

PEDAGOGUES FOR A NEW AGE:  
CHILDREARING PRACTICES OF UNSCHOOLING PARENTS

By

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To my gentle husband, Andrew, and our children

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The prevalent characterization of homeschooling in both research and popular perception relies on the instructional practices of the more prolific of two movements of modern parent-educators: those who seek to ameliorate a perceived lack of religious reverence, intellectual rigor, or adequate supervision in the public school system and whose structured, adult-led instructional design closely resembles conventional schooling. The earlier movement, incited by social reformers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is motivated neither by the commitment to moral principles nor by the increased potential for academic achievement afforded by personalized instruction. Little scholarly attention has been focused on “unschoolers” and other parent educators who remain apart from the Christianization of homeschooling, and attempts to identify their justification for the sacrifices of income and personal time necessary to support their radically child-centered pedagogy have been speculative at best.

This research contributes to the anthropological investigation of grassroots social movements, educational reform, and family dynamics by 1) discussing the parental decision to participate in the de-institutionalization of education, 2) contextualizing the practice of consensual learning and an alternative family lifestyle within the cultural domain of childrearing tasks, and 3) comparing the alternativity of unschooling, conventionally homeschooling, and

schooling parents. Utilizing electronic bulletin boards as both virtual sites for participant observation and vehicles for respondent recruitment, this research employed semi-structured interview protocols adapted for online administration to collect qualitative and systematic data to test five hypotheses. First, cultural domain analysis confirmed the existence of a cultural domain of childrearing tasks with a cohesive set of core elements. Second, consensus analysis indicated a cultural consensus among unschooling parents and parents whose children are educated with more conventional curricular models; however, observational data confirmed the hypothesis that unschooling parents are culturally distinct. Third, the underlying categorical dimensions of childrearing tasks revealed by property fitting include how alternative they are and how much decision-making power is afforded to the child whose parent practices a task; the hypothesis that parents organize tasks according to how likely they are to practice each task was not confirmed. Fourth, Guttman scaling analysis revealed that alternative childrearing tasks form a unidimensional continuum by which the practice of certain highly alternative tasks can predict the performance of less alternative tasks. Finally, a comparison of the number of alternative childrearing tasks performed by unschooling parents, their conventionally homeschooling peers, and parents whose children attend school revealed that unschoolers practice more alternative childrearing tasks than their conventionally schooling counterparts. Moreover, homeschooling parents are more similar in their parenting practices to schooling parents than unschooling parents, a finding that suggests parenting style may be a more significant curricular influence than educational setting.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the anthropological investigation of a radical form of homeschooling called *unschooling*, in which decisions concerning what and when to learn are left to the children of parents who have elected this educational model for their children. Unschooling<sup>1</sup> parents dismiss schools (especially those that are publicly funded and operated) as especially antithetical to true education, purporting that school is neither the only nor the best place learning occurs. The anthropological literature has few references to “unschooling” as an educational practice, though challenges to the pre-eminence of school are found in recent discussions of intent-participation and “informal” learning. The chapter also briefly reviews previous research performed using the Internet, along with a discussion of theoretical and ontological implications of ethnographic fieldwork in virtual sites. The statement of the problem, research objectives, and main questions are then presented, followed by a brief discussion of Wallace’s mazeway reformulation as a possible theoretical orientation. The chapter concludes with an annotated outline of the study.<sup>2</sup>

### Literature Review

#### Anthropological Perspectives on Unschooling

The multidisciplinary examination of educational alternatives has been confounded by nebulous definitions and a lack of an updated methodological framework (Kellmayer 1998; Neumann 2001; Raywid 1994; Eisenhart 2001). While a limited number of alternative school

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<sup>1</sup> Unschoolers are referred to as “progressive homeschoolers” by Guterson (1992), who uses the term *progressive* to recognize the student-centered approach proffered by Dewey and other pedagogical progressives (as opposed to administrative progressives) of the educational reform movement.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from this research were presented as a paper entitled, “The End/s of Educational Ethnography: ‘Virtual’ Participant Observation and Systematic Data Collection in an Online Unschooling Community,” at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, PA.

ethnographies exist, home schools have largely been overlooked by anthropological investigation.<sup>3</sup> In addition, while the home-to-school connection is a frequently pondered topic in anthropology (e.g., Blakely 1983; Jones 2007; Lewis and Forman 2002), homeschooling as an educational alternative in the U.S. has received more attention from historians and education policy analysts than from anthropologists. Studies that examine education in the home tend to focus on the public school experiences and family lives of immigrant populations.<sup>4</sup>

Pitman and Smith conducted what appears to be the first (and perhaps only) systematic analysis of unschooling in their examination of an intentional community of approximately twenty independent households in rural north-central United States. Their study is a continuation of work begun earlier in a community of rural homesteaders in the northeastern U.S. that Pitman identified as “an American New Age community” (1987:282).<sup>5</sup> Based upon claims from both educational anthropology and primatology concerning the biological parameters of learning gleaned from the evolutionary past of humans, Pitman and Smith posit that humans display all major forms of primate learning, including observation, modeling, social experience, and play. They argue that researchers of culture acquisition “take the nonformal learning environments of home, family, and community very seriously” (1991:78). Their systematic observation of home learners sought to discover and describe the context and process in which humans “unconsciously and continuously acquire information (81–82). They conclude that “humans are learners and that they cannot be prevented from learning, even in their own homes” (97).

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<sup>3</sup> One exception is Pitman and Smith’s ethnography of homeschooling in an intentional community network of rural and urban dwellers “characterized by their advocacy of personal and planetary health” (1991:78).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in “Biliteracy and Schooling in an Extended-Family Nicaraguan Immigrant Household: The Sociohistorical Construction of Parental Involvement,” Julia Menard-Warwick (2007) explores the relationship of parental involvement and scholastic success of two Nicaraguan mothers and their urban-schooled daughters.

<sup>5</sup> Pitman describes New Agers as “the rural and urban homesteaders who are likely to be advocates of peace, bioregionalism, decentralization, home birth, alternative medical care, sustainable agriculture, land trusts, spirituality, Green politics, and a commitment to well-being on both the personal and planetary levels” (1987:282).

Although Pitman and Smith never mention unschooling, their description of cultural acquisition from social interactions in the context of everyday household tasks is heavily reminiscent of unschoolers' reliance on life as learning.

Despite the lack of anthropological research on “unschooling,” the literature has by no means ignored education as a research problem. Little activity occurred before George Spindler’s pre-WII interest in applying anthropological methods to the study of educational processes; the collection of essays from the first seminar-conference to contemplate educational anthropology, published as *Education and Anthropology*, included works by Alfred Kroeber, Cora DuBois, Margaret Mead, C.W.M. Hart, Bernard Siegel, Jules Henry, Solon T. Kimball, Felix Keesing, and Dorothy Lee (Spindler 1955; Spindler 1982). More recently, Sherry Ortner’s analysis of class mobility among her New Jersey high school classmates provides a concept of “class” constructed on the basis of “occupational categories” (2003: 29). By recognizing the balanced interplay between class determinism (an external factor) and the American myth of self-determinism (an internal factor), Ortner argues that individuals’ social success is “a function of their backgrounds, motivation, and hard work” (277).

Varenne and McDermott (1998) also examine the competitive pattern governing American schooling in order to document the political and institutional foundations supporting the construction of scholastic success and failure as a cultural fact. Their intent is to demonstrate “how much work is necessary for the American world to be reconstructed in the everyday life of everyone” (xii) in the hopes that understanding the context and mechanisms involved in the creation of an educational system will allow participants to improve it. George Spindler recognized this situation in his discussion of what he terms a “collusion of illusions,” which he claims partially explains the old anthropological adage “Nothing is as it seems”: “The basic idea

is that whole school systems (or social systems anywhere) may be centered on illusions about the nature of the situation they are dealing with, and responsible people will make decisions on the basis of them” (2002:18). Both of these works suggest that dispelling these illusions may be the only way to improve a system that now seems impervious to reform.

Claiming that “[s]chool achievement is but a small part of American education,” Varenne argues for an anthropological inquiry into education that transcends analyses of formal schooling and investigates the teaching and learning that occur both inside and outside the classroom (2008:364).<sup>6</sup> He exclaims, “Escaping schooling does open many new roads for anthropological investigation!” This same challenge to the pre-eminence of institutional schooling in anthropological examinations of education is present in discussions of intent-participation and “informal,” “observational,” or “practical” learning, long recognized and studied by anthropologists and psychologists such as Pettitt (1946), Fortes (1970), Mead (1970), Scribner and Cole (1973), Philips (1983), Fine et al. (2000) and, most recently, Paradise and Rogoff (2009) in their examination of family and community-based learning. Learning outside of the bounds of the classroom has been conceived of as being “natural” or “simplistic” and relegated to a secondary (or at least separate) position, reflecting a school-centric bias in research that frustrates understanding of the social and cultural organization that supports informal learning (Paradise and Rogoff 2009; Lave 1982; Strauss 1983). Thus, studies showcasing English language acquisition without explicit instruction (e.g., Kalmar 2001; Gundaker 2007) are few and far between.

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<sup>6</sup> Historian of education Lawrence Cremin defines education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended” (1980: ix).

Moreover, while much of the work of applied anthropologists of education “focuses on the *providers* (teachers and administrators) of educational services rather than on the *recipients* (students)” (Chambers 1985:20), studies focusing on parents as educational providers are even rarer. Even the single existing systematic study of childrearing practices surveyed recipients of corporal punishment instead of parents. Weller et al. (1987) found cultural consensus among Hispanic and white communities regarding corporal punishment and concluded that the practice is pervasive in the U.S. irrespective of race.

### **Non-Anthropological Perspectives on Home Education**

Homeschooling as an educational alternative in the U.S. has received more attention from historians and education policy analysts than anthropologists. Most existing sources specifically addressing unschooling are also non-anthropological and include the normative works of educator-turned reformist writer John Holt, who has been credited by the contemporary movement as its founder. His last book, *Learning All the Time* (1989), illuminates his theory of children not needing instruction in order to learn. Grace Llewellyn’s *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* (1998) discusses life learning and provides a succinct summary of the unschooling community’s indictment of the public education system. Alison McKee provides an autobiographical account of the reconciliation of her public-school training and teaching and her experiences as an unschooling parent in *Homeschooling Our Children Unschooling Ourselves* (2002). Gustafson (1988) included unschoolers in his study of parental motivations for homeschooling. Of the 143 questionnaires from unschoolers, about 25 percent cited social isolation as a disadvantage of homeschooling, with comments ranging from lack of group participation in music and drama to the extra effort that must be expended to provide social contact for their children.

In their attempt to discover how the academic achievement and affective development of homeschooled children compare to the academic achievement and affective development of conventionally schooled children, education policy analysts Ray and Wartes addressed the “serious doubt [that] exists as to whether parents teaching their children in the confines of their homes can be pedagogically successful at transmitting to their children the highly prized curricula of American schooling” (1991:43). Observing that homeschooling parents cite higher academic achievement and improved socialization as reasons for keeping their children out of traditional schools despite the apparent lack of both formal pedagogical training and opportunities for interaction in the confines of the home, Ray and Wartes examined several studies relating to the measurement of academic achievement and affective development. They found that homeschooled children fare the same or better than their public-schooled peers in academic achievement regardless of parent education level. Homeschooled children “also appear to be at no great risk with respect to socialization” (57). Despite noted shortcomings in sampling (most samples were self-selected) and research design (none were true experiments), these reviewers concluded that “the apparently positive results of home schooling can be perceived as a critique of traditional schooling . . . exacerbated when findings include that, upon close analysis, there is an insignificant relationship between the test scores of homeschooled students and whether the parent-teachers were state-certified teachers” (59).

Ray and Wartes also note that homeschooling parents are “willing to make great personal sacrifices for their children’s total growth and development—academic, social, and spiritual. Given the parental support and commitment they experience at home, it may be that these home-educated children would have done just as well, academically and socially, in conventional schools” (58–59). “Finally, it may be that the detailed measurement of achievement and

socialization is a moot exercise in terms of explaining, promoting, or defending home education. . . perhaps what is also needed is for researchers to question home-school parents carefully to find out more precisely what *their* objectives are for *their* children. Researchers could then follow the youth over a long term to determine whether home education is actually effective in meeting home schoolers' goals" (59).

Van Galen (1986; 1988; 1991) was the first to use the terms "ideologues" and "pedagogues" to differentiate between what many have identified as the two broad categories into which homeschoolers may fall.<sup>7</sup> She interviewed twenty-three parents from sixteen homeschooling families in North Carolina in addition to attending homeschoolers' meetings (most often the Central Christian Academy). Most of the families (thirteen out of the sixteen) described themselves as conservative Christians while the remaining three reported no religious affiliation. Van Galen lamented the lack of information about "the values, beliefs, and motives of the parents who chose to home school," adding that "even less is known about how parents living in a culture that takes institutional schooling for granted come to teach their children at home" (1988:89).

Pitman profiled homeschooling families and examined the effect of the homeschooling movement on compulsory attendance. She observed that middle-class homeschooling families "who have been honest, open, and direct in their rejection of contemporary schooling . . . have become the focus of truancy enforcement disproportionately on a national scale" (1987:281). She suggested three broad, motivation-based categories by which home-schoolers can be characterized: "religious, progressive and academic, or, alternatively, Fundamental Christians,

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<sup>7</sup> Milton Gaither calls Van Galen's dissertation "one of the earliest and best doctoral dissertations on homeschooling," though he takes issue with referring to conservative Protestants as ideologues and calling "more liberal homeschoolers" pedagogues because of the ideological and pedagogical motivations of both groups (2008:143).

New Agers, and the “Harvard-bounds.”<sup>8</sup> Pitman found that religious concerns motivated the largest proportion of homeschooling parents.

Mayberry used surveys and in-depth interviews to examine the demographic, religious, political, and educational attitudes of home school families in Oregon for her dissertation in sociology (1988). She identifies four general categories of home educators: religious families and New Age families (both of whom object to the content of the public school curriculum); and academic and socio-relational families, who believe parents are best equipped to provide children with high academic standards, individualized instruction, and safe, nurturing learning environments. She also claims that home schoolers maintain a “peripheral” relationship to mainstream society and reject contemporary social institutions in their responses to modernity and secularization.

Other educational studies of parental motivation include Gustavsen’s (1981) survey of 150 homeschooling families drawn from Raymond and Dorothy Moore’s Hewitt Research Foundation mailing list, which cited poor quality public schools, desire to provide moral education, and hopes of closer parent-child relationships as reasons for homeschooling.<sup>9</sup> The sixty-six Christian families in Texas responding to Linden’s (1983) chose homeschooling for the explicit purposes of preventing the inculcation of their children by the progressive, humanistic values of the public schools and demonstrating their deep commitment for their children and the priority they placed on their upbringing. Greene found a similar assortment of religious, progressive, and academic concerns among Alaskan families whose children were enrolled in the state-sponsored Centralized Correspondence Study program. Fifty-eight percent of the

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<sup>8</sup> These categories are by no means discrete, as the homeschooling movement’s famed Colfax family illustrates. David and Micki Colfax’s homeschooling style most closely resembles unschooling in the New Age tradition, yet all three sons attended Harvard (Colfax and Colfax 1988).

<sup>9</sup> The foundation was geared mostly to conservative fundamentalist homeschoolers.

respondents reported having chosen homeschooling for the “teaching of religious/spiritual and moral values,” fifty-two percent cited the integration of academic skills with “daily practical skills,” and thirty percent claimed that homeschooling is “more consistent with their lifestyle” (1984:32).

Knowles et al. assert, “Children’s learning predominantly from parents is a cross-cultural phenomenon and a natural occurrence within family contexts” (1992:201). In an oft-cited article providing a brief historical account of the homeschooling movement, they concede the ancient origins of home schools but attribute the contemporary emergence of homeschooling as a school alternative to “a growing trend that can, in its modern inception, be viewed as an outcome of a direct reaction to the many shortcomings of public education that were commonly raised by educational reformers of the 1960s and 1970s” (1992:195). Duly noting the dichotomies that are “very apparent in the orientations and substance of home-school activities,” Knowles et al. determine that “the pedagogical orientation, which was dominant prior to the 1980s, most clearly had its origins in the educational reform writing of the previous two decades” (197). Early home schools, they observe, reflected the alternative views and practices of these reformers; however, by the time the movement passed through its five phases (contention, confrontation, cooperation, consolidation, and compartmentalization) during the two decades that span 1970 to 1990, religious justifications for homeschooling had replaced pedagogical concerns as the main impetus for the growth in the home schooling population.

Knowles et al. found that religiously motivated parents operate home schools mainly to avoid secular humanism and “apparent student immorality,” lamenting: “[I]n these settings, the processes and functions of the public school are largely replicated” (196). On the other end of the spectrum Knowles et al. place families who regard the term “home schooling” as a misnomer

and may prefer “home education” to more accurately represent their children’s learning activities.<sup>10</sup> Integrating learning with household activities, these families believe that “schooling” does not guarantee an education. Knowles et al. compare extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for learning to differentiate between schooling and education:

With systematic curricula, teacher-directed lessons, and external rewards and punishments, schooling provides a structure that requires extrinsic motivation of the student. Conversely, education implies the development of the learner and includes the notion that the learner is responsible for deciding what is learned. This perspective places a greater emphasis on intrinsic motivation as learning is less structured, more direct, and more experiential (*ibid.*).

Home schools with this educational orientation use the real world as “both a laboratory and a purpose for learning, making them “vastly different from public schools, both in content and operation” (196).

In his sociological examination of contemporary homeschooling in the Chicago area, Stevens (2001) corroborates the rise in prevalence of religiously motivated parents who now dominate both home education and commonly held perceptions about home educators. His work begins with a detailed account of the specific contexts from which the two homeschool movements emerged. He emphasizes their differing histories and organizational models:

Some of them cut their teeth as activists in the liberal “free school” movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These activists were familiar with the highly democratic organizational forms favored by attendant causes of that era, namely, the New Left student movement and, a bit later, the nascent feminist movement. From the beginning they have imagined a diverse and democratic homeschool cause, a big-tent movement with plenty of room for political and philosophical agreement. Those who became homeschool leaders in the evangelical and fundamentalist world, however, did so with contrary understandings of what a social movement ought to look like. In that world, hierarchical divisions of labor and authority are generally regarded as appropriate, as is the exclusion of those who do not share one’s religious faith (Stevens 2001:5).

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<sup>10</sup> The authors note that these parents are similar to the “pedagogues” described by Van Galen (1986); many of Van Galen’s “pedagogues” are unschoolers. See Appendix K for a differentiation between the terms *home education* and *home schooling*.

Instead of Van Galen's categories "ideologues" and "pedagogues," Stevens prefers the terms "believers" for conservative Protestant homeschoolers and "inclusives" for homeschoolers who place more emphasis on liberal pedagogy than religious motivations. The "inclusive" label seems to also extend to the latter group's incorporation of children, who were noticeably absent from the believers' regimented meetings.

Keenly aware of the dichotomy within home education, Stevens observes that the "exclusively Christian" and "inclusive" organizations have met different fates; the evangelical Protestant version "is larger and wealthier and more handily directs the national conversation on homeschooling" (2001:7). Conversely, "ecumenical" homes schoolers operate

according to the rules and with the resources of "alternative" America—that fragile organizational network left after the ebb of liberal causes of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the world of alternative schools, progressive not-for-profits, food co-ops, and the occasional surviving commune that carry on the egalitarian ethos of the student movements and the counterculture. It is a small world now, short on cash, physical plants, and new blood, but still a hotly idealistic and quietly optimistic place (*ibid.*).

Many of the "other home schoolers" to which Stevens refers are most likely those who label themselves as "unschoolers."

Stevens reports that parents repeatedly claimed their children's self-development was "worthy of virtually any sacrifice," noting the suspended careers, decreased incomes, unkempt houses, limited adult social lives, and occasionally strained marriages—"all in the interest of giving more to the kids" (7-8). Whereas he easily associated the believers' motivations for the material comforts and personal time forfeited on behalf of their children as clear extensions of Christian motherhood, he found justifications for the similarly sacrificing behavior of the inclusives, ostensible descendants of the feminist movement, less apparent.

Gaither's *Homeschool: An American History* (2008) contextualizes the contemporary homeschooling movement within the history of the U.S. and its public education system. Gaither

comments that Stevens's terminology "avoids [Van Galen's] connotation that only liberal homeschoolers had pedagogical motivations and only conservatives had ideologies, but it too runs the risk of implying that only conservative protestant homeschoolers are religious believers or that all believers are separatistic" (143). He uses the terms "closed communion homeschoolers" for those who only allow certain members into their groups, conferences, and subscriptions and "open communion homeschoolers" for those with no such exclusive selection criteria for participation.

One of only a few scholarly works to formally recognize practitioners of "unschooling" as a subgroup of open-communion homeschoolers, Gaither's text chronicles the Christianization of modern homeschooling and describes how unschoolers and other followers of John Holt eventually found themselves viewing their own movement from "outside the loop." Noting the attempt of many unschoolers of the 1970s to "keep a low-profile" (182), he observes that, in the period directly preceding the "massive influx of conservative Christians into the movement," the majority of parents were able to handle inquiries without court involvement. Gaither perceptively addresses the attitudinal contrast between unschoolers and evangelical Christian home schoolers:

[U]pon the entrance of thousands of angry Protestants who were convinced that public schools were "Satanic hothouses," relations with officials were strained considerably. . . . [W]hile many unschoolers successfully cooperated with school officials, religious conservatives were often aggressively antagonistic, leading to showdowns (Gaither 2008:183).

According to Gaither, the amplified tension in the once-cordial relations between parent educators and local school districts affected religious conservatives and unschoolers alike, as school officials' increasing hostility toward homeschoolers made regulation imminent, much to the chagrin of unschoolers: "While some homeschoolers feel the need for an official sanction for their behavior, others, especially unschoolers, tend to prefer the vagaries of unregulated practice. New legislation usually grants legitimacy but increases regulation" (*ibid.*).

Like Stevens, Gaither attributes the one-sided growth in homeschooling to the conservative Protestant retreat from secular humanism coupled with a sizeable population of stay-at-home mothers (142). Gaither also asserts that the much smaller but no less dedicated number of radical leftists abandoned the government-sponsored schools out of pro-child, anti-institutionalist protest:

The progressive left had long harbored romantic ideals of child nature, born of Rousseau and come of age in the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century. Countercultural leftists inherited this outlook, and when they had children their instinct was to liberate the kids from what they thought to be the deadening effects of institutionalization by keeping them at home (113).

Pointing to the increased diversity in homeschool demographics and parental motivations, Gaither concludes that homeschooling is “a major, and increasingly mainstream, force in American education, so much so that we may be dealing no longer with a self-conscious protest movement but something more like the routine domestic education of the past” (200).

Radical feminist Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff<sup>11</sup> (2007) offers another possible explanation for the leftist attraction to homeschooling. In “Homeschooling Is a Feminist Act,” she claims participation in a largely invisible movement to revolutionize motherhood and “create a new and better life, even within the constraints of a surrounding male supremacist culture” (Seelhoff 2007:64). She writes that home schooling enables mothers to provide “a woman-centered education, unhindered by the regulations of the patriarchists” while avoiding the “racism, sexism, misogyny, classism [and] bullying in the schools” (65). She posits:

Imagine raising children who need never be scarred or traumatized by the dehumanizing effects of such things as popularity and beauty contests, proms, school bullies, peer pressure, including the pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, to be “feminine” or “girly” or “macho,” religious bigotry, religious

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<sup>11</sup> Gaither briefly chronicles the controversy surrounding Seelhoff’s transition from a Christian homeschool leader to a radical feminist unschooler, calling it “the biggest scandal to have emerged out of [the] feud between closed and open communion homeschoilers” (2008:170).

holidays, homophobia, racism, or exposure to gangs, drugs, alcohol or weapons at school. Envision instead deciding with your children where and how they will learn about all of these things (66).

According to Seelhoff, removing children from public schools also allows women to create communities among like-minded mothers. The daycare system that exists to support “the tyranny and rigid regimentation of modern life under Western male supremacy” by warehousing even the smallest children, she suggests, can be replaced with “villages” of mutually respecting women and children. After listing the various cottage industries with which she supported her own family, she emphasizes home schooling’s potential for lifestyle simplification and concludes that such a lifestyle should be especially attractive to separatist feminists seeking to create intentional communities centered around women’s concerns, politics, businesses, and organizations.

### **Virtual Community**

While several such intentional communities exist in various parts of the U.S. (e.g., Twin Oaks and Acorn Community in rural Virginia, founded in 1967 and 1993 respectively; Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, founded in 1997 in rural northeastern Missouri; Earthaven, established in 1994 in the southern Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina; and West Wind, founded in 1995 on a mesa in northern New Mexico), the increased networking capabilities afforded by online communication created new possibilities for community formation.<sup>12</sup> Over

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<sup>12</sup> Media and entertainment companies, such as NBC Universal and Bonnier Corporation, have been targeting women since the popularization of the Internet. New York-based iVillage, established in 1995 and acquired by NBC Universal in 2006, is “the first and most established media company dedicated exclusively to connecting women at every stage of their lives.” [iVillage.com](http://www.ivillage.com/about/0,,799xklpf,00.html) claims to offer “an authentic and robust community infused with compelling content from experts on health, parenting, pregnancy, beauty, style, fitness, relationships, food and entertainment” (About iVillage, electronic document, <http://www.ivillage.com/about/0,,799xklpf,00.html>, accessed June 29, 2010).

forty years ago, Licklider and Taylor<sup>13</sup> anticipated improved communication aided by the computer:

[L]ife will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity . . . communication will be more effective and productive, and therefore more enjoyable (1968:31).

Twenty-five years later, Rheingold introduced the potential importance of cyberspace<sup>14</sup> to political liberties and proposed several ways virtual communities could transform “our experience of the real world, as individuals and communities” (1993:4).<sup>15</sup> Rheingold offered the following definition of “the Net”: “an informal term for the loosely interconnected computer networks that use computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology to link people around the world into public discussions” (1993:5). Reifying virtual communities as a “new kind of social habitation,” Rheingold defined them as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1993:5). According to him, activists and educational reformers were already using virtual communities as a political tool (Rheingold 1993:3-4).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Their article in *Science and Technology*, “The Computer as a Communication Device,” is said to have “ushered in the great experiment that began in 1969 as the ARPANET and that we know today as the Internet” (Hauben 1996).

<sup>14</sup> A term adopted from William Gibson’s science-fiction novel, *Neuromancer*, used to represent “the conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using CMC technology” (Rheingold 1993:5).

<sup>15</sup> Rheingold’s *Virtual Community* was his awareness-raising call to arms for shaping the future of the Net in a way that preserved its democratic (if not anarchical) character and function from the Panoptic control of political and commercial powerholders.

<sup>16</sup> On the other end of the spectrum are “the most addicted players of Minitel in France or Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) on the international networks, [who] spend eighty hours a week or more pretending they are someone else, living a life that does not exist outside a computer” (Rheingold 1993:4). Because MUDs are “susceptible to pathologically obsessive use” and are a “strain on computer and communication resources, MUDding has been banned at universities such as Amherst and on the entire continent of Australia” (*ibid*).

Rheingold proposed that the creation of computer bulletin-board systems (BBSs) by independent hobbyists using modems to interconnect personal computers via telephone lines represents “a true grassroots use of technology” (1993:7). He wrote, “The population of the grassroots part of the Net, the citizen-operated BBSs, has been growing explosively as a self-financed movement of enthusiasts, without the benefit of Department of Defense funding” (Rheingold 1993:8). *Boardwatch* magazine reported an estimated sixty thousand BBSs operating in the U.S. in 1993 (Rheingold 1993:9). Now known as online message boards, or discussion forums, BBSs exist to support the exchange of information for seemingly endless special interest groups and topics.

Rheingold predicted that computer-mediated communication would alter human lives at three inter-related levels. First, by appealing to intellectual, physical, and emotional needs, CMC influences perceptions, thoughts, and personalities in the same ways that other communication technologies (radio, television, etc.) have affected people in the past, manifested in part by the new vocabulary “now emerging from millions and millions of individual online interactions” (1993:12). Second, the added capacity for “many to many” communication affects the level of person-to-person contact and challenges users of CMC technology “to consider whether it is possible for us to build some kind of community together” (1993:12). Third, CMC makes change possible at the political level, which Rheingold attributed to the important role communications media plays among the citizenry of a democratic society:

The idea of modern representative democracy as it was first conceived by Enlightenment philosophers included a recognition of a living web of citizen-to-citizen communications known as civil society or the public sphere. Although elections are the most visible fundamental characteristics of democratic societies, those elections are assumed to be supported by discussions among citizens at all levels of society about issues of importance to the nation (1993:13).

He cited Ben Bagdikian's prediction<sup>17</sup> that, by the year 2000, "five to ten corporate giants will control most of the world's important newspapers, magazines, books, broadcast stations, movies, recordings and videocassettes" (Rheingold 1993:14). Rheingold argued that, because the governed now get their information from "the mass-media-dominated public sphere," which has been "polluted with barrages of flashy, phony, often violent imagery a public sphere that once included a large component of reading, writing, and rational discourse" (1993:13), CMC stands to challenge the political monopoly of mass media. To Rheingold, computer-mediated communication was a vehicle that could either restore conviviality and revitalize citizen-based democracy or usher in totalitarian rule.

Acknowledging the apprehension with which some regarded virtual communities, Rheingold immediately defended CMC for its capacity to make interpersonal interaction more comfortable:

Some people—many people—don't do well in spontaneous spoken interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a conversation in which they have time to think about what to say. These people, who might constitute a significant proportion of the population, can find written communication more authentic than the face-to-face kind. Who is to say that this preference for one mode of communication—informal written text—is somehow less authentically human than audible human speech? (1993:23-24).

To critics alarmed by the idea of a virtual community "substituting more technological ersatz for yet another natural resource or human freedom," he conceded that community building requires more than words on a screen. Rheingold clearly envisioned a future in which CMC would allow the construction of a global community of scholars and full participatory democracy.

Four years after Rheingold described the potential of the NET to transform human interaction, Steven G. Jones, editor of *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in*

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<sup>17</sup> *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

*Cybersociety*, observed that the World Wide Web had become “a full-blown medium of communication gaining widespread use, one on which we pin hopes, dreams, fortunes, and fantasies” (1997:ix). Noting the social motivation for creating the communication infrastructure from which the Internet emerged (1997:8),<sup>18</sup> he predicted the Internet’s potential to “‘get us all together’ . . . without our having to expend much effort” (Jones 1997:9). Because of its ability to transcend space and time and make communication possible, some believed

[t]he Internet would thus make community *better*. It was to result in a community free of the constraints of the constraints of space and time, and so free us to engage with fellow humans irrespective of geographic proximity and the clock, and it would construct that community from *communication*, rather than inhabitance and being, which do not guarantee communication (Jones 1997:9–10).

This perception was aided by the view of communications from a “ritual” perspective, which defines it as “the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (Carey 1989:18).

It is difficult for some to believe that true camaraderie can be found in a virtual space. Rheingold admits, “The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences” (1993:1). He claims that millions of people around the globe participate in computer-mediated social networks, or “virtual communities,” using his early experiences with Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, now known as WELL,<sup>19</sup> to describe how virtual communities can exist:

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<sup>18</sup> This was in addition to the industrial and military objective of increased productivity of personnel; ironically, the Internet has had the opposite effect of decreasing workers’ productivity and increasing their socializing during work hours (Schmitz and Fulk 1991).

<sup>19</sup> WELL began in 1985 as a regional dial-up service for the San Francisco Bay area as well as a forum for dialogs between contributors to the *Whole Earth Review*. According to its home page, WELL now “provides a literate watering hole for some articulate and unpretentious thinkers” (2009).

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures is attractive, even addictive (3).

WELL felt like an “authentic” community to him not only because he participated in local, real-life events taking place in the San Francisco Bay area, but also because he experienced genuine human interaction online.

René Lysloff believes that online communities are “as ‘real’ (or imagined) as those off line” (2003:236). According to Lysloff, communities are “based on a shared sense of belonging that is not necessarily dependent on physical proximity” (*ibid.*). The Internet represents “a new *materiality* through which social interaction and group formation can take place and from which new possibilities for subjectivity and group identity can emerge” (*ibid.*; emphasis in original). Schuler even proposes replacing the concept of the old, “traditional” community, which he characterizes as “often exclusive, inflexible, isolated, unchanging, monolithic, and homogenous,” with new communities possessing “a high degree of awareness . . . and principles and purpose” (1996:9). Instead of being “places to be, to engage in conversation (from mundane to the momentous),” communities under this new conceptualization would be “groups of people seeking to achieve particular goals” (Jones 1997:10).

Although many electronic groups have emerged to address seemingly endless facets of modern-day life with information, advice, product recommendations, and social support, Jones is skeptical about “what happens to those ‘selected’ groups once their goals are achieved,” asserting that “Schuler’s call for new communities seems more like a call to form committees. . .

conceived of as a means to a material end rather than a set of moral values" (*ibid.*).<sup>20</sup> Whether or not computer-mediated communication (CMC), facilitated by the emergence of the Internet, has led to a proliferation of true virtual communities of a new kind, critics of CMC point to yet another problem associated with the inability to see the person at the other end of the modem.

### **Authentic Representation and the Virtual Self**

Just as people do not always do what they say they do (Bernard 1995; Bernard, Killworth et al. 1984), in cyberspace, people are not always who they say they are, as the following cartoon<sup>21</sup> aptly illustrates:



*"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."*

© The New Yorker Collection 1993 Peter Steiner from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

Figure 1-1. Difficulty of ascertaining identity on the Internet

<sup>20</sup> See Jones (1995) for a discussion about the concerns computer-mediated communication raises about community and the way people represent themselves online. This research does not posit each homeschooling discussion group as one of these "new communities," even though their purpose is often to offer support and advice to one another as well as inform those considering homeschooling for personal or investigational reasons.

<sup>21</sup> As of the year 2000, this popular panel was the most reproduced cartoon from *The New Yorker*, and Steiner has earned over US\$50,000 from its reprinting (Fleishman 1998; Fleishman 2000).

Rheingold admits:

You can be fooled about people in cyberspace, behind the cloak of words. But that can be said about telephones or face-to-face communication as well; computer-mediated communications provide new ways to fool people, and the most obvious identity swindles will die out only when enough people learn to use the medium critically. In some ways, the medium will, by its nature, be forever biased toward certain kinds of obfuscation (1993:27).

Although the problem of false representation is real for parents trying to protect their kids from online predators, the anonymity of the Internet might actually facilitate social research as “a place that people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms” (*ibid.*). Rheingold suggests that, “[b]ecause we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public” (26). The anonymity of a virtual environment may also promote more open disclosure about more controversial parenting decisions, such as the choice not to follow mandatory vaccination schedules.

### **Previous Work Online**

Although participant observation normally takes place in culturally relevant physical locations, a limited number of recent ethnographies have ventured successfully into virtual field sites (e.g., Constable 2003; Emad 2003; Lysloff 2003; Ito 1997), subscribing to the notion that, “like the products of mass media, the ‘cultural texts’ produced by the Internet are themselves public representational forms, a part of what might be called ‘public culture’” (Lysloff 2003:233). For example, Emad (2003) uses an Internet mailing list called WITSENDO as one of three “sites” in her ethnography of chronic pain sufferers. For women suffering from endometriosis, WITSENDO operated as a support group for sharing stories, advice, and empathy. Emad argues that the list’s members, who participate almost daily, are co-creating “a

virtual community that strikingly mitigates their experiences of chronic and intense pain” (2003:7). In addition to examining the texts produced in the course of posting and responding to messages, she elicited seventeen qualitative narratives from list participants who e-mailed private responses to posted questions regarding the lists’ helpfulness in the mitigation of their pain. She observes:

When treatment protocols of trusted physicians fail, women begin to actively question the treatment options offered and insist on asking questions and receiving understandable and useful responses. The Internet has vastly changed the possibilities for doing this. . . . Through storytelling as an exchange of information (“what do you know about this?”), the respondents begin to formulate critiques of biomedical authority that they experience as empowering (Emad 2003:8–9).

The ethnography of schooling, which is long overdue for a methodological update (Eisenhart 2001), would benefit from an examination of the electronic texts produced by homeschooling parents, especially if such an examination could access a group of people for whom learning outside of the school is paramount to genuine education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Previous sociological and historical examinations of home education in the U.S. have treated its modern manifestation as the result of at least two social movements with simultaneous yet distinct historical origins, ideological catalysts, and social network structures. The prevalent characterization of homeschooling in both research and popular perception relies on the instructional practices of the more prolific group of modern parent-educators: those who seek to ameliorate a perceived lack of moral content, intellectual rigor, or adequate supervision in the public school system and whose structured, adult-led instructional design closely resembles conventional schooling. Their motivational orientations are frequently publicized by both mainstream media and educational researchers as being linked to the reification of Christian parenthood and the concomitant refusal to abdicate the formative function of the family. The

earlier movement, incited by social reformers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is motivated by neither the commitment to moral principles nor the increased potential for academic achievement afforded by personalized instruction.

Little scholarly attention has been focused on “unschoolers” and other parent educators who remain apart from the Christianization of homeschooling, and attempts to identify the justification for the sacrifices of income and personal time necessary to support their radically child-centered pedagogy have been speculative at best. This dissertation discusses the parental decision to participate in the de-institutionalization of education and asks whether or not unschooling parents’ childrearing model, which is reminiscent of pre-industrial society that values children’s early integration into adult activities, identifies this version of home education as a revitalization movement. Five hypotheses emerge from the contextualization of the practice of unschooling within the cultural domain of childrearing tasks. First, childrearing tasks are elements of a cultural domain. Second, unschooling parents are culturally distinct from conventionally homeschooling parents. Third, the underlying dimensions by which childrearing tasks are organized include how alternative they are, how likely a parent is to practice each task, and how much decision-making power is afforded to the child whose parent practices a task. Fourth, alternative childrearing tasks form a unidimensional continuum by which the practice of certain highly alternative tasks can predict the performance of other tasks that are considered to be less alternative. Fifth, unschoolers are more likely to practice alternative childrearing tasks than their conventionally schooling counterparts.

### **Research Objectives**

This research endeavors to study the narrow perspective of the majority of contemporary home-school advocates and their critics. Because proponents of consensual learning purport reliance on a family lifestyle different from that of their schooling counterparts, this research

project aspires to discover the impetus of the personal decisions to participate in the de-institutionalization of education in the U.S. by the practice of unschooling. First, this research compares the demographic dimensions of unschooling parents to those of home educators who employ a more conventional, adult-led curriculum. Second, this research asks how non-school-related parenting practices are affected by the decision to unschool to determine whether or not parents who unschool their children are more likely to engage in “alternative” parenting practices than their conventional counterparts. Third, the research investigates whether or not modern parenting practices in the United States form a unidimensional continuum on which unschooling represents any predictive attributes: do parents who unschool always possess more characteristics of the alternative parenting style and less of the conventional parenting strategies? Fourth, what is the unschooling parents’ childrearing philosophy and what is their motivation to make the economic sacrifices necessary to devote their time to this educational alternative?

By comparing unschooling parents to homeschooling parents who use curricula considered to be more conventional (and hence, more similar to that of public schools), the study seeks to address the following questions: (1) What characteristics, activities, and influences lead parents to unschool instead of selecting a more traditional curriculum for their children? (2) Do parents who unschool share a domain of parenting practices with parents who espouse adult-developed curricula, or do their childrearing tasks indicate a disparate cultural milieu? (3) Do alternative parenting practices lend themselves to Guttman scaling and thus form a unidimensional continuum in which the practice of unschooling can be predicted by the performance of other alternative childrearing tasks?

The first question is exploratory and intended to provide the basis for the characterization of unschoolers and their comparison to home educators who use methods and curricula more

closely resembling the conventional classroom, including whether or not the practice is multi-generational. Previous analyses employed historical contextualization versus direct observation or inquiry to determine foundational influences. The latter two questions arose when the analysis of data collected in relation to the first question revealed the possible association between unschooling and a certain parenting agenda.

### **Mazeway Reformulation and Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

One theory through which the practice of unschooling might be interpreted is the mazeway reformulation model coined by Wallace (1956) and later described by Louise Spindler:

The reformulation [model] posits that each person has a mazeway which is his or her unique mental image or perception of physical objects in the environment. The mazeway includes nature, society, culture, personality, and body image *as seen by one person*. No two mazeways are identical but there must be some complementarity or general agreement in mazeways in order for communication to occur (1977: 87).

When a group has to endure more stress than it has the ability to cope with, in times of disaster, or rapid change due to a dominant, oppressive group, a member of the group may undergo a sudden or radical mazeway resynthesis. He or she may become a prophet or teacher, leading others to add new elements to their mazeways in a sort of conversion, resulting in a revitalization or reactive movement, which Wallace defined as “*deliberate, organized, conscious efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture*” (1956:265).

Wallace applied the revitalization model to Yippies, Black Muslims, and Young Americans for Freedom, as well as the to Communist revolution in Russia and the Peoples Republic of China (Spindler 1977:89). Paredes also identified a revitalization movement that enabled the Poarch Creek Indians to maintain their identity despite the loss of the use of the Creek language, the lack of U.S. governmental recognition as a tribe, and limited contact with other Native Americans (1974, 1992).

Examples of “informal” learning appear to be more prevalent in communities and social situations that incorporate children into the everyday activities of adults (Paradise and Rogoff 2009). The integration of a community’s youngest members into the lives of their parents and other adults is also reminiscent of the social conditions of colonial America, when homeschooling was the predominant educational form. By keeping their children out of school and instead allowing them to participate fully in community life, unschooling parents create similar conditions that support informal learning. The resemblance of unschooling to earlier educational forms in the U.S., as well as to societies that incorporate children into adult activities suggest that unschooling may be a revitalization movement.

Mazeway reformulation is similar in many ways to the cognitive dissonance theory proposed around the same time by Festinger (1957). Based on the primitive axiom that people naturally strive to ease the psychological discomfort caused by the difference between their perception of reality and their beliefs about the way things should be, cognitive dissonance theory may explain why unschooling parents, faced with the decision to either conform to the traditional and emergent values in American society<sup>22</sup> and send their children to school or change their external reality by rejecting the school and everything for which it stands, choose the latter.

### **Research Outline**

The next chapter explores the philosophical and historical contexts of unschooling as an educational alternative. Sharing a common influence by incendiary social and educational reformers of the late 1960s and early 1970s with the concurrent free and democratic schools

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<sup>22</sup> Traditional values in U.S. society were identified three decades ago by Louise Spindler as Puritan morality, a work-success ethic, individualism, achievement orientation, and future-time orientation. Emergent values included sociability, a relativistic moral attitude, consideration for others, hedonistic, present-time orientation, and conformity to the group (1977:115).

movement, unschoolers and other liberal progressives engendered the contemporary movement to return education to its pre-industrial locale: the home. Though their movement was eventually commandeered by a second wave of evangelical Christian homeschoolers determined to escape the secular liberalism they perceived in the public school system, unschoolers remain a separate but viable wing segment of the homeschooling population. Chapter 2 ends with a self-characterization of unschooling families that claims the practice as both an educational choice and a household lifestyle.

Chapter 3 details the unique research design of the study, which was conducted in the virtual spaces of online bulletin board systems to access participants' authentic perspectives using multiple data sources. Conceptual and operational definitions of "alternativity" are discussed, followed by a description of the units of analysis and sampling methods incorporated into the research design. Because of the observed differences between electronic communications and face-to-face interactions, this chapter also gives particular consideration to both the anonymity and intimacy that is afforded by virtual communities dedicated to giving and seeking advice. Finally, the necessary adaptations of participant observation and semi-structured interview protocols, traditionally accomplished in face-to-face settings, are described.

