Role Strain, Emotion Management, and Burnout: Homeschooling Mothers' Adjustment to the Teacher Role

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Drawing from three years of field research with a homeschooling support group in the Pacific Northwest, I present the emotional stages mothers passed through as they tried to integrate the teacher role into their busy lives. In most cases, mothers found teaching more demanding than they had expected, straining their other roles as mothers and homemakers, as well as causing emotional burnout. To manage their insecurity, anxiety, and stress, mothers employed a variety of emotion management techniques. Mothers who successfully overcame burnout prioritized some roles, combined others, and received significant support from their husbands. I conclude by discussing the implications for theories of burnout.

Many workers in service-oriented jobs experience emotional burnout. Teaching, in particular, has received a great deal of attention from researchers. Teachers often cite burnout as a main reason for leaving (or wanting to leave) their jobs (Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey, and Bassler 1988). This article qualitatively examines the stages of emotional burnout among a small subset of teachers: mothers who homeschool their children. Although these mothers are not in the paid labor force, they have much in common with schoolteachers, experiencing the same role demands such as assigning work that expands students' knowledge and abilities, inspiring a strong work ethic, and staving off frustration. As a result, they experience many of the same emotional reactions, including burnout, that schoolteachers do.

Researchers have studied worker burnout in two ways. Analyzing workers' emotions on the job, Hochschild (1983) claims that job-related burnout is prevalent in service-based economies because employers can commodify and appropriate employees' private emotions. When professional transactions elicit negative emotions—whether in workers or customers—it is always workers who are obligated

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to smooth the situation over by manipulating their own emotions. This type of "emotion management" for a wage, which Hochschild terms "emotional labor" (p. 7), is most prevalent in jobs where workers must interact closely with clients, produce particular emotions in them, and have their own emotions evaluated as part of their job performance. As a result, some laborers reduce their emotional distress by numbing their own emotions and, consequently, become unable to distinguish their private feelings from those they manage on behalf of the company. These workers become "burned out"; they feel emotionally drained and exhausted from their work.

Researchers have also examined burnout through the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a quantitative tool that measures job-related burnout along three dimensions, which workers experience sequentially (Maslach 1982). "Emotional exhaustion" occurs when people feel emotionally "used up" from their work and dread facing another day on the job. With few emotional resources left, they begin to engage in "depersonalization," becoming callous and less emotionally involved with clients. Workers may then experience a sense of "reduced personal accomplishment": since they have stopped caring, they feel that they are not adequately doing their job. Despite the conceptual importance of emotional exhaustion as the catalyst that begins the burnout process, most of the literature using the MBI does not examine how workers try to manage their problematic emotions once they appear.

One concept that has been examined in the MBI literature, however, is "role strain," which is consistently found to be positively associated with worker burnout. Although Goode (1960) originally defined role strain as "difficulty in meeting given role demands" (p. 485), other researchers have since delineated three subtypes. "Role overload" occurs when there are too many role demands, given the time allotted (Hecht 2001); "role conflict" arises when one role's demands directly interfere with another's (Hecht 2001); and "role ambiguity" exists when role expectations are unclear (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970).

According to Hochschild and the emotional labor strand of the burnout literature, the type of emotion management that workers engage in may have a great impact on whether and how they experience burnout. Teacher burnout, however, has been studied almost exclusively in the MBI tradition, concentrates heavily on role strain issues, and overlooks teachers' emotions, which may be integral to understanding their experiences (see Capel 1987; Friedman 1991; Greenglass and Burke 1988; Ray and Miller 1991; and Starnaman and Miller 1992). As a result, the literature on teacher burnout seems less comprehensive than it could be. Because the burned-out homeschooling mothers I studied often discussed the strain they felt from their multiple roles as mother, teacher, and homemaker, as well as their problematic emotions associated with their experiences in each role, it makes sense to integrate the two theoretical literatures on burnout to accurately analyze these mothers' experiences.

Research has shown that homeschooling is not a monolithic movement. Although Van Galen (1988) classifies homeschoolers as either ideologues, who homeschool because of their religious beliefs, or pedagogues, who homeschool for academic

reasons, she acknowledges that these are ideal types, and, in reality, many homeschoolers are motivated by a variety of goals (see also Knowles 1988; Mayberry 1992; Mayberry and Knowles 1989). Homeschoolers vary in other ways as well: Mayberry and her colleagues (1995) report that homeschoolers are from all races (though typically white), socioeconomic statuses (though usually middle class and above), and family types (though overwhelmingly from intact nuclear families). Homeschoolers hold a variety of religious orientations (though most often Evangelical or mainstream Protestant), and, although any adult family member may do the teaching, it is almost always the mother who holds the primary responsibility (Mayberry et al. 1995). Although many parents are the sole teachers of their children, many use other resources, such as sending them to public school for one or two courses, hiring tutors, joining co-ops, and enrolling their children in distance-learning courses (see Collom 2005; Mayberry et al. 1995; Stevens 2001).

Scholars have also analyzed macrosocietal aspects of homeschooling, such as how it developed as a social movement (e.g., Bates 1991; Collom and Mitchell 2005; Stevens 2001) and the consequences for public education (e.g., Apple 2000; Hill 2000; Lubienski 2000; Ray 2000a). Others have focused on outcomes, comparing children with their conventionally schooled peers on achievement (e.g., Ray 1988, 2000b; Wartes 1988) and social skills (e.g., Medlin 2000; Shyers 1992). Researchers have also investigated homeschooling parents, describing their demographic characteristics (e.g., Lines 1998; Mayberry et al. 1995; Wagenaar 1997; Wartes 1988) and documenting their individual motivations to homeschool (e.g., Knowles 1988; Mayberry 1988, 1992; Mayberry and Knowles 1989; Van Galen 1988).

