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Unschooling and the Self:

A Dialogical Analysis of Unschooling Blogs in Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract

Unschooling is a form of home education in which free play, trust and autonomy are highly valued. Unschooling is also a countercultural movement that began in the United States in the 1970s. Applying dialogical theories about the development and exchange of ideas through dialogue, unschooling can be seen as an internally persuasive, centrifugal discourse that resists an authoritative, centripetal discourse that assumes children's education happens at school. The researchers conducted a dialogical analysis of 19 unschooling blog posts that contained autodiologue among multiple voices within the Self, including I-as-unschooler, I-as-mother, I-as-countercultural, I-as-learner, and I-as-thought-leader. These I-positions interacted with inner-Others, such as public figures in the unschooling movement, other bloggers, children, mainstream adults, and the school system. There were clear tensions as the bloggers engaged in imagined dialogue with their critics. As an exploratory, qualitative study on an under-researched phenomenon, the study opens up questions for further research, including how values, beliefs and identities play out in unschooling families in practice, and contributes unique insights into the ways unschooling bloggers dialogically author their social identities.

Keywords: unschooling, dialogical analysis, bloggers, countercultural, home education, I-positions, Bakhtin, Self, social identity, dialogical self theory.

Unschooling and the Self: A Dialogical Analysis of Unschooling Blogs

School is a near-ubiquitous feature of contemporary Western society. Children are routinely asked their school and grade; education and schooling are seen as synonymous; and many people assume school is compulsory (Lees, 2014). As such, discourses of schooling are dominant within certain cultures. A discourse, according to Parker (1990), is a coherent system of meanings, appearing in the form of texts, that contains instances of reflection on its own use of language, makes reference to other discourses, represents objects (such as concepts), contains subjects (such as speakers), and is historically located. Some discourses, like those around schooling, are implicated with the structure of institutions, reproduce power relations, and have ideological effects (Parker, 1990).

Bakhtin (1981/1994a) draws attention to a constant tension between *authoritative discourses*, which centripetally pull audiences toward socially accepted pronouncements, and *internally persuasive discourses*, which centrifugally resist that tendency and pull individuals towards words that they find persuasive and that shape their perspective. According to Bakhtin (1981/1994a, p. 78), authoritative discourse is a prior discourse, “the word of the fathers”, and derives its authority and higher, untouchable status from its connection to the past. Authoritative discourse, like the discourse of schooling, enters our verbal consciousness fully formed, demands unconditional allegiance and permits no play with its borders, nuance, or creative variation. Audiences are compelled to either totally affirm it or totally reject it, and it is fused with whichever person, institution or political power bestows its authority (Bakhtin, 1981/1994a, p. 79).

Conversely, to Bakhtin (1981/1994a), internally persuasive discourses encourage the awakening of consciousness and independent, experimental and discriminating ways of thinking. Even when internally persuasive discourse is fused with a speaker, it permits creative stylisation and experimentation. An individual comes to ideological consciousness

by struggling with the other's discourse in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981/1994a). Discourses of home education centrifugally pull away from the school system to varying degrees, exploiting and opening tensions within the authoritative discourse.

Home education is a general term for learning that is based around a child's family and community rather than the institution of school, and encompasses a wide spectrum of approaches (Dowty, 2000). It is legal in Australia, New Zealand (NZ), and the United States (US), among a range of other countries; however, it is illegal in Germany, Sweden, China, Cuba, Turkey and elsewhere (Home School Legal Defence Association, 2018). A family's decision to leave or not enter the school system sometimes stems from a parent and/or a child having had negative experiences with school, or a belief that the system is fundamentally flawed, broken, or oppressive (Gray & Riley, 2013; Morton, 2010; Raja, 2012). Some parents choose home education because they believe their particular child needs a tailored approach, due to disability, giftedness, or mental illness (Morton, 2010; Rothermel, 2011). Families also choose to educate their children at home to have more family time (Holt & Farenga, 2003).

Within home education, there exists an explicitly countercultural and strongly centrifugal discourse of *unschooling*. Unschooling is a form of home education in which parents facilitate their children to learn in a self-directed manner (Gray & Riley, 2013). Unschoolers typically reject the mainstream education system's use of standardised curricula, standardised testing, "teaching to the test", homework, and behaviour management interventions (Gray & Riley, 2013).

