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# ‘I’m Sorry You Had a Bad Day, but Tomorrow will be Better’: Stratagems of Interpersonal Emotional Management in Narratives of Fathers in Christian Homeschooling Households

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Sociological studies on homeschooling have focused narrowly on the experience of teacher-mothers and on the academic outcomes of homeschooled children. There is a dearth of studies on the role of fathers in this subculture. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 21 Christian homeschooling fathers in the upper midwest, this article addresses a major lacuna by focusing on the perceptions and social functions of the men in these families. Results suggest that one of the principal roles of fathers is emotion management of the frustrations and role strains of their teacher-wives. In most cases, homeschooling compels fathers to develop effective strategies to mitigate the inevitable role strains and role conflicts that mother-teachers will encounter. As such, fathers in homeschooling households perform theologically grounded emotion work, and develop critical stratagems of interpersonal emotion management to ensure the prolongation of this ideologically-driven subculture.

The increasing number of homeschooling children in the United States, some 1.5 million in 2007, represents one of the fastest growing alternatives to the common mode of education (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Studies on this subculture have focused largely, though not without warrant, on the academic achievement and social outcomes of children, and the pedagogical methods and motivations of parent-teachers (see Barwegen et al. 2004; Collom 2005; Jones and Gloeckner 2004; McDowell 2000a, 2000b; Rothermel 2004). Other studies have focused on the cultural politics of homeschooling, especially inquiries on whether the subculture of homeschooling should come under further government purview and whether

homeschooling undermines civic values and the socialization goals of public education (see Carper 2000; Hill 2000; Kunzman 2009; Lubienski 2000; Reich 2002). Recently, there has been a welcome sociological focus on the role of mothers in homeschooling households, namely, studies on mothers' role strain and time management strategies (Lois 2013, 2010, 2006). Yet, there remains an inexplicable lack of sociological focus on the social role of fathers in homeschooling families.

The lack of attention in the sociological literature to homeschooling fathers is quite defensible since, overwhelmingly, the teachers in this subculture are mothers, and survey and ethnographic studies suggest that homeschooling families are generally traditional in terms of household composition (see Farris and Woodruff 2000; Ray 2010; Rudner 1999; Stevens 2001; Lois 2013). The current lacuna in the scientific literature poses two deceptively simple questions of sociological interest that this study veers toward: How does the father perceive his role in the homeschooling household, and what role is the father playing to ensure the maintenance and continuation of this mode of family life? The question of the father's role is one of tremendous weight for the sociological study of gender, hegemonic masculinity, fatherhood, emotion, and the phenomenology of shared meaning in intimate relationships.

This article presents findings from in-depth interviews with 21 homeschooling fathers who self-identify as Christians and see their households and pedagogical practices as reflecting what might best be described as conservative religious values. Data presented in this article show that the main role of homeschooling fathers, aside from principal wage earner, is the emotion management of the frustrations and role strains of their teacher-wives who are the core constituency of their attention. In most cases, homeschooling compels fathers to develop token strategies to mitigate the inevitable role strains and role conflicts that mother-teachers will encounter. As such, the 21 fathers in these homeschooling households perform theologically grounded emotion work, and develop critical stratagems of interpersonal emotion management to ensure the prolongation of this ideologically-driven subculture. We say "theologically grounded" emotion work in order to connect this type of gendered interaction to a religious worldview that particularizes the spiritual role of fathers in the Christian household, a role to which each of the men in this study aspired to conform in interacting with their teacher-wives and their homeschooled children.

## Literature Review

"One of the greatest achievements of the homeschooling movement," wrote Milton Gaither (2008a:175) in his history of the homeschool in the United States, "was the legalization of homeschooling in the 1980s and early 1990s in every state in the country." And over the decades of legal victories establishing the right to homeschool, parents, primarily Christian conservatives, have been drawn to this subculture for reasons such as the opportunity to design and teach a curriculum that is Bible-centered, and because of empirical results that show increased academic success for homeschooled students (see Blockuis 2010; Cooper and Sureau, 2007; Gaither 2008b; Ray 2010). Among the earliest Christian propagators of homeschooling as an alternative to public education were Dr. Raymond and Dorothy Moore, two educators who were instrumental in popularizing homeschooling among conservative Christians with titles like *Better Late Than Early* (1975), *Home Grown Kids* (1981), *Home-Spun Schools* (1982), *Home*

*Style Teaching* (1984), and *The Successful Homeschool Family Handbook* (1994). Their writings offered practical advice and solutions to common dilemmas in homeschooling, while framing the home environment as the pristine socialization arena for raising children who would adhere to a Biblical worldview as adults.

## The Homeschooling Mother

Jennifer Lois’ work (2013, 2010, 2006) on the roles of emotion and time in the homeschooling practices of Christian mothers in the Pacific Northwest has been a welcome addition to the sociological literature on this subculture. Lois (2013) describes two groups of mother-teachers in the homeschooling community, *first choice* and *second choice* homeschoolers. The former she defines as individuals who saw homeschooling as the only alternative for their children. These mothers decided to homeschool after an epiphanic experience associated with the birth of a child, and saw it as a natural outcome of their commitment to intensive mothering. On the other hand, second choice mothers were not embedded to the ideal of the homeschool as the only alternative and a natural outgrowth of a mother’s need for closeness to her children. Second choice mothers may have initially sought other conventional approaches but settled on the homeschool after experiencing problems with the traditional classroom setting. These mothers grappled with the decision to homeschool and the opportunity costs of foregoing careers to teach their children at home. Of the 24 women in Lois’ (2013) sample, 19 were first choice homeschoolers.

