Homeschooler Socialization

Skills, Values, and Citizenship

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As this handbook emphasizes, research about homeschooling faces many methodological challenges. Insights and data about participants, approaches, and outcomes are partial at best. But when considering the topic of homeschooler socialization, it's not only the answers that are unclear, but the questions themselves. Perhaps the most emotionally charged and conceptually dense topic in the homeschooling research literature, socialization involves a range of normative – and highly contested – assumptions and claims. Media stereotypes and outside observers raise concerns about homeschoolers being socially isolated, lacking in sufficient exposure to peer groups and formative public interactions that institutional schooling typically provides. Defenders of homeschooling respond that the multitude of learning cooperatives and extracurricular group activities increasingly available to homeschoolers provide ample opportunity for social interaction beyond the family. But beneath the question of social exposure lies a more basic disagreement about what constitutes appropriate socialization in the first place. Homeschooling advocates often question the value of age-segregated school milieus, sometimes caricaturing schools as rampant with peer pressure, bullying, and violence.

Underlying these debates, then, are certain fundamental questions. What does it mean to be properly socialized? Which values are important to learn, and how should that occur? What role should parents, peers, and the broader society play in the process of socialization? To help organize this chapter and keep these normative questions in mind, the topic of homeschooler socialization will be divided into three related but distinct strands:

- personal interaction (learning how to interact effectively with others, including groups and broader society)
• values and beliefs (navigating peer, parental, and societal influences in the formation of one's identity and commitments)
• civic identity and engagement (coming to see oneself as a citizen with rights, responsibilities, and the capacity to exercise them).

Despite the complexity of the topic, the "socialization question" has received significant (albeit unsystematic) attention among researchers and scholars. As well it should: in the United States, 46% of homeschool parents identified socialization-related concerns as the primary motivation for their decision to homeschool their children when surveyed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). These socialization-related reasons – more specifically, concern about conventional school environments, a desire to provide moral instruction, and a desire to provide religious instruction – were three of the four most common reasons given overall by parents (Noel, Stark, and Redford, 2013).

While not offered as a choice in the NCES survey, a motivation that in some ways encompasses these other reasons is an emphasis on family as the center of daily life (Kunzman 2016; Murphy 2014). Many parents view homeschooling as both a protective and nurturing enclave, a personalized resistance against the broader culture. While some homeschool parents identify a tradeoff being made between family cohesion and wider social engagement, an abundance of studies reveal that homeschool parents generally think their children are receiving necessary – and often superior – socialization experiences through interactions with family, learning cooperatives, extracurricular activities, and broader community engagement (Medlin, 2000, 2013).

**Socialization for Personal Interaction**

In light of homeschool advocates' criticism of institutional schooling's socialization process, we should be clear that asking, "Do homeschooled children acquire the necessary social skills to function effectively in broader society?" does not presume that homeschoolers should necessarily mimic the behavior and customs of the wider culture. Instead, the relevant question is whether children gain the social fluency to *navigate* that context, learning how to develop relationships and work effectively with others who may be different from them.

When examining the range of studies on homeschoolers' social skills, three major methodological limitations become apparent. The first one is common across homeschooling research more generally: most study participants are drawn from small convenience samples, preventing any reliable generalizations about the "average homeschooler." The second weakness of research on homeschooler socialization is that it relies heavily on the perceptions of parents or students themselves.

The third methodological shortcoming deserves a bit more elaboration: most studies treat school attendance as a binary – students are either homeschoolers or
not, with no distinction regarding the years they have spent homeschooled as compared to conventionally schooled. But given the apparently significant number of children who move between homeschooling and conventional schooling, it is important to take into consideration how long someone has been homeschooled when trying to evaluate its possible effect on socialization and other outcomes. Children who have been homeschooled their entire lives might conceivably have very different experiences and outcomes than those who did so for only a year or two.

Most empirical studies of homeschooled socialization consist of participants (children and/or their parents) being asked to complete a questionnaire such as the Social Skills Rating System (with subtopics of cooperation, assertiveness, empathy, and self-control) or the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale; other surveys inquiring about peer friendships and loneliness have also been used. These studies generally find that homeschooled children (or their parents) view their social skills as at least as robust as the broader school-age population views their own. Participants describe themselves (or parents describe them) as generally possessing social confidence, contentment, and skills, and they report engagement in extracurricular activities at rates similar to students in institutional schools (Kunzman and Gaither 2013; Murphy, 2014).

