ABSTRACT

KENNEDY, EARL A. Homeschooling as Reflexive Modernity. (Under the direction of Martha Crowley.)

Although still a substantial minority, there now exists a sizable and growing population of parents in the United States making the decision to educate their children themselves, in their own homes. Curiosity, skepticism and often misperceptions abound about this group of people. Scholarly inquiries into the world of homeschooling have tended to focus on parental motivations to homeschool, characteristics of homeschoolers, homeschooling methods and homeschooling outcomes, usually measured by standardized test scores. Perhaps the largest body of research has sought to sort and classify homeschoolers according to various typologies. Research to date has shed a great deal of light on what appears to many a somewhat shadowy niche of American society. While helpful, many of these studies are severely limited and have sometimes produced, I will argue, misleading results. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with homeschooling families in North Carolina, I explore some of these issues. I will argue that none of the various homeschooling typologies work when compared to the lived experiences of actual homeschooling families. I suggest that a concentration on what homeschoolers have in common is more useful than attempts to subdivide and force them into ill-fitting typologies. I explore the connections between sociological theories of modernization and homeschooling. Specifically, I adapt and expand theories of reflexive modernity and argue that homeschoolers are best understood as social innovators at the micro-level through a practiced reflexive-modernization. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of designating homeschoolers as ‘reflexively modern’.
Homeschooling as Reflexive Modernity

by
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For Jaz and Kaylie.
BIOGRAPHY

Earl Kennedy was born in Virginia, graduated from high school in South Dakota and went to work in an electronics factory two days later. For seven years, Earl held a series of manual labor jobs where he became convinced that his interests and the interests of his bosses were diametrically opposed to one another. Out of boredom and curiosity, Earl read the writings of Karl Marx and soon after decided to go back to school. In college, Earl discovered the power of sociology to vocalize and interpret the frustration he had always felt over issues of inequality and social justice. He received his bachelor’s degree in sociology from Minnesota State University Moorhead in 2005. Earl continues to study sociology at North Carolina State University where he is pursuing a PhD. It is Earl’s greatest hope that he may help others to develop a sociological consciousness and perhaps a willingness to take on the responsibility of improving the conditions that sociology helps us to understand.
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An Introduction to Homeschooling

A group of roughly 30 children, infants to young adults, gather, mingle and play together in the food court of a shopping mall in a mid-sized southeastern city. At the perimeter of this enthusiastic and boisterous group sit about a dozen mothers. No fathers are present. The mothers talk and laugh with one another, keeping a watchful eye on their children. It is a Thursday afternoon in late April, and most of the kids in this city are in school. Scenes like this one have become increasingly common in malls, museums, libraries, on playgrounds and at local historic sites. These children and their parents are homeschoolers and today they are meeting to sign the yearbooks they received from a homeschooling cooperative that they participate in and that many of their mothers helped create. I meet one young woman who has just graduated from her homeschool and will attend an Ivy League college in the fall. I meet another young man diagnosed with a learning disability by the public school; he has flourished since his mother began educating him at home. Talking with the mothers I learn that there are fundamentalist Christians here, but there are also atheists. There are staunch conservatives and bleeding-heart liberals. Some mothers have high school diplomas and others have PhDs. There seems little, in fact, to bind these people together apart from the decision they made to assume full educational responsibility for their children.

In strictly numeric terms, the homeschooling population is a definite minority in the U.S., but their numbers are increasing rapidly. More importantly, the homeschoolers seem to be responding to a much more widespread dissatisfaction with the state of modern society and with the public education system more specifically. It is for this
reason above all others that the homeschooling population deserves sociological investigation. With some notable exceptions, however, good research is surprisingly lacking and sometimes misleading, as I will argue below.

This paper explores what I have come to view as some significant shortcomings of the extant research while acknowledging the valuable contributions that this research has made to our understanding of homeschooling. I propose that viewing homeschoolers through a different theoretical frame can both clear up some of the misperceptions and illuminate some useful new insights on this dynamic and symptomatic phenomenon. Specifically, I will argue that homeschoolers are best conceived as practitioners of what Giddens (1984, 1993) and Beck (1997; 2005) have called ‘reflexive modernity’.

I begin with a brief description of the homeschooling population in the United States and in North Carolina where I conducted my interviews. In the following section I survey the research literature on homeschooling, giving specific attention to the numerous efforts to classify homeschoolers. I conclude this section with a discussion of what I view to be the significant weaknesses of the extant research literature. Next, I propose a theoretical framework through which homeschooling may be better understood; a perspective focusing on what homeschoolers share in common as opposed to what may divide them. In this section I examine the sociological discourse on theories of modernity. I draw most heavily on Ulrich Beck’s (1997; 2005) theory of reflexive-modernization. Theories of reflexive-modernization, sometimes called second-modernization, have focused on changes that occur at the institutional or organizational level. I will suggest an expansion and adaptation of the reflexive-modernity perspective to account for changes at a more micro-level. Following this, I introduce the current
research with a discussion of sampling and methodology. I then draw on data collected in qualitative interviews to support the proposition that homeschoolers are in fact reflexive-modernists. I will demonstrate that homeschoolers: (a) reject public education as an over-rationalized institution of first modernity; and (b) re-create education as a reflexively-modern institution in their homes. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study and some suggestions for future research.

**Homeschool Demographics**

Patricia M. Lines (1987) estimated that in 1987 between 120,000 and 260,000 children in the United States received their education at home. The numbers seemed enormous at the time, and they touched off a minor flurry of research and even greater media attention focusing on homeschools. Scholars and popular audiences alike wanted to know more about these people; why they were leaving the schools and with what consequences for their children and for society. Indeed, many saw the withdrawal from school as an affront to the very idea of ‘America’ (Knowles 1988a). With public education occupying so central a role in the modern world, it is easy to forget that home education pre-dates public schooling (Hill 2000). While most people were vaguely aware of home education, Lines’ research suggested that the practice was far more widespread than previously thought. Many were no doubt relieved by Lines’ prediction that the rapid increase in homeschooling had peaked and would continue to grow only at a much slower rate.

The most recent and the most reliable, although still problematic, estimates of homeschooling in the U.S. come from a 2003 report by the National Center for Education
Statistics (Princiotta, Bielick and Chapman 2003). Based on a survey of 11,994 students, 239 of whom were homeschooled, the NCES estimated that nearly 1.1 million students are being homeschooled nationally. The NCES estimate represents at least a 421% increase over the 1987 figure, and a 29% increase over estimates drawn from a previous wave of the same survey in 1999. As a proportion of the national student population homeschoolers had grown from well under 1% in 1987 to 1.7% in 1999 and finally to 2.2% in 2003. To put it another way, Hill (2000) reports that there are more children in homeschools today than there are in the public schools of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York City combined. There is no evidence that the numbers have either plateaued or decreased in the preceding half-decade. In fact, there is reason to believe that the homeschooling population continues to grow faster than ever (McDowell and Ray 2000).

Understanding exactly who these homeschoolers are is still more problematic. Again, our best estimates come from the 2003 NCES study, but with a sample of only 239 homeschoolers and an overall response rate of 54%, the numbers that follow must be interpreted with caution; 95% confidence intervals are reported in parentheses. In 2003, 77% (+/- 7.6%) of homeschoolers were White, 9% (+/- 5.6%) were Black and 5% (+/- 3.8%) were Hispanic. Two-parent households made up fully 81% (+/- 7%) of the homeschool sample and 72% (+/- 9.6%) of homeschoolers lived in urban areas. Twenty-two percent (+/- 7.4%) of homeschool families made over $75,000 a year, while 26% (+/- 8.5%) made $25,000 or less. In general, homeschool families are more likely to be White, to live in a two-parent household and to have only one parent in the labor force. Homeschool families are slightly less likely than public school families to earn over $75,000 each year and equally likely to make $25,000 or less. Homeschool parents are
more likely to have at least a bachelor’s degree, although a significant minority (25% +/- 8.3%) has a high school diploma or less. Although there is an undeniable class issue, in that homeschooling is largely a luxury available to those homes with two parents and only one working, there is anecdotal evidence that the number of single-parent homeschoolers is rapidly rising (Rod Helder, Director of North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education, personal communication).