Yet, although homeschooling is a unique blend of two major and (in industrialized countries) distinct social institutions—family and education—very little research has investigated the family dynamics that result from bringing children's schooling into the home. Many day-to-day issues, such as how parents find the time and divide the labor required to educate their children as well as how homeschooling affects parents' identities and their relationships with their "students," have not been addressed in much detail.[1] Knowles's (1988) work on the "parent-teacher role identity" is one exception. He finds that homeschoolers develop a teacher identity and adopt particular pedagogical practices in the same way that fledgling schoolteachers do: they draw on their own educational experiences. Yet new homeschooling parents do not simply lack formal training in educating children; they lack formal training in educating *their* children. The parent role is highly salient, as homeschoolers are emotionally invested in their students in ways that schoolteachers could never be. Thus it makes sense to study not only the ways homeschoolers enact a teacher role but also how their connection to their "students" affects their emotional "labor."

Homeschooling mothers' experiences, however, cannot fully be analyzed from an "emotional labor" perspective, because their work is not performed for a wage. Hochschild (1983) does not deny the importance of private-life emotion management, however, and terms this phenomenon "emotion work," noting that "in the

most personal bonds . . . emotion work is likely to be the strongest" (p. 68). Although some research has demonstrated the intense emotion work that family relationships involve, only a small subset has addressed the possibility that burnout may occur from private-life emotion work—that people may become emotionally drained and exhausted from their interactions with their family members. Two of these studies examine married couples: Kulik (2002) finds that poor health, low religiosity, and inequality in gender roles contributes greatly to marital burnout among older Israeli couples, and Erickson (1993) finds that husbands' contributions to "family emotion work" is more important to marital well-being than their combined contributions to housework and child care. Gottschalk (2003) shows how children of Holocaust survivors become emotionally exhausted as they try to manage their parents' post-traumatic feelings and meet their difficult emotional expectations. If such intense parent-child interactions can drain children, it makes sense to study how they may affect parents.

In this article, I examine how homeschooling mothers in the Pacific Northwest adjusted to the teacher role and attempted to manage the new emotions accompanying it. Homeschoolers were optimistic at the beginning, but as they encountered challenges, they quickly found the teacher role overwhelming. Many experienced strain between their role as teacher and their other roles as mother and homemaker—as a result, many burned out. Particular types of emotion work helped reduce role strain, and the mothers who employed these strategies were able to overcome burnout.

In the next section, I describe the homeschoolers I studied and the methods I used to gather, analyze, and validate my data. I then outline the stages of adjustment to the teacher role and show how mothers' experiences, emotions, and approaches to teaching changed over time, straining their ability to perform other roles. I conclude by discussing the implications for theories of burnout.

METHODS AND DATA

After moving to "Springfield" (pseudonyms are used throughout), a semirural county in the Pacific Northwest, in 2000, I immediately noticed that homeschooling was popular. I was intrigued by the sheer number of people homeschooling and wondered how it affected their family lives. Believing that I could best answer this question by gaining "intimate familiarity" (Blumer 1969) with the phenomenon, I decided to conduct an ethnography of a homeschooling support group and interview homeschoolers about their experiences. I began attending the Parents Association for Teaching at Home, or PATH, a support group open to the public. PATH's purpose was to help parents make connections with other homeschooling families, share curricular ideas, vent stresses, solve common problems, and gain legal, academic, and social information about homeschooling. There were over 600 member-families in PATH. Compared with the national average, people in Springfield were more than twice as likely to homeschool.[2]

Although homeschoolers were overrepresented in Springfield, PATH members' demographic characteristics were quite similar to what the most representative studies have shown (see Mayberry et al. 1995; Ray 2000b; Wagenaar 1997). Almost every PATH family was white, intact, and heterosexual. Most were middle class, although their income-levels ranged from poor to very affluent. Since mothers were overwhelmingly in charge of homeschooling, most participants at PATH meetings were women. Held one night a month in a middle-school gym, the meetings included question-and-answer panels, small-group discussions, famous guest speakers, and informal curriculum displays. Participant numbers waxed and waned—some meetings drew hundreds, while others drew only a few dozen.

I took on an "active membership role" in the setting (Adler and Adler 1987). Because I did not have children when I began the research, I did raise some suspicion on occasions when I was forced to reveal this fact. Some people shied away immediately, possibly fearing that I, a researcher from a state-run university, was motivated to "prove" that homeschooled children were academically and socially deficient.[3] Other PATH members, however, enthusiastically shared their experiences with me. Thus, although I was able to participate in the meetings and talk openly to many homeschoolers to gain intimate familiarity with the phenomenon, I remained somewhat removed from the experience because I myself was not homeschooling.

For three and a half years I took detailed field notes of the monthly PATH meetings as well as three statewide, all-day homeschooling conventions that I attended. I also conducted twenty-four in-depth interviews (via convenience, snowball, and theoretical sampling) with homeschooling parents about their experiences and philosophies, focusing the questions loosely on the topics of homeschooling, parenting, family, and education.[4] Finally, I collected data from various other sources, such as the monthly PATH newsletter, the two most prominent national homeschooling magazines, several audiotaped sessions from three conventions that I had not attended, and an occasional newspaper article or National Public Radio report.[5]

My sample of interviewees was also fairly consistent with larger samples of homeschoolers (see Mayberry et al. 1995; Ray 2000b; Wagenaar 1997). Twenty identified with a Christian-based religion, and among those, fourteen held highly conservative and fundamental Christian beliefs. Four interviewees told me they were not at all religious. Twenty-one of the families were white, two were Hispanic American, and one was African American. Parents' ages ranged from the late twenties to early fifties, with most in their mid-thirties to early forties. All interviewees were women, although four husbands participated with their wives in the interviews. The number of children they were homeschooling (or had homeschooled) ranged from 1 to 12 and averaged 3.2; their years of experience ranged from 1 to 17 and averaged 6.3. Most families were middle class, although a few were working class or upper middle class. One subject was a single mother; one homeschooled her grandson, whose father was single; all others were married. Most held four-year college degrees; two worked outside the home (the single mother worked part-time; the other worked nights and weekends).

As I collected my data, I saw patterns emerging from certain topics, or "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969), such as the role stresses and burnout from adjusting to the teacher role. I kept these concepts in mind as I collected more data, further probing homeschoolers in an effort to flesh out the richness and intricacy of the experience. I then formulated tentative theories to explain the patterns and their interrelations. As some new data supported my developing analysis and others refuted it, I revised my concepts and categories as well as refined my emerging conceptual framework, a process similar to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory. Using theoretical sampling, I continued this process until I reached "theoretical saturation"—until I felt that I was not learning anything new, that my findings were validated, and that no new patterns emerged from the data.

