

Not-So-Spontaneous Socialization Outcomes of Spontaneous Family Structures

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Abstract: What enabled U.S. public schools to expand their educational mission to include the role of socializing children? Parents are increasingly relying on public schools to socialize their children. This paper argues that this results from the historical transformation of the structure of U.S. families from planned internal arrangements to spontaneous orders. By increasingly relying on public schools, parents unintentionally diminished their ability to pass down customs and morals. The state acquired the socialization role that parents forfeited through the administration of public schools, opening the door to public indoctrination and the influence of special interest groups. We provide two recent examples, critical race theory and COVID-19, demonstrating the knowledge and incentive problems that emerge from relying on public education to fulfill the family's socializing role. The growth of homeschooling can, at least in part, be attributed to attempts to restore the family's traditional role in socialization.

Keywords: children, education, family, schools, socialization

The development of science and of the creative activities of the spirit in general requires still another kind of freedom, which may be characterized as inward freedom. It is this freedom of the spirit which consists in the independence of thought from the restrictions of authoritarian and social prejudices as well as from unphilosophical routinizing and habit in general. This inward freedom is an infrequent gift of nature and a worthy objective for the individual. Yet the community can do much to further this achievement, too, at least by not interfering with its development. Thus schools may interfere with the development of inward freedom, through authoritarian influences and through imposing on young people excessive spiritual burdens; on the other hand schools may favor such freedom by encouraging independent thought.

— Albert Einstein (1950, pp. 13-14)

1. INTRODUCTION

What enabled U.S. public schools to expand their educational mission to include the role of socializing children?

Historically, the role of socialization has been one of the core functions of the family. As a spontaneous order, however, societal, and technological changes led the family to evolve in a manner that led to the unintentional and partial abdication of this role. Today, family organization is less hierarchical with fewer group activities, such as family meals, making individual family members increasingly more independent (Horwitz 2008, 2015). While this has led to numerous advantages, one of the unintended consequences has been that the new family structure has sharply curtailed the role parents play in passing on moral and social skills to their children.

The changing family structure enabled and encouraged public schools to expand beyond their traditional education objectives to also provide a socializing role for students (Beaulier et al. 2016; Marshner 1978; Spencer 1963, 1966). Like traditional education objectives, however, the socialization role of public education faces severe knowledge and incentive problems (Beaulier et al. 2016; Friedman and Friedman 1980, Ch. 6; Hoxby 2003; Lott Jr. 1990; Pakaluk 2021). Determining the correct form and goal of socialization, especially for a diverse society, faces steep epistemic problems. Public education, by its very nature, is organized to operate without the information and incentives conveyed through market mechanisms, preventing decentralized information from guiding and correcting educators. The knowledge problems create the opportunity for special interest groups to influence the socialization occurring in public schools towards their own objectives, rather than those of parents and students.

In the extreme, public educators adopting the socialization role forfeited by parents enables state indoctrination. This becomes most obvious in authoritarian regimes (Lott Jr. 1990, 1999; Piano 2022a, 2022b). In democratic countries, however, the incentives and means for indoctrinating young citizens through education are less visible. While totalitarian regimes hijack public education to advance their interests by seizing control through force, the factors enabling indoctrination in democratic countries are likely to advance through a more discrete process.

This paper argues that public socialization is a likely unintended consequence of the spontaneous evolution of the family toward a more decentralized form in a society in which public education is the dominant form of educating youth. Public education has expanded to fulfill the socialization role that was previously played by parents, enabling special interest groups to influence the socialization process to their own ends. But, public education, like its standard education role, faces knowledge and incentive problems in taking on its socialization role.

We provide two brief case studies, on critical race theory and COVID-19, demonstrating the knowledge and incentive problems that can emerge when it comes to public socialization. The emergence of a movement for school choice in the form of vouchers, educational savings accounts, charters schools, and homeschooling represents a movement by parents to take back their socializing role.

Section 2 discusses the historical transformation of families from hierarchical to decentralized orders. Section 3 discusses the state's role in socializing and teaching morals to children and provides two brief case studies on critical race theory and COVID-19. Section 4 highlights a couple of possible solutions to the current problems facing public schools in the form of school choice. Section 5 concludes.

