

### **Journal Editor's introduction**

Welcome to the third 'journal corner' where we offer curriculum friendly summaries of papers published in the BSA journal *Sociology*. These are accompanied by an informal interview with authors.

In this journal corner, we look at Martin Myer's paper "The Unhomely of Homeschooling" This paper is open access and free to download.

This article is a little different from previous 'journal corners' – in that it is largely conceptual. Whilst touching on important themes across the curriculum - including education, stratification and family – it also raises interesting important questions about sociological method and the boundaries of sociology.

As always, we hope that this will inspire wide-ranging, and critical, discussion.

Best wishes

The Editors of *Sociology*

## The Unhomely of Homeschooling

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic shone a very bright light on the idea of ‘homeschooling’ it would be wrong to associate it only with very recent times. As Dr Martin Myers explains in this article, homeschooling has a long history and is characterized by heterogeneity of families, diversity of practices and differences in legal status and requirements. As an example, homeschooling has always been a legal choice in the UK, Republic of Ireland, France and Scandinavia – whereas in the United States homeschooling remained illegal in most states until 1980. In Germany, Spain and Portugal it is only allowed in exceptional circumstances.

The article starts from the idea that there is a ‘discomfort’ surrounding homeschooling. Policymakers – we are told – have associated homeschooling indirectly with “other social issues including Islamic radicalization, child abuse and maltreatment” (see page 1105 of the article). Other examples of this ‘discomfort’ can be seen in the focus on safeguarding in the first serious review of homeschooling in the UK and long held concerns over a lack of data on who is being homeschooled and why.

The article explores this discomfort in the context of Freud’s account of *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is often taken to mean ‘uncanny’. In turn, dictionaries tend to define ‘uncanny’ as ‘weird, strange and difficult to explain’. But it is not simply a matter of being weird or spooky. ‘Uncanny’ relates to disturbance of the familiar. It is about unfamiliarity which appears at the heart of the familiar, or a sense of familiarity at the heart of the unfamiliar (see [here](#), for example). According to the [Freud Museum](#) examples might include inanimate objects coming alive or seeing your ‘double’. Another example might be the unsettling feeling we get when technology resembles humans but is still not quite convincingly human.

Why, then, does *unheimlich* help us understand the discomfort surrounding homeschooling? According to Dr Myers *unheimlich* is really about the ‘unhomely’ and it helps us think about how ideas of ‘homely’ and ‘unhomely’ fold into one another within discourses of homeschooling. For example, whilst the state often associates homeschooling with fears for children’s physical safety, homeschoolers readily identify the home as a ‘safe space’ away from the unsafe space of school.

In developing this argument further the article touches on important themes across the curriculum. As well as ‘education’ – which clearly runs throughout – these include stratification and differentiation and family and households.

*Stratification and differentiation* – The article explores aesthetic examples of *unheimlich*, including folktales and anecdote. This idea of anecdote seems pertinent to homeschooling. Official and government accounts often lament the lack of reliable data; whilst media accounts are either ‘lifestyle’ stories or sensationalized accounts of individual tragedies. As Dr Myers says, these “often mirror repetitions of events or subject matter in which the anticipated homely example is projected upon an unhomely equivalent, consistently generating a sensation of being unsettling and frightening” (see page 1103 of the article). As an example, the space of the home – and the fact that homeschooling happens behind closed doors - is used to evidence the potential for harm for homeschooling poorer families. However, the homes and domestic lives of White middle-class homeschoolers are portrayed as loving, safe and secure. Here, families flourish in ‘bespoke’ educational adventures.

*Family and households* – The domestic home contributes to understandings of homeschooling (and the distress surrounding it). It is often a place of safety, bounded by conventions of privacy, and not normally a space where regulated activities (like schooling) occur. This collision between state and family/home creates an unstable backdrop. Homeschoolers are not visible and their practice is not surveilled by the state. However, consistent attempts to legislate homeschooling message to homeschoolers that the state perceives them as a *risk*. There is also a doubling in the semantics of homeschooling and schooling in which “two apparent opposites are merged – though only in the context of the family home.” (see page 1109 of the article). Schooling tends to be seen as both the practice of education in municipal buildings and also the language of schooling. Homeschoolers adopt the language while also rejecting the concept of schooling and its regulatory framing by the state.

The articles raised a series of questions as we read through: What is ‘home’? What is ‘unhomely’? How do these ideas appear in discourses of ‘homeschooling’? Are they ‘conflated’? Does this help explain the ‘discomfort’ around homeschooling? The paper also invites discussion around the relationship between theory and method. Whilst it appears largely conceptual, the author does say that the article draws upon his research since 2008. Many of these studies included interviews with teachers, children and parents.

To us, the paper is also a really nice example of the power and promise of the ‘sociological imagination’. Dr Myers shows how homeschooling is embedded within complex discourses, structures and webs of interdependence. At the same time, Dr Myers possibly troubles disciplinary boundaries when he brings sociology into conversation with psychology (Freud). Would Freud be Ok with this? Where does it leave sociology? These are questions we touch upon in the interview below.

## Interview with Dr Martin Myers

*Martin is currently Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. Prior to working at Nottingham, Martin taught at the Universities of Portsmouth and Greenwich and worked as a researcher at Southampton, Goldsmiths and the University of London. Martin has also worked as a Senior Policy Advisor at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Martin's research explores the impact of race/racism and social class in different educational contexts including Higher Education (HE) and homeschooling. More details about Martin can be found [here](#).*

### **Can you tell us what led you to write this paper?**

Talking to other sociologists I get the impression a lot of research emerges out of a mix of personal experience, passion for social justice and unexpected, chance events. All three played some role in my research on home schooling (and having an academic career in the first place).