HOMESCHOOLING MOTHERS' ADJUSTMENT TO THE TEACHER ROLE

Mothers who taught their children at home had to adjust to the demands of adding the teacher role to their other family roles. Although a few mothers had previously been schoolteachers, for most, the role was entirely new. Many mothers experienced similar types of role strain, which typically led to problematic emotions. They used similar strategies to try to alleviate these feelings, but, like many beginning teachers (see Capel 1991), most homeschoolers eventually burned out. Some of them overcame burnout, while others stagnated in this emotionally draining stage.

Homeschoolers passed through four stages as they adopted the teacher role. The type of role strain they experienced, the emotions they felt, and the particular strategies they used to try to manage these feelings marked these stages.

Role Ambiguity: Insecurity and Structure

Parents decided to homeschool at different times. Some decided years before their children were ready for school (sometimes before they were born), some decided once their children reached school-age, and others removed their children from public or private schools. Once they committed, however, mothers entered the first stage of homeschooling where they felt a mixture of excitement and insecurity about their decision. They were excited because they thought this option was best for their children, yet they remained nervous that they would not succeed—a common concern among new homeschooling mothers (see Stevens 2001). As Cassandra, a white, upper-middle-class mother of four boys, explained: "It can be terrifying. . . . Kids come out of school not knowing how to read, so you just expect that if the teachers can't do it, then it must be really, really hard."

Most mothers doubted their ability to become their children's primary teachers, especially if they had no formal teaching training. Yet even some who had been schoolteachers were insecure about their ability, which is not uncommon for teachers and is often a factor contributing to burnout (Cordes and Dougherty 1993;

Friedman and Farber 1992; Greenglass and Burke 1988; Ray and Miller 1991). Molly, a former high-school teacher, reflected on her "terrible" confidence level when she began teaching her six-year-old son:

> If it had not been my child, it would have strictly been a professional thing. But this has emotional and professional and long-range impact to our child. So I was very nervous about it. I really did not think I could really do it well.

It was not that Molly did not know how to teach but that she did not know how to teach a child to whom she had a deep emotional attachment—her own. She felt unable to approach this assignment solely from her "professional" teacher role because of the personal investment she held in her son's education. Other research has uncovered the flip side of this phenomenon, where paid caregivers like nurses (Bullock and Waugh 2004) and day-care workers (Murray 1998) are not sure how to maintain a professional role and still become close to their clients (see also Copp 1998). Such role ambiguity has been shown to be an important factor in burnout among schoolteachers (Capel 1987, 1991; Kottkamp and Mansfield 1985; Ray and Miller 1991; Starnaman and Miller 1992) and other service workers (Copp 1998; Cordes and Dougherty 1993), perhaps because role ambiguity may lead to emotional insecurity, as it did for these homeschooling mothers.

To reduce this role ambiguity, and thus their insecurity, mothers researched different pedagogies and curricula. Most, but certainly not all, felt an intense desire to structure their curriculum and plan out a yearlong schedule that would keep their children on track with their conventionally schooled peers. Some mothers first sought curricular advice from the public school district, which was of little help, so most eventually turned to experienced homeschoolers.

The most common advice that veterans offered mothers was to embrace more flexibility in their teaching styles and curricula. Indeed, research shows that schoolteachers who incorporate more flexibility in their classrooms avoid burnout better than those who do not (Friedman 1991). Veteran homeschoolers talked about their own (often disastrous) experiences starting out with "too much" structure (which they called the "school-at-home" method), in which they simulated a conventional classroom in their home, complete with blackboards, desks, and subjects separated out by minutes of the day. Veterans tried to convince newcomers that "homeschooling" was not simply about bringing structured ideas on education into the home but about holistically educating their children according to their interests and needs. They constantly told newcomers to relax and that their children would learn if parents made learning fun.

Experienced homeschoolers tried to redefine inexperienced mothers' emotions for them, exposing them to the "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1983) of the homeschooling subculture. They suggested that they "should" relax (both their curricula and their emotions), that they "should not" be terrified about their abilities to teach their children, and that children learn best through enjoyable, playful engagement—at times even suggesting children's everyday play be the main curriculum. A few

mothers implemented this approach, but most became very nervous at such suggestions—it only heightened their sense of role ambiguity and insecurity. They did not believe their children would learn without a formal curriculum, and, as a result, they ignored the advice. When I asked newcomers whether they would consider an unstructured approach, many made statements like, "I'm too terrified to try that right now," and "I can't gamble with my son like that." Instead, they bought expensive curricula and scheduled the entire year by dividing the chapters in the books by the weeks in the traditional school year. Despite constant warnings against such rigidity, most newcomers initially alleviated anxiety in this way.

Once "structured" mothers began homeschooling, most experienced a honeymoon period (anywhere from six weeks to five months) when they stuck to their schedules—even getting ahead in some areas—and their children were happily absorbing the knowledge their mothers imparted to them.[6] Sarah, a white, middle-class mother of two girls, ten and two, described her first few weeks of homeschooling after pulling her older daughter out of a private Christian school:

> The first six weeks of homeschooling were *fantastic*. . . . Oh! She was just a delightful kid! She was *wonderful* to be around! . . . We got all our work done when I was at my strongest and not as tired, and we weren't bouncing off each other's emotions as much [as when she was in school]. . . . Both [my daughter and I] are much more comfortable with structure, so we had our schedule. We both like to check things off, see how much we can get done in a day.

Homeschooling originally brought the relief Sarah was hoping for—more relaxed family dynamics and a more academically productive child. She attributed her success partly to the structure they followed. Mothers like Sarah, at this point, thought the demands of the teacher role seemed clear, which reassured them that homeschooling—and their structured approach to it—was the right choice. It also made them feel competent in the teacher role. When one mother's child taught himself to read during her first year homeschooling, she thought, "What's there to teaching kids? It's so easy, they teach themselves! What do teachers complain about?"