The qualitative results from the first two of five phases of data collection are presented and analyzed in Chapter 4. Primary research began with participant observation conducted in the virtual space of an electronic bulletin board system dedicated to unschooling. An exploratory questionnaire administered to parents of school-aged children regardless of their chosen educational setting yielded information regarding parenting styles and influences, as well as a freelist of childrearing tasks from each respondent. A more detailed online interview administered to unschooling obtained data comparable to national statistics on homeschooling.

Chapter 5 focuses on the cultural domain analysis of childrearing tasks. Several quantitative analyses of the systematically collected cognitive data are reported, including the identification of core and peripheral elements provided by the freelists from the exploratory first phase; hierarchical clustering and multi-dimensional mapping of the proximity data obtained from single pilesorts; and the vector data from a multi-vector questionnaire used to test three hypotheses regarding possible underlying dimensions of the domain: (1) the “alternativity” of each task, (2) the popularity of each task, and (3) the degree of a child’s decision-making power represented by each task. Finally, a Guttman scaling analysis measures the predictive capability of unschooling and other “alternative” childrearing tasks identified by the mean scores of the first vector.

Chapter 6 concludes the study with a discussion of how the findings relate to previous research, as well as to the current study’s objectives, research questions, and hypotheses. Theoretical implications include a possible revision to the mazeway reformulation model proposed by Wallace for understanding revitalization movements. Several possibilities for future investigation are suggested, along with a brief summary of the significance of this research for illuminating the longevity of unschooling as both an alternative pedagogy and lifestyle.

## CHAPTER 2

### REJECTING “SCHOOL”: THE PHILOSOPHY, ORIGINS, AND CHARACTER OF UNSCHOOLING

Shirley Brice Heath once called approaches to research in education that are qualitative, global, sociodemographic, and dependent on large-scale comparisons of many different schools ignorant of “the social and cultural context which created the input factors for individuals and groups” (1983:8). Heath’s extensive archival research for *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* adds an exemplary richness to her ethnography of language learning in two culturally distinct communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. In an attempt to provide the kind of detail she claims is only possible by placing subjects of study within their sociohistorical context, this chapter explores the philosophical underpinnings, historical background, and characterization of unschooling, indicating that this model of home education may be both a pedagogical choice and a countercultural lifestyle.

#### **Philosophical Foundations of Unschooling**

Seventeenth-century English political philosopher John Locke believed that parents were obligated to teach their children by good example and play an integral role in their education. His essay “Some Thoughts on Education” expresses a distinct preference for home education:

He that considers how diametrically opposite the skill of living well, and managing, as a man should do, his affairs in the world, is to that malapertness, tricking, or violence, learnt among schoolboys, will think the faults of a privater education, infinitely to be preferred to such improvements; and will take care to preserve his child’s innocence and modesty at home, as being nearer of kin, and more in the way of those qualities, which make an useful and able man. . . . Virtue is harder to be got than a knowledge of the world; and, if lost in a young man, is seldom recovered. . . . And therefore I cannot but prefer breeding of a young gentleman at home in his father’s sight, under a good governor, as much as the best and safest way to this great and main end of education.

Locke’s concern for the character education missed by sending children to school is quite similar to the sentiments of many homeschoolers today.

While unschooling parents might agree with Locke's appraisal of the physical and psychological violence that children still experience at school, their position on the freedom of children to choose their own activities (to which Locke, knowing the course of instruction necessary to raise a man of letters, would have been opposed), is closer to Rousseau's emphasis on the natural curiosity of children. Unschoolers also appreciate the educational musings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who admonished parents, "Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude" (quoted in Llewellyn 1998:24). Such transcendentalist ideals are consistent with unschooling parents' explicit rejection of institutionalized schooling, whether located in a government-owned facility, a private school influenced in its curricular emphasis by the national agenda, or at home. Abandoning the cultural milieu that created public schooling and the associated myths which perpetuates its existence, unschoolers derive much of their political radicalism from critical theorists and pedagogists such as Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, and John Taylor Gatto, as well as cultural production theorists Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Proponents of the application of critical theory to education reject the blame-the-student ideology of school failure in favor of a view that takes into account the social and economic roots of educational disparity (Goodman 1999). McLaren is acutely aware of how critical pedagogy contradicts the meritocratic perspective:

Understanding school failure as the secondary effect of cultural capital and class- and gender-specific social practices runs directly counter to the prevailing neoconservative social logic, which attributes school failure to individual deficiencies on the part of a lazy, apathetic, and intellectually inferior underclass of students or to uncaring or selfish parents. . . . Eventually the myth of the inferiority of minorities and working-class groups becomes part of the social heredity of the dominant culture. Such a perspective, which carries with it the shame of racism, prevails in many mainstream theories of schooling (1994:217).

Thus, critical pedagogists argue that the meritocratic function of the school system is to sort students according to ability, which usually relates to socio-economic status, claiming that money and economics drive the system and perpetuate the socioeconomic status quo.

### **Ivan Illich: School is a fraud**

Radical social philosopher and reformist thinker Ivan Illich blamed the inability of domestic and international amelioration projects to effectuate true socioeconomic progress (despite obvious technological advancement) on the institutionalization and commodification of societal values, such as health and education. Illich was an Austrian-born Roman Catholic educator who as head of the Centre for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico, asserted at a conference on the World Educational Crisis and the Church in Lima, Peru that formal schooling is by nature “an instrument of domination, preparing youngsters for their places in a hierarchical, technocratic, consumption-oriented social order at the same time that it blinded them to the possibilities for learning from the people and the life around them” (Cremin 1988:66; citing Illich 1971).<sup>1</sup>

Illich used compulsory schooling as a metaphor and example of the way society at large has been commandeered by the dominant national ideology through the deliberate creation and

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<sup>1</sup> In her analysis of language socialization in Appalachia, Heath came to a similar conclusion about the school: “The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people’s values, skills, and knowledge bases. Yet some portions of the population, such as the townspeople, bring with them to school linguistic and cultural capital accumulated through hundreds of thousands of occasions for practicing the skills and espousing the values the schools transmit. Long before reaching school, children of the townspeople have made the transition from home to the larger societal institutions which share the values, skills, and knowledge bases of the school. Their eventual positions of power in the school and the workplace are foredestined in the conceptual structures which they have learned at home and which are reinforced in school and numerous other associations. Long before school, their language and culture at home has structured for them the meanings which will give shape to their experiences in classrooms and beyond. Their families have embedded them in contexts that reflected the systemic relationships between education and production. From their baby books to their guide books for participation in league soccer, the townspeople’s children have been motivated towards seeing their current activities as relating to their future achievements. Their socially determined habits and values have created for them an ideology in which all that they do makes sense to their current identity and their preparation for the achievements which will frame their future” (1983:367-368).

maintenance of a permanent underclass and concomitant caste system in the U.S. Just as people become satisfied with medical treatment instead of healing, students are taught to accept instruction in place of education. Offering more than econo-political commentary, Illich proposed that truly useful education can occur only through the demystification of manufacturing and scientific invention. Arguing that the creation of the school also forged its own demand for institutionalized schooling, he advocates the elimination of credentials and the use of learning webs in which each member of a community, young and old, is both teacher and student. Unschooling parents are particularly fond of the way *Deschooling Society* advocates educative processes based on equal access to learning materials and frequently express the shared assumption that children do not need to be segregated from adults in order to be educated (McKee 2002; Llewellyn 1998; Griffith 1998).

### **John Taylor Gatto: School is a vampire**

More recently, New York City-schoolteacher-turned-critical historian John Taylor Gatto went as far as claiming that the public school system, with its rigid time schedules, subject demarcation and curricular progression, grade leveling, “and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling” was deliberately fashioned “as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior” (1992:xii). Mirroring the sentiment expressed by Illich, the publisher of Gatto’s *Dumbing Us Down* prefaced the book with the following quote by social philosopher Hannah Arendt: “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any” (1968:168). Gatto recognizes that his premise jeopardized the total institution of government monopoly schools:

Kept contained, the occasional teacher who makes a discovery like mine is at worst an annoyance to the chain of command (which has evolved automatic defenses to isolate such bacilli and then neutralize or destroy them.) But once loose the idea

could imperil the central assumptions which allow the institutional school to sustain itself, such as the false assumption that it is difficult to learn to read, or that kids resist learning, and many more (1992:xiii).

Influenced by Paul Goodman, who addressed the plight of disaffected youth nearly fifty years ago in *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Gatto follows Illich in assigning the public school system much credit for the very maintenance of American society, especially its economy:

Indeed, the very stability of our economy is threatened by any form of education that might change the nature of the human product schools now turn out; the economy schoolchildren currently expect to live under and serve would not survive a generation of young people trained, for example, to think critically (xiii).

Convinced that teaching in such a system means imparting lessons in confusion, class position, indifference, emotional and intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem, and the impossibility of escaping surveillance, Gatto concludes, as did John Holt, that, because of their entrenched dependence on their central myths, “government monopoly schools are structurally unreformable” (1992:xiv): “Over the years, I have come to see that whatever I thought I was doing as a teacher, most of what I actually was doing was teaching an invisible curriculum that reinforced the myths of the school institution and those of an economy based on caste” (xiv).

Gatto laments that what he does as a teacher “that is wrong” is “strange, complex and frightening” (xiv). These words, especially coming from the New York State Teacher of the Year in 1991, might not instill much comfort among parents who are seriously considering an educational path for their children. Gatto discovered that teaching the “right” way involves simply giving students “space and time and respect” (xiv); incidentally, these elements are considered to be essential for education by several unschooling parents interviewed for this study.

Gatto’s criticism of the public school system certainly begins with curriculum that he believes to be fragmented, incoherent, and unnaturally sequenced. Quality in education, Gatto

contends, has nothing to do with how much money we spend to support the system, “It’s just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing” (26). In an Emerson-inspired moment, Gatto concludes that schools are obstructing a crucial step in the production of self-teachers by “taking from our children all the time they need to develop self-knowledge” (1996:34), an unfortunate effect because “only self-teaching has any lasting value” (1996:35).

### **Cultural Production Theory**

Another perspective informing unschooling parents’ rejection of the dominant system is the cultural production theory normally associated with scholars of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, who believe that the popular culture expressed by subcultural styles and mass media articulates the structural relationships between classes and social groups. As it defines the relationship of individuals and groups to the world, cultural production theory provides a possible explanatory framework for the creation of reactionary subcultural constructs, such as unschooling.

According to cultural production theory, the establishment of a hegemony is the conscious task of the organic intellectuals of the ruling class: “At the highest level, they create philosophy, the sciences and the arts; at a lower level, they administer an existing body of knowledge and ideology through their work in the educational system, cultural institutions and the media” (Macey 2000:177). More than an expression of dominance, hegemony is also its precondition. A social group or class must establish its ideological hegemony over a society before it can seize governmental power. The establishment of hegemony also involves more than merely imposing an ideology: “A potentially hegemonic group always attempts to absorb and transform the ideologies of allied and even rival groups. The hegemonic group establishes and maintains its dominance by creating a ‘historical bloc’ in which there is an organic cohesion between leaders

and led, and in which the ‘feelings’ of the population are completely imbued with its dominant view of the world” (Macey 2000:177).<sup>2</sup>

### **Antonio Gramsci: School and hegemony**

As acolytes of French Marxist Louis Althusser, cultural production theorists maintain a concept of culture that is traditionally recognized to mirror the notions of political dominance and counter-hegemony popularized by Italian Marxist and political prisoner Antonio Gramsci (McGee and Warms 2004:342–343, note 23). Gramsci’s emphases on hegemony and intellectual leadership counterbalance the traditional Marxist penchant for the economic relations of production. Though never completely abandoning materialism, he focused on the process by which the political and intellectual leadership of a society create a system of beliefs and ideas that are accepted by the common people and which help maintain the power of the ruling class (612). Viewing politics as a “battleground between economic forces and contesting hegemonic and counterhegemonic systems” (623), Gramsci insisted that “consent is as important as coercion if a hegemony is to be established and maintained” (Macey 2000:197). He most consistently uses the term hegemony to refer to a system of intellectual devices used by the political and moral leadership of a society “to infuse its ideas of morality to gain the support of those who resist or may be neutral, to retain the support of those who consent to its rule . . .” (Kurtz 1996:106;

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<sup>2</sup> This is not necessarily the case for Durkheim’s concept of social fact, which arises out of the social interactions of a group, yet the coercive nature of social facts makes them appropriate for examining education, as Durkheim himself recognized: “What makes [social] facts particularly instructive is that the aim of education is, precisely, the socialization of the human being; . . . This unremitting pressure to which the child is subjected is the very pressure of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image” (Durkheim 1895; McGee and Warms 2004:88). This process of enculturation is also unconscious: “[W]e think and act they way we do largely because of the unconscious internalization of cultural constraints imposed on us during childhood, not because of conscious, rational choice” (McGee and Warms 2004:88 note 5). Students of any school must learn to comply with norms of behavior that comprise the standard from which deviation is measured. According to Durkheim, these norms are at first external to the students’ concepts of themselves, but they eventually make their way into students’ consciousness: “Considering the facts as they are and as they have always been, it becomes immediately evident that all education is a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously” (Durkheim 1895; McGee and Warms 2004:87).

quoted in McGee and Warms 2004:333). The institutions, social relations, and dominant ideas of a society, believed as "common sense" by the masses, create and reinforce these ethical and political ideas. Illich, Goodman, and Reimer argued (and unschoolers agree) that the public school system is one such "common sense" institution created to perpetuate class and gender divisions in the U.S.

Gramsci also believed that counter-hegemonic ideas arose from intellectuals among the oppressed and exploited masses whose new notions of morality, leadership, and alliances contained the revolutionary potential to transform the cultural worlds in which they lived (McGee and Warms 2004: 341–342). Again, it is this transformation of the world through a rehabilitation of consensual relationships to which Illich, Goodman, and Reimer aspired and which now persists through unschoolers.

### **Paulo Freire: School and oppression**

Ideas approximating cultural production theory are also readily apparent in the writings of Paulo Freire, although he is more recognized as one of the original critical pedagogists. Freire, who cites Althusser in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (a seminal work in the critical examination of education), would define such imposition as *cultural invasion*, in which "the actors draw the thematic content of their action from their own values and ideology; their starting point is their own world, from which they enter the world of those they invade" (Freire 1971:181). This, proponents of democratic education say, is exactly why the principles upon which traditional schools are based do not meet the true needs of children, many of whom are subsequently labeled as behavioral deviants and relegated to punitive alternative educational arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Democratic education is a configuration of private and charter schools within the choice movement that values student input in both school administration and curricular selection. Even the youngest students of democratically principled schools are granted ultimate authority over their own learning and enjoy the same voting privileges as adult faculty members, who are considered facilitators or mentors rather than authoritarian teachers. Notable

Freire also refers to cultural synthesis, a concept akin to cultural production in its anti-hegemonic function, as the opposite of cultural invasion: “In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from ‘another world’ to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to *teach* or to *transmit* or to *give* anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world” (1971:182). According to their proponents, the pedagogical foundations of democratic schools facilitate the production of a subculture of education in which the child, as an equally valued participant in the community, determines her own instructional activities and is free to develop genuinely spontaneous and individual interests.

Paulo Freire was not an anthropologist, but he writes as one in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, even devoting an entire chapter to designing locally informed, participatory fieldwork. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* easily elucidates the concept of cultural hegemony propagated by Antonio Gramsci; anticipates the emically inspired, participatory fieldwork of the postmodern era in anthropology; and facilitates the discussion and subsequent critical analysis of the Marxist and non-Marxist revolutions to date. The book’s contributions to Marxist analysis and social reconstruction should ensure its place among the seminal works of socialism and anthropological discussions of cultural hegemony. *Pedagogy* goes beyond the suggestion that the “banking system” of education<sup>4</sup> serves the dominant ideology of the oppressor by training students “not to think,” although this is certainly a prominent aspect of this work, to pose larger questions concerning cultural invasion via colonization, modernization versus true development, and even the authenticity of our nation’s own revolution. Though Freire is most often touted as an

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examples are the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, MA and A.S. Neill’s Summerhill in England. See Miller (2002) for a history of democratic and free schools. See also Raywid (1994), Kellmayer (1998), and Neumann (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Freire refers to the curriculum model in which instructional material is transmitted from authoritarian teacher to subservient student as the “banking system” of education.

unapologetically Marxist educator, his anthropological perspective, reminiscent of Sol Tax's action anthropology, is sophisticated, providing a field guide for investigating a people's "thematic universe" (Freire 1986:86), which basically translates to an "emic perspective." Friere believed that liberation from prescription was the humanist ontological vocation, and his analysis gives a detailed description of the essential steps toward it.

Freire used the term conscientização to describe the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (19; translator's note). Though utopian, his democratic vision is grounded in the poverty and oppression that characterized his native area of Recife, Brazil. Living in abject poverty as a child, Freire experienced and understood what he later named the "culture of silence" that characterizes the oppressed. Freire believed that, because of their victimization by the economic, social, and political paternalism of the dominant classes, the poor and dispossessed are not equipped to respond to the world's realities in a critical fashion, a disadvantage that is exacerbated by the educational system created by the dominant classes to keep the masses perpetually "submerged" and contained in a "culture of silence."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Both Gramsci's symbolic hegemony and Freire's subjugation of the oppressed originate from a dominant political or intellectual ideology to be revealed and subsequently overcome to achieve humanity's zenith. The common consciousness that shapes and controls individual behavior according to Durkheim is created by social exchanges and experiences within a shared context and made life possible and meaningful. For the most part, social cohesion is maintained because everyone in a society shares its set of collective representations. Just as Durkheim's collective conscience foreshadowed the modern concept of culture (McGee and Warms 2004: 82), his social fact may have anticipated the concept of cultural hegemony articulated by Gramsci and later adopted by Freire.

Contrary to Durkheim, whose social facts functionally reinforced social solidarity, Gramsci and Freire highlighted the hegemonic dominion of the state ideological apparatus for a different ontology: freedom from oppression. Still, the apparent interchangeability of these concepts suggests that all are valid explanations of cultural production. For example, medical hegemony justifies why most women give birth in the hospital, and historical repression enlightens the discussion concerning why most public high school dropouts are minorities. It is a social fact that the hospital is the safest location to deliver a baby, even though midwives around the globe are proving otherwise. Compulsory schooling continues to perpetuate the dominant ideology of white, middle-class, Protestants. Thus, the "cultural production" theories of all three of these seminal social scientists provide useful models for analyzing practices that are considered alternative to the norms of mainstream society, such as the practice of unschooling and its concomitant childrearing tenets.

Revolutionary educational philosophers “inform[ed] not only the efforts of newly self-conscious minorities but also the broader attempts of schoolpeople, church educators, youth workers, and adult educators, leading them to infuse their teaching with a new vitality and self-consciousness” (Cremin 1988:67). Despite these attempts, the compulsory institutions of the hegemonic state, including the idea of school as the rarely questioned locus of education, prevail. In *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*,<sup>6</sup> Guterson insinuates that death and taxes have finally met their match: “School is so deeply ingrained in us that a call for learning outside of it, without it, can sound as strange as a call for us to try to live without food. . . . School is inevitable; school is a fact of life” (1992:1). The school has become the primary, if not monopolistic, means of cultural transmission, and for some, removing education from the school represents an endorsement of Illich’s conviviality over modern industrialism.<sup>7</sup>

### **Historical Background of the Contemporary Homeschooling Movement**

Home was the original educational facility in the United States. The Puritan colonial family served as a miniature school, responsible for transmitting literacy, morality, and vocational skills (Axtell 1974). Its central position as the fundamental societal unit was upheld by law and enforced by the courts. In Massachusetts, a 1649 law stipulated that any son over sixteen years of age who was “stubborne [sic] or rebellious” was punishable by death. Although no colonial magistrates are known to have carried out such a sentence, in 1664 a young John Porter was sent to the gallows, where he wore a noose around his neck for an hour before being

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<sup>6</sup> Guterson acknowledges Pat Farenga, a well-known unschooling advocate, for taking an interest in *Family Matters* and providing “invaluable suggestions and insights” (1992:v).

<sup>7</sup> One example is the Quiverfull movement: “The attraction of Quiverfull is that it casts Christianity as a total lifestyle, a means of transcending the public/private split that has haunted modern people since the 19th century” (Gaither 2009).

whipped and subsequently imprisoned for his persistent disobedience and disrespect toward his parents (Axtell 1974).

A child's educational experience began at baptism, which was usually within days of birth (Altenbaugh 2003:26). Historian of education John Axtell notes, "Parental feelings and expectations were frequently expressed in such names as Truegrace, Reform, Hoped For, Promise, More Mercy, Restore, Preserved, Thanks, Desire, Hope, Joy, Rejoice, Patience, and Love" (Axtell 1974:53). Daily "piecemeal moralizing" in the home was reinforced by routine family prayer and worship as well as children's experiences in the surrounding community, as children were exposed to public preaching while accompanying their parents to town (Axtell 1974). The Protestant Reformation forwarded the focus on literacy and the primacy of the Bible as a text.

Before the establishment of "common schools" in the 1850s and the compulsory attendance statutes nationwide into which the nation became entrenched by the turn of the [twentieth] century, school was optional for most families (Griffith 1998). Mary Griffith notes:

Formal school attendance was often confined to the winter months when the pace of life slowed and children were comparably free of agricultural chores. Furthermore, unless a child was male and planned to go to college or a seminary—or came from a well-to-do family—school only lasted for three to five years. That provided just enough time to get a good grasp of reading, writing, and arithmetic, with a smattering of history and literature. The rest of the knowledge children needed to become competent adults was acquired by working alongside older family members or other adults, learning everyday tasks by doing them, knowing that their work was an essential contribution to their family's livelihood (v).

In this way, children were seamlessly integrated into the lives of their adult housemates. With "no idea that each generation required separate spheres of work or recreation," children "learned the behavior appropriate to their sex and station by sharing the activities of their parents" (Demos 1970:100–101). Apprenticeships provided young men with on-the-job training in a surrogate family setting that eased the transition into the world of work, providing "a safe

passage from childhood to adulthood in psychological, social, and economic ways" (Rorabaugh 1986:vii).

The fleeting stability of the colonial family, already vulnerable to the high mortality induced by the harsh elements of an unfamiliar environment, was further challenged by religious leaders and government officials who expressed their increasing dissatisfaction with families' failure to transmit Puritan cultural values by passing what would become the first American education laws (Axtell 1974; Bailyn 1960). As early as 1642, Massachusetts condemned "the great neglect of many parents and masters in training up their children in learning and labor," the goal of which was religious as well as civil: "to read and understand the principles of religion & the capitall lawes of this country" (Shurtleff 1853:6; quoted in Keller-Cohen 1993:291). Virginia admonished county officials to take children away from parents who were unable "to maintaine [sic] and educate them" (Bailyn 1960:26). A contemporaneous law in Connecticut decreed that children be taught "to read the Inglish toungue," and the 1647 revision added writing (Trumbull 1850:521; 555). By the second half of the seventeenth century, the diminished educational function of the family had begun to be "supplemented by other institutions, many of which were new to American society" (Axtell 1974: 35).

Education adopted a more institutionalized, formal quality most rapidly in developing urban centers along the eastern seaboard, where "family education was at a disadvantage because it could not compete with the availability of two phenomena: the presence of adequate schools and a thriving industry in trades and crafts" (Szasz 1988:32). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, major urban areas such as Boston offered a host of opportunities to learn reading and writing, although the home was still an important site for literacy development (Keller-Cohen 1993:293). Enclaves of family-based education persisted longest where low population densities prevented the

organization of externalized institutions, such as in the rural settlements of the agricultural South and the expanding western frontier (Kaestle 1983).

An organized system of schools was on the horizon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Keller-Cohen 1993:293; Tyack 1974), and despite the home's historical position as the first educational site, its acceptance—and even its legality—eclipsed almost entirely by the advent of compulsory schooling. The increased prevalence of public schools and compulsory attendance laws engendered a concomitant assumption regarding the necessity of schools to prepare children for their role in twentieth-century society. As Griffith explains, “So much were schools assumed to be necessary for children’s education that, while there was much debate over the form schools should take and the content they should teach, there was almost no discussion of whether they were in truth the indispensable institutions they appeared to be” (1998: v). Despite the claim by home-school advocates that William Penn, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Agatha Christie, Pearl Buck, Margaret Mead, and Thomas Edison received most or all of their instruction at home, few children were educated at home between the 1850s and 1970 (Knowles et al. 1992). The minority of children who received their education outside the public school were viewed as “eccentric exceptions.” The “other” status of homeschooled students had begun.

Despite the proliferation of public schools and concomitant faith in a system plagued by unlimited expectations and limited capacity, exceptions to attendance existed. Some children lived too far away to take advantage of communal educational facilities. To others—Thomas Edison represents a notable example—school was “intolerable.” Some children, such as Margaret Mead, came from families with unconventional ideas about learning. Mead’s quip was, “My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school” (from her

autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, quoted in Griffith 1998:v). Such “unconventional learners” employed various educational methods, including formal tutors, avid reading, or accompanying their parents while they worked or traveled, gleaning “lessons” from their everyday activities. Regardless of their circumstances, these unconventional learners were isolated cases.

Progressive Era reforms in public education and high rates of unemployment culminated in the proliferation of the American high school,<sup>8</sup> which became a crucible for adolescent culture in the 1930s and 1940s (Palladino 1996). During the 1940s, adolescent culture became increasingly distinctive as both social problem and target market niche, especially after World War II, when the term “teenager” first appeared. Adults became increasingly distressed about the potential for juvenile delinquency, which became a ubiquitous concern by 1943, when the U.S. Senate held its first hearings on delinquency. The war had taken disrupted family life by removing fathers and mothers from the home to serve in the military and work in armaments factories (Altenbaugh 2003:282). Suddenly finding themselves with a lack of parental supervision, teens became frequent clients of police and juvenile court officials, who “complained about teenage drinking, smoking, vandalism, auto theft, petting, and, for the first time, drug abuse, in the form of ‘reefers’” (Altenbaugh 2003:282). A proliferation of magazine articles and radio programs followed, sensationalizing “this apparent epidemic of juvenile delinquency,” which, according to Palladino, “had as much to do with adult perceptions of teenage behavior as it did with a rise in criminal behavior” (1996:51–52).

Within months after the war came to an end in August of 1945, the U.S. entered an ideological war with the Soviet Union, who was already agitated by the U.S.’s failure to disclose its atomic weapon capability prior to detonation over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Truman

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<sup>8</sup> Secondary school attendance rates jumped from 4,800,000 in 1929 to 7.1 million in 1939 (Altenbaugh 2003:276).

Doctrine in 1947, followed by the Berlin Crisis (1948), the 1949 detonation of the first Soviet atomic device, and the ensuing proliferation of missiles engendered not only the military rivalry and mutual distrust characteristic of the Cold War but also paralyzing fear, insecurity, and paranoia. As had been their habit, Americans turned to the public school system to both train its newly essential generation of scientists and ease the psychological tension. The late 1940s was the first time in U.S. history that a connection was made between the quality of education and national security. Sharpened public criticism and waning confidence in the school's ability to meet the nation's technological challenges led to increased federal involvement in public education. Concurrently, TV and film were emerging as very powerful methods of mass communication, becoming the newest vehicles for public education.

The nation's confidence in the technical superiority of the U.S. plummeted further with the launch of Sputnik in fall 1957, and the public school system was once again the target of criticism. In direct response, and taking advantage of the unmistakable opportunity for the federal government to become more involved in public education, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in the fall of 1958, providing generous federal subsidies for enhancements to math, science, foreign language instruction, as well as vocational education and newly developed civil defense education.

At the conclusion of the post-war wave of reform, the public school system was expected to teach basic academic skills, morals, behavior, and hygiene; assimilate immigrants; help the U.S. win the "space race"; and even fight poverty. As public high school attendance rates escalated, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, it became increasingly apparent that scholastic success still eluded various groups of students, many of whom eventually became dropouts or "push-outs" (Dorn 1996). By the 1960s "many schools were experimenting with alternatives to

traditional curricula and methods" (McKee 2002:2). Some students were exiled to "continuation" schools for truant, disruptive, suspended, or pregnant students, while others benefited from the creation of "free" schools and "schools without walls" based on freedom of choice and created in an attempt to make the schooling experience more democratic or child-centered (Neumann 2003).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, educational reformers including John Holt, Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, Allen Graubard, and Paulo Freire disseminated influential messages in support of the pedagogical innovation, intimacy, and flexibility afforded by alternative educational environments such as home schools (Knowles et al. 1992). Knowles et al. associate the contemporary home education movement to "the influence of the educational reformers who published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a turbulent period that initiated considerable questioning about the status, goals, educational practices, and achievements of public schools" (200). These writers, whom Knowles et al. deemed decreasingly influential after the proliferation of homeschoolers of a more religious orientation, addressed the concepts of deschooling, free and alternative schools, community control of schools, and parental rights concerning their own children's education. Related commentary from existentialist educational philosophers and proponents of free schools also propagated messages of dissent (e.g., Neill 1960; Kozol 1972, 1967; Goodman 1960, 1962; Friedenberg 1964) which resonated with parents already disenchanted with the public school system and "provid[ed] the ideological underpinnings for educational innovation" (Colfax 1983:44).

### **Alternative Education and the Democratically Principled School**

The term "alternative education" during the past twenty years has been attached to "magnet schools for subjects such as science, math, and the performing arts; to schools for pregnant teens and teen mothers; to schools within schools; to schools without walls; to schools located on

college campuses, inside shopping malls, churches, museums, zoos, and amusement parks; to schools for the chronically disruptive, the chronically disaffected, and adjudicated youth; to schools for the intellectually gifted, the emotionally disturbed, and schools for students who require special education; to schools that hold classes during the usual daytime hours, to schools that hold classes in the late afternoon or evening, and to schools that don't hold classes at all” (Kellmayer 1998:28). A few of these are participants of democratic education, a movement characterized by shared decision-making among the students and staff, a learner-centered approach in which students choose their daily activities, equality among staff and students, and the use of the community as an extension of the classroom (AERO 2006).<sup>9</sup> Because of the reluctance to accept the democratic model of education espoused by these schools, only a few are publicly funded (AERO 2004). Nonetheless, the current trend in alternative education toward schools organized around the principle of freedom of choice shares its origins with the democratic school movement.

Since the proliferation of alternative schools during the late 1960s, alternative education research has focused mainly on the non-voluntary assignment of students to publicly funded behavior modification programs and the limited rehabilitative function of these conventional educational alternatives, as if such institutions are the only alternative (G. Goodman 1999; Martin 2003; Raywid 1994, 2001). John Kellmayer's “primer” for educational alternatives

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<sup>9</sup> The oldest and most well-known democratic school is Summerhill in Suffolk, UK. Founded in 1921 by existentialist educational philosopher A.S.Neill, Summerhill is a small, residential private school with an enrollment of approximately sixty-five children from ages five to seventeen. With an ethos based on the right of children to control their lives and education, the school community is controlled by democratic meetings in which each community member, regardless of their role, controls one vote. Unfortunately, due to negative publicity in the school's controversial past as well as her father's protective selection of a reclusive location for the school, Summerhill's current administrator, Zoë Neill Readhead, does not allow research or even extended visits to the reclusive campus (personal communication, January 13, 2006).

includes a mention of democratic education, placing it on the far end of the alternative education spectrum as “schools that don't hold classes at all” (1998:28).

Small-school aficionado Mary Anne Raywid, in her 1994 appraisal of the field of alternative education, argues that the formal public school classroom frequently reinforces frustration and failure for students already at risk of dropping out. She laments the rare recognition that “environment makes the difference and is what enables [alternative] students to succeed” (Raywid 1994:26). Raywid’s type II alternatives are “last-chance” programs “to which students are sentenced—usually as one last chance prior to expulsion” (Raywid 1994:27). In this category Raywid places in-school suspension programs, “cool-out rooms,” and “longer term placements for the chronically disruptive” (*ibid.*). She and Kellmayer consider such programs as “soft jails” because they are antithetical to alternative programs that students attend by choice. They are designed and evaluated under the assumption that the student is the source of the problem. Those who agree that so-called "soft jails" are not the answer (Kellmayer 1998; Raywid 2001) refuse to blame the student for scholastic failure.

In later work, Raywid claims there is a substantial record of failure associated with the comprehensive high school, which she considers to be a stratifying institution that broadens the gap between the fortunate and disadvantaged. Urban high schools have especially low standards and are resistant to educational innovation (Raywid 1999). She also points out that pedagogical progressives widely touted the merits of small, personalized schools constructing the kind of authentic learning and student engagement that have characterized a number of alternative schools for over thirty years, but because of "behavioral objectives," the Eighties excellence movement, recentralization, and now the nationwide obsession with accountability, these ideas are still not taken seriously enough to effectively resurrect failing schools (Raywid 2001).

Some authors theorize about the possible relationship between rigid traditional school structure and the consequences for students unable or unwilling to conform. For example, Kennedy and Morton unabashedly claim that “[s]tudent failure is a social construct perpetuated by our education system” (1999: 57). McLaren, Goodman, and other proponents of critical theory also reject the blame-the-student ideology in favor of a view that takes into account the social and economic roots of educational disparity. Carole Mottaz decries traditional schools for the lack of significant changes despite the innovation of some, claiming that, despite the dramatic difference between the background of the average American student today and the student who attended school a century ago, the subjects being taught and the methods of presenting information have not changed (Mottaz 2002:x). Sprinkling her pages with Tyack and Cuban (1995), Mottaz suggests that alternative schools offer a way to tinker with the system that is having trouble accommodating youth who might otherwise drop out or be expelled.

Miller (2002) argues that the critique of traditional secondary schools brought by proponents of the democratic school movement is especially relevant to the educational conditions of the present time, including issues such as the standards movement, high stakes testing, school violence and its suppression, and corporate influence over the curriculum. Explaining that the movement emerged out of a particular historical context in which many of the nation's social and political institutions were under attack and its claimed values and beliefs were contested, Miller locates this educational "counterculture" in the context of the New Left, the civil rights movement, student protests, the antiwar movement, and a growing cultural and intellectual resistance to the homogenization and commercialization of American society.

Advocates of the free school movement rejected corporate capitalism, governmental authority, and the meritocratic notion that education should prepare youth for their place in

society. They argued that conventional schools were morally repressive institutions that reinforced racial and class oppression and sought to mold students for roles in an increasingly depersonalized "technocratic" society. Schools, they felt, should "nourish rather than diminish young people's autonomy and sharpen rather than co-opt and commodify their critical intelligence" (Miller 2002:106).

Despite having enough philosophical agreement within the movement to suggest that there was a coherent "free school ideology" (Miller 2002), sharp divisions in the free school movement led to its eventual collapse. Jonathan Kozol, once a recognized leader in the free school movement, accused the free schools of promoting the personal liberation of their white upper-class students while eschewing the larger social and political mission that he believed belonged at the center of the movement.<sup>10</sup> Comparing free schools to sandboxes "for the children of the SS Guards at Auschwitz" (quoted in Miller, 71; see also Neumann 2003), Kozol condemned them for failing to ameliorate racial and social oppression. Still, the foundation had been laid for a non-conventional alternative to the public school system.

Related to freedom of choice is participatory decision making. Alternative schools of the past and present have utilized "democratic all-school governance systems" to give students, faculty, staff, parents, and the community "a real voice in the day-to-day operation of the alternative program" (1998:32). This was a key feature in many of the exemplary schools of the original sixties movement (Neumann 2003).

The optimal flexibility sometimes demonstrated towards students of alternative schools who are supposed to be in a punitive environment creates a perceived unfairness which is a major source of antagonism to their design among the traditional school cohort (Gold and Mann

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<sup>10</sup> Most free schools were established by middle-class white parents (Neumann 2003: 74; Graubard 1972:40).

1984:157–158). This perception of unfairness develops mostly among proponents of the blame-the-student ideology, who are uncomfortable with the idea of “rewarding” deviant students with “leniency.” Mottaz argues many students must attend alternative schools in the first place mainly “because the traditional school could not be flexible enough to adjust to their individual needs” (Mottaz 2002: 34): “These students desperately need small school size, small class size, extended roles for teachers, cooperative roles for students, voluntary membership, student involvement in governance, and an absence or minimization of tracking, ability grouping or other kinds of labeling” (13).

Despite the penchant for punitive educational arrangements for students who do not fit the mold of the conventional high school, rare examples exist of non-coercive, academically rigorous alternative schools that are also responsive to the diversity of student needs. Proponents of democratically principled education models have suggested that most public school districts eschew the existential educational philosophy upon which democratic schooling is founded and hence only private alternatives employ this model (AERO 2004). Many parents who value the right of their children to choose their own educational pursuits turn to unschooling.

### **John Holt and the Rejection of the U.S. Public Education System**

At the turn of the 60s decade, experienced public school educator John Caldwell Holt observed a colleague’s classroom in a Boston private school. What began as a collection of anecdotal remarks became an analysis of “the harmful effects of today’s schooling on the character and intellect of children” and “the ways in which schools foster bad strategies, raise children’s fears, produce learning which is usually fragmentary, distorted and short-lived, and generally fail to meet the real needs of children” (1964:xv). Published in 1964, *How Children Fail* gradually led other educators and parents down the same path of disillusionment with the process of school reform. Convinced of the impossibility of truly child-centered education

necessary for learning within a compulsory school setting, Holt became a vocal advocate of homeschooling, following his seminal work with *How Children Learn* (1967), *The Underachieving School* (1969), *What Do I Do Monday* (1970), *Freedom and Beyond* (1972), *Escape from Childhood* (1974), *Instead of Education* (1976), *Never Too Late* (1978), and *Teach Your Own* (1981). By the time of the publication of *Instead of Education*, his work had already engendered a modern movement toward withdrawing students from government schools and teaching them at home before the “damage” became permanent. Many parents took Holt’s renunciation of what he called the “myth of ‘learning’” to its logical conclusion and incorporated “doing, not ‘education’” into their own homeschooling practices.<sup>11</sup>

To provide support for families wanting ideas to help their children learn outside of school, Holt began publishing a four-page newsletter called *Growing Without Schooling* (Griffith 1998:vii). The first issue of *GWS* appeared in 1977 and continued until 2001. Resonating with many like-minded parents, *GWS* subscribers numbered nearly five hundred by its six month of publication and nearly tripled after Holt’s 1982 appearance on The Phil Donahue Show, prompting over seven thousand letters to the magazine, over half expressing support or requesting more information (Holt 1982:1).<sup>12</sup> In Issue 8 of *GWS*, Holt wrote:

In GWS #7 I said that we had received 2700 letters as a result of the TV show with Phil Donahue, and might get 1000 more. The total is now about 7500, and though the flood has slowed down a good deal, it has not stopped.

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<sup>11</sup> Though he defended children’s freedom to pursue their own interests as opposed to following a defined curriculum, Holt originally used the word “unschooling” to describe the act of removing one’s children from school. The term soon became a synonym for “homeschooling,” and over the next two decades, the meaning of “unschooling” evolved and narrowed, now referring to the child-centered style of homeschooling that Holt advocated (Griffith 1998:vii).

<sup>12</sup> In Issue 8, Holt reported: “The group subscription record has moved to a Southeastern state (for the time being, I can’t say which one), where readers have taken out—hold onto your hats—a 74X subscription, for 12 issues! (Each reader will get *GWS* for about \$1.32 per year, or \$.23 per issue.) The next largest group subscription is in Great Britain, where a group of people connected with the British unschooling movement called Education Otherwise have taken out a 40X subscription for 18 issues.”

Of these letters, about half expressed some kind of sympathy and support, from mild to ecstatic. Perhaps 1000 or so said they definitely wanted to subscribe to GWS. (Had I guessed how much mail there would be, I would have tried to give the price on the air!). Another 1000 seemed strongly interested. As far as we can, I plan to follow up these people until they either subscribe or say, leave me alone!

Only eight letters were critical and/or hostile, and none of them were what you could call hate mail. Of the eight, four or five did not so much defend the schools as criticize me for not trying to make them better.

Hundreds of the supporting letters (and about four of the critical) were from teachers or ex-teachers. Some of the latter had retired, many had quit in despair and disgust, or been fired. Many of those who are still teaching said things like, I work in the schools, and I know what they're like, and I don't want that for my child.

Only one letter strongly defended the schools.

While doing the show, I said to Linda Sessions during a station/commercial break, and after we had heard some fairly hostile comment from the audience, that we were not there so much to convince the audience as to send out a signal. Later I read that about four and a half million families (mostly mothers, since it is a daytime show) regularly watch it. That's a lot of people. But there are a great many more still to be reached. We have much more signal sending left to do.

Impervious to misunderstandings of his anti-school sentiment, Holt, having carefully considered school reform and finding it futile, instead recognized his awareness-raising role in protecting future students from the destructive capacity of institutionalized learning. He concluded his article with a report of the continuing press coverage of “unschooling”:

CBS 60 Minutes wanted to do a show on the same subject, but was told by higher-ups that the number of unschoolers was not big enough to justify it. But another CBS TV show, called Magazine, definitely plans to do a program on unschooling. At least one other big national show is looking into it.

The monthly magazine *Mother Jones* has a very good article on unschooling coming out. I have had long conversations about it with people from *The Ladies' Home Journal*. *Omni*, a new magazine of science and science fiction, has said they want to interview me. An interview with me, which I have not yet seen, has been published in the *Libertarian Review*. And all over the country the newspapers have been full of stories about unschoolers.

Perhaps coincidentally, following the national exposure of Holt's fledgling flock of home educators, the attention of the federal government returned to the subject of public school reform.

In 1983 Ronald Reagan appointed a special commission to report on the state of education in the US. The result was “A Nation at Risk,” which reported a “rising tide of mediocrity” in our country; the report and subsequent analysis were very critical of issues in education that are perhaps beyond the control of the schools. Nevertheless, the report linked a massive reform of education, including a focus on higher standards of performance, to national security (Rury 2002: 200). Historian of American education John Rury writes: “Americans of nearly every social strata believed that education was a vital national interest, necessary for competing on a global scale with such rising economic powers as the Japanese and Europeans” (*ibid.*). Among the changes enacted was an end to the then-popular cafeteria-style curriculum that gave students at least the appearance of the freedom to choose their own course of study, an unfortunate consequence if the extent to which students participate in academic activities depends on the choices available to them (AERO 2004; Angus and Mirel 1999; Dugger and Dugger 1998; Kellmayer 1998; Neill 1960; Raywid 1994).

In addition to deflecting attacks on the Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk* served to arouse widespread public concern about the deterioration of educational quality and the simultaneous loss of American economic strength. During its relatively recent history, schooling in the U.S. had become so central to the social and economic life of the nation that the federal government began taking a leading role in both formulating educational policy questions as well as funding for key elements of the system both parties hoped would contribute to the human capital revolution (Rury 2002:200–201).

At the same time, the decentralization of laws governing compulsory schooling makes alternative education movements possible. Stevens notes the uniquely favorable legal context in

which John Holt, Michael Farris, and other progenitors of contemporary home education operated in the early 1980s:

The United States is distinctive among Western industrialized nations in the extraordinary decentralization of legal rules regarding schooling. Public schooling is governed largely by states and localities in this country, and this kind of legal structure creates lots of wiggle room for educational innovators. . . . And since the question of just who ultimately is responsible for the education of children (parents? the state?) has never been squarely resolved in America, the country has accommodated many alternatives to public schools (Stevens 2001:6).<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary home schooling also benefited from the historical context of post-1960s America. Intensely aware that state officials and school bureaucrats are capable of abusing their powers, the nation had become “rather more accustomed than it used to be to groups that do things unconventionally, to people who live their ideals” (*ibid.*). Many home school advocates who came of age during the cultural innovation and educational experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s now consider themselves “their own people, a bit outside the mainstream” (*ibid.*).

