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The Normalisation of Homeschooling in the USA

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Home education emerged as a deviant practice in the USA in the late 1970s and became an acceptable alternative to conventional schooling in a remarkably short period of time. This paper argues that the trajectory of normalisation has been shaped by cultural and institutional features peculiar to the US national context. The paper also offers several ways in which the history of home education in the USA usefully informs assessments of the practice in other countries.

Keywords: home education, social movements

By 'normalisation' I refer to the process whereby unconventional activity comes to be seen as acceptable (see Vaughan, 1996: 409–422). If we take as indicators of this process the extent to which an activity is legal, popularly unremarkable and smoothly integrated into the social processes surrounding it, then home education in the USA can be said to be highly normalised. In the USA today homeschooling enjoys legal protection, popular acceptance and increasing amounts of institutional support from public school systems. The normalisation of homeschooling in the USA represents a formidable accomplishment for its early advocates who, only 25 years ago, faced sceptical and even hostile reactions from school administrators and the general public.

The extent of homeschooling's normalisation also can be used as an index of changes in the society surrounding it. If home education now is broadly acceptable in the USA, it is partly because key ideas that home education embodies – an expanded sensitivity to children's individual distinctiveness, and a profound uncertainty about public schools' ability to manage it – have come to enjoy wide legitimacy in American culture. I will argue here that the normalisation of home education is best understood as a reflexive phenomenon: peculiar cultural and institutional conditions provided a hospitable context for the early development of a home education movement in this country, while the success of that movement fuels cultural and institutional changes in turn.

My argument is essentially an application of an insight first specified by scholars of the US civil rights and feminist movements (Friedman & McAdam, 1992), and variably developed by students of other causes (Armstrong, 2002; Skrentny, 2002). My intent in applying this insight to the homeschool case is to provide some better purchase on just why home education developed its first broad following in the USA and then came to enjoy broad acceptability quite quickly here. I conclude by suggesting that lessons learned from the US case

provide some useful insights for understanding the growth and diffusion of home education in other national contexts.

The following is divided into three sections. I first specify what it means to say that home education is a *social movement*. I then briefly trace the trajectory of homeschooling's normalisation, distinguishing legal, cultural and institutional strands of the normalisation process. Third, I explain normalisation as a product both of homeschool activists' efforts, and of broader changes in the cultural climate around schooling in the USA generally. I conclude by suggesting how the history of homeschooling in the USA might provide useful lessons for scholars and policy makers who are assessing the practice in other national contexts.

My analysis is based largely on an ethnographic and historical study of the early phases of the US homeschool movement (Stevens, 2001), and subsequent observation of the ongoing development of home education policy nationwide.

Home Education as a Social Movement

Elizabeth Armstrong defines social movements parsimoniously, as 'efforts to change the rules of the game' (Armstrong, 2002: 11). 'The game' can be just about anything: a playground amusement, an employment relation or a political regime. Social movements differ from other kinds of collective action in that they seek to change the terms of some established social arrangement: to replace a monarchy with an elected parliament; to make an employer negotiate with a union; to redefine how scores are kept, teams chosen or winners declared.

In the late 1970s, the first public advocates of home education in the USA began concerted efforts to change the rules – legal, cultural and institutional – about how children could be acceptably educated. I have traced the efforts of these advocates in considerable detail elsewhere (Stevens, 2001). What matters for our purposes here is that, 25 years ago, homeschooling was a risky venture of questionable legality in the USA. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the rules of the game were clear: send your child to school, or face legal sanctions and sceptical in-laws. Indeed, to be a homeschooler during this period often meant subjecting oneself and one's children to criticism and incomprehension from loved ones and school officials. In some states, home education required outright obfuscation: claiming to have 'enrolled' one's children in a fictive private school, for example, or simply failing to register a child with the local school district. School officials and wary relatives were, in their different ways, nontrivial critics. This had consequences for the kinds of people who were first drawn to the cause.