Role "Failure": Anxiety, Interpersonal Emotion Management, and Intensification

For the vast majority of "structured" families, though not all, the homeschooling honeymoon came to a crashing halt when they encountered two challenges: children's low motivation and their lack of progress relative to parents' expectations. These impediments made mothers feel as if they were failing as teachers, which marked the second emotional stage of adjusting to the teacher role. They experienced extreme anxiety, fearing that they were "ruining" their children. To counter these feelings of role failure, mothers tried to manage their children's negative emotions and help them "catch up" academically by intensifying the curricular structure.

Low Student Motivation and Managing Emotions

One challenge that mothers encountered was their children's poor attitude toward schoolwork, one of the most difficult aspects of schoolteachers' jobs as well (Burke, Greenglass, and Schwarzer 1996; Cunningham 1983; Friedman 1995; Greenglass and Burke 1988; Walsdorf and Lynn 2002). Many children quickly learned that it was no fun to complete a workbook assignment at the kitchen table before they could play. I asked Sarah what happened after her initial six weeks, during which her ten-year-old daughter had been "just wonderful to be around":

> I don't know *what* happened [*laughs*], but she would [say,] "No, I don't want to do this! . . . No, I *won't* go to my room!" . . . [She was] slamming doors—you name it. . . . It was a huge crisis point. [She] just didn't want to do anything. . . . She *hates* writing, so we started out the school year doing some calligraphy, but I think she overheard me saying that we call that "penmanship," too, and she hasn't done it since [*laughs*]! So I'm needing to work on ways to motivate her. To make it interesting to her. . . . To push through it.

The majority of parents I talked to described having experienced similar problems (though not always as severe). Like Sarah, most tried to "push through it," because they saw it as a way to instill important values in their children—traits that they, like many Americans, saw as necessary to succeed in life, such as discipline and delayed gratification. Parents' fear was that if they allowed their children to perform only the activities they liked at the expense of those they did not, they would develop a poor work ethic and not become successful adults. Thus "pushing through it" was a strategy that mothers used to try to manage not only their children's emotions but also their own anxieties about "ruining" their children.[7]

However, when pushed, some children "dug in their heels," as one mother told me, and when that happened, parents felt that they had to hold firm. Alice, a white, middle-class grandmother in her first year of homeschooling, explained that her six-year-old grandson did not understand that school time was "serious," not "play time with Grandma": "If he's not in the mood to cooperate fully, we have a test of wills, and I won't give in [*laughs*]. That is the hardest part for me, because some days it seems like it's an all-day process." As a result, Alice set up a classroom in her spare bedroom to try to manage her grandson's emotions—to keep him from "goofing around"—by changing the setting and thus the definition of the situation. In this way, she engaged in "tight" interpersonal emotion management (Lois 2001) by rigidly and unilaterally directing what emotions her grandson should feel and, thus, how he should behave. Her artificial classroom, however, did little to help him become more serious—despite her best efforts, Alice became emotionally drained from the constant interpersonal emotion management.

Like Alice, many homeschoolers soon realized that one of the most exhausting aspects of homeschooling was the sheer amount of interpersonal emotion management they had to perform before any "education" could take place. Research has shown that managing others' emotions—whether for a wage (e.g., Bullock and

Waugh 2004; Copp 1998; Hochschild 1983) or not (e.g., Gottschalk 2003; Mac Rae 1998)—can be draining, which sets the stage for burnout.

Yet mothers who "pushed" also struggled with some of the basic philosophies of homeschooling, which they initially found attractive, such as providing their children with an individualized education. Unmotivated children, the experts claimed, were not developmentally ready to learn certain things. Forcing them would only further decrease their motivation. Experienced homeschoolers, again, recommended more flexibility. Trying to change children's feelings about a subject was a losing battle; indeed, the strategy could backfire, reducing motivation in other areas or, worse, extinguishing children's "love of learning" entirely.

"Inadequate" Student Progress and Intensifying Structure

Another challenge many homeschoolers encountered was that their children were not progressing as quickly as they had planned. Although mothers were happy to devote extra time to teaching when their efforts were successful, they felt as if they were failing in the teacher role when their children did not improve. Research on schoolteachers has shown that burnout is likely to occur when they define student outcomes as very important (Cordes and Dougherty 1993), feel responsible for student performance (Capel 1991; Friedman 1995), and have students who underperform relative to expectations (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). Whitney, a white, working-class mother halfway through her first year of homeschooling, was unsure about how well her eleven-year-old son was keeping up with his conventionally schooled peers:

> I look at his math book and . . . [I say to myself], "There's no way we're going to get done by the end of May or middle of June!" I mean, there's just *no way*. And then Ritchie keeps saying, "But mom, [my class] didn't finish our book last year [in private school]." And I'm like, "Okay, okay." But why didn't *we* finish? Why aren't we further along?

When children were "slow" in an area, parents experienced a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, which is one of the main dimensions of the burnout syndrome (Maslach 1982). Mothers felt extreme anxiety and blamed themselves; one mother, for example, told me that she lay awake some nights crying, thinking, "I'm never going to be able to teach my child to read. I don't have any [training]. He's going to be retarded." The fear that their children were "behind" panicked them. Gretchen, a former high-school teacher and mother of three boys, eight, four, and two, was homeschooling her two oldest. Unlike many mothers I studied, she had always homeschooled in an unstructured way, which worked for her first son, Harry, who started reading at age three. Thus she had never experienced any worries or frustrations with Harry's academic ability. At one point, however, she became more structured because she realized that "we've really got to get to work" on one of his skills:

> It was writing. I [saw] what kids his age could do, [and] I had the feeling like he was *behind*, even though he was reading giant, hardback chapter books, I'm thinking, "Oh man, he's really behind." So I decided we were going to do "school at home" for writing. . . . I tried to really make it official. . . . I got one of those pads that has upper and lower case lines so you know how your letters are to be formed. And I told him, . . . "every day you need to practice your letters." . . . And he would cry, and he would fight when it was time to do the writing.