In 2003, 41% (+/- 9.7%) of homeschoolers lived in the South with the remaining 59% more-or-less evenly distributed throughout the Northeast, Midwest and West. Homeschooling is legal in each of the United States, but the degree of regulation differs dramatically from state to state. The North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education reports that in 2008 the state had 38,367 homeschools teaching a total of 71,566 students (NC DNPE 2008). These are certainly underestimates, as they reflect only those families who comply with the state’s registration requirements. It is impossible at this point to determine how many families choose not to register with the state, but it is certain that some do. Unfortunately, North Carolina does not collect data on the demographic characteristics of registered homeschoolers. Rod Helder, Director of the Division of Non-Public Education, reported a strong impression that the population has become far more ethnically and racially diverse than it was when the DNPE was first charged with regulatory duties in the mid-1980s.

Researchers often use the presence or absence of religious motivations in attempts to classify homeschoolers. Each homeschooling family in North Carolina is asked to register as either a ‘religious’ or an ‘independent’ homeschool. In 2008, 66.7% chose to register as religious. This represents a steady decrease from 1989, the first year for which
data are available, when fully 80% registered as religious (NC DNPE 1989). These numbers must be interpreted with caution as there is no way of knowing how many of those registered ‘independent’ actually hold religious beliefs but do not see them as crucial to their decision to homeschool, or conversely, how many families choose ‘religious’ but teach a mostly secular curriculum. Indeed, one of my main contentions is that the religious/not-religious dichotomy imposed on homeschoolers by regulatory practices, and often by scholarly research, is a false one.

Good estimates are lacking, and homeschool advocacy groups often report much higher statistics than do government sources. The Homeschool Legal Defense Association, for example, reports that as many as 2.1 million U.S. children were homeschooled in 2003 (HSLDA 2008). Whatever the exact numbers, however, it seems clear that the homeschooling population is a sizeable minority, is growing rapidly and is becoming increasingly diverse (McDowell and Ray 2000). The growth in homeschooling is further indicated by the spiraling number of companies offering curriculum packages for homeschoolers. One popular website offers such packages from 189 different companies (Homeschool Stockroom 2008). I turn now to an examination of the small but growing body of research into homeschooling.

**Literature Review**

**Classifying Homeschoolers**

Probably the majority of scholarly attention on homeschoolers has sought the development of some satisfactory typology. Efforts to sort homeschoolers tend to hinge on parental motivations for homeschooling or parental philosophies and worldviews.
Perhaps the most influential typology was developed by Van Galen (1988). Based on 18 months of participant observation with homeschool groups, interviews with 16 homeschooling families and 10 education officials, and textual analysis of homeschooling publications, Van Galen claims that homeschoolers can be sorted into either pedagogues or ideologues.

Pedagogues, according to Van Galen (1988), choose homeschooling primarily for academic reasons. Pedagogues do not necessarily disagree with the content of instruction in the public schools, but rather feel that the public schools are inept at delivering that instruction. Often pedagogues pull their children out of public schools following a series of incidents that lead to the child being labeled as a ‘trouble student’. The pedagogues see such incidents as evidence of the public schools’ inablity to provide appropriate instruction for their children’s unique styles of learning. Pedagogues tend to favor experiential learning and experimentation and often pick and choose curricula or other materials based on the individualized learning preferences of their children. This being the case, pedagogues tend to place a far higher value on creativity and critical thinking than they do on structure or discipline. Pedagogues also tend to be well-informed about pedagogical theories and many are influenced by the writings of John Holt. Holt (1981) argued that all children were natural learners and that the public school system effectively quashed their inherent love of learning. He therefore stressed that all learning should be child-led learning. Taken to its extreme, Holt’s pedagogy has given rise to what is today called ‘unschooling’ (Stevens 2001).

Ideologues, according to Van Galen (1988), choose homeschooling for entirely different reasons, and the way they accomplish homeschooling reflects this difference.
The ideologues, unlike the pedagogues, are troubled by the content of what is taught in public schools. They have very specific values and beliefs that they want to impart to their children and they feel that the public school undermines their efforts to do so. Generally speaking, ideologues cherish individual freedom, are politically and socially conservative and tend toward religious fundamentalism. For the ideologues, character development is at least as important an educational objective, and often more so, than is strictly academic instruction. While the ideologues have serious problems with the content of public schools, they are not concerned so much with the structure through which the schools deliver that content. That being the case, the actual practice of homeschooling in the ideologue’s home tends to closely mirror that of the formal classroom. These families structure learning around textbooks and curricular packages and have less interest in experiential learning practices. Many enroll their children in correspondence programs like those offered by Bob Jones University or Christian Liberty Academy. Ideologues tend to be less informed about pedagogical theories, choosing instead to entrust their chosen curriculum providers with all matters academic. Whereas the pedagogues are influenced by John Holt, the ideologues are more likely influenced by conservative social critics like James Dobson. Van Galen’s (1988) groundbreaking work is heavily cited in the literature and many researchers have uncritically adopted her terminology (e.g. Knowles, Marlow and Muchmore 1992; Riegel 2001).

Stevens (2001) provides the most systematic sociological account we have to date of the homeschooling movement. He draws on ten years of field research, including 40 interviews with homeschool parents, to analyze homeschooling as a social movement. He finds that the movement has become fractured along the lines Van Galen (1988)
described. Stevens (2001) re-labels the ideologues as ‘heaven-based’ and the pedagogues as ‘earth-based’ and also sometimes refers to the pedagogues as ‘inclusives’ and the ideologues as ‘believers’. Stevens’ major finding is that the differing belief-systems and motivations of the two groups have led to two distinct ways of structuring homeschool movement organizations. Heaven-based homeschoolers, believing in an authoritarian god, have formed organizations emphasizing hierarchical structure and discipline. The earth-based homeschoolers have a stronger preference for grassroots democracy and their organizations tend to be less hierarchical and more informal. Stevens argues that because the believers sought control and power while the inclusives sought democracy, the believers have surpassed the inclusives as the dominant voice and agenda-setter for the broader homeschool movement.

Arai (2000) interviewed 23 homeschooling families in Canada and found that they divided into pedagogues and ideologues, but only at a very abstract level. She found that there was, in fact, considerable overlap between the two groups. Specifically she found that parents in both groups placed a strong emphasis on family unity, saw homeschooling as an alternative lifestyle, viewed homeschooling as a means of taking responsibility for the education of their children, and both groups tended to have unpleasant memories of their own experience in schools. A finding that is particularly pertinent to what I will argue below, namely that homeschool typologies are misleadingly simplistic, was that while all of the families she interviewed showed strong religious or spiritual commitment, only eight of the 23 families identified religious beliefs as an important reason that they were homeschooling. I will argue below that such findings
may be indicative of a broader dissatisfaction of which both religious fundamentalism and homeschooling are manifestations.