2. A SPONTANEOUS FAMILY

Spontaneous orders are composed of institutions that are formed due to human action but in a natural and unplanned manner (Hayek 1973). Man-made orders are formed through human design and planning (Hayek 1973; Horwitz 2005, 2008; Menger 1996 [1883]). Family structure can be viewed through these two lenses of social organization.¹ The internal structure of a family depends specific historical and economic contexts (Vanek 1980), and for long it was believed that the division of labor was the main determinant of the organization of the family.²

Family structures started to change during the proto industrialization (Mendels 1972). Early-stage industrialization allowed family members in Western Europe to be financially independent from their household (Rudolph 1980). This was due to economic and social changes.

Some of the primary economic changes that influenced the evolution of family structure was related to family farming. Even as late as the 1920s, one-third of American households still lived on farms. On these family farms men and women tended to work together not only to create a home but also to earn a livelihood (Vanek 1980). In agricultural societies, families were organized to maximize the productivity of their family firm. The family unit was at the core of the production line and thus was specifically designed for efficiency. The family itself was a social unit subjected to the process of division of labor.

Due to these circumstances, families were designed like firms for a specific reason and thus were not an emergent spontaneous order. The increasing productivity of farms, including mechanized—and now computerized—machinery, advanced fertilization and watering techniques, and advancements in agricultural science (e.g., crop rotation and treated seeds), was limited by the confined scalability of family farms (Schmitt 1991; Valentinov 2007).

Today, the family unit does not require a specific structure to fulfill economic needs as it did in the past. There were also some social changes that also influenced the transition of the family structure from man-made to spontaneous orders. Women, for instance, exercised more independence and took on roles outside of the home. The growing wealth of families, including a decline in the percentage of income that went to purchasing necessities (Fogel 2004), enabled families to move up Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs away from providing necessities to self-actualization (Horwitz 2008). Self-actualization became the motivation behind having a family and the independent goal of each family member. The decline of religion also likely played a role, since, historically, tight religious communities tend to influence the structure of the family towards hierarchical forms.

As families became more independent from social and economic pressures, the family structure moved away from a designed order to a spontaneous order. The family unit is not comprised of members fulfilling socially constructed rules or rules determined by the division of labor, but rather they are individuals pursuing independent goals. Perhaps this explains the recent trend of family members “doing their own thing” where they “see the family less as a site of collective activity and more as a means through which they pursue their own ends” (Horwitz 2008, p. 177).

The transition of the structure of the family from man-made to spontaneous order also affected the traditional role that parents had in educating their children about social standards and appropriate conduct. This essential role prepares children for the world by giving them a degree of socialization. As families become less hierarchical and more spontaneous, however, children are less influenced by the family's moral and social influence due to reduced exposure. Hence, there is a negative relationship between the influence of the family on the children's education and the level of spontaneity of the family as demonstrated in Figure 1.

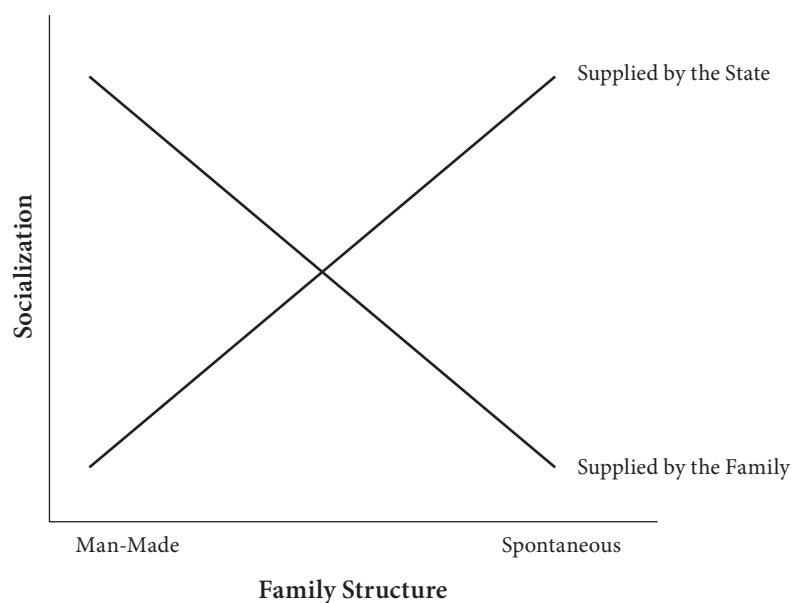


Figure 1. *Relationship Between Provision of Socialization and Structure of the Family*

