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## *Re-Privatizing the Family How “Opt-Out” and “Parental Involvement” Media Narratives Support School Privatization*

Amy Shuffelton  
Loyola University Chicago

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### **Abstract**

*To speak of the “neoliberal privatization of education” is discursively to acknowledge a distinction between “public” and “private,” which “privatization” seeks to override. To critics of school privatization, the erosion of the distinct sphere of the public is a regressive move. It is noteworthy, therefore, that progressive feminists, who are also concerned with the distinction between feminized “private” and masculinized “public” spheres, have historically supported the erosion of this distinction. There are, this paper contends, importantly gendered dimensions to neoliberal privatization that feminist analysis of the “private” brings into focus.*



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To speak of the “neoliberal privatization of education” is discursively to acknowledge a distinction between “public” and “private,” which “privatization” works to erode. Critics of school privatization interpret this erosion as a politically regressive process, which consolidates resources and power in the hands of the few. An effective seawall between these realms, critics often imply, would support a more just distribution of power and resources. In the words of Diane Ravitch, who has been one of the most outspoken and articulate of school privatization’s critics, “public education has been a force for social and intellectual progress, a force to achieve a more just society.” The privatization of schools, she argues, will leave an educational landscape of “haves and have-nots, reinforcing the structural inequalities of American society” (2013, pp 319-21).

Ravitch ends her second book on privatization, *Reign of Error*, with a principle that would divide private and public moneys as sharply as our Constitutional division of church and state: “public money for public schools, private money for nonpublic schools” (2013 p. 321). It is, she says, appropriate for a pluralistic democracy such as the United States to have both a system of public schools available to all children and a system of private schools for parents who prefer their children to receive religiously oriented instruction. Private money, however, should be restricted to appropriately private schools, rather than flowing into public schools and washing the system of public schooling away from its foundations. Note, however, that her argument mixes two distinct senses of the private: the private of religious convictions and the private of the market. Perhaps there should be a “wall of separation” between market and schools, just as there is between church and state, but religious belief is not exactly the same private as the private market and may or may not serve as a suitable analogue. I mean here less to challenge the principle Ravitch proposes than to point out that in distinguishing public from private, critical accounts of privatization need also attend to the varying significations of the private.

Family, and the domestic labor that feminist theorists call “reproductive labor” – the work of reproducing human societies and the relationships upon which they depend, work that includes raising and educating children – constitutes another aspect of the private. To this special issue on the media, neoliberalism and the privatization of schooling, this article contributes an account of how contemporary media stories about the family support the privatization of schooling by “re-privatizing” the family. Feminist theory has been addressing the public/private binary for at least half a century, and a full account of school privatization needs its insights.<sup>1</sup> Following a brief exposition of feminist critique of the public/private binary, this article explores how the media’s depiction of two kinds of relationships, those between parents and the workplace and those between parents and schools, contribute to the constitution of contemporary understandings of families, markets and public schooling. It critically considers two media narratives prominent in the past decade: the tale of women “opting-out” of paid employment, and the case for the importance of “parental involvement” to children’s school achievement. The “opt-out” narrative’s presentation of women/mothers as freely choosing to leave paid

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<sup>1</sup> The private/public binarization of women’s work has historically affected different groups of women differently. It is important to bear in mind that half a century ago the issue became a prominent concern for *White middle class* feminists, whose work was constrained to the “private sphere” in a different way than was the work of *Black, poor and working class* women. Black women especially were excluded from the public sphere of politics on grounds of race as much as gender. Poor and working class women of all races were thrust into the public sphere of market relations by economic necessity. Black feminists in particular have pointed out the error of assuming that this binarization affects all women in the same way.

employment for the sake of their children, I argue, functions to contain responsibility for child-raising within the family. The narrative legitimates family policies in the US that are anomalous within the developed world in their extreme privatization of responsibility for children's well-being. Besides letting public policy off the hook for family needs, the opt out story supports the notion that every child has or should have a parent in the household whose time and labor are freely available. Parental involvement discourse taps this supposedly free time and unpaid labor and holds parents accountable for using it to support their children's school success. It renders parents responsible for provisioning their children with an array of job-oriented skills. These media narratives, that is, privatize aspects of child-raising that can legitimately be considered public responsibilities. Where does this leave critics of neoliberal privatization? Although Ravitch's bright line distinction makes a decent rule of thumb, the well-being of American parents and children depends not on reestablishing a private/public divide in education but instead on treating the work of raising children as a public concern, not a matter of private contract but a political issue through and through.