### **The Homeschooling Movement Today**

In the midst of the unsuccessful reforms surrounding *A Nation at Risk*, and owing much to the publicity promulgated by Holt, the homeschooling movement in the U.S. has grown tremendously since the 1970s, estimated to encompass as many as 1.5 to 2 million students, though state laws regulating homeschooling—and therefore the legal definitions of the term “homeschoolers”—vary widely, making accurate estimates difficult (Griffith 1998: vii).<sup>14</sup>

Homeschooling is now considered the ultimate indictment of the public school system in the United States. In 1986, it was estimated that between 120,000 and 260,000 school-aged children in the United States were being educated at home (Lines 1987). Twelve years later,

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<sup>13</sup> By contrast, homeschooling is prohibited by national law in Germany, Bulgaria, China, and Brazil; it is legal but highly regulated in Sweden, Poland, Malaysia, Lithuania, and Romania (HSLDA 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Some researchers claim that the typical characterization of school dropouts obscures the increase of home schooling (Pitman 1987:280; LeCompte 1986).

Patricia Lines (1998) reported for the U.S. Department of Education that there were fifteen thousand homeschoolers in the early 1970s, three hundred thousand in 1988, and as many as one million in the 1997–98 school year.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Princiotta and Bielick interpreted the results of the Parent and Family Involvement Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program to indicate that homeschooling may be the fastest growing sector of American educational alternatives (2006:iii). According to Princiotta and Bielick, the number of homeschooled students in 2003 had grown to an estimated 1,096,000, a 29 percent increase from the estimated 850,000 in 1999. The percentage of school-aged children being home-schooled had risen from 1.7 percent in 1999 to 2.2 percent in 2003 (*ibid.*).<sup>16</sup> In 2007, there were 1.5 million homeschooled students in the U.S., representing 2.9 percent of the school-age population (Planty et al. 2009:14). The NCES also noted a 74 percent increase from 1999 to 2007 and “a 36 percent relative increase since 2003” (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup>

According to an article on Parents.com, a website labeled by its publisher, the Meredith Corporation<sup>18</sup>, as “the online home of *American Baby*, *Parents*, and *Family Circle*,” there are currently almost two million homeschooled children in the U.S. (Reilly 2008). The article describes the experiences of three homeschooling families and attributes the decision to “opt out of traditional school” to some parents’ preference for faith-based curricula, dissatisfaction with

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<sup>15</sup> Another study commissioned by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a homeschooling advocacy group, found 1.23 million children being homeschooled in the U.S. in 1996 (Ray 1997:2-3).

<sup>16</sup> In 1990, Brian Ray predicted that approximately 2 percent of the school-aged children the U.S. would be homeschooled by the turn of the century (Ray 1990).

<sup>17</sup> The NCES defines homeschooled students as “school-age children (ages 5-17) in a grade equivalent to at least kindergarten and not higher than 12<sup>th</sup> grade who receive instruction at home instead of at a public or private school either all or most of the time” (Planty et al. 2009:14).

<sup>18</sup> A leading media and marketing company focused on women in the U.S., the Meredith Corporation boasts 26 subscription magazines, 12 television stations, approximately 400 books in print, and an audience of over 75 million American women (Meredith Corporation 2008).

academic standards, the necessity of individualized instruction, and the desire to spend more time with their children (Reilly 2008).

Stevens notes that, unlike the charter school movement which has benefited from positive press and encompasses about 350,000 students, “home education has grown without the imprimatur of groups like the National Education Association and through years of skeptical media coverage” (2001:11). He cites section B-67 of the *1999–2000 NEA Resolutions*, which began, “The National Education Association believes that home schooling programs cannot provide the student with a comprehensive educational experience” (200, note 5).<sup>19</sup> He adds that the NEA and the PTA are “cautiously supportive of charter schools” (*ibid.*).<sup>20</sup> Home schooling is the topic of section B-81 of the 2009–2010 resolutions, which states, “The National Education Association believes that home schooling programs *based on parental choice* cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience” (NEA 2009; emphasis added). The section continues with the NEA’s requirements for acceptable home education:

When home schooling occurs, students enrolled must meet all state curricular requirements, including the taking and passing of assessments to ensure adequate academic progress. Home schooling should be limited to the children of the immediate family, with all expenses borne by the parents/guardians. Instruction should be by persons who are licensed by the appropriate state education licensure agency, and a curriculum approved by the state department of education should be used” (*ibid.*).

Next, the NEA takes on the use of public school facilities by home schoolers: “The Association also believes that home-schooled students should not participate in any extracurricular activities

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<sup>19</sup> Stevens’s source, <http://www.nea.org/resolutions/99/99b-67.html> (accessed by him on 6/27/00), is no longer available.

<sup>20</sup> Stevens cites the *1999-2000 NEA Resolutions*, section A-26; *National PTA Background Brief: Charter Schools*, <http://www.pta.org>; accessed by him on 6/27/2000. The PTA’s opinion regarding charter schools can now be found in its *PTA Position Statement on Public Education* under the heading “Charter Schools”: “The National PTA acknowledges charter schools as one avenue to school reform and supports the concept of charter schools only if the schools reflect the positions and principles of the National PTA. The National PTA will support legislation or policy decisions relating to charter schools that adhere to and comply with applicable laws and guidelines set forth for other public elementary and secondary educational institutions” (PTA 2009).

in the public schools.” Finally, the NEA claims authority for local districts over placement upon re-entry: “The Association further believes that local public school systems should have the authority to determine grade placement and/or credits earned toward graduation for students entering or re-entering the public school setting from a home school setting” (NEA 2009).<sup>21</sup>

Homeschooling is a family’s expression of distrust of the public school’s ability to educate their children (Griffith 1998). It is popularly characterized by the freedom to work at the student’s own pace and study in non-traditional learning sites, such as outdoors or at a museum. Parents who prize home education communicate from the perspective that they are enriching their children’s lives in ways that are not available in a school setting, as the following poem appearing in a recent issue of *Mothering* magazine illustrates:

I am keeping my daughter home from school today

I am keeping my daughter home  
from school today.  
She has fallen behind in some subjects  
and they need special attention,  
like birdwatching  
and blowing on the dust bunnies  
'til they scamper across the floor  
and deciding once and for all whether  
the crack on the ceiling is a sleeping dragon  
or a boat to sail away in.

Later on  
with furrowed brows  
we will conference over cups of hot chocolate  
our fingers curled  
around the smooth ceramic surface,  
both seeking and protecting its warmth.  
Earnestly we will say to each other  
that it is all very well  
to excel in math and spelling,

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<sup>21</sup> The new resolutions also include a comment regarding home schooling in section A-32 concerning acceptable charter schools: “i. Charters should not be granted for the purpose of home schooling, including providing services over the Internet to home schooled students” (NEA 2009).

but if you cannot tell the difference  
between a sparrow and a chickadee  
then you're headed for some trouble in life.

Tomorrow  
I think she can go back  
when she is caught up,  
when I am sure that she knows  
how to catch the icy points  
of the year's first snowflake  
on her tongue (Schmitt 2008:58).<sup>22</sup>

Despite the intentions of homeschoolers to provide the best possible education for their children, popular perception of parents who choose homeschooling is at best guarded. Many responses to homeschooling in general and unschooling in particular are negative; most opponents of home education express concerns about inadequate socialization and quality of instruction. Some accuse homeschooling parents of religious fanaticism or neglect, as demonstrated by the first of four online comments reacting to a Parents.com article on September 17, 2008. Someone identifying herself as "Bobby Sue Jo" wrote, "A truly awful article/fluff piece—all are from the South—how about someone who actually has a normal (or even gifted) child that isn't immersed in the Old Testament? Oh wait, I suppose that would be a threat to the NEA." A quip by Seth Meyers during the October 23, 2008 airing of Saturday Night Live's "Weekend Update Thursday" jabs, "There is a growing trend among some parents toward homeschooling children because they believe that mandated vaccinations for public schools are unsafe. This is expected to lead to another new trend: dying of polio."

### **Public Schoolers vs. Homeschoolers**

Despite the now-legal status and increasing acceptance of homeschooling, there is still much animosity between parents and educators who support public school and those who

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<sup>22</sup> Reprinted by permission of the author.

homeschool, as illustrated by the following question recently posted on an ivillage.com message board dedicated to schooling choices: “Hi. I am a homeschooler, and I hope that doesn't offend you because I could really use some advice.” One parent, defensive of her conscious choice of public school for her kids, rants on Nickelodeon/Viacom's parentsconnect.com in a spill called, “School Is Where the Mind Is.” She starts, “A note to all the home-schoolers who dis me: Knock it off.” She continues with a lamentation about the beginning of a new school year and the inherent “undisguised disdain” directed at parents of public-school students by self-righteous homeschoolers. While expressing her reverence for homeschooling parents, she questions their apparent penchant for making offensive inferences to “children being warehoused, institutionalized, systematically brainwashed and forced to the lowest common denominator.”

Her closing remarks reveal her perception of public school and her own parenting, writing:

I struggle with time constraints and social issues and the occasional academic shortcoming. But none of these is overwhelming. School isn't a vacuum. I don't think [my child]'s getting enough depth in science? I add that to our home life. I'd like to see her reading more advanced books? I go to our never-ending bookshelves and pluck something off to add to the stack of books next to her bed. I'm part of the PTA; I volunteer in the classroom; I follow through at home. I play with my children and teach them and discipline them. I am no more—and no less—a parent than you.

As of December 2008, fifty-seven readers have given their vote of approval to this disgruntled public schooler, indicating an informal consensus among public school parents that homeschoolers think less of them as parents.<sup>23</sup>

### **Parental Motivations to Homeschool**

Parents who educate their children at home are “depart[ing] from the mass-schooling ethic that has been perceived as a cornerstone of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American way of life” (Rakestraw 1990:67). The parents who comprise the contemporary homeschooling movement are far from a

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<sup>23</sup> This “spill” appears on [http://www.parentsconnect.com/spills/school\\_where\\_mind\\_is.jhtml](http://www.parentsconnect.com/spills/school_where_mind_is.jhtml), accessed 8/12/2008.

homogenous group, varied in both their reasons for homeschooling and curricular goals (Gaither 2008; Mayberry 1988). For example, a great number of parents choose to homeschool specifically so that they can ensure that their children receive a Christian-based education (Lines 1991; Van Galen 1991; Mayberry 1988; Mayberry et al. 1995; Stevens 2001; Princiotta and Bielick 2006; Gaither 2008). Some homeschool because they value a different curricular focus than the essentialist philosophy espoused by many public and private schools (Mayberry 1988), such as the classical “trivium” model promoted by Wise and Bauer (1999). Recent studies suggest that academic concerns may outweigh religious reasons to homeschool (Gaither 2008:204).<sup>24</sup> The disparate parental motivations for refusing attendance in government-run schools reflect numerous perceived failings in not only the public educational system but also parental responsibility, including academic standards, negative socialization, and school violence. Asked their most important reason for homeschooling, 31 percent of homeschooled children had parents who cited environmental concerns “such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure,” 30 percent reported the desire to provide religious or moral instruction, and 16 percent of the children had parents who claimed to be dissatisfied with the quality of the instruction available outside the home (Princiotta and Bielick 2006).

Some parents of children with special needs chose to homeschool because they feel like their children will benefit from the individual attention, as illustrated by a Lancaster, South Carolina mother who called in to the November 18, 2008 airing of NPR’s *Talk of the Nation* to share her story with Stephen Hinshaw, chair of the Department of Psychology at UC-Berkeley whose research focus is on commonly missed indicators in girls with Attention Deficit and

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<sup>24</sup> Some families enjoy the competitive advantage afforded by the academic rigor, flexibility, and individualized instruction of homeschooling. Gaither observes, “Homeschoolers have been tearing up the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee and the National Geographic Bee for well over a decade” (2008:202).

Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD (National Public Radio 2008). The caller reported that after her daughter was diagnosed,<sup>25</sup> “her teacher still would mention to me that. . . even though she was testing at or above grade level in almost all subjects they felt that she was missing something and that as time went on she would have more difficulties.”<sup>26</sup> The subsequent decision to homeschool led to the discovery that her daughter has significant problems with sequencing, or “breaking things down into steps to analyze problems,” something she hadn’t noticed until she started homeschooling, even though “that single problem has consequences in everything that she does.” The attention she gets at home has made the difference: “In ten minutes she grasps something that she’s never been able to do before.”

### **Homeschooling vs. Unschooling**

Given the increased incidence of homeschooling in the U.S., perhaps the most striking feature of homeschool education today is its mixed character. Stratifications within the homeschooling community seem to be based on parental justification for homeschooling, and there is no more radical rejection of the public education system in the U.S. than “unschooling,” which is a division within homeschooling that eschews virtually all curriculum models and places the ultimate authority over educational decisions with the child. It is this locus of authority to make curricular decisions that differentiates unschooling from homeschooling models that use a parent-selected curriculum.

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<sup>25</sup> She claims to have resisted diagnosis of her daughter because of the negative stigma and her own belief that the real problem might have been lack of discipline; children with ADHD usually present symptoms such as inattention, inability to “sit still,” and an apparent lack of impulse control. During the interview, Hinshaw comments on the common responses to ADHD, such as, “Everyone has ADHD”; “It’s a fake diagnosis . . . the real problem is poor parenting,” or “It’s only an American diagnosis; it doesn’t anywhere else in the world. We’re just intolerant of kids who fidget and squirm.” He clarifies: “In fact ADHD exists in every culture where there is compulsory education.”

<sup>26</sup> “She also commented, “Cognitive problems I think are often misinterpreted as behavioral problems.”

Unschooling parents' educational philosophy dismisses schools (especially those that are publicly funded and operated) as especially antithetical to true education, purporting that schools are neither the only nor the best places to learn. Relying on self-motivated, self-directed, self-taught lessons (McKee 2002), unschooling parents allow each child to decide what and when to learn. Author and unschooling parent Alison McKee makes the recurrent observation that she had to learn to trust her children and allow them to "show [her] the way" (2002). Whereas homeschooling families trust themselves to educate their own children, unschooling families trust their children to educate themselves.

Unschoolers' challenges to generally accepted assumptions about childhood and education also raise questions about the possible bifurcation of childrearing philosophies. An informal content analysis of two different subscription periodicals focused on parenting reveals two sets of seemingly contrasting childrearing practices. *Parents* magazine, a favorite of pediatrician waiting rooms, caters to an audience of consumer-oriented, high-tech moms who identify with the majority opinion of what constitutes best parenting practices and revere the advice of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Parents from the "alternative" camp may find more camaraderie on the pages of *Mothering: Natural Family Living*, whose target audience seems to be defined as much by what they don't do: They don't medicate, circumcise, vaccinate, or send their children to school, as noted by a reader in the "Your Letters" forum of the November-December 2008 issue: "I don't think I'm your target audience. I am an epidural-birthing, bottle-feeding, disposable diapering, vaccinating mom . . ." Indeed, the advertisements in the same issue display a wide array of homeopathic remedies, natural supplements, and chemical free baby products, many of which tout the absence of paraben, synthetic fragrances, sulfates, phthalate, propylene glycol, and pesticides—all the recently identified enemies of "naturalness."

By contrast, the advertisements in December 2008 *Parents* magazine are adult-focused, ranging from convenience products such as disposable diapers and frozen dinners to technological advances like kitchen appliances, digital cameras, and a crossover SUV.

Dividing the estimated two million homeschooled students among the many models employed is even more difficult than characterizing the movement, but Griffith approximates that “homeschoolers who consider themselves unschoolers . . . constitute somewhere between ten and fifty percent of the movement” (1998:vii). Her calculation likely reflects her perceived shift toward the child-centered approach to homeschooling envisioned by Holt, though she also observes that traditionalist homeschoolers who use formal curriculum packages and conventional timelines have disapproved of unschooling, considering it “a form of benign neglect at best” and sometimes disparaging unschoolers for “giving homeschooling a bad name” (*ibid.*). One unschooling mom of two girls from California who used to use a more traditional homeschool model responded with this comment to Griffith’s survey: “It’s been a long process of unraveling the school protocol; with each year we feel more free of its shadow, until now [traditional homeschooling] seems like an alien thing, even the concept of it” (viii).

### **Unschooling as Both Educational Choice and Childrearing Style**

Unschoolers claim that their particular homeschooling model is more than their preferred educational option—it is also a way of life (Griffith 1998; McKee 2002). For example, due to the financial constraints of having at least one parent abstain from work outside the home to direct the education of its younger members, many homeschooling households are familiar with resources to help them simplify their lives. Often, this entails reducing reliance on several modern conveniences touted by consumer advertising culture. For unschooling parents, whose economic adaptations exude an almost unanimous respect for the natural environment in such

practices as producing their own food, powering their homes with renewable energy sources, and other practices associated with natural family living.<sup>27</sup>

In her questionnaire for unschooling parents, Mary Griffith asked, “How has unschooling affected your life as a whole? Has it affected you or your kids more? What effects do you think unschooling will have on the adults your kids become? How will they be different from more conventionally educated people?” (1998:198) One unschooling parent responded:

We’ve found a style of child-rearing, an approach to education, a way of life that allows our children so many advantages over conventional schooling that it often sounds too simple and easy to be credible—too good to be true. We often find ourselves confronted by skeptics who insist that unschooling has to be more complicated than we say it is, that there must be some key element we are leaving out (Griffith 1998:viii).

Another reported: “I think that we, as unschoolers, learn to trust our children. . . . By and large, society tends to underestimate kids, and by giving them the freedom to explore possibilities, we have an opportunity to demonstrate how much more many kids could be doing.” Another unschooling parent wrote, “[Unschooling is] appreciation of children—who they are and where they are in their growth journeys” (200). This unschooling parent makes the lack of distinction between life and learning explicit: “I’ve always said that homeschooling in any form is really a lifestyle choice and not just an educational choice. Unschooling just makes it more so. It is a decision to put children first, to respect their needs and opinions, to treat them as fully human beings and not as property” (*ibid.*). The same respondent mentioned an escape from “the rat race of constant busyness and rushing from one thing to another” (*ibid.*).

Unschooling is also based on the idea that children learn best when they are interested in a subject:

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<sup>27</sup> Many unschooling families also subscribe to consensual living, which is a process, philosophy, and mindset, based upon the principles of equality, trust, and the right to self-determination, by which individuals endeavor to live “in harmony with [their] families and community” (Brown 2009). Consensual *learning* is often used synonymously with unschooling.

As a classroom teacher I was always amazed at how well the students always did in the subject areas that sparked their interest. One good, well-done demonstration could ensure better understanding from your students, not because they understood the concepts but because they had become interested enough in it to want to learn about it. It became obvious to me that if a child wants to learn something, a child will learn it, and learn it very well. Unschooling, for us, taps into that natural curiosity and desire to learn. —Kathy, Illinois (5).

Because unschooling “puts the learner in charge” (2), parents who subscribe to it report an uncommon trust in their children’s ability to learn without being coerced:

Unschooling, for us, is mindful living, free play, and exploration. It is letting go of the schoolish “shoulds” and “oughts” and measuring sticks. We aim to live more fully rather than manufacture educational experiences to fill the gaps in our lives. Living this way requires a considerable amount of trust and patience—*trust* that children will learn what they need to know without years of conventional instruction, and patience enough to let them get to it in their own good time. It is not a life to be hurried, nor is it neat and tidy. What we are doing is so vastly different from the way our society is schooled to believe humans learn that more people are quite skeptical, even uncomprehending of it. How do you know if they are learning? Do you use textbooks? How can you tell if they’re at grade level? What about phonics? How will they get into college? How will they learn to do things they don’t like to do? What about advanced math and science? The litany of questions makes me chuckle and then sigh. —Laura D, Texas (3).

We don’t approach learning as something people do as a separate activity. We live our lives and learn as we go. We have no teaching, no classes, no lesson plans, no grades, no curriculum, no textbooks, no tests. Basically, I don’t pay particular attention to what the kids are learning; it is enough to see that they are growing as people, and gaining knowledge and experience as they go. I don’t keep track of what they do, other than as you’d know about what any of your friends learn about subjects they are interested in. We talk a lot. There is no special time set aside to do a learning activity, nor are any activities done because they’re educational. I have no list, physical or mental, of what I think they should know at any certain age. —Linda, New York (4).

My whole philosophy of unschooling is based on the premise that learning is a natural, enjoyable, impossible-to-avoid drive that we are all born with. I believe that children want to learn about life and will learn if they’re not interfered with. By interference, I mean extrinsic rewards, threats, being told what to learn and when to learn it. . . . *You have to trust children in order to unschool.* —Susan, Iowa (*ibid.*).

This common theme of trusting children to know when and what to learn expands to the idea of granting children the same privileges as adult members of the family; hence, the unschooling

lifestyle begins at birth and encompasses all aspects of family life.<sup>28</sup> As one unschooling parent interviewed by Griffith observes: “Unschooling is tied up with a lot of other lifestyle choices. It fits our whole parenting philosophy of giving kids choices whenever possible and respecting them as people” (204). She reports that her first year as an unschooling parent also caused her to “question other things in our society that are long-held ‘truths’: ‘I’ve disproved the one that says ‘kids won’t learn without being forced’; what else is false?’” (*ibid.*). Unschoolers’ challenge to the educational establishment (further illustrated by the following cartoon) is reminiscent of the rejection of cultural normality characteristic of the Do It Yourself movement.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

Education in the United States began as an increasingly formalized and deliberate project of the colonial family for ensuring cultural transmission (Bailyn 1960). Beginning in the 1830s, the common school movement brought publicly funded schools into the reach of many parents who did not qualify for charity schooling but could also not afford to send their children to private schools. For the first time in history, American families had an alternative to educating children in the home, and homeschooling rates became negligible. As compulsory education laws became more prevalent in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the decision whether or not to

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<sup>28</sup> The description of AlwaysUnschooled, a group for radical unschoolers listed under the Attachment Parenting category of Yahoo! Groups, states, “Secular in nature, we welcome unschoolers from all walks of life. Our discussions focus on exploring topics like organic learning, respectful parenting, consensual-living, freedom and autonomy, living by principles, convincing family, surviving panic and criticism, living without fear, resisting enrollment, non-coercive parenting, deschooling ourselves, joyful living and releasing control. As a discussion list, AU regularly challenges ideas and accepted memes.” (Electronic document, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AlwaysUnschooled>, accessed August 17, 2008.)

<sup>29</sup> Do It Yourself (DIY) is a movement that began in the mid-1970s and peaked in the mid-1980s. Eschewing corporate capitalism, proponents of DIY believe they can remove themselves from the culture of mass production and consumption by acquiring goods and services by less commercial means, e.g., participating in food coops, shopping at thrift stores, and reusing instead of buying new, etc. Articles promoting unschooling, including a biographical sketch of John Holt, have occasionally appeared in Do It Yourself publications such as *Mother Earth News*, a periodical dedicated to living “off the grid” and other environmentally sustainable household practices. The anti-corporate message of DIY has been disseminated by the punk movement. See Mattson (2001); also Lamy and Levin (1985).

educate children was removed from prerogative of parents. Despite its early prominence, homeschooling increasingly remained a viable option mainly among rural families whose livelihood was tied to the agricultural calendar, especially as school systems gained centralized control over the education of increasing numbers of the school-aged population. As the nation moved into an era of scientific and industrial progress, public schooling was reified in its role to train the next generation of technological savants.



One unsettling event in aerospace achievement—the launch of Sputnik—caused citizens to question the technological and intellectual superiority of the United States and parents to doubt the efficacy of the public school system. A wave of educational reforms followed, many of them leading to the proliferation of alternative public schools and concomitant growth of private schools. Some parents, dissatisfied with the bureaucratization of the public school system and disenchanted with the slowness of reform took matters into their own hands, “withdrew their

children from traditional schools and initiated the contemporary home school movement” (Rakestraw 1990:70).

The educational reformers of the late 1960s and early 1970s incited a movement of home education proponents disenchanted with the hegemonic function and lack of conviviality of the public school system. Though they are returning to a previously acceptable educational tradition, practitioners of the contemporary homeschooling movement have experienced powerful official resistance and, early in its history, criminalization (Rakestraw 1990:70). Made more visible by a second, larger wave of home educators—this time motivated by the prospect of infusing their children’s education with conservative Protestant values—parent educators still travel many roads to achieve their ideal education for their children. While a review of the contextually disparate histories from which at least two homeschooling movements emerged, the process of discovering whether or not homeschooling parents in the U.S. belong to the same cultural milieu begins in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methodology employed in this research, beginning with conceptual and operational definitions of “alternative” childrearing and a description of the instruments used for identifying the indicators of “alternativity.” The ethnographic elements of the research design are then discussed, including a description of the “virtual” field site and the process for respondent recruitment using Internet bulletin board systems. The chapter concludes with an account of the various instruments adapted for online collection of the qualitative and quantitative data for this research.

#### **Operationalizing “Alternativity”**

The term *alternative* is defined as “different from the usual or conventional as existing or functioning outside the established cultural social, or economic system.”<sup>30</sup> Considering someone or something “alternative” requires different indicators depending on context. For example, alternative forms of energy usually refer to sources other than fossil fuels; alternative medicine might include homeopathy or herbal pharmacopoeia; and alternative schools could be those that deviate from the administrative organization, curriculum, or delivery methods of the public education system.<sup>31</sup> Because homeschooling parents comprise the population being studied, “alternativity” will be used here exclusively in reference to childrearing tasks.

In *Research Methods in Anthropology*, Bernard writes, “Understanding begins with questions and with ideas about how things work” (1995:13). The current project began with the

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<sup>30</sup> From the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative>, accessed June 29, 2009. A possible direction for future research is the relationship between “alternativity” and income, education, race, gender, and other demographic variables.

<sup>31</sup> Illustrative of this alternative-conventional dichotomy, the Whole Foods Market, a grocery store offering an expansive selection of “natural” foods and personal products, differentiates between organic and “conventional” produce.

following questions: What is unschooling? What influences lead parents to choose unschooling for their children? Are there “alternative” childrearing practices associated with unschooling parents that distinguish them from “conventional” homeschooling parents, i.e., are unschoolers more “alternative” than homeschoolers with respect to their parenting practices?

Determining whether or not the practice of childrearing tasks that are considered “alternative” makes a parent more likely to select unschooling over conventional homeschooling requires an operationally defined variable, and hence the reduction of a complex human phenomenon, “alternativity,” to a set of measurable traits (Bernard 1995). In order to measure the alternativity of homeschoolers, I identified indicators with which to score each respondent using elements of cultural domain analysis.

First, I asked parents of all educational persuasions to name as many childrearing tasks as they could so as to elicit a list containing both conventional and alternative tasks. I imported the list data into the ANTHROPAC environment with medium soundex sensitivity (Borgatti 1996) and obtained a “cleaned” list of the most frequently mentioned items, plus a few additional items identified ethnographically as possible indicators, for a total of sixty tasks. The next step was to generate a vector questionnaire designed to identify the indicators of alternativity. I asked parents, again from various educational orientations, to rate each item on a scale of one to five according to how “alternative” it was. Items scoring 3.5 or higher became the indicators of alternativity for a second questionnaire, administered to only homeschoolers and unschoolers, in which each respondent identified simply whether or not they practiced each childrearing activity. Using binary scoring a “Yes” response was 1 and a “No” response was 0. The scores were added

and totals used to compare respondents, identifying parents with higher scores as more “alternative” in their childrearing practices than those with lower scores.<sup>32</sup>

### Research Design

The overall design of this project most closely resembles the natural experiments that “are going on around us all the time” and are not conducted by researchers but simply evaluated (Bernard 1995:56–57). Some homeschooling parents select or design a structured curriculum based on their preconceptions of developmentally appropriate and desirable content; others allow their children free reign over their own activities, trusting that true learning will take place without externally imposed direction. Sampling each group and treating each as if it were part of a static-group comparison design loses the logical power associated with the random assignment of participants but allows the formulation and testing of the hypothesis that parents who choose unschooling over conventional homeschooling are those who practice a more *alternative* childrearing style. The survey instruments (described later in this chapter; see also Chapters 4 and 5 and Appendices B, C, F, H, and J) used as part of this design are admittedly weaker than the observations obtainable from true experimentation, but their validity is improved by conceptualizing them in terms of testing natural experiments and supporting their results ethnographically (70).<sup>33</sup>

In volume I of the seven-volume *Ethnographer’s Toolkit*, editors LeCompte and Schensul set forth “the seven characteristics that mark a study as ethnographic.” Paraphrased, these characteristics reveal that ethnography (1) is carried out in a natural setting, not in a laboratory;

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<sup>32</sup> This led to the idea that “alternativity” might be a unidimensional variable, and that there may be some point along the “alternativity” continuum at which unschooling as an *educational* alternative might be predictable.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard and Ashton-Vouyoucalos (1976) used life histories and surveys collected from Greek migrants and non-migrants to confirm that “[t]hose who had worked abroad were far less enthusiastic about providing expensive dowries for their daughters than were those who had never left Greece” (Bernard and Ashton-Vouyoucalos 1976, cited in Bernard 1995:70).

(2) involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants; (3) presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviors; (4) uses inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories; (5) frames all human behavior and belief within a sociopolitical and historical context; (6) uses multiple data sources, including both quantitative and qualitative data; and (7) uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results (1999:9).

The majority of this project was conducted in the virtual spaces belonging to several online parenting communities that inhabit the Internet, which has over the last fifteen years become a natural setting.<sup>34</sup> Although interactions with online respondents were not face-to-face, the comfortable anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication creates a virtual research environment in which personal information can be transmitted both directly through exchanges with the researcher and indirectly through messages between fellow members of the virtual community. In order to accurately reflect participants' perspectives and behaviors, this research combined qualitative observational, survey, and cognitive data with inductive analyses of several cultural texts created and published by community members (see Chapter 4). These qualitative data and analyses then informed several quantitative cognitive methods used to construct and test related hypotheses and cultural theories (see Chapter 5). Chapter 2 delineates the sociopolitical and historical context within which the question of parents' childrearing styles and the selection of an educational model for their children can be framed. The multiple data sources for this research (both qualitative and quantitative) will be described shortly. The ethnographic design culminates with the use of the culture concept as the interpretive lens.

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<sup>34</sup> Ontological implications of the virtual community, as well as the theoretical and methodological implications of doing online ethnography among virtual community members, are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

## **Virtual Field Site: Perspectives from an Online Unschooling Community**

Participants in online communities are more than casual observers or frequent e-shoppers, creating culturally expressive texts as they post responsive messages to electronic bulletin boards and articulate personal commentaries on blogs.<sup>35</sup> Wellman asserts that “[w]hen a computer network connects people, it is a social network” (1997:179).<sup>36</sup> Mickelson’s comparative study of parents of children with special needs who seek social support in electronic groups and those who attend traditional groups demonstrates the usefulness of the Internet for exchanging empathy, information, advice, or tangible aid with strangers.<sup>37</sup> Of Internet and social support, she concludes:

Parents who read electronic bulletin boards can obtain comparison information or vicarious support without having to disclose anything about themselves. This “lurking” may also allow parents to obtain validation for their feelings of stigma without having to communicate those feelings to others. Reading about or posting to parents having similar problems may allow parents to receive social support from their electronic support group without having to confront family and friends about potential or experienced conflicts (1997:172–173).

Parents who unschool can and do participate in electronic bulletin boards designed for seeking support, sharing resources, and giving advice. Most of what approximated participant observation among unschoolers occurred in the discussion forums sponsored by *Mothering*

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<sup>35</sup> A weblog, or blog for short, is a type of website on which a person (or group of people) can add regular entries in text, audio, or photo/video format to form an online diary or commentary on a particular subject. According to Technorati, the first Internet search engine dedicated to searching blogs, blogs are a pervasive, “global phenomenon that has hit the mainstream” and become a part of our daily lives (Technorati 2008). The number of blogs on a particular topic may indicate its relative salience. A Technorati search for “unschooling” on September 2, 2009 yielded 414 results.

<sup>36</sup> Wellman’s work demonstrates the possible usefulness of social network analysis for understanding how people relate to each other through computer-mediated communication. Although such analysis is beyond the scope of this project, it does suggest furtive possibilities for future research.

<sup>37</sup> The parents from Mickelson’s electronic sample were “slightly older and more likely to be married, White, Protestant, have completed college, and be employed full-time” (1997:169). Also, parents from electronic support groups “perceived family and friends as less supportive than did the mothers in the non-electronic sample” (174). Future research could pursue a similar investigation of the differential process of exchanging support for unschooling in electronic versus traditional formats.

*Magazine*. Visitors to Mothering.com can click on a tab labeled “Community” to reach the MotheringDotCommunity<sup>38</sup> forums, which number fifty-two, divided into nine categories: Welcome to the MotheringDotCommunity, Parenting, Family Life, Pregnancy and Birth, Breastfeeding, Health, Education, Natural Family Living, and The MDC Trading Post.

Unlike some message boards, all forums on MotheringDotCommunity are active, as evidenced by current message posts.<sup>39</sup> For example, on June 25, 2009, each forum had anywhere from eight topic threads with 132 posts to 139,204 threads with 3,213,807 posts. (The “Learning at Home and Beyond” forum had 18,213 threads with 209,044 posts.) All forums had new posts that same day except two, which had new posts the day before. Within each forum are several separate “threads” begun by members of the MotheringDotCommunity. Each represents a conversation that may contain hundreds of individual contributions spread over days or even years, which Rheingold likens to “a long, topical cocktail party you can rewind back to the beginning to find out who said what before you got there” (1993:18).

### **Entering the Field**

To facilitate my entry into the online home schooling community and build rapport with discussion board participants, I subscribed to several homeschooling and unschooling listserves and posted my own contributions to several discussion boards related to parenting and education. Discussion strands allow instant documentation of interaction and ready-made content for textual analysis, enabling me to record “observations” with a simple “cut-and-paste” operation into a word processing file. I also maintained detailed records of both my objective observations and

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<sup>38</sup> Until very recently, the forums were referred to as MotheringDotCommune.

<sup>39</sup> Not every thread of every discussion forum contains current messages, or “posts.” Some discussion threads can go for years without a new message posted to it. This phenomenon prevented me from being able to use several discussion boards that, despite having forums no longer active.

my subjective feelings in my field notes (Spradley 1979) to facilitate the deconstruction of my recorded observations (Dewalt et al. 1998).

Although most anthropologists base their research on the role of participating observer (Bernard 1995:138), I have taken the less-common role of observing participant. That is, I am a parent and active participant of the MotheringDotCommunity forums.<sup>40</sup> I identify myself in my signature and profile as someone who practices attachment parenting, elimination communication, co-sleeping, extended nursing, homebirth, and intactivism. I do not, however, homeschool my children, nor do I pretend to, and I have clearly identified myself as someone doing research into the childrearing practices of parents who do.

### **Units of Analysis**

The primary units of analysis for this research are homeschooling parents. Collecting and analyzing data at the household level might be subject to the ecological fallacy (also known as the “Nosnibor effect” after Robinson (1950)) in which homogeneity of each household in terms of the altertnativity of all its members might be assumed. However unlikely, there could be “conventionally minded” parents working outside the home to support the “alternative” practices of the other parent. By collecting data on the individual level, I am able to draw conclusions about parents *and* households (Bernard 1995). Online bulletin board systems, or discussion forums, comprise the secondary units of analysis for this research. Several are devoted to parenting and education, and many have sub-forums related directly to homeschooling in general and unschooling in particular.

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<sup>40</sup> See Marriott (1991) and Fleisher (1989) for other examples of work based on anthropologist’s role as observing participant.

## Sampling

In an attempt to supplement previous studies where the liberal-pedagogical perspective of the homeschooling movement was lacking due in part to errors in sampling methods, I used sampling methods that intentionally over-sampled the unschooling population. The first time I turned to the Internet to facilitate an initial inquiry into homeschooling, I revisited the discussion forums of the MotheringDotCommunity. A group of unschoolers had recently “broken away” from the homeschooling sub-forum to form their own sub-forum. Familiar with the precepts of existentialism that have led to the organization of democratically principled schools, I was intrigued. During the exploratory stages of my research, a hybrid of purposive<sup>41</sup> and quota sampling led to the collection of useful cognitive data from several subpopulations of American parents, each espousing a different educational model for their children (public/charter/magnet schooling, private schooling, homeschooling and unschooling).

In locating and recruiting respondents for this study, I became a member of several other discussion boards ([www.parentsconnect.com](http://www.parentsconnect.com), [www.community.kaboose.com](http://www.community.kaboose.com), [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/RiverCityUnschoolers](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/RiverCityUnschoolers), and [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/AlwaysLearning](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/AlwaysLearning)) with forums dedicated to conventional homeschooling and unschooling.<sup>42</sup> It soon became apparent that, because sampling frames were not available for either of these relatively inaccessible populations of homeschoolers, probability sampling was likely unattainable.<sup>43</sup> Through my membership in several online discussion boards

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<sup>41</sup> In their ethnography of buyers and sellers at a swap meet, Belk et al. (1988) argue that purposive sampling is particularly suited to the naturalistic inquiry commonly performed by anthropologists.

<sup>42</sup> Mickelson’s (1997) study of parents who seek social support in electronic support groups uses a similar process for participant recruitment.

<sup>43</sup> In retrospect, there might be a way to obtain a representative sample by using a two-stage sampling design that employs *cluster* sampling, which is possible even when there are no convenient lists or frames of the study population, and then a simple random sample to select the eventual units of analysis (Bernard 1995:89). Each

dedicated to parenting and education,<sup>44</sup> I was able to solicit participation for my questionnaires by posting links to a unique URL generated by surveymonkey.com, a secure survey service used by academic and market researchers. By creating threads<sup>45</sup> within several online discussion forums, I was able to invite fellow members of each forum to follow links to an online survey instrument where, after providing informed consent, they could participate.<sup>46</sup> Parents who clicked on the link immediately encountered my official informed consent protocol<sup>47</sup> followed by a brief survey (see Appendix A, Figure A-1). At the end of each protocol, respondents were asked to provide their e-mail addresses if they were interested in participating in the next phase of data collection.<sup>48</sup> Respondents were also asked to forward the link to the survey to others who might be interested in participating. Hence, I employed quota sampling supplemented by chain referral<sup>49</sup> sampling to ensure an adequate size, equal sample from each subpopulation for the ensuing comparative analysis.<sup>50</sup>

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discussion forum or list serve to which unschoolers subscribe and post messages could be considered a “cluster,” and parents from each group could then be sampled randomly to select a representative sample of parents. See Bernard and Comitas (1978) for an example.

<sup>44</sup> The initial samples were solicited by posting messages containing the link to my survey in discussion threads at Mothering.com, Unschooling.info, Parents.com, ParentsConnect.com, and GreatSchools.com. Those who responded to the survey were also asked to forward the link to others who might be interested.

<sup>45</sup> A thread is a topic within a forum in which one member makes an observation or poses a question that forms the basis for a conversational exchange between that member and other participants of the forum.

<sup>46</sup> The first page of each survey contained the informed consent process which, by requiring an affirmative response, prevented potential respondents who did not agree to its terms from continued participation in the research. It is important to note here that the two populations being sampled might include isolates who are not members of the online discussion forums selected for this study (or any other group, for that matter) who will be necessarily excluded from the samples.

<sup>47</sup> The informed consent protocol, required by the Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects, necessitated modification to accommodate online submission; instead of following the traditional procedure of signing a printed form, each respondent clicked a radio button in agreement before being allowed to continue to the survey.

<sup>48</sup> More than half of the respondents for each successive instrument were obtained in this way. Twenty-six of the 53 respondents to the pilesort activity provided their e-mail addresses for continued participation in the survey.

<sup>49</sup> *Chain referral* sampling is better than the more common *snowball* sampling. Snowball sampling has the problem of representing factions or very small subcultures. It also requires that you do something the people find unsettling,

## **Study Time Frame**

The University of Florida Institutional Review Board approved the protocol and informed consent process for one year between July 11, 2008 and July 11, 2009. All data collection was completed within this timeframe. The final stages of data analysis took place from July 2009 to February 2010.

## **Qualitative Data Collection**

### **Non-Virtual Participant Observation**

Participant observation is still considered by many anthropologists to be the most effective and appropriate method to provide the context through which other data collection instruments can be formulated and evaluated (Bernard 1995). Time spent carefully watching allows the ethnographer to observe people and their behavior in natural settings and also invite them to interpret their own activities through informal or formal interviews. It also may include simultaneously engaging in some of the activities (Spradley 1979).

My scientific interest in parenting activities that purveyors of “mainstream” childrearing might consider unconventional began two summers ago when I encountered a woman in the restroom of an upscale hotel in downtown Atlanta while attending the Dragon\*Con, the second largest fantasy/science-fiction convention in the world that takes place annually over the Labor Day holiday weekend. We were the only two people in the restroom, we were both “wearing” our infants in carriers designed to wrap around the body. I commented on the relatively rare practice of “babywearing” in industrialized North America and complimented her “wrap.” She

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which is a lack of informed consent regarding the identity of potential informants. With chain referral, you get many seeds who then solicit a bias-free sampling of informants.

<sup>50</sup> The disadvantage of non-probability sampling techniques is the low external validity normally associated with their use; however, Bernard reassures that, “when backed up by ethnographic data, studies based on these sampling techniques are often highly credible” (1995:94).

replied that she could not afford the “Baby Bjorn” (which I was wearing) and had made her own from discount fabric. As I placed my five-month-old daughter on the toilet and began to explain that I practiced something known as “elimination communication,”<sup>51</sup> she indicated that she knew what I was doing and had just finished “pottying” her baby. The instant connection surrounding our mutual commitment to this relatively unknown diapering alternative led to an intimate conversation about parenting.

As “out-of-the-norm” in parenting practices, I insisted on birthing my three babies out of the hospital (two of them in planned homebirths) and breastfed each of them for much longer than the year recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (four years, three years, two years and counting). I subscribe to babywearing, co-sleeping in a family bed, delayed/selective vaccination, intactivism,<sup>52</sup> and elimination communication. This new friend was in concurrence, and we soon discovered commonalities being avid readers of *Mothering Magazine*, a periodical publication aimed at supporting a “natural” parenting philosophy. Although we both engaged in practices that might have been considered unconventional, our differences actually went beyond my wearing an expensive front carrier as opposed to her handmade wrap. For example, although we both eschewed the diapering industry for promoting the idea that potty training “readiness” came only after two to four years of dependency on their products, her baby was bare-bottomed inside her wrap, whereas mine was wearing a disposable pull-up “just in case.” I mentioned that I had just joined the discussion forum sponsored by the magazine, and she told me that she was a long-time member who frequented the “UC” message boards. She told me her screen name, and

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<sup>51</sup> Also known as “natural elimination,” “infant potty teamwork,” “diaper-free,” and “trickle treat,” this is a potty training alternative that takes advantage of an infant’s ability to learn to use a receptacle other than a diaper for elimination. Elimination communication is described in more detail along with other unconventional parenting practices in Chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Intactivists decry the medical benefits of circumcision and are proponents of keeping baby boys “intact.”

although I did not admit to her that I was unfamiliar with the “UC” acronym, I told her that I would “find her in cyberspace.”