A few studies, even while presenting largely positive analyses of homeschoolers’ socialization, observe that homeschoolers occasionally express a greater sense of social isolation and appear less peer-oriented than public school students (Delahooke 1986; Sco 2009; Shirkey 1987). This perception is frequently echoed in concerns voiced by public school officials, who worry that homeschoolers do not receive adequate peer socialization (Abram 2009; Fairchild 2002; Kunzman 2005). A different interpretation, however, is offered by other researchers who suggest that a lower dependence on peer relationships may have some positive benefits, such as less concern about social status and unreflective conformity (Medlin 2000). One small-scale study found that homeschoolers actually reported similar peer victimization as conventionally schooled children – but interestingly, the homeschoolers expressed less distress about it (Reavis and Zakrisi 2005). The researchers speculate that perhaps such peer conflicts may be less of a threat to social status in the homeschool context.

Most of the studies mentioned, however, suffer from all three methodological limitations noted above: they rely on small convenience samples, depend entirely on the perceptions of parents or the children themselves, and fail to include “years of homeschooling” as a variable. The results of these surveys are then often compared to national US samples of the broader school-age population, a misleading exercise at best.

A handful of studies have pushed beyond the limits of self and parent-evaluation to consider social behaviors and outcomes for homeschoolers cataloged by either disinterested observers or more objective measures. Shyres (1992) employed a double-blind protocol of behavioral observations of seventy homeschoolers and seventy public school students which revealed significantly fewer “problem behaviors” among homeschooled children ages 8 to 10. Chatham-Carpenter (1994) asked children to
track all substantial (longer than two minutes) social interactions over a timeframe of one month; homeschoolers reported no statistically significant differences in the number of social contacts they had compared with public school students, although public school students had more frequent interactions with those contacts. Homeschoolers, however, reported interactions with a wider range of ages than their public school counterparts. Haugen (2004) asked children’s teachers to rate their social behavior and skills (in the case of homeschoolers, their parents selected teachers from church, learning co-ops, or other classes available in the community). Homeschoolers’ teachers rated them significantly higher on social skills and significantly lower on problem behaviors than the ratings provided by teachers of conventionally schooled students. All of these studies, however, still used convenience samples, so results cannot be reliably extrapolated across the broader population.

A few large-scale surveys have also been conducted of homeschool graduates. The most highly publicized of these have been conducted by Ray (1997, 2004). These paint an extremely rosy portrait of homeschooler socialization outcomes but suffer from the same methodological shortcomings of non-random sampling and self-reporting. A more recent large-scale survey of homeschool graduates shared a similar methodology but yielded a decidedly more mixed picture of satisfaction with the homeschooling experience and healthy outcomes as adults (Coalition for Responsible Home Education 2014). In both cases, the clearly non-random respondent pool seems likely to have shaped the findings in ways that tell us little about homeschooler socialization more broadly.

In studying long-term outcomes, Knowles and Muchmore (1995) offered a richer methodology than the Ray (1997, 2004) and Coalition (2014) studies. Their research, while far less expansive in number, probed more deeply by conducting life history interviews with ten adults who had been homeschooled (culled from a pool of forty-six volunteers to represent a range of demographic diversity). The authors found little indication that the homeschooling experience had produced significant social disadvantage; rather, they suggested that it may have in fact contributed to a strong sense of independence and self-determination.

This latter observation is echoed by research examining the social integration of homeschoolers in the college setting, which finds that homeschoolers compare favorably to their institutionally educated peers in social behavior and leadership (Calloway and Sutton 1995; Sutton and Galloway 2000). As Medlin (2000) notes, however, the college setting for this research may have been especially well-suited for homeschoolers, since so many of them enrolled there.

One of the few studies that has actually employed random samples of homeschoolers from the broader population offers a decidedly mixed evaluation of homeschooler socialization over the long term. The Cardus Education Survey explored the perspectives of high school graduates from the United States and Canada, and found that religious homeschoolers expressed higher rates of “lack of clarity of goals and sense of direction” and “feelings of helplessness in dealing with life’s problems,” although the Canadian differences were attributed to demographic variables rather than homeschooling itself (Pennings et al. 2011, p. 24; 2012, 40). Further complicating the picture...
are some other results from the US survey: for example, religious homeschoolers felt strongly (relative to the other subgroups) that their schooling had prepared them for personal relationships, friendships, and family relations, especially marriage. In addition, they scored highest on the question that asked whether high school prepared them for a vibrant religious and spiritual life. How these findings relate to religious homeschoolers reporting higher divorce rates, lack of clarity and sense of direction, and greater feelings of helplessness in dealing with life’s problems merits further investigation. It is also worth noting that the survey represents the views and experiences of those who, in some cases, were homeschooled more than two decades ago. Between 1999 and 2007, it’s estimated that homeschooling grew nearly 75% in the United States, so the Cardus survey data reflects only some of that growth. Finally, while the actual number of homeschoolers who participated in the surveys was relatively small (82 in the United States, 58 in Canada), the fact that they were obtained via random sampling makes them more statistically reliable than the Ray (1997, 2004) and Coalition (2014) research mentioned above.