Regardless of their status as first or second choice homeschoolers, the mothers in Lois’ study had a common experience in shouldering most of the responsibilities in their homeschooling households. As Lois (2013:93) notes, “The homeschool mothers I studied reported that homeschooling added so much extra work to their already busy lives that it often pushed them into ‘homeschool burnout.’” Lois’ subjects also revealed that although fathers did contribute intermittently to child care, their contribution was not enough to give the mothers the necessary “me-time” away from their children, and so “mothers resorted to other methods of creating personal time that did not depend on their physical separation from the children” (Lois 2013:121). Lois (2006) explains how mother-teachers potentially experience two types of burnout, from both in-home emotion work that comes with dealing with familial relationships, and Hochschild’s emotion labor, wherein workers must manipulate their own emotions to give the perception of positivity (see Wharton 2009). Lois (2006) finds that role strain is exacerbated for mother-teachers whose work and private lives are so intertwined. Lois (2006) explained that wives whose husbands provided significant assistance in the household were less likely to experience frustration from role strain and were able to successfully overcome burnout. But Lois (2013:122) also notes the following about the household division of labor in her homeschooling sample:

Conservative families, who, in my sample, were highly religious, tended to have a more traditional gendered division of labor, and thus less husband involvement. Husband contribution was slightly higher in the more gender-egalitarian families, though these wives still reported encountering a great deal of resistance. Moreover, because egalitarian wives expected more, they were more dissatisfied than traditional wives who expected, and received, less support.

One strategy that mother-teachers used to mitigate the confluence of emotion work and role strain was to redefine their subjective concept of personal time, what Lois (2010) calls *temporal emotion work*. In her research, Lois describes how mother-teachers, given very little time for themselves, resort to redefining “me time” to include chores like washing dishes or cleaning the house. Additionally, mother-teachers spent a great deal of time outside of the present, feeling nostalgic for the time they spent with their children while also looking at homeschooling as having a definite “end point,” after which they would have ample time to be “selfish.” The data that Lois presents on mothers in this setting suggests that fathers are not making an equitable contribution to the homeschool enterprise outside of their primary role as breadwinners, and this finding, which is consistent with the evidence in this study, is one source of role strain.

### Gender and Domestic Labor

Couples construct gender realities which impact their decisions and ideologies; and since inequities in domestic labor can affect perceptions of the quality of relationship for both men and women, it is important to address the degree to which gender inequality may be present in homeschooling households (see Hochschild 1989; Lively, Steelman, and Powell, 2010; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede, and Hall 1996). McDowell (2000a, 2000b) explains that most of the major stressors of homeschooling are deferred to mother-teachers, including housework, worries that children may not be academically prepared, and other stressors falling into the category of *emotion work* described by Hochschild (1979). Since most of these stressors are put onto mother-teachers, the question remains as to what role fathers play in mitigating these agitations. Emotion work in the home was traditionally perceived as a burden of women, and that men were unwilling or unable to handle the demands of the day-to-day nurturing of children (Thompson and Walker 1989). However, as this supposition gradually changes, the homeschooling household, a family construct relying heavily on conservative religious-based ideologies, must simultaneously adapt to changing social realities of gender equality in parenting while attempting to maintain a traditional family configuration. Erickson (2005) describes a gradual shift from emotion work in households with children being characterized as a woman’s responsibility, to a broader *working role*, switching between both partners. Even so, a continuing lack of acknowledgement of emotion work and interpersonal emotion management in homes helps perpetuate traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Coltrane (2000) and Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, and Robinson (2000) find that women are still doing at least twice as much routine housework as men, and a more balanced division of housework is associated with women having a greater perception of fairness, decreased feelings of depression, and higher marital satisfaction.

Though recent studies have analyzed the lived experience of the mother-teacher in terms of emotion work and role strain, very little exists on the perceptions of the father and how he considers his own contributions to the potentially stressful homeschool environment. The current study seeks to fill this void in the scholarship on homeschooling families.

### REFLEXIVITY

The principal investigator has been a homeschooling father for over 12 years. His foremost role, besides assisting in supplemental instruction, has been supporting his teacher-wife emotionally.

Homeschooling can be psychologically taxing for the teacher-parent, and that is his experience (see Lois 2013, 2006). It demands long-suffering fortitude and consistent patience on the part of the primary teacher, and an attentive emotional acuity, by the non-teaching spouse, to the needs of the parent who is bearing the bulk of the workload. It was his role in a homeschooling household that eventually led him to study the social roles of fathers in this subculture. His initial query was “What are other homeschooling fathers doing in their households?”

## DATA, METHODS, AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

In the book *Insider/Outsider Team Research*, Jean M. Bartunek and Meryl Reis Louis (1996:1) say this about the benefit of joint insider/outsider research projects:

People who are insiders to a setting studied often have a view of the setting and any finding about it quite different from that of the outside researchers who are conducting the study. These differences, we believe, have significant implications for the quality of knowledge that will be gained from the research, its potential to enhance insiders’ practice, and the relationships insiders and outsiders have with each other.

From Bartunek and Louis’ standpoint, insiders have a distinct lived-experience from outsiders, and they bring a unique perspective to the interpretation of data founded on their roles in the culture under study and their emotional proximity to other members within the social setting. In this project on homeschooling fathers, the principal researcher is numbered among the prototypical father, “head-of-household,” insider within this subculture, while the co-investigators are outsiders. While each researcher shares a common set of research and epistemological tools, their individual proxemics to the Christian homeschooling subculture—and to religious practice broadly speaking—potentially lends itself to interpretive conflict. Yet, interpretive conflict during the data analysis and interpretation portions can strengthen the interpretive validity structure of insider/outsider team research (see Bartunek and Loius 1996; Borland 2004; Johnson 1997). While each investigator works to ensure the study has strong validity by grounded theory standards, the principal investigator, as an insider, has an additional vested interest: to safeguard the members of this subculture from harmful misconstructions. And the stakes are high because misinterpretation of nonconforming subcultures can deepen intolerance, and make it more difficult for future researchers to gain access in order to undertake needed study (see Weston 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Through interpretive interchanges about the data on gender roles in conservative Christian homeschooling households, both outsiders and the insider were able to arrive at a mutually agreeable construal of the role of fathers in this subculture—a critical elucidation that neither distorts the subculture by interpreting their lifestyles as one marred by patriarchal domination nor one that obscures noticeable inequalities in division of domestic labor and in levels of

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<sup>1</sup>Kath Weston (2004) describes the challenges of doing fieldwork in the gay and lesbian community of San Francisco as an insider in the early 1980s, a time when the community was deeply suspicious of researchers who were outsiders because of how their lived-experiences were at times maligned in scientific reports. Weston argues that being an insider (as a lesbian) gave her a measure of access, rapport, and trust with her informants that would not have been possible otherwise.

familial stress. We believe our collaboration as insider/outsider team researchers presents a middle-range interpretation of the gendered milieu of homeschooling.