I only *became* a sociologist in my early forties. I took a career break from the civil service to care for my four (at that time) very young children. One consequence of that decision was I re-engaged with full time education and eventually completed a PhD in sociology at the Open University. My PhD was interested in the multiple ways Traveller and Gypsy families in the UK experience racism and are excluded from society.

Many Travellers choose to home school for a complicated mix of reasons. One of which being families' experiences of racism at school which at that time was my only real interest in the topic. That changed following a national review of homeschooling that recommended greater monitoring of homeschooling families. The review itself was triggered by a very tragic story. A young girl in Birmingham, Khyra Ishaq, was starved to death by her parents. One reason suggested for the failure of social services to intervene was that Khyra was being homeschooled. None of the recommendations from the review were implemented but the publicity resulted in many local authorities deciding they needed to review their own practice. I was recruited as a researcher on several such reviews.

In each case their research was defined in terms of the potential risks posed by Traveller homeschoolers and never the potential risks posed by any other group such as the far larger numbers of white middle class homeschoolers. What I identified at that time, and in subsequent research, is that narratives about homeschoolers assign risk based on demographic characteristics such as race and class. So, the lifestyle sections of Sunday newspapers often carry idyllic stories of an affluent family selling their family home, buying a camper van and embarking on their home schooling adventure. Meanwhile on their front page they will run a story identifying failing or abusive home schooling families whose lives are characterized as being 'off grid'.

The same narratives also appear in policy making. OFSTED for example identified the threat of Muslim homeschoolers radicalizing their children. In conversation with Muslim homeschoolers, they often explain their decisions are driven by their children being bullied and labelled as extremists within schools. As a sociologist I'm interested in hearing people's voices. How do they explain their lives and the choices they make. Homeschoolers are not a generalizable group, they have diverse backgrounds, interests and hopes for the future. What they all tend to share is the same concern for their children's safety and well-being described by Muslim families. As a sociologist of education understanding how race and class shape and skew educational outcomes has been a core concern of my research. This is often well understood in terms of schools and universities but largely ignored in relation to homeschooling

**It is really interesting that the paper uses Freud's concept as a sociological tool. Do you think Freud would be happy with this?**

I don't know what Freud would say! I think he described sociology as being "just" applied psychology. That said the bit of Freud that I use – *the unbomely* – does not feel entirely psychological. He is talking about a particular type of nagging, unsettling fear that materializes in the social world. It is a type of fear that is recognizable and shared. The sort of fear at the heart of a horror film where we know something is wrong but cannot quite put our finger on what it is. I enjoy working around concepts like this because on the one hand they are very recognizable but on the other quite ambiguous.

With home schooling I find there is a particular fear about certain homeschoolers in certain settings. The setting of the home plays a big part in the particularity of the risks identified and the fears associated with those risks. Other people's homes are obviously private spaces but also spaces we like to pry into. Be that glimpsing into a well lit house at night to see someone else's domestic life unfolding or watching an episode of *Come Dine With Me*. As a private space there is always the sense that we don't really know what happens behind closed doors. That privacy fosters and magnifies a lot of the fears and stereotypes of difference that infuse our daily lives. The hard empirical evidence for those fears is often absent, but imaginations can run wild about what happens out of sight.

I think that's one reason the Freud essay is useful to sociologists. We can think around the unsaid nature of a phenomenon like home schooling. When I wrote the article I was very conscious of providing a lot of evidence and examples of how risk is understood and fear materializes around homeschooling. That was largely because the empirical evidence of the phenomenon at times feels like an absence. Mark Fisher makes a nice distinction between the 'eerie' being fear of something that is absent and the 'weird', a fear of something that is present that does not belong. In homeschooling both eerie and weird seem present in different times and contexts. Providing the evidence is difficult and again Freud's approach is a good one. He piles on the examples and pulls them altogether in quite a literary fashion. He really wants to convince the reader and that is definitely something sociologists ought to be doing. Our subject is the social world and people's lives. That ought to be interesting. And Convincing.

**Does this disciplinary blurring make it hard to say what sociology is and isn't?**

Possibly, but if it does I think that is a good thing. Every time I am asked to introduce who I am, I always begin by saying I'm a sociologist of education. Which is true but that's really just professional shorthand for my academic role. I am a sociologist and my work has tended to focus on education. But I draw on whatever works to make an argument including bits of geography, philosophy and even business studies. Once or twice I have been advised on the need as an academic to specialize both in terms of research subject and approach. The argument being that you become the specialist in your field. Partly I don't think that would suit my temperament. I'm easily bored and derive a lot of pleasure from exploring more eclectic angles. But more importantly I'm not convinced that a narrow focus makes for good social science. It is almost an admission of limitation.

**What are you currently working on?**

Although I am still continuing with research around Travellers and homeschooling my interests have shifted towards higher education (seen through the lens of race and class). I published a book, *Elite Universities and the Making of Privilege*, (available in all good bookshops),

earlier this year with Kalwant Bhopal at the University of Birmingham. This reports on a project exploring race and class in the setting of elite universities in the UK and US. In a strange way seeing the book published has raised new questions about the subject matter itself that I am developing at the moment. In particular, the sense of ambiguity that surrounds some of the mechanisms by which inequalities are reproduced such as university brands. It is another area where blurring disciplinary boundaries is useful. I've been drawing on critical management studies. It is also a problematic field to explore in terms of my positionality. As an academic and, even more so as a sociologist of education, its hard to know where criticality ends and self-interest begins.