Mayberry (1988) sent surveys to 1600 homeschooling families in Oregon, of which 35% were returned. Based on these data and 15 in-depth interviews, Mayberry sorts homeschoolers according to motivation and finds four, rather than two, main categories. According to her research, 65% of homeschoolers were religious homeschoolers (ideologues); 22% were academically motivated (pedagogues); 11% were concerned with the academic and social environments of public schools; and 2% were seeking a ‘New Age’ orientation in their children’s education. Exactly what a ‘New Age’ orientation is was somewhat unclear but these parents appear to emphasize the ideals of peaceful coexistence and the interrelatedness of life. Although the last two categories were much smaller, Mayberry’s study is important because it begins to illustrate the tremendous diversity within the homeschooling population.

Knowles (1988b, 1991) takes a somewhat different approach and attempts to classify homeschools based on parental biographies. Using a combination of interviews, life history accounts and observations of 12 families in Utah, Knowles found that parental motivations could be sorted into four categories based on life experiences. According to Knowles, parents had reasons for homeschooling that were based on: the parents’ childhood family environment; the parents’ school experience; observation of children encountering difficulty in contemporary schools; or the development of a belief that the parents themselves could do a better job of teaching their children. It is unclear to what extent such categories are either exhaustive or mutually exclusive, but in another article
Knowles (1988a) acknowledges that the complexity of parental motivations for homeschooling makes categorization difficult.

**The Problem with Classifying Homeschoolers**

Part of the goal of this paper is to identify and deal with what I argue is a persistent problem with studies of homeschoolers. While classificatory schemes were helpful in imposing some order on a population that was little-understood, the continuing relevance of such schemes is questionable. The problem is that homeschoolers simply do not fit into the boxes that academics have attempted to create for them. Any contact with homeschoolers will reveal far more complexity and diversity than can possibly be contained in two, four or a dozen classifications.

Charvoz (1988) conducted an interesting, albeit small, study in which she gave homeschoolers a stack of research articles on homeschooling and asked for their reactions. The homeschoolers did not see themselves or their movement in the designations that researchers were so eager to give them. They felt that ‘pedagogues’ and ‘ideologues’ carried connotations which were misleading and that categories were too fixed. As one homeschooling mother lamented, “She talks about the pedagogues and the ideologues as if these are the only groups” (Charvoz 1988: 86). The parents I interviewed often echoed these sentiments. Clearly, these are not the only typifications homeschoolers recognize among themselves, and it is far from clear that one cannot be both a pedagogue and an ideologue.

The simple truth is that homeschoolers continually cross and re-cross the boundaries drawn by researchers. Certainly there are some homeschoolers who are
religious and some others who are not. But there are also homeschoolers who are religious but homeschool for reasons wholly unrelated to religion. Furthermore, the reasons parents begin homeschooling are not always the same as their rationales for continuing to homeschool. The first homeschooler I interviewed told me that she decided to homeschool to bring her family closer together, but that over the years (her oldest daughter just graduated) she has come to think of herself as a religious homeschooler. Another mother I interviewed chose homeschooling because she believed her son was gifted and she wanted to provide an individualized style of instruction that would help him reach his full potential. This mother would be a pedagogue based on Van Galen’s (1988) typology, but she had very definite ideas about morality and worldview that she also wanted to impart to her children.

It must also be remembered that motives are tricky things to pin down. As Mills (1940) argued, statements of motive come about in specific contexts and circumstances, and are made in consideration of their anticipated reception by interested others. In other words, there are reasons behind the reasons people give for their actions. Homeschoolers are accustomed to having their motivations questioned and part of what happens in the many organizations homeschoolers create is the development of ‘vocabularies of motive’. When homeschoolers answer the question “Why?” they attempt not only to explain, but also to influence and to persuade. This does not mean that statements of motive are dishonest or inaccurate, just that they are probably only part of the story.

**Theoretical Proposition**

I propose that we will enhance our understanding of homeschooling, and the
relationship between homeschooling and the broader society, if we focus not on ways to divide and sub-divide homeschoolers but on what they share. At the simplest level, homeschoolers are united by their decision to remove their children from traditional public or private schools and instead to educate them at home. What they share, then, is a dissatisfaction with typical educational practice in the contemporary United States.

Homeschoolers give various reasons for their dissatisfaction with public education: some object to the moral climate of the public school; some believe that public schools are failing academically; and still others feel that the public schools are physically unsafe. Most, if not all, homeschoolers hold some combination of these and other beliefs about the institution of modern public education. When I asked homeschoolers what exactly they object to in the public schools, and why, an interesting trend emerged. Expressed in various ways, homeschoolers told me that they were opposed to the modern (that is rationalized and bureaucratized) structure of the public school. In a very real sense, the homeschoolers I interviewed offered again and again an often trenchant critique of the public school as an embodiment of late-modernity. Every homeschooler with whom I spoke made this critique in one way or another. I propose, therefore, that we can understand homeschoolers as critics of modernity and as social innovators seeking to remedy its ills through a practiced reflexive modernization.

To explore this issue further I first review the theoretical literature on modernity and on reflexive-, or second-, modernity. I elaborate on the theory of reflexive modernity and illustrate how it can be used to understand micro-level innovation like that represented by homeschooling. To demonstrate the appropriateness of situating homeschooling in an adapted theoretical perspective of reflexive modernity, I introduce
the research on which I base my arguments. Following a brief discussion of methodology,
I present my findings and conclude with a discussion of their implications.

**Modernity and its Critics**

**Linear Modernity**

Sociological discourse on modernity is usually traced back to the work of Max Weber. Weber saw the modern world as increasingly rational, bureaucratic and disenchanted. Although Weber recognized and described several types of rationality - purposive, value, traditional, affective - he devoted most of his attention to purposive-rationality which he felt would eventually supplant all other forms. Purposive-rationality involves the calculation and selection of means for the realization of technically-determined ends with an emphasis always on efficiency. Early in what we might call the modern era, purposive actions required integration with value-rational justifications. This was the basic thesis of Weber’s (1958) seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Increasingly, however, social institutions and systems of action broke away from their groundings in value-rationality, and purposive rationality became the be-all and end-all of social organization. Institutions and action-orientations have grown more and more technical and administrative. Weber viewed this trend with a great degree of pessimism as he believed that once society began the process of rationalization it could only increase. This is what he meant when he referred to the ‘iron cage of bureaucracy.’

While bureaucracy allowed societies to advance at a previously unimaginable rate, something important was lost. Note that advancement here is a value-laden term the connotations of which often go unexplored. Advancement refers to the development of
the means of production to the extent that humanity could now control nature and put it to its own uses, but also to the development of the relations of production in accordance with the dictates of a capitalist economy requiring that the many be subservient to the few who make decisions affecting the whole of society based on the dual imperatives of growth and profit-maximization. Under the marriage of capitalism and rationalization, value systems, worldview, emotion and morality receded further into the background until they were, or would eventually be, completely irrelevant to decision making (see Horkheimer 1947). According to Weber, “The specific nature of bureaucracy develops the more perfectly the more the bureaucracy is ‘dehumanized,’ the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation” (Gerth and Mills 1946: 216).

Along with rationalization comes increased specialization and functional differentiation. In the pre-modernized world a family was likely to live, work, take leisure and see to the education of young all in the home. In the modern world, each of these takes place in a specially designated location outside of the home. Children are no longer educated in the home, instead they go to a school where they receive instruction from an expert in facts about mathematics, followed by an expert in facts about grammar, an expert in facts about history and an expert in facts about physics. If the child accumulates enough facts of a particular kind, she may exchange them through specialized examinations for a degree or certificate which qualifies her as an adult to occupy a functionally limited and specialized role in society. Gone is the well-rounded personality, in her place the technical expert.
For many in the 1930s, Weber’s worst fears about modernity seemed to have come true with the rise of fascism. Here, and especially in Nazi Germany, the world witnessed the tremendous power of rationalization turned against humanity itself as millions were sent to work camps and killed in the name of progress and efficiency. Science and technology were no longer the means of liberation but of the most heinous oppression (Horkheimer and Adorno 1991).