The epistemological underpinning of this research is constructivism and its methodology is grounded theory (see Guba and Lincoln 2004). Constructivism seeks to understand how individuals construct and interpret their realities, with an emphasis on the implicit meanings of shared realities (Charmaz 2006). The epistemological stance and the grounded theory approach to this research seek a *verstehen* of how fathers make sense of and interpret their roles in homeschooling households. Constructivism has an intentional focus on perceptions and meaning-making. The goal is to elicit how people make sense of their social realities and to discover the meanings they confer on their experiences. At its heart, a constructivist approach is deeply phenomenological because of its keen attention to perceptions about the social world and the interactional rituals that respondents inhabit.

This study's data comes from 21 Euro-American, Christian males in the upper midwestern states of North Dakota and Minnesota. It was collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews using a structured questionnaire instrument that was administered to each subject by the principal investigator. The interviews were between one and two hours in length, and typically held in the respondents' homes, offices, or a public setting that provided a modicum of privacy such as a café or restaurant. Complementing the in-depth interviews with fathers, data for this study also included ethnographic observations at the national meetings of a large Christian homeschooling organization in the Midwest.

About one-third of the interviewees for this study were recruited with the help of this Christian homeschooling organization who granted the principal researcher permission to send a letter to each of its members detailing the purpose of the study and to seek participation of fathers for an interview lasting about one hour. Other interviewees were recruited by the personal requests of the principal researcher. The 21 fathers in this study ranged from 29 to 56 years old, with a mean age of 46, having an average of 4 children, and a range from 1 child to 9 children. Together, they had a mean of 8 years homeschooling, with a time span from one to 19 years. Most of the men were college graduates and worked in upper middle-class professions ( $n = 15$ ) such as architects, university professors and researchers, city planners, business entrepreneurs, IT, healthcare, and engineering to name a few. The remaining six men worked in upper-lower or lower middle-class fields such as welding, building maintenance, and assembly-line industrial work. The overwhelming majority of fathers ( $n = 19$ ) in this study fit Lois' (2013) classification of first choice homeschoolers by their asserted views on homeschooling as the only *God-given* choice for their children's education and for never utilizing the option of public education. The two fathers who fit Lois' description of second choice homeschoolers, decided to home educate because of dissatisfaction with their children's experiences in public school.

The principal researcher read a consent form prior to the start of each interview. Informants signed and received a copy of the consent form that explained the study's purpose, their rights as participants in research, the confidentiality protocol which employs pseudonyms and excludes identifying information for sub-rosa purposes, and who to contact if their rights were violated by deceptive or unethical procedures. This study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval under the full review protocol prior to its commencement.

The data collection came to a stop after the 21st interview because the study had reached the point of saturation where no new information was being collected from this narrow sample of the

homeschooling community: Midwestern, Euro-American, conservative Christian fathers. Using grounded theory’s “constant comparison method” (see Charmaz 2006), the point of saturation is determined when the same categories or themes are found repeatedly with each additional interview, and no new or theoretically substantive codes or categories are being discovered.

The transcription protocol was verbatim, and generated over 300 pages of transcribed interview data for focused coding, which, under grounded theory, “means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data.” (Charmaz 2006: 57). The categories that were construed came inductively from the data analysis and not through a priori deduction. Each member of our insider/outsider team had an individual copy of the transcribed data, and we individually coded each interview using a standard set of earlier codes that were generated after the principal researcher initially coded the data.

When we compared our individual analyses of the critical sections of each interview, our codes were consistent the vast majority of time. When we diverged from agreement on codes or on interpretation of data, we discussed the reason(s) for our dissenting opinions and then arrived at a mutually agreeable interpretation. Data interpretation and coding as a team, which is not typical in most qualitative research studies, is an arduous process that is potentially fraught with interpretive conflict. The benefit, however, is how insider/outsider team research can safeguard against potential threats to interpretive validity, namely our implicit and epistemic biases, especially when the burden of interpretation is the undertaking of a single researcher.

## RESULTS

### The Father’s Role in the Homeschooling Household

The findings suggest that the Christian homeschooling fathers in this study have a consistent perception of their place and duty in the homeschooling enterprise, a role that was regularly described as being a “helpmate” to their wives’ roles as mothers and pedagogues. The fathers in this study were sensitive to the fact that the entire homeschooling enterprise hinges on the commitment and perseverance of mothers, and maintained that their principal duty is nurturing the long-term dedication of their teacher-wives to this arduous work. As such, the narratives contained a series of key stratagems, or emotion and stress management devices, designed to mitigate role stress and burnout on the part of their teacher-wives, but these devices also remind their wives about the theologically sanctioned values that homeschooling protects.