John Holt, a US social reformer and former schoolteacher, coined the term unschooling in the 1970s. He defined it as "allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world as their parents can comfortably bear", with parents and children living and learning together (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p. 238). Similarly, Gatto (2002) argued that schools created confusion by thrusting facts and concepts on children out of context and without meaning,

emphasised classroom position and stratification through test scores and grades, and encouraged indifference through the sounding of end-of-class bells that meant nothing important was ever finished and no task was worth caring deeply about. He argued that schools fostered emotional dependency through rewards, punishments, judgements, interventions and denial of privacy, and intellectual dependency through a rigid, expert-determined curriculum. These features, he argued, amounted to a hidden curriculum, which he described as “an essential support system for a model of social engineering that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows as it ascends to a terminal of control” (Gatto, 2002, p. 39).

Accordingly, unschooling parents tend not to seek to control their children through rewards, punishments, force, or emotional manipulation (Gray, 2013). For some unschoolers, including radical unschoolers, unschooling is not just an alternative approach to education, but an alternative lifestyle in which parents are not coercive in any domain of their children’s lives (Petrovic & Rolstad, 2016). Unschooling discourse emphasises trusting children to play freely, take risks, explore, make their own decisions, and learn from their own mistakes (Gray, 2013).

Research in the US, UK and Australia shows unschoolers tend to express beliefs about “natural” human child-rearing practices exemplified by hunter-gatherers, drawing on discourses of attachment parenting (English, 2015; Grunzke, 2010; Holt & Farenga, 2003; Kirschner, 2008; Rothermel, 2011). Attachment parenting is linked to Liedloff’s (1986) observations about the Ye’kuana indigenous people of the Amazon basin in her book *The Continuum Concept*. Liedloff described a culture in which babies were in constant physical contact with their mothers or other trusted people until they were ready to explore on their own, children of all ages were part of daily activities and learned naturally, and children were trusted to manage risks and behave prosocially.

Although home education is legal in many countries, it carries a degree of stigma (English, 2016; Morton, 2010). Home educated children are stereotyped as sheltered, friendless and socially awkward, while unschooling families report experiencing negative judgement or criticism from relatives, friends and strangers, and the perceived need to continually justify their decision to unschool (Gray & Riley, 2013). Unschoolers seem motivated to persist, despite social pressure to conform to centripetal, mainstream beliefs about parenting and schooling (Gray & Riley, 2013; Lois, 2013; Stevens, 2001).

Approach to This Study

There is little research into unschooling, and no published studies regarding unschooling in Australia or NZ in the psychology field. However, unschooling discourses appear to be growing in both countries, with several unschooling mothers maintaining public blogs in which they share their unschooling beliefs and explain how their children learn, what their lives are like, and how they see themselves in relation to mainstream views about parenting and education. Blogs can be a valuable source of naturalistic data for qualitative research. They provide rich, spontaneously generated, first-person textual accounts of daily life that are easily accessed by researchers (Hookway & Snee, 2017).

Bakhtin (1984/1994b) argued that an idea cannot stay alive if it remains in one's individual consciousness, but takes shape, develops and generates new ideas only by entering into genuine dialogue with other ideas. Bakhtin saw all of life as a continuous, unfinalisable dialogue (Morson & Emerson, 1990). According to dialogism, the Self arises in and through its relationships with Others, and is infused with and continually responding to the voices of Others, such as when we paraphrase someone's words or are concerned with how our audience will receive our words (Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2015). We each anticipate and react to how Others *author* us, try to author our own identities, and engage in continuous dialogue between Self and Other, even when we are the only speaker (Sullivan, 2012).

Dialogue is made up of *utterances*. Utterances, whether spoken or written, are units of communication bounded by a change of speakers, and range in length from a single-word rejoinder to a large novel or scientific document (Bakhtin, 1986/1994c). Utterances have properties, such as their style, shape and expressions, that can be understood and are made meaningful within the genre of the discourse and in the context of their cultural framework (Martinez, Tomicic, & Medina, 2014). Here, utterances under analysis are blog posts, within the discursive genre of unschooling blogging, and in the context of an authoritative discourse or cultural paradigm that assumes children's education happens at school. Consistent with dialogism, the study aims not to uncover a single, coherent meaning, but to make sense of different and ambiguous ways of experiencing a meaning, and the tensions within and between utterances (Sullivan, 2012).