### **Constituting the Private**

By and large, the private with which critical accounts of neoliberal privatization are concerned is the market. Because "neoliberalism" has been used both broadly and specifically in the past decade, it is necessary to pin down some meaning before discussing it, yet also to acknowledge that any definition is partial. For an exploration of neoliberal privatization to start with too precise a definition is to put the cart before the horse, but David Harvey provides a useful starting place. "Neoliberalism," he says "is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (2005, p. 2). Viewed as a process, because it "holds that that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions," neoliberalization "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (2005, p. 3)

This relentless marketization of human action reaches into another "private" often marked off from the "public": that of family life. Importantly, the private of the family and its relationship to the public has been the subject of politically progressive critique which led to a distinct set of recommendations. In a famous 1969 essay, Carole Hanisch declared that "The Personal is Political," and the phrase was picked up by the feminist movement as a rallying cry.<sup>2</sup> Hanisch's essay argues that focusing on purportedly "personal" problems women face, such as marital abuse, the inequitable division of housework, and access to birth control, is not mere therapy or navel-gazing. "One of the first things we discover in [consciousness-raising] groups is that personal problems are political problems," she wrote. "There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution" (1969, p. 4). Feminist activists who picked up the phrase recognized that the cultural and structural forces oppressing women depended, ideologically, on the relegation of women's problems to a personal, private sphere construed as an inappropriate site for collective, political action. Feminist scholars produced a wealth of historical and philosophical research that explored the establishment of "separate

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<sup>2</sup> Hanisch disclaims credit for thinking up the title, which she attributes to Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, who edited the collection in which it was originally published.

spheres” ideology, whose roots can be traced to Ancient Greek philosophy but which has taken on distinctly modern parameters since the Eighteenth century. As industrialization changed how men and women worked, married, and raised children, a starker divide separated the feminized domain of the private home from the masculinized domain of politics and paid employment. The progressive feminist response to *this* particular division of private and public was to pull the wall down.

Although there is now broad consensus that many issues dismissed as “personal” in 1969 are indeed matters of political concern – sexual harassment, for instance, and reproductive rights – the question of how and whether traditionally feminized caretaking activities, including children’s education, should be combined with paid employment remains contentious.<sup>3</sup> With its repetitive stories of “Mommy wars,” the media portrays contemporary women as divided into hostile camps, with one cadre of feminists gleefully marching into paid employment, marketizing child-raising as they relegate their babies to institutional daycare or imported nannies, and their warm-hearted opponents holding fast to the value of traditional breadwinner/caretaker arrangements in which children are nurtured at home.<sup>4</sup> These stories fail to capture the complexity of most women’s decisions and commitments, but their popularity indicates widespread ambivalence and anxiety about how the labor of caring for and raising children should be carried out. There is a genuine problem at the heart of “Mommy Wars” stories: If old barriers between a feminized domestic sphere and the market are down in new ways, how are children to be raised and in whose charge? Underlying these stories is uncertainty about exactly where the private and public divide, with women’s paid employment functioning as a public/private hybrid that disrupts conventional demarcations of public and private spheres.<sup>5</sup>

One contemporary answer has been the stepped-up marketization of reproductive labor. In *The Outsourced Self*, Arlie Hochschild (2012) explores contemporary Americans’ delegation, to paid specialists, of work that families and friends used to do for themselves and each other. Her examples include hosting children’s birthday parties, elder care, counseling friends through difficult times, and even the task of laying flowers at a grave. As Hochschild shows, the availability of paid services to carry out these and other such tasks has a mixed effect: on the one

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<sup>3</sup> I use “caretaking” here to indicate the full range of activities that go into bringing a child up to adulthood, including far more than education. By “child-raising” I mean a subset of caretaking activities focused on the child’s growth as a person. In this usage, child-raising is synonymous with education, in its expansive sense. Schooling is a subset of child-raising and not to be confused with education. The word “education” is traditionally used to refer only to educational work carried out in public institutions, while the significant educational work carried out by women, especially mothers but also other care providers, is called “child-raising.” This distinction maintains an alignment of dichotomies – male/education/school/intellect/public versus female/child-raising/home/emotion/private that both subordinates the feminine and misconstrues the intrinsic connections between both elements of each pair. Thanks to Stefan Ramaekers for fruitful conversation on the importance of these terms.

