultant Small Business Owner	Part-time Full-time	75500
Kasey Daniel	10, 7, 1	Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree	None Information Systems Tech.	Not employed Full-time	75500
Jean Jon	16	Graduate Degree Not reported	Fine Artist (Painter) Not reported	Part-time Not reported	65500
Kate Jerry	6, 3	Graduate Degree Graduate Degree	Teacher Elementary School Teacher	Part-time Full-time	55500
Cherri Doug	12, 6, 3 months	Graduate Degree Graduate Degree	Freelance Writer Painting Contractor	Part-time Full-time	45500
Maura Matt	7, 5	Bachelor's Degree Not reported	Volunteer Coordinator Small Business Owner	Part-time Full-time	45500
Liz Lawrence	17, 13	Some College Not reported	Hairstylist Not reported	Part-time Not reported	35500
Lesley Tim	6, 4, 1.5	Graduate Degree Bachelor's Degree	Private Spanish Teacher Musician	Part-time Part-time	35500
Sarah Steve	9, 11	Bachelor's Degree Not reported	Building Contractor Building Contractor	Part-time Part-time	25500
Ellen Greg	7, 3	Graduate Degree Graduate Degree	Teacher Graduate Student/Instructor	Part-time Part-time	15500

\*"Not reported" indicates that husband did not participate in interview and wife did not provide information.

**Table 2. Select Characteristics of Religious Families**

Family	Age of Children	Education	Occupation	Employment Status	Annual Household Income
Cindy Charles	21, 12	Associate's Degree Not reported*	Accountant Self-Employed Plumber	Part-time Full-time	85500
Maureen Mike	10	Bachelor's Degree Some College	Construction Safety Officer Construction	Full-time Full-time	79500
Brenda Paul	19, 17, 13	Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree	Campus Minister Minister	Part-time Full-time	55500
Angela Barry	10, 9, 7, 5	Bachelor's Degree Some College	None General Contractor	Not employed Full-time	45500
Jane Ted	11, 7	Bachelor's Degree Graduate Degree	Art Teacher Elementary School Teacher	Part-time Full-time	45500
Kristy Bruce	11, 8, 5, 3	Associate's Degree Bachelor's Degree	Retail Clerk Minister	Part-time Full-time	45500
Carrie Noel	6, 4, 2	Graduate Degree Some College	Teacher/Consultant/Tutor Self-Employed Carpenter	Part-time Full-time	45500
Patty Dan	9, 5	Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree	None Accounting Clerk	Not employed Full-time	45500
Laurie Len	9, 8, 5, 3	Bachelor's Degree Not reported	None Not reported	Not employed Not reported	40000
Donna Hal	10, 8, 7, 4, 2	Bachelor's Degree Bachelor's Degree	Retail Clerk Dairy Farmer	Part-time Full-time	35500
Rochelle Jack	6, 3, 2 months	Some College Some College	None Retail Manager	Not employed Part-time	15000

\*"Not reported" indicates that husband did not participate in interview and wife did not provide information.

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### What do you do?

- 1) How long have you been homeschooling?
- 2) What's the best thing about homeschooling?
- 3) What is the biggest challenge?
- 4) Who is responsible for the daily instruction of your child/children?
  - a. How was that decided? Describe the process. Was there conflict?
- 5) I'd like to hear more about what homeschooling is like in your family. So, can you take me through what you did from the time you got up until the time you went to bed?
  - a. If not yesterday, then the most recent homeschooling day.
  - b. Was it a typical homeschooling day? Why/why not?
- 6) Do you use a pre-packaged curriculum?
  - a. If yes...
    - i. Can you describe it to me?
    - ii. Can we look at it?
    - iii. Why did you choose this particular curriculum?
    - iv. Who decided which curriculum to use?
  - b. If no, why not?
- 7) Do you read homeschooling literature?
  - a. If yes, what do you read and why?
  - b. What do you get out of it?
  - c. How did you hear about it?
- 8) Are you involved with other homeschoolers (formally or informally)?
  - a. If so, who are you involved with?
  - b. What do you do?
  - c. What do you get out of it?
  - d. What do you think your children get out of it?
- 9) Do you attend meetings?
  - a. Why, or why not?
  - b. What is that like?
  - c. Who is there?
  - d. What do you get out of it?
  - e. How did you hear about them?