As classic theories of deviance make clear (Becker, 1963), conventional people do not simply wake up one morning and begin to challenge the rules. Rather, unconventional behaviours tend to cluster, both within particular individuals and in particular demographic groups. Going against the grain in one aspect of life makes it easier to consider being different in other ways. Also, difference loves company. People invariably seek out others who are 'different', just like them (sociologists refer to this as the *homophily principle*

(McPherson, 1983)). These simple insights help to explain why home education as a contemporary practice first developed in particular sectors of US society. John Holt, a prominent liberal school reformer in the 1960s, created his distinctive homeschool pedagogy – one he called ‘unschooling’ – in the subsequent decade, and found disciples among parents active in the Free School movement (see Swidler, 1979). Holt’s first converts already had experience at thinking critically about traditional public schools and at getting school officials to accommodate change. Also during the 1970s, the child development specialists Raymond and Dorothy Moore developed their own version of home education, one that mixed insights of developmental psychology with a traditionalist conception of family authority. The Moores found their first followers among conservative Protestants. Home education was unconventional, and so too were the highly religious parents who first were drawn to the Moores’ version of the cause. As other scholars have demonstrated amply, evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants are accustomed to living at arm’s length from mainstream culture (Ammerman, 1987; Smith, 1998).

As several early advocates of home education showed me in interviews, the people who were first drawn to the cause were quite unconventional people. In the course of my field research among homeschoolers I met anarchists, practicing witches, macrobiotic vegetarians, devotees of family beds, Orthodox Jews and a large number of fundamentalist Christians. ‘I have always been a little bit alternative’, one mother told me as she began her rationale for homeschooling. ‘Everything I do is a little bit different’, began another. Home education first came to seem sensible to those who imagined themselves at some distance from the cultural mainstream.

While some critics have argued that the movement was largely a religious one in its early years (Apple, 2000), in fact it was ideologically diverse from the very beginning. Progressive educators and conservative Protestant Christians made for strange movement bedfellows during the early years, and the philosophical cleavage between these two wings was expressed in an organisational divide in the US homeschool community that endures into the present (Stevens, 2001). As I will argue in more detail below, it is important to remember this dual history when making sense of US home education today.

From Fringe Practice to General Acceptance

From the earliest days of the movement, home educators have confronted three kinds of challenges from the surrounding society: legal impediments, popular scepticism and institutional resistance from public schools.

The basic right of parents to educate their own children is formally established through judicial interpretations of the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the US Constitution (Henderson, 1992).¹ The mere fact of legal protection for a practice or a category of persons does not by itself, however, ensure freedom from legal and regulatory obstacles. As participants in the mid-20th century black civil rights movement in the USA learned the hard way, bringing legal protections to bear on real life requires sustained,

well orchestrated effort (Morris, 1984). Despite differences in the kind and magnitude of the challenges facing these different movements, they are comparable in at least one way: for both, legal change required that activists create durable organisational machinery to forward their cause. In the homeschool case, that machinery was supplied in large measure by the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA).

A legal services firm whose goals are as much entrepreneurial as philanthropic, HSLDA was organised in the early 1980s for the expressed purpose of representing homeschool families should they face challenges from courts, school officials or state welfare agencies. Members pay annual dues for coverage. While HSLDA is registered as a tax-exempt, not-for-profit organisation, it aggressively courts members and, some critics have argued, essentially functions as a for-profit enterprise (Hegener & Hegener, 1991).² But regardless of the mixed intentions of its leaders, HSLDA has been instrumental in the maintenance of a generally favourable legal climate for home education throughout the USA. By the mid-1990s, HSLDA was the preponderant policy advocate for home education in Washington, and could claim a long string of judicial and legislative victories on behalf of homeschoolers (Stevens, 2001).

Legality and popular acceptance are not, however, the same thing. Normalisation required changing the critical presumptions of neighbours, relatives and grocery-store checkout clerks. Advocates went about shifting popular opinion by feeding the US news media's unending need for material, and by practicing home education in a highly public manner.