Fathers in this study interpreted their homeschooling craft as a Christian ‘calling,’ and expressed the view that the moral socialization of children was the first and foremost duty of parents. Indeed, a Christian worldview even permeates how fathers interpret the role-stress and strain that teacher-mothers encounter during their day-to-day interactions with children. One father, whose views are cogently emblematic of this idea, interpreted the role-stress and strain that mothers encounter during the regular school day as a form of “spiritual warfare” and “spiritual discouragement” designed by the devil, or Satan, to sabotage and derail the homeschooling enterprise:

My wife is involved in spiritual warfare trying to teach our kids, and I think that becomes a discouragement as well because the devil will try to tell her that she is not doing a good job and



maybe she should stop. I think it's good to evaluate whether you should continue to homeschool, but you should do that not based upon pressure from the enemy [Satan] convincing you to put your kids back in public education. –Micah (51 years old, 2 children, 14 years homeschooling)

Each of the fathers in this study expressed the view that their foremost role was to be the “spiritual leader” for their wife and children, a worldview that conforms to a conservative theology on gender-relations where women “submit,” at least in theory, if not in actual practice, to their husbands as the spiritual head of the home, and one that thrusts on fathers the mantle of nurturing the spiritual wellbeing of each family member, a role that men understood and articulated in their narratives:

One of the biggest negative influences in our society is the lack of fathers being involved in their families, and this is consistent with what I think the Bible says about men being a leader in the household, such as what Ephesians says about being leaders in the household, that they must prove themselves by being wise and effective leaders of their homes. –Jacob (49 years old, 2 children, 5 years homeschooling)

First of all, I think that my primary role is to pray for my wife who teaches the children, and to be the superintendent or the principal because I want leadership in it. I feel that the man should be the leader in the home, and of course, my wife has no objections to that. I sign all the cards for grading. I want input, and I feel that my primary responsibility is to support my wife. And if there is some correction that needs to be done, and she will submit to that, then I try to do that too. I try to do the disciplining, but when you are not around it is hard to do that. But I do some discipline. –Simon (52 years old, 5 children, 13 years homeschooling)

A key aspect of their role as spiritual leaders in the household was “setting the vision” (henceforth *the vision*) and articulating the values that undergird their homeschooling practices to each stakeholder in the enterprise. A unified vision for homeschooling that everyone understands is a strategic tool for dealing with the predictable stressors and role strains that the teacher-wife encounters, and it offers a ready justification to children who may, at times, seek explanation for their parents' decision to homeschool. Several fathers in this study articulated this specific sentiment in their narrative about their primary role in the homeschooling household:

My wife relies on me for like the overall vision, and this stems back to the day when we decided that we should investigate homeschooling. And I think it is incumbent upon fathers to provide vision—the vision that it's possible to do that and provide good reasons to do it. –Timothy (46 years old, 2 children, 9 years homeschooling)

My role is, I think, to work with her in developing the vision, to develop the framework and a plan for where we're going from year to year, and to do, perhaps, some of the teaching as well—certainly to reinforce what she's learning during the day, and to talk to my wife about specific curriculum and make decisions regarding curriculum. But in terms of daily lesson plans and implementing this, that's my wife's role on a day-to-day basis. –Moses (47 years old, two children, one year homeschooling)

Again, being the principal, my role is the whole visioning process: “*Why are we doing this as a family?*” And the kids need to know there is a value to it. My job is to help them step back and

look at the bigger picture, how it’s all starting to fit together, how this will empower them for their future. —Ezra (42 years old, 4 children, 7 years homeschooling)

“Setting the vision” becomes a key part of the father’s role because in advent of critical role strain that might threaten to halt the practice, both the father and mother can look to the vision as a reorganizing and revitalizing maxim for prolongation. In a Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1912), the father’s vision is akin to a totemic icon, where it, the totem, or in this case, the vision, stands as a representative of the values of the family which reflects the desires of God. Under this frame, where the vision is God’s ideal for the homeschooling family, to reject the vision by deciding to forsake homeschooling due to stress or strain, might be akin to turning one’s back on what God prescribes as the ideal model for the moral socialization of children.

The vision, then, might be interpreted as a key stratagem for the emotional encouragement and moral coercion of the stakeholders in the homeschooling family, a totemic function that is critical for the long-term adherence to the conservative values and Christian worldview that are built into homeschooling practices. And here, two Biblical texts were frequently invoked by fathers in discussing what the visioning process entailed: Proverbs 22: 6 (“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” New King James Version) and Deuteronomy 6:7 (“You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” New King James Version). Both of these scriptures play a pivotal role in defining the vision behind homeschooling, which is essentially that God has prescribed this model of parenting as a way to guarantee the unspoiled moral socialization of children. As one father succinctly puts it:

There is a verse, Deuteronomy 6:7, that says that we should train our children all day without ceasing, and that it is our responsibility to train our children up. So we made a conscious decision not to give that responsibility to somebody else who we didn’t know or trust, and that’s what it comes down to. That’s the primary foundational principle for homeschooling with a lot of add-ons: a quality education; being able to be with your children; and being able to keep them isolated until you feel that they are able to handle the world. There is a lot of icing on the cake, but that is the foundational principle. —Peter (52 years old, 9 children, 19 years homeschooling)

This vision is, in fact, the “foundational principle” that homeschooling fathers see as their foremost duty to articulate as the spiritual leaders of their households. But the visioning totem also frames the public school as working contrary to this ideal, thereby functioning as a stratagem of moral conformity because, since public schools cannot enforce or propagate values that are in accord with a conservative Christian worldview, the desired—God sanctioned—option is to homeschool. Indeed, the view that the public school was anathema to Christian values was pervasive in the narratives of fathers in this study (see Vigilant, Trefethren, and Anderson 2013). This widespread sentiment is clearly summarized in the following proclamations:

In the public school system, the worst common denominator seems to be the base for comparison, and that’s what kind of infects people, if you will. The religion of the public school is secular humanism, and that certainly clashes with our Christian worldview. So we want to maximize our ability to influence them in a homeschool environment. —James (46 years old, 3 children, 12 years homeschooling)

You know, part of the whole philosophy of homeschooling is seeing who controls the minds of the next generation. And if the government does that through the public education process, then what we are really involved in is a spiritual war for the minds of young people. And so, how does that play out in the public arena from a spiritual perspective? When I was in public education, the NEA [the National Education Association] was very manipulative. They have an agenda, you know. They are tolerant of everything but Christianity; they teach about everything your kids need to know *but* Christianity. They are very anti-God. –Micah (51 years old, 2 children, 14 years homeschooling)

Homeschooling's visioning process frames the institution as the best model for preserving conservative Christian values and a Biblically-based worldview. It also provides justification for a model that the fathers in this study believe best conforms to the Biblical injunction that parents should be the principal socialization agents of the moral cultivation of values that harmonize with Christ-centered ethics. All of the stratagems of interpersonal emotion management that we will discuss in the next section are designed with these visioning goals in mind.