The loss of parental authority over children corresponded with the expansion of the state's control over the socialization of children through public education (Beaulier et al. 2016; Marshner 1978; Spencer 1963, 1966).³ Figure 1 also shows the positive relationship between the movement of the family toward a spontaneous order and the expanded role of the state in socializing children.

3. TOWARDS STATE-LED SOCIALIZATION

State responsibility for socialization through public education faces both knowledge and incentive problems.

Socialization is a subjective process with a wide range of methods, purposes, and intended outcomes. These variables are highly dependent on the worldviews, religions, and the demographic, geographic, and economic circumstances faced by the relevant individuals. It also, importantly, depends on the character, level of progress, aptitude, and interests of the child. Parents, being the individuals most directly familiar with their children, used to pass on relevant cultural and moral knowledge to their children to provide meaningful socialization (Horwitz 2008). This socializing role was essential for the development of self-governing society (Ostrom 1997, Ch. 11)

A centralized public education system, however, has no mechanism for aggregating this information. At best different tradeoffs are weighed together and averaged out, producing a uniform system with little room for innovation or customization to local or child-specific needs (Shakeel and DeAngelis 2017).

More fundamentally, there can be disagreement about what the goals of public education should be. While the explicit goal of the state in taking on this role may be to shape children into good citizens by using its own discretion in establishing what a good citizen is and how children might be shaped into one (Spencer 1966), there is plenty of disagreement about how to achieve this.

The knowledge problem arises because of the top-down nature of the educational system. Public schools cannot truly capture the preferences of parents or the needs of students in a top-down system. If parents prefer a specific moral view or methodology, the top-down nature of the system and the lack of competition do not allow schools to acquire this dispersed, and sometimes contradicting, knowledge.

One of the complicating factors is that teaching moral virtues using typical classroom techniques does not sufficiently provide the moral growth needed for an individual to exercise free-will (Donohue

1968; Beaulier et al. 2016; Ozoliņš 2013). An essential part of the process is learning how to live with others through social interaction (Oliveira 2013). This is a process that necessarily involves someone making judgements for parents.

Peers also play a key role in the socialization process. Public education inhibits the ability of parents to select educational environments that tend to attract the children that align with their socialization goals. For instance, some parents may determine that a child would benefit from interacting with other students that are likely college-bound but that their other child may benefit from interacting with students going into the trades. More importantly, parents, especially those of limited means, do not have alternative options to pursue if the peer socialization environment generated by a school is not a good fit for their child. This prevents feedback mechanisms from delivering decentralized information about a school's performance in creating a socializing environment to educators.

Even in the absence of knowledge problems, public education faces severe incentive problems that would inhibit effective socialization through public education. The bureaucratic structure of public education and the protection of public unions combine to create a system that hampers the incentives for educators to respond to decentralized knowledge they may receive from parents or children (Chubb and Moe 1990; DeAngelis 2017; Friedman and Friedman 1980; Neal 2002).

Of even more concern, the educational system is held hostage by special interest groups that can manipulate the curriculum in schools and the overall structure of the educational system to benefit their own personal interests. Biases can become permanent fixtures of the educational environment even if done by well-meaning educators. One example of special interest groups is the teachers' unions, who can have a heavy-handed influence on education to ensure job security, sheltering them from the pressure of parents or even the needs of children (Beaulier et al. 2016, p. 8; Also see Moe 2011, 2019).