It is by now a truism among scholars of the media that news is a product, created as much in light of economic and organisational exigencies faced by producers as by the events and issues that ultimately become news content (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1989). Home education has provided fodder for human-interest news stories in the USA for two decades. The stories, which often appear in the back-to-school time of early autumn, follow a predictable format: a profile of one or two homeschool households, a brief discussion of the legal status of the practice and estimates of the movement's size and growth; quotes from a homeschool advocacy organisation, rosy accounts of academically successful homeschooled children and, for 'balance', the critical voice of an education professor or policy analyst. While the structure of such stories is sufficiently predictable as to have become cliché, the sheer ubiquity of the coverage has been important for spreading word that home education is practiced legally, nationally and successfully, by 'regular' people. By fulfilling the queries of scores of journalists, homeschool families and advocacy organisations have rendered home education a stock feature of US popular culture.

Additionally, the everyday life practices of homeschoolers have been important catalysts of normalisation. To a degree that scholars of social movements have begun to appreciate only recently (Linneman, 2003), routine performances of difference can have important cumulative effects on popular perceptions of a cause. Homeschooling families are visible actors in public space. Libraries, athletics facilities, community halls and shopping centres are among the mundane contexts in which homeschooled families interact with

others in public and, not infrequently, challenge stereotypes of home educated young people as socially inept, 'weird' or academically deficient.

Additionally, homeschoolers are remarkably active in formal civic life. Contrasting the views of some critics that homeschoolers are social isolates, recent survey research indicates that homeschoolers are considerably more likely to be politically active than their public-school counterparts (Smith & Sikkink, 1999). In this, homeschoolers exemplify a common paradox of unconventional groups: repression itself creates the conditions for political activism (Johnson, 2004; Linneman, 2003).

The normalisation process has played out on a third dimension as well: the integration of homeschooling into the organisational apparatus of the surrounding society. As the work of John Meyer and his colleagues makes clear, the organisational configuration of modern societies is inseparable from the institution of compulsory mass schooling (Boli-Bennett & Meyer, 1978; Meyer, 1977). Mass schooling creates the autonomous, skilled worker-citizens who are the presumed actors of modern societies. The simultaneous development of modern states and mass schooling in politics worldwide suggests that the two systems are mutually constitutive (Meyer *et al.*, 1992). Much of the task of homeschool activists has been to integrate the human products of home education into this larger organisational apparatus. Part of this work has, to be sure, been legal. One indicator of the hegemony of compulsory mass schooling is that a legally acceptable homeschool education is defined as one that is substantively equivalent to what young people would obtain in public school (Henderson, 1992). But in addition to standards of substantive equivalence, the institutional integration of homeschooling also has required getting other government organisations to accommodate homeschoolers as inputs. Programmes that allow homeschoolers to receive state educational services are examples (Lines, 2000), as are efforts by organisations such as HSLDA to change admission requirements of the US military and eligibility criteria for federally subsidised college loans.

Explaining Normalisation

It is no accident that contemporary home education was first nurtured, and developed quickly, in the USA. Distinctive institutional and cultural characteristics of US society have made it fertile ground for the homeschool movement.

The USA is unique among industrialised nations in the extent to which educational administration is decentralised (Meyer *et al.*, 1994). The fact that state and local governments are the primary arbiters of education policy in the USA creates what we might call a favourable institutional ecology for education movements. Parties that wish to change the rules can choose where to pursue their endeavours on a remarkably varied legal and regulatory landscape. No central authority need be appeased early on in order for the cause to survive. Rather, innovators can find hospitable regions for their first efforts and then move on to harder territory with the precedent of earlier victories.³ Home education could survive for many years as a small,

decentralised movement partly because of the decentralised jurisdictional structure of education in the USA.