### Stratagems of Interpersonal Emotion Management

Aside from their roles as spiritual leaders, the fathers saw as their secondary duty that of being a 'servant' and a 'helpmate' to their wives in facilitating the objectives of their daily household practices and schooling plans. Here again, the frequent use of the monikers 'servant' and 'helpmate' in the narratives, elicit a certain Biblical perspective on gender roles found in Genesis 2:18, where God is said to create Eve as a "helpmate" for Adam, a view that is pervasive in conservative Christian subcultures (see Joyce 2009 and Kunzman 2009). In our sample of conservative homeschooling fathers, however, there is a curious inversion of this traditional ideal because of a recognition that since homeschooling depends largely on the arduous labor of the mother-teacher, the father is expected to work in concert to mitigate her strain and burden. In essence, the father becomes *her* helpmate because of the uneven division of labor and the potential stressors homeschooling carries:

I think the primary function of the father is that of being a servant. You have to be a servant in terms of trying to provide a way to make homeschooling happen. –James (46 years old, 3 children, 12 years homeschooling)

The primary role that I seem to have taken is one of support. My wife is the primary instructor, principal, and curriculum evaluator, and she is right there actually doing it and she is very close to it. So I do a lot of listening, and at times when she wants to consult about decision-making, I try to help with that, and I provide the finances to make sure we can buy the supplies to do the activities or use the curriculum that we want. And also, my primary role is one of support and flexibility on my own part. When you have a homeschooling household, there needs to be more flexibility. –Abel (40 years old, 4 children, 7 years homeschooling)

And it is in their roles as 'helpmates' and 'servants' that fathers articulated a common set of stratagems to ensure the continuation of the homeschooling practice. We assert that fathers, in this conservative Christian homeschooling subculture, perform a strategic set of interpersonal emotion management practices which, in their belief, helps to mitigate the role strain of their wives and to keep the focus on the visioning ideal that undergirds the practice of homeschooling.

Interpersonal emotion management strategies are designed to align a person’s emotions with the feeling norms or rules of a particular context (see Francis 1994, 1997). It is, according to Francis (1997:153), “the process in which others can shape, work, or manage our emotions.” In interpersonal relationships, especially close intimate affiliations, individuals are constantly “managing” or “influencing” the feelings of other people, whether those actions involve attempts to make others more happy or to reduce feeling of stress, unease, or guilt (see Thoits 1996; Niven 2012). As such, Niven, Macdonald, and Holman (2012: 2) define interpersonal emotion regulation as “deliberate attempts to influence others’ feelings,” while Francis (1997:169) has observed that interpersonal emotion management is a key strategy of support groups, where “the facilitator alters the emotional situation and the emotion norms by altering the identities of the relevant actors.” Other researchers have written about interpersonal emotion management in law firms between paralegals and attorneys (Lively 2000) and in a psychodrama based group (Thoits 1996). Our research shows that the conservative homeschooling fathers that comprise this sample perform a set of interpersonal emotion management stratagems that are designed to change the moods of their mother-teachers in times of undue stress from home-schooling and to mitigate the ever-present threat of role strain and terminal burnout among their teacher-wives.

The fathers in this study are keenly aware of the unusual power dynamics at play in performing their roles as spiritual leaders of homeschooling families. They sagaciously and cogently articulated the standpoint that homeschooling depends on the willingness of mothers to adhere to the vision which forms the basis of their religious worldview and homeschooling enterprise. However, the mother’s willingness to yield to this vision depends largely on whether the father fulfills his role as helpmate, and a key part to fulfilling this role is interpersonal emotion management stratagems that come into play. These emotion management tokens not only ensure the prolongation and continuation of the vision, but function to appease and mollify the agitations, stressors, and strains that come along with being in the presence of children as a teacher-mother for most of the day. The 21 fathers in this study mentioned several emotion management stratagems that include functioning as: (1) a daily soundboard and release valve for their wives; (2) a break time placeholder to avoid burnout; (3) a disciplinarian for the children, especially around the enforcement of household chores; and (4) acting as a monitor for the preservation of eros in the intimate relationships with their wives.

### Soundboard and Release Valve

Perhaps the most important stratagem for interpersonal emotion management is the father’s role in acting as the principal sounding board and release valve for his wife. The magnitude of this perceived role for the continuation of homeschooling is not overstated in this article or in the narratives of the fathers in this study. The keen cognizance that fathers have a special role to play at the end of each day in listening to their wives’ frustrations was clearly noted by *all* of the men in this study:

I don’t pick up on emotions too easily. It is one of the non-extravert aspects of my personality. When I do manage to pick up on her frustrations after it’s announced to me that *‘The children were terrible today!’* I say, *‘I’m sorry you had a bad day. Thank you for sacrificing and for being the teacher in*

*our homeschool. We know that it's not going to all be wonderful, but it is something that we decided.* And usually I don't have to get that far. Usually, I get to *'I'm sorry you had a bad day, but tomorrow will be better,'* and that is enough to give her the pressure release that she needs . . . That is a skill that I am working on developing, learning how to sit and listen, because I am used to helping people with their problems. I am starting to find out that wives aren't always like that; they don't always want their problems fixed. Sometimes, they just want to get it off their chest and to be able to talk and put it in words so they can get it out. –Silus (39 years old, 2 children, 3 years homeschooling)