Even if there is no centralized plan to brainwash children in schools, there is a widespread unresponsive provision of public education that can refuse to meet the demands of the market. The indoctrination of children in the public school system is a natural result of parents transferring to the state the responsibility of socializing their children. In the past, families had the duty to teach moral values to children (Horwitz 2008). Schools acquired that role and are now often responsible for the moral development of children. That is, schools have the duty to make children "good citizens" (Beaulier et al. 2016, p. 10).

In the extreme, governments can regulate the information that their populations receive via public education and media ownership (Diwan and Vartanova 2020; Lott Jr. 1999; Coyne and Leeson 2009; Leung 2004; Paglayan 2022).⁴ Totalitarian governments have strong incentives to control information and civic education to reduce the risk of civil unrest. Strong family structures, however, may be able to overcome some totalitarian attempts at indoctrination (Kao 2021).

In the remainder of this section, we demonstrate the knowledge and incentive problems in public education playing a socialization role using two recent examples: critical race theory and COVID-19.⁵

3.1 Critical Race Theory

Recently, there has been growing controversy around the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 schools (Harrigan and Davies 2021; Morgan 2022; Stuart 2022). CRT seeks to redefine the interpretation of historical and modern institutions through the lens of established power relations based on race. While this approach certainly has a lot of merit in terms of shining light on historical and modern injustices and developing the critical thinking skills of children to challenge orthodoxy, there are deep ties between CRT and far left ideologies, including anti-capitalism and Marxism (Harrigan and Davies 2021; Stuart 2022).

There are also concerns about the historical accuracy of some of the central claims of CRT proponents. For instance, one of claims associated with CRT is that the founding of America was inherently racist in origins, with slavery, not independence from England being the driving motive of the Revolutionary War (Hannah-Jones 2019). This claim, however, does not appear consistent with our best available historical evidence (Magness 2020). Another claim often advanced by CRT proponents is that our modern wealth was

primarily driven by slavery. Again, this claim does not seem justified by evidence (Geloso 2019; McCloskey 2018; Wright 2022). There is also a concern that CRT precludes an examination of the potential role of culture in discussions about modern disparities of outcomes between racial groups (Sowell 2005). Even for topics that are not controversial, such as teaching students about racism, some manifestations of classroom lessons in the CRT space entail teaching methods that reasonable parents can find controversial.

Since K-12 educators are trained in our colleges and universities, where there is a growing leftward bias in the faculty, one can see the expansion of CRT into K-12 public education as part of an attempt to indoctrinate children politically and socially. CRT is a perfectly legitimate research and teaching program at the college level where adult students have alternative instructors, majors, and even colleges available. Academic freedom at the university level, however, does not readily apply to the K-12 educational space where a captive audience of minor children lacking alternative options. Importantly, CRT involves topics that fall beyond traditional technical education and permits educators to assume the role of moral educator.

3.2 COVID-19

COVID-19 presents another case study demonstrating the knowledge and incentive problems involved with the delivery of socialization education through public schools. During the pandemic teachers' unions aggressively put their own personal safety and comfort above the needs of school children by advocating for remote learning well beyond the point where the evidence became clear that school-aged children were relatively safe (Oster 2022). School districts with stronger teachers' unions were less likely to return to in person instruction (DeAngelis and Makridis 2021). Remote learning negatively affected children. This was especially true for children in low-income neighborhoods (Agostinelli 2020). It also adversely affected families, especially single-parent families (Jace and Makridis 2021; Makridis, Piano, and DeAngelis 2022).

Even when children, usually under strong pressure from parents, resumed in-person classes, it was typically with strict masking and distancing policies, despite the fact, again, that the evidence did not support their use (Alexander 2021; Nogrady 2020; Patel and Verma 2020). This was especially true given that the types of masks most children were wearing were unlikely to have mitigated the spread of the virus (Alexander 2021). These strong COVID-19 protocols, often advocated for by teachers, severely hampered the socialization of children.

Both remote education and masking and distancing policies followed by public schools during the pandemic demonstrate the knowledge and incentive problems that can emerge when public educators adopt the role of socialization education. Real opportunities for the socialization of children were readily dropped by public educators when it came to their own exaggerated concerns for their safety.