Another study that combined a large randomized dataset with control variables was not explicitly focused on social skills, but used data on more than 180,000 students from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health to examine homeschoolers’ rate of drug abuse and extracurricular participation relative to the broader school population (Green-Hennessey 2014). Controlling for key demographic variables, the analysis revealed that only 3% of homeschoolers with strong religious ties reported having a substance disorder, compared with 6% of religious, conventionally schooled students. More than 15% of homeschoolers with weak or no religious ties, however, reported substance abuse. Regarding extracurricular participation, less-religious homeschoolers were two and a half times more likely to report no extracurricular engagement than their less-religious counterparts in conventional schools. Religious homeschoolers were 50% less likely to report no extracurricular participation than religious conventionally schooled students. Interestingly, 20% of religious homeschoolers reported that church-based activities were their only kind of extracurricular activity; less than 4% of religious conventionally schooled students reported church-based activities as their sole social outlet.

As is evident from this brief summary of research, both critics and advocates can find data in the empirical record to support their stances on homeschoolers’ development of social skills, but the methodological weaknesses of most studies renders any comprehensive judgments elusive. Not surprisingly, this empirical uncertainty leaves room for a range of normative arguments about social skills and group interactions in the scholarly literature as well, with a frequent emphasis by homeschool proponents on the ways in which the very culture of institutional schooling inhibits creative thinking and the cultivation of a rich and cohesive family life (Meighan 1984; Ray 2013). These arguments challenge the “common-sense” narrative that institutional schooling is necessary for normal social development and a stable society. The vision of institutional schooling as serving the best interests of the child, they assert, instead actually privileges perpetuation of the system itself, over and against children’s individual needs and interests (Monk, 2004). Wyatt
(2008) contrasts this dynamic with a thoughtful case for homeschooling as an appropriate and effective means of socialization for many families. He surveys the literature on the social context of public schools and theorizes that many choose homeschooling in pursuit of an alternative conception of the family and in resistance to broader culture and its values. Merry and Howell (2009) affirm this idea, arguing that homeschooling enables attentive parents to develop more intimate, supportive family relationships that foster healthy social and personal development in their children.

The health care community occasionally weighs in on the topic of homeschooler socialization as well, offering practitioners a variety of perspectives. The few homeschooling-related articles published in medical journals reveal some concern among health care providers as it relates to homeschooled children’s socialization, including their exposure to cultural and value diversity, as well as children’s eventual capacity to navigate mainstream society (Klugewicz and Carraccio 1999; Murray 1996). Pediatricians are urged to exercise extra vigilance with homeschooled children due to the absence of health care screening (formal and informal, mental and physical) that is typically conducted in school settings. This vigilance would include directing parents of children with special needs to resources otherwise provided in schools, as well as encouraging parents to provide group socialization opportunities outside the family context (Abbott and Miller 2006; Johnson 2004; Wallace 2000). Despite these various cautions and recommendations, however, the professional medical literature suggests a growing acceptance of homeschooling as a legitimate educational option, much in the way that some alternative medicine has slowly gained legitimacy among practitioners (Abbott and Miller, 2006). Medical professionals do note the need for long-term outcome data, however, to help better inform their understanding and interactions with homeschool families (Murray 1996).

Socialization for Values and Beliefs

Developing the interpersonal skills necessary to navigate day-to-day interactions is only part of the socialization process, of course. As they grow up, children acquire values and beliefs that help shape their social and ethical identities. Parents are typically the first and most significant factor in this identity formation process, but numerous other influences—peers, local community, and broader culture—emerge as the child grows and begins to engage more fully with the world.

The role of education in the formation of children’s values and beliefs is certainly not a topic unique to the homeschooling literature. There exists a rich scholarly discourse exploring both the process of self-determination and the degree to which core value commitments can be arrived at independently; psychologists typically speak of agency, while philosophers use the term autonomy. These are vigorously contested concepts, however: given the complex array of influences that shape us, what does it mean to lead?

As expected, self-efficacy is an important factor in the development of autonomy. At the independent school, students are encouraged to take the lead in shaping their own education. This is not to say that they are left entirely on their own; support is provided by knowledgeable and experienced teachers. However, the focus is on the students taking ownership of their learning. This approach emphasizes the importance of autonomy development and the role of self-efficacy in this process.
mean to think and act for oneself, and how important is such self-determination in leading a good life?