**Rationalization of Public Education**

Critical theorists have been quick to argue that there is nothing inevitable about the form rationalization takes. The organizational forms taken by social institutions instead reflect the needs of the elites and are subject to the imperatives of the capitalist system (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1970; Aglietta 1979; Meszaros 1995). On the one hand, rationalization and bureaucratization serve the needs of capitalist firms for predictability and universalism. But a system based on inequality must also be publicly legitimated lest capitalism’s losers, who will always outnumber its winners, become dissatisfied and begin to challenge the status quo. Here the schools play an important role. By adopting the tenets of modernity – universalism, credentialism based on merit, competition, hierarchical organization and the dominance of technical expertise – public education fosters belief in a meritocratic system and prepares students to be efficient and obedient workers in the capitalist system (Bowles and Gintis 1976). This perspective on education will become important later when we consider the possible implications of homeschooling.
Writing from a different theoretical perspective, Meyer and Rowan (1977) have argued persuasively that when the goals of an institution are ambiguous or difficult to measure, as they are in the case of education, institutions may gain legitimacy by adopting the standards of rationalization, which are broadly taken-for-granted, in a way that is more ceremonial than it is substantive. Organizations may develop a thoroughly rationalized public ‘face’ while maintaining a technical core that is largely shielded from both public and private scrutiny and in which professionals are granted a substantial degree of autonomy in deciding how best to actually accomplish their work. Schools, for example, can impose strict technocratic definitions of who is a legitimate teacher, what educational topics should be covered at what levels and what objective criteria constitute graduation from one level to the next. As long as schools meet these broad expectations, the public and other organizations will be confident that ‘education’ is happening and what actually takes place in the classroom may remain unexamined (Rowan and Meyer 1978).

Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) studied public schools at a time when few efforts were made to impose accountability on the educational process. They found that teachers exercised a great deal of autonomy in the classroom and while standardized tests were administered, they were used primarily as aids to teaching and not in an attempt to quantify educational outcomes. In such an environment it was entirely possible to adopt modernization measures in a ceremonial or even superficial manner. The times have changed, however, and the façade of rationalization has become the all-encompassing reality of public education. This sea-change in public education has been exacerbated by

Revising Weber: Reflexive or Second Modernity

More recently, several theorists have objected to Weber’s pessimism by reintroducing human agency into theories of modernity. Habermas (1984), in particular, has demonstrated that Weber’s dire view of modernity was a result of his overemphasis on purposive rationality to the neglect of other forms. Habermas agreed that purposive rationality had come to dominate the modern world, but he disagreed with Weber that this was either inevitable or irreversible. Habermas begins by postulating that all acts, including speech acts, should be groundable in rationality: whether instrumental; value; affective; or aesthetic. Human interaction, then, makes possible the reintegration of the forms of rationality through a process that he termed communicative rationality. Although sometimes written-off as overly-idealistic, Habermas was among the first and most effective to demonstrate that rationalization/modernization has developed along a particular track and that other tracks are possible.

Of greater direct relevance to this study has been the work of Anthony Giddens (1984; 1993) and Ulrich Beck (1997; Beck and Lau 2005). According to Beck (1997) modernization, through processes of specialization and differentiation, becomes characterized by dichotomies of the sort family/not-family, work/not-work and education/not-education. However, in late modernity these dichotomies are challenged and begin to break down, or at least the boundaries are blurred. This blurring is the result of the reflexive agency of human actors and organizations interacting with a system that
has not failed at modernization but has triumphed too completely. As sub-systems become evermore specialized and separated from one another, they begin to produce more and more unintended consequences for other sub-systems, eroding the predictability which was supposed to be such a hallmark of rationalization. For example, faced with the necessity to provide energy to an expanding population, science and industry responded by harnessing the power of the atom in nuclear reactors. This, of course, introduced the possibility of disaster on a massive scale like that experienced in Chernobyl in 1986. The Chernobyl disaster, and the possibility that it could happen elsewhere, becomes a problem for local communities and economies, as well as a hotly-contested political issue. The result of Chernobyl, and many more subtle examples, is that what was once certain is no longer so, and side-effects become the order of the day. In such a situation the old dichotomies may no longer make sense, revealing new possibilities for social reconstruction. Such circumstances represent a break from linear modernity, but they do not usher in the postmodern era, as some have claimed, but instead a ‘second modernity’ (Beck and Lau 2005).

Second modernity is a time of uncertainty, because the old patterns of routinized behavior which depended on certain knowledge and predictability (Giddens 1984) are no longer appropriate. But it is also a time characterized by the type of possibilities that Weber was unable to predict. Organizations and individuals, confronted with structures that no longer work, re-create those structures; but do so reflexively and with the knowledge, or at least the sense, that the old structures no longer work because they were over-, rather than under-, rationalized. It is a second modernity because, unlike postmodernity, it accepts many of the basic principles of the first modernity. Rather than
dispelling the imperatives of first modernity, second modernity seeks to reintegrate them with a view towards value-rationality. Instead of the world of ‘either/or’ dichotomies characteristic of first modernity, second, or reflexive, modernity embraces conceptions of ‘both/and’ (Beck and Lau 2005). It is through reflexive modernization, Beck (1997) tells us, that a new society can be created without a revolution.

Along with the possibility inherent in the break with first modernity, however, there is also risk. According to Beck (1997), a reflexive second modernity is only one possible solution to the contradictions of a modernity run its course. Equally likely is a retreat into the past, a redrawing of the old boundaries, a counter-modernization. Sociologists of religion, for example, have long been cognizant of the link between modernization and religious fundamentalism (see Emerson and Hartman 2006). Just as Beck and Lau (2005) emphasize the ‘both/and’ rather than the ‘either/or’, it seems reasonable to suspect that attempts to recreate the institutions of society will have elements of both reflexive- and counter-modernity. Whether the actual institutions created during this phase are reflexively modern or counter-modern is largely a question of politics (see Stevens 2001).

It is crucial to remember also that institutions and organizations embedded in a capitalist society are not free to innovate at will. Instead, each organization or institution must operate and adapt within a field of both opportunity and constraint dictated by the larger system of which it is a part. Public education in the U.S. serves many functions, of which the education of children is only the most obvious. Schools also prepare people to occupy positions in the occupational hierarchy in ways that are wholly unrelated to whatever knowledge they may impart. Education prepares some students for positions
near the top of the hierarchy; many more are prepared for positions nearer the bottom. Apart from the skills and knowledge required for different role assignments, students must also learn modes of behavior and expression that are appropriate for their future positions (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Students preparing for upper-level positions must develop a sense of entitlement while students preparing for lower-level positions must learn to accept a sense of constraint. The credentials distributed by the educational system are also used to signal both competence and appropriate socialization to employers (Meyer 1977). Indeed, the use of credentials is one crucial way that elites maintain and reproduce their privilege (Parkin 1979). The United States has also relied heavily on the public education system to socialize students, often from divergent cultural and ethnic backgrounds, into ‘responsible’ citizens (Issel 1979). These are not mere side-effects of the educational system; they are important functions for which schools are accountable. History has shown that schools failing to serve these tasks are subject to pressure from the public, the government and from the business community (Ray and Mickelson 1993; Schneider and Keesler 2007).