Even mothers who had previously used an unstructured approach found it difficult to follow the experts' advice to drop the subject for a few months (or even years) until the child is "ready for it." Thus mothers reacted to their children's struggles (and to their own role-failure anxiety) by intensifying their structure—by assigning more work in the "problematic" area—which decreased the child's motivation and, in turn, often led to lower performance. When performance and motivation dropped again, many mothers responded by ratcheting up the structure once more. This process illustrates what Hochschild (1990) calls an "emotion line," a "series of emotional reactions to a series of instigating events" (p. 123), but in this case, the emotional reactions created an intensifying loop for mothers, which led to a cycle of relentless planning and stress. Many mothers ended up using their "free" time to plan the next day's lessons, and this became emotionally draining. Research on schoolteachers has found a similar dynamic: those who take work home are prone to burnout (Capel 1987, 1991).

Sarah, whose daughter had started slamming doors and quit working on calligraphy, found herself caught in this cycle of relentless planning. She described the toll it took on her:

> I get tired. Gosh, there's a lot of times where I just crawl into bed at eight-thirty. . . and I'm just like [*big sigh*], read my book, roll over, go to sleep. But then I'll wake up at two in the morning and start thinking, "Okay, what do we need to do here?" and just—the wheels [in my head] are turning. . . . It's a continued thing—I'm constantly maybe just half a step ahead of Melissa in some areas, feeling like I'm maxing out in fifth grade [*laughs*]!

Anxious about role failure, Sarah decided to intensify her structure. Although her intense emotional and physical investment in the teacher role exhausted her, and the stress was chronic, she continued because it reduced her anxiety about failing. The emotional exhaustion she and many mothers described is the first step to burning out (Maslach 1982).

Role Conflict and Overload: Burnout, Compartmentalization, and Reliance on God

As mothers ratcheted up their curricular demands and tried to combat their children's low motivation, they burned out, which marked the third stage of mothers' emotional adjustment to homeschooling. Homeschoolers often feel stress and overcommitment, as Mayberry and her colleagues (1995) note, because of their immense "physical and psychological workloads" (p. 49). However, the mothers I

studied described the deleterious effect of the substantial emotional workload as well, which took its toll in the form of role conflict and role overload, depending on which roles were involved. The mother role brought about conflict because its demands interfered with those of the teacher role. The homemaker role caused overload because mothers had too much housework in the time available to them. These two types of role strain have been identified as major factors in burnout for schoolteachers (see, e.g., Starnaman and Miller 1992) as well as other service workers (see, e.g., Cordes and Dougherty 1993).

Some mothers felt the conflict between their roles as teacher and mother. Whitney, the mother of eleven-year-old Ritchie, described this tension in detail:

> When you go from being a mother to being a mother-teacher, it's a real hard adjustment for both of you. My son, who teachers think walks on water and is considerate and polite and kind, . . . becomes much more demanding. And things [that] he would never do in school, he's very comfortable [doing] with me. . . . He falls apart. [He says], "I can't do it," and, "I need you." He knows that I won't reject him, and that my love is unconditional for him, so he can push a little further. His teacher would *never* tolerate that kind of behavior. . . . The easy thing would be [to say], "Let's just close the books." But that's what he wants me to do. So you just keep pushing. And then you think, "Why did I do this? Why am I here?"

Whitney was torn between acting as a teacher (not tolerating such behavior) and as a mother (tending to her child's emotional needs). Mothers often reported that emotional dynamics made a typical teacher-student relationship impossible (note that Whitney did not go from "mother" to "teacher," but to "mother-teacher"). At home, children could use their emotions to manipulate their mothers (not necessarily consciously), and mothers spent an inordinate amount of time trying to combat it. This seemed especially true for mothers who embraced the school-at-home method, presumably because they also embraced the traditional idea of "teacher," which in many ways requires a degree of affective neutrality that conflicts with the idea of "mother." Paid caregivers also feel tension between personal caring and professional neutrality (see, e.g., Bullock and Waugh 2004; Copp 1998; Murray 1998). To manage the drastically different emotional requirements of each role, mothers compartmentalized mothering and teaching, which is a logical response to role conflict (Goode 1960). However, homeschoolers who tried to be emotionally available mothers some times but professionally distant teachers at others often burned out. Juggling both roles separately did not adequately alleviate their conflicted feelings.

Many mothers also felt strain in the form of role overload with regard to their role as homemaker because of the sheer amount of time that homeschooling took from their daily schedules, a finding supported by other research on homeschooling parents (see Mayberry et al. 1995; McDowell 2000; Stevens 2001). I heard countless mothers express anxiety about having no time to do housework, which they considered solely their responsibility because they were stay-at-home wives and mothers.

Homeschooling often overloaded them, upsetting the delicate balance of household responsibilities, which distressed them. Many made statements like, "Ah! A messy house! How can I homeschool?"

Housework involved many duties. Abby's white, upper-middle-class family was committed to "whole foods," which meant that Abby bought the raw ingredients to cook, from scratch, much of the family's food. For example, she would grind her own grain from wheat berries to make the family's bread. This commitment only furthered the role overload she experienced. Professional teachers as well as other service workers also often become burned out from having too many role demands (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; see also Copp 1998).

One way mothers adjusted to the increased demands placed on them was by trying to juggle it all—performing every role in their repertoire to the utmost of their ability. Abby stayed up late and got up early to do chores. I asked Abby and her husband, David, about housework:

> Abby: Our standards are fairly high in that department. I can't live with a messy house. . . . And so I pick up every night. We all pick up—well, everybody but David picks up. David does the sensible thing and reads *The New Yorker* and then goes back to work.
>
> David: No, that's not—
>
> Abby: —It's okay, honey, you do other things. . . . And I have to say that both David and I have an unusual amount of energy that other people comment on. Most of my friends could not do what I do, the way I do it. It's not a fault or a blessing or anything, it's just that, you know, they go to bed at night.

Abby, a nonreligious, "liberal, environmental, left-wing" woman, felt responsible for most of the daily housecleaning. When David tried to contest her characterization of him as no help in this department, she soothed his feelings by justifying why she did so much more: first, the overall division of household labor was fair (he did "other things"), and second, housework was not an imposition because she had such an unusually large store of energy (compared with friends, who "go to bed at night"). With these rationalizations in place, Abby was able to feel good about juggling her roles as teacher, mother, and homemaker, and to deny that she was overcommitted.