Several weeks after I returned home from the convention, I logged into the MotheringDotCommunity (formerly known as the MotheringDotCommune, <http://www.mothering.com/discussions>) and searched the discussion forums for “UC.” I found a sub-forum in the “Birth and Beyond” forum under the Pregnancy and Birth category called “Unassisted Childbirth,”<sup>53</sup> and there was my new friend, with active posts in several discussion threads. Her signature<sup>54</sup> indicates that she is anti-circumcision and espouses gender equality, two traits that are fairly common among the *Mothering* readership; however, her profile also lists her as “polyamorous, bisexual, and nontheist/polytheist,” characteristics which, in the U.S., might place her in another category of the spectrum of “alternativity” than someone who is monogamous, heterosexual, and monotheistic.

### **Virtual Participant Observation**

Internet research allows investigators the “opportunity to lurk or to ‘listen in unobserved’” (Constable 2003:34). A field experience akin to participant observation can be achieved by monitoring and then contributing to the texts created in subject-specific online discussion forums. Following the particular example of Nicole Constable (2003), whose creative use of Internet research contributes to a savvy ethnography of international courtship and marriage, I conducted this study in the virtual spaces of parenting discussion boards and electronic mailing lists. From unschoolers’ shared advice and ponderings, I gathered rich descriptions of their

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<sup>53</sup> Discovery Health recently ran a program called “Freebirthing,” giving the following description in the channel guide: “A natural-birth movement that shuns drugs, midwives, and medical support is discussed, along with commentary from doctors who oppose the trend.”

<sup>54</sup> Each member of the MotheringDotCommunity forums can design a “signature,” composed of a combination of text and symbols called “smileys,” that appears at the end of every message post to represent certain aspects of their identity pertinent to the content of the forums.

attitudes toward government-sponsored schools and perceptions of their children's education, demonstrating that much can be accomplished ethnographically in the virtual environment of cyberspace. I found that multiple postings by the same participant in various boards make it possible to document online activity that parallels observations in settings that are more typical sites for anthropological work.

The Internet also makes contact possible with otherwise inaccessible populations. Moreover, it allows the quick identification of and instant communication with groups that might not necessarily exist outside cyberspace, who have formed a community that exists primarily or exclusively online. For instance, when I set out to study the childrearing styles of the contemporary homeschooling movement, my first online inquiry into discussion boards related to homeschooling entailed the use of a search engine,<sup>55</sup> that yielded mostly informational and vendor websites intended to be used as resources for parents needing materials and support. The first discussion boards I visited were oriented almost exclusively toward Christian constituents of homeschooling. Because of their interspersed locations, contacting unschoolers by any other means would be logically impractical if not impossible.

### **Online Interview Protocols**

The balance of the qualitative data collection was accomplished with two interview protocols in questionnaire format designed for online administration. The first derived from participant observation to explore the possible relationship between educational choices and parenting styles, in addition to soliciting a freelist of childrearing tasks (see Appendix B). The second interview, administered exclusively to unschooling parents, was designed to collect not

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<sup>55</sup> Yahoo!, the default search engine for both the Safari and Flock browsers.

only data parallel to previous studies of homeschooling, but also information specific to the practice of unschooling (see Appendix C).

### **Cognitive Data Collection**

Cognitive data collection techniques lend themselves easily to an online environment, where discussants may already have familiarity with Web-based surveys. An online survey generator ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) facilitated the efficient and inexpensive design and administration of four systematic data collection instruments necessary for assessing the alternativity of unschoolers versus conventional homeschoolers. The first three (freelisting, single pile sorts, and a multi-vector questionnaire) enabled the cultural domain analysis of childrearing tasks. The last instrument was designed to assemble an inventory of alternative childrearing tasks to test for the possible existence of a unidimensional continuum of those tasks using Guttman scaling analysis.

### **Cultural Domain Analysis: Freelisting**

Consensus analysis begins with the definition of cultural domains, which are ethnographically discovered categories whose constituents remain largely unknown until they are explicitly elicited and analyzed. Thus, the first step in cultural domain analysis is to identify the elements that comprise a domain, most commonly accomplished through a data collection technique called freelisting, an open-ended activity in which respondents list as many items as they can for the domain under investigation (Weller 1998; Weller and Romney 1988). Because established cultural domains include a defined core and peripheral items, with core items recalled first and consensus among respondents, each respondent's list will contain a set of core items in addition to idiosyncratic items.

The entire freelist of childrearing activities survey, provided in Appendix B, asked parents to identify the educational setting(s) and predominant educational philosophy selected for their

children, briefly describe their parenting style, and provide basic demographic information. The freelist question incorporated redundant questioning and nonspecific prompting (Brewer et al. 2002) in order to increase recall and elicit a complete a list as possible from each respondent (see Appendix A, Figure A-2).<sup>56</sup>

### **Cultural Domain Analysis: Single Pile Sorts**

A total of sixty (60) tasks were selected from the two hundred childrearing tasks obtained from the freelist questionnaire. Proximity data were then gathered using a single pilesort activity. Pilesort data are normally collected in a face-to-face structured interview in which the respondent is presented with several cards, each containing one element of the domain, to be sorted into piles according to similarity. Each card also contains an arbitrary number or some other notation, traditionally on the back of the card, for ease of data recording. After the cards have been sorted, the researcher records the number corresponding to each item that was placed in a pile, using a separate line for each pile, until all piles have been recorded. In order to accomplish this task online, I created a .pdf file containing sixty cards for participants to print and cut out, which I then attached to an e-mail sent to addresses volunteered at the conclusion of the freelist questionnaire (see Appendix A, Figure A-3).<sup>57</sup> I also publicized a link to a website containing instructions for the pilesort as well as the .pdf for download. Both the e-mail and the website directed respondents to a SurveyMonkey questionnaire in which they could enter their own data from the pilesort. Separate text fields were provided to allow respondents to record as many as fifty-two piles, lettered A to ZZ (see Appendix A, Figure A-4; also Appendix F).

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<sup>56</sup> Frelisting, designed to identify the elements of a domain for cultural domain analysis, can be accomplished easily online for technologically capable populations; respondents simply type items into a text field instead of writing them by hand or naming them out loud for the researcher to record.

<sup>57</sup> Appendix E contains the complete set of cards.

## **Property Fitting Analysis: The Multi-Vector Questionnaire**

The next phase of cognitive data collection involved the generation of vector questionnaires to be administered using the same online survey tool (see Appendix A, Figure A-5). Normally, a vector questionnaire measures the viability of a single property or attribute as an explanation for the arrangement of items on a proximity map. However, the transformation from pen-and-paper instrument to online survey enabled three separate columns on a single questionnaire, allowing respondents to simultaneously rate each childrearing task on three hypothesized attributes: alternativity, likelihood to practice, and the degree of decision-making ability parents who practiced each task afforded their child.<sup>58</sup> The data were then used to verify the dimensionality of the proximity data. The first vector also became the basis for the inventory used in the Guttman scaling analysis of alternative childrearing tasks, as it identified the tasks considered to be alternative.

## **Guttman Scaling Analysis: Inventory of Alternative Childrearing Tasks**

Finally, a list of alternative childrearing tasks receiving a mean score of 3.5 or higher for alternativity on the vector questionnaire was used to collect an inventory from each respondent to be used in a Guttman scaling analysis of alternative parenting practices (see Appendix A, Figure A-6). Each parent simply identified each task she or he actually practices by checking the box associated with it.<sup>59</sup> The data were then employed to test the predictive capacity of certain alternative tasks through the construction of a unidimensional continuum, or scale, which locates the least alternative task at one end and the most alternative task at the other. The practice of the most alternative tasks can then be used to “predict” the practice of other, less alternative tasks.

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<sup>58</sup> Dimensions were previously identified by a combination of respondent-provided descriptive labels for their piles and an analysis of the hierarchical clustering of the proximity data.

<sup>59</sup> Respondents “checked” each box with the click of a mouse or other pointing device.

Binary tabulation of the data also enabled the calculation of an “alternativity” score for each respondent that was subsequently used to compare parents grouped according to the educational choices they made for their children (i.e., unschooling, conventional homeschooling, or schooling in an external institution).

## Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach to the instant study of unschooling parents, including detailed descriptions of how techniques normally utilized in traditional ethnographic settings were adapted for online use. First, qualitative data were collected through virtual and non-virtual participation and two online interview protocols. Indicators for the operationalization of “alternative” childrearing tasks were identified by eliciting frelists of childrearing tasks from members of several electronic discussion forums and subsequently calculating the mean scores from the first vector of the multi-vector questionnaire generated for the ongoing cultural domain analysis. Virtual communities created by online support groups combine anonymity with common ground, increasing the potential for authentic, intimate revelations of sensitive information. Proximity data were also collected over the Internet, using downloadable cards that respondents could print, cut out, and sort. Drop-down menus similar to those commonly encountered online—and thus familiar to most potential respondents—enabled the collection of various data sets, including a multi-vector questionnaire. Inventories of alternative childrearing tasks were collected with mere clicks of participants’ mouse buttons. This research demonstrates that online survey instruments are particularly suited to the compilation and subsequent analysis of qualitative and systematic data. The two chapters that follow present the analyses of those data.

## CHAPTER 4

### QUALITATIVE SURVEY RESULTS

This chapter details the qualitative results obtained for the study. A preliminary stage of data collection consisted of participant observation in the virtual space of MotheringdotCommunity's homeschooling forum. This exploratory phase concluded with a brief online questionnaire administered to parents of school-aged children who were asked to identify their children's educational setting and the predominant educational philosophy used in the setting's curriculum determinations; describe their parenting style; and disclose their most trusted source(s) of parenting advice. Cultural domain analysis also began in this first stage, as parent-respondents were asked to freelist tasks associated with childrearing. The second stage of qualitative data collection was an online interview protocol fashioned in part after two relatively well-known studies of homeschooling undertaken by Mayberry et al. (1995) and the National Center for Education Statistics (Princiotta and Bielick 2006; Planty et al. 2009). This interview produced data comparable to both studies and provides the foundation for the comparative analysis of parents who practice unschooling and those who espouse homeschooling methods more closely resembling a conventional classroom. Systematic data collected through the use of pile sorts, vector questionnaires, and a childrearing tasks inventory, as well as their quantitative analyses, are presented in Chapter 5.

#### **Participant Observation in an Online Parenting Community**

Qualitative data analysis revealed several themes. The first theme centered around the creation of a new sub-forum for unschooling: a virtual space where unschoolers could give mutual support differentiated from their conventionally homeschooling peers. Other themes include the process of "deschooling" former students of institutionalized education; unschoolers' experience with investigations of educational neglect by state child protective services; reactions

and preparations for community rebuilding after an anticipated societal apocalypse; modes of virtual self-identification; and unconventional parenting practices.

### **There's No Place Like a Home for Unschoolers**

Unschooling members of *Mothering* magazine's online discussion forums, MotheringDotCommunity (MDC), previously participants in the Homeschooling sub-forum of the Learning at Home and Beyond forum, celebrated the creation of a brand new sub-forum dedicated to unschooling as recently as February 19, 2008.<sup>1</sup> MDC moved the earlier discussion threads relating to unschooling to the new forum, including a thread entitled, "What is unschooling?" started on December 26, 2001 by a then-twenty-four-year-old woman using the screenname cobbluegirl who is now a stay-at-home mother of three. The thread contained only the original question, "Ok I have heard this mentioned . . . what is it? Also what is Waldorf?" and three replies by members who had joined the discussion community in the preceding month.<sup>2</sup>

The first reply by forum member Lindy directed her to "[g]o to [www.unschooling.com](http://www.unschooling.com) and find out. Try it, you'll like it." The second reply came from Missgrl, a stay-at-home mom who wrote:

There is a ton of info over in the Education forums! The homeschooling forum has several threads about unschooling and you'll get all you need on Waldorf schools in the Alternative Ed. forum. I'm getting very curious about Unschooling too now. . . ds [dear son] is about 4! And I've really been researching the unschooling thing! I'm going to move this thread over to the homeschooling forum. You'll get a lot more help over there! In fact, I'm going to visit your thread to see what members tell you!

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<sup>1</sup> I became a member of MDC in June of 2008 and, upon obtaining IRB approval the following month, began officially participating in the unschooling sub-forum as a researcher. It was here that I began my online journey into the world of unschooling.

<sup>2</sup> Verbatim responses are reported with minor edits to syntax in order to preserve the flow of the prose. Participants of online discussion boards often use Internet shorthand in their posts. Each abbreviation is followed by its translation in brackets.

The third and final reply before the thread was closed to further additions came from a woman using the screenname Lucy, whose public profile identified her as a full-time, stay-at-home, homeschooling mom with interests in sewing, baking, and reading. Her post answered cobluegirl's question with the following description:

imo [in my opinion] unschooling is learning thru life. Viewing education as the stuff everyday life is made of, not following a set curriculum, letting your child decide what, when and how to learn.

I once read someone describing it as, “imagining every day as summer vacation” or st [something] like that.

As Ms. Frizzle says from *Magic School Bus*, “take chances, make mistakes, get messy!” (this is our motto btw [by the way]!)

Unschooling doesn't mean that you never use traditional study materials, but that you use them when your child expresses an interest in learning abt [about] st [something].

Unschooling isn't lazy, to the contrary you need to have an active, full, interesting life full of field trips, tons of books, etc. to spark the child's interest in things, and then you just go off from there.

It is trusting your child to learn what he needs to learn, when he needs to learn it.

Hope this helps a little; I agree unschooling.com is an excellent resource and can help you define it better.

It is difficult to ascertain what other members told cobluegirl after her thread was moved to the Homeschooling forum, but over 500 discussion threads were migrated to the new forum.

Unschooling parents received the new forum with jubilance and even relief. The first discussion thread was created at 7:39 A.M. by TheJoyfulMom of southwest Florida, who describes herself in her public profile as a “peace loving, feminist-leaning, music listening, story writing, veggie eating, liberal, eclectically relaxed homeschooling mom of 3.” In her ice-breaking thread entitled “Has anyone noticed?,” she began the conversation with the exclamation, “We have our own forum now! Yay! Thank you!” Other threads were equally

celebratory: “I just saw it posted on the thread in Questions and Suggestions so I came here to see. Yay!”; “I know it! I’m so excited to see this. . . . Now I’ve got to start thinking about all the things I want to post!”; “lol [laughing out loud] . . . now what do we do with it?!”; “Hey! When did this happen? Hurray!”; “Hi everyone! This is great!”; “Oh wow! It’s so clean and shiny in here! Woohoo!” The thread’s sixteen participants, sprinkling their replies heavily with dancing emoticons,<sup>3</sup> christened the brand new forum with sentiments of gratitude and approval as if they are attending the grand opening of a new edifice. It became clear that the unschooling parents who “lurked” in the MDC Education sub-forums considered themselves part of a social support network, occupying a certain virtual “space” within a larger virtual “community” dedicated to natural living and parenting.

True to the profile of electronic support groups, MDC’s Unschooling sub forum is a safe haven for the exchange of information, comfort, and advice for its like-minded, non-conventional parent-members. It contains how-to suggestions for “letting go” of school-centric tendencies and trusting the natural inquisitiveness of children. The message board is also a resource for affirming (and defending) unschoolers’ convictions, demonstrating that the decision to homeschool is often not without repercussions from family, friends, and child protective services.

### **Unschoolers, Schooling, and ‘Deschooling’**

One of the ways unschoolers support each other is by sharing stories about their encounters with the public school system. Threads sometimes read like ghost stories around a campfire. Other times, unschooling parents make their rejection of “the system,” explicit, as in the following post by maplesugar:

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<sup>3</sup> Emoticons, or “smilies,” are small graphics, usually in the form of a modified smiley face, text writers insert to represent various feelings or interests.

Dsd [dear step-daughter] recently showed me her report card from a public school. She does really well in all her third grade subjects, but I was somewhat dismayed to see that one of the things she got a grade for was "respecting authority."

I told dh [dear husband] that if this were ds [dear son], you could cross out the "respect" and insert "question." He would have an O in that for sure. I am just not so sure I want my kids to respect authority just because. Yes, I want them to be respectful, but something just sat wrong with me there—grading kids on respecting "authority."

This unschooling parent is quick to differentiate between being respectful and granting unconditional deference to school personnel.<sup>4</sup>

The Learning at Home and Beyond forum also contains an archived thread called, "The Warehousing of American Children," started at 10:02 p.m. on March 26, 2008 by Anglyn, a very active member whose public profile identifies her location as "state of confusion" and her occupation as "saving the world."<sup>5</sup> Beginning the original post of the thread by stating her hope that "no one wanders over from the Learning at School forum to flame blast [her]," Anglyn laments the monopolization of children's time by compulsory schooling. "And what about family time? What about having a childhood?" she asks before disparaging day care centers as the worst warehouse of them all. Her "rant" directly confronts the cultural assumptions that perpetuate the isolation of children from their families for several hours every day:

Something is really wrong in our culture. Kids need to be home. Families need to be together. Do you know that a two income couple in 1990 had the same earning power as a one income couple in 1920? Inflation goes up, wages don't. When cultures don't value children above all else, that culture is on its way out. To not value children is almost lack of a desire to live (how will a culture go on into the future if it discourages reproduction and devalues its children and those that care for them?)

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<sup>4</sup> Parallels between unschooling and the punk movement are beyond the scope of this research; however, there are indications that a correlation may exist, such as the propensity for DIY (Do It Yourself) and questioning authority.

<sup>5</sup> Her signature is a quote by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."

This is not about sah [stay at home] vs. woh [work outside the home]. This is about a culture that devalues children and families. This is about the state controlling us and institutionalizing our children.

This may sound like paranoid drivel to some (to me, several years ago) but to anyone who truly sees and thinks, its quite frightening is what it is. It's sad and its wrong and I fear for our future generations.

One hundred fifty congratulatory replies ensued before the conversation ended with a final post, like so many topic threads on electronic bulletin boards, at 11:06 p.m. on April 28, 2009.<sup>6</sup> Every post concurred with Anglyn, thanking her for putting into words what they had not, including the following by Dr.Worm, a stay at home mom from Pittsburg:

Well, my dd [dear daughter] goes to public school and I have something to say to you...here goes.....

I TOTALLY AGREE!!!!!! Not to mention the fact that if your child doesn't conform to some neat little stereotype something must be wrong. I am going through h-e-double hockey sticks at dd's school because she is a bit nervous in class. . . . best part is she told us she gets nervous when her teacher yells! Her dad was verbally abusive so she is sensitive. . . . [S]orry to go off here but schools are frightening...you guys are awesome for unschooling and I wish I never sent her to school....she liked school in the beginning of the year and now she is terrified...I have to go be her advocate but it is very scary when they think they are the parents....I have also heard other horror stories from friends...my mom's friend daughter was in high school and was shy so they thought something was wrong with her and they tried to send her to a special school...they had to go through a magistrate....and I agree with everything you said...all the grades are accelerated...my dd didn't do preschool cause I was a sahm [stay-at-home mom]...people looked at me like I was nuts when I said she didn't....didn't know preschool was the new kindergarten....meanwhile, my dd gets good grades, never has behavior problems (even defends kids getting picked on) and they are making her a nervous wreck! Once again, sorry to hijack the thread...but you all are so awesome and I wish I never sent her to school.

Unschoolers, as well as those investigating the option, use the sub-forum to share many such “horror” stories related to public school attendance.

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<sup>6</sup> Although this topic thread had closed before I joined MDC, I was still able to “listen in” because of the texts that remained even after the conversation ended.

Another ostensibly recurring theme in the unschooling sub-forum is advice given and received regarding a “decompression” period necessary for recovering from the ill effects of public school attendance. Unschoolers refer to the period as “deschooling.” One forum member, in response to a question from a concerned mother of a bright but troubled thirteen-year-old son, defined deschooling as “a chance to heal emotionally and mentally from being forced to hate learning for the last 8 years. In other words, if you switch to unschooling, be prepared for him to not want to learn anything for months, because he has been conditioned to think that learning is un-fun, because in school, it is.” Another response offered, “[H]e would not be going without ‘education’ for the time he unschools . . . but it would give him a chance to just be a kid, figure out who he is, maybe discover why he is having the problem he is having . . . definitely allowing him to just be, giving his creativity room, would be good for him . . . follow your heart.” These accounts and many others like them are reminiscent of the deleterious effects of school attendance on a child’s self-esteem and natural curiosity described by Holt and Gatto.

### **Unschooling and Child Protective Services**

The intentions of parents who choose to nurture their children’s self-esteem and natural curiosity by homeschooling with a child-led curriculum are sometimes so misunderstood that state investigative agencies become involved. Just as prevalent as accounts of deschooling were reciprocal narratives of unschoolers’ experiences handling investigations of reported educational neglect. One such conversation occurred during the course of this research. On September 18, 2008, an unschooling mom with the screenname mammal\_mama began a new thread labeled, “We’ve been hotlined!” Her opening post related a detailed account of a surprise visit from a children’s services caseworker the previous day. She immediately suspected a family member had initiated the investigation because of certain information contained in the original report. Despite having been told previously not to allow the caseworker to enter the home without a

warrant, mammal\_mama reported being cordial and compliant, conducting a tour of the home, allowing contact with the children, and answering all questions with frankness and authority. Finding no need for intervention, the caseworker proceeded with paperwork to close the case; mammal\_mama was not entirely reassured by the caseworker's positive assessment: "Today I got a niggling fear that maybe someone from the board of education will visit next. We have things in order, but I'd still rather not have any further intrusions on our privacy." After a conversation with her mother, who expressed surprise that the investigator "agrees with homeschooling," she decided that breaking contact with her mother was the only way to finally protect her daughters from their grandmother's criticisms.

Although the investigator indicated that she found no evidence of neglect and would close the case, the shared experience prompted much sympathetic response from other unschooling members of the forum, many of whom related their own encounters with state investigators. The first response was reflective of the limited acceptance enjoyed by unschooling parents among those who approve of homeschooling in general: "I had not really thought too heavily about our decision to unschool and what it might mean to our extended family. I know most are supportive, as long as I phrase it as 'homeschooling.'" Two others indicated having dealt with the same issues in their families and no longer having contact with their mothers as a result. Support for the decision to sever ties with a CPS-reporting family member was nearly unanimous, as were expressions of the sanctity of household autonomy, such as this post by an unvaccinating, homebirthing mother of two girls: "It seems like a clean cut with your family that betrayed you is the best option, as you must protect your own little family. Your freedom is the most important thing." Several posts also recommended *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* by Susan Forward. Departure from the parenting decisions of the previous

generation seems to be not only acceptable but necessary for many of the participants in this discussion thread.

About a month later, mammal\_mama reported receiving a letter that child services would not be pursuing further action. After expressing relief at the relatively rapid resolution, she relayed the contrary experience of a friend who had not initially cooperated and had endured seven months of scrutiny and paperwork as a result. Interestingly, mammal\_mama had been repeatedly applauded by many fellow unschooling members of the sub-forum for the way she handled the visit from the caseworker; her friend who had refused to allow a CPS investigator enter her home also homeschools her children but follows a more conventional curricular model. This is reminiscent of earlier characterizations of unschoolers being more compliant and hence less harassed by government officials.

On Christmas Day 2008, mammal\_mama called her mother and discovered that it was her sister who had reported her to CPS. Her decision to break contact with her mother now reified, she decided over the next few months to discontinue her relationship with her sister and maternal aunt and uncle as well. In her final post on April 19, 2009, she described her suspicion that the call to CPS was likely the result of hostility surrounding a plan involving her mother paying her sister to design a curriculum for mammal\_mama's unschooled daughter, an offer which mammal\_mama declined: "I think [my sister] was pissed that I prevented her from making some additional income—and also that she and my mom were both offended by the fact that I'd leave it up to dd [dear daughter] to decide what she wanted to do."

### **The End of the World as We Know it**

An illuminative sub-text also emerged when beansricerevolt, who according to her tagline is "[n]ot conforming to this age or its kings" wrote: "FWIW [for what it's worth], I believe our civilization will collapse and our culture will be in ruins. How, I have no idea but I bet we will

see it before we pass.” Her comment affirms the revolutionary spirit of the works of Illich, Reimer, and Goodman, and reflects many unschoolers’ attitudes toward the human condition. An unschooling, stay-at-home mom from the Poconos who posts under the screenname paquerette expresses kudos for Anglyn’s rant and then directly addresses beansricerevolt’s comment: “I think you’re correct. I’ve been watching patterns trying to figure out what exactly is going to happen and I’m still not sure, but jeez we don’t even have much culture left here!” The side conversation continues with dillonandmarasmom responding,

YES! to all of it. I have always hesitated to rant in such a way because there are so many people close to me who do/will place their children into school. And, to the society in ruins comment, DH [dear husband] has been sharing this with me for several years. 2012 will be quite the year, and we are soooo ready. Change can be a very. good. thing. Our "society" is on a downward spiral that is moving at ever-increasing speed....

Unschoolers are acutely aware of the steadily increasing loss of community, but instead of lamenting an unnamed, impending doom, they are preparing for a new world by invoking their own social and educational rebellion—one consensual household at a time.

### **Electronic Signatures as Personal and Political Banners**

Almost as instructive as the questions and replies in the various threads of the unschooling sub-forum are the signatures and tag lines of the members who post there. Many signatures incorporate text and emoticons to indicate relationship status; number, ages, genders, and personalities of children; and various interests of the household. For example, the signature of a member with the screenname lauradbg shares the following personal information: she is a married woman, and her husband either “rocks” or plays the guitar; she has two children, whom she represents pictorially as an animated sword-fighting duo; and she is dedicated to the environment, homeschooling, blogging, politics, parents’ rights to refuse vaccination, and “not buying new things.” Another member by the screenname of rockportmama, who joined MDC

during the same month I did, announces in her signature in fifteen words and seven emoticons that she is an avid read who has been happily married since May 2004, is the mother of a home-birthed boy, born December 2005, and is planning a water homebirth for her second baby, due in December 2008.

Many posts and signatures contain graphical enhancements in addition to text. MDC provides an unusually expansive selection of smilies depicting not only the usual array of responsive emotions (smiling, frowning, winking, sticking tongue out) but also the personal activities and politics that are meaningful to their membership.<sup>7</sup> MDC members have 388 smilies—well beyond the usual scope of emoticons—with which to identify themselves, including graphic representations of breastfeeding, water birth, co-sleeping in a family bed, intactivism, elimination communication, cloth diapering, babywearing, extended and tandem nursing, environmentalism, and more.<sup>8</sup>

MDC members also supplement the personal details supplied in their signatures with self-created public profiles. An examination of the public profiles of members who regularly interact in the Unschooling sub-forum reveals much about the parents behind the posts. Notably, every participant in the “Has anyone noticed?” thread who identifies gender is female.<sup>9</sup> KimProbable, an “Unschooly mama” to three children, ages nine, four, and four months, lists her occupation as SAHM [stay-at-home mom]. Hailing from Edmonton, Alberta, she identifies herself in her signature as an advocate of unassisted childbirth. Village Mama is a stay-at-home mom from

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<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Parenting.com Community does not use smilies in message posts or user signatures.

<sup>8</sup> There is even a smilie for “lurking,” which at least one ethnographer uses in her signature.

<sup>9</sup> This contradicts Times Mirror (1995), who reported differential Internet usage favoring men. Mickelson suggests that online support groups are “particularly attractive for men because they provide anonymity and do not demand self-disclosure” (1997:176). Her conclusions are consistent with prior research demonstrating that women are more likely than men to attend traditional (face-to-face) support groups (Taylor et al. 1988).

British Columbia who listed her interests as “foraging, holistic health, cooking, spinning . . . what don’t I do?!” Under occupation, she wrote, “job?????” Member beansricerevolt describes herself as an “Anarchist Christ follower & lover of our Mother the Earth, mom of 2 unschooled sweets and wife to a wonderful man.” Under finding interests, she includes “Bicycles, dancing, growing food & making things.” Her self-reported occupation is especially illuminative: “Doula, co-creator of The Lady Fallopia, placenta encapsulator, Blessingway & Menarche ceremony consultant.” These profiles parallel those of intentional community network constituents representing “a small but ubiquitous segment of Americans who are living deliberately simple lives . . . characterized by their advocacy of personal and planetary health” (Pitman and Smith (1991:78).

### **Unconventional Parenting Practices**

In addition to the personal identifiers illustrated by their signatures and profiles, unschooling parents often make references in the text of their posts to bounded, descriptive labels identifying certain household practices they incorporate their own childrearing. Almost universally, these practices are associated with natural family living (NFL), a construct that seems to have arisen from attention to issues of economic and environmentally sustainability. Although some of the practices require little explanation, such as breadmaking, buying local produce, organic gardening, and using natural remedies, many others may be completely unfamiliar to the majority of parents in the U.S. To illustrate the contrast between NFL and the “mainstream” parenting stance, three related practices—gentle discipline, attachment parenting, and elimination communication—are discussed in more detail below.

#### **Gentle discipline**

Unschooling parents’ descriptions of their own childrearing methods usually include “gentle discipline,” also known as “positive discipline,” which refers to a corrective style

focused on empathy, compassion, and mutual respect. Distinctive for its professed lack of physical punishment and verbal disparagement, gentle discipline is central to the “nonviolent childhood” movement, whose mission is illustrated in the following entreaty from an article posted on the website of La Leche League International, a well-known breastfeeding advocacy organization:

We can change the world. Our society as a whole is in many ways torn apart by a self-perpetuating habit of power and control. This pattern is reversible. Recent generations of parents have been making headway in turning away from the harsh authoritarian models of the past. As it picks up pace, the movement toward more compassionate parenting has tremendous potential. You can't snap your fingers and change the world in an instant, but you do have power over your own orientation in life, how you treat the people you encounter, and most importantly, you can author new possibilities for your family. You can change the world from your family outwards (Flower 2005).

Proponents of gentle discipline claim that the practice is not passive, punitive, or reactive but rather engaged, communicative, preventative, and reliant on redirection and example to encourage appropriate behavior. By their commitment to gentle discipline, parents are practicing one of the eight principles of attachment parenting.

### **Attachment parenting**

According to Attachment Parenting International (API), “The long-range vision of Attachment Parenting is to raise children who will become adults with a highly developed capacity for empathy and connection. It eliminates violence as a means for raising children, and ultimately helps to prevent violence in society as a whole” (API 2008). With its motto, “nurturing children for a compassionate world,” API promotes the formation and preservation of strong attachments between parents and children by encouraging parents to “treat [their] children with kindness, respect and dignity” (*ibid.*). To assist attachment parents, the organization created *The Eight Principles of Parenting*, which are: “[prepare for pregnancy, birth, and parenting; feed with love and respect; respond with sensitivity; use nurturing touch; ensure safe sleep, physically](#)

and emotionally; provide consistent and loving care; practice positive discipline; strive for balance in your personal and family life” (API 2008). These principles and the qualities of the parent-child relationship upon which they are based are frequently reiterated by unschoolers.

Practitioners of attachment parenting justify their infant caretaking practices with research-based attachment theory:

[I]nfants are born "hardwired" with strong needs to be nurtured and to remain physically close to the primary caregiver, usually the mother, during the first few years of life. The child's emotional, physical, and neurological development is greatly enhanced when these basic needs are met consistently and appropriately. These needs can be summarized as *proximity, protection, and predictability* (*ibid.*; italics in original).

At the same, API claims that attachment parenting represents a revival of past parenting practices rather than innovation: “Attachment Parenting isn't new. In many ways, it is a return to the instinctual behaviors of our ancestors” (*ibid.*). Likewise, many attachment parents subscribe to the elements of the natural family living (NFL) lifestyle, most of which represent a direct rejection of their modern counterparts, such as natural childbirth, home birth, stay-at-home parenting, co-sleeping, breastfeeding, babywearing, homeschooling, unschooling, the anti-circumcision movement (intactivism), natural health, cooperative movements, naturism and support of organic and local foods, and elimination communication.<sup>10</sup>

### **Elimination communication**

Elimination communication (EC), also known as natural infant hygiene, infant potty teamwork, and diaper-free, is a parenting practice in which a caregiver uses timing, signals, cues, and intuition to accommodate an infant's need to eliminate waste. An alternative to traditional diapering and toilet training, EC typically enables its practitioners to partially or completely

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<sup>10</sup> Co-sleeping and, more recently, babywearing have received negative media attention as the subject of numerous warnings from child protective service agencies and pediatric health organizations reporting the perceived danger of suffocation. Advocates of both have been quick to respond with guidelines for their safe practice.

avoid the use of diapers. As its name implies, EC emphasizes communication between the caregiver and child, helping them both become more attuned to the child's innate rhythms and control of urination and defecation. The term "elimination communication" was inspired by traditional practices of diaper-less baby care in less industrialized countries and hunter-gatherer cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Repeated encounters with terms such as gentle discipline, attachment parenting, and elimination communication led to the development of a preliminary hypothesis regarding childrearing practices and the educational settings selected by parents for their children: that these and similarly nonconforming practices associated with NFL and unschooling suggest the existence of a counter-cultural childrearing movement in the U.S. whose goals are antithetical to those of the public education system. The task then became to test the relationship between parental educational decisions and childrearing styles.

### **Educational Choices and Childrearing Styles Questionnaire**

The first interview protocol (see Appendix C), administered online to parents of students from a variety of educational environments, was the first step in discerning the relationship between the educational setting selected by parents for their children and childrearing styles. Parents were asked to identify the education setting selected for their children,<sup>12</sup> briefly describe their parenting style, and indicate their most dependable source of childrearing support. Forty-five respondents (including one father) completed the questionnaire, twenty of whom were

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<sup>11</sup> Like attachment parenting, EC has its own advocacy group. DiaperFreeBaby ([www.diaperfreebaby.org](http://www.diaperfreebaby.org)) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Massachusetts. Founded in January, 2004, DiaperFreeBaby is the only non-profit organization dedicated to supporting families that practice Elimination Communication (EC).

<sup>12</sup> Parents were also asked to identify the predominant educational philosophy guiding the curricular decisions of the selected setting. Parents of public school students either did not know the philosophical foundation of their children's formal learning activities or reported that the curriculum was "standard."

unschoolers; eight were conventional homeschoolers, five had children attending private schools, and the remaining twelve had children attending public schools.

Most parents of public school students reported a childrearing style similar to that of two respondents who entered simply, “Disciplined but loving” and “Consistency.” In observable reverence to the previous generation, another wrote, “We try to the best of our ability to be authoritative parents, setting reasonable limits based on age appropriate expectations with as much love and humor as possible. I think mostly we look at how we were raised and try to bring the best of that experience to our children.” Others reported a more authoritarian approach, like this mom: “I try to focus on teaching respect and proper behavior. I do not believe I should be my child's best friend. It is my job to keep them safe and teach them how to make good choices in this world even if they don't always like it.”

Responses from private school parents are both authoritative and authoritarian, such as one from this mother:

I love my son but I believe in discipline. I do not spank him unless I have to but there are consequences for bad choices, and or not following directions. My son doesn't lie to me, so far he is really good and we are very close. I make a point of being involved in his life and decisions as much as I can. I never lie to him, if I tell him something or promise him something, I honor it. He knows I love him and he knows I have high expectations of him.

Another mother responded, “I am a fairly structured parent, organized and believe myself to be well educated on parenting issues and my child's issues in particular (ADD).” One was much less authoritarian: “I try to reason with my daughter, and encourage her creativity and independence.”

Responses from homeschooling and unschooling parents regarding their parenting styles confirm the stalwart dedication to children observed by Stevens (2001). For example, a homeschooling mom described her parenting style as “deliberate, conscientious and pro-active, with a focus on long-term results/consequences.” Another wrote, “My parenting style can be

described by unconditional love and acceptance, partnered with capitalizing on teaching moments throughout the day focusing on the development of self-discipline.” While democratic principles are detectable, they are nearly always tempered with behavioral constraints: “We include our children in making rules of the house and discipline as well. They know before they do something what is expected of them.”

Unschoolers’ responses instantly and unanimously revealed a reverence for their children as equal household members. One unschooler wrote, “My parenting is based on respect, kindness, gentleness. I often reflect, ‘Would I like to be treated this way?’ or ‘Would I speak to another adult this way?’” Another unschooling mom expressed democratic principles:

For the most part, we have very few ‘don’t’ rules: don’t hurt yourself, don’t hurt others, don’t set the house on fire. We ask that the kids think about ‘who they Are—who they want to Be’ and then act accordingly. For example, do they want to be someone that others trust? Then their actions must reflect trustworthiness. We also remind them that their rights end where someone else’s begin. Just as we allow them to be who they are—so must they give others that same courtesy.

Such examples of consensual living were common, as were expressions of mutual respect, but none as explicit as this mother: “Everything is based on respect. I respect them, they respect me.” Some unschoolers described their parenting style with a list of qualities, many of which included being responsive to their child’s needs, relaxed, completely non-punitive, mindful, respectful, nurturing, and empathetic.

When the same sample of parents reported their most dependable sources of childrearing support, only four of the forty-five respondents listed their own parents. Two were parents of publicly schooled children, one of which claimed to rely on her “Mother and Father only” for childrearing advice<sup>13</sup>; one was a homeschooling parent, and one was an unschooler. Many

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<sup>13</sup> The other public school parent relying on her parents for childrearing information wrote, “My most dependable source would be my own parents. I don’t really buy into reading ‘parenting books’ and things like that.”

respondents claimed to rely on their parenting peers (e.g., attachment parents sought advice from other attachment parents, etc.). Unschoolers were the least likely to rely on their parents for childrearing information, turning instead to fellow unschooling parents in online support groups, unschooling resources in print, or their own children.

In fact, many unschoolers identified their children as the most authoritative sources of information on childrearing, despite being well read: “I’ve read a lot—Mothering, John Holt, A.S. Neill, Ginott—but really, I trust my own knowledge and intuition most. I know my kid, and I know what I believe, morally and ethically, and I use this knowledge to guide me.” Another unschooling mom wrote, “My ‘sources of information’ are my own children—are they happy? Are their needs being met?” These responses were highly demonstrative of unschoolers’ deference to their children’s developmental prerogatives.

### **The Unschooling Interview**

A second interview, administered online to unschooling parents, yielded data comparable to the more general demographic data reported in previous studies of homeschooling, as well as more specific information about unschooling.<sup>14</sup> Twenty-seven respondents completed the interview.<sup>15</sup> Although the sample sizes for this research are small, especially in comparison to those of Mayberry et al. (n=1,497) and the NCES Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the 2007 National Household Education Surveys Program (n=10,681<sup>16</sup>), the

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the terms *homeschooling* and *homeschoolers* will be used in this chapter to denote the home learning model that uses the conventional curricula and adult-led organizational structure more closely resembling the instruction that occurs in formal education settings such as public and private schools. *Unschooling* will refer specifically to the subsection of homeschooling that espouses the completely child-centered pedagogical approach taken by parents who identify with the term. In this sense, homeschoolers would fall into the category of “conventional schoolers.”

<sup>15</sup> Because a link to the survey was posted on three different online discussion boards, it is not possible to determine the response rate.

<sup>16</sup> Herrold and O’Donnell report that “PFI interviews were conducted with parents or guardians of a nationally representative sample of children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade including children who were enrolled

demographic data obtained from unschoolers still provide interesting comparison to the previously reported homeschooling data.<sup>17</sup>

### **Demographic Characteristics of Unschooling Parents**

For example, consistent with the majority of data previously reported on the predominantly female character of homeschooling (e.g., Stevens 2001; Gaither 2008; Mayberry et al. 1995; Gladin 1987; Wartes 1988b), 88.9 percent of the unschooling respondents were female (n=24) and 11.1 percent were male (n=3). All unschooling respondents (100 percent, n=27) were married or living with a domestic partner.<sup>18</sup> All were white/Caucasian, with two reporting additional information about their ancestry: Scotch/German and Australian. All spouses/domestic partners were also white, with three being identified as German, Australian, and Italian/Polish.<sup>19</sup> The 2007 NCES data demonstrated a similar racial demographic. White homeschooled students represented 3.9 percent of the school-age population and constituted 77 percent of the homeschooling population, while Black and Hispanic homeschooled students represented 0.8 and 1.5 percent of the school-age population respectively and constituted 4.0 and 9.8 percent of the homeschooling population (Planty et al. 2009:134).

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in public or private schools or homeschooled" (2008:1). The total number of completed PFI interviews was 10,681, which represents a weighted population of 53.2 million students in grades kindergarten through twelve and a weighted unit response rate for the PFI survey of 74.1 percent.

<sup>17</sup> Although Mayberry et al. used non-representative sampling methods, they recognized the multifaceted character of the homeschool movement. The NCES, on the other hand, had the benefit of a large, random, and hence more likely to be representative, sample but used aggregated data which did not differentiate between the disparate groups of homeschoolers who had various motivations and approaches to home learning.

<sup>18</sup> All but one of these partners were identified as being biological parents of the children.

<sup>19</sup> Respondents for this research were recruited from websites supporting the general population of unschoolers; however, it is important to note that there are also communities catering specifically to further subdivisions, including black unschoolers, Hindu unschoolers, Muslim unschoolers, LDS (Mormon) unschoolers, etc. who were not sampled directly. These groups represent unexamined segments within an already marginalized sector of the homeschooling movement deserving the attention of future research.

A comparison of the number of children in each household is also useful. For both groups, an only child is the least common; however, 60 percent of homeschoolers have three or more children in the household compared to only 33 percent of unschoolers, possibly related to their religious orientation.

**Table 4-1. Percentage distribution of number of children in the household**

Number of children in the household	Unschoolers <sup>a</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>b</sup>
One child	22.2	12.4
Two children	44.4	27.3
Three or more children <sup>c</sup>	33.3	60.3

Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>Source: Author's data. <sup>b</sup>Source: Planty et al. (2009:134). <sup>c</sup>No unschooling parents interviewed for this survey reported more than three children in the household, although one had seven children, four of whom were older than eighteen.

The number of parents in each household and parents' participation in the labor force among unschoolers is also consistent with data on homeschoolers, as indicated in Table 4-2.

**Table 4-2. Percentage distributions of number of parents in the household and parents' participation in the labor force among unschoolers and homeschoolers**

Characteristic	Unschoolers <sup>a</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>b</sup>
Number of parents in the household		
Two parents	96.3	89.4
One parent	0.0	7.6
Nonparental guardians	3.7	3.0
Parent's participation in the labor force		
Two parents, one in labor force	66.7	53.6
Two parents, both in labor force	29.6	33.8
One parent, in labor force	3.7	8.4
No parent in labor force	0.0	4.3

Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding. <sup>a</sup>Source: Author's data. <sup>b</sup>Source: Planty et al. (2009:134).

All unschoolers reported two parents in the home, except one mother who answered, "me, my partner who is NOT a parent, and my daughter, who is parent to the 2 year old." Unschooling parents' participation in the labor force mimics the configuration of homeschooling households

in which one parent must engage in gainful employment in order to support the educational activities of the other parent.

Table 4-3 compares the household income of unschoolers to the income reported to the NCES by homeschooling parents in 2007. The majority of families in both categories have an income at or above the median household income in the U.S.<sup>20</sup> However, homeschooling parents are nearly three times as likely to have incomes in the highest category than unschooling parents.

**Table 4-3. Percentage distribution family income of unschoolers and homeschoolers**

Family Income	Unschoolers <sup>a</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>b</sup>
\$25,000 or less	22.2	15.9
\$25,001–50,000	11.1	24.1
\$50,001–75,000	55.6	26.8
\$75,001 or more	11.1	33.2

<sup>a</sup>Source: Author's data. <sup>b</sup>Source: Planty et al. (2009:134).

Previous survey data also indicate that homeschooling parents as a group have somewhat higher education attainment than parents nationally (Pitman 1987; Greene 1984; Gustavsen 1981; Linden 1983; Lines 1991).<sup>21</sup> The educational attainment of unschooling parents appears to be consistent with that of the general homeschooling parent population (Table 4-4).