Be willing to listen to your wife when you come home at night and she has concerns or if she just needs someone to talk to about things that went on during the day or problems with the children that needs to be addressed. Of course, you are always tired when you come home from work, but it is so important because they often have no one else to listen to them or to use as a sounding board . . . So often your best and biggest sounding board may be your spouse, and no one can relate to you as well as your husband or your wife. So, it is very important to give them the support they need. –Jude (46 years old, 3 children, 12 years homeschooling)

You have to make a conscious effort to be a sounding board and to listen to your wife rather than try to fix problems—and that's our tendency, is to try to fix problems. We've got our toolbox out ready to fix things . . . but what she really wants is someone to listen to her. Moses (47 years old, 2 children, 1 year homeschooling)

Central to the narratives on being an emotional release valve for their teacher-mothers is an implicit recognition that the quality of homeschooling relies on maintaining the emotional well-being of all stakeholders involved, both children and mothers alike. And as part of the visioning process, fathers become inextricably and morally tied to being their wives' emotional helpmate, ensuring conformity to a shared moral vision of God's design for their family. Whether in actual practice or not, the fathers in this study expressed commitment to communicating with their wives on a daily basis about their frustrations and concerns from the schooling day. The importance of listening and verbally affirming the experiences of their wives was frequently cited as a simple stratagem to soothe the dissatisfaction with teaching a difficult child or to quiet the teacher's worry that things aren't going as they should be. Moreover, fathers mentioned that one of the difficulties of being a stay-at-home parent and homeschooler is the sheer amount of time that mothers spend in the company of immature children with puerile antics and behaviors which must be corrected. The irritation that builds when teacher-mothers are unable to vent to an adult was clearly articulated as a central problem with homeschooling, and one that each of the fathers in this study claimed to address in their listening practices with their wives at the end of the day.

### Break Time Placeholders

The second stratagem that homeschooling fathers employ in their interpersonal emotion management arsenal is functioning as a placeholder so their wives can have planned time away from the home and from their homeschooled children. These "breaks," as they were often described, were a key method of decompression after stressful periods of homeschooling. Whether they were proffered on a nightly basis or one or two times per week, fathers described "breaks"

as liminal escapes from the drudgery of childcare and education. The necessity of liminal getaways for mothers was one of the strongest themes in the narratives on strategies for the maintenance and continuation of the subculture.

This I’ve learned over time, making sure, number one, that my wife needs time to get away. Sometimes, I am one of those take charge type-of-persons, but she is not asking me to take charge. She is asking me to give her a break, to help her rejoin the battle, and to be there as encouragement. You know, there will be days she’ll just want to chuck the whole thing. But she is not looking to me to replace her; she is just looking at me to support her, and part of this is to give her time to vent, and venting is a good thing. And that was, for a while, something I wasn’t doing. –Judas (54 years old, 8 children, 5 years homeschooling)

I know my wife was stressed out because it added to her schedule once the homeschooling started. And the only thing that I could do to eliminate some of that stress is when I came home from work, I gave her a break. She would go do what she wanted to do, or go out or go visit some friends. I took the kids for the evening and spent time with them, and that was basically all I could do. –Matthew (56 years old, 2 children, 11 years homeschooling)

My wife spends 24/7/365 with the kids! I try to give breaks. Me and my wife spend most of our time within a comfort zone of each other. I don’t take the kids for a weekend, and I don’t tell her to go somewhere for the weekend. But for three hours on a Saturday, I’ll take them down to the park. I try to give her short breaks—short bursts, here and there, of time for her to do what she needs to do or what she wants to do. –Daniel (36 years old, 3 children, 2 years homeschooling)

As break time placeholders, fathers interpret the time away from the home and from the children as a space where mothers can temporarily escape the all-consuming requirements of parenting and teaching, and this respite is needed in the estimation of fathers because it abates the potential for burnout and terminal strain. But the break time placeholder stratagem is also a simple procedure for giving fathers a level of involvement in homeschooling, which in turn offers mothers a small gesture of their emotional investment and moral commitment to the schooling enterprise.

“When my wife would have a particularly stressful day, I would do something with the kids or take them to the park or whatever, and give her some time to read or write. We have done that on a Saturday afternoon, where I’ve taken the kids hiking or whatever to give her time. –Nehemiah (53 years old, 4 children, 20 years homeschooling)

We need to learn to take our children and give our wives some time not only to work on their school curriculum but some time away from the kids. It’s one of the hardest things for the moms because they spend so much time with the little people, talking to the little people, that they don’t have a lot of adult time. So we as husbands need to learn to give them some of that adult conversation. We need to encourage them because the more we encourage them the better teachers they become. –Peter (52 years old, 9 children, 19 years homeschooling)

By taking the kids in the evening or taking the kids to the park “for a few hours” of the day, mothers have a symbolic token of fathers’ commitment—even though both parties know full well that the level of work involved in “watching the kids” at play can never compare to the dedicated teaching and mothering that is accomplished by teacher-mothers on a daily basis.

Indeed, homeschooling fathers' time with children, under this stratagem, is "leisure time," and not at all commensurate to the "work time" that mothers contribute. Nevertheless, this small token of appreciation in "watching the children" so that teacher-mothers can have a break from the home is a powerful stratagem for the maintenance of educational quality, the mitigation of stress and role strain, and for the continuation of homeschooling in service to the vision.

### Disciplinarian and Chores Enforcer

One tangible duty of fathers, which accorded well to traditional gender roles, is acting as the disciplinarian for the family. A common theme in the narratives about this role was how it was quite suited for fathers to perform, and a role that was a major assistance to mothers in allowing them to focus, at least in principle, on pedagogical matters. While the act of teaching naturally imposes a level of discipline and correction on children, fathers often suggested that their role was to deal with the particularly serious disciplinary incidents that posed a threat to the homeschooling enterprise. As several fathers noted, having a strict disciplinary regime grounded in the words "Wait till your father gets home!" was absolutely essential for reducing the stress and potential for burnout in homeschooling moms. The home classroom, to a much greater extent than conventional ones, requires docility on the part of children in respecting their mother-teachers since she cannot "suspend" her homeschooled children for discourtesy or belligerence as public schools frequently do. If children are undisciplined and disrespectful, the mother may experience terminal burnout. Therefore, the father's disciplinary role becomes all the more important because maintaining strict discipline is a stratagem of safeguarding the mother-teacher's commitment to homeschooling. And as one father, James (46 years old, 3 children, 12 years homeschooling), said rather succinctly and forcefully, "You have to provide the disciplinary environment because if your children don't have a mind to obey, it [homeschooling] is not gonna happen for the wife!"