However, Abby was burning out. Homeschooling in a structured, "school-at-home" way added too much work for most mothers (though not all) to comfortably fold into their daily lives, an observation supported in other research on homeschooling (see Mayberry et al. 1995). Mothers' immense role overloads made them feel inadequate in all of their roles and led to burnout. When I interviewed Abby, she sounded busy but committed to homeschooling. However, several months later, things had changed. She found homeschooling to be increasingly draining because she could not keep her son learning on a predictable schedule, and the more she tried, the more he rebelled. Her friend Gretchen (who used an unstructured style

because her son read at age three) advised her to be more flexible, but Abby resisted. Gretchen told me about Abby's frustration:

> She was hitting a wall. . . . She did "school at home," and it was *awful*. . . . [So I] gave her several examples of how we just do [school] in our everyday life. And so that day she said [to Eddie], "I need help. I don't know how we're gonna pay these bills. Can you show me how we can?" and she said it was the best day they'd had in weeks. She put the curriculum aside and just let him do it. And he didn't realize he was doing math. He didn't realize he was doing his writing. And he did it willingly, and he had a good time doing it. . . . But she just said, "It's so *exhausting* to always have to go in the back door, rather than just sit down and say we're gonna do math, and we're gonna do reading, and we're gonna do writing, and then we can play and have fun."

For Abby, "going in the back door" involved integrating her teacher and homemaker roles so that her son could learn while the bills got paid. But her desire to compartmentalize the roles made her resistant to this approach, and with David's scant domestic contribution, it was too much for her to juggle. She burned out and shortly thereafter enrolled Eddie in public school.

Leanna, like Abby, was also burned out from homeschooling. She not only used a very structured curriculum but revised it often, which made her teacher duties seem relentless. When I asked her whether she had considered a less-structured approach, she said she was "not comfortable being that hands-off with it." Yet constantly revamping her curriculum took a great deal of time, which exacerbated her feeling that she was not accomplishing enough—a common progression of the burnout syndrome (Maslach 1982). Furthermore, homeschooling was not her only source of stress. She also reported feeling strapped for time to do "my chores," though she made a conscious effort every afternoon. Her husband worked full-time (as a public school teacher) and had trained for five marathons in recent years. Leanna told me that he had very little energy to contribute to household and family duties, which meant the housework, child care, and homeschooling of their nine-, six-, and three-year-old boys fell on her.

Like Abby, Leanna juggled the competing demands of teacher, mother, and homemaker, yet unlike Abby, Leanna overcame burnout periodically by relying on her religious beliefs:

> I think [you can overcome burnout] if you have a clear feeling that this is what you're supposed to do. You know, we *know* why we're homeschooling. We know it's the right choice for us. And that makes all the difference. . . . Feeling that this is what God wants us to be doing with our children. . . . And He's gonna help us do what we need to.

Leanna was able to overcome burnout because she was confident that she was following god's plan, a pattern Stevens (2001) also finds among his religious subjects. She not only used her faith in god—"knowing" it was the right path—to alleviate her feelings of overcommitment, but she also used language to obscure the unequal burden she carried in the family: "God wants *us*" to homeschool. By recasting her

individual effort as a collective endeavor, Leanna concealed the fact that she was solely responsible for the housework, parenting, and teaching.[8]

Role conflict and overload took a strong physical and emotional toll on homeschooling mothers, burning them out despite their best emotion management efforts. Abby and Leanna's burnout arose from the same sources: an overly structured curriculum and an unwillingness to acknowledge (or at least be angry about) their husbands' avoidance of household chores.[9] Yet Leanna's reliance on the tenets of fundamentalist Christianity (and perhaps on the unequal gender roles therein) helped her more easily justify her husband's minimal contribution, whereas Abby's secular and progressive ideology perhaps prevented her from adequately explaining away David's lack of involvement. It was more difficult to accomplish all the work because it contradicted her ideas about gender equality, much like many of the wives in Hochschild's (1989) study of married couples' division of household labor. As a result, Leanna persevered, but Abby abandoned homeschooling altogether.

Role Harmony: Prioritization, Support, and Integration

Although some mothers became trapped in the burnout stage of homeschooling, some moved beyond the role conflict, overload, and juggling that homeschooling produced. One way they did so was by "bowling." I heard this term from an experienced homeschooler at one of the monthly PATH meetings. She was fielding questions from the audience, and someone asked, "How do you juggle it all?" She answered, "You can't juggle it all. With homeschooling, it's more like bowling!" Though she did not elaborate, everyone laughed because it was such an apt analogy: jugglers fail when they drop one ball. Bowlers knock down what they can at each opportunity; they do not always need a strike to do well—it all counts.

Mothers who bowled relieved the emotional stress of role overload by prioritizing their mother role over the homemaker role. They lowered their standards for housework so that they could spend more time with their children. This philosophy has been found in other research on homeschooling (see Stevens 2001) as well as in studies of motherhood, such as Bobel's (2001) of La Leche League members who embraced the slogan "people before things" (p. 140). Abby's friend Gretchen, the former teacher and mother of three young boys, told me:

> I have to constantly remind myself that I have the rest of my life to have the house be perfect. . . . This is a pretty small window of time that I'm going to have this opportunity to be home with the kids, and if the laundry waits because we're reading out loud and doing watercolor and taking nature walks, then we can dig through the laundry pile to find clean socks. And we do, often, because the priority isn't on the house.

Gretchen's roles were not equally important, so she did not juggle them as though they were.

Yet it was difficult for homeschoolers to prioritize motherhood without help from their husbands because, although some housework, like folding laundry, could

be disregarded, there was still too much, like meal preparation, that was essential. Mothers who overcame burnout almost always had husbands who supported them with housework, child care, and teaching. Cassandra's husband supported her by being a highly involved father and taking charge of some of the teaching. He also agreed with her that the housework was unimportant. She told me, "Joel knows what it's like to be home with the four kids, and he's glad that I'm playing with them and not feeling like I need to have the house be a social showpiece or anything. He doesn't have that expectation of me."

Husbands who shared the work, whether teaching, housework, or child care, were integral to these mothers' worlds. They helped alleviate stress and burnout by sharing and reducing the workload. Similarly, research on schoolteachers has found that social support—practical, emotional, and informational (Greenglass, Fiskenbaum, and Burke 1996)—from principals (Starnaman and Miller 1992), colleagues (Ray and Miller 1991), and significant others (Greenglass, Fiskenbaum, and Burke 1994; Ray and Miller 1991) greatly reduces burnout.