**Table 4-4. Educational attainment of unschooling and homeschooling parents**

Parents' education	Unschoolers <sup>a</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>b</sup>
High school diploma or less <sup>c</sup>	17.6	13.7
Some college or vocational/technical	35.3	36.4
Bachelor's degree	35.3	29.4
Graduate/professional degree	11.8	20.5

<sup>a</sup>Source: Author's data. <sup>b</sup>Source: Planty et al. (2009:134). <sup>c</sup>The unschooling interview divided this category into two parts: those with less than a high school education and those with a high school diploma or equivalent. No unschooling respondents reported less than a high school education for either parent.

<sup>20</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey, the median household income in the United States for all households was \$50,740 (Bishaw and Semega 2008:3).

<sup>21</sup> Pitman also observed that "home-schooled children do as well or better on standard measures of academic achievement than do their peers attending public school" (1987:284).

Though not reported in the NCES data, many researchers have noted the striking religiosity of home school families (Mayberry et al. 1995; Mayberry 1988; Gladin 1987; Van Galen 1986, 1988, 1991; Wartes 1988b; Stevens 2001; Gaither 2008). By contrast, when asked to describe their church affiliation and/or religious identity, most unschooling parents reported no affiliation, though many responses were similar to “creation spirituality or UU or something along those lines.” Six claimed to be atheists, and another responded, “Non affiliated. We describe ourselves as ‘Anything is Possibilists.’” Others indicated former affiliations, describing themselves as “irreligious with Christian roots” or “non practicing Lutherans.” One unschooling parent responded, “I believe in a Creator, and pray, but don't attend church these days, or have a narrow view of what that Creator is. [I] prefer to talk to my creator privately, and in the natural beauty of the world.” There was also one unschooling mother in the sample who reported “Protestant non denominational” as her religious affiliation.

### **Parental Motivations to Homeschool**

Unschoolers were presented with the same list from which homeschooling parents responding to the NCES survey could choose as reasons for homeschooling. Table 4-5 reports the percentage distribution of their responses alongside the data from the NCES survey of homeschooled students.

One of the most striking differences between unschoolers and homeschoolers as a whole is the percentage of parents who keep their kids out of school to provide religious or moral instruction. Over 83 percent of homeschoolers identified religious or moral reasons as important compared to only 22 percent of unschoolers. Almost 36 percent of the general homeschooling population claims that religious or moral instruction is the most important reason for homeschooling, whereas none of the unschoolers surveyed for this study found this reason to be the most important. Not surprisingly, a desire to provide a nontraditional education received the

most attention from unschoolers, 89 percent of whom listed it as important. Over sixty-five percent of the NCES sample also indicated its importance, but only 7 percent placed it as number one compared to 44 percent of unschoolers.

Table 4-5. Reasons parents gave as important and most important reasons for unschooling and homeschooling

Reason	Important <sup>a</sup>		Most Important	
	Unschoolers <sup>b</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>c</sup>	Unschoolers <sup>b</sup>	Homeschoolers <sup>c</sup>
A desire to provide religious or moral instruction	22.2	83.3	0.0	35.8
A concern about environment of other schools (such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure)	66.7	87.6	0.0	20.5
A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools	77.8	72.7	11.1	17.1
A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education	88.9	65.2	44.4	6.5
Child has other special needs	22.2	20.9	0.0	3.6
Child has a physical or mental health problem	0.0	11.2	0.0	2.1
Other reasons	44.4	32.2	44.4	14.3

<sup>a</sup>Respondents to both surveys could choose more than one reason. <sup>b</sup>Source: Author's data. <sup>c</sup>Source: Planty et al. (2009:135).

The “other” category was also popular among unschoolers, with 44 percent claiming its importance and possibly the same 44 percent giving it the highest rank. Other reasons specified by the general homeschooling parent population include “family time, finances, travel, and distance” (Planty et al. 2009:135). Unschooling parents’ “other” reasons include respect for child, the ability to create “a unique program which will provide my child with an education made to suit him . . . not a one-size-fits-all education,” flexibility, and family togetherness/the desire to spend more time with child(ren). One parent who specified “other” as the most

important reason for unschooling responded, “because my child knows my child best; no school or teacher can come close to that. Who better to direct their own learning (and LIFE)?”

In order to explore the apparent abdication of adult authority, parents identifying themselves as unschoolers answered several open-ended questions concerning their decision to unschool and their own experiences as children and students, including when and how they arrived at the decision to unschool. Most respondents were able to definitively report when they first heard of unschooling to the year, with responses ranging from 1987 to “one year ago.” One mother reported that she discovered unschooling “when [her] older son was five” while “reading books about homeschooling styles,” indicating that the discovery of unschooling most likely occurred while this mother was actively investigating educational options and homeschooling curricula. The earliest discovery of unschooling among survey respondents was made by one of the three fathers to respond to the survey, who claimed to have first heard of unschooling “[i]n college in the late 60s reading Holt.”

As to how they first encountered unschooling, most respondents reported having learned of unschooling from an online source, such as a homeschooling website or an e-list. When asked “What/who have you read about unschooling,” responses ranged from “Grace Llewellyn (*The Teenage Liberation Handbook*), John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Unschooling Handbook, Sandra Dodd” to “Impossible. Thousands of e-mails, blogs, Sandra Dodd, Dayna Martin, Natural Parenting site, The Unschool Unmanual, John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, etc, etc.” Most respondents reported having read John Holt’s writings directly, indicating a certain dedication to saving their children from the “failing school.” One highly educated, former public school teacher and unschooling mother of two elementary aged children lamented, “I wish I could trust that the [public] school system has the ability to meet the educational needs of my children better

than I can. I know from reading Holt and *really* paying attention in my education courses for my master's degree that this is not the case. Now that I can stay at home with my children, my children are staying home from school."

Respondents also identified the most influential sources informing the ultimate decision to unschool. The most common answer was "my children" or something similar, like, "My child's personality and needs." Many commented on their own experiences as students and as teachers and their kids' experiences in school. Most unschoolers reported having read John Holt's writing. One mom, the only parent in the sample who reported having been unschooled herself during her final years of high school, listed *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* and *Guerilla Learning* by Grace Llewellyn. Many listed Sandra Dodd, Dayna Martin, Beverley Paine, unschooling email lists, and online discussion groups through Google (e.g., UnschoolingDiscussion) and yahoogroups (e.g., AlwaysLearning and AlwaysUnschooled).

When asked, "What else do you remember about deciding to unschool?" some unschooling parents related their decision to their own upbringing, e.g., "Realizing that my mom was very 'unschooling,' and how she instilled a lifelong love of learning in me." Most indicated that the choice to unschool was made with informed deliberation. The respondent who had been an unschooling student wrote, "When I was 15, it took my entire sophomore year to convince my parents to let me drop out of school and come home. After my first son was born, I read Guerilla Learning and was reminded that it was the best choice for my children as well." Others made the choice with more trepidation, "[f]eeling like [they] were jumping off a cliff into the unknown," especially given the context of their own education: "It was certainly scary for us as thoroughly schooled parents but it also almost instantly \*felt\* right. It made sense." Many began homeschooling with a more structured approach and later changed to unschooling: "We started

out eclectic home schoolers and evolved to what suits our style best.”<sup>22</sup> The “feeling” of doing the “right” thing for their children’s education was unanimous.

The unschooling interview also presented parents with the question: “Why is unschooling the best educational model for your child(ren)?” Overall, responses reveal a distinction made between the “artificial” education these parents believe is received in school and the “authentic” education afforded by unschooling, which according to one respondent is “best for any human being; self-chosen learning is the only real kind of learning.” The distrust in the public school system is readily apparent from responses such as, “My son is too intelligent for the manipulation games and tricks that public school uses to string people along.” Children’s self-directed learning is also a major theme: “They can follow their own interests and dreams and desires and focus on what matters to them the most.” Other responses focus a belief in unfettered personal development among unschooled children. For example, one parent replied, “Because it allows [children] to grow up free from institutionalization and to choose to be who they really are.” Another answered, “freedom, choice, chance to develop in his own way.” One wrote simply, “It allows creativity and discovery to flow.”<sup>23</sup>

Answers to the question, “Please describe your parent(s)’ approach to discipline,” revealed an almost universal departure from the parenting practices of respondents’ parents. Although a few unschooling parents responding to the question of ante-generational discipline described their own parents in ways similar to one mother, who said, “Patient, understanding, loving, lose

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<sup>22</sup> One respondent answered, “We were already close (very flexible homeschooling, relaxed parenting), just needed an extra nudge.” Another wrote, “I started out thinking we would follow an eclectic style (using unit studies), but found that unschooling is what works for us.” The consensus among these haphazard unschoolers is that “it just kinda happened and seemed to work.”

<sup>23</sup> Other responses include, “Freedom for the child and the family”; “It meets everyone’s needs (when each person is ready), keeps everyone interested, and lets us have fun and enjoy the process—there is more wonder than work”; and “[I]t follows their interests and strengths and shows respect and value for their decisions.”

their temper sometimes . . . human,” most indicated that their parents ranged from gentle but authoritarian to abusive. For example, a thirty-year-old unschooling mother of two boys, ages 6 and 4, responded, “They were focused on gentle discipline with no corporal punishment, but definitely maintained an Authority-figure attitude. I was spoken to as an adult as much as they felt able or willing to do so, but they always had the last say about decisions.” A forty-four-year-old mother of three reported having an absent father “and a mom—what she did when I was a child would be considered abuse by today's standards and she should have been jailed or institutionalized (BPD).” The remaining responses included descriptions like, “My mother was very direct, yet relaxed. My father was very controlling. more rigid, they did spank, tho [sic] rarely and not severely Authoritarian”; “Essentially classical disciplinarians but without spanking”; “Conventional: spanking, shaming, punishments”; and “traditional—not much hitting, mostly yelling.” Perhaps this explains why only one unschooler reported her own parents as a trusted resource for childrearing advice on the previous questionnaire.

To the question, “What else should a detailed description of unschooling parents include,” one unschooling mom claimed that unschooling parents have “[a] fierce dedication to their children’s best interest!” Another insisted that unschooling parents be “curious independent learners themselves” with a “love of life, faith in the human spirit, [and] respect for children and their natural desire to learn.” Involvement and dedication are expressed in this response: “Unschooling parents are very loving, thoughtful people who love their involvement in their children’s lives. They have a great respect for their children as human beings.” Unschooling as a lifestyle is evident in another: “[T]he whole family learns together (including parents) . . . in their own unique ways, and rejoice in life and the joys of learning.” According to one respondent, unschooling parents demonstrate “[a] love of being with, and interacting with, their children” as

well as “[r]espect for their children as whole individuals.” Without question, unschooling parents enjoy spending time with their children.

Unschooling parents are careful to avoid the misperception of those who espouse more mainstream views of education who might accuse them of child neglect: “To the outsider, it’s probably important to differentiate unschooling from unparenting, which implies lack of, or bad, parenting.” One unschooling mother of two boys writes,

To be an unschooling parent, you need to have an open mind, and you need to question most things you ever believed (how kids should behave, what kinds of rules you should have, what an education looks like, etc.) I know that I still have panicky moments, wondering how it will all turn out, because I am going against the grain, and against the way I was brought up—essentially charting new territory in my family. Trust is probably the number one most important thing—you need to trust that children are natural learners, that they want to learn, and they WILL learn in the way that is most beneficial to them.

Her comment acknowledges that unschooling depends on a view of education and parenting that is perhaps shared only among other unschooling parents. This view is exemplified by a more detailed examination of two unschooling households.

### **A Tale of Two Home Educations**

While no two unschooling families are identical, several commonalities emerge when unschooling parents’ descriptions of their own educational and childrearing philosophies are compared. The next section attempts to clarify the unschooling lifestyle with two case studies of households selected and expanded from the unschooling interview. The first comes from a mother of two boys in Ohio—the only second-generation unschooleder of the study, whose sons have always unschooled. The second is an unschooling mother of two boys from New Jersey who discovered unschooling when her older son was five years old.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Respondents’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

## **Unschooled to Unschooling**

Amanda was fifteen years old in August of 1994 when a friend gave her Grace Llewellyn's *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*. This book became her primary and most influential source of information regarding unschooling, along with Llewellyn's *Guerilla Learning*. It took her entire sophomore year to convince her parents to allow her to drop out of school and "come home." After her first son was born, she read Guerilla Learning and "was reminded that [unschooling] was the best choice for [her] children as well." She has also read the works of John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Mary Griffith, and Sandra Dodd and believes that unschooling is the best educational model for her sons because "it allows them to grow up free from institutionalization and to choose to be who they really are." She acknowledges that her decision to unschool makes her "economically vulnerable" because she must stay home instead of work, but, she reports, "it also means that we're free to decide our lives' direction every day." Although she and her family are involved with other unschoolers and have many unschooling friends who "get together regularly to hang out, play, and do crafts and activities," she claims that the most support for unschooling exists "on the Internet."

Amanda's response to the question, "How would you describe unschooling to someone who had never heard of it?" belies her familiarity with the scenario in which she, as an unschooler, must explain the practice to the curious and the concerned:

I tell people two stories: one is how unschooling is learning just how adults do (by choice) and the other is to point out how all the really "good" schools do hands-on, real-life work to gain a sense of inter-connection, cooperation, and applicable understanding of academic subjects, which is simply what we do every single day.

She has clearly taken the time to distill her description into a few short ideas. Her children have always been unschooled, mostly because of her desire to provide a nontraditional approach to her children's education and "a fierce dedication to [her] children's best interest."

Twenty-three years old when her first son was born, Amanda's descriptions of her sons indicate an intimate knowledge of their abilities, personalities, and preferences:

Aaron, who is almost seven, is high-energy, totally goofy, fascinated by all things alien and monstrous, and exceptionally artistic. Despite speech issues due to being born with a cleft lip and palate, his vocabulary is huge! His fine motor skills astound me, and his understanding of math and science comes naturally. He is funny, bright, extremely outgoing, and very interesting. My younger son, Ben, is four. He is more calm (well, used to be) and introverted. He plays quietly by himself really well, though he likes others; he doesn't constantly seek interaction to the extent that Aaron does. He is incredibly silly and very, very loving and affectionate. He also has a fondness for monsters and destruction. He is particularly inclined towards imaginative play and working out relationships. He is more emotionally and interpersonally focused than his brother. His play revolves entirely around conflicts, discussions, and cooperation between characters.

Unschooling has afforded opportunities for creative social activities and community involvement, as well as the flexibility to address the older son's special needs. The family belongs to a Lego club, hosts an arts and crafts group at their house, takes Aaron to weekly speech therapy, and volunteers at an Urban Community Supported Agriculture project weekly during the summer. Aaron has required frequent specialist visits and multiple surgeries for his cleft lip and palate, mostly as an infant; several procedures were scheduled in 2009 that most likely would have resulted in extended absences from school. Amanda believes that, "were he in an institutional setting, he might be labeled hyperactive or ADD."

Amanda's goals for her children include that they "grow to be who they most uniquely are; that they become confident, fulfilled adults and active, engaged members of society." She defines educational success as her children's "love of learning" and their "motivation to be engaged in the world." Her estimation of her sons' definition of educational success emphasizes their ability to "do whatever it is they want."<sup>25</sup> This success will be measured by whether or not

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<sup>25</sup> Future work might explore unschooling from the perspective of unschooled children.

they can “support themselves and follow their dreams,”<sup>26</sup> but Amanda doubts they will know when educational success has been achieved: “Their lives are their own. It’s a journey and truly not a destination. We don’t differentiate between life and learning, and to them, there is no difference, as it’s been their entire life’s experience.” Indeed, her vision for their next several years involves each child pursuing his own interests:

Next year we’ll be continuing to play and learn the way we are—casually with new projects now and then, but focused primarily on play. In three years, I hope we’ll be able to engage in more interest-specific activities, that their interests will have reached a point where they start looking into classes or activities outside of the home more. In five years, I believe those specific interests will continue to grow and change. In ten years, I imagine we’ll start discussing college/work plans or just continuing to follow our interests as normal.

Although Amanda anticipates a gradual transition from home to increasingly external instruction and involvement, her activities and those of her sons are intertwined with the course of their lives together as a family.

Amanda tries not to allow outside influences (extended family, friends, media content, etc.) affect the education of her children, although Internet unschoolers attempt to make her feel as thought she should either be doing more with her children or that she should be more relaxed with them and her own expectations. She observes that, whereas “many families experience a pull between traditional schooling and unschooling,” the tension she feels is most often between unschooling and radical unschooling.<sup>27</sup> Identifying her residential setting in Ohio as “pseudo-urban,” Amanda acknowledges many benefits to her children’s educational experiences:

It’s an old suburb, close to the city with lots of stuff (shops, library, restaurants, galleries, museums) in walking distance. It’s got a small-town feel because we know so many people in the neighborhood. It’s like Sesame Street, but with (small) yards. It makes life and learning so rich! There’s a bit of room to garden and lots of

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<sup>26</sup> Another possible direction for future research could focus on educational outcomes of unschoolers.

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix K.

people we know in spitting distance. There are very few children, however. We travel for children.

Unschoolers value the lack of age segregation afforded by their choice of educational setting but also actively seek to create opportunities for their children to interact with other children. With an educational background that includes some college coursework focused on art history, art, and creative writing, Amanda describes a typical day in her family's life:

We shlep around for many hours in the morning/early afternoon, playing on the computers or with toys, talking on the phone, drawing, writing, eating, working on a craft or art activity, looking things up online to answer questions, flipping through books. . . . Then we get out and do something in the afternoon 'til dinnertime. This may be a group or activity, a library visit, playing with friends, a trip to a museum, or just hanging out in the front yard. We eat dinner, play at home, and watch movies and read books before bed.

She claims four parents, three with Master's degrees and one college dropout. All were educated in parochial and public schools. They were focused on gentle discipline with no corporal punishment while maintaining "an Authority-figure attitude." Amanda was "spoken to as an adult as much as they felt able or willing to do so," but her parents always had the final word in decisions.

Her diverse experience with schooling began in Montessori from eighteen months to six years, followed by a public elementary for first and second grades. She then transferred to a different public school with a gifted program. In junior high, she attended a public magnet school for the arts with a "warm" environment and an arts-infused academic curriculum. Moving to a second arts magnet school for high school, she found the environment less friendly. After she learned of unschooling at age fifteen and spent the next year convincing her parents to withdraw her from school, she unschooled for what would have been her last two years of high school. Admitted to a private alternative college, she dropped out after the first year and began working full time and pursuing art history part time for two years at a community college. During this

time, she met and married her husband, who shortly thereafter transferred to a major state university. She withdrew from the community college and, at the state university, “tried again for two semesters to like school.” Amanda narrated the result of her dislike for formal education:

Didn't take, so I dropped out again and promptly found out I was pregnant. End of formal education to date. (My husband, on the other hand, has in the time we've been married finished a Bachelor's, a Master's and will graduate with his Ph.D. in December.)

Amanda's own experience with education does not seem to affect her attitude toward her husband's degrees and the potential for her children to attend outside classes and eventually college.

Amanda's husband, a first-generation U.S. citizen from Ukraine, graduated with a Ph.D. in environmental history in December 2009. She reported that he is “completely committed” to unschooling and their discipline methods, estimating that he spends about six to eight hours each day in their care and education, although “it took him a long while to figure out that he doesn't have to make sure certain subjects were covered or that there was no need to direct their education at all.” Their disciplinary approach is quite different from that of her parents:

I try to be non-coercive but don't always succeed. My ideal is total non-coercion; my reality is that I yell and coerce and try my best not to. The real approach is that we try our best to let the children do as much as possible, discuss things endlessly, and restrain or redirect as is necessary for safety (and sometimes for consideration). I'd say our approach is Consensual Living,<sup>28</sup> though probably closer to Anarchism.

Like many unschooling parents, Amanda and her husband adhere to a disciplinary style consistent with their educational model. Like many parents, they are not always consistent.

### School Lover to Unschooler

Kelly also has two boys who were eight and four years old in 2009. She first learned of unschooling when her older son was five while reading books about homeschooling styles. She

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix K.

has read Holt's *Learning All the Time*, a magazine no longer in publication called *Live Free Learn Free*, McKee's *Homeschooling Our Children Unschooling Ourselves*, Griffith's *The Unschooling Handbook*, and various websites, especially Sandra Dodd and Joyfully Rejoicing. Her most influential sources that informed her decision to unschool were Holt and *Live Free Learn Free*. She had planned to follow an eclectic homeschooling style using unit studies until she found that "unschooling is what works best" for her family because "it meets everyone's needs (when each person is ready), keeps everyone interested, and lets us have fun and enjoy the process; there is more wonder than work." The decision to unschool has meant that she and her sons "have the power to direct [their] lives and follow [their] hearts and the ability to make decisions that are good for [their] family."

As there are not many unschoolers in her area, she belongs to an online unschooling group she describes as "a place where we can share and support each other." She and her family also meet with a couple of homeschooling groups not specific to any style of homeschooling or religious affiliation. Like Amanda, Kim perceives the most support for unschooling exists online, although she has friends with older children who unschool who also frequently rely on groups on the Internet. Her description of unschooling seems as rehearsed as Amanda's:

It is life learning. We find our education in everything we do. We actively seek new experiences and information, and we all learn together. We have a lot of togetherness, but we also have a ton of freedom. And, I learn from the kids every day—I'm open to the lessons they are here to teach me!

Kelly's older son attended Montessori preschool through kindergarten prior to unschooling, and her younger son attended one year of Montessori preschool. She identified a concern about the environment of other schools as important to her decision to keep her children out of school, but her desire to provide a nontraditional approach to her sons' education was most important.

As an unschooling parent, Kelly places ultimate trust in her children's natural desire and ability to learn. Like most other unschooling parents, Kelly is departing from her own educational experience. Twenty-four years old when her first child was born (similar to Amanda, who was twenty-three), she is also intimately acquainted with her sons' personalities, interests, and talents:

My older son (eight years old) needs some time and space to himself. He is cautious when it comes to physical activities, but overall he is an easy-going kid. He loves video games (computer, TV, and handheld), but also loves being outside. His current interest is chemistry. He loves TV shows that explain how things happen (how things are made, Mythbusters, learning how magic tricks work. He has a special ability to understand the workings of things on a deeper level. He loves the Harry Potter stories (I read them aloud to my kids all winter—we're on the last book), and is eager to see the newest movie. In the summer, he loves being at the beach and riding his boogie board. My younger son (almost five) has a huge, magnetic personality. He is equally loving and demanding. All of his emotions are BIG. He shares his brother's interests in computer games, Harry Potter, and playing outside, plus he loves horses, Star Wars and gardening.

Kelly's sons also participate in activities outside the home, including karate for the older boy and pre-karate<sup>29</sup> and tee-ball for the younger. Her description of her children demonstrates her fondness for them and indicates the extensive time she dedicates to them.

Her goals and expectations as a parent are similar to Amanda's, wanting her sons to "grow up to be adults who are confident, comfortable in their own skin, who know that they enjoy, and who are able to provide for themselves in a way that brings them satisfaction." She also defines educational success in much the same way: "having exposure to lots of experiences and access to lots of information so that a person continues to be an interested and excited learner." Kelly believes that the achievement of educational success is "an ongoing, lifelong process" that is guaranteed unless "someone stops being interested in and excited by learning." When asked how her sons know when educational success has been achieved, she responded:

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<sup>29</sup> According to Kelly, pre-karate has fewer requirements than the regular belt program.

That's really a very subjective question, especially for unschoolers. There are no markers for success or the beginning or ending of learning, so I'm not sure what makes a child feel successful in learning, other than the fact that he gets excited about the new things he learns.

Just as unschoolers do not divide learning into discrete subjects or time periods, they do not separate education from everyday activities, making it nearly impossible to mark achievement in the same way that scholastic success is measured and recorded. Kelly follows this rationale in her vision for her sons' foreseeable future:

Next several years, more of the same—same process, but different information. We'll just have to see where the kids lead us. In ten years . . . at this point, I do imagine my kids going to college. I say "at this point" because that may become less important, both philosophically and culturally. I think our system of education is going to go through a lot of changes in the coming years—or at least I hope so!

It is not clear whether the change she anticipates for the education system refers to successful reform or the theories of complete social overhaul associated with 2012, but her dissatisfaction with the current system is unmistakable.

Mainstream information about conventional education only reinforces what Kelly believes as a home educator in general and an unschooler in particular. "Family and friends are tougher," she laments, "I don't feel like I have a lot of 'buy in' with my family." She reported that she sometimes feels pressure that she is "not doing enough" or that she is "not meeting other people's standards." This is similar to the comment Amanda made about the conflict between unschooling and radical unschooling.

Describing her residential setting as a small, close-knit neighborhood in New Jersey, Kelly also has a problem similar to Amanda's finding daytime playmates for her sons, whose friends

are not available during school hours. With a Bachelor's degree in art history<sup>30</sup> and the classics, she spends her days relatively unconcerned with the passage of time:

The days just flow. There is no specific time allotted for any one thing. My husband works long hours, six days per week, so I am with the kids from the time they get up until the time they go to sleep. The only time I “demand” to myself, is a little bit of time in the morning to have my coffee.

She experienced more structure during her own upbringing. Her mother, an RN and entrepreneur, and her father, a sought-after computer programmer with no formal education, employed what Kelly identified as a “traditional” approach to discipline: “not much hitting, mostly yelling.” Aspiring to gentle discipline like Amanda, Kelly admitted that she tends to yell but is “trying very hard to break the habit.”

Kelly also claims to have had a “traditional” education from preschool through college. In direct contrast to Amanda’s dislike for schooling, she wrote, “I actually loved school, and I can’t say that I had a negative experience that shaped how I think today.” Her husband, a self-employed contractor/builder with a Catholic high school education, “fully supports” their style of education and “is pleased with the results,” even though he is only able to spend two to three hours each day with his sons. While the sample size of these two case studies is not large enough to be representative, both unschooling fathers are supportive and involved in their children’s education.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented the qualitative results of the “virtual” participant observation and exploratory questionnaires administered during the two first stages of this research. A relatively

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<sup>30</sup> As a remarkable coincidence, Amanda’s college coursework was also in art history. Religiously speaking, thirty-year-old Amanda is an atheist, while Kelly (age forty-two) and her family are “non-practicing Lutherans.”

new sub-forum dedicated to unschooling<sup>31</sup> provides support, information, and community where unschooling parents seem comfortable sharing school horror stories, advice on deschooling, and commentary on failing social institutions and their anticipated future resolution. Members' posts, signatures and profiles reveal commitment to an unconventional parenting style philosophically consistent with their radically child-centered educational model, that was confirmed by unschoolers' subsequent responses to a brief online survey regarding parenting styles and educational choices. Unschoolers were also more likely to attribute expert childrearing advice to their children than to their parents.

Responses to the unschooling interview enabled the comparison between homeschooling parents who use adult-selected curriculum materials and unschooling parents, whose expressions of great respect for children as people are reflected in their educational model and reported disciplinary practices. The two case studies provide additional contrast and illustration of the unschooling pedagogy and lifestyle. While unschooling parents' gender and racial profile, marital status, income, educational attainment, and employment profile are fairly consistent with that of homeschooling parents, their household size, religiosity, and reasons for rejecting formal educational institutions for their children diverge. Unschoolers are well read and self-reflective and are also less likely to use their parents as a resource for childrearing support and advice and more likely to depart from the disciplinary measures of their own parents. This combined with the fact that only one unschooling parent had been unschooled might suggest a lack in generational continuity. Alternatively, the movement may be expanding laterally.

Finally, unschooling parents' use of the terms "classical," "conventional," and "traditional" in their descriptions of other parents' styles is further indication that they differentiate

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<sup>31</sup> [www.mothering.com/discussions/forumdisplay.php?f=439](http://www.mothering.com/discussions/forumdisplay.php?f=439)

themselves from the practitioners of a more “mainstream” parenting philosophy, to whom the tenets of gentle discipline, attachment parenting, and elimination communication may be foreign concepts. One method of testing this assumption is by the identification and definition of childrearing tasks as a cultural domain. The next chapter discusses the cognitive data collected and the quantitative analyses employed to interpret them.

## CHAPTER 5

### COGNITIVE DATA AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

This chapter presents the systematic data collected for this research, followed by a discussion of the results of the quantitative analyses of those data. First, fifty-two<sup>1</sup> participants sorted sixty of the childrearing tasks listed during the exploratory frelisting exercise into groups according to their similarity. Parents responding to the next stage rated each childrearing task on three different dimensions: alternativity, that is, how “alternative” each task is; how likely they were to practice each task; and how much decision-making authority is attributed to the child by the parent practicing each task. The last stage involved an inventory of “alternative” childrearing tasks from which respondents selected the specific tasks practiced in their respective households.

Three main empirical tests based on cultural domain analysis were used to validate the assumptions regarding disparate parenting strategies drawn from the participant observation among unschooling parents: consensus analysis, property fitting, and Guttman scaling. Consensus analysis unexpectedly revealed that unschooling parents operate under the same cultural milieu as their conventional-schooling counterparts. Property fitting analysis confirmed two of the three hypotheses concerning the cognitive organization of childrearing tasks. Results of property fitting and Guttman scaling revealed the existence of a unidimensional continuum of alternativity among alternative parenting tasks.

#### **Defining the Cultural Domain of Childrearing Tasks**

Unschooling parents are distinguishable from most other parents by their child-centered approach to learning, which seems to translate to an almost exclusively child-centered approach to childrearing. For example, when many parents have rules about bedtime, how much television

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<sup>1</sup> All respondents to the systematic data collection instruments were from the same population, and some also participated in the qualitative data collection.

watching is appropriate, and whether or not dessert will be consumed, unschooling parents leave these decisions to their children, whose preferences are given equal status as those of the adults in the household. The unschooling child's privileges are based on mutual respect and consideration rather than the authority of a parental figure. Most parents interviewed who chose adult-led models of education, such as public school, private school, and conventional homeschool claim to value "authoritative" childrearing practices, closely monitoring academic progress, and establishing clear expectations and boundaries for achievement and behavior. On the other hand, unschoolers appear more "facilitative" in their parenting practices, offering genuine choices and treating children as equals in their homes. One method of testing this assumption is by the identification and definition of childrearing tasks and then comparing unschoolers to their differential parenting cohorts. Thus, in order to determine whether or not unschooling parents share an established domain of childrearing tasks with parents favoring more structured educational settings, cultural domain analysis was employed.

### **The Freelist**

Cultural domains are ethnographically discovered categories whose aspects remain largely unknown until explicitly elicited and analyzed. The first step in cultural domain analysis is to identify the elements that comprise a domain, most commonly accomplished through a data collection technique called frelisting, an open-ended activity in which respondents list as many items as they can for the domain under investigation (Weller 1998; Weller and Romney 1988). Because established cultural domains include a defined core and peripheral items, with elements of the core recalled first and consensus among respondents, each respondent's list will contain a set of core items in addition to idiosyncratic items.

Upon ascertaining that childrearing tasks of unschooling parents might be different than those of other parents, participants were solicited from several parenting and education-related

discussion boards to complete a short online “survey” (Appendix B), in which respondents were asked to identify the educational setting(s) and predominant educational philosophy selected for their children, briefly describe their parenting style, and provide basic demographic information. The survey culminated in respondents listing as many childrearing tasks as they could.

Forty-six surveys yielded thirty-one<sup>2</sup> frelists, that were imported into the Anthropon software environment using the highest possible sensitivity level for identifying terms with the same meaning (Borgatti 1996). The first importation yielded a “cleaned” list of 291 parenting tasks in which there were still several matching items that could be collapsed further. For example, “carrying baby continuously in a sling from birth” and “babywearing” could be considered the same task and yet are not semantically similar enough to have been identified by even the most sensitive “soundex” procedure and hence were maintained in the list as discrete tasks. In order to reveal a more accurate frequency distribution, several of the items in the “cleaned” frelist were manually coded and reimported.

The final list of two hundred childrearing tasks sorted by frequency is presented in Appendix D, as well as the percentage of respondents who listed each item and its average rank in all the lists. Forty-four of the tasks were mentioned at least three times each, and these were combined with sixteen other tasks, selected both at random and for contrast, for use in the collection of proximity data.

### **The Single Pilesort**

The next task was to obtain an emic measure of similarity of the items in the domain of childrearing tasks. This was accomplished through the use of a single pilesort. The list of the forty-four most commonly listed childrearing tasks was combined with sixteen others for a total

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<sup>2</sup> Twenty to 30 consultants are a sufficient sample size for eliciting a free list (Weller and Romney 1988).

of sixty items. Each respondent was provided with a link to a set of sixty cards saved in portable document format (.pdf) to download, print, cut out, and sort (see Appendix E).<sup>3</sup> Each card contained one childrearing task and a number from one to sixty. Participants then reported their results through the same online survey tool used for the previous two data collection instruments (see Appendix F). Respondents simply typed the item numbers, separated by commas, into a separate text field for each pile. They were also asked to give each pile a descriptive label that specified why the items in the pile belonged together. These labels provided the basis for the generation of vector questionnaires for the next data collection phase.

Fifty-two respondents entered pilesort data, which were imported into AnthroPac to create individual and aggregate proximity matrices, individual-to-aggregate correlations, and a respondent-by-item frequency matrix. The resultant proximity data were then analyzed using Johnson's hierarchical clustering and multidimensional scaling in order to identify patterns among childrearing tasks (Borgatti 1992).

### **Vector Questionnaires**

A secondary goal in analyzing proximities is to "discover underlying dimensions along which the items vary, and which could in some sense explain the observed pattern of proximities" (Borgatti 1992:26). Accordingly, parents responding to the pilesort interview were asked to name each pile they made with a descriptive label in addition to reporting which items they grouped together. Several possible attributes of childrearing tasks emerged from this labeling task, forming the basis for discovering the dimensions that parents unconsciously use to classify these tasks. Respondents' pile labels were imported as freelist data into AnthroPac to create a frequency distribution of the labels used. An online, multi-vector questionnaire enabled

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<sup>3</sup> I also created a separate text file containing abbreviated labels for the childrearing tasks (see Appendix G).

parents to rate each of the sixty childrearing tasks used in the pilesort according to three dimensions derived from the most frequently mentioned labels: (1) how alternative it is; (2) how likely each parent is to practice it; and (3) how much decision-making the parent who practices the task grants to the child. Measurements of the three vectors were accomplished with separate columns of drop-down selections in a single questionnaire (see Appendix H).

In the first column of the questionnaire, respondents rated each childrearing task on a five-point scale where 5 is very alternative and 1 is not at all alternative. For the second column, they indicated how likely they are to practice each childrearing task, where 5 is very likely to practice it and 1 is not at all likely to practice it. For the last column, parents reported how much decision-making is enjoyed by children whose parents practice the task, where 5 is absolute decision-making for the child and 1 is no decision-making for the child. The data collected from this questionnaire were utilized in property fitting (PROFIT), an analytical technique that will be described in the next chapter.

### **Alternative Childrearing Tasks Inventory**

The final data collection task was to take inventory of the “alternative” childrearing tasks performed by both unschooling parents and their conventional counterparts to aid in the determination of whether or not there exists a unidimensional continuum of “alternativity” along which parents of varying educational persuasions are situated. The first vector of the multi-vector questionnaire provided the additional data needed to test not only the hypothesis that “how alternative” is indeed an emic category of childrearing tasks but also the extent to which a task is considered *alternative*. Items averaging a score of 3.5 or higher became the indicators of alternativity for the final questionnaire of this research, administered to parents espousing various educational strategies for their children (see Appendix I and J). Respondents simply reported whether or not they practiced each childrearing activity. Data from these inventories

were analyzed with Guttman scaling; each affirmative response contributed to a parent's total "alternativity" score as well as the construction of a comparative scale in which parents with higher scores may be considered more "alternative" in their childrearing practices than those with lower scores.

### **Consensus Analysis**

Consensus analysis is an empirical test of ethnographic observation that provides "the best estimate to date of the cultural answer to cultural questions" (Romney 1999:S113). Stephen Borgatti, developer of the ANTHROPAC statistical analysis environment, describes consensus analysis as "both a theory and a method":

As a theory, it specifies the conditions under which more agreement among individuals on the right answers to a "test" indicates more knowledge on their part. As a method, it provides a way to uncover the culturally correct answers to a set of questions in the face of certain kinds of intra-cultural variability. At the same time, it enables the researcher to assess the extent of knowledge possessed by an informant about a given cultural domain (1996:40).

Culture theory is based upon the idea that culture consists, in part, of shared knowledge (Goodenough 1981; Roberts 1964; Chavez et al. 1995). Cognitive anthropologists have attempted to define and measure shared knowledge using cultural consensus analysis, which operates under the assumption that "the correspondence between the answers of any two informants is a function of the extent to which each is correlated with the truth" (Romney et al. 1986:316). The "truth" in this context, or the "right answer" to a question is a culturally defined concept:

We are not talking about truth in the Western folk-scientific sense of empirical reality. To name a tree correctly I do not conduct a biological investigation; I access the culture that assigns it a name. Knowing the right answer to "is the earth flat?" has nothing to do with understanding astronomy or geology. It is a function of one's access to the culture of a given group (Borgatti 1996:40).

A certain level of concurrence, or “truth,” among interviewees on the elements within a cultural domain indicates an agreed upon “cultural model” (Chavez et al. 1995:41). The degree of consensus that must be achieved to permit the assumption of a single cultural model is usually indicated by an Eigen value ratio of at least three to one (Weller et al. 1993). Inter-informant agreement can then be used to estimate individual knowledge levels (Boster et al. 1987:383), supplying quantitatively derived criteria for when and how to aggregate qualitative data (Borgatti 1994:276).

The validity of the theory behind cultural consensus is also much enhanced by the unanticipated association of cultural competence with other social and psychological characteristics (Romney 1999:S112). Roy D’Andrade discusses many of these characteristics, including reliability of responses, inter-informant consistency, normality, education, intelligence (defined as “the specific ability to do well with the kind of materials that are involved in the task”), and experience (1987:199.). D’Andrade observes that “[p]eople who are more likely to give modal responses on a task are more likely to be reliable, that is, to give the same responses when the task is presented at a later time” (195). Alternatively, “those who perform most consistently and reliably are also most likely to use modal meanings and understandings” (201). Finally, “*those who give more modal responses display the behavioral characteristics of an expert*” (200; emphasis in the original), which one may become by gathering and integrating knowledge from a number of other people. D’Andrade argues that the type of communication it takes to become an expert necessitates “common meanings and understandings with respect to the system being learned or used” (201). Most cultural domains “have a kind of *coherence* to them” (199), possibly because “the desire to be understood leads people to work at reducing the

variance in cultural standards” (Goodenough 1968: 99–101; paraphrased in D’Andrade 1987:201).

Successful uses of consensus analysis include Linda Garro’s (1988) study of hypertension among the Ojibway, which revealed a shared a cultural model of the disease. Another notable example is Chavez et al. (1995), whose consensus analysis discovered that, among Latinas, Mexican and Salvadoran immigrant women were the two groups farthest from the biomedical model of physicians in terms of their rankings of possible risk factors for breast and cervical cancers.

Like most modern anthropologists, Romney acknowledges that culture is both “shared among relevant participants” and “learned as part of our social heritage.” While consensus is one indicator of knowledge, “it would be serious error to assume that all consensus indicates *cultural knowledge*” (Romney 1999:S104). For instance, Romney’s belief that “a given disease is contagious is a learned cultural response” is “neither supported nor disconfirmed by the data. . . . What is invariant about them is just this: there is consensus among the respondents concerning some characteristics of the items” (S112). Distinguishing between “natural knowledge” (knowledge that is “unlearned and arises from interaction between the nature of the organism and that of the organism’s world environment”) and “cultural knowledge” (that which “arises from human inventions, is learned and handed down from one generation to the next, and usually varies from one society to another”), Romney concedes that “[t]he line between [them], as between all arbitrarily constructed categories, is not absolute and is sometimes difficult to draw, but the extremes on this continuum and the prototypes are not hard to distinguish at all” (S104). This ability to identify the extremes and prototypes allows anthropologists to trust the shared aspect of cultural knowledge:

[T]he very notion of ‘culture’ involves sharing of ideas, concepts, behaviors, etc., by more than one person. . . . A minimum requirement for the confident inference of shared cultural knowledge would be to demonstrate that not all humans could perform the task (*ibid.*).

Accordingly, the cultural consensus model is based on the assumptions that (1) consultants share a common culture and there is a culturally correct answer to any questions you ask them; (2) consultants give their answers independently; (3) all of the questions come from the same cultural domain; and (4) questions are of equal difficulty. If all of these assumptions are satisfied, the model provides a reliable measure of cultural agreement, with high cultural consensus indicating cultural competence and a single factor solution indicating the existence of a single culture.

### **Consensus Analysis and Intracultural Variation**

Susan Weller et al. (1993) recognize the necessity of examining inter- and intracultural variation using methods and techniques that enable informed and comparable cross-cultural analysis. In fact, intracultural variation and the difficulty of describing culture as something shared given such variation is a commonly recognized problem in studies of cultural consensus (Aunger 1999; Boster 1986; Crick 1982; Garro 1986; Pelto and Pelto 1975; Weller 1983, 1984). Responses range from the ambivalence of Pelto and Pelto, who dismiss individual differences as minor variations on a cultural theme, to Crick, who claims that the invariably high degree of variation in cultural knowledge jeopardizes the idea of a shared cultural system (1982:295).

Acknowledging the problematic reconciliation of variation and individual differences in culture theory, Linda Garro asks, “In order to function in a cultural system, is it necessary for people to share cultural knowledge or is it possible for people to have varying degrees of cultural competency?” (1986:352). Garro readily admits the problem of intracultural variation: “To say that individuals vary is to state a truism, and no one would go so far as to say that a shared

culture implies complete cognitive equivalence among informants, but how to incorporate variation and individual differences in culture theory is problematic” (1986:353). Without being able to answer the question, “What is significant variation and how is it to be measured,” she concludes that even variation demonstrates systematic patterning, and systematic patterning in variation “is a consequence of living in a culture” (*ibid.*).

Numerous applications of systematic data collection and analysis techniques can be used to test ethnographically derived hypotheses about the salience of concepts to transcend qualitative ethnographic intuition to measure concepts and test hypotheses. For example, Weller et al. (1993) emphasize the necessity of examining inter- and intracultural variation using methods and techniques that enable informed and comparable cross-cultural analysis. In their study of the knowledge and beliefs about a gastrointestinal disorder known in several different Latino communities across North and South America as *empacho*, they illustrate the utility of cultural consensus theory in comparative research. Despite small variations among sites identified through their use of consensus theory, the overall large consistency in results across their sites “suggests a common origin for the concept of empacho” (Weller et al. 1993:122). These researchers conclude, “A comparative study based upon a standard protocol is one of the most powerful methodological tools there is” (123).

Integrating analytical methods is a significant improvement over work that relies entirely on either qualitative or quantitative data and analyses (Chavez et al. 1995). Whereas qualitative researchers in anthropology’s past relied upon analyzing responses by iteratively coding and categorizing data to uncover thematic categories (Glaser 1967), researchers who employ systematic data collection and analysis techniques are now able to identify integrated sets of

agreed upon beliefs, even among interviewees with radically different views, as well as the multiple sources from which people in multicultural settings formulate their beliefs.

### **Freelisting**

Consensus analysis begins with the delineation of a semantic domain that is defined using the most basic method in the cognitive ethnographer's toolkit—free listing. The result of each free listing task can be augmented considerably by employing three supplementary interviewing techniques suggested by Brewer to enhance recall and “maximize output”: nonspecific prompting, reading back to an informant the items he or she free listed, and using free-listed items as semantic cues (2002:109). More importantly, the interviewer does not need prior knowledge of the domain in order to use these techniques.