Two enduring features of US culture also have facilitated the development of a robust movement. First, the USA has a very large population of conservative Protestant Christians. Secular observers are often startled to learn that 25% of the US population can be characterised as conservative Protestant (Smith, 1998). This world of faith creates a large potential pool of recruits for the homeschool movement. To the extent that conservative Protestant sects tend to profess traditionalist conceptions of womanhood and to valorise full-time domesticity, these faiths have created a ready labour pool of women predisposed to being full-time mothers. Multiple studies indicate that full-time mothers are home education's primary adult personnel (Bauman, 2002; Stevens, 2001). Additionally, conservative Protestant America is organisationally rich; its wide array of churches, publishing houses and religious colleges have long provided rich organisational supports for this movement (Stevens, 2002).⁴

These two features of conservative Protestantism – its encouragement of women's full-time domesticity and its organisational wealth – do much to explain why religious homeschool groups ultimately secured definitional control of home education despite the diverse ideological origins of the cause. Conservative Protestants simply had more potential recruits and organisational resources with which to fuel the project than did the educational radicals who followed John Holt's early lead. This pattern of resource inequality continues into the present. HSLDA, while nominally nonsectarian, is headed by conservative Protestant Christians and finds much of its membership base within this population. HSLDA also maintains a national network of advocacy organisations comprised largely of religious homeschoolers. Additionally, many religious publishing houses support large lists of homeschool curriculum products. Even while homeschooling becomes ever more taken for granted as a legitimate educational option for 'normal' Americans, the organisational infrastructure of the US homeschool world remains dominated by conservative Protestants.

Yet despite this organisational dominance, the fact of home education's appeal to families across a wide ideological spectrum is testament to the resonance of the practice with more general features of American culture. Specifically, homeschooling is one manifestation of an enduring American scepticism about the legitimate role of the state in child instruction, and of the culture's increasingly elaborate presumptions about the importance of children's individual needs.

One of the most striking features of debates among homeschoolers in the USA is the depth to which speakers question state authority over education matters. It is not uncommon to hear advocates talk derisively about 'government schools' and make explicit claims that the state has *no* legitimate jurisdiction over education. Some liberal critics of homeschooling have argued that this scepticism of state authority is a conservative backlash against the redistributive aspects of universal public instruction (Apple, 2000). While there may be substance to this critique, it also is the case that the jurisdictional boundary between parents and government over schooling has always been

blurry in the USA (Galston, 2003). Indeed, uncertainty over the proper role of the state in education has shaped the development of public education in the USA throughout its history (Tyack, 1974). In light of that history, it is reasonable to see homeschooling as but a current manifestation of an enduring US tension.

Nevertheless, contemporary home education emerged and flourished in the USA at a particular point in time, and that temporal specificity says something important about the cultural context surrounding its emergence. Many observers have noted that during the 1960s and 70s, Americans worried increasingly about the nurturance of the individual self (e.g. Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Clecak, 1983). Less recognised is the extent to which highly individualised pedagogies became fashionable in subsequent decades. Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf methods each found eager audiences among US parents in the 1980s and beyond, while in conventional public schools the goal of meeting children's individual needs became more pronounced in ideals if not in practice (Paris, 1995). Substantial ethnographic scholarship indicates that during this same time period, upper middle-class parenting came to be characterised by concerted attention to the development of children's distinctive selves. Variably described as 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) and 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), the common finding of this scholarship is that affluent US parents are increasingly concerned with attending to children's individual needs and capacities. Homeschooling – perhaps the most individualised and resource-intensive kind of parenting imaginable – has flourished in a society in which the terms of conventional parenting are themselves becoming more elaborate.

Conclusion: Lessons for Other National Contexts

Best estimates indicate that some 850,000 children were educated at home in the USA in the late 1990s, nearly double the number only a decade before (US Department of Education, 2001). As striking as the numerical growth, however harder to measure, has been the extent to which home education has become a taken-for-granted feature of US culture. The normalisation of homeschooling is the accomplishment of a vital social movement that has, in its success, changed the meaning of its own cause. What was once countercultural has become a generally acceptable educational choice.