4. BACK TO FAMILY-LED-SOCIALIZATION

As the role of parents in the socialization of children diminishes, the role of the state increases. When public schools take up the task of socializing children, they often become unresponsive to the preferences of parents due to knowledge and incentive problems (Beaulier et al. 2016; Hoxby 2003; Lott Jr. 1990; Pakaluk 2021). Though some connect the education issue to the lack of education supplied by parents, the solution often proposed is to strengthen the involvement of the state in education (Hilger 2022). That is, society should lower parental expectations and put more effort into a collective state-led investment. This strategy, however, does not resolve the knowledge and incentive problems. In fact, relying on public education even more exclusively likely would exacerbate these problems by further sheltering the monopoly of public education from the needs of parents and students.

The idea that parents can set aside their "petty differences" and collectively push for an educational system that pleases everyone is a romantic solution that overlooks the nature of the issue (Hilger 2022, p. 14). Parents are different, and as a result, they have unique preferences, which a public system cannot accommodate. Nor do public educators have an incentive to.

There are two possible solutions to these dual problems. If families desire to transfer the responsibility of moral education to their children, a decentralized voucher-based education would most likely fix both problems (Beaulier et al. 2016; Friedman and Friedman 1980, Ch. 6; Lott Jr. 1990; McCluskey and DeAngelis 2020; Moe 2002).

The key aspect of a voucher system is that it gives power to the consumers, in this case, the parents. By providing a universal voucher to families, parents can choose what school they want their kids to attend. That way, parents can also choose what type of moral education they want for their kids. The voucher system also forces schools to compete for the students, boosting the quality of education and educational attainments like high school and college graduation rates (Bravo et al. 2010; Friedman and Friedman 1980, Ch. 6; DeAngelis and Erickson 2018; Hoxby 2003; McCluskey and DeAngelis 2020).

Parents unsatisfied with even private options can also turn to homeschooling. In the 2016 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), 67% of parents claimed that a desire to provide moral instruction is an important reason why they homeschool their children. Homeschooling continues to grow, and it is an effective way for parents to regain influence over the moral education of their children. As the state acquires the obligation to socialize children via public education, homeschooling provides a counterforce to that tendency as well as a feasible and effective answer to the issues that public education faces. Especially in the wake of COVID-19, parents have turned towards alternative options, such as homeschooling (Makridis, Piano, and DeAngelis 2022).

The other possible solution is enabling the spontaneous development of complementary institutions to supplement the socialization of children. Absent reform in the public educational system, we could see an increase in the level of influence that parents have on the education of their children. That is, parents can exert their influence on the children's education by providing complementary educational opportunities that "wrap around" the traditional education.

While there is limited evidence, the evidence available suggests that school choice provides just as good of a civic education (DeAngelis 2017) without engendering the mechanisms for government socialization or indoctrination. School choice also tends to encourage school environments conducive for the success of children (Shakeel and DeAngelis 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the historical transformation that families underwent from a planned internal arrangement to a spontaneous order decreased the level of influence that parents had on the moral education and socialization of children. As parents decreased their role in the socialization of children as family structure changed, they also diminished their ability to pass down customs and morals. Today, families are less responsible for the socialization of children, with public schools increasingly adopting that role. This opened the door to special interest influence and potential indoctrination due to the knowledge and incentive problems public schools face in administering this socialization role. The recent growth in school choice and homeschooling represents the attempts by some families to regain influence over the moral formation of children.

NOTES

- 1 Like other institutions, families are small and organized social units. But there are two main characteristics that do make families unique. One, the family members live together. Two, family members are connected by blood or by marriage (Neel 2004).
- 2 However, it is also possible to suggest that the organization of the family is also dependent on variables beyond the division of labor (Aronoff and Crano 1975).

- 3 The state's willingness to take over the domain may have further amplified the neglect of the responsibility of socialization on the part of families.
- 4 In China, indoctrination was also enforced via the Civil Examination System (Chen, Kung, and Ma 2020).
- 5 Thompson (2022) argues "that the theory and practice of "Progressive" education—the dominant educational philosophy in America's schools—is the root philosophic cause of the cognitive and moral chaos that defines our education system and the crisis of our teenage boys."

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