Using the output file from the importation of the cleaned freelist data, a scree plot of frequencies was created with a spreadsheet program (see Figure 5-1). There were over two hundred idiosyncratic items listed in addition to a “core” set. The scree plot validates the decision to incorporate all forty-four of the tasks that were mentioned at least three times for the collection of proximity data. Other tasks were selected, some at random and a few for contrast, from the more idiosyncratic items for a total of sixty (60) tasks to be used for the next phase of data collection.

ANTHROPAC was then used to perform additional analysis on the respondent-by-item matrix generated by the importation of the cleaned freelist data by first dichotomizing the values in the matrix to obtain just the similarity data (a person-by-person matrix indicating who mentioned what childrearing task in common with whom) with which to create a similarity matrix. First, the profile matrix showing who listed each childrearing task was converted into a task by task matrix. Next, non-metric multidimensional scaling using similarities produced a list

of coordinates and the similarity “map” in Figure 5-2 displaying each childrearing task based on these coordinates:

Stress under 0.1 is considered excellent, and anything over 0.15 is considered too high (Borgatti 1992:32). The stress of this map in two dimensions is .114. Increasing the number of dimensions to three yields a map with a stress of .075, and four dimensions yields .050. Thus, there appears to be insufficient dimensionality when childrearing task data from all parents are included and only two dimensions are used in the similarity map.

However, disaggregating the data for unschoolers and parents selecting “conventional” curricula for their children yielded a slightly different picture. The data were disaggregated fairly simply by returning to the sorted dichotomized respondent-by-item matrix and performing two extractions, keeping only the rows for unschoolers in the first extraction and only the rows for the conventional schoolers in the second extraction. The two resultant dichotomized profile matrices were then used to create separate similarity matrices for unschoolers and conventional schoolers. The corresponding similarity maps are displayed in Figures 5-3 and 5-4. Stress levels for these maps are 0.02 and 0.019 respectively in only two dimensions, a preliminary indication that there is higher within-group consensus when the larger set of parents is divided into unschoolers and their conventional counterparts.

Systematic data collected through the pilesorts were imported into AnthroPac to construct individual and aggregate proximity matrices, with all pairs of items in a pile represented as “1” in the similarity matrix. Using the individual proximity matrices created by the importation of the pilesort data into the AnthroPac environment, the program’s consensus analysis feature was used to compare the degree of agreement between respondents and thereby test the hypothesis that intra-cultural variability exists among the parents of school-age children and whether there is

separate, inter-group consensus among parents of conventional schoolchildren and parents of unschoolers. Table 5-1 displays Eigen values for each of three factors.

Table 5-1. Eigen values from consensus analysis

Factor	Value	Percent	Cum %	Ratio
1:	29.845	87.5	87.5	11.189
2:	2.667	7.8	95.3	1.674
3:	1.594	4.7	100.0	
	34.106	100.0		

Source: Author's data.

The high ratio between the first and second factors indicates a single-factor solution. There is a single factor solution with a pseudo-reliability of 0.985; because cultural agreement is being tested, that factor, under certain conditions, indicates a single culture. Had there been two different sets of cultural assumptions operating among parents in the U.S., the consensus analysis would have revealed a lack of cultural consensus within the aggregated data set including all homeschooling parents. It would then have been necessary to disaggregate the data to determine whether or not the within-group consensus among unschoolers and conventional homeschooled parents is high enough to the existence of two culturally distinct parenting creeds.

### **Property Fitting Analysis**

Property fitting analysis, or PROFIT, is used to test hypotheses about underlying dimensions, or item attributes, that seem to govern the placement of items in the MDS map. An r-squared value indicates whether or not the location on the map is related to the values of the attribute, with a higher r-squared value signifying a closer relationship and hence a verified hypothesis. Property fitting analysis for this research began with the construction of individual and aggregate proximity matrices, which were automatically generated by the importation of the pilesort data. The matrices were then used to arrange the childrearing tasks into both a

hierarchical clustering diagram and a multi-dimensional map that were each visually examined to identify potential patterns underlying the cultural domain.

### **Hierarchical Clustering**

Proximities are analyzed primarily to discover which items are associated with each other. One of the simplest methods of analyzing proximity data, cluster analysis, produces a diagram in which the columns are the grouped (clustered) items arranged in optimal order and the rows are levels of clustering (Borgatti 1992). The individual proximity matrices generated by the importation of the pilesort data were analyzed using Johnson's hierarchical clustering. The resultant hierarchical clustering diagram is displayed in Figure 5-5.

The major divisions in the cluster diagram, visually discernible by the deepest cleavages created by the columns consisting of mostly dots, provide as few as four main groups from which to begin forming a hypothesis about the cognitive organization of childrearing tasks. From left to right, the first group seems to include tasks associated with behavior and discipline: gentle discipline (GDIS), maintaining high expectations (HIEXP), spare the rod spoil the child (SPANK), dividing household duties (CHOR), etc. The second includes unconventional tasks appearing most frequently on unschooling parents' lists, such as extended and exclusive breastfeeding (EXTBRST and EXCBRST), babywearing (WEAR), and elimination communication (IPT). The third group contains tasks that might be associated with fostering a child's emotional well-being and self-esteem, such as trusting each other from birth (TRUST), focusing on the child's happiness (HAPP), being honest (HNSTY), and having good communication (LIS). The fourth group contains tasks supporting physical and mental development, such as encouraging physical activity (PHYSACT), looking after a child's personal hygiene and appearance (HYG), reading together everyday (READ), visiting the library regularly (LIBRY), etc. Item label abbreviations used in the display are listed in Appendix G.

## **Non-Metric Multidimensional Scaling**

Multidimensional scaling (MDS) provides another visual representation of the pattern of similarities or distances between items in a cultural domain. The aggregate proximity matrix, representing the average measure of similarity between childrearing tasks and the relative agreement between each task and the aggregate proximity matrix were entered into AnthroPac's program for non-metric multidimensional scaling to produce a visual representation of the relative distances between childrearing tasks. Tasks perceived to be very similar or closely related appear near each other on the MDS map, and tasks perceived to be very different are plotted far away from each other. MDS in two-dimensional space produced the map in Figure 5-6. The abbreviated item labels displayed in the map are expanded in Appendix G.

The degree of correspondence between the distances among childrearing tasks implied by the MDS map and the aggregate proximity matrix is measured by a stress function.<sup>4</sup> Stress in two dimensions is 0.152.<sup>5</sup> Increasing the number of dimensions to three necessarily reduces the stress of the map to a more acceptable 0.108 and produces the map in Figure 5-7.

## **Emically Derived Dimensions: Pile Sort Labels**

Perhaps the most important source of hypothesized dimensions came directly from respondents reporting labels for each pile created during the pile sort. One respondent whose children attend public school categorized childrearing tasks according to decisions regarding intellectual, physical, emotional, and social health, as well as discipline and “meta-parenting philosophies.” Another parent who has selected a combination of public and private schooling for her child had similarly developmental labels but with added commentary: “birth to 4–5 years

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<sup>4</sup> ANTHROPAC uses “Kruskal Stress,” also known as “Stress Formula 1” or “Stress 1” (Borgatti 1992:31).

<sup>5</sup> Recognizing the varying standards regarding the amount of stress to tolerate, Borgatti’s guideline it that “anything under 0.1 is excellent and anything over 0.15 is unacceptable” (1992:32). Non-zero stress values occur because of insufficient dimensionality.

because a child's personality and overall character is developed by age 5—discipline is very important, so is food and structure and the people they are exposed to outside the home"; "5 years old and older—this is a tricky situation, trust is earned, as a child gets older they want to do and see more, consequences are important, especially if bad decisions are made, respect is earned and has to be taught." She called her third and final pile "weird and I would never consider doing or applying any of these to my parenting career," expanding with the following:

First of all, if you want your kid to become a criminal or an unproductive member of society then use these techniques. I believe in punishment, spanking, yelling "no" if I have to. I absolutely believe in vaccinations, and circumcising (and no I am not Jewish). This diaper-free stuff is unsanitary. Children need rules and chores. Having a baby anywhere other than a hospital is a risk to your baby. I loved bribing my son at an early age; it worked. Besides, when they get older you can't bribe them; they get too smart for that, so tell them it's milk tea when they're two. They will think it's sweet tea and drink it anyway.

Clearly, this parent maintains strong negative opinions about the childrearing practices she and other respondents consider to be alternative.

Conventional homeschoolers tended to group childrearing tasks according to their value-neutral function, such as "spiritual guidance," "information gathering practices," "socialization practices," "educational practices," "principle-centered practices," "disciplinary practices," "routine establishment," and "health/hygiene practices." Two responding mothers who first homeschooled then unschooled their children sorted their piles according to whether or not they performed the tasks, with the exception of one pile labeled "things that 'sound good' in our culture, i.e., the 'right' thing to do, but aren't actually necessary or even desirable (things I am trying to steer away from)." The three childrearing practices in this pile (praising/rewarding for good behavior and accomplishments, teaching respect and proper behavior, and instilling a love of learning) are tasks essential to public schooling but not, according to this respondent, unschooling.

Unschoolers' labels were generally normative and reflected their disapproval of tasks that are inconsistent with their parenting philosophy. One mom called her piles "instinctual," "respectful," "controlling," "personal," and "removed/disconnected." An unschooling father made three piles labeled "positive," "ok," and "evil." An unschooling mother made four piles called "things we do," "things we used to do," "things we've never done," and "not applicable."<sup>6</sup> Another parent's labels were explicitly related to her practice of unschooling: "mindful practices that promote or are integral to unschooling"; "practices or values that while mostly positive in themselves, are neutral regarding unschooling, or not essential for unschooling to flourish"; "practices that are barriers to unschooling"; "ideas that while more positive in being gentler than group C, show a fundamental misunderstanding of true unschooling"; and "practices that could be a barrier or conducive to unschooling depending on how enacted."

### **Hypothesis Testing with Attribute Data from Vector Questionnaires**

The semi-structured interview data obtained during the pilesorts and a visual examination of the hierarchical clusters and MDS map led to the formulation of three possible hypotheses concerning the possible dimensions underlying the reasons childrearing tasks were grouped together. The first hypothesis emphasizes parents' perception of how alternative a childrearing task is compared to other tasks. The second speculates that parents may be sorting childrearing tasks according to how likely a parent is to perform them. The third hypothesis surmised that the perceived level of decision-making power for the child imbedded in each childrearing task might be an organizational principle.

Vector questionnaires were then created and administered to test each of the three suspected attributes: alternativity, popularity, and decision-making power for the child. The data

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<sup>6</sup> The three items grouped into this pile were elimination communication, extended breastfeeding, and doing homework with child and/or monitoring homework progress and checking for accuracy.

from each vector questionnaire were imported into ANTHROPAC and the mean of the scores for each childrearing task was calculated to produce a single vector to for use in the profit analysis.

Table 5-2 displays the regression results for the three dimensions analyzed with PROFIT.

Regression results for the first attribute, alternativity, includes a correlation coefficient (mult r) of 0.872 and r-squared of 0.761 at 0.001 probability, confirming the hypothesis that parents organize childrearing tasks according to how alternative they are. The correlation coefficient for the third vector, decision-making power for the child, may also be high enough to indicate an accurate prediction;<sup>7</sup> however, the hypothesis that parents sort childrearing tasks according to how likely they are to practice them has not been confirmed.

Table 5-2. Regression results for three possible dimensions of childrearing tasks

Variable	Mult R	R-Squared	Probability
Alternativity	0.872	0.761	0.001
Popularity	0.816	0.665	0.001
Power to the child	0.866	0.750	0.001

Source: Author's data.

Figures 5-8, 5-9, and 5-10 present a graphic display of how far the childrearing tasks are from the mean for each predicted dimension.<sup>8</sup>

### Guttman Scaling

Guttman scaling is a method “for discovering whether a series of measures on a set of individuals (or groups) belong on a unidimensional continuum” (Bernard 1994:292–297). According to Bernard, “If most cases conform to this expectation, then an underlying dimension . . . would account for the differences between individuals” (296). Just as Johnson (1995) used

<sup>7</sup> If the dimensions are accurately predicted, the correlation coefficient (Mult R) should be .9, or perhaps slightly lower if the probability is .001. R squared translates into the percentage of the variance in the cultural domain successfully explained by the analysis for the respondents (or a cohort like them), i.e., a low r-squared means only a small percent of the variance has been captured by the analysis. The probability (p) is the likelihood that the correlation coefficient occurred by chance.

<sup>8</sup> Normally indicated by a + sign, the mean in each PROFIT display has its own coordinates and is simply labeled “Mean.”

Guttman scaling to determine whether “manufacturing skills” form a single dimension for Matsigenka men of the Peruvian Amazon, this research sought to discover whether or not a list of alternative childrearing tasks could achieve a coefficient of reproducibility high enough to predict the presence of several alternative parenting practices based on just a few attributes.

The first dimension of the multi-vector questionnaire served the dual function of collecting attribute data for the PROFIT analysis and identifying the indicators of alternativity. Parent-respondents rated each childrearing task on a scale of one to five according to how “alternative” it was. Items scoring 3.5 or higher (listed in Appendix I) populated the final questionnaire for this research, administered to parents espousing various educational strategies for their children, in which respondents identified simply whether or not they practiced each alternative childrearing activity (see Appendix J). Each affirmative response contributed to a parent’s total “alternativity” score, allowing a comparative perspective with the assumption that parents with higher scores may be more “alternative” in their childrearing practices than those with lower scores.

The Guttman scaling analysis produced the unidimensional continuum of childrearing tasks illustrated in Figure 5-11. The final statistics after sorting yielded a coefficient of reproducibility of 0.820.<sup>9</sup> According to the scale, assuming the intervality/ordinality of the scale can be trusted, parents who choose not to vaccinate, who practice elimination communication, and who subscribe to Alfie Kohn’s anti-praise dictum are most likely to engage in other practices considered alternative, including unschooling. Additionally, respondents scoring higher on the scale can be considered “more alternative” than those with a lower score. The distribution of alternativity scores displayed in Table 5-2 suggests that unschooling parents perform the greatest

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<sup>9</sup> In order to be high enough to trust the intervality/ordinality of the scale, Guttman’s coefficient of reproducibility should be at least 0.85, but 0.8 is acceptable in some circumstances.

number of alternative childrearing tasks, followed by conventionally homeschooling parents, and then parents whose children attend school (public, private, charter, and magnet).

Table 5-3. Mean alternativity of unschooling, conventionally homeschooling, and schooling parents

Number of alternative childrearing tasks performed (X)	Unschoolers <i>n</i> =26		Homeschoolers <i>n</i> =10		Schoolers <i>n</i> =17	
	Frequency (f)	fX	Frequency (f)	fX	Frequency (f)	fX
0			1	0	1	0
1			1	1	8	8
2			1	2	1	2
3			1	3	1	3
4	3	12	2	8	3	12
5			1	5	1	5
6						
7	1	7	2	14	1	7
8	2	16	1	8		
9	4	36				
10	3	30			1	10
11	5	55				
12	6	72				
13	2	26				
N = 53	$\sum fX=254$	X=	$\sum fX=41$	X=	$\sum fX=47$	X=
		254/26=		41/10=		47/17=
		9.769		4.100		2.765

Source: Author's data.

The mean number of alternative childrearing tasks performed by unschooling parents is 9.769, with SD 2.592. The means for conventionally homeschooling and schooling parents are 4.1 (SD 2.548) and 2.765 (SD 2.579) respectively.<sup>10</sup> The difference between the mean alternativity score for unschoolers and the mean alternativity score of conventional homeschoolers is 5.669, which according to a one-tailed *t* test is significant at a .0005 confidence

<sup>10</sup> The modal number (1) of alternative childrearing tasks performed by parents of children who attend school may be a more accurate measure of central tendency, as the mean is positively skewed by the single case of a parent performing ten alternative tasks. This parent reported that, although his children attend public school, he would unschool them if he could.

level. The difference in mean alternativity scores for conventional homeschoolers and parents who send their children to school (1.335) is not statistically significant.

## **Discussion**

The systematic data collected and analyzed for this research enabled the operationalization of the concept of “alternativity,” as well as the identification of childrearing practices as a cultural domain. A comparison of the correlations between individuals and the aggregate matrix revealed that unschoolers have a higher correlation to the aggregate matrix than conventional schoolers, with average correlations of 0.498 and 0.258 respectively. This is consistent with the similarity maps displayed in Figures 5-2, 5-3, and 5-4; the item-by-item matrix of childrearing tasks listed by unschoolers produces a very different similarity map than the map derived from the item-by-item matrix of tasks listed by conventional parents. Moreover, the maps for all parents and unschooling parents appear to be much more related spatially than the map displaying the similarity of childrearing tasks according to conventional parents, whose map seems to indicate a dichotomy of parenting activities. The mean alternativity scores of unschooling parents compared to conventional homeschoolers and parents whose children attend an educational institution outside the home confirm that the practice of unschooling can be predicted by the number of alternative childrearing tasks performed.<sup>11</sup>

Although consensus analysis indicates the operation of one set of cultural assumptions among parents with respect to the domain of childrearing tasks regardless of the educational configuration selected for their children, observational data indicate that there is likely a lower consensus (and a higher intra-group consensus) of the tasks actually performed by each set of

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<sup>11</sup> Future research might discover whether or not the performance of alternative childrearing tasks necessarily precludes the performance of their conventional antitheses.

parents. Additional data, both observational and systematic, collected from parents of all selected educational settings may yet reveal the existence of an alternative parenting subculture.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the inconsistency between the observational data and the results of the consensus analysis illustrates not only the problem with reconciling intracultural variation and consensus theory experienced by Crick, Garro, Weller, and others, but also the benefit of collecting and analyzing systematic data in the first place. Because this research employs these methods instead of relying entirely on qualitative or quantitative data and analyses, an integrated set of agreed upon beliefs regarding childrearing is able to emerge, even among two groups of parents operating under the same set of cultural assumptions but practicing antithetical childrearing tasks.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the quantitative analyses of the cognitive data systematically collected using several instruments designed to facilitate the cultural domain analysis of childrearing tasks. A freelist exercise defined the elements of the domain, and non-metric multidimensional scaling revealed two distinct groupings of tasks listed by unschooling parents and conventional homeschoolers. However, subsequent consensus analysis of the proximity data gathered in a single pilesort did not support the existence of two distinct cultural groups, suggesting that parents in the U.S. share common assumptions regarding childrearing tasks, regardless of the educational choices they make for their children.

Three hypotheses emerged regarding the possible underlying dimensions of the domain from a visual examination of the multidimensional scaling of the proximity data: the

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<sup>12</sup> It is also possible that disaggregating the data for unschoolers and conventional schoolers may produce a correlation coefficient for the PROFIT analysis of the second hypothesized attribute (how likely to practice) high enough to confirm its dimensionality.

“alternativity” of the tasks, the likelihood to practice each task, and the decision-making power the parent practicing the task allocates to the child. Only the first and last hypotheses were confirmed by PROFIT analyses. Finally, a Guttman scaling analysis of an inventory of alternative childrearing tasks revealed that these tasks can be arranged along a unidimensional continuum. Given the acceptable coefficient of reproducibility, parents who choose not to vaccinate, who practice elimination communication, and who subscribe to Alfie Kohn’s anti-praise dictum are most likely to engage in other practices considered alternative, including unschooling. Moreover, a parent’s decision to unschool predicts an objection to corporal punishment, the practice of attachment parenting, respect for the child as an equal, and the use of a family bed. Univariate statistics computed for the number of alternative childrearing tasks performed provide additional interpretive assistance regarding the relationship of educational setting and alternative childrearing tasks performed. Alternativity scores were higher for unschoolers than for any other group, and a statistically significant difference was found between the number of alternative childrearing tasks performed by unschooling parents and that of conventionally homeschooling students.

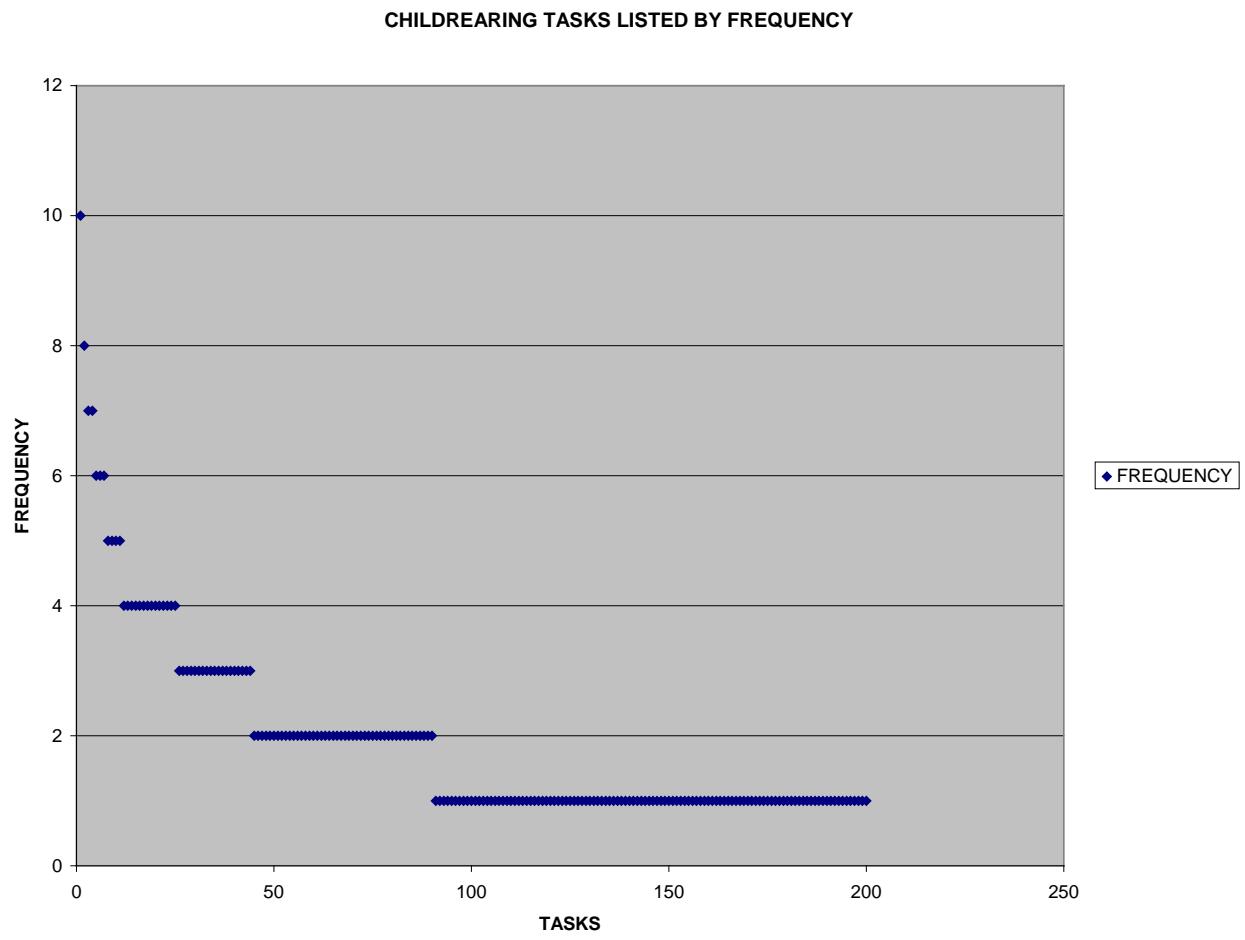


Figure 5-1. Scree plot of childrearing task frequencies

Source: Author's data.

There is an “elbow” in the plot at the forty-fourth task, where the frequency drops from three to two mentions, indicating a natural cutoff for the selection of items for the next phase of systematic data collection.



Figure 5-2. Similarity map of childrearing tasks for all parents

Source: Author's data.

This figure provides a visual display or “map” of the association between freelist childrearing tasks when all respondents' lists are included. The distance between tasks on the map represents the distance between items on each list. For example, tasks that are near each other in the map, such as “babywearing” and “attachment parenting,” were listed in close succession in the lists including these two tasks; those that are farthest apart, such as “child-led weaning” and “setting and enforcing limits” likely appeared on different lists. The tasks in the vertical list on the left-hand side of the map are outliers.



Figure 5-3. Similarity map of childrearing tasks for unschooling parents

Source: Author's data.

When the freelist data are disaggregated and only unschooling parents' lists are included in the similarity map, tasks are fairly widespread with no discernible core.

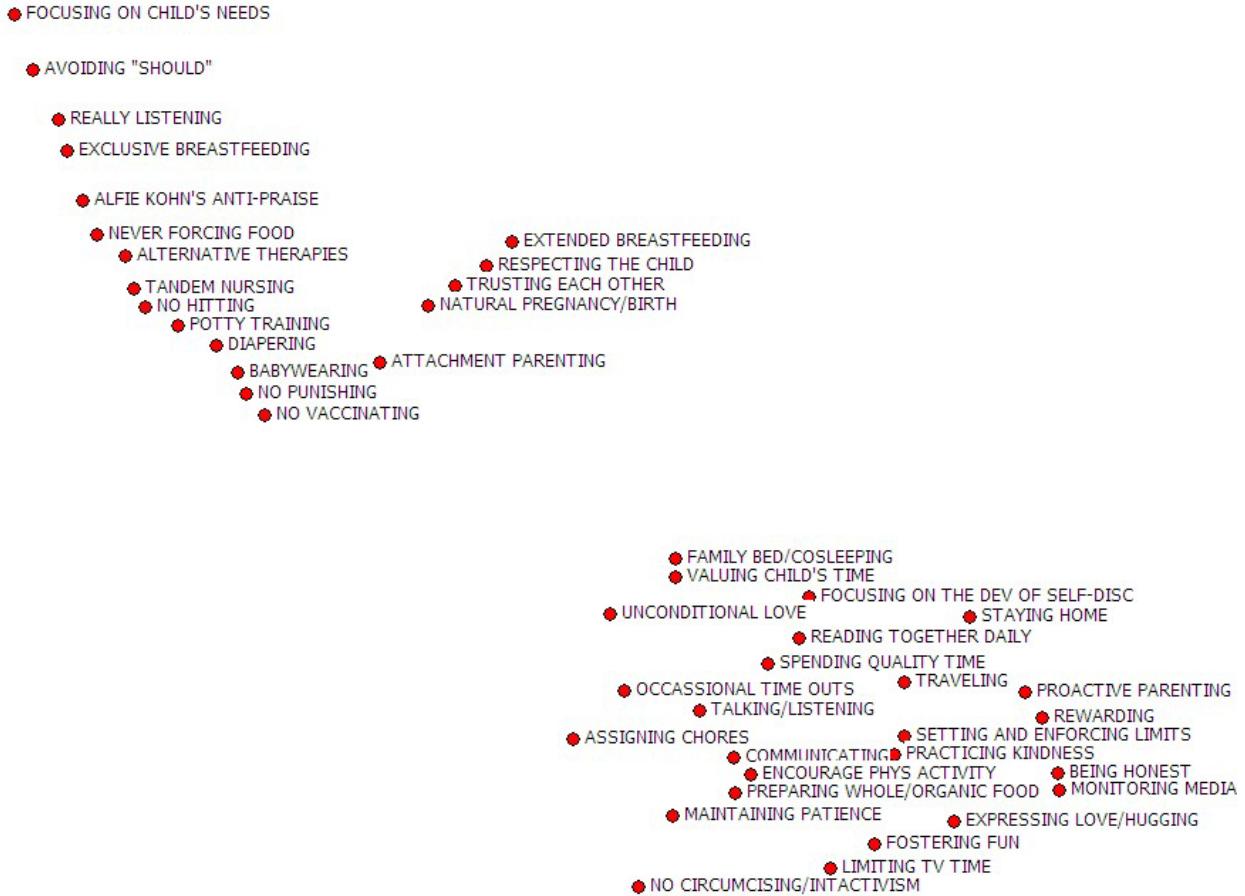


Figure 5-4. Similarity map of childrearing tasks for conventional parents

Source: Author's data.

Two well-defined cores emerge when only data from conventionally schooling parents are displayed in the similarity map. With few exceptions, a sharp division exists between tasks commonly associated with conventional childrearing practices and those that are considered alternative.

Figure 5-5. Hierarchical clustering of childrearing tasks

Source: Author's data.

Item labels are abbreviated; the key to the abbreviations can be found in Appendix G. Each row in the clustering diagram corresponds to a level of clustering, and each column corresponds to a childrearing task. In any row (level) of clustering, an x in the column for two or more tasks indicates that the tasks are grouped at that level; a dot in the column corresponding to an item indicates the item is not grouped with any other items at that level. For example, in the first row of the clustering diagram, the only childrearing tasks in a cluster at the 0.8077 level are two pairs: (1) no vaccinating (NVAC) and unmedicated childbirth (NATBIRTH), and (2) no punishing (NPUN) and no spanking or hitting or other physical punishment (NHIT). This indicates that, for the cultural domain under investigation, the highest proximity exists between these two pairs of items. At the next cluster level, reading together every day (READ) and visiting the library regularly (LIBRY) are nearly as proximate, and so forth.

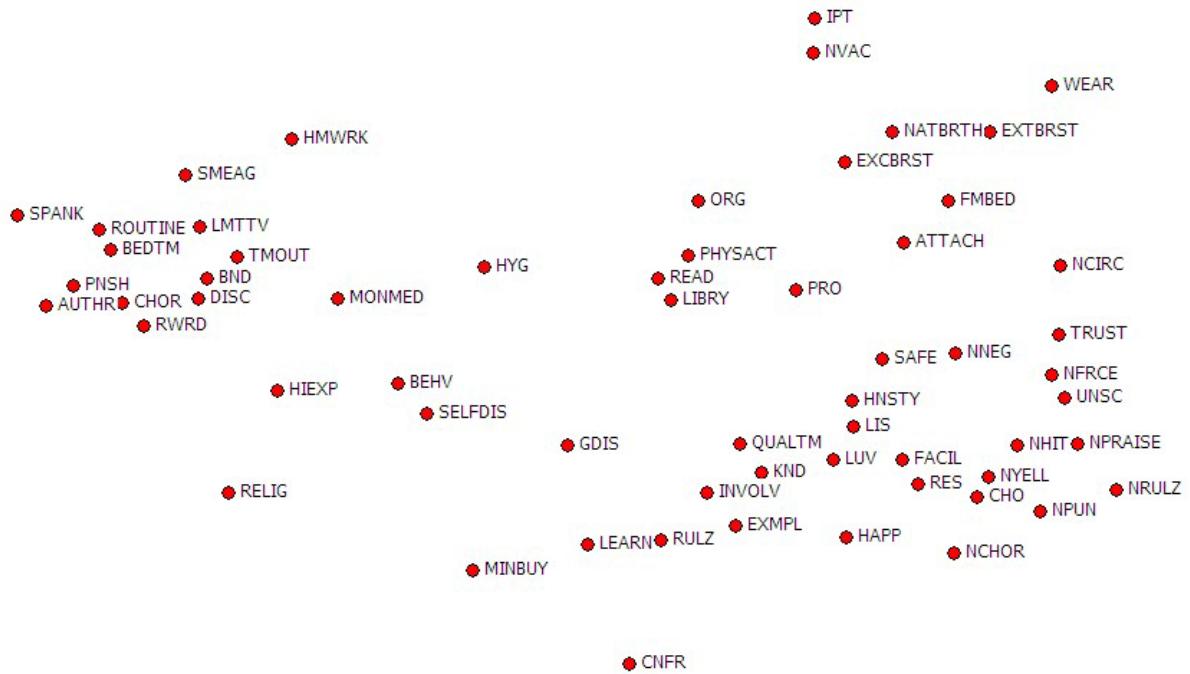


Figure 5-6. Non-metric multidimensional scaling of the aggregate proximity matrix of childrearing tasks in 2 dimensions

Source: Author's data.

This map displays the proximity in two dimensions of childrearing tasks based on their similarity to each other. Tasks near one another on the map are considered to be closely related by respondents, who may have sorted them into the same pile. For example, teaching respect and proper behavior (BEHV) and focusing on the development of self-discipline (SELFDIS) are next to each other on the map, indicating their high degree of similarity, whereas no circumcising/respect for bodily integrity (NCIRC) appears on the other side of the map, indicating that it was likely not grouped by respondents with BEHV or SELFDIS. Abbreviated labels are listed and expanded in Appendix G.

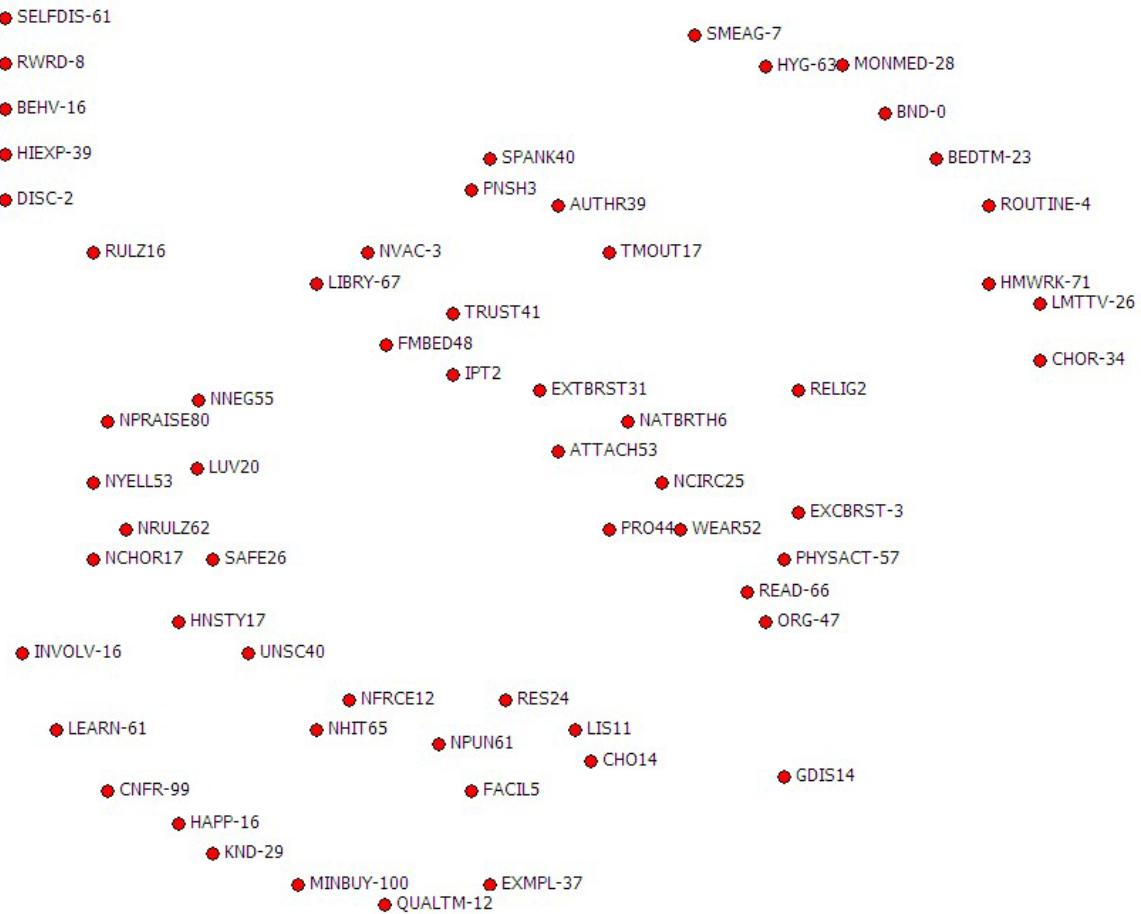


Figure 5-7. Non-metric multidimensional scaling of the aggregate proximity matrix of childrearing tasks in three dimensions

Source: Author's data.

Because the stress of the MDS map in two dimensions was too high, the proximity data were re-scaled in three dimensions, producing the revised coordinates (displayed here) that were used in subsequent PROFIT analyses.

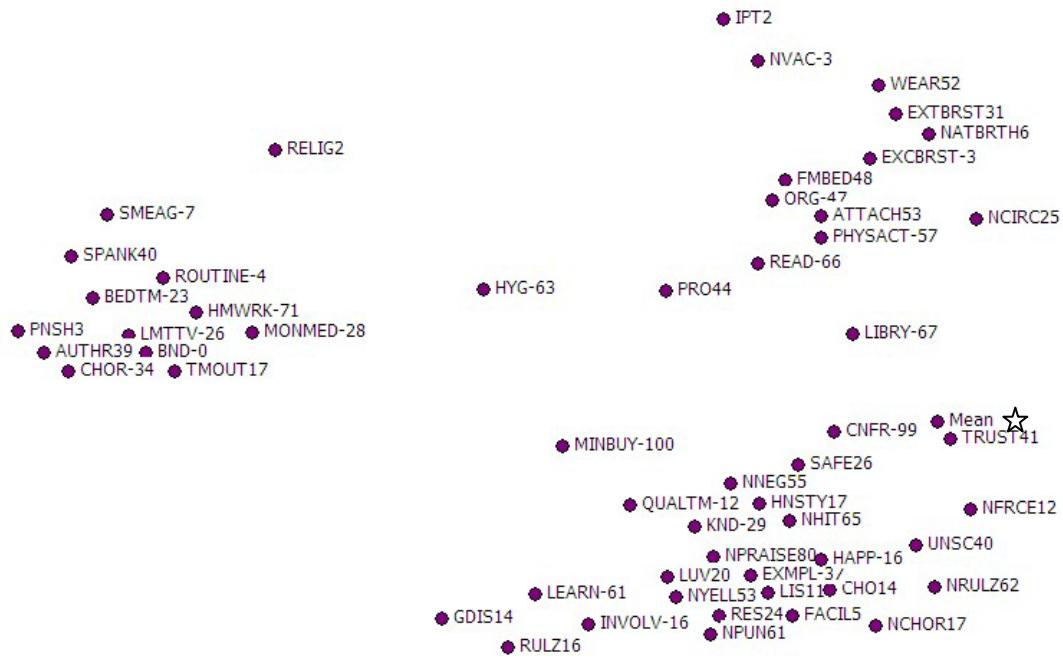


Figure 5-8. PROFIT display of childrearing tasks plotted according to alternativity

Source: Author's data.

This figure provides a visual display of the distance between each childrearing task from the mean (identified with a star) for the first predicted dimension, alternativity.

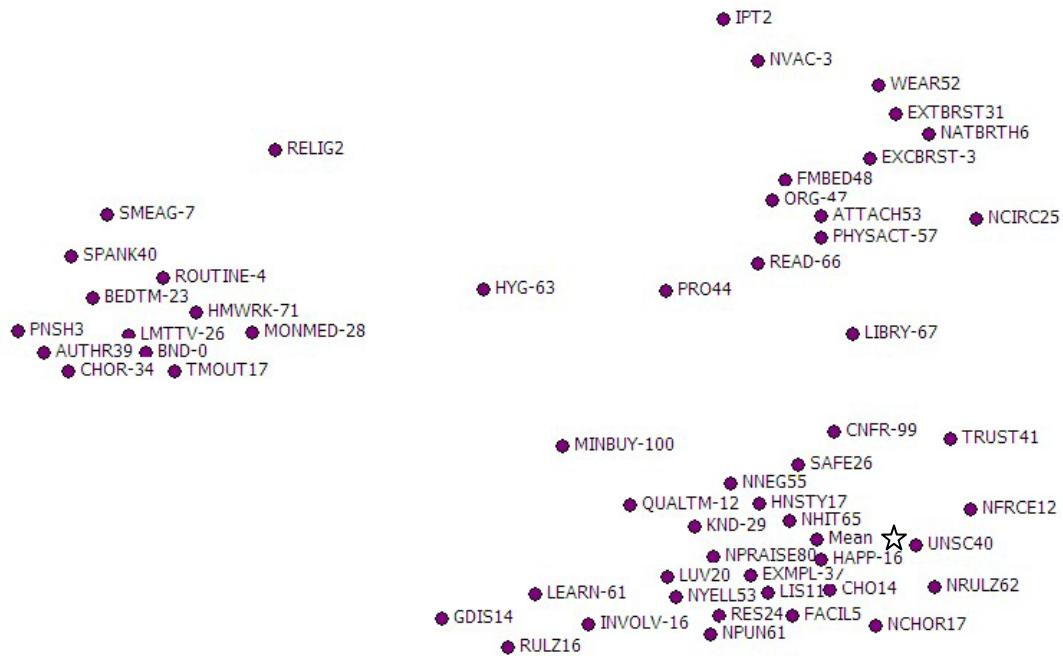


Figure 5-9. PROFIT display of childrearing tasks plotted according to how likely a parent practices them (popularity)

Source: Author's data.

This figure provides a visual display of the distance between each childrearing task from the mean (identified with a star) for the second predicted dimension, popularity.

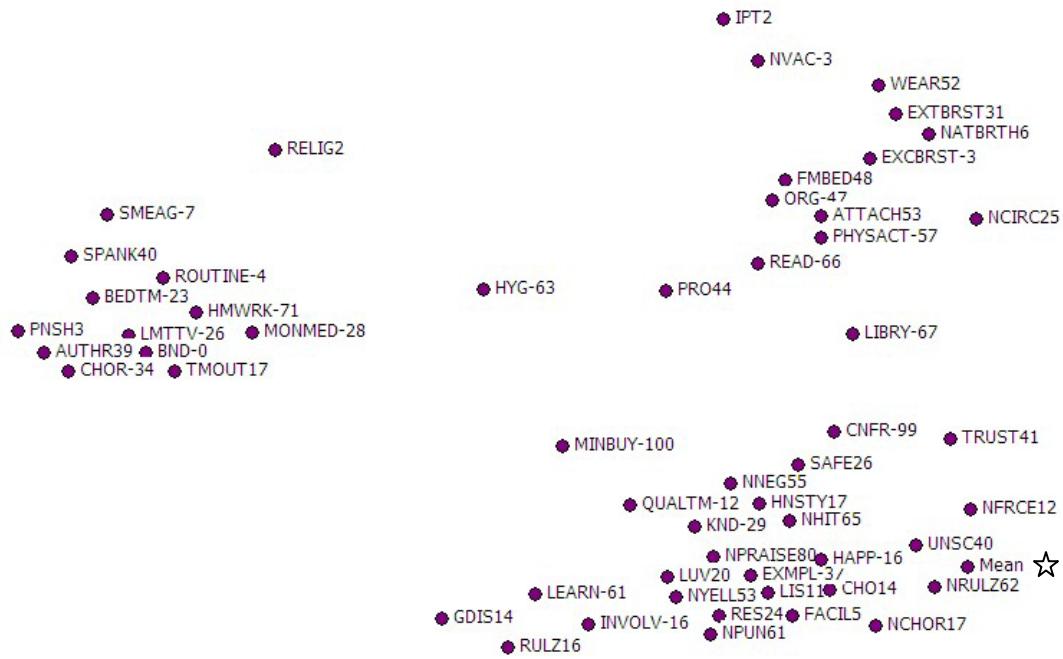


Figure 5-10. PROFIT display of childrearing tasks plotted according to how much decision-making power is afforded to the child

Source: Author's data.

This figure provides a visual display of the distance between each childrearing task from the mean (identified with a star) for the third predicted dimension, decision-making power of the child.