If the above constraints have served to limit the options available for educational innovation, the passage of No Child Left Behind has virtually straitjacketed public education. Held to very strict standards and facing severe sanctions if they fall short, schools are understandably hesitant to attempt novel approaches to education. Any changes to normal educational practice must be vigorously defended with hard scientific evidence of efficacy. The high-stakes of No Child Left Behind make experimentation extremely risky (Schneider and Keesler 2007).
Finally, the ability of schools to innovate is seriously constrained by financial considerations. Schools in the U.S. are funded largely through property taxes, which means that the lowest performing schools are also likely to be the poorest schools (Kozol 1992). This also means that the schools which would be most likely to benefit from innovation are least likely to be able to do so. Along with inequalities in the resources available to schools, there are also inequalities in the ways the resources that are available are actually invested (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey and Crowley 2006). Inner-city schools, for example, may find it necessary to invest a far greater proportion of their resources into building maintenance and security measures. Furthermore, the federal funds available to schools usually include strict rules and regulations concerning their expenditure (Freeman 1979).

It is my contention that the homeschoolers are largely able to avoid these constraints, are therefore able to innovate in ways unavailable to the public school system, do so in ways that incorporate their critique of public education as an overly-modernized institution, and therefore represent an active experiment in reflexive modernization. As I will illustrate below, homeschoolers have become dissatisfied with a thoroughly rationalized and bureaucratized system of education. They are not alone in their dissatisfaction, but they are unique in that they are attempting to recreate ‘school’ in ways that retain the key enlightenment goals of education, but also seek to pursue those goals in a more humane and value-rational way. Homeschoolers are not a static category, and they are not divisible into static sub-categories. They are an institution in the process of becoming and they are characterized far more by the ‘both/and’ than they are by the
‘either/or’. Following a brief discussion of methodology I will illustrate these assertions with examples from the homeschoolers themselves.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

I employed a qualitative methodology for a number of reasons. Most importantly, I was interested in finding out how the homeschoolers themselves saw what they were doing. To do this necessitated the ability to probe more deeply into issues as they arose, the ability to follow an unexpected but valuable line of discussion and to focus more on process than on end result. Traditional survey methods, particularly those using a closed-ended question and response format, are unlikely to uncover the full complexity and diversity in homeschooling. Qualitative methods are also better suited to the type of rapport building that is necessary when studying reluctant populations. Finally, I was not interested in the standard deductive process of testing hypotheses and predicting outcomes, but rather in an inductive exploration of homeschoolers’ lived reality.

Qualitative interviews provided the majority of the data analyzed here. These were supported with, and informed by, observations of home and family interactions, attendance at a number of homeschooling events and with textual analysis of homeschool web sites, e-bulletin boards, blogs and newsletters. I interviewed a total of 16 homeschool parent-teachers (12 mothers, 2 fathers and 2 grandmothers). In most cases interviews took place in the respondents’ homes and lasted from one and a half to two hours. With the respondents’ permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality; so all names used here are fictional.
Because I felt it was important to be able to follow-up on interesting or unexpected topics as they arose in discussion, I entered each interview with an idea of what I wanted to ask but with no structured list of questions. Some of the topics covered in interviews included: reasons for homeschooling; how the decision to homeschool was made; issues with traditional education; homeschool practice; reactions of family and friends to homeschooling; and involvement in homeschooling organizations. I analyzed and coded transcriptions for reoccurring themes throughout the data collection period.

**Recruitment of Subjects**

Prior to beginning this study, I was warned that I may find this population hesitant to participate (Wright 1988). After observing the websites and discussion boards of many homeschooling groups in the area for several months, I selected five sites on which to post my initial recruitment notice. I chose websites based on the size of the organization and the frequency of activity on the discussion boards. In addition, I tried to pick sites that would give me access to the full range of diversity within the homeschooling community. Two of the chosen websites were explicitly religious, one was explicitly secular, one was ‘inclusive’ (all were welcome) and one was devoted to African American homeschoolers. I designed my recruitment notice to elicit participation by ensuring that it was not my intention to misrepresent homeschoolers (see Appendix I for the recruitment letter).

I was concerned that my sample would be skewed against homeschoolers who were unaffiliated with any organization. To guard against this I also invited respondents to pass my information along to other homeschoolers who would be interested in
participating. Finally, I posted an announcement about the study on the bulletin board of a store that sells new and used curricula to homeschoolers (Appendix II). Despite my precautions, only one of my respondents was unaffiliated with any homeschool group, and she had been a member of multiple groups in the past. It is not possible to know how many homeschoolers remain unaffiliated. That more of them were not included in my sample may be a limitation of this study. Given the importance my respondents placed on networking and cooperation among homeschoolers, however, it would seem that the completely isolated homeschooler is a rarity. Although there may be good reasons for homeschoolers to be skeptical of inquiries from outsiders, I found that most were actually eager to talk with me.

Findings

Defying Classification

Earlier on I argued that existing classifications do not make sense when applied to actual homeschoolers. Homeschoolers are most consistently classified as either religious or non-religious. Indeed, the North Carolina Department of Non-Public Education asks each homeschool to register as either ‘religious’ or ‘independent’. Of my sixteen respondents, all but one claimed to have religious beliefs but only three named those beliefs as the most important reason that they were homeschooling. I asked Sara, whose Christian faith was clearly important to her, if she was registered as a ‘religious’ homeschool with the state. Her response was fairly typical:

No. No because we just don’t want, we don’t like labels. We’re not secular, but we’re not religious either. We’re in-between.
The four quotes that follow come from one mother-teacher, Ruth, and illustrate
the difficulty with putting actual homeschoolers into clear conceptual classifications:

We’re Christian and so faith is a big part of what I’ve always incorporated
in our schooling and to me, I find that when I have a really hard time or
felt like I’d failed my kids, if I stop and I pray and I ask God to guide me
then He always works something out.

I’m trying to teach my kids how to think, I’m trying to teach them how to
think critically, because that’s what we don’t have enough of are critical
thinkers.

We’re teaching our kids a lot of different philosophies, we’re not just
teaching one philosophy and we’re exposing them to a broader curriculum
than they would get almost anywhere else.

We can customize every kid’s educational experience… and even though
we’d love to use that same math book for every kid, it doesn’t always
work, because one kid thinks differently or has a different learning style
than the other kid.

Would this person be a pedagogue or an ideologue? It is hardly clear. The first
statement, taken in isolation, would place her squarely in the ideologues’ camp. The last
statement, however, is clearly pedagogical. She refuses to conform to the ‘either/or’
classifications described by Beck and Lau (2005) as foundational to linear modernity.

Instead, Ruth’s motivations for homeschooling embrace the reflexive-modernity
paradigm of ‘both/and’. And while her case is illustrative, it was far from exceptional.

Time and time again, parents told me that they chose homeschooling because they were
concerned about values and academic quality. I asked my respondents what success as a
homeschooler meant to them. Their responses are further indication of the
homeschoolers’ concern with both matters of values and matters of academics:

Janet: I hope that I can provide them with the skills and opportunities to
pursue things that they’re interested in. I want them to be effective
communicators and critical thinkers. I hope that they’ll be able to make
good decisions about what they want to do with their lives, and be good people and be part of their community.

Jessica: Happy, independent, responsible children who can support themselves.

Rejecting Public Education

There was very little ambiguity in respondents’ feelings about public education. Everyone had strong beliefs about what was wrong with the public schools, even those whose children had always been homeschooled. Recall that one of the keys to my argument is that homeschoolers are critical of public education as an institution of rationalized modernity. Over and over respondents gave me their critiques of public education, and while they rarely used the language of sociological theory, it became clear early on that they were objecting to a school system that was overly-bureaucratic, inflexible, frustrating in its attempts at universality, impersonal, inhumane and in short, thoroughly modern.

Many homeschool-parents told me that the public schools emphasized rule-following and conformity, to the detriment of ‘real’ education.

Janet: These kids [in public school] spend most of their time standing in line, they go from one place to another and stand in line, you know, they’re cattle.