Controlling the waywardness of children is a way of relieving pressure from their teacher-wives and a suitable stratagem for demonstrating their own deep-rooted commitment to each stakeholder in the family:

If the husband is the principal, then any disciplinary issue has to come to him, and this alleviates pressure from the wife and encourages her more since she doesn't have to deal with that. –Micah (51 years old, 2 children, 14 years homeschooling)

My role is to fully support my wife, and if there is anything I can do to help her, I will try to be there to help. If there is a tough decision to make, or if there is a discipline issue, that would be my responsibility. As far as curriculum, that was pretty much left up to her, but if she had trouble during the day in school, she had the freedom to send the kids to their rooms and school would be over for that day. But they would stay in their rooms, and then when I came home from work, I would deal with the situation. –Timothy (46 years old, 2 children, 9 years homeschooling)

My role is to provide support to my wife, so that she knows she's not alone in homeschooling and knows that I'll back her up with rules of the household and be the head of the household as far as making sure the children respect their mother and follow through with their assignments. –Thomas (44 years old, 2 children, 2 years homeschooling)

Almost all of the fathers expressed the view that contributing to chores is one of the easiest ways of reducing the role strain of teacher-mothers, and that getting the children to participate in chores—at the earliest possible age—was one of their primary duties of their role as disciplinarians. In this way, fathers viewed the involvement of children in domestic labor as a contributor to the mitigation of the role strain commonly expressed by mother-teachers.

The kids all have their chores. I do the laundry and put them out on the line. I also put all laundry away. I help sometimes with meals although I am not the best at it. My son cooks supper, and the other ones set the table and washes. Everyone has chores and everyone has a room assignment, even my eighteen year old who still lives at home. –Simon (52 years old, 5 children, 13 years homeschooling)

We’ve got it scheduled whereby kids will do dishes on certain nights, and on certain meals, the kids will take care of the dishes. I will help with the dishes all the time. I will sort laundry and get that done. When it’s time to clean the house, we all have our specific rooms that we will clean. So we are very much involved in all those household tasks, but she will organize the chores. –Matthew (56 years. old, 2 children, 11 years homeschooling)

The fathers in this study also highlighted their own mindfulness in doing more chores around the house, especially in preparing the evening meals and undertaking a greater share of the cleaning in an effort to ease the burden on their wives.

“When my wife is at her wit’s end, I go right after it and start cleaning up the house and doing the dishes and trying to get the boys ready for bed so that she can have some time to unwind to reduce frustration. –Thomas (44 years old, 2 children, 2 years homeschooling)

We have an informal but pretty hardline division of labor in our home. I cook the evening meals, and now we started to have our kids take turns doing the clean-up or washing dishes and that kind of thing. They help now with laundry . . . I do all the garbage, [and] my wife does all the room cleaning type of stuff. –Jacob (49 years old, 2 children, 5 years homeschooling)

I make may be 90–95% of the meals. It gives her some time to relax, so I do a lot of the chores, and make sure that the kids are doing their school work, and I double check it to make sure they understand what they are doing. –Ezra (42 years old, 4 children, 7 years homeschooling)

While the only way to verify reports of inordinate amounts of cooking and cleaning is to interview other homeschooling stakeholders, namely children and teacher-mothers, the fathers in this study did seem to be especially sensitive to how their actions are helping their wives by reducing other domestic worries so they can focus mostly on the primary duty of educating children. As a stratagem for the continuation of homeschooling, doing more chores around the house and seeing to the discipline of children brings a seemingly egalitarian character to what appears, from the outside, to be a rather conservative and traditional family structure, albeit a stratagem inspired to reduce the frustration and role strain of teacher-mothers.

The men in this study are intensely responsive to a simple fact: they cannot rely on their wives to singularly shoulder the full responsibilities that come along with the titles of teacher, mother, and wife. And since the entire homeschooling endeavor hinges on whether mothers avoid terminal burnout, fathers must be more than passive overseers of the enterprise. They



are obliged to contribute a level of service to the venture that demonstrates they too are deeply invested and committed to the overall vision. While their small sacrifices are mere tokens of devotion when compared to the arduous labor of their teacher-mothers, theirs is a necessary and sufficient contribution that works to promulgate feelings of indebtedness to their wives' labor of sacrifice in adhering to *the vision*.

### Monitoring Relationship Quality

The potential role strain involved in fulfilling the various responsibilities of mother, teacher, and wife is something that comes out repeatedly in the narratives of the fathers in this study. But the strain of the latter role—that of wife—is one that home-schooling fathers have to be careful to avoid and work against. A stratagem for prolongation is monitoring relationship quality by offering small tokens that remind the teacher-mother that she is also a wife. The fathers in this study were keen to recount the ways that they make their teacher-mothers feel like beloved wives.