A	EE	N	N
F	T	XX	ANP
M	TNUCTWTCR	N	
	BRAHNBEBIAIV		
	EECISRRARRIPA		
	DSHTCSSRTCSTC		
1	1	1	1
1259427086133		Number of tasks performed	
-----	-----	-----	-----
29:	1111111111111	13	
17:	1111111111111	13	
27:	1111111111111	13	
12:	1111111111-1+	12	
11:	1111111111111	12	
25:	1111111111111	12	
10:	11111111---++	11	
13:	111-1111111+	11	
6:	11111111111	11	
5:	11111-1111+	10	
28:	111--11111 ++	10	
2:	1-111111- + +	9	
1:	1-1--1111+ ++	9	
22:	11111111-+	9	
15:	111111111	9	
7:	1111111-1 +	9	
9:	-1111-11 ++	8	
14:	11-11--1+ + +	8	
19:	111111-1 +	8	
3:	111--111+ +	8	
24:	1111111- +	8	
21:	111-1-1 ++	7	
26:	11-1-1+ +	6	
8:	-1-11+ +	5	
18:	1111	4	
16:	1--1+ +	4	
4:	1- +	2	
20:	- +	1	
23:	- +	1	

Figure 5-11. Guttman scaling of alternative childrearing tasks

Source: Author's data.

This table displays a unidimensional continuum of alternative childrearing tasks. Each column represents an alternative childrearing task (labeled vertically with the abbreviations listed in Appendix G), and each row corresponds to a respondent. Tasks that are performed by a given respondent are denoted by a “1”; errors are marked with “-” and “+” for missing tasks and extra tasks respectively. For example, the first three respondents (29, 17, and 27) perform all thirteen tasks in the continuum. The next respondent (12) performs twelve tasks, but as the “-” and “+” indicate, this respondent does not practice anti-praise (NPRAIS) and does practice no vaccinating (NVAC). Given the sufficiently high coefficient of reproducibility, the performance of tasks at the left end of the continuum can be predicted by the performance of tasks at the right end, i.e., sleeping in a family bed is the most commonly practiced alternative childrearing task, and parents who do not vaccinate are likely to perform all of the tasks to the left of it on the continuum.

## CHAPTER 6

### NEITHER “FREAKS” NOR “LAWBREAKERS”: CONCLUSION

This chapter relates the findings to the literature and the objectives of the research. The significant contributions made by this research to the understanding of unschooling parents' childrearing philosophy and their motivation to make the economic sacrifices necessary to devote their time to this unique educational alternative are presented. A discussion of how the study's analyses of alternative childrearing tasks associated with unschooling advance understanding of countercultural social movements is then proffered. Finally, possibilities for future research are proposed; these include queries into the diversity of the unschooling population, the role of the Internet in the development and continuation of the movement, and the relationship between unschoolers and the Do-It-Yourself movement.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Virtual participant observation in an online unschooling community provided the ethnographic basis for an investigation into alternative childrearing practices and their relationship to the educational models selected by parents for their children. The subsequent battery of semi-structured interview protocols, specifically designed and adapted for online use, successfully accomplished the study's research objectives.

First, the comparison of the demographic dimensions of unschooling parents to those of home educators who employ a more conventional, adult-led curriculum revealed a population that is white, middle-classed, educated, and predominantly female. The apparent lack of religiosity among unschooling respondents is consistent with previous characterizations (Stevens 2001; Gaither 2008); the data collected for this research also reveal that unschoolers tend to have fewer children than parent educators who teach their children at home for religious reasons.

Second, the suspected association between the practice of unschooling and the many non-school-related parenting practices identified as “alternative” was confirmed by responses to specific probing, as well as through the collection of attribute data and subsequent Guttman scaling analysis of alternative childrearing tasks. Parents who unschool their children express less deference to the childrearing styles of the previous generation and are more likely to engage in “alternative” parenting practices than their conventionally homeschooling counterparts. Consensus analysis demonstrated that, despite philosophical disagreement regarding the sovereignty of children, unschooling parents and parents whose children are educated using conventional, adult-led curricula share a cultural domain of childrearing tasks.

Third, alternative parenting practices in the United States do indeed form a unidimensional continuum on which unschooling represents a predictive attribute, even though it is not considered the most alternative practice. The ultimate identification of this continuum, as well as the results obtained in pursuit of the first two objectives, satisfy the comprehensive fourth objective, to provide a more complete explanation of unschooling parents’ childrearing philosophy. The results of this research substantiate the claim made by several unschooling authors that the unschooling pedagogical model is also a way of life (McKee 2001; Griffith 1998; Llewellyn 1998).

In addition, the highly significant difference between the mean number of alternative childrearing tasks performed by unschooling parents and the mean number of alternative tasks performed by conventional homeschoolers also signifies the prognostic ability of parenting choices with respect to educational models. The lack of significance in the difference of mean alternativity scores when conventionally homeschooling parents and schooling parents are compared indicates that homeschoolers who use conventional curricula are closer in their

parenting practices to parents who send their children to school than parents who unschool. This may explain why many homeschooleds mimic the environment and curriculum of conventional schools, as noted by Knowles et al. (1992).

The contrast between unschoolers and homeschooleds goes beyond their differential religiosity, observance of hierarchy, and subscription to gender roles. While allowing their children educational autonomy, unschoolers hope to transmit a distinct set of values, including age and gender equality, environmentalism, anti-consumerism, and self-responsibility. Many conventional homeschooleds emphasize academic advantage, religious piety, and respect for conservative familial roles. Homeschooleds suspect public schools as failing to perpetuate traditional ways of living, whereas unschoolers express disappointment at the system's perceived inability to ameliorate society's ills.

### **Unschooling and Virtual Social Reform**

Whereas John Dewey advocated a facilitation of the transition between home and school by creating micro-societies by which the child is introduced gently and gradually into the social world of adults, John Holt's form of pedagogical progressivism advocates keeping the child at home where the child can authentically participate in adult society in much the same way. In true Holtian form, unschooling parents continue to echo the sentiment of Bellah et al. (1985; 1991) and other social commentators who underscore "the need for rebuilding community in the face of America's loss of a sense of a social commons" (Rheingold 1993:12).

In his defense of the virtual community, Rheingold employed a schema proposed by sociologist Marc Smith (1992) in his attempt to analyze online interaction for community behavior. Smith, who performed fieldwork in a virtual community for his Master's thesis,

focused on the concept of “collective goods.”<sup>1</sup> As Rheingold explains, “Every cooperative group of people exists in the face of a competitive world because that group of people recognizes there is something valuable that they can gain only by banding together. Looking for a group’s collective goods is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into a community” (1993:13). Unschoolers turn to the Net for community not just because they are few and far between but because it is there that they find validation for their scholastic escape from mass-media-dominated, corporate-agenda-monopolized, government-funded education.

In 1969–1970, Ivan Illich lamented the commodification of education; he and Reimer proposed killing school and establishing learning networks. Although there was no infrastructure to make this possible at the time, he wrote of a computer network that would enable learners and teachers to contact each other. At nearly the same time, Holt began writing about the destruction of the student spirit by the public school system, while others were envisioning the use of electronic communications to recapture the community that had been lost to urbanization and industrialization. User networks, aided by government-endorsed technology not specifically designed for social interaction, gained momentum and led to the creation of the Internet. By the early eighties, the proliferation of online communities like the WELL and the readership of *Mother Earth News* supplemented the growing Do-It-Yourself movement. Disgruntled with Reagan’s economic and educational policies, DIY families responded to *A Nation at Risk* by turning to Holt and his brand of home education. Utilizing the newly created social networking possibilities of the Internet, unschoolers created a social support network that comes closest to realizing the revolutionary dreams of Illich and Reimer.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith proposes three kinds of collective goods that can function as social glue to bind something resembling a community: social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion.

The networking savvy and entrepreneurial spirit of the conservative Protestant homeschoolers eventually surpassed these pedagogical rebels in numbers and visibility.<sup>2</sup> Wanting to give their children a religiously based moral education while at the same time endowing them with a competitive edge, these parents pursued academic standards consistent with mainstream American ideals. Over the next several years, the disparate goals of the two movements in home education became increasingly clear: whereas conventional homeschoolers exact educational reform implemented at an individual family level, unschoolers withhold their children from government-sponsored schools as a personal contribution to their movement's vision of true social reform.

### **Unschooling and Mazeway Reformulation**

By their practice of several unconventional childrearing tasks, the unschooling parents who are the subjects of this study are responding to more than their dissatisfaction with the public school system; they are rejecting a mainstream parenting culture while maintaining cognitive congruency with it. Their alternative childrearing tasks and the respect and ultimate authority they gift to their children contradict the cultural consensus unschoolers share with conventional parents, indicating that unschooling parents are participants in a movement that severs ties with previous generations, even their own parents, in order to reformulate childrearing and education.

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<sup>2</sup> Just as entrepreneurship played a mutually supportive role in the proliferation of the contemporary homeschooling movement, it is also a way for some choosing an out-of-the-mainstream lifestyle to make ends meet while filling a niche for providing products and services to other alternative seekers. The Internet's realized potential for the inexpensive, instantaneous dissemination of information propagates such ventures. For example, Do Life Right, Inc. maintains its website "to help inspire people to be the best they could be through healthy living and mindful parenting,"<sup>2</sup> providing links to online resources for "healthy living" and "unschooling" as well as offering individual e-mail counseling to "people striving to live a vegan lifestyle and/or an Unschooling lifestyle." Do Life Right, Inc. was created in 2005 and incorporated in October 2006 with the mission statement: "Empowering all people to reach their full potential in life" (Online document at [www.doliferight.com/blog/about](http://www.doliferight.com/blog/about); accessed August 31, 2009). It is clear from this company's mission statement and website content that "doing life right," that is, living healthily and parenting mindfully, entails mainly eating vegan and unschooling.

Perhaps ironically, the movement simultaneously returns to the pre-industrial past for their model of integrating children into family and community life.

Stevens argues that “people who build social movements . . . are appropriately thought of as entrepreneurs. They see trouble in their surrounding culture and cannily find ways to define them in novel and compelling ways” (2001:5). Wallace (1956) explained this resynthesis in the face of insurmountable stress as mazeway reformulation. In the case of unschooling, Holt and other social reformers led others to add new elements to their mazeways, resulting in a revitalization or reactive movement in which liberal progressive parents chose to reject the childrearing practices of mainstream culture, including the edict of compulsory public school attendance. At about the same time, futurist Alvin Toffler wrote of many such cultural innovators:

The techno-societies, far from being drab and homogenized, are honeycombed with . . . colorful groupings—thesosophists and flying-saucer fans, skin divers and sky divers, homosexuals, computerniks, vegetarians, body builders, and Black Muslims. . . . The same destandardizing forces that make for great individual choice with respect to products and cultural wares are also destandardizing our social structures. This is why, seemingly overnight, new sub-cults, like the Hippies, burst into being. We are, in fact, living through a “sub-cult” explosion (1970:285).

During the late 1960s these sub-cults became what Roszak (1969) called the new “counter-culture.” From Illich, Reimer, Gatto, and Holt, unschoolers glean that school is overpriced, fails at authentic education, damages intellectual potential, and extinguishes the innate curiosity of children. They continue to react, making the same “*deliberate, organized, conscious efforts*” described by Wallace “to construct a more satisfying culture” (1956:265).

Although perceived as cultural innovation, unschooling is also a revitalization of past educational forms. In pre-industrial societies such as the Yanomamo and the !Kung, the most significant learning environment to which children are exposed is created by parents, extended family, or community members (Chagnon 1983; Shostak 2000). Native American children have

traditionally learned from elders (Knowles et al. 1992). Knowles et al. explain, “In such environments, education was viewed as inseparable from life” (Knowles et al. 1992: 201). Before perceptions of home-based and informal education changed with the advent of public schooling in the mid nineteenth century, parents integrated their children into community life in much the same way as unschoolers accommodate their children’s education into the household economy. The “alternative” childrearing tasks and educative roles performed by unschooling parents are those commonly associated with pre-industrial configurations of family and community life. This revitalization movement’s reliance on the tools of the current technological age for the networking and mutual support necessary for re-establishing community and returning to the pre-industrial incorporation of children into adult life is perhaps ironic.

As with any movement, there are various levels of participation, ranging from parents who incorporate principles of consensual living (and learning) into their household life to families residing in intentional communities. This research also demonstrates that members of counter-cultural movements may retain the cognitive organization as their mainstream counterparts. Cognitive dissonance and the resultant conscious departure from a dominant childrearing philosophy can occur despite a cultural consensus in childrearing tasks, i.e., performing alternative childrearing tasks does not necessarily imply that unschoolers are operating with a separate set of cultural parameters.

### **Significance**

The disparate reasons to homeschool reflect numerous perceived failings in the public educational system and parental responsibility. The informal learning showcased by this work contributes to foundational studies in education by emphasizing education as a primary vehicle for cultural transmission, while the tensions within the extended family created by the child centeredness of unschooling households raise implications for family studies. The research also

investigates a modern domestic revolution that situates the locus of familial control and accountability in the home. This research has the potential of broadening the understanding of the relationship between cultural transmission and educational space by focusing on a public school alternative that has been under-represented in educational studies in the U.S. Examining the cultural dimensions of parental educational involvement also allows for the identification of outstanding issues in the current reform agenda and has implications for the improvement of both alternative and traditional education. Finally, this research contributes to the anthropological investigation of grassroots social reform movements, as unschoolers' commitment to the return of convivial human relationships makes them not simply antagonists of institutionalized education but soft-spoken constituents of a complex movement with multiple influences that transcend educational reform by moving towards goals of socioeconomic revolution.

### **Contributions to Prior Perspectives on Informal Learning**

This study is the first examination of unschooling (and possibly other educational options) within the cultural domain of childrearing practices. Answering Varenne's (2008) call for anthropological inquiry into education that escapes formal schooling, this research joins previous anthropological and psychological examinations of intent-participation and "informal," "observational," or "practical" learning that challenge the pre-eminence of institutional schooling (cf. Pettitt 1946; Fortes 1970; Mead 1970; Scribner and Cole 1973; Lave 1982; Philips 1983; Strauss 1983; Fine et al. 2000; Kalmar 2001; Gundaker 2007; Paradise and Rogoff 2009). This project can also be placed alongside Pitman and Smith's twenty-three-year-old systematic analysis of homeschooling in an intentional New Age community. Although an online community represents greater geographic diversity among participants, respondents proved just as likely to advocate "peace, bioregionalism, decentralization, home birth, alternative medical care, sustainable agriculture, land trusts, spirituality, Green politics, and a commitment to well-

being on both the personal and planetary levels” (1987:282). Apparently aware of the public school system’s “collusion of illusions” recognized by Spindler (2002) as inimical to reform, the unschoolers interviewed for this study explicitly reject the competitive pattern governing American schooling observed by Varenne and McDermott (1998) and establish the possibility of improving the education of their own children, if not the educational system in the U.S., without revering the political and institutional foundations supporting the construction of traditional scholastic success and failure.<sup>3</sup>

The project’s findings should also prove illuminative to non-anthropological examinations of contemporary homeschoolers. Unschoolers, who still list Holt along with Gatto and Llewellyn as a major source of inspiration, represent a subset of parents motivated by concerns other than religious instruction—“pedagogues” to Van Galen (1986; 1988; 1991), “inclusives” to Stevens (2001), and “open-communion” homeschoolers to Gaither (2008). These are the same families whom Knowles et al. (1992) placed on the liberal left end of the spectrum among those who regard the term “home schooling” as a misnomer and may prefer “home education” to more accurately represent their children’s learning activities. The emphasis placed on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation seems to identify unschooling as a childrearing practice; indeed, Alfie

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<sup>3</sup> The struggle to achieve both equity and equality in the public education system in the U.S. has resulted in several federal educational improvement initiatives, beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 and including No Child Left Behind (2001) and, most recently, Race to the Top. Parental responses to the accountability movement include concerns about “teaching to the test,” the questionable safety of the school environment, the omnipresent reduction in funding for instruction in creative and performing arts, and whether or not the achievement gap is actually closing. Despite the perception that home education is antithetical to schooling in a democracy, unschoolers, who have always valued common spaces and free, democratic learning, generally do not support privatization of education in its many forms. See Swidler (2010) for a discussion of how commonalities between unschoolers and progressive public educators have the collaborative potential to effectuate genuine educational change. She claims that unschoolers mostly operate “under the radar,” and that the public school system would benefit from their educational philosophy once they were no longer suspected of trying to destroy it. This research is hopefully a step towards increasing mainstream awareness of unschoolers’ pedagogical values without undermining the delicate legislative climate in which they are able to apply those values.

Kohn's anti-praise dictum is a favorite among unschooling parents and is predictive of most other alternative childrearing tasks.

Pitman (1987) was slightly more specific with her characterization of homeschooling parents, dividing them into three broad, motivation-based categories ("religious, progressive and academic, or, alternatively, Fundamental Christians, New Agers, and the "Harvard-bounds").<sup>4</sup> Mayberry (1988) extended her general categories of home educators to four: religious families and New Age families (both of whom object to the content of the public school curriculum); and academic and socio-relational families, who believe parents are best equipped to provide children with high academic standards, individualized instruction, and safe, nurturing learning environments. The current project corroborates her claim that home educators maintain a "peripheral" relationship to mainstream society and reject contemporary social institutions in their responses to modernity and secularization.

The personal sacrifices of parents on behalf of their homeschooled children, previously noted by Ray and Wartes (1991) and Stevens (2001) are readily apparent in advice offered to fellow unschoolers regarding simplified household economics. The desire to maximize family time as reflected in unschooler's responses was reported nearly thirty years ago by Gustavsen (1981), who cited hopes of closer parent-child relationships as one of the top reasons for homeschooling among the families surveyed. "Alternative" America, with its rules and resources held over from the 1960s and 1970s from which unschoolers continue to draw their brand of home education, is the same "hotly idealistic and quietly optimistic place"—"short on cash, physical plants, and new blood" as Stevens observed (2001).

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 1, especially footnotes 5 and 8.

Gaither's historical profile of unschoolers, decidedly non-confrontational compared to the evangelical Protestants who later commandeered the movement, is consistent with the sentiments expressed for the current project indicating enjoyment of the few remaining "vagaries of unregulated practice" (2008:183) that still exist in some states. Judging from shared accounts of encounters with child protective services, unschoolers still prefer to remain as unnoticed as they did in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and they still benefit from a non-confrontational stance with state agencies, as evidenced by the divergent experiences of one unschooling member of the Mothering unschooling sub-forum and her conventionally schooling friend. Because of the ostensible absence of a discernible curriculum that approximate the academic standards of the public school system, unschoolers are potentially vulnerable to reports made to state protective services for perceived educational neglect. The fact that many such reports originate from family members may explain why unschoolers derive most of their support from anonymous, like-minded parents online; such a stance is similar to parents of children with special needs studied by Mickelson (1997).

### **Methodological and Theoretical Contributions**

In any research, the proper interaction of the methods and the data can be the difference between distinction and distortion. This particular project demonstrates the necessity for multiple data sources, as qualitative and cognitive methods by themselves are not sufficient. Virtual ethnography also suffers from an inherent lack of "thick description" made possible only by direct observation and face-to-face interaction. Cultural domain analysis begins with properly conducted participant observation and enables the discovery of systematic patterning that might otherwise be impossible to detect. On the other hand, consensus analysis by itself might mislead to the erroneous conclusion that unschoolers were not so different from homeschoolers.

Conducted in the virtual spaces of parenting discussion forums, this research also demonstrates what can be accomplished ethnographically in cyberspace, a field “site” that is especially conducive to data collection techniques akin to participant observation and other methods normally reserved for face-to-face interviewing typical of anthropological inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Employing innovative online adaptations of systematic data collection instruments, absent from the methodological toolkit of educational anthropology, this study contributes to anthropological methodologies by serving as an example of how to conduct ethnography in challenging fieldwork scenarios, especially in an electronic age.

Ethnography requires the use of the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results. The results of this research may imply the necessity of rethinking culture and cultural consensus diametrically, calling into question what is shared and what cannot be shared and mirroring the cautions regarding intracultural variation and consensus noted by previous researchers. Subcultural groups can and do share polysemic symbols while deliberately engaging in alternative practices.

### **Future Research**

Many opportunities for further investigation into the unschooling movement became evident during the course of this research. Perhaps most important is the determination of the true relationship between the results of the qualitative analysis of the observational data and the consensus analysis of the proximity data. Future efforts could include face-to-face ethnographic techniques to re-examine the second hypothesis with additional data regarding sex education, evolution, gender roles, patriarchy, and the imposition of adult structure.

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<sup>5</sup> The value of conducting in-person ethnographic techniques should not be underestimated. Such methods can and should be incorporated into future investigations of the unschooling population.

This research presents an ethnography of unschooling from the comparative perspective of parents who have adopted the unschooling family style and those who have not. Knowledge of how unschooled children think and feel about their education would be useful, as would a more in-depth exploration into the means by which unschooled students transition into post-secondary education and employment (e.g., how academic work is documented without an official transcript). Another element missing from the comparison between homeschoolers and unschoolers is their age at commencement and the duration of their home education experiences, which could be measured from the time they are first kept out of school until they leave home. Formerly unschooled adults could also be surveyed regarding their life outcomes.

The diversity within the unschooling movement also remains relatively unexamined. The predominantly white, religiously unaffiliated, unschooling parents responding to the online interview instruments obscure the existence of associations specially dedicated to certain segments of the unschooling population—African Americans, Buddhists, Latter-day Saints, Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, and others—whose motivations and household demographics may diverge from those presented here.

Further investigation might also ascertain the mechanism by which the movement has survived since the early 1970s despite the fact that all but one of the unschooling subjects of this study were first-generation practitioners. The concurrent development of the Internet and its past and present contribution to the movement's need for communication and support might prove furtive in this respect. Social network analysis can and should be used to identify the relationships that now exist among unschoolers, most of whom are only connected electronically.

The possible connection of unschooling to the “Do-It-Yourself” movement also deserves more attention, judging from the not-so-subtle references to unschooling sprinkled in DIY

periodicals. For example, in 1983, notable homeschooling parent David Colfax published an article called “Teaching Your Own” in *Country Journal Magazine*, circulated out of Harrisburg, PA. Gardenscape.com, an information resource for home gardeners and horticultural professionals, lists *Country Journal* under the category “Gardening Publications” and describes it as a magazine focusing on

both the practical aspects and the intangible rewards of living in the country. Gardening, home and landscaping. Do-it-yourself projects. Food for good health. Land, nature and community issues. *Country Journal* chronicles the affairs of contemporary country life and the highly involved people who live it.<sup>6</sup>

Articles highlighting unschoolers, including an interview with John Holt, published in *Mother Earth News* provide additional indications of the connection between liberal pedagogy and the naturalist viewpoint.

### **Conclusion**

In 1980, Toffler foresaw an increased educational role of families and contended that schools should assist homeschoolers, who should not be regarded as “freaks or lawbreakers.” Possibly due to its characterization as an educational reform movement external to the primary structures of institutional education, the homeschooling movement is seen as a rejection by both liberal, secular humanists and, more recently, fundamentalist Christians, who challenge the very premises of the "modern" educational developments which had served to enhance state control over education (Knowles et al. 1992). The negative sentiments surrounding the homeschooling-public schooling debate continues to cause public education policy analysts like Stephen Arons to ask, “Why is it that a million children who are pushouts or dropouts amount to business as usual in the public schools, while one family educating a child at home becomes a major threat to universal public education and the survival of democracy?” (1983:88). This question remains

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<sup>6</sup> [www.gardenscape.com/GSMagsBooks.html](http://www.gardenscape.com/GSMagsBooks.html), accessed August 21, 2009.

unanswered, as the debate continues over whether or not home education and other public schooling alternatives endanger the equitable distribution of educational resources.

Almost two decades ago, Ray and Wartes suggested that “today’s conventional or traditional schools may be able to learn from home schools” (1991:59). They cited John Holt, who asserted that the homeschooling movement is “a laboratory for the intensive and long-range study of children’s learning and of the ways in which friendly and concerned adults can help them learn. It is a research project, done at no cost, of a kind for which neither the public schools nor the government could afford to pay” (1983:393). While educational research concerning homeschooled students has centered mostly on the comparative academic achievement and socialization of homeschooled versus public schooled children, this study provides a glimpse at a relatively unexamined segment of the movement whose student-centered pedagogy and relaxed parenting style may provide further insight into viable educational alternatives for today’s school-aged child. There is perhaps no other group with the potential to help public education while simultaneously hoping for its demise.

The debate concerning the best model of American education continues. It includes parleys between modern-day progressives and a movement for smaller schools, justifications for and against excluding certain students from their mainstream counterparts, satisfaction and disappointment with the quest for equity and quality in education, critiques of the juvenile justice system, and speculations regarding the appropriate quantity of parental involvement. While the fate of the public school is unknown, its present and past provide crucial keys for guiding current inquiry into educational alternatives. Despite the fact that so many perspectives already exist concerning the past and future of alternative education, the field remains an opportunity for expanding the cultural parameters of both schooling and education.

## APPENDIX A

### SCREENPRINTS OF ONLINE INTERVIEW INSTRUMENTS

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Freelist of Childrearing Tasks - Windows Internet Explorer

EW\_MODE=DO NOT USE THIS LINK FOR COLLECTION&sm=OAX3M3rsAqZbLrAAW8oJ9uvT4Mem%2fdwIaEo0t%2fvq9Q%3d

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WEB SEARCH

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What you will be asked to do in the study:  
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to reflect on and describe your involvement in your child's education. This inquiry will be in the form of online "interviews" in which you will be asked to input your responses into text fields on a website.

Time required:  
One to five sessions for a total of 15 to 90 minutes

Risks and Benefits:  
This study will broaden the understanding of parents' educational and childrearing choices. No more than minimal risk is anticipated, and there are no immediate benefits expected.

Compensation:  
There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:  
Your privacy will be protected and any data collected will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your participation will be anonymous as no personal identifiers will be attached to the data.

Voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study:  
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to answer.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:  
Rebecca Zellner Grunzke, M.Ed., doctoral student, Department of Anthropology, 1112 Turlington Hall, PO Box 117305, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Gainesville, FL 32611-7305. Phone: (352) 317-2832. Fax: (352) 392-6929. Email: [rzellner@ufl.edu](mailto:rzellner@ufl.edu) and/or Anita Spring, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, 1112 Turlington Hall, PO Box 117305, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Gainesville, FL 32611-7305. Phone: 352-392-7102 x308. Fax: (352) 392-6929.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:  
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

**\* 1. Agreement:**  
**I have read the procedure described above, and by clicking the button below, I voluntarily agree to participate in the research procedure.**

Continue to the survey.

Done Internet 75%

Figure A-1. Informed consent protocol

The screenshot shows a Windows Internet Explorer window titled "[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Freelist of Childrearing Tasks - Windows Internet Explorer". The URL in the address bar is [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW\\_MODE=DO\\_NOT\\_USE\\_THIS\\_LINK\\_FOR\\_COLLECTION&sm=OAX3M3rsAqZbLIrAf](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW_MODE=DO_NOT_USE_THIS_LINK_FOR_COLLECTION&sm=OAX3M3rsAqZbLIrAf). The browser interface includes a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Favorites, Tools, Help), a toolbar with icons for search, web search, and other functions, and a status bar at the bottom.

The main content area displays a survey page titled "Freelist of Childrearing Tasks" under section "4. Freelist of Childrearing Practices". A progress bar indicates "4 / 6". Below the title, a question asks: "Please think for a moment about your childrearing philosophy. What do you do as a parent that demonstrates this philosophy? What do you do that other parents don't? What do other parents do that you don't? What do you consider to be the "best practices" of parenting?"

A note below the question provides instructions: "**\* 5. In the text field below, please type as many childrearing practices as you can think of. Separate each item on your list by pressing enter/return after each one. When you have finished, please review your list to see if there are any more items that you could add.**"

At the bottom of the page are "Prev" and "Next" navigation buttons. The status bar at the bottom right shows "Done", "Internet", "75%", and a zoom control.

Figure A-2. Freelisting question

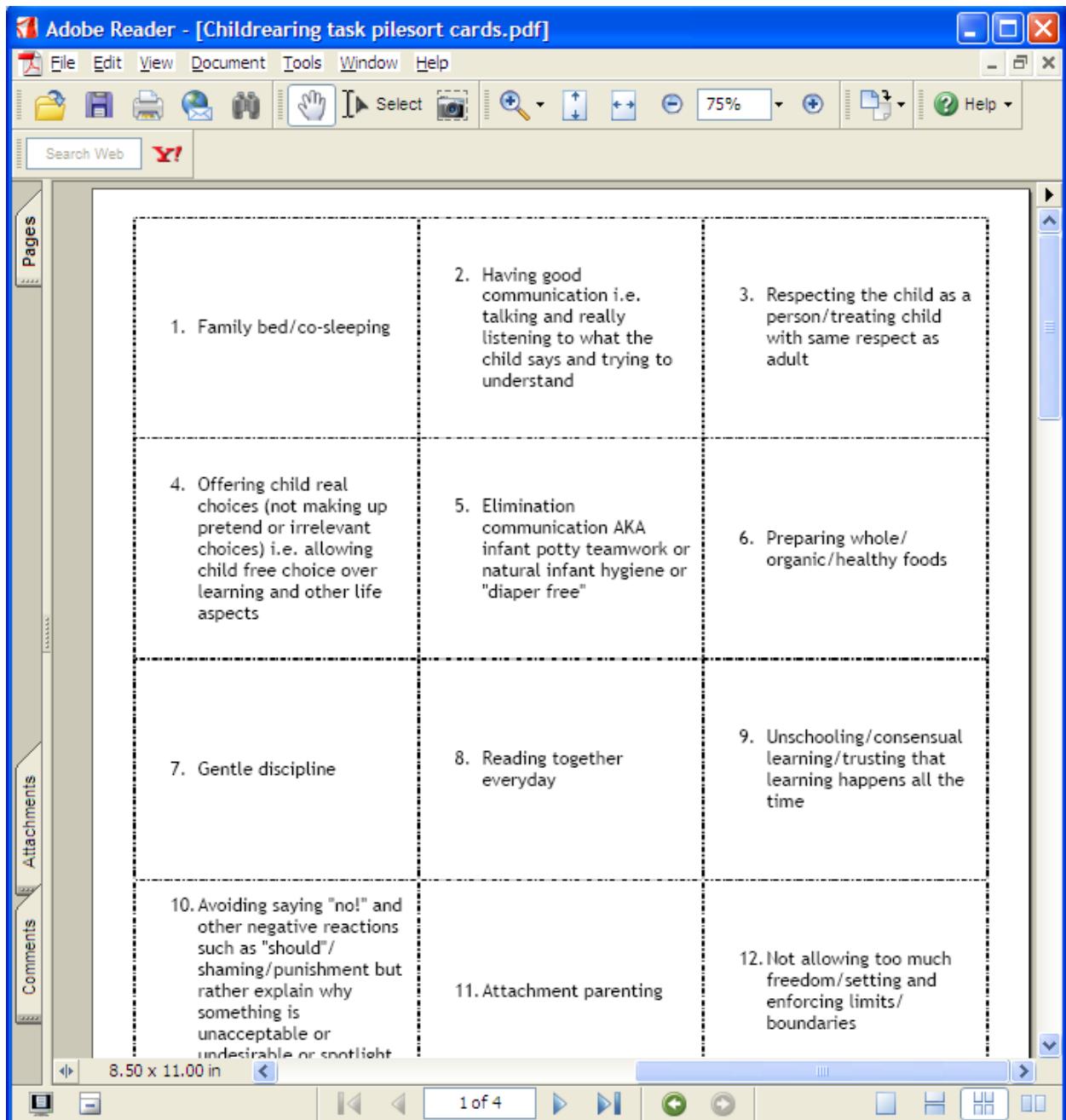


Figure A-3. Pdf file of childrearing task cards

The screenshot shows a survey page titled "Pile sort of Childrearing Tasks" from SurveyMonkey. The page has a green header and a light green body. It contains instructions for sorting cards into piles based on similarity. Below the instructions, there is a list of items labeled A through L, each followed by a text input field for labeling a pile. The items listed are:

- A 41 weird
- B 18, 25, 30 funny
- C etc...
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J
- K
- L

Figure A-4. Pile sort question

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Appendix Attributes of Childrearing Tasks - Windows Internet Explorer

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW\_MODE=DO\_NOT\_USE\_THIS\_LINK\_FOR\_COLLECTION&sm=nofz4O8rU9YkaG8LTQerupi

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### Attributes of Childrearing Practices

50%

For the following list of childrearing tasks, please indicate how strongly each task scores on each of three attributes: (1) how alternative it is, (2) how likely you are to practice it, and (3) how much decision-making it leaves to the child.

In other words, for the first column, please indicate how alternative you think each childrearing task is using a 5-point scale where 5 is very alternative and 1 is not at all alternative. For the second column, please indicate how likely you are to practice each childrearing task, where 5 is very likely to practice it and 1 is not at all likely to practice it. For the last column, please indicate how much decision-making each childrearing task leaves to the child, where 5 is absolute decision-making for the child and 1 is no decision-making for the child.

**1. Using the drop-down menus, please indicate how alternative you think each childrearing task is, how likely you are to practice each childrearing task, and how much decision-making the parent who practices the childrearing task leaves to the child.**

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision-making for the child?
Having frank discussions about possible consequences to instill safety	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
No circumcising/respect for bodily integrity	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Praying as a family/church attendance/teaching biblical traits/religious training	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment but rather explain why something is unacceptable or undesirable (while being flexible on why) or spotlight natural consequences	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Setting a good example with own behavior/education/health habits	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Trusting each other from birth	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Maintaining high expectations	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Having good communication i.e. talking and really listening to what the child says and trying to understand	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>

Done Internet 75%

Figure A-5. Attributes of childrearing tasks (vector questionnaire)

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Pilesort of Childrearing Tasks - Windows Internet Explor... [Close]

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW\_MODE=DO\_NOT\_USE\_THIS\_LINK\_FOR\_COLLECTION&sm=0lMp

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Shop Online \$ Coupons [Search]

**3. Childrearing Tasks Inventory**

3 / 6

**3. Please indicate which of the following parenting/childrearing decisions you have practiced (or will practice in the future). Check as many as apply to you and your child(ren).**

- Visiting library regularly
- No vaccinations
- Staying home with children
- Cloth diapering
- Delayed/selective vaccination
- Consensual living
- Out-of-hospital birth
- No circumcision
- Radical unschooling
- Unmedicated/intervention-free/natural childbirth
- Buying and preparing mostly organic food
- Unschooling
- Treating child(ren) with the same respect as adults
- Gentle discipline
- Exclusive breastfeeding
- Infant swimming
- Tandem nursing
- Family bed/co-sleeping
- Elimination communication/infant potty teamwork/diaper free
- Feeding on demand

Done [Search] Internet [Search] 75% [Search]

Figure A-6. Alternative childrearing tasks inventory

**APPENDIX B**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE: EDUCATIONAL CHOICES AND PARENTING STYLES**

***Informed Consent***

Protocol Title: Childrearing Practices and Educational Choices in the U.S.

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to determine how childrearing practices among home-schooling parents compare to those of parents who send their children to public school.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to reflect on and describe your involvement in your child's education. This inquiry will be in the form of online "interviews" in which you will be asked to input your responses into text fields on a website.

Time required:

One to five sessions for a total of 15 to 90 minutes

Risks and Benefits:

This study will broaden the understanding of parents' educational and childrearing choices. No more than minimal risk is anticipated, and there are no immediate benefits expected.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:

Your privacy will be protected and any data collected will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your participation will be anonymous as no personal identifiers will be attached to the data.

Voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study:

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Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Rebecca Zellner Grunzke, M.Ed., doctoral student, Department of Anthropology, 1112 Turlington Hall, PO Box 117305, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Gainesville, FL 32611-7305. Phone: (352) 317-2832. Fax: (352) 392-6929. Email: [rzellner@ufl.edu](mailto:rzellner@ufl.edu) and/or Anita Spring, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, 1112 Turlington Hall, PO Box 117305, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Gainesville, FL 32611-7305. Phone: 352-392-7102 x308. Fax: (352) 392-6929.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:  
UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

**1. Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above, and by clicking the button below, I voluntarily agree to participate in the research procedure.

- Continue to the survey.

***Educational Choices***

**2. Which of the following best identifies the educational setting you have selected for your child(ren)? (Please check all that apply.)**

- Public school
- Private school
- Charter school
- Homeschool
- Unschool

Other (please specify)

**3. What is the predominant educational philosophy and/or curriculum focus of your child(ren)'s educational setting?**



***Parenting Style***

Think for a moment about yourself as a parent. What do you consider to be key childrearing issues?

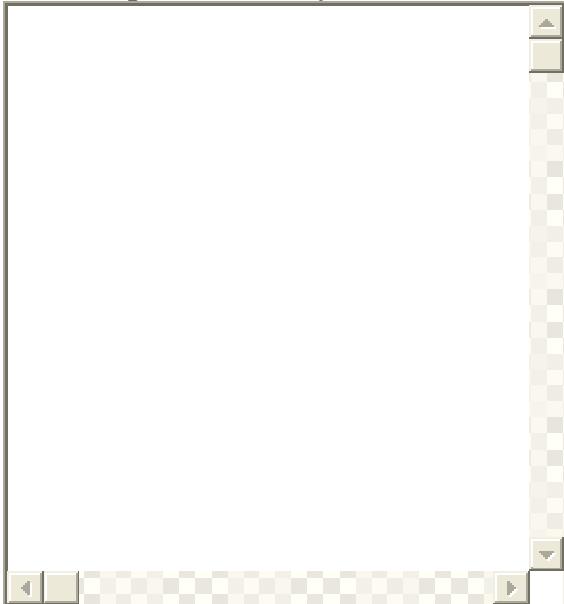
**4. Please describe your parenting style. To whom do you turn as your most dependable source(s) of information regarding childrearing?**



### ***Freelist of Childrearing Practices***

Please think for a moment about your childrearing philosophy. What do you do as a parent that demonstrates this philosophy? What do you do that other parents don't? What do other parents do that you don't? What do you consider to be the "best practices" of parenting?

**5. In the text field below, please type as many childrearing practices as you can think of. Separate each item on your list by pressing enter/return after each one. When you have finished, please review your list to see if there are any more items that you could add.**



### ***Demographic Questions***

The following questions are optional but will help the researcher analyze her data using demographic dimensions.

**6. In which state/U.S. territory do you and your child(ren) reside?**



Other (please specify)

**7. What is your gender?**



**8. What is your racial identity?**



### ***Thank You and Invitation for Continued Participation***

Thank you for participating in this research. In a few weeks, the childrearing practices you have listed will be combined with the lists of other respondents to form a compilation of childrearing practices. The next research task to be completed is called a pilesort, which consists of placing each childrearing practice on its own card. All of the cards are then placed into groups. Many respondents find this data collection method unique and even enjoyable. If you would be willing to receive a .pdf file containing the cards for this pilesort, please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below. Thank you again for your assistance and your continued interest in this research.

Sincerely,  
Rebecca Zellner Grunzke, M.Ed.

**9. Please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below if you would like to continue to participate in this research.**

APPENDIX C  
QUESTIONNAIRE: UNSCHOOLING INTERVIEW

**1. Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above, and by clicking the button below, I voluntarily agree to participate in the research procedure.

- Continue to the survey.

***Household Profile***

**2. How many children (age 0–18) are currently in your household?**

***Educational Choices***

**3. Which of the following best describes your child(ren)'s educational model?**

- Public prek–12 school
- Private prek–12 school
- Charter school
- Sudbury school
- Homeschool
- Unschool

***Unschooling Interview***

These questions relate specifically to your decision to unschool.

**4. When did you first hear of unschooling?**

**5. How did you find out about unschooling?**

**6. What/who have you read about unschooling?**


**7. What were the most influential sources that informed your ultimate decision to unschool?**

**8. What else do you remember about deciding to unschool?**

**9. Why is unschooling the best educational model for your child(ren)?**

**10. What does your decision to unschool mean to you and your children?**

**11. What is your relationship to other unschooling parents, e.g., do you belong to/participate in an unschooling community?**

**12. Where does the most support for unschooling exist?**

**13. How would you describe unschooling to someone who had never heard of it?**

**14. Have your children always been unschooled? If not, please describe their previous schooling experiences.**



**15. Following is a list of reasons from which parents responding to the NCES survey could choose as important for homeschooling. Please indicate which, if any, of these reasons pertain to your family's situation. (Check all that apply.)**

- A desire to provide religious or moral instruction
- A concern about environment of other schools (such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure)
- A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools
- A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education
- Child has other special needs
- Child has a physical or mental health problem
- Other (please specify)



**16. Which of these reasons is the most important for unschooling?**

- A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools
- A concern about environment of other schools (such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure)
- A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education
- Child has other special needs
- Child has a physical or mental health problem
- A desire to provide religious or moral instruction
- Other (please specify)



**17. What else should a detailed description of unschooling parents include?**



## ***Parenting Profile***

**18. How old were you when your first child was born?**

**19. Please describe each child's personality, interests, and talents.**

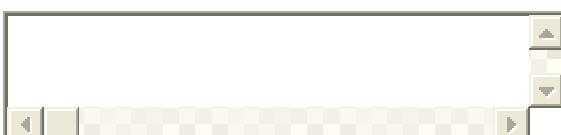

**20. In what activities outside the home do(es) your child(ren) participate?**


**21. Please describe any special needs your child(ren) may have.**


**22. What are your goals as a parent, i.e., what are your hopes/expectations for your children?**

**23. How do you define educational success?**


**24. How does your child define educational success?**


**25. How do you know when educational success has been achieved?**


**26. How does your child know when educational success has been achieved?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**27. What do you envision your child(ren) doing next year? In three years? In five years? In ten years and beyond?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**28. How do outside influences (e.g., extended family, friends, the Internet, television and other media), affect the education of your children?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**29. How would you characterize your residential setting (i.e., metropolitan/urban, suburban, rural, secluded, close-knit/small-town, agricultural, professional, academic, etc.)?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**30. How does this setting affect your child(ren)'s educational experience(s)?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**31. What was/were your major field(s) of study?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**32. How is your time allocated during a typical day?**



A large, empty rectangular input field with a dark grey border. On the right side, there are vertical scroll bars (up and down arrows). At the bottom, there is a horizontal navigation bar consisting of four small square buttons: a left arrow, a light grey square, a right arrow, and a white square.

**33. Please describe your parent(s)' education.**

◀ ▶

◀ ▶

**34. Please describe your parent(s)' approach to discipline.**

◀ ▶

◀ ▶

**35. Please describe your own education from birth to the present.**

◀ ▶

◀ ▶

**36. Please describe your approach to discipline.**

◀ ▶

◀ ▶

**37. What is your relationship status?**

- Single/divorced/widowed
- Married/living with a domestic partner

### ***Partner Profile***

Please answer the following questions concerning your spouse/domestic partner.

**38. What is the racial identity/ethnic affiliation of your partner?**

**39. What is the highest educational level attained by your partner?**

**40. What was/were your partner's major field(s) of study?**

What was/were your partner's major field(s) of study?

**41. What is/are your partner's occupation(s)?**

**42. How many hours each day does your partner spend in the care and/or education of your child(ren)?**

**43. What has your partner said about your child(ren)'s education?**

### ***Partner Profile***

The following questions will help the researcher compare responses to this survey with the demographic dimensions of the 2009 National Center for Education Statistics survey.

**44. Please indicate the age and gender of each child in your household.**

	age	gender
Child #1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child #8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

If you have more than 8 children, please specify the age and gender of each child not included above.