Mothers also overcame burnout by heeding the advice of experienced homeschoolers and relaxing their curricular structure. Jackie, a middle-class African American mother of two young girls, told me that she was very anxious early in her homeschooling career, trying to make sure that she assigned the right kind of work for her daughter. Jackie read many books on age-appropriate skills and pedagogies, becoming progressively overwhelmed until one book helped her redefine her idea of "teacher":

> All of a sudden, everything came into focus. "Okay, I don't have to know everything in order to be able to help her. I just have to be a *facilitator*." So to change the role from, "I'm her teacher, and she's got to do what I'm saying," . . . to, "Wow, I'm here to help her get what she needs done,"—it was so freeing for me. . . . [I can] learn with her instead of feeling like I have to know everything.

Jackie's approach relieved burnout by reducing the planning time that drained so many mothers. By setting the child on an independent learning course, the "facilitator" strategy allowed mothers to be less dictatorial about their children's education. Since it also gave children some control, their motivation was more easily managed in this "loose" (Lois 2001), collaborative way.

Jackie's experience was also typical in another way: most mothers who embraced a less-structured approach did so only after finding the highly structured, compartmentalizing strategy difficult, frustrating, and ineffective. Other research has revealed this pattern as well; indeed, the move to a less-structured curriculum over time is one of the most consistent findings in the homeschooling research (see Charvoz 1988; Knowles 1988; Mayberry et al. 1995; Stevens 2001; Van Galen 1988). My research reveals the underlying process that may explain this move: a less-structured curriculum allows mothers to achieve harmony among their roles by integrating them rather than experiencing the conflict and overload that arises from compartmentalizing them. After hearing many stories from burned-out mothers, I asked

Cassandra about the difficulties in homeschooling. Her answer illustrated the importance of role integration:

> [Homeschooling] just turned out to be so different than I thought it was going to be. It's so much easier and so much more fun. I thought it was going to be difficult and hard and exhausting, and it's not. . . . Once you realize that [teaching them to read] is just as easy as teaching them to walk and teaching them to feed themselves and teaching them to use the potty, you just do it. It's really not that hard. Once they're ready, they're ready, and they'll just do it.

CONCLUSION

Mothers who began homeschooling had to find a way to combine the teacher role with their other roles. Most passed through three stages of role strain, each of which engendered more intense emotions and time-consuming management techniques than the previous stage. Though experienced homeschoolers advised newcomers to incorporate learning into everyday life, new mothers ignored them because they thought teaching involved setting up a structured curriculum, achieving affective neutrality toward students, and compartmentalizing "education" from other aspects of life. They clung to dominant definitions of "teaching" and "education" (the only ones they knew) in an effort to manage their fears about shortchanging their children. They had to be sure they were educating them the "right" way. Yet despite all these efforts, their emotion work in each stage was largely ineffective in targeting their problematic emotions, and many eventually burned out. Mothers who overcame or avoided burnout did so by achieving role harmony—integrating some roles and prioritizing others.

One significant contribution of this research is found in comparing homeschoolers' burnout with that of workers in paid service roles. In some ways, homeschoolers' burnout paralleled that of schoolteachers, which has been extensively studied using the three dimensions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach 1982): emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Mothers became emotionally exhausted from such intense, and often adversarial, interactions with their children. When children "dug in their heels" or "fell apart," mothers spent a great deal of emotional energy trying to combat these reactions, just as teachers do with similar student behavior (Friedman 1995). Mothers also felt a reduced sense of personal accomplishment when they thought their teaching was subpar or if they had forgone the housework; much like overworked teachers (Starnaman and Miller 1992), they felt as if they were not accomplishing what they were supposed to. Yet it is interesting that homeschoolers did not experience the third dimension of burnout; they showed no evidence of depersonalization, as schoolteachers (Greenglass et al. 1996) and other service workers (Copp 1998; Cordes and Dougherty 1993) commonly do.

One explanation may be that depersonalization is an emotion management technique that is not available to homeschooling mothers because their role is not

professionalized. When socioemotional imbalances occur in professionalized relationships, detachment allows workers to regain a semblance of equality (refusing to invest emotionally lowers the cost relative to the benefit; see Hochschild 1983 and Mac Rae 1998). Schoolteachers (or other service workers, for that matter) can counter their feelings of emotional exhaustion by detaching from their students and investing less in these relationships. Homeschoolers, however, cannot depersonalize their students because "good" mothering requires emotional investment; to pull away from one's children violates the ideology of good mothering (Hays 1996). However hard mothers tried to compartmentalize their teacher and mother roles, perhaps they could not do so sufficiently to achieve detachment in one role but not the other—a potential problem for people in any relationship that requires emotional investment. This research, then, suggests that burnout is not only possible in private life, as Erickson (1993), Kulik (2002), and Gottschalk (2003) have shown, but also that the experience may be drastically different from that of paid work.

In addition, theories and measures of professional burnout may not be applied unconditionally to explain burnout in all personal relationships because, when intimacy is involved, women and men inhabit two different "emotional cultures" (Gordon 1989): each has specific beliefs about what emotions are important as well as how particular emotions should be interpreted, acted on, and expressed. My data suggest that the gendered emotional culture of motherhood (and intimate relationships) constrains how women experience and cope with burnout. This constraint does not apply to men, for whom the strategy of emotional inexpressiveness, or detachment, is culturally available (Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006; Sattel 1976). Since detachment is a less-viable emotion management strategy for women than for men, women may have to rely on other techniques that may be less effective and, in some cases, more emotionally draining. These data indicate that studying burnout in personal relationships will help refine existing theories.