Kim: … we send kids off and we call it school. I used to teach in a private school and I feel public school, private school, daycare, it’s just 90% babysitting and it’s crowd-control and it’s just a face that’s on different schools, and there’s a philosophy with different schools, but when the door closes it’s still a teacher or two with 15 to 30 kids… it is about control.

Later, I asked Janet if there was anything that she felt public schools were good for.

Janet: The things that I think they’re really good for I’m not sure I want
done. Learning to follow directions and be part of the group and stand in line, those are things that are expected, but I’m just not sure it’s good for them… I think it’s healthy for people to say “why, why should I do that?”

Several of my respondents felt that the public schools sacrificed individual potential for efficiency by ‘teaching to the middle’. Many of these parents were influenced by pedagogical theories emphasizing unique learning styles. Criticisms of this type pervaded the interviews and were heard from the most conservative and the most liberal homeschoolers alike. Barbara put it most succinctly:

Barbara: Public schools cater to mediocrity.

Kim had this to say:

Kim: I feel generally, if you could pick my kids up and drop them in school at any age, they would be there, each with their strengths, each with their weaknesses, [and they would be] on-par or rapidly made to be on-par, with the children there, seamlessly, you wouldn’t pick them out of a crowd.

Alecia, who pulled her daughter out of public school in the first grade, said it like this:

Alecia: The public school system crushes children’s love of learning, it forces all children to conform to one style of learning or get left behind. Anna (her daughter) completely lost her sense of self in that environment; she didn’t know who she was anymore.

Concerns of this sort were especially salient for parents who felt that their children were special in some way. Mark, whose son had been diagnosed with a learning disability, said this:

Mark: One of our children has learning issues, if we had put him in the public school system he would have been labeled, he would have been put in ‘slow’ classes. He would probably have had very low expectations, and he would have grown up thinking that he was limited in his potential.

Sara first considered homeschooling at the advice of her pediatrician who was treating her nine-year-old daughter for symptoms of anxiety and depression.
Sara: She thought that she was probably not getting her emotional needs met, and she thought that was probably not a good environment for her. Just because she’s so sensitive, you know, and that whole being told what to do thing was just really personally devastating for her.

Many parents felt that the rigidity and one-size-fits-all approach stifled critical thinking skills as well as self-expression.

Sherri: It [public school] was just boring; it was just tedious busy work. You learned pretty early that there was a particular answer that your teacher was looking for. There’s a right answer you know, but there may be other ways of looking at it but they’re unwilling to discuss with you because they’re the teacher and you’re just the kid, so you can’t even have that conversation.

Sara: All of their activities were structured and there was very little time for them to just explore stuff. I think they push the academic stuff way too hard, way too early, to the point where it becomes like a power struggle with these kids; it becomes that rather than any kind of learning. Later: What’s encouraged in public school is conformity to a very narrow standard of expression. You know, you can’t cry, you have to put up with what I think is really emotionally abusive behavior and not show any reaction to it.

Nearly all of the parents expressed disdain for the end-of-the-year testing that has become such a cornerstone of public education, especially since the passage of “No Child Left Behind” legislation.

Vivienne: Public schools don’t encourage children to learn. I don’t want them to learn to take a test; I want them to learn that learning is fun, because it is fun.

Sara tells an interesting story about picking her daughter up from school one day:

Sara: I remember when Trina (daughter) was in first grade seeing a little boy who was probably 8 throwing up in the bushes during the end of grade testing. And all the other moms were trying to comfort his mom, saying “They all do that, there’s at least three kids a week that do that, the boys especially.” And I’m like, “Why on earth does it seem like a good idea to adjust people to the reality that your 8 year old son is puking from anxiety from a test?”
Finally, several of my respondents were concerned with the administrative structure of public education. Specifically, they felt that the schools made decisions according to a bureaucratic rationale that lacked accountability, had little to do with education and even less to do with value-rationality.

**Mark:** Now you have a situation where the whole society votes on school boards and the superintendent goes to the school board and says “Alright, this is what we’re going to do.” The school board says “Ok.” And the parents almost have no say.

**Ruth:** There are a ton of non-teaching employees and costs in the public school system. And as long as the budget and the referendum and the bond says school on it, people are like, “Oh well, the more we spend on our kids the better.” Well, in reality the research doesn’t necessarily support that.

**Later:** I see narrow-mindedness in public school officials [and] it makes me suspicious that there’s an agenda there, that they feel threatened by any kind of open discussion.

It should be clear at this point that one useful way in which we can view homeschoolers is as a group of people reacting against an overly rationalized, bureaucratized and modernized institution. Just as Habermas (1984) argues that modernization has broken loose from its moorings in value-rationality, so the homeschoolers see an education system that has lost the will or the ability to fulfill its original enlightenment mission of a well-rounded education. Just as Beck and Lau (2005) emphasize that the problems of modernity are the result of modernization itself, the homeschoolers find that the problems of the schools stem from the purposive-rationalization of public education. The following extended excerpt from my interview with Sara does a nice job of illustrating the feeling many homeschoolers have that they are dealing with a system that has taken rationalization too far, to the point where rationality becomes the negation of rationality (see Horkheimer 1947).
Sara: There’s a very broad dissatisfaction with public education. Even with people that would never consider homeschooling, the level of dissatisfaction is very high. I think a lot of people spend a lot of their time either working, or going to and from work, or trying to run errands. There’s very little family time in our culture. That sense of loss is grounded in something very real. As a culture we’re running on a treadmill. The things that really do make us happy are not considered to be valuable. Most people I know that are my age are working full time to pay a mortgage on a house that’s really too big and they send their kids to childcare that they’re not entirely happy with. And then when their kids get to be teenagers they don’t really know them. I think there’s a real loss there, and we need to think about that as a culture. The whole corporate thing, that whole way of life is really corrupt and I think a lot of people are dependent upon it, but really fearful and resentful of that. And I think that a lot of the growth in homeschooling is people who are able to find a way to do it differently… The homeschooling movement is part of an attempt by people to restore that balance. They want a more humane way of life.

Sara’s assertion that there exists a broad level of dissatisfaction is important. Homeschoolers are certainly not alone in their feeling that something is wrong with society in general and public education in particular. It is telling that when I asked Sara what the most common reaction she got from people when they found out she was homeschooling was, “Wow, I wish I could do that!” Of course, what makes homeschoolers interesting and worth studying is the fact that they are doing something about the problems they see. They are recreating the institution of education in their own homes and in ways that incorporate their criticisms of the public education system they left behind. I turn now from a discussion of what the homeschoolers reject about public education to an examination of what they embrace.

**Embracing a Reflexive-Modern Education**

Homeschoolers are able to experiment in ways that the public school system is not. When change occurs at the organizational level it often takes the form of mimicry
rather than actual innovation because organizations, especially under capitalism, are faced constantly with the imperative to make decisions quickly (Lash 2003). Adopting the structural characteristics of other well-established organizations can also be an effective strategy for gaining or maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the public and/or other organizations in the institutional field (Meyer and Rowan 1977). At the individual level, homeschoolers are able to escape such constraints and are therefore better able to experiment. With accountability mainly to themselves and their children, and with less-restrictive time constraints, the homeschooling mothers were free to try new approaches and techniques. Public schools must justify the things they do to the public, the school district, the business community, the state and to the federal government. Homeschoolers have a different notion of accountability.

Kim: I will feel like a success as a parent and a teacher if my children are happy and they can function in the world in a way that is fluid and allows them to do what they want to do.

I asked Kim if she feared the judgment of the school system.

Kim: I think I fear the judgment of my children. I fear them growing up and saying “you failed me.” I just don’t fear the school system; I don’t fear them judging me.