Dialogical self theory (DST) is a bridging theory that brings together the concept of self, rooted in American pragmatism, and the concept of dialogue, from Bakhtin and other European thinkers (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). This contemporary approach to self and dialogue conceives the self as plural, multiple or *multivoiced*, with others forming part of Self because of the way the self arises in and through interactions with others (Aveling et al., 2015). In DST, the self is made up of multiple, interacting voices, including *I-positions* and *inner-Others*. The concept of I-position at once acknowledges the self's multiplicity and preserves its coherence and unity: it is a dynamic process in which the *I* positions, repositions and counter-positions in relation to personal or social spaces (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Inner-Others are constructions of the other in the self, and mediate between internal positions and actual others in the outside world; they are continually reconstructed as external positions in the self through ongoing dialogue between the self and the actual other (Hermans & Gieser, 2012).

Research based on DST suggests imaginal dialogue performs psychological functions, including support or hope, substitution for real-life contact, exploration or escape from ordinary life, bonding, self-improvement or learning from mistakes, insight or new perspective on a personal issue, and self-guidance (Puchalska-Wasyl, Chmielnicka-Kuter, & Oleś, 2008). Analysis of discourse in this tradition pays attention to levels of authority and internal persuasiveness, and the changing boundary lines between self and other (Sullivan, 2012), as well as tensions and aspects that are unfamiliar, difficult or disconcerting (Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017).

Given the countercultural status of unschooling and associated parenting practices within society at large, and the strength of DST in examining dynamic tensions and boundaries between self and other, issues of social identity are of interest. This study, which is exploratory and aims to reveal avenues for further research rather than definitive answers, examines how unschooling bloggers dialogically author their Selves as unschoolers and as parents in their posts, and the ways in which they position themselves in relation to their audiences, other unschoolers, and mainstream discourses.

Method

Participants

The research project was approved by the Queensland University of Technology Ethics Committee, based on the use of opt-out consent and moderate disguise of bloggers' identities so that it would not be obvious to a reader which blogs were under analysis (Bruckman, 2002). Selected blog posts written in English and already published on the internet by unschooling parents based in Australia and NZ comprised the data. Using social media and search engines, the researchers found nine publicly accessible blogs based in Australia or NZ that incorporated "unschooling" as part of their name, subtitle or as a category, contained at least five posts about unschooling, and communicated a person's beliefs and experiences as

an unschooling parent. Two blogs that did not contain an email address or online contact form were excluded. The seven remaining bloggers were contacted with information, and none requested to opt out. Moderate disguise entailed replacing bloggers' names with pseudonyms, omitting other identifiers, and altering direct quotations over six words. Full de-identified transcripts can be made available to interested researchers.

Procedure

Data collection and thematic analysis. Posts were deemed relevant if they explicitly or implicitly expressed the blogger's social identity as an unschooling parent. Data collection occurred iteratively and ended once theoretical saturation was reached: when the addition of new data was no longer changing the emerging theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Blog posts were imported into NVivo software. Thematic analysis involved an iterative process of open and selective coding of patterns within the data corpus of 90 posts, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method.

Dialogical interpretation of key moments. Nineteen blog posts, including at least two by each blogger, were selected for in-depth analysis of multivoicedness, using Aveling et al.'s (2015) method. These posts were considered utterances of significance, or key moments, based on the researchers' perception of their richness and relevance (Sullivan, 2012).

Although each had a single author, these posts were considered particularly suitable for dialogical analysis because multiple interacting voices were readily discernible within them.

First, I-positions were identified. I-positions are aspects of identity that originate in particular social contexts and are internalised in a person's psychological life (Aveling et al., 2015). Examples from the current study include "I-as-mother", "I-as-unschooler", and "I-as-thought-leader". Secondly, inner-Others were identified. Inner-Others are voices attributed to others, whether real individuals ("my child", "my husband"), imagined or generalised Others ("mainstream society"), or discourses associated with particular institutions ("the school

system”). Inner-Others appear within utterances in the form of direct quotes (giving voice to a specific person or group), indirect quotes (referring generally to other people’s opinions, beliefs, ideas or utterances), and *echoes* (akin to unreferenced quotations, when a speaker uses ideas and words that are borrowed from someone else) (Aveling et al., 2015).

Thirdly, interactions among voices were identified. In single-author blog posts, *autodialogue*, or dialogue between the voices within the Self, is present in rhetorical questions, internal debate, and anticipating responses of others (Aveling et al., 2015). Certain I-positions and inner-Others may dominate, undermine or silence others, reflecting patterns of dominance and power asymmetries in the broader sociocultural context (Aveling et al., 2015). The researchers engaged in an iterative process of identifying and labelling voices and relationships among them in the 19 blog posts.