- 10) Who do you think is responsible for the day-to-day activities of homeschooling in most families?
- Why do you think that?

Why do you Homeschool?

- 11) How did you first come to think about homeschooling?
- Did you read something? If so, what?
  - Did someone talk to you? Who?
- 12) Why did you start homeschooling?
- What are the 2 or 3 most important factors?
  - Is religion a factor? If so, how?
  - What about academic concerns? (quality, methodology)
  - What about the school environment? (safety, values, so on)
  - What about the kind of family life you want?
- 13) Are your reasons for homeschooling the same today as when they started?
- If no, how have they changed and why?
- 14) Who made the decision to start homeschooling?
- Was this a hard decision?
  - Were you and your spouse/partner in agreement about the issue or did one of you have to convince the other?
- 15) How have your friends and family reacted to your decision to homeschool?
- Give me examples of what they said.
  - How did you react?
- 16) How does homeschooling fit with your other life choices?
- Are there other choices you make with for your family that you consider to be “non-mainstream?”
  - If yes, did homeschooling flow from these other decisions or has homeschooling caused you to make other non-mainstream choices?
- 17) As a homeschooler, do you consider yourself part of a broader social movement?
- If yes, what is this movement trying to accomplish?
  - Is it just about education?
  - Is it also about family? If so, how?
  - Is it a political movement? If so, how?
- 18) Although the numbers are growing, homeschoolers still represent a small minority of all families. Why do you think more families don't homeschool?
- What roles do values play?

- b. What about the availability of resources?
  - c. Perhaps people just don't know about it, or think it is an option?
- 19) What do you think is the future of the homeschooling movement?
- a. Will it continue to grow?
  - b. Why or why not?
- 20) What are you, personally, hoping to accomplish through homeschooling?
- a. What do you hope for your child/children to get out of it?
  - b. What do you hope to get out of it?
  - c. What are your hopes for how homeschooling will impact your family?
  - d. What about your town or community?
  - e. What about society in general?
- 21) What would happen if more and more families would homeschool?
- a. How would that impact your community/society?

What are the consequences?

- 22) Tell me about your work history since you decided to homeschool your children?
- a. If stopped working or working less...
    - i. Was that a hard transition?
    - ii. If you stopped, do you miss working outside of the home?
  - b. If working more...
    - i. Was that a hard transition?
    - ii. Do you sometimes regret it?
- 23) Have you altered your career goals in order to make homeschooling possible?
- a. If so, in what ways?
- 24) How, if at all, will your work life change once you're done homeschooling?
- a. Will you work more, less, why?
- 25) Has the decision to homeschool affected other family goals?
- a. For example, buying a new car
  - b. How you spend your leisure time (vacation)
  - c. Your home (buying, renting, upgrading)
- 26) How has it affected your relationship with your spouse?
- a. Has it brought you closer? If so, how?
  - b. Has it created tension? Explain.
- 27) How has it affected your relationship with your children?
- a. What are some of the positive impacts?
  - b. What are the negative consequences?

- 28) How has it affected your relationship with your community?
- Do you feel closer to people in your community?
  - Do you sometimes feel alienated? If so, why? Has something happened?
- 29) In general, how has homeschooling impacted your family?
- Do you feel more interconnected or unified?
  - Have there been unexpected consequences, either good or bad?
- 30) Do you ever regret the decision to homeschool?
- If so, why?
  - Have you thought about sending your children to school in the near future? What about when they get older?

### Attitudes

- 31) What do you think are the biggest challenges facing families today?
- 32) Nowadays, more and more mothers are working outside of the home. What do you think about this?
- How does it impact children?
  - How does it impact spouses?
  - How does it impact women?
- 33) What are the characteristics of a good mother?
- 34) What are the characteristics of a good father?
- 35) Do you consider homeschooling as part of your identity as a parent?
- In other words, do you consider yourself a “homeschooling mother”/”homeschooling father?”
  - What does this mean to you?
  - Do you think homeschooling parents are different from non-homeschooling parents? If so, how?
- 36) Do you think men and women are equal nowadays?
- Should they be? Why, why not?
- 37) What do you think of when I say the word *feminism*?
- Do you think homeschooling is in any way feminist?
  - Is it anti-feminist? Explain.
- 38) Is there anyone else you know who homeschools that might be interested in participating in this project?
- If yes, would you share their contact information?

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