Sara objected to the idea that she was accountable to anyone else for her children’s education.

Sara: Pretty much everyone in the homeschooling community objects very strongly to the idea of somebody else telling them what to do in their own homes with their own children. We feel very strongly that we know what’s best for our kids and we don’t trust any other authority to tell us what’s best for our family. There’s a strong anarchist streak in the homeschooling community… people don’t want the government to tell them what to do to educate their children. They feel like they’re going to make better decisions for their own kids than some government authority.
Barbara had this to say:

**Barbara:** Up until 8th grade maybe we didn’t really test. I mean there was no purpose; I’m sitting here, I know if you know it or not, I don’t have to test you. And if you don’t do well I’m going to teach you till you know it well, my purpose isn’t to fail you. I’m teaching here; not failing. We didn’t come here to fail, we came here to teach, you know, to learn.

If there is such a thing as a guiding principle among homeschoolers it is that when it comes to education, one size does not fit all. Instead, homeschool-parents value the ability to experiment and to find ways of teaching that best suit the particular learning styles of their children.

**Ruth:** We’re looking at where the kids are strong, where are they weak, which program fits their learning style, how quickly or how slowly can we move through this academically?

**Alecia:** Homeschooling allows for a tremendous amount of flexibility. We can find the absolute best way that our children learn and build their education around that. You just can’t do that in the public school.

**Jessica:** You can make mistakes. So, you might buy something that you thought would work great for your child, like “oh, this will be great!” No. That didn’t work. And that’s the beauty of homeschooling, because you can do that. In the school system it’s “this is what we use, everybody uses this, you will use this, this year, next year, and every day until the end of the earth.” You know? We can switch.

**Vivienne:** That’s the joy of homeschooling, you have the freedom to teach what you want to teach. You don’t have to stay with one specific curriculum, and you can mix curriculums.

Probably the most striking element of homeschool pedagogy is a consistent challenge to the school/not-school dichotomy characteristic of modernized education in the United States. Each of the homeschoolers I interviewed told me about the ways they integrate learning with everyday life. These parent-teachers find opportunities to teach and to learn everywhere.
Kim: Children who are allowed to follow what they’re interested in and passionate about will absorb whatever they’re learning in that moment most readily and deeply. If you let a child go and explore what they’re really interested in they will have a lot of foundations because math is innate in our world, and you need math to get along, and you need to read, and you need to understand physics and how the world works, and you just can’t escape that stuff. When you force kids to learn it’s just rules and it’s not very meaningful for them and it’s hard for them to keep their minds open and really take it in, because it’s kind of divorced.

Mark: Whether we’re on vacation in Philadelphia or we’re at the beach, it’s all a field trip. I mean, we’ve never really delineated “this is for school and this is for play.”

Ruth: It’s not just about academics, there’s so many different aspects of homeschooling and they’re all just kind of working together. Your academic subjects and your scientific theories can’t just be taken in a vacuum, you know, there is some connection to other areas of life.

Vivienne: When my husband travels they get some really good geography lessons. They look at the globe and then they go to Google Earth and then when he gets back they look at the pictures he took and then my husband’s able to show him other cultures.

Sherri: It would be so foreign to my kids to say, “We’re going to take a summer break. We’re not going to learn anything this summer, you’re off.” They’d be like, “off what?” They don’t even call it learning, they’re just living.

The homeschool parents I spoke with sought not only to reintegrate learning with everyday life, but also to integrate academics and values.

Mark: Homeschooling is not about academics, it’s about life. Academics are a part of life, character development is a part of life, domestic skills are a part of life, social skills are a part of life.

Kari: I have poured so much of myself into her, and I have tried, not to create this shell around her, but to give her experiences and to help her be a creative thinker, and also morals and values are important. And, unfortunately, that’s kind of a mixed bag in the public school, or even in the private school, it’s kind of a crap-shoot.

Kim: I feel like the elementary years are the most important time for raising good human beings, and that’s what we do everyday. I’m crazy
about manners and treating each other respectfully. I mainly just want them to be solid, happy, mentally healthy, capable people who aren’t shut down, or what I call ‘bludgeoned by academia.’

Of course, innovation is worth little if it fails to produce any positive outcomes. The obvious next question, then, is whether or not the innovations of the homeschoolers are effective. Do homeschooled children learn the things they need to learn? Do they learn them as well as children in the public schools? And, of course, what about socialization? Before concluding, I offer a brief review of the available evidence.

**Does Homeschooling Work?**

**Problems with Homeschool Research**

Research into homeschooling has been plagued with some persistent problems, and with the notable exceptions of Van Galen (1988) and Stevens (2001) good sociological research is almost entirely non-existent. One problem is that homeschoolers are, or are perceived to be, a population that is suspicious of academic research and researchers (Wright 1988). Because of this, much of the research we have on homeschoolers comes from homeschoolers themselves or from researchers closely affiliated with homeschoolers and their organizations (Lois 2002). These ties introduced the possibility of serious ideological bias, and the research must be viewed with a degree of skepticism. There are also persistent methodological issues relating to the lack of an adequately representative sampling frame. Both sample sizes and response rates tend to be exceedingly small. Given the population and the decentralized manner in which homeschoolers are regulated, these problems have proven difficult to rectify. Nevertheless, researchers must continue to work on improvements in sampling
procedures. I have not found any studies that discuss the characteristics of non-respondents, nor have I found any that discuss attempts to improve response rates. Both would be very welcome additions to the literature. With these reservations in mind, I turn now to the existing evidence on the efficacy of home education.

Academics

No shortage of research exists attempting to answer the question, “Does homeschooling work?” The most common method of addressing this question is to compare the standardized test scores of homeschoolers to public and/or private school students. As part of the Washington Home School Research Project, Jon Wartes, examined the scores of 219 homeschool students on the 1986 Stanford Achievement Test. Wartes (1988) found that homeschoolers scored above average in all areas except math computation where average scores were in the 42nd percentile. In math applications, however, homeschoolers averaged in the 65th percentile. The highest scores were found in science (70th percentile), vocabulary (79th percentile) and reading (76th percentile).

More recently, Ray (1997, 2000a) surveyed a sample of 1,657 homeschooling families. One section of his questionnaire asked each family to report the percentile rankings of each of their children on a variety of nationally standardized tests. He found that homeschoolers’ scores averaged at the 87th percentile in total reading, the 82nd percentile in total math, the 85th percentile in social science and the 87th percentile in complete battery. Interestingly, Ray (2000a) found that among homeschoolers, scores were not correlated with whether or not either of the parents was a certified teacher, nor did scores correlate with either family income or time spent on “formal educational
Unfortunately, these studies have been subject to the same limitations I described earlier: researchers have tended to be persons politically invested in homeschooling; no study that I am aware of has used a sample that could accurately be called representative; and response rates tend to be somewhere between 20 and 50%. These are significant shortcomings, but not ones that are likely to be remedied soon. Nevertheless, the evidence we do have consistently shows homeschoolers scoring as well or better than the general student population on standardized tests (McDowell and Ray 2000).

Socialization

Nearly all of my respondents reported, with some frustration, that the first question they are usually asked is “What about socialization?” Riegel (2001), while sympathizing with some of the complaints homeschoolers make about public schools, argues that public education is the only currently suitable environment for teaching children the knowledge and skills that they will need to function effectively in society. On the other hand, Hill (2000) argues that while homeschoolers tend to be fiercely independent, they are not isolationists and, in fact, are very concerned to see that their children are socialized adequately for the “real world” (Hill 2000: 25).