Results

Some demographic information about the seven bloggers (Anna, Christine, Emma, Kate, Maria, Michelle and Rebecca) was available from the blogs. All identified as female, as mothers and as having male partners; six were estimated to be in their 30s and one in her 40s; six resided in Australia and one in NZ; two mentioned having migrated from Europe. Three bloggers had two children, one had three and three had four children. Educational attainment ranged from high school education to master’s degree (three bloggers). At least five held a bachelor’s degree or higher. All bloggers indicated they were their children’s primary caregivers. One received income as a writer and online content creator, one marketed essential oils through her blog, three hosted paid advertisements, and one noted she had only ever worked in two brief casual jobs.

Themes in the Data

A key theme across the broader data corpus of 90 posts was the bloggers’ opposition to a mainstream “control paradigm”. All seven wrote posts concerned with critiquing the

mainstream school system or challenging mainstream approaches to parenting, and some drew on their personal experiences. Secondly, the bloggers seemed acutely aware of their minority status as unschoolers. They wrote about tensions with mainstream ideas, dealing with their own fears and doubts, and the importance of “finding their tribe”. The third key theme was the bloggers’ expressions of a set of values and beliefs, many of which were shared by all seven, including children’s autonomy, letting go of parental control, joy in family life, connection between parents and children, children’s rights, and trust in children.

I-Positions and Dialogue

Among the I-positions identified in the 19 “key moments” posts, five appeared most frequently and were voiced by all or most of the bloggers.

I-as-unschooler. Several blog posts defined unschooling or demarcated what constituted an unschooler. Anna equated unschooling with a particular approach to respecting children as “whole people”, arguing “there are no rules on how you do that, but once you start seeing children as true equals, don’t be surprised if you start acting like an unschooler too”. The centrifugal idea of no rules on unschooling appeared in tension with Anna’s and other bloggers’ repeated efforts to centripetally demarcate the boundaries of the unschooler identity.

Anna constructed an explicit contrast between the experiences of unschooled children and mainstream schooled children in a post about a day outdoors with several unschooling families, when a school group was nearby. She spoke from the I-positions of unschooler, nature lover, observer and activist, and there were echoes of several inner-Others: her own children, school children and their absent parents, the institution of school, unschooling thought leaders, and her blog audience. The post was a rhythmic, back-and-forth juxtaposing of the unschooling children’s joyful, autonomous play and the school children’s sedentary, soulless, curriculum-based activities. I-as-unschooler was the dominant I-position, speaking

in opposition to the inner-Other of the institution of school. Anna expressed exasperation and anguish on behalf of the school children, linked to a perception that they were being denied freedom, autonomy, play and natural learning. Her I-as-unschooler voice also painted a picture of an idyllic unschooling lifestyle that was far better for children. She positioned the school children's parents as unaware of how school-like their children's nature excursion was, and her blogging as activism illuminating the deficits of school education in allowing children only "adult-controlled experiences".

In a post about becoming an unschooler, Emma shared an autodiologue between her longstanding position of I-as-left-wing and an emerging position of I-as-unschooler. Having held a left-wing or politically progressive position in favour of state education, Emma wrote of an epiphany in which she questioned her faith in that system after reading about the school-free childhood of an author she admired (an inner-Other), who she said taught herself to read and to write novels with great success. Emma wrote that it led her to trust her intuition about her child's natural ability to learn. She sought to reconcile the tension between I-as-left-wing and I-as-unschooler by predicting that schools would reform eventually, and that to be an unschooler was to be part of a progressive movement for education reform. This conclusion aligned with arguments by Holt, whom Emma cited as a major influence.

When the seven bloggers spoke from I-as-unschooler, many were clear about the influence of inner-Others who were public figures in the North American unschooling movement. These included Holt, Gatto, Liedloff and Gray, cited earlier in this paper, as well as contemporary unschooling and parenting writers Alfie Kohn, Carol Black, Idzie Desmarais, Ben Hewitt and Teresa Graham Brett. There were relationships of influence and agreement among bloggers: Christine quoted Anna and Rebecca, Kate quoted Rebecca and herself, Rebecca quoted Anna and Kate, and there were many instances of links to their own

and each other's blogs. There was no critique, debate or discernible tension in these relationships, suggesting the presence of centripetal forces within unschooling blogging.