Answers to these questions run the gamut, from the stance that free will is ultimately illusory, to the assertion that autonomy requires boundless choice and self-creation (Feinberg 1980; Skinner 1971). Neither extreme, however, is useful in illuminating the process of identity formation or the role of education in cultivating certain values and beliefs. Even if sharp distinctions cannot always be drawn between education and indoctrination, certainly a meaningful difference exists between an environment marked by opportunities to question, reflect, and judge, and one demanding unreflective adherence to received tradition (Snook 1972).

At the same time, however, a moderate version of autonomy doesn’t require radical independence – one can still draw from the wisdom of community, culture, and tradition, and willingly rely on others; such interdependencies, in fact, often support the development of further autonomy (Chirnov et al. 2003; Ryan and Deci 2001, 2006).

As homeschooling has grown in popularity and opportunities for diverse learning experiences have multiplied, the stereotype of children huddled around a kitchen table secluded from the broader world has become increasingly inaccurate (Green-Hennessey 2014). Nevertheless, the flexibility that homeschool parents have to shape their children's education in ways that adhere closely to their own values and priorities raises questions about the development of homeschooled children's autonomy: how much influence should parents have on the identity and beliefs of their child, particularly as they transition toward young adulthood?

Few would dispute the notion that a central responsibility of parenting is to instill certain values and commitments in one's children, and certainly when children are very young this often is accomplished through direct instruction. Even as children begin to differentiate from their parents during adolescence, the process is not simply about separation, but rather identification with and integration into a broader community and its values (Bar-Yam Hassan and Bar-Yam 1987; Helwig 2006; Lewis 2013; Schachter and Venture, 2008). Furthermore, differentiation need not entail ideological and relational rupture – parents and other influential adults can serve as pivotal "identity agents" who co-participate in adolescents' identity formation, even while leaving them ample room for choice and self-determination (Freeman and Almond 2012; Koepke and Denissen 2012; Schachter and Venture 2008).

One avenue of potential insight into homeschooling learning contexts is through analysis of parenting styles. A significant body of research exists on the relationship between parenting styles and the cultivation of autonomy in children, irrespective of schooling choice. Research on parenting styles typically identifies four distinct categories: authoritarian (strict demands on children with little room for questioning or dissent, and a lack of emotional warmth); authoritative (clear expectations and consequences but room for dialog and perhaps compromise, with abundant emotional warmth); permissive (minimal expectations or control but abundant
emotional warmth); and disengaged (offering neither behavioral expectations nor emotional warmth) (Collins and Laursen, 2004; Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Some parenting styles, however—especially those from non-Western cultures—don’t fit as easily within this framework, such as parents who combine strict demands and little room for negotiation with abundant emotional warmth and connectedness (Baumrind, 1987). Furthermore, parents rarely fall into just one of these categories exclusively in terms of their interactions with their children, and oftentimes their parenting style differs across the children in their own family (East, 2009). This appears to be the case in terms of gender expectations in some conservative religious homeschool families (MacFarquhar, 2008; McDannell, 1995; Joyce, 2009; Talbot, 2000).

Those qualifications notwithstanding, research on adolescents generally supports the idea that authoritative parenting produces outcomes more strongly associated with autonomy—providing a balance between clear expectations for adolescents and room to develop their own values and decision making as they continue to grow in judgment and responsibility (Steinberg, 2000). This is not to suggest, however, a direct correspondence between parental styles and actions and any adolescent’s emerging sense of identity and autonomy. Many other factors, including a range of social influences and the responses of adolescents themselves create a complex web of outcomes (Arnett, 2013).

A few empirical studies of homeschoolers suggest that conservative religious parents adopt a more authoritarian stance in their homeschooling (Cai, Reeve, and Robinson, 2002; Manuel, 2000; Vaughn, 2003). Batterbee (1992), on the other hand, found that homeschoolers tested higher for intrinsic motivation and autonomy. McEntire (2005) found homeschoolers to be more settled in their personal values and commitments than a comparison group of public school students—but whether this serves as evidence of thoughtful personal reflection or inflexible adherence to dogma remains unclear. In a study of 30 children and their parents from two Christian homeschool support groups, Kingston and Medlin (2006) found no statistical difference in their response to the statement, “I want my child to decide for him/herself what values to believe in,” as compared with the responses of fifty public school parents from the same geographical area. Of course, what parents say they want for their children, and the actions they take in that regard, do not necessarily align. In addition, all these studies were relatively small convenience samples, so the usual caveats about broader applicability apply.