<sup>4</sup> For visual commentary on this interpretation, see Valenti (n.d.), “Sad White Babies With Mean Feminist Mommies”

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, women have always worked for pay. Which women work, and at what stages in their life, and what kinds of paid employment are made compatible with child-raising, have shifted – and not uni-directionally – over the years. I cannot provide a full account of women’s paid employment here, but it would be a mistake to read it as a uniform or recent trend. See Folbre (2001, 2008) on the free market’s reliance on reproductive labor. Furthermore, the market was never excluded from the domestic sphere. Even as “home” took on new significance following the industrial revolution, women of means were able to pay poorer women to do some of the work of maintaining their households.

hand, those who use them often feel liberated from burdensome chores and able to spend time on what really matters to them – playing with their children, for instance, rather than shoveling the driveway. On the other hand, and this is Hochschild’s strongest contention, many of these tasks have an affective component – shoveling a neighbor’s driveway is as much about maintaining relationship as maintaining pavement – and when we outsource the tasks, we lose access to their use as building blocks of a meaningful life. Insofar as a sense of self is shaped by what one does for others, the decision to pay others to do it in one’s stead affects the self one can become.

Perhaps in recognition of this, American mothers have, as Sharon Hays details in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), held tight to the essentiality of mother-care for children. Hays addresses one of the more perplexing changes that followed women’s increasing presence in the labor market: as mothers of young children more frequently hold jobs, one would expect the number of hours they spend caring for children to drop. It has, however, risen – considerably. Through interviews with mothers from a variety of class and racial backgrounds, mothers who are in and out of the paid workforce in varying ways, Hays finds a nearly universal commitment to an ideology she calls “intensive mothering”: the notion that only a mother can adequately provide care for a child, and that therefore even the decision to hold paid employment and delegate the child’s care to others can only be justified as “being in the best interests of the child.” Hays points out that this ideology is not the only possible way to conceptualize the interests of women and their children, and she considers several possible explanations for an ideology that women adopt although it means running themselves ragged. What she finds most compelling is the idea that motherhood contains, but has not managed to resolve, the contradictions of modern capitalist society. Those “Mommy Wars” stories appeal to readers, in spite of their empirical limitations, because Americans are deeply uncertain how to square their commitments to personal life with their commitments to private capital.

When one brings feminist analysis of women’s paid and maternal work into the conversation about neoliberal privatization, the questions of what constitutes the private and the public and how they should be held together or apart become murkier matters than bright line arguments like Ravitch’s recognize. Paid employment for women has enabled their participation in public affairs, politicizing issues that had previously been treated as private. Simultaneously, it has opened the family further to market forces, privatizing, in the sense of marketizing, relationships that had been treated as the prime locus of cooperative endeavor. The impact of economic change on the family continuously forces rearrangements of public and private, a process that started with early industrialization and continues today. The critic of neoliberal privatization who would pay due respect to the insights and advances of feminism cannot therefore rest an argument on a simple conceptual division of public and private. Rather, those of us who support both public schooling and women’s equality (including a recognition of the important relational work that has traditionally been shouldered by women) should attend to what the demarcation of certain domains as private and others as public makes possible. Like other binaries, private and public are mutually constitutive. The ways in which they are defined as each other’s opposites shifts with context, and their co-construction affects human possibilities and relationships.