I-as-mother. The bloggers' identities as mothers were closely linked to their identities as unschoolers, and their parenting and unschooling values were intertwined. Kate, Maria, Anna and Rebecca all wrote that motherhood was their most important role. To some, it was partly their attunement to their children as individuals that fuelled their desire to unschool and practice what they called respectful or conscious parenting. Anna wrote from I-as-mother in responding to remarks from women in her life (inner-Others) who said they could never homeschool or unschool because they "needed a break" from their kids. In this example of autodialogue, I-as-mother overlapped with I-as-unschooler when Anna endeavoured to address her audience's misconceptions that home educating mothers must be "supermums". The post contained a direct imagined dialogue with Anna's blog audience (inner-Other) about what her life was like, with rhetorical questions like "You know that feeling of freedom you get on holidays? Well, it's kind of like that." Anna seemed keen to clarify that she was a facilitator of her children's largely independent learning, which she constructed as being far less onerous and stressful than either a school-at-home approach or doing all the organising, lunch-making and transportation involved in a five-day school week.

Christine shared a reflective post about anxiety, speaking mostly from I-as-mother. She wrote about "naturally falling into a gentle attachment style of parenting", and experiencing great joy until chronic sleep deprivation, a difficult second pregnancy and injury combined to take a toll on her mental health. Christine communicated vulnerability, courage and emotional pain, and included the voices of several inner-Others: her partner, children in general, health professionals, and her blog audience. In another post, Christine wrote that her pre-baby career as a researcher had influenced her to research everything in life extensively.

There was a sense of I-as-researcher being a past identity, replaced by new identities that had formed through motherhood and unschooling.

I-as-countercultural. All bloggers spoke from I-as-countercultural when writing about living within a dominant culture that they saw as discriminating against children. Emma referred to academic research into the concept of adultism: a prejudice that adults were superior and were entitled to act upon children and young people in many domains without seeking their consent. She also wrote about enjoying the company of other adults who had come to terms with “their own childhood oppression” and were now able to celebrate the “wildness” of children.

Rebecca wrote that for those raised in authoritarian households and educated in authoritarian schools, it would be easy to simply stay within a mainstream paradigm. She perceived stretching outside of one’s comfort zone as confronting, yet necessary for one’s own self-worth and self-respect, and for one’s children’s sake. Addressing her readers (inner-Others), she gave advice on how to parent respectfully when triggered, and acknowledged how difficult it was to parent “without arbitrary control and obedience”. Christine described needing to recover from her own childhood and a “heartfelt desire to break the cycle” of ageism against children. Kate wrote a post challenging the definition of “permissive parent”, a label unnamed Others had given her, by arguing that no parent had the right to give or withhold permission for a child to express themselves, and that the concept of permissiveness only made sense within the paradigm of adults controlling children. Citing a book by developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik, Anna argued that respectful parents were not shaping their children like a carpenter shaped wood, but being in relationship with their growing children the way a gardener supported plants.

Rebecca wrote openly about the tension between herself (I-as-countercultural) and her critics (inner-Others) in an autodialogical post about being told she was offensive and

judgemental for judging other people's parenting. She argued that all humans judged others, and judgement underpinned passion, advocacy and social change. Noting that she "rubbed people up the wrong way", Rebecca defended herself as judging concepts rather than people, and acknowledged that when she advocated for children's rights, her opinion was interpreted by others as a judgement of other parents. She also referred to the stress involved: "It's hard to live loud with countercultural beliefs around parenting and schooling, because even just making different choices challenges others' reality."

For the bloggers, mainstream parenting was wrapped up in centripetal discourses of schooling, and institutional and parental control over children were intertwined. Anna, Rebecca and Kate were particularly outspoken in their criticisms of the school system. They quoted prominent unschooling writers in arguing that the mainstream approach to education was "extraordinarily authoritarian" and involved "forcible subjugation of children by adults" (Rebecca, quoting Carol Black), and that it was excessively hierarchical and disempowering for children (Anna, quoting Teresa Graham Brett).