Actual evidence on the question of socialization in homeschools is severely lacking. One notable exception is Shyers (1992) who used a comparative-experimental design to compare 70 homeschooled children to 70 traditionally schooled children on measures of assertiveness, self-concept and behavior. Both groups were between the ages of 8 and 10 and the groups mirrored one another in terms of socioeconomic status, race,
gender and family size. Shyers measured assertiveness using the Children’s Assertive Behavior Scale and found no significant differences between the homeschooled and traditionally schooled children. She found no significant differences either between the two groups when measured on the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale. Shyers then sorted the children into subgroups based on similar demographic characteristics and allowed them to play together under video surveillance. Videotapes were then analyzed and scored according to the Direct Observation Form of the Child Behavior Checklist. Observers were unaware of whether the children they observed were homeschooled or traditionally schooled. Here the results were dramatic. Children who had been traditionally schooled their entire lives scored eight times higher than homeschooled students on the index of problem behaviors. At least among Shyers’ sample socialization was not a problem for homeschooled children when compared to those who were traditionally schooled.

Advocates and critics continue to make well-reasoned arguments for why homeschooling should or should not work. In the absence of more and better empirical studies, however, we can cautiously conclude that homeschooling is one of the most successful (as measured by academic and socialization outcomes) educational options available to some parents. Of course, the effect of homeschooling on society or on the schools that are left behind is another question entirely and beyond the scope of this paper (but see Illich 1970 and Ray 2000b for a positive viewpoint; and for a contrasting view see Apple 2000 and Lubienski 2000).
Discussion and Summary

In this paper, I have attempted to move the discussion of homeschooling beyond the confines of previous attempts to force them into classificatory schemes that no longer make sense when compared to the actual lived experiences of homeschooling families. It is obviously true that there are different kinds of homeschoolers and that homeschoolers employ a variety of ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Mills 1940). But I have argued that a more fruitful line of inquiry is into what unites, as opposed to what divides, homeschoolers.

Homeschoolers share, at the most basic level, a dissatisfaction with public education. But it is a particular kind of dissatisfaction. Homeschoolers are critical of public education as an embodiment of late modernity. Their sentiments about both education and society are far more common than their numbers might suggest. But the homeschoolers are not just critics, they are also activists, they are social inventors (see Coleman 1970). Homeschoolers are exemplars of reflexive-modernization. They reject ‘either/or’ dichotomies, instead embracing the ‘both/and’ of second modernity. They retain several of the key goals of modernity such as the emancipatory potential of knowledge. Instead of greater differentiation and specialization, however, the homeschoolers seek greater integration of social roles and rationality types. Their attempts to do so offer scholars of second modernity a unique opportunity to observe and study reflexive-modernization as it occurs.

I have sought also to add to the theoretical discussion begun by Ulrich Beck by focusing on the previously under-explored micro-level of reflexive modernity. Reflexive modernity is similar at the micro- and macro-levels: both are characterized by the recognition that modernization has created problems requiring innovative solutions; both
emphasize a redrawing of boundaries and a move beyond either/or dichotomies; and both
highlight the importance of the reflexive application of knowledge. There are also
important differences. Most notably, as this study of homeschooling has shown, micro-
level reflexive modernity creates a laboratory that is partially free from the constraints
imposed upon organizations by the now global capitalist system. The homeschoolers are
able to experiment in ways that organizations would find difficult or impossible because
homeschoolers have broader time-horizons and less-restrictive accountability structures.
At the meta-level, modernization occurs reflexively in the sense that change is driven by
unforeseen consequences which must be reacted to, and quickly. Broader time-horizons
allow homeschoolers to draw on an almost limitless stock of knowledge and to
continually re-create their pedagogical methods. Thus, at the micro-level, ‘reflexive’ has
a slightly different meaning than it does at the meta-level. Here reflexivity implies the
ability to monitor one’s actions, to problematize them, and to seek out and use new
information in the ongoing stream of action. Less-restrictive accountability structures
allow homeschoolers to customize their children’s learning experiences and to re-
introduce value-rationality into their pedagogy. Whether innovations developed at the
micro-level can be transferred to the level of organizations or institutions remains to be
seen but is an intriguing possibility. Given the constraints, discussed earlier, under which
public schools must operate, their ability to learn from the homeschoolers may be limited.
But, just as the path of modernity described by Weber was not inevitable, neither are the
constraints, or accountability structures, of public education necessarily immune to
pressures for change. There are also surely numerous other contexts characterized by
reflexive modernization at the micro-level. These should be sought out and researched.
First and foremost, we need methodologically rigorous studies of academic and other outcomes of homeschooling. Beyond that, future research should seek to further explicate the particular ways in which homeschoolers recreate education as a reflexively-modern institution. Research could also examine homeschool organizations to illuminate the ways in which they differ from more traditional organizations built in adherence to the model of linear modernity. As Beck (1997) warned, the projects of second-modernity are always in danger of regressing into counter-modernity. And it is undeniable that there are some counter-modern trends within the homeschooling movement. Homeschooling offers a valuable opportunity to study the interplay between reflexive- and counter-modern currents within the same movement. Organizational theorists will also be interested to see whether the homeschool organizations are able to avoid the pressures towards isomorphism and bureaucratization faced by many collectivist organizations as they continue to grow (Rothschild-Whitt 1979).

There are also important questions yet to be answered regarding the implications of a growing homeschool movement. As I discussed earlier, the public school system serves several important functions in the capitalist system (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Homeschooling is not only about a relatively small group of parents choosing a different way to educate their children. As an experiment in reflexive modernity, homeschooling represents a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of public education. At present the challenge is subtle but that does not mean that it is inconsequential. It will be very interesting to see how the public school system, the state and federal government, and the business community responds as the movement grows.
References


Held, Rod. Director. North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education.


Appendix I. Recruitment Letter

Greetings Home Schoolers,

My name is Earl Kennedy and I am a researcher at North Carolina State University in the Department of Sociology. I am studying home schooling in North Carolina and am looking to interview some of the true experts on the subject – you. You have probably heard some of the public debate on home schooling and you may have noticed that the so-called ‘experts’ often don’t really know much about home schooling. You may have even heard false information reported on home schooling. In short, my research aims to clear up misconceptions by taking seriously what actual home schoolers have to say.

I am recruiting people like you to be interviewed about home schooling. This research has been approved by N.C.S.U.’s Institutional Review Board which is charged with protecting the rights of human subjects in scientific research. I guarantee complete confidentiality, of course. Interviews can be scheduled at any time and place that is convenient for you and typically last from one to one and a half hours. If you are willing to be interviewed, or if you have any questions, please email me at eakenned@sa.ncsu.edu or call my office at (919) 515-0453. Once again, your input is extremely important to my research.

Thank you,

Earl A. Kennedy
North Carolina State University
Department of Sociology
Campus Box 8107
Appendix II. Recruitment Posting

Homeschoolers,

• Are you tired of hearing and seeing homeschooling misrepresented?

• Are you sick of being asked “how will your kids get socialization if not in school?”?

• Do you know that you are doing what’s best for your children and are you ready to tell someone about it?

I am a sociologist at North Carolina State University conducting research on homeschooling in North Carolina. My major interests are in exploring the diversity within the homeschooling community and addressing some of the many misperceptions people have about homeschooling. Toward this end, I am conducting interviews with homeschoolers (the real experts on this topic) as part of my dissertation/book project on homeschooling. If you answered yes to any of the above questions, I want to talk to you. Interviews are confidential and painless (many even find them enjoyable), and usually last about an hour. I can schedule interviews around your schedule. If you are willing to be interviewed, please respond by email or phone so I can tell you more and we can schedule an appointment. Email is the most reliable way to reach me, but feel free to call my office or cell phone if that works better for you. Thank you very much,

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