A second significant finding of this research is that it contributes to the MBI theoretical perspective by illuminating the important interrelationship between roles and emotions in the burnout process. Although emotional exhaustion is a key element of Maslach's (1982) burnout theory, researchers in this tradition have paid little attention to the specific emotions and management techniques that cause exhaustion, often focusing instead on role strain as one of its main antecedents (see Cordes and Dougherty 1993). One insight of my research is that it is not role ambiguity, conflict, and overload that directly contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Rather, these types of role strain evoke problematic emotions that, in some cases, cannot be successfully managed. It is these undesirable emotions—and the management techniques that fail to alleviate them—that lead to exhaustion and burnout. Copp (1998) has also shown that emotions are instrumental in the burnout process: emotional labor can be stressful when a workplace's organizational requirements conflict with its ideology (which, in my terms, constitutes role conflict). As a result of such an incongruity, workers may experience "occupational emotional deviance," which, when chronic, causes burnout. My research supports Copp's findings and

also shows that chronic emotional deviance need not be "occupational" to cause burnout. Furthermore, my data indicate that other types of role strain—specifically, ambiguity and overload—also contribute to burnout. By examining mothers' emotional experiences, my analysis reveals some previously hidden explanatory links between role strain and burnout.

A third significant finding is that mothers who began to burn out reacted in two ways. Mothers who thought of teaching as just one aspect of their (more important) mother role better navigated the competing role demands than mothers who compartmentalized and juggled each role equally. Hochschild (1983) suggests that "when roles change, so do rules for how to feel and interpret events" (p. 74). By prioritizing motherhood and recognizing that teaching was an essential part of mothering, these homeschoolers reconciled the competing emotional demands of the "professionalized" teacher role and the "personalized" mother role. They learned to feel differently about teaching and education, and as a result dramatically changed their homeschooling experiences and their identities. In her research on gay and ex-gay Christian support group members, Wolkomir (2001) has also demonstrated a link between emotions and identity. As she states, "Feeling a certain way meant being a certain someone" (see also Hochschild 1983), and this was certainly true for the homeschoolers who overcame burnout by redefining their roles. This idea may also explain why some mothers resisted integrating and prioritizing their roles: they did not want to change who they were.

Yet the fact that mothers with husband support were the ones likely to redefine their roles, whereas mothers without support were not, adds another layer of complexity to the analysis. It is possible that the unsupported homeschoolers did not redefine their roles because the inequality inherent in their marriages kept them from doing so. Redefining the demands of each of their roles could easily change the balance of power in their unequal relationships, an option that traditional husbands would likely oppose (see Hochschild 1989). Although mothers would alleviate the stress that they felt as mothers, teachers, and homemakers by reducing and integrating their role demands, husband resistance would increase the stress they felt as *wives*, which might be no relief at all. Thus my research goes beyond Wolkomir's, showing how structural inequality affects people's ability to manage their emotions through role redefinition.

Finally, this research contributes to the existing literature on homeschooling. My data show that many homeschooling mothers saw the roles of teacher and mother to be intricately connected. Other studies also show this pattern and find that many homeschoolers reject modernist assumptions that create separate institutions for education and family, and instead think of their roles as mothers, teachers, and homemakers as one unified role (Mayberry and Knowles 1989; Mayberry et al. 1995). Yet this existing research is cross-sectional and aimed at explaining parents' motivations to homeschool as reported at one point in time. It cannot explain how homeschoolers arrive at these ideas.

My research illustrates how homeschoolers come to view their roles as unified. Most of the homeschoolers I studied did not start out fully ensconced in the premodernist worldview where teaching and mothering are part of one unified role. If they had, the majority of mothers would have easily accepted the advice from experienced homeschoolers to "destructure" their curriculum and would have blended their roles much sooner, avoiding the burnout that most eventually experienced. Although many of my subjects embraced the role-integrating ideology on the surface, their fears about ruining their children and their deep-seated ideas about the way education "should" happen prevented many from fully accepting this ideological stance. Since my research has focused on the stages of homeschooling burnout, it has illuminated some of the complexity of this dynamic role-unification process.

In addition, Mayberry and her colleagues' (1995) research demonstrates that it is mostly the New Age and Christian homeschoolers who tend to view their roles as unified. My research suggests a different pattern: that the homeschoolers most likely to integrate roles were those whose husbands strongly supported them. Whether they shared housework, teaching, or child care, these husbands were instrumental in helping their wives redefine their roles. Thus my research indicates that if the substantial work of homeschooling is not shared alongside household and caregiving labor, it may deepen gender inequality and make women's family life even more emotionally demanding.

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NOTES

1. For a brief description of how homeschooling families divide household labor see Stevens 2001.
2. According to recent U.S. census data, the 600 homeschooling families who were members of PATH constituted 3 to 4 percent of the family households with children under eighteen living in Springfield County. The U.S. Department of Education (see Lines 1998 and the National Household Education Surveys Program 2003) has estimated that 1 to 2 percent of school-age children are homeschooled nationally; thus, homeschooling in our county was indeed quite prevalent—at least twice the national rate, but probably much higher, since most families homeschooled more than one child and not all were members of PATH.
3. Other research has found that homeschoolers tend to regard certain individuals and groups with some suspicion. Mayberry et al. (1995) finds that homeschoolers tend to distrust "large-scale social institutions" (p. 41), and Stevens (2001) finds that they tend to be "wary of state intrusion into family life" (p. 5).
4. I directed two undergraduate students, who had been homeschooled themselves, in conducting several of these interviews.

5. I did not observe people in the act of homeschooling—a potential limitation of my data. My field notes came from support-group meetings and conventions, forums that gave the participants a chance to talk about what they found challenging and how they felt—largely the issues I also covered in interviews. Thus I rely most heavily on my interview data because they confirm what I saw and heard in the field, yet allow the subjects to speak for themselves.
6. This short honeymoon period was typical for mothers using the structured, "school-at-home" method of teaching, which the vast majority implemented at the start. It is important to note, though, that I did interview two mothers (Gretchen and Cassandra) who used a flexible pedagogical style from the start (something other mothers only adopted later). However, even mothers who were unstructured at the beginning were not immune to experiencing the challenges of homeschooling, which only meant that their honeymoon period—perhaps a year or two—was longer than that of structured mothers.
7. Chin (2000) finds similar emotional dynamics in her study of parents helping their children apply to elite private schools.
8. My thanks to Martha Copp for pointing this out and for suggesting several other analytic revisions.
9. Kulik (2002) finds that inequality in gender roles is a major factor in marital burnout.

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