I take my wife out on dates every so often on a Friday night, and my older kids will take care of the younger ones. You need to take them out every so often to tell them just how much you appreciate them. Now I haven't done this lately, but I leave notes to her that say, *'Thanks for being a good teacher to the kids and a good mom. What a Godly example you are!'* And I know that will do it; that note will motivate her all day. —Simon (52 years old, 5 children, 13 years homeschooling)

My wife and I try to make a date just for romantic reasons; we don't have to make a date for the homeschooling thing because we're working on it together already all the time. But we often take time to just sit down and talk about it because she might have had some concerns about how it's going. But I think the important thing for fathers is to initiate that and be prepared to be a real support to your spouse. —Samuel (52 years old, 1 child, 5 years homeschooling)

I try to give my wife a break. So we have a date night, although we haven't had one lately . . . It doesn't have to be a date, but I think a gesture to the wife to say *'I recognize what you're doing and that you're working hard, so here is a token of my appreciation for your hard work.'* Now you don't have to say that, but I think just to recognize and give these tokens of appreciation are a tangible thing I would encourage to do every day. —James (46 years old, 3 children, 12 years homeschooling)

Monitoring relationship quality by providing small romantic tokens of appreciation is a seminal stratagem not only for prolongation of homeschooling but for strengthening the husband-wife commitment to each other within the framework of *the vision* for the family. One homeschooling father spoke to the importance of this stratagem when he confessed that he and his wife had to undergo counseling because they had let homeschooling override and strain their romantic connection as husband and wife. His teacher-wife was so engrossed in homeschooling their young children that the eros side of the marital relationship suffered until the problem was addressed in counseling:

Well I think one big issue is that more time spent homeschooling the children, the less time for husband and wife. And so the issue we keep getting back to is that the children are taking all of our attention—even more so with them being trained at home. The husband and wife have hardly

any time together and it’s hard on a marriage . . . We actually had some counseling about that, and I’m not embarrassed to say that we did counseling because it is a difficult situation and counseling has really helped us. It has really helped us to communicate. —Thomas (44 years old, 2 children, 2 years homeschooling)

This stratagem of providing romantic tokens to teacher-mothers is so crucial to the maintenance of the homeschooling enterprise that we interpret it as a fundamental substructure undergirding the other devices. Anthony Giddens (1991) notes that relationships in late-modernity are reflexively organized, where participants remain committed not because of external constraints, but rather due to the perceived level of commitment from each partner to maintaining the quality of the relationship. “Pure relationships,” as Giddens calls them, enjoins continuous and reflexive monitoring to ensure an adequate level of communication, trust, emotional satisfaction, commitment, intimacy and romantic sentiment. Under this stratagem, the homeschooling fathers in this study demonstrate a cognizance of the important need to reflexively monitor their marriages for elements of the pure relationship. However, where Giddens’ pure relationship is contextualized on the grounds of ensuring that mutual pleasure and satisfaction accrue to the partners in intimate unions, the fathers in this study connect the necessity of maintaining a pure relationship—especially in the field of intimacy—to fulfilling *the vision* of the homeschooling family.

## DISCUSSION

### Interpersonal Emotion Management and the Homeschooling Father

How do we to interpret the stratagems of interpersonal emotion management outlined in this paper? Are these emotion management stratagems another variant of masculine domination in the private sphere meant to perpetuate hegemonic masculinity? The interpersonal emotion management stratagems that the 21 Christian homeschooling fathers employed in this study serve the higher calling of *the vision*. For this population of conservative homeschooling fathers, *the vision* is preeminent and sufficient justification for a traditional model of family life that imposes a theologically sanctioned form of masculine authority on the homeschooling household—but a paradigm that requires both father and mother to willingly submit to what a God-centered household should be, and a modality that imposes economic and personal sacrifices on both parents, although costs differentially borne by the mother-teacher.

The interpersonal emotion management and motivational strategies that are employed to mollify the potential role strain of mother-teachers in this subculture can be interpreted as a form of emotion work (Hochschild 1979), albeit, *interpersonal* and *theologically grounded* emotion work to ensure the maintenance and prolongation of the subculture. These stratagems serve the higher calling of acquiescing to a Biblically sanctioned worldview on the preeminent role of parents in the moral socialization and education of children. The interpersonal emotion management work of fathers function to avoid terminal burnout on the part of mothers, but it also ensures that they (fathers) will be especially attuned to—and cognizant of—the needs and trepidations of each homeschooling stakeholder, but especially mother-teachers. And homeschooling’s endurance depends on the insubstantial and unequal tokens fathers proffer in (1) setting the vision and being the spiritual “head” of the household, and in their strategic

roles as (2) soundboard and release valve, (3) break time placeholder, (4) disciplinarian and chores enforcer, and (5) invigilator of eros and intimacy for their wives.

This give-and-take from each party constitutes an epistemic agreement, albeit implicit and unequal in terms of division of labor, for the prolongation of *the vision*: fathers are outspokenly cognizant of the unexampled weight of responsibility that their partners carry in their triangulated roles as mother, teacher, and wife, and their narratives claim that they are acutely sensitive to the emotional needs of their wives. Indeed, from the narratives of these twenty-one fathers, mothers are shouldering an enormous burden that the mere symbolic and unequal tokens cannot compensate for. Yet, teacher-mothers persevere in service to *the vision* within a context of extreme inequality in the gendered division of homeschooling labor (see Lois 2013). And it is *the vision* that forms the basis of the long-suffering perseverance of mother-teachers, and the symbolic tokens directed at them by their husbands for interpersonal emotion management: an epistemic agreement for the survival of this Biblically-based—and now heterodox—model of family life.

### Limitation and Future Research

This study focused on the perceptions of a small group of conservative homeschooling fathers at the exclusion of their mother-teachers. Obviously, the perceptions of teacher-mothers are crucial to validate the lived experiences and insights of the homeschooling fathers that were interviewed for this analysis. For instance, as one anonymous reviewer of this article enquired, in what percentage of Christian homeschooling families is *the vision* shared by both mother and father—as opposed to being *his* vision that is imposed on her? To answer this question and others, future studies on the homeschooling subculture might take the unique methodological approach of interviewing both parents simultaneously or separately, or directing focus groups of homeschooling fathers and mothers on topical issues affecting this subculture. Notwithstanding the ethical and methodological quandaries of dual partner interviews and the focus group method (namely, confidentiality and dealing with sensitive relationship dilemmas in the company of others), interviewing both parents, either simultaneously or separately, might provide an opportunity for confirming or disconfirming evidence to the sentiments of fathers in this study.

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