The role of schooling in fostering personal autonomy has received ample attention in philosophical scholarship as well (Brighouse and Swift, 2006; Callan, 1997; Galston, 2002; Spinner-Halev, 2000), and recent years have seen theorists turn their attention more squarely on homeschooling in this regard. Reich (2002, 2008) contends that parents, children, and the state all have legitimate interests in the educational process—sometimes these converge, but other times they exist in tension with one another. Children, he argues, have an interest in “minimalist autonomy”: they should develop the capacity to reflect critically on their values and commitments, and they should have a range of meaningful life options to select and pursue. Reich and similarly minded scholars (Blokhuis, 2010; West, 2009; Yuracko, 2008) worry that
some forms of homeschooling will inhibit the development of such autonomy in children, since parents can serve as sole instructors and ostensibly restrict exposure to a variety of ideas and perspectives.

Other theorists disagree with Reich's emphasis on autonomy, or dispute his contention that the homeschooling milieu poses a particular risk to its development, often questioning whether public schools are any more likely to foster minimalist autonomy (Glanzer 2008; Merry and Karsten 2010). Even among those who find the value of autonomy conceptually compelling, it appears destined to remain an ideal whose inherent imprecision prevents reliable measurement. In this respect, it seems highly doubtful that the state, in the role of guarantor of children's rights (Brighouse 2002), possesses either the wisdom or capacity to evaluate whether anyone has met some minimum threshold for autonomy (Conroy 2010; Kunzman 2012).

A homeschool environment emphasizing the inculcation of values and commitments that run counter to the broader culture would not necessarily inhibit the development of autonomy, of course. As noted previously, homeschooling is a countercultural endeavor for many families, and an ethos of resisting authority and questioning professional expertise is not uncommon (Meighan 1984). Consider the efforts toward "educational protectionism" identified by Mazaua and Lundy (2012, 2013) in their study involving 74 African American homeschooling families. The reasons these parents gave for homeschooling were not simply about protection but also empowerment — they sought to help their children develop a positive self-image by providing cultural role models (both racial and religious) and a supportive community that would provide a powerful ideological counterweight to a broader society and promote the development of their children's autonomy in ways that institutional schooling could not (see also Fields-Smith and Kisura 2013; Fields-Smith and Williams 2009; Lundy and Mazaua 2014).

This goal of protectionism is certainly at play in the motivations of many religious homeschooling parents. Their often passionate commitment to instilling religiously informed values and beliefs in their children adds another layer of complexity to the project of values formation and the question of children's autonomy. Buss (2000) contends that adolescents need exposure to ideologically diverse peers to help facilitate the process of identity development, and she argues that religiously inspired homeschooling may inhibit such development, especially in adolescents (see also Blokhuis 2010; West 2009, Yuracko 2008). But there may also be a way in which religious homeschooling promotes independent thinking and offers alternative life options to consider.

For at least some religiously motivated homeschoolers, the very act of homeschooling serves as an assertion of their religious identity (Liao 2006), and this countercultural ethos may in turn foster the kind of mindset that characterizes autonomous thinking. One can imagine learning contexts where children are encouraged to interrogate "conventional wisdom" in ways that actually foster critical thinking and alternative viewpoints. Much depends, of course, on whether such cultural resistance is informed by a range of alternative perspectives, or merely the unreflective acceptance of a single competing narrative (Kunzman 2010).
Some studies have attempted to explore the socialization effects of homeschooling contexts that are motivated in large part by parental desire to instill religious values and commitments in their children. Hoelzl's (2013) interviewed four young adult Christians, exploring how they viewed the impact of their homeschooling experiences in shaping their values and beliefs, as well as they ways in which these now align with or diverge from their parents. Hoelzl asserts that Reich's (2002) concerns about lack of exposure to diverse ways of life are overstated, pointing to participants' acknowledgment that they had encountered ideas and people not scripted by their parents as well as their assertions that they felt free to shape their own lives. Even while retaining generally close relationships with their parents, participants revealed not insignificant divergence from their parents' religious views in ways that suggest autonomous functioning. Kunzman's (2009) study of six conservative Christian homeschooling families also found indications that, despite some parents' concerted efforts to the contrary—children were exposed to outside social and ethical influences in ways that appeared to moderate religious ideology. Whether such moderation was sustained into adulthood remains an open question, however.

Of course, it is possible that participants in retrospective studies such as this are not always able to recognize the ways in which their supposed perceptions and choices were actually narrowly channeled by powerful parental influence. Self-deception or lack of awareness seems an unavoidable possibility with survey or interview research; to the extent that childhood memories and adult self-appraisal could be triangulated by other participant perspectives, a richer and more compelling picture of socialization might emerge.