I-as-learner. Bloggers wrote extensively about their own experiences of personal growth, and of *deschooling*: an unschooling term for the process of shedding dominant discourses around education and learning. For example, Michelle reflected she was previously a "fairly authoritarian" parent. After taking her eldest child out of school, she tried to emulate school at home, but adult-imposed lesson plans made her child bored and unmotivated. Over time, she read about learning, looked at international approaches, and let herself be influenced by other unschoolers. In telling this story, Michelle drew attention to her own internal dialogues and tensions. She wrote that she gradually "let go of control" and embraced unschooling. Michelle described experiencing more trust, connection, play and harmony as she moved through this deschooling process. She addressed her blog audience, imagined their feelings, and positioned herself as similar to them: "I was once like you and

worried about the whole home education thing”. Michelle also wrote of tensions with the school her eldest child had been attending: a hostile inner-Other. She constructed the school as labelling her child “broken” and requiring medication for psychiatric diagnoses, and wrote triumphantly about how her child was now thriving with unschooling.

In a post on her decision to unschool her children, Christine wrote primarily from I-as-learner. As she detailed her gradual journey towards unschooling, there was a sense of increasing certainty. Christine shared her inner dialogue about an epiphany she experienced while listening to a talk by education reformer Sir Ken Robinson (an inner-Other):

That’s it, I thought. That’s why conventional schooling didn’t sit right with me. Every child is different. Why are children labelled difficult or lacking if they don’t fit the mould? Why is there only one ‘right’ way to be educated?

There was harmony between I-as-learner and I-as-countercultural in Christine’s post, and explicit mention of inner-Others who had influenced her: bloggers Rebecca, Kate and Anna, who had become her friends, and unschooling or education reform proponents such as Holt, Gray, Black and Robinson.

I-as-thought-leader. The researchers coded text as coming from I-as-thought-leader when it expressed a blogger’s awareness of how her discourse reached and affected audiences. While the previous I-positions were used by all seven bloggers, I-as-thought-leader was only prominent in posts by Anna, Emma, Kate, Maria and Rebecca, who were also the more established and prolific of the bloggers.

Rebecca spoke from I-as-thought-leader in a post addressing online messages she had received from her audience (inner-Others). According to Rebecca, who recognised her thought leader position in referring to herself as “someone who publicly shares my life and opinions”, these messages and comments positioned her as making motherhood look easy, and as not sharing enough “real” parenting because she did not engage in what she saw as a

blogging trend of complaining about children and partners. She argued that putting down children was “so praised in our culture”. She defended blogging about the “lovely”, “awesome” and “beautiful” moments of her life as being “just as real” as blogs focusing on negativity, and said she had been open about her family’s struggles.

Similarly, Kate spoke from I-as-thought-leader in addressing comments that she and other “vocal” unschoolers presented a picture of unschooling that was “intimidating in its grandeur”. According to these unspecified inner-Others, Kate and other bloggers portrayed their lives as too peaceful and incredible to be true, and as unrealistic, unrelatable and unachievable. Whereas Rebecca’s tone in response to similar criticisms was one of passionate exasperation mixed with defensiveness, Kate’s approach was to turn the scrutiny back on her critics, arguing that they felt intimidated not because of the “unschooling narrative” itself but because of cognitive dissonance. She argued that her critics were actually envious but could not bring themselves to pursue an unschooling lifestyle, so they constructed it as intimidating and unachievable, to reduce dissonance and continue with their school-centric lifestyles.

Discussion

The analysis explicated how the bloggers invoked identity positions of I-as-unschooler, I-as-mother, I-as-countercultural, I-as-learner and I-as-thought-leader in discursive moves such as delineating the unschooler identity, comparing their children and lifestyles with schooled children and school-centric lifestyles, in describing and defending their parenting, and in discussing their minority status, fears and doubts, and the importance of finding their “tribe”. I-as-learner was accompanied by humility and reflection, while I-as-thought-leader expressed an explicit awareness of the bloggers’ influence on readers and conflict with their critics’ views. Only the more prolific and experienced bloggers spoke from I-as-thought-leader, raising the possibility that this identity developed over time, or as a function of audience size or impact. Although the five prominent I-positions seemed compatible, there

were hints of tensions with other aspects of the Self, such as previous career identities and political views.

Bloggers engaged in imaginal dialogue with the internalised voices of critical inner-Others. On one hand they were accused of being permissive and irresponsible, and on the other hand of being judgemental “supermums” who presented their unschooling lifestyles as unrealistically perfect. In response to the former, bloggers tended to reject the ideological premises on which these criticisms were based. In response to the latter, they drew attention to the ways in which they believed their blogging was honest and “real”. The study’s findings are a tangible example of DST in action, showing how people’s sense of identity can emerge from the richness of dialogue among I-positions and inner-Others, and how a confrontation among these voices can produce new ideas, meanings or insights (Batory, 2014).