Normalisation is a common indicator of a social movement's success. To take but one example, it is today unremarkable in Western democracies to advocate for gender-equitable hiring criteria and wage scales. The extent to which these ideas have been normalised occludes their origins as contingent accomplishments of a sophisticated and longstanding feminist movement (Friedman & McAdam, 1992). Similarly, the normalisation of home education tends to occlude our appreciation of its contingent past. I have argued that the conditions for normalisation of home education in this US national context were multiple: a heterogeneous regulatory landscape that was favourable to a grassroots cause; a large religious population that provided personnel and sturdy organisational support to the movement early on;

a culture with an enduring uncertainty about the proper role of the state in child instruction; and broad changes in US cultural sensibilities which, since the 1960s, have lent increasing importance to meeting children's individual needs.

While the primary purpose of this analysis has been to provide an explanatory framework for the history of homeschooling in the USA, some of its general insights may illuminate our understanding of the phenomenon in other national contexts. First, we should expect that home education will be adopted initially by households at the margins of mainstream culture. Early in the course of its normalisation, home education is deviant activity, and it will appeal initially to those who already are comfortable with living unconventionally. The practice will likely be especially tempting for religious, linguistic and ethnic minorities in a variety of national contexts. These groups will find in home education a powerful means of asserting and maintaining their distinctive identities. And of course, social power will matter, too. Those groups that both believe themselves to be different and which have the organisational muscle to change the rules in their favour are most likely to be successful champions of home education.

Second, the mere fact of the normalisation of homeschooling in the USA means that the process will be both easier and rather different in other countries. Much of the work of making home education sensible – i.e. an imaginable alternative to conventional schooling – has already been done by advocates of the US cause. Rather than remaking a whole new rationale and new technologies for the practice, advocates elsewhere can borrow what has already been built in the USA: the pedagogies; the curriculum programmes; and the advocacy-group model of organising homeschool politics. This US-made equipment will need to be tailored to local particularities, certainly, but it will still be used. And the fact that home education already is acceptable in a large, wealthy and culturally influential nation will lend the practice a good deal of initial legitimacy wherever it travels.

Finally, because home education is easily construed as a *choice* – an option that parents pursue at their own discretion – it dovetails easily with the market logic that is becoming pervasive in US education circles (Chubb & Moe, 1990) and with a larger, global trend toward neoliberal understandings of states as service-providers and citizens as client/consumers (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001). Wherever parents come to see themselves as *consumers* of education, with legitimate claims to choice (as in Canada; see Aurini & Davies, 2003), home education is likely to find an accommodating institutional niche.

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Notes

1. Two landmark cases did much to establish the basic Constitutionality of home education in the USA. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), the Court ruled that the First Amendment's protection of the free exercise of religion protected the right of an Amish family to educate their own children despite a Wisconsin law obliging all children under age 16 to attend a public or private school. In that case the Court made clear that the state of Wisconsin's legitimate stake in ensuring that children were adequately educated should be balanced with parents' right to the free exercise of their religious beliefs. Constitutional protections for home education also are provided under the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibits states from depriving any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law. The landmark cases *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), among others, 'create a private realm of decision-making into which the state cannot easily intrude', as legal scholar Alma Henderson writes. 'Thus', she continues, 'the Fourteenth Amendment protects a parent's decision to teach his child at home' (Henderson, 1992: 992).
2. HSLDA is not alone in blending entrepreneurship and legal advocacy. Arum describes a similar phenomenon among legal services providers who capitalised on public school teachers' fears of litigation during the 1970s, a period of heightened student rights advocacy in the 1970s (Arum, 2003).
3. This institutional variation helps to explain why the same educational movements tend to meet different outcomes in different settings (see Binder, 2002).
4. Herein is another interesting comparison between the homeschool and black civil rights movements: both causes relied heavily on the organisational support of Protestant churches, especially in their early years.

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