The most empirically compelling data regarding religious value formation suggests that parents' religious commitments are far more significant in shaping the religiosity of their children than the method of schooling their children experience. In his analysis of the National Survey of Youth and Religion database, Uecker (2008) found that, for children with deeply religious parents, whether or not they were homeschooled made no statistical difference in their religious behavior and commitments. The parents' influence was the same regardless, a counterintuitive finding that calls into question the assumption by many theorists that the homeschool milieu increases the ideological influence of parents.

As noted at the outset of this chapter, one parental motivation for homeschooling that cuts across several listed in the NCES survey is the desire to make family the center of daily life. Often this motive has religious impetus (Carper 2000; McDannell 1995; Sun 2007), but certainly the desire of parents to retain deeper influence and involvement in their children's daily lives resonates well beyond religious affiliation. For many homeschool parents, schooling is seen as naturally embedded in the broader project of education, which is in turn embedded in the even broader project of parenting. Homeschooling becomes a means to strengthen the bonds among family members, to provide a context that honors individual needs and interests, and to create a source of social and ethical support that parents may find lacking in the conventional school setting (Brabant, Bourdon, and Jutras
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Does homeschooling contribute significantly to these goals of making family the centerpiece of daily life, a bulwark against the wider culture? Butler and others (2015) explored this question by comparing 35 homeschool with 38 public-school families, all of whom were rated as having a strong "family-centric orientation" - the parents highly valued family cohesion and desired to create an environment in which members encouraged, supported, and collaborated with one another. The researchers found that the homeschoolers did experience somewhat greater family cohesion than their public school counterparts, but not to an extent that would suggest inherent superiority of the homeschooling model. As the authors conclude, "Family-centric families appear to find ways and means to achieve reasonably comparable family cohesion and positive interaction outcomes irrespective of the type of schooling they choose" (Butler et al. 105).

Here we may arrive at a central finding for the educational process of values formation. Both Ucker's (2008) large dataset and Butler et al.'s (2015) smaller sample offer intriguing comparisons between the effects of schooling type on children's socialization experiences, particularly in relation to the formation of core values and beliefs. In both cases, it appears that parents who are committed to a particular ethical vision of values formation in their children do not need homeschooling to accomplish this. There may be a range of other benefits (and tradeoffs) to homeschooling, but viewing it as either reliable protection against social influence or an indispensable lever for ethical maturity is likely misguided.

Nevertheless, any conclusions about the relative influence of homeschooling as an educational choice on the formation of students' values and beliefs remain tentative at best. The transmission of values from parent to child is hardly a straightforward matter, regardless of schooling context. Continued exploration of these complex questions, combining the bird's eye view of survey research with the nuanced texture of narrative inquiry - particularly when long-term perspectives and outcomes are included - remains a rich field of study.

Socialization for Civic Identity and Engagement

Liberal democracies depend on the cultivation of citizens who can participate in the political process and engage respectfully with diverse viewpoints informed by a multitude of values and commitments. Some scholars view homeschooling as an extreme form of educational privatization that threatens the mutual civic obligation and tolerance vital for a democratic public (Apple 2000; Lubienski 2000, 2003; Nemer 2004; Ross 2010). Homeschoolers, they worry, may lack sufficient exposure to a range of cultural and ethical diversity and thus may be ill-equipped for a citizenship that requires critical self-awareness and respectful engagement with pluralism (Blokhuis 2010; Reich 2008). But homeschoolers typically do not see their avoidance
of public schools and their resistance to contemporary culture as a rejection of community; some view homeschooling as a way to reestablish local communities in a modern society where such associations have withered (Moss 1995).

Before turning to the research on civic formation of homeschoolers, however, a review of the broader literature on civic identity and engagement identifies several key influences in cultivating engaged democratic citizenship in youth. Not surprisingly, participation in voluntary groups focused on community service, public speaking, and fostering communal identity all appear to make future political activity more likely (Hart et al. 2007; McFarland and Thomas 2006). The orientation toward political discourse as experienced in the family context plays a critical role as well. Parents serve as important models for civic volunteerism, but also as influential dialogical partners: adolescents who talk about politics with their parents score higher on measures of civic skills and behavior (Andolina et al. 2003; McIntosh, Hart, and Youniss 2007). Significantly, alignment of parental and adolescent political viewpoints is not a pivotal factor in cultivating a commitment to democratic citizenship; rather, it is the modeling by parents of a dialogical process wherein they genuinely listen to their children's perspectives and honor their prerogative to hold their own opinions that matters. When parents genuinely engage with adolescents' viewpoints and arguments, their children come to see themselves as viable participants in the civic realm. In this way, families serve as "mini-polities where the civic dispositions and identities of younger generations are being formed" (Planagan 2013, 93).