Researcher Reflections

The first author examined the unschooling blogs from a dual perspective: as a researcher in graduate psychology and an unschooling mother. Bakhtin observed that researchers become participants in the dialogue and must accept they are approaching the data from a particular worldview, and be willing to shift or even abandon their original positions, because “in the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 142, as cited in Hong et al., 2017). Reflective journaling and dialogue between the two authors sponsored a reflexive approach. As an unschooling mother, the first author identified with many of the bloggers’ unschooling values, and most of the I-positions from which the bloggers spoke. As such, it was easy to empathise with the bloggers, whereas reading their blogs critically required a deliberate change of standpoint. In this, she noticed tension in herself between I-as-unschooler and I-as-psychology-researcher. Like the bloggers, the first author found a way to reconcile – but not necessarily resolve – this dialogical tension, by viewing her role as that of a bridge

connecting unschooling with psychology research and opening up the potential for constructive dialogue.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study examined not unschooling families in general, but selected utterances of seven unschooling mothers who blogged about their lifestyles and values. As a qualitative study, it aimed for in-depth understanding, not generalisability. The bloggers' decision to publish their accounts of their personal unschooling lifestyles on the internet might set these women apart from other unschoolers in some way, such as in terms of intensity of beliefs, willingness to disclose personal information, confidence in their choices, communication skills, and various forms of privilege. Additionally, the researchers chose to analyse only text, even though all seven bloggers had produced other data. All included photos in their posts, all accepted reader comments and sometimes replied, some hosted paid advertisements, and most were active on social media. One blogger regularly published unschooling-related videos on her own YouTube channel. The opportunity to examine this data was foregone due to the limited scope of this study.

As an exploratory, qualitative analysis of an under-researched phenomenon, the study opened up many new questions. For example, the pattern of stay-at-home unschooling mothers and employed fathers was consistent with Gray and Riley's (2013) demographic findings in an international survey, but any personal tensions the bloggers experienced about this pattern were rarely mentioned in the blogs. Emma was the only blogger who wrote about being a feminist; where do the other bloggers stand on feminism? How do unschooling bloggers feel about leaving their previous careers? How do other unschooling families balance work and family, and what roles do fathers play? What financial choices and layers of privilege underpin the decision to unschool? A survey- or interview-based study could

examine these questions, although there might be methodological challenges, such as difficulty accessing a representative sample of unschoolers and researcher expectancy effects.

The extent to which the bloggers rejected the traditional hierarchy of parents as leaders, in favour of a flat, egalitarian family structure, was not clear from the data and seemed to vary among bloggers. Beyond what is written in blogs, how do unschoolers navigate questions of family leadership in practice? What is family life like in unschooling families in which the parents lead, in comparison to radical unschooling families in which children's autonomy is rarely fettered? These are questions for an observational study or ethnography.

Finally, research questions about the extent to which unschooling can be beneficial or detrimental for children's learning and development were outside the scope. Some values and practices central to unschooling discourse, such as facilitating children's free play and supporting their autonomy, have a strong evidence base in psychology. Research links free play to creativity, problem-solving, social skills and resilience – as developmental psychologists Gray (2013) and Gopnik (2016) review in their books, both of which are cited by the unschooling bloggers. Autonomy-supportive parenting has been linked to greater wellbeing, emotional regulation, executive functioning, and social and emotional development among children in general (Distefano, Galinsky, McClelland, Zelazo, & Carlson, 2018; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2015). A longitudinal study of unschooled and schooled children is needed to examine these issues.

Implications

This exploratory qualitative study introduces a psychology audience to unschooling, which has attracted little research attention despite its growth and its relevance to debates about the school system, children's learning needs, and approaches to parenting. It also applies Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue, DST, and Aveling et al.'s (2015) dialogical method of analysing multivoicedness in utterances, to the relatively new and highly prevalent genre of

blogging. The researcher found no published studies that had yet applied this method to blog data. Notably, the study contributes to understanding the ways in which unschooling bloggers in Australia and NZ dialogically author their social identities as unschoolers and as parents. It shows the multiple identity positions adopted by unschooling bloggers and how these interact with other voices. By providing insights into unschooling bloggers' identity positions and their imagined dialogues with various influential or critical voices, this study sets the stage for further research into the phenomenon of unschooling, and a broadening of dialogue.

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