**45. What is your racial identity and/or ethnic affiliation?**

**46. Please describe your church affiliation and/or religious identity.**



**47. What is your gender?**

- Female
- Male

**48. How old are you?**



**49. How many parents are in the household?**

- Two parents
- One parent
- Nonparental guardians
- Other (please specify below)



**50. How many parents participate in the labor force?**

- Two parents, one in labor force
- Two parents, both in labor force
- One parent, in labor force
- No parent in labor force

**51. What is your household income?**

- \$25,000 or less
- \$25,001–50,000
- \$50,001–75,000
- \$75,001 or more

**52. What is the highest level of education attained by each parent/guardian?**

	Parent/guardian 1	Parent/guardian 2
Less than high school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High school diploma or equivalent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some college or vocational/technical training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bachelor's degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Graduate/professional degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

**53. In which state/U.S. territory do you and your child(ren) reside?**



Other (please specify)

***Thank You and Invitation for Continued Participation***

Your participation in this research is truly appreciated. As a parent myself, I know how valuable your time is. I hope that you enjoyed participating in this research. If you would like to continue participating in this research, please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below. Thank you again for your interest and participation in this research.

Sincerely,  
Rebecca Zellner Grunzke, M.Ed.  
University of Florida Anthropology

**54. Please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below if you would like to continue participating in this research.**

**APPENDIX D**  
**FREELIST OF CHILDREARING TASKS SORTED BY FREQUENCY**

	CHILDREARING TASK	FREQUENCY	PERC	AVG RNK	SMITH'S S
1	FAMILY BED/COSLEEPING HAVING GOOD COMMUNICATION I.E. TALKING AND REALLY LISTENING TO WHAT THE CHILD SAYS AND TRYING TO UNDERSTAND RESPECTING THE CHILD AS A PERSON/TREATING CHILD WITH SAME RESPECT AS ADULT	10	32	2.8	0.283
2	OFFERING CHILD REAL CHOICES (NOT MAKING UP PRETEND OR IRRELEVANT CHOICES) I.E. ALLOWING CHILD FREE CHOICE OVER LEARNING AND OTHER LIFE ASPECTS	8	26	6.5	0.185
3	ELIMINATION COMMUNICATION AKA INFANT POTTY TEAMWORK OR NATURAL INFANT HYGIENE OR "DIAPER FREE"	7	23	5	0.17
4	PREPARING WHOLE/ORGANIC/HEALTHY FOODS	7	23	4	0.191
5	GENTLE DISCIPLINE	6	19	6.333	0.137
6	READS TOGETHER EVERYDAY UNSCHOOLING/CONSENSUAL LEARNING/TRUSTING THAT LEARNING	6	19	8.5	0.123
7	HAPPENS ALL THE TIME AVOIDING SAYING "NO!" AND OTHER NEGATIVE REACTIONS SUCH AS "SHOULD"/SHAMING/PUNISHMENT BUT RATHER EXPLAIN WHY SOMETHING IS UNACCEPTABLE OR UNDESIRABLE (WHILE BEING FLEXIBLE ON WHY) OR SPOTLIGHT	5	16	4.6	0.123
8	NATURAL CONSEQUENCES	5	16	8.4	0.092
9	ATTACHMENT PARENTING NOT ALLOWING TOO MUCH FREEDOM/SETTING AND ENFORCING LIMITS/BOUNDARIES	5	16	8.8	0.09
10	PROACTIVE PARENTING NO CIRCUMCISING/RESPECT FOR BODILY INTEGRITY	4	13	3.6	0.141
11	FOCUSING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-DISCIPLINE DIVIDING HOUSEHOLD CARE DUTIES E.G. ASSIGNING CHORES FOR EACH CHILD OR AGE	4	13	5.5	0.087
12	EXTENDED BREASTFEEDING UNMEDICATED AKA INTERVENTION-FREE OR	4	13	5.75	0.095
13	NATURAL PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH DOING HOMEWORK WITH CHILD AND/OR MONITORING HOMEWORK PROGRESS AND CHECKING FOR ACCURACY	4	13	3.5	0.113
14	NO SPANNING OR HITTING OR OTHER PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT	4	13	1.5	0.125
15	NOT FORCING FOOD AT MEALTIMES E.G. NOT MAKING A BIG DEAL ABOUT EATING "VEGGIES" OR OTHER FOOD THEY DISLIKE	4	13	7	0.069
16	CARRYING BABY CONTINUOUSLY IN A SLING FROM BIRTH (BABYWEARING)	4	13	7.25	0.09
17	PRAISING/REWARDING FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR	4	13	10	0.075
18	AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS	4	13	9.25	0.058
19	NO BRIBERY OR MANIPULATING (INCLUDING USING PRAISE OR REWARDS) I.E. ALFIE KOHN'S ANTI-PRAISE THEORY (PUNISHED BY	4	13	8	0.047
20	REWARDS)	4	13	7.5	0.048
21	FACILITATING A CHILD'S PURSUIT OF THEIR INTERESTS I.E. FINDING A WAY TO SAY "YES"/HELPING CHILD MAKE THINGS HAPPEN	4	13	7.5	0.085
22	WITHIN LIMITS OF TIME/MONEY/SAFETY	4	13	7.5	0.085
23		4	13	8.25	0.036
24		4	13	10.75	0.056
25					

	ENCOURAGING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY/EXERCISE/FRESH AIR	3	10	15.333	0.034
26	LIMITING TV TIME	3	10	10	0.051
27	EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING	3	10	12	0.05
28	NO PUNISHING	3	10	6.667	0.058
29	SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE WITH OWN BEHAVIOR/EDUCATION/HEALTH HABITS	3	10	5.667	0.069
30	SPENDING QUALITY RECREATIONAL TIME TOGETHER	3	10	2	0.091
31	TRUSTING EACH OTHER FROM BIRTH LOOKING AFTER CHILD'S PERSONAL HYGIENE AND APPEARANCE E.G. ENSURING BATHING/BRUSHING TEETH AND HAIR/PRESENTABLE CLOTHES	3	10	7.333	0.057
32	NOT YELLING OR USING HARSH/DEMEANING WORDS	3	10	9.333	0.04
33	ENFORCING CONSISTENT BEDTIME	3	10	10.667	0.042
34	UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE DE-EMPHASIZING MATERIALISM I.E. MINIMAL BUYING E.G. NOT WORRYING ABOUT NEW CLOTHES OR THE LATEST TOYS BEING HONEST I.E. ANSWERING QUESTIONS	3	10	9.333	0.033
35	TRUTHFULLY AND NOT LYING TO CHILD CONTINUITY/MAINTAINING STRUCTURE E.G. ADHERING TO MEALS AND ROUTINES FAIRLY	3	10	11.667	0.052
36	STRICTLY PRAYING AS A FAMILY/CHURCH ATTENDANCE/TEACHING BIBLICAL TRAITS/RELIGIOUS TRAINING	3	10	6.333	0.07
37	NO VACCINATING	3	10	11	0.049
38	OCCASSIONAL TIME OUTS CONFERRING WITH MANY DIFFERENT SOURCES (ONLINE DISCUSSIONS/NETWORK OF PARENTS WHO SHARE VALUES/THE CHILD ETC) ABOUT QUESTIONS/CONCERNS/DIFFICULT PARENTING DECISIONS	3	10	7.667	0.034
39	PRACTICING KINDNESS TOWARDS PEOPLE AND ANIMALS	3	10	6	0.04
40	CHILD-LED WEANING	2	6	10.5	0.038
41	DIAPERING	2	6	9.5	0.04
42	CLOTH DIAPERING	2	6	10	0.034
43	INFANT SWIMMING	2	6	14.5	0.026
44	VISITING LIBRARY REGULARLY REFLECTING AND JOURNALING SUCCESSES AND IMPROVEMENT AREAS	2	6	12	0.031
45	COMMUNICATING WITH CHILD'S TEACHER ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES/HERBAL MEDICINE/HOMEOPATHY	2	6	8	0.036
46	FREE ACCESS TO BREAST/NURSING ON DEMAND	2	6	7.5	0.044
47	MAKING CONSCIOUS/STRATEGIC SELECTIONS/PURCHASES OF QUALITY MEDIA (BOOKS/TV/MOVIES)	2	6	9	0.041
48	TRAVELING	2	6	13	0.024
49	TEACHING ABOUT BEING A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD/RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT	2	6	13.5	0.023
50	ALLOWING A FAIR AMOUNT OF (MOSTLY) EDUCATIONAL COMPUTER TIME	2	6	6.5	0.046
51	PROTECTING CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL SAFETY FOSTERING FUN E.G. TAKING CHILD TO PARK/FAIR	2	6	15	0.024
52		2	6	7.5	0.031
53		2	6	10.5	0.027
54		2	6	13	0.023

	FOCUSING SERIOUSLY ON MEETING CHILD'S NEEDS (EVEN WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING OR AGREEING WITH THEM)	2	6	6	0.037
60	MONITORING MOVIES/VIDEO GAMES/WEBSITES AND PROHIBITING THOSE WITH OBJECTIONABLE CONTENT	2	6	17	0.015
61	BUILDING AND PARTICIPATING IN A COMMUNITY OF POSITIVE PEOPLE (FAMILY/FRIENDS/MENTORS)	2	6	6.5	0.045
62	LETTING KIDS TRY OUT A NUMBER OF SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES	2	6	6	0.023
63	DOING PROJECTS BEING PROACTIVE/INVOLVED IN CHILD'S EDUCATION/LIFE/DECISIONS	2	6	10.5	0.032
64	TANDEM NURSING STREWING CHILD'S PATHS/HOME WITH INTERESTING RESOURCES TO CREATE STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT/MENTAL CHALLENGES	2	6	9.5	0.038
65	SUPPLYING "TAXI" SERVICE/FERRYING CHILDREN TO ACTIVITIES FOSTERING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT FOR EACH OTHER	2	6	12.5	0.029
66	FACILITATING CHILD'S CREATIVITY	2	6	11.5	0.014
67	STAYING HOME WITH CHILDREN	2	6	7.5	0.039
68	MAKING EXPECTATIONS CLEAR WORKING TOGETHER TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS IN COOPERATIVE WAYS SO THAT EVERYONE'S NEEDS ARE MET AND/OR EVERYONE IS HAPPY WITH THE OUTCOME	2	6	8.5	0.025
69	TEACHING RESPECT AND PROPER BEHAVIOR	2	6	6	0.039
70	MAINTAINING PATIENCE ENTERTAINING FREQUENTLY WITH GREAT PARTIES TO PROMOTE PLANNING/SOCIAL SKILLS	2	6	3.5	0.048
71	NO "CHORE CHART" PREPARING PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY FOR PARENTHOOD DURING GESTATION I.E.	2	6	6.5	0.041
72	PRENATAL YOGA NOT DICTATING WHAT CHILDREN HAVE TO DO I.E. NOT HANDING OUT ASSIGNMENTS OR CHORES	2	6	14.5	0.023
73	INSISTING ON CHILD'S HONESTY	2	6	10	0.012
74	MAKING MUSIC EDUCATION A PRIORITY/EXPOSING CHILD TO FINE ARTS	2	6	5.5	0.037
75	PHYSICAL AFFECTION/HUGGING ALLOWING A CHILD TIME TO TRANSITION E.G. NOT INSISTING THAT A CHILD WHO STILL WETS THE BED SOMETIMES WEAR PULL-UP	2	6	14	0.026
76	HAVING FRANK DISCUSSIONS ABOUT POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES TO INSTILL SAFETY	2	6	7.5	0.039
77	FOCUSING ON CHILD'S HAPPINESS EXPLAINING THE WORLD/TRYING TO BE AUTHORITATIVE PARENT	2	6	11	0.025
78	PUNISING FOR NOT OBEDIING THE RULES OR POOR MARKS/BEHAVIOR	2	6	2	0.054
79	DISCIPLINING WITH OCCASIONAL SPANKING/"TIME OUTS" TO DEMONSTRATE CONSEQUENCES FOR BAD CHOICES/NOT FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS/DISOBEYING THE RULES/POOR MARKS/MISBEHAVIOR ETC	2	6	5.5	0.042
80	POTTY TRAINING	2	6	12	0.029
81		2	6	3.5	0.029
82		2	6	8	0.034

	FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE E.G. MAKING CHILDREN WORK THINGS OUT ON THEIR OWN				
90	WHEN THEY NEED A PUSH	2	6	5	0.022
91	HOMEBIRTH	1	3	16	0.007
92	MEETING OUR BASIC HUMAN NEEDS	1	3	8	0.017
93	NOT INTERRUPTING CHILD	1	3	11	0.018
94	CONSENSUAL LIVING	1	3	13	0.012
95	NEVER SAYING "DON'T ASK THAT QUESTION" HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP AWARENESS OF THEIR PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL/SOCIAL/INTELLECTUAL NEEDS	1	3	19	0.006
97	NURTURING	1	3	10	0.02
98	EMPATHY	1	3	11	0.019
99	CREATING AN OPTIMAL EMOTIONAL TONE	1	3	7	0.02
100	NO BEDTIMES	1	3	13	0.009
101	MAKING OBSERVATIONS TOGETHER	1	3	8	0.017
102	PROVIDING SOCIAL INTERACTION GIVING CHILD ENOUGH TIME TO	1	3	20	0.007
103	RESPOND/MAKE UP MIND NOT HAVING MUCH CANDY/SWEETS IN THE HOUSE	1	3	13	0.015
104		1	3	11	0.011
105	DELAYED/SELECTIVE VACCINATION	1	3	5	0.027
106	NO RECOGNITION OF 'AUTHORITY'	1	3	15	0.002
107	NOT COMPARING SIBLINGS	1	3	14	0.004
108	ENGAGING IN GUIDED PARTICIPATION	1	3	8	0.018
109	WALKING	1	3	21	0.003
110	HOMESCHOOLING	1	3	10	0.013
111	HAVE A LARGE FAMILY	1	3	14	0.004
112	LAUGHING IF POSSIBLE TO BE DISCIPLINED AND TO WORK HARD AT SOMETHING EVEN IF ITS NOT EASY	1	3	7	0.019
113	SPENDING MUCH TIME AND EFFORT TRYING	1	3	7	0.021
114	TO HELP CHILD ACHIEVE IN SCHOOL BUDGETING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION	1	3	8	0.019
115	SAVINGS TEACHING THE BASICS OF PHONICS AND	1	3	14	0.011
116	DECODING AT HOME TO 3–4 YEAR OLDS	1	3	10	0.015
117	CLEANING FREE OF TOXIC CHEMICALS LOVING/SHOWING RESPECT TO OTHER PARENT	1	3	19	0.002
118		1	3	19	0.003
119	MONITORING MUSIC PRACTICES	1	3	13	0.009
120	FOLLOWING SUZUKI METHOD INVOLVING OUR FAMILY HEAVILY IN	1	3	15	0.006
121	COMMUNITY WORK TEACHING DIVERSITY THROUGH READING AND	1	3	5	0.006
122	SOCIAL EXPERIENCES	1	3	17	0.002
123	TEACHING LOVE	1	3	4	0.023
124	NO RULES ABOUT DESSERT/TV/CLOTHING	1	3	11	0.013
125	NO CURFEWS	1	3	12	0.011
126	STABILITY CAPITALIZING ON TEACHING MOMENTS	1	3	7	0.013
127	THROUGHOUT THE DAY	1	3	2	0.03
128	DANCING/SINGING TOGETHER	1	3	8	0.024
129	COLORING	1	3	9	0.022
130	ALWAYS AVAILABLE	1	3	17	0.009
131	KEEPING A CLEAN/ORGANIZED HOME	1	3	18	0.005

	ALLOWING BABY TO CHOOSE SLEEPING POSITION	1	3	18	0.009
132	DONATING TIME/INTEREST/THINGS TO SCHOOL	1	3	15	0.015
133	KNOWING HER FRIENDS' NAMES	1	3	16	0.014
134	NO COERCION	1	3	12	0.009
135	LETTING GO AND LOVING BEING A PARENT ANSWERING QUESTIONS TRUTHFULLY/BEING HONEST/NO LYING TO CHILD	1	3	19	0.01
136	TEACHING CHILD TO EMBRACE OWN EMOTIONS	1	3	14	0.004
137	KNOWING ALL OF HER FAVORITES	1	3	22	0.006
138	REMEMBERING THAT EACH DAY ONLY HAPPENS ONCE	1	3	24	0.004
139	EXPERIENCING WONDER TRANSPARENCY (BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO CHILD FOR DECISIONS/AUTHORITY EXERCISED ON CHILD'S BEHALF)	1	3	25	0.002
140	NOT HAVING AN ALLOWANCE EXPECTING THE OLDER KIDS TO HELP WITH THE YOUNGER ONES WHEN NEEDED INCORPORATING VARIOUS STYLES	1	3	26	0.001
141	DEPENDING ON THE CHILD NOT TRYING TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS/SAYING "I DON'T KNOW" IF I DON'T INVESTIGATING AFTER SECRETEIVE/DISHONEST BEHAVIOR E.G. DELIBERATELY LOOKING INTO CHILD'S ROOM/READING EMAIL	1	3	16	0.01
142	PUBLIC TRANSPORT (A LOT) STRESSING IMPORTANCE OF BEING ABLE TO TRUST CHILD	1	3	3	0.022
143	SHARING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH CHILD AND ENCOURAGING HER TO DO THE SAME	1	3	5	0.011
144	EXPRESSING LOVE ASKING QUESTIONS	1	3	6	0.005
145	HONORING PROMISES/STATEMENTS	1	3	9	0.027
146	MAINTAINING HIGH EXPECTATIONS CARING WHERE CHILD IS/PREVENTING CHILDREN FROM RUNNING WILD OR LOOSE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD	1	3	9	0.015
147	NO CELL PHONE AT THE AGE OF 10/11 LIMITING SOCIALIZATION TO KIDS OF SAME AGE AND WHOSE PARENTS SHARE SIMILAR VALUES	1	3	10	0.017
148	SMALL INCENTIVES CUDDLE TIME	1	3	11	0.013
149	MODELING POLITENESS FOCUSING ON EARLY CHILDHOOD (BIRTH TO AGE FIVE)	1	3	13	0.009
150	DO NOT FORCE MY CHILDREN TO HUG/KISS FRIENDS OR RELATIVES IF THEY DO NOT WANT TO	1	3	14	0.008
151	NATURAL PARENTING	1	3	3	0.025
152	HELPING CHILD FIND WAYS TO EXPLORE THE WORLD IN SAFE AND RESPECTFUL WAYS	1	3	4	0.022
153	TREATING CHILD'S TIME AS VALUABLE NOT TREATING CHILD IN A WAY THAT WOULD DAMAGE A FRIENDSHIP	1	3	6	0.014
154	PUTTING THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP FIRST (AND FITTING EVERYTHING ELSE AROUND IT)	1	3	7	0.011
155	LIVING BY PRINCIPLES INSTEAD OF RULES	1	3	15	0.002
156		1	3	13	0.006
157		1	3	7	0.016
158		1	3	17	0.024
159		1	3	6	0.012
160		1	3	7	0.008
161		1	3	8	0.004
162		1	3	9	0.009

	ACCEPTING MY KIDS AS THEY ARE INSTEAD OF TRYING TO MOLD THEM OR FILL THEM UP						
169	OR CHANGE THEM	1	3	10	0.006		
170	LETTING GO OF ANY OF MY AIMS OR GOALS AND BEING HAPPY TO FOLLOW MY CHILDREN'S TEACH CHILDREN TO BE PROUD OF THE US BUT THAT ITS NOT THE ONLY COUNTRY	1	3	6	0.018		
171	WORTH EMULATING	1	3	16	0.004		
172	SPARE THE ROD/SPOIL THE CHILD	1	3	9	0.009		
173	RADICAL UNSCHOOLING MAKING SEPARATE MEALS FOR CHILD IF HE DOESN'T LIKE MAIN MEAL	1	3	9	0.006		
174	GETTING CHILDREN TO KEEP THEIR AREAS CLEAN AND NEAT	1	3	10	0.003		
175	NOT ALLOWING CHILDREN TO RIDE BIKES IN THE STREET (OUT OF PARENT'S VIEW)	1	3	5	0.016		
176	SUPERVISING TRIPS TO PLAYGROUND LOOKING AT OWN CHILDHOOD AND TRYING TO BRING THE BEST OF THAT EXPERIENCE TO OUR CHILDREN	1	3	7	0.008		
177	INSTILLING SOCIAL SKILLS E.G. TABLE MANNERS	1	3	8	0.004		
178	SELF EXPRESSION	1	3	5	0.016		
179	180	181	EXERCISING AUTONOMY AS A FAMILY UNIT PROMOTING PEACE AND ORDER BY ACTIVELY FOCUSING ON "MICRO-ROUTINES" ESPECIALLY RELATED TO DAILY TIMES OF TRANSITION (LEAVING THE HOUSE/GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL/COMPLETING HOMEWORK/ETC) FOLLOWING THROUGH ON ROUTINE	1	3	6	0.022
182	EXPECTATIONS AND DISCIPLINE HELPING EACH OTHER TO MEET OUR BASIC HUMAN NEEDS	1	3	8	0.02		
183	PROMOTING SELF-REFLECTION AND A CONCERN FOR OTHERS	1	3	9	0.019		
184	SUPPLEMENTING WITH VITAMIN(S) AND FISH OIL DAILY	1	3	9	0.015		
185	SETTING "POLICIES" WHEN CHILDREN ARE YOUNG RATHER THAN CHANGING IT UP LATER	1	3	13	0.012		
186	ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERING TO HELP THOSE LESS FORTUNATE	1	3	14	0.01		
187	TAKING UP COLLECTIONS AT CELEBRATIONS INSTEAD OF RECEIVING GIFTS	1	3	15	0.008		
188	HAVING CHILDREN WRITE/DRAW THANK-YOU NOTES TO PROMOTE GRATITUDE	1	3	16	0.007		
189	THINKING FOR THE LONG TERM	1	3	17	0.005		
190	191	192	NOT STRESSING ABOUT A CLEAN HOUSE	1	3	18	0.003
193	INSTILLING A LOVE OF LEARNING	1	3	19	0.002		
194	195	196	EXPLORING THE WORLD AROUND US ENCOURAGING INTERACTION BETWEEN OUR CHILDREN TO HELP/TEACH EACH OTHER AND PLAY TOGETHER	1	3	1	0.032
197	INCLUDING CHILDREN IN MAKING RULES OF THE HOUSE AND DISCIPLINE	1	3	2	0.028		
198	199	200	SETTING AN EXAMPLE OF TOLERANCE OFFERING CHOICES TRYING TO SPEND ONE-ON-ONE TIME WITH EACH CHILD FOLLOWING THEIR LEAD HELPING CHILDREN WHEN THEY NEED IT	1	3	4	0.02
				1	3	5	0.016
				1	3	6	0.012
				1	3	4	0.016
				1	3	5	0.011
				1	3	6	0.022
				1	3	1	0.032

**APPENDIX E**  
**PILE SORT CARDS**

1. Family bed/cosleeping	2. Having good communication i.e. talking and really listening to what the child says and trying to understand	3. Respecting the child as a person/treating child with same respect as adult
4. Offering child real choices (not making up pretend or irrelevant choices) i.e. allowing child free choice over learning and other life aspects	5. Elimination communication a.k.a. infant potty teamwork or natural infant hygiene or "diaper free"	6. Preparing whole/organic/healthy foods
7. Gentle discipline	8. Reading together everyday	9. Unschooling/consensual learning/trusting that learning happens all the time
10. Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment but rather explain why something is unacceptable or undesirable (while being flexible on why) or spotlight natural	11. Attachment parenting	12. Not allowing too much freedom/setting and enforcing limits/boundaries

13. Proactive parenting	14. No circumcising/ respect for bodily integrity	15. Focusing on the development of self-discipline
16. Dividing household care duties e.g. assigning chores for each child or age	17. Extended breastfeeding	18. Unmedicated a.k.a. intervention-free or natural pregnancy and childbirth
19. Doing homework with child and/or monitoring homework progress and checking for accuracy	20. No spanking or hitting or other physical punishment	21. Not forcing food at mealtimes e.g. not making a big deal about eating "veggies" or other food they dislike
22. Carrying baby continuously in a sling from birth (babysizeing)	23. Praising/rewarding for good behavior and accomplishments	24. No bribery or manipulating (including using praise or rewards) i.e. Alfie Kohn's anti-praise theory ( <i>Punished by Rewards</i> )

25. Facilitating a child's pursuit of their interests i.e. finding a way to say "yes"/helping child make things happen within limits of time/money/safety	26. Encouraging physical activity/exercise/fresh air	27. Limiting tv time
28. Exclusive breastfeeding	29. No punishing	30. Setting a good example with own behavior/education/ health habits
31. Spending quality recreational time together	32. Trusting each other from birth	33. Looking after child's personal hygiene and appearance e.g. ensuring bathing/brushing teeth and hair/presentable clothes
34. Not yelling or using harsh/demeaning words	35. Enforcing consistent bedtime	36. Unconditional love and acceptance

<p>37. De-emphasizing materialism i.e. minimal buying e.g. not worrying about new clothes or the latest toys</p>	<p>38. Being honest i.e. answering questions truthfully and not lying to child</p>	<p>39. Continuity/maintaining structure e.g. adhering to meals and routines fairly strictly</p>
<p>40. Praying as a family/church attendance/teaching biblical traits/religious training</p>	<p>41. No vaccinating</p>	<p>42. Occasional time-outs</p>
<p>43. Conferring with many different sources (online discussions/network of parents who share values/the child etc) about questions/concerns/difficult parenting decisions</p>	<p>44. Practicing kindness towards people and animals</p>	<p>45. Monitoring movies/video games/websites and prohibiting those with objectionable content</p>
<p>46. Being proactive/involved in child's education/life/decisions</p>	<p>47. Teaching respect and proper behavior</p>	<p>48. Not dictating what children have to do i.e., not handing out assignments or chores</p>

49. Having frank discussions about possible consequences to instill safety	50. Focusing on child's happiness	51. Explaining the world/trying to be authoritative parent
52. Punishing for not obeying the rules or poor marks/behavior	53. No rules about dessert/tv/clothing/bedtime	54. Maintaining high expectations
55. Limiting socialization to kids of same age and/or whose parents share similar values	56. Spare the rod/spoil the child	57. Following through on routine expectations and discipline
58. Instilling a love of learning	59. Including children in making rules of the house and discipline	60. Visiting library regularly

**APPENDIX F**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE: PILESORT OF CHILDRARING TASKS**

**1. Consent Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above, and by clicking the button below, I voluntarily agree to participate in the research procedure.

Continue to the survey.

**2. Pilesort of Childrearing Practices**

If you haven't done so already, please place the cards into piles according to how similar they are. It's ok to put a strange item in a pile by itself, and you can make as many or as few piles as you wish, as long as you don't put everything into one pile or every card into a pile by itself.

When you have your piles, please think of a "label" for each pile that indicates why you grouped those particular items together. Your label can be as short or long as you like.

In the text fields below, please identify the piles you made by typing the numbers of the items for each pile separated by commas. At the end of each row, please type your descriptive label for the pile. For example, if your first pile contains only item 41, a task you consider "serious," and your second pile has items 18, 25, and 30 in it, tasks you consider "funny," you would type "41 serious" in field A and "18, 25, 30 funny" in field B. Your answer might look like this:

A 41 weird  
B 18, 25, 30 funny  
C etc . . .

A	<input type="text"/>
B	<input type="text"/>
C	<input type="text"/>
D	<input type="text"/>
E	<input type="text"/>
F	<input type="text"/>
G	<input type="text"/>
H	<input type="text"/>
I	<input type="text"/>
J	<input type="text"/>
K	<input type="text"/>
L	<input type="text"/>

M	
N	
O	
P	
Q	
R	
S	
T	
U	
V	
W	
X	
Y	
Z	
AA	
BB	
CC	
DD	
EE	
FF	
GG	
HH	
II	
JJ	
KK	
LL	
MM	
NN	

OO	<input type="text"/>
PP	<input type="text"/>
QQ	<input type="text"/>
RR	<input type="text"/>
SS	<input type="text"/>
TT	<input type="text"/>
UU	<input type="text"/>
VV	<input type="text"/>
WW	<input type="text"/>
XX	<input type="text"/>
YY	<input type="text"/>
ZZ	<input type="text"/>

### 3. Educational Choices

Which of the following best identifies the educational setting you have selected for your child(ren)? (Please check all that apply.)

- Public school
- Private school
- Charter school
- Homeschool
- Unschool

Other (please specify)

### Demographic Questions

The following questions are optional but will help the researcher analyze her data using demographic dimensions.

#### 4. In which state/U.S. territory do you and your child(ren) reside?



In which state/U.S. territory do you and your child(ren) reside?

Other (please specify)

5. What is your gender?

What is your gender?

6. What is your racial identity?

What is your racial identity?

#### Thank You and Invitation for Continued Participation

Your participation in this research is truly appreciated. As a parent myself, I know how valuable your time is. The data you entered will be combined with that of other respondents to determine their similarity. The next step is a questionnaire to test assumptions about why different people grouped items the way they did. Many respondents find this data collection method unique and even enjoyable. If you would be willing to receive a link to the next questionnaire, please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below. Thank you again for your assistance and your continued interest in this research.

Sincerely,  
Rebecca Zellner Grunzke, M.Ed.

7. Please provide your e-mail address in the textbox below if you would like to participate in the next questionnaire for this research.

**APPENDIX G**  
**ABBREVIATED LABELS FOR CHILDREARING TASKS**

ATTACH	Attachment parenting
AUTHR	Explaining the world/trying to be authoritative parent
BEDTM	Enforcing consistent bedtime
BEHV	Teaching respect and proper behavior
BND	Not allowing too much freedom/setting and enforcing limits/boundaries
CHO	Offering child real choices (not making up pretend or irrelevant choices) i.e. allowing child free choice over learning and other life aspects
CHOR	Dividing household care duties e.g. assigning chores for each child or age
CNFR	Conferring with many different sources (online discussions/network of parents who share values/the child etc) about questions/concerns/difficult parenting decisions
DISC	Following through on routine expectations and discipline
EXCBRST	Exclusive breastfeeding
EXMPL	Setting a good example with own behavior/education/health habits
EXTBRST	Extended breastfeeding
FACIL	Facilitating a child's pursuit of their interests i.e. finding a way to say "yes"/helping child make things happen within limits of time/money/safety
FMBED	Family bed/cosleeping
GDIS	Gentle discipline
HAPP	Focusing on child's happiness
HIEXP	Maintaining high expectations

HMWRK	Doing homework with child and/or monitoring homework progress and checking for accuracy
HNSTY	Being honest i.e. answering questions truthfully and not lying to child
HYG	Looking after child's personal hygiene and appearance e.g. ensuring bathing/brushing teeth and hair/presentable clothes
INVOLV	Being proactive/involved in child's education/life/decisions
IPT	Elimination communication aka infant potty teamwork or natural infant hygiene or "diaper free"
KND	Practicing kindness towards people and animals
LEARN	Instilling a love of learning
LIBRY	Visiting library regularly
LIS	Having good communication i.e. talking and really listening to what the child says and trying to understand
LMTTV	Limiting tv time
LUV	Unconditional love and acceptance
MINBUY	De-emphasizing materialism i.e. minimal buying e.g. not worrying about new clothes or the latest toys
MONMED	Monitoring movies/video games/websites and prohibiting those with objectionable content
NATBRTH	Unmedicated a.k.a. intervention-free or natural pregnancy and childbirth
NCHOR	Not dictating what children have to do i.e. not handing out assignments or chores
NCIRC	No circumcising/respect for bodily integrity
NFRCE	Not forcing food at mealtimes e.g. not making a big deal about eating "veggies or other food they dislike
NHIT	No spanking or hitting or other physical punishment

NNEG	Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment but rather explain why something is unacceptable or undesirable (while being flexible on why) or spotlight natural consequences
NPRAISE	No bribery or manipulating (including using praise or rewards) i.e. Alfie Kohn's anti-praise theory ( <i>Punished by Rewards</i> )
NPUN	No punishing
NRULZ	No rules about dessert/tv/clothing/bedtime
NVAC	No vaccinating
NYELL	Not yelling or using harsh/demeaning words
ORG	Preparing whole/organic/healthy foods
PHYSACT	Encouraging physical activity/exercise/fresh air
PNSH	Punishing for not obeying the rules or poor marks/behavior
PRO	Proactive parenting
QUALTM	Spending quality recreational time together
READ	Reading together everyday
RELIG	Praying as a family/church attendance/teaching biblical traits/religious training
RES	Respecting the child as a person/treating child with same respect as adult
ROUTINE	Continuity/maintaining structure e.g. adhering to meals and routines fairly strictly
RULZ	Including children in making rules of the house and discipline
RWRD	Praising/rewarding for good behavior and accomplishments
SAFE	Having frank discussions about possible consequences to instill safety
SELFDIS	Focusing on the development of self-discipline

SMEAG	Limiting socialization to kids of same age and/or whose parents share similar values
SPANK	Spare the rod/spoil the child
TMOUT	Occasional time outs
TRUST	Trusting each other from birth
UNSC	Unschooling/consensual learning/trusting that learning happens all the time
WEAR	Carrying baby continuously in a sling from birth (babywearing)

**APPENDIX H**  
**VECTOR QUESTIONNAIRE: ATTRIBUTES OF CHILDREARING TASKS**

For the following list of childrearing tasks, please indicate how strongly each task scores on each of three attributes: (1) how alternative it is, (2) how likely you are to practice it, and (3) how much decision-making it leaves to the child.

In other words, for the first column, please indicate how alternative you think each childrearing task is using a 5-point scale where 5 is very alternative and 1 is not at all alternative. For the second column, please indicate how likely you are to practice each childrearing task, where 5 is very likely to practice it and 1 is not at all likely to practice it. For the last column, please indicate how much decision-making each childrearing task leaves to the child, where 5 is absolute decision-making for the child and 1 is no decision-making for the child.

**Using the drop-down menus, please indicate how alternative you think each childrearing task is, how likely you are to practice each childrearing task, and how much decision-making the parent who practices the childrearing task leaves to the child.**

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision- making for the child?
<b>Being proactive/involved in child's education/life/decisions</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Enforcing consistent bedtime</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Visiting library regularly</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Unmedicated aka intervention-free or natural pregnancy and childbirth</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Conferring with many different sources (online discussions/network of parents who share values/the child etc) about questions/concerns/difficult parenting decisions</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Following through on routine expectations and discipline</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Focusing on child's happiness</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Dividing household care duties e.g. assigning chores for each child or age</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision-making for the child?
<b>De-emphasizing materialism i.e. minimal buying e.g. not worrying about new clothes or the latest toys</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment but rather explain why something is unacceptable or undesirable (while being flexible on why) or spotlight natural consequences</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Occasional time outs</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Unconditional love and acceptance</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Monitoring movies/video games/websites and prohibiting those with objectionable content</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Explaining the world/trying to be authoritative parent</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Spare the rod/spoil the child</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Including children in making rules of the house and discipline</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Doing homework with child and/or monitoring homework progress and checking for accuracy</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Maintaining high expectations</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Being honest i.e. answering questions truthfully and not lying to child</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Extended breastfeeding</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Attachment parenting</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision-making for the child?
Encouraging physical activity/exercise/fresh air	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Unschooling/consensual learning/trusting that learning happens all the time	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
No bribery or manipulating (including using praise or rewards) i.e. Alfie Kohn's anti-praise theory ( <i>Punished by Rewards</i> )	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Exclusive breastfeeding	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Limiting tv time	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Teaching respect and proper behavior	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Having frank discussions about possible consequences to instill safety	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Not dictating what children have to do i.e. not handing out assignments or chores	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
No punishing	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
No rules about dessert/tv/clothing/bedtime	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Having good communication i.e. talking and really listening to what the child says and trying to understand	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Practicing kindness towards people and animals	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Looking after child's personal hygiene and appearance e.g. ensuring bathing/brushing teeth and hair/presentable clothes	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Trusting each other from birth	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision-making for the child?
Praising/rewarding for good behavior and accomplishments	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Offering child real choices (not making up pretend or irrelevant choices) i.e. allowing child free choice over learning and other life aspects	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Gentle discipline	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Not yelling or using harsh/demeaning words	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
No circumcising/respect for bodily integrity	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Proactive parenting	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Spending quality recreational time together	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Limiting socialization to kids of same age and/or whose parents share similar values	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Punishing for not obeying the rules or poor marks/behavior	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Not forcing food at mealtimes e.g. not making a big deal about eating "veggies or other food they dislike	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Praying as a family/church attendance/teaching biblical traits/religious training	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Focusing on the development of self-discipline	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
Preparing whole/organic/healthy foods	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
No vaccinating	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>

	How alternative?	How likely to practice?	How much decision-making for the child?
<b>Respecting the child as a person/treating child with same respect as adult</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Instilling a love of learning</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Setting a good example with own behavior/education/health habits</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Facilitating a child's pursuit of their interests i.e. finding a way to say "yes"/helping child make things happen within limits of time/money/safety</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Family bed/cosleeping</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Elimination communication aka infant potty teamwork or natural infant hygiene or "diaper free"</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>No spanking or hitting or other physical punishment</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Reading together everyday</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Not allowing too much freedom/setting and enforcing limits/boundaries</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Continuity/maintaining structure e.g. adhering to meals and routines fairly strictly</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>
<b>Carrying baby continuously in a sling from birth (babywearing)</b>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>	<input type="button" value="▼"/>

**APPENDIX I**  
**ALTERNATIVE CHILDREARING TASKS**

<b>Task</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Mean Alternativity Score</b>
Family bed/cosleeping <sup>1</sup>	FMBED	3.81
Having good communication i.e. talking and really listening to what the child says and trying to understand	LIS	3.50
Respecting the child as a person/treating child with same respect as adult	RES	3.50
Offering child real choices (not making up pretend or irrelevant choices) i.e. allowing child free choice over learning and other life aspects	CHO	4.38
Elimination communication aka infant potty teamwork or natural infant hygiene or "diaper free"	IPT	4.56
Unschooling/consensual learning/trusting that learning happens all the time	UNSC	4.69
Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment but rather explain why something is unacceptable or undesirable (while being flexible on why) or spotlight natural consequences	NNEG	4.06
Attachment parenting	ATTACH	4.13
No circumcising/respect for bodily integrity	NCIRC	4.06
Extended breastfeeding	EXTBRS	4.56
Unmedicated aka intervention-free or natural pregnancy and childbirth	NATBRT	3.63
No spanking or hitting or other physical punishment	NHIT	3.69
Not forcing food at mealtimes e.g. not making a big deal about eating "veggies or other food they dislike	NFRCE	3.88
Carrying baby continuously in a sling from birth (babywearing)	WEAR	4.13
No bribery or manipulating (including using praise or rewards) i.e. Alfie Kohn's anti-praise theory ( <i>Punished by Rewards</i> )	NPRAIS	4.31
Exclusive breastfeeding	EXCBRS	3.88
No punishing	NPUN	4.69
Trusting each other from birth	TRUST	3.56
No vaccinating	NVAC	4.63
Not dictating what children have to do i.e. not handing out assignments or chores	NCHOR	4.69
Focusing on child's happiness	HAPP	3.63

<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, the tasks "cosleeping" and "family bed" should have been separate, as the first denotes sleeping in the same room, whereas the second term is used to identify the practice of sleeping in the same bed with infants and children.

No rules about dessert/tv/clothing/bedtime	NRULZ	4.44
Including children in making rules of the house and discipline	RULZ	3.63

## APPENDIX J

### INVENTORY OF ALTERNATIVE CHILDRARING TASKS

Please indicate which of the following parenting/childrearing decisions you have practiced (or will practice in the future). Check as many as apply to you and your child(ren).

- Family bed/co-sleeping
- Really listening to what the child says and trying to understand
- Offering child real choices/allowing child free choice over learning and other life aspects
- No punishing
- Unschooling
- Tandem nursing
- Elimination communication/infant potty teamwork/diaper free
- Including children in making rules of the house and discipline
- Trusting each other from birth
- Unmedicated/intervention-free/natural childbirth
- Anti-praise (Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*)
- Avoiding saying "no!" and other negative reactions such as "should"/shaming/punishment
- Extended breastfeeding
- Focusing on child's happiness
- Not dictating what children have to do i.e., not handing out assignments or chores
- Exclusive breastfeeding
- No vaccinations
- No rules about dessert/tv/clothing/bedtime
- Babywearing
- Treating child(ren) with the same respect as adults
- No hitting/spanking (or other physical punishment)
- Attachment parenting
- No circumcision

## APPENDIX K

### LIST OF TERMINOLOGY

“2012”	The anticipated year of apocalypse determined by the end of the Mayan calendar and coincidental to a predicted catastrophic astronomical event expected to cause global geological disaster, political turmoil, and social upheaval
Anti-praise	A child discipline practice valuing intrinsic over extrinsic rewards patterned after Alfie Kohn’s <i>Punished by Rewards</i> in which parents refrain from establishing a token economy to reward good behavior and/or academic achievement
Attachment parenting	Adherence to certain childrearing practices intended to strengthen the bond between parent and child, such as extended breastfeeding, cosleeping, and babywearing; see also <i>continuum concept</i>
Babywearing	The practice of carrying an infant in a sling, wrap, or other carrier worn on the body instead of in a stroller
Consensual living	Household mantra based on mutual respect for other members’ preferences, regardless of age
Continuum concept	A theory of human development articulated by Jean Liedloff based on the childcare habits and emotional security of the Yequana Indians of Venezuela, who maintain physical proximity with their children for the first six years of life; see also <i>attachment parenting</i>
Conventional	Mainstream or practiced by the majority of a given population; that which is customary or based on popularly held views or opinions
Cosleeping	Sleeping with an infant or young child in the same room, as opposed to separate rooms
Deschooling	1. The process or period of “decompression” or “rehabilitation” observed by unschooled children and their parents following enrollment in formalized education; 2. The deinstitutionalization of education proposed by Ivan Illich
Elimination communication	A potty training alternative using timing, signals, and intuition to encourage a baby to eliminate in a receptacle instead of a diaper; also known as natural infant hygiene, infant potty teamwork, trickle treat, and diaper-free
Exclusive breastfeeding	Breastfeeding without supplementing with formula or the early introduction of solid foods

Extended breastfeeding	Breastfeeding longer than the year recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, usually into the toddler years
Family bed	A bed shared by one or both parents and an infant and/or young child
Gentle discipline	Behavior modification emphasizing learning by example and a complete lack of physical or emotional violence
Home education	Formal or informal learning taking place in the home as opposed to a school or other institution external to the family
Home schooling	A type of home education containing formalized educational elements resembling school in curriculum and/or pedagogy
Intactivism	Advocacy for leaving a male infant uncircumcised or “intact”
Lactivism	Advocacy for breastfeeding and the rights of breastfeeding mothers
Radical unschooling	A form of unschooling in which the use of conventional educational elements, such as textbooks and worksheets, is avoided
Tandem nursing	The practice of simultaneously breastfeeding an infant and an older child who has not yet been weaned
Unassisted childbirth (UC)	Planned labor and delivery without the aid of a licensed attendant
Unschooling	a form of radically child-centered home education in which the child decides when and what to learn

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Zellner Grunzke graduated from Brigham Young University in 1993 with a Bachelor of Arts in Near Eastern studies and sociocultural anthropology. She first entered the graduate program in cultural anthropology at the University of Florida in 1994 and left after two years of coursework to accept a position as a course developer and editor with a corporate training and development firm. The following year, after several assignments as a substitute teacher, she accepted an invitation to teach full-time at the Alachua Regional Juvenile Detention Center. Her public secondary education experience continued at the Horizon Center, the district's disciplinary alternative school, where she taught social studies, math, science, language arts, and life management skills. Profoundly affected by the plight of "at-risk" students, she returned to graduate school in August of 2003 to pursue her Master of Education in social foundations of education, which she obtained in August of 2005.