Dinas (2014) also explores the civic effects of parent-child interactions, employing data from surveys spanning multiple generations to show that highly politicized parents produce initially like-minded children - but then these children are more likely to shift away from their parents' view in young adulthood. Dinas' analysis of the reasons behind this dynamic deserve additional scrutiny, however. He asserts that active political talk helps children become more attuned to alternative viewpoints - and thus sets the stage for a future change of heart - but one could easily imagine political talk occurring instead within an echo chamber of consistently one-sided arguments offered by parents. If additional perspectives are not presented by other sources outside the home, it seems less likely that children will change their political beliefs. In fact, Dinas identifies two necessary conditions for such a shift: adolescents "must be attentive to the political cues and messages that others are providing" and they "must develop accurate beliefs about others' opinions" (5). It is certainly possible that eventual college and/or employment contexts will eventually expose young adults to alternative viewpoints - in which case disillusionment with and rejection of parental political views may follow as Dinas contends - but simply the presence of political talk at home seems unlikely to suffice.

So what does the research say about participation in civic life by homeschoolers specifically, and their development of key liberal virtues such as tolerance? Empirical data regarding the civic outcomes for adults who were homeschooled provide some insights but leave many questions unanswered. Ray's (2004) well-publicized study of adults who were homeschooled shows them voting more often than national
averages, and volunteering for civic organizations at a much higher rate, but he neither employed random sampling nor controlled for income, education, or other key demographics. By contrast, studies employing rigorous methodology paint a more complex and uneven picture.

At least some research suggests that homeschoolers contribute significantly to their communities. Drawing on data from the National Household Education Survey, Smith and Sikkink (1999) found that homeschool families are consistently more involved in civic activities than public school families, even when controlling for key variables such as parental income and education levels. Most homeschoolers, they assert, are “embedded in dense relational networks” (20) of other families, support organizations, and community activities. Of course, the value of local community for the broader civic good depends mightily on the nature of those associations and the willingness of its members to engage beyond its boundaries with those who may not share the same values and beliefs. As noted previously, some scholars raise concerns that homeschooling allows parents to inscribe their children in social cocoons that limit exposure to the wide range of values, beliefs, and ways of life found in broader society (Ross 2010). So one unanswered question is how cross-cutting these networks are—do they help create bridges across diverse social groups, or simply reinforce bonds among like-minded citizens (Putnam 2000)?

While Smith and Sikkink’s research focused on homeschooling families, Hill and den Dulk (2013) explored whether the type of schooling (public, Catholic, Protestant, or homeschooling) has any impact on whether civic engagement persists among those graduates during adulthood. Given that schools often provide a site and social network for volunteerism, the question of whether homeschooling affords the same opportunity and encouragement seems a reasonable one. Hill and den Dulk found that homeschoolers were about half as likely to volunteer as public school students (and even less compared with Catholic or Protestant school students). This disparity held true even when controlling for a wide range of family background variables and even school-related characteristics such as the cultivation of social networks, volunteer opportunities, or motivational encouragement. The authors speculate that perhaps students unknowingly internalize certain “social scripts” about adult civic responsibility, or perhaps certain kinds of schools connect adolescents to volunteer organizations that retain their commitment into adulthood. This latter dynamic might be especially relevant for religiously related service.

The strong influence of religion in the lives of many homeschoolers creates additional complexities when considering questions of civic identity and engagement. Weithman (2002) presents an array of empirical data to argue that churches, mosques, and synagogues provide settings and resources in which citizens develop an identification with and capacity to enact their democratic citizenship. They see themselves as having the rights and duties of citizens as well as the skills and opportunities to exercise them. Churches, mosques, and synagogues provide political information, opportunities for discussion, an emphasis on individual empowerment, and a vision of the public good (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).
Data from the Cardus Education Surveys, the large randomized samples of the US and Canadian populations mentioned earlier, offer some insights into the political activity of religious homeschool graduates (Pennings et al. 2011, 2012). In general, they were less involved in politics and public affairs, although Canadian (non-Quebecois) graduates reported volunteering frequently in their religious congregations. The study authors note that their data appear to counter the perception that graduates of religious schools and homes are highly politicized.

Another common perception that recent research calls into question relates to the political tolerance of homeschoolers. Cheng (2014) compared the political tolerance of college students who had been homeschooled with those who had not. He first asked 304 students at a private Christian university to identify the social or political group whose beliefs were most strongly antithetical to their own. Defining political tolerance as “the willingness to extend basic civil liberties to political or social groups that hold views with which one disagrees” (49), Cheng then posed a series of questions to measure how politically tolerant students were of the group each had chosen. Results showed that study participants who had been homeschooled prior to college were more politically tolerant that those who had attended public schools, and the more years students had been homeschooled, the more politically tolerant they were – although the school effects were significantly less than demographic effects of race, gender, parent education, and family income. It is also worth pointing out that Cheng’s survey questions set quite a low bar for political tolerance, asking whether the least liked group should be allowed to exercise basic rights such as making a public speech, running for elected office, and holding public demonstrations. While such attitudes are obviously to be encouraged – and offer a counterpoint to misperceptions of homeschoolers as intolerant – they fall well short of the kinds of virtues necessary for a healthy democracy undergirded by mutual understanding.

Much of the research exploring the civic impacts of homeschooling focuses on what might be lacking among homeschoolers, but it seems important to keep in mind the ways that opportunities might look quite different in the homeschool context. As educational options proliferate, and shifts in policy and advances in technology blur the boundaries between formal schooling and alternative learning, the possibilities for new forms of civic engagement will undoubtedly emerge. Local homeschool cooperatives and support communities pose some of the same challenges and opportunities for civic navigation – as more public institutions such as schools. Certainly many home educators who help organize and run learning cooperatives know that such “institutions” (however informal) require collaboration and compromises among participants if their organizations are going to sustain themselves over time. Newcomers are initiated into these “communities of practice” through the sharing of group history and norms and even, at times, peer monitoring that encourages quality practice (Kunzman 2009; Safran 2010). These communities must negotiate their internal shapes, striving to cultivate a collective sense of purpose while also providing flexibility in response to members’ individual learning goals and needs. It may also be that the political advocacy sometimes engendered among
home educators - through their efforts to communicate with local education authorities and advocate for the legitimacy of home education practice - can serve as a model of civic engagement for their children (Brabant and Bourdon 2012).

In this respect, perhaps these homeschool learning communities and support organizations can serve as incubators of democracy in ways similar to Dewey’s (1938/1997) vision of the common school. Yet one could also imagine some such communities remaining decidedly insular, navigating only low-stakes logistical matters, rather than providing a vital training ground for citizens of a globally connected world marked by profoundly different visions of how we ought to live together. Much depends on the particulars of the context, of course. But this holds true not only for homeschoolers, but citizens prepared in public and private schools as well. The common school vision - no matter where it is enacted - remains largely an aspiration rather than achievement.

Opportunities for Further Study

As noted, much of the empirical work on homeschooler socialization has drawn from convenience samples and relies on self-reports of students and their parents. Research into homeschoolers’ development of social skills would benefit from structured behavioral observations of random sample pools, in order to paint a fuller picture of homeschoolers more generally and offer more revealing comparisons with the broader school-age population. Such a methodology would also provide a more consistent view unmediated by self-report or potential biases of parents or other familiar adults.

Another methodological weakness deserving attention is the lack of information and analysis relative to the number of years that children are homeschooled in comparison to other schooling contexts they may have experienced. It appears that a significant number of students move back and forth between homeschooling and institutional schooling, so binary categories of schooling type almost certainly compromise data analysis. This variable will become even more complicated and pertinent with the proliferation of online schooling; it may even become difficult to define whether someone is homeschooling or “attending” an institution at any single given point in time.

An even more complex challenge is exploring the formation of homeschoolers’ values and commitments, and how these manifest in graduates’ roles as citizens. Most extant studies aimed on homeschoolers’ values formation employ surveys that offer a broad view of homeschoolers’ (or their parents’) perceptions of their socialization experiences – but these instruments cannot capture the nuances of what that process means for their values and beliefs as adults. Gaining insight into how young people (homeschoolers or not) navigate the influences of parents, peers, and society in shaping their lives requires deeply textured, qualitative research. That sort of inquiry likely involves some sort of narrative approach, more akin to the studies
conducted by Hoefzle (2013) and Knowles and Muchmore (1995) — although a larger pool of participants than those studies would also be helpful.

Some intriguing evidence does suggest that homeschooling, for all its structural flexibility and opportunities to customize content and experiences to emphasize certain values and beliefs, may not be the powerful influence that its advocates claim and its critics fear. Further qualitative inquiry that explores the stories of homeschoolers might help clarify the relative influence of parental values and the homeschooling context itself, both during homeschooling and in the years of adulthood that follow.

This necessity points to the broader lacuna for homeschooling research more generally — randomized, longitudinal studies where important variables (family income, parental education, years spent homeschooling) can be accounted for. To the extent that education is best understood as a long-term process, one that extends well beyond formal schooling, then the most fulsome insights into the challenges and opportunities of homeschooling will be uncovered by research that takes stock of what it means for participants long after they leave their educational home.

References


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