### **The Opt-Out Narrative**

In 2003, the same year No Child Left Behind became law, the New York Times Magazine ran a cover story on “The Opt-Out Revolution.” Work/family columnist Lisa Belkin

presented as “revolutionary,” and in that sense heir to earlier feminist movements, the decisions of elite women to leave high-flying careers in order to spend time raising their young children. Belkin interviewed women who had achieved success in journalism, law, and business and were on track to achieve still more until they decided, when their children were young, that the demands of career were incompatible with the family life they were simultaneously striving for. That mothers who combine paid employment with responsibility for dependent children face a 24/7 and decades-long gantlet of challenges was not news, as social scientists had been providing evidence for years that mothers continue to face discrimination at work and a second-shift of housework and childcare at home, a situation made exceptionally harsh in the United States by the developed world’s most family-hostile set of public policies (Hochschild, 1989; Williams, 2001, 2010).<sup>6</sup> What Belkin presented as the new revelation of her reporting was that the mothers she talked to did not even *want* the rewards of paid employment that feminists had claimed were their due.

“Q: Why don’t more women get to the top?” asked the Magazine’s cover, in large letters under a woman staring absently into space at the foot of a ladder as she played with her baby’s hair. “A: They choose not to.” As Belkin tells it, “Arguably, the barriers of 40 years ago are down.” Look, she says, at how many women graduate from elite colleges and graduate programs, entering the workforce as men’s peers. “And then suddenly,” she reports, “they stop.” Belkin cites statistics on women in leadership positions (only 16% of partners in law firms; only 16% of corporate officers), and the large numbers of graduates of elite law and MBA programs staying home with children or working part-time (62% of Harvard MBAs, in one study). She acknowledges the research of Joan Williams, Arlie Hochschild, and others on the barriers women face when they combine motherhood with paid employment. But the conclusion she draws, based on her interviews, is that “something more is happening here.” “It’s not just that the workplace has failed women. It is also that women are rejecting the workplace.” Why? In Belkin’s words,

As these women look at the ‘top,’ they are increasingly deciding that they don’t want to do what it takes to get there. Women today have the equal right to do today what men have done for centuries – to take time from their family in pursuit of success. Instead, women are redefining success. And in doing so, they are redefining work.

These claims are questionable, but they express ideological positions on paid employment and family – that “what it takes” to remain in a well-paid career is *necessarily* incompatible with significant involvement in family life, that *women but not men* value family over employment – that are hardly revolutionary. It is, as Joan Williams argues in her critique of opt-out narratives

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<sup>6</sup> Because many Americans are unfamiliar with the extent to which the United States is an outlier on family welfare policies, it bears mentioning a few. The US is one of only four nations in the world, alongside Lesotho, Swaziland, and Papua New Guinea, that has no mandated paid maternity leave. We provide far less support for childcare and pre-school education than any other developed nation, less even than many developing nations. American parents rely more on family caregiving (grandparents, siblings, etc.) than any developed nation, and such caregiving arrangements are notoriously unstable, especially as parents may find themselves caring for their child’s caregiver, as well as the children, should that person fall into ill-health. The unavailability of national health care coverage has made this situation even worse than it otherwise might be. Furthermore, there is no requirement that workers be provided with leave time to care for dependents. This is a partial but suggestive list; see Williams (2010) for more.

(2010), separate spheres rechauffé. The only part that is genuinely new is the presumption that women have an “equal right” to pursue self-interest. The claim is pragmatically false, insofar as both childless women and mothers in the workplace are sanctioned for perceived self-interest, which conflicts with cultural expectations that women be selfless nurturers (Williams and Dempsey, 2014), but as its publication in the Times suggests, it is widely believed to be true. What the “equal rights” claim adds is a novel explanatory boost. When preferences are juxtaposed with rights -- rather than, as in older accounts of maternal caretaking, duty -- the economic marginalization of caretakers becomes a freely made *choice*.

This contemporary version of separate spheres accomplishes two contradictory moves. It re-engenders a division between a public (economy and politics) world of self-interest and a private (home) world of caretaking, but, paradoxically, it also extends notions of freedom, equal rights, and choice into the realm of family life. As the private family had previously been treated as appropriately the domain for fellow-feeling and interdependence – a haven in a heartless world -- this extension of choice-discourse resignifies the territory even as it restakes it.

The media has trumpeted, recycled, and eventually, in the wake of the Great Recession, tweaked but still repeated this story for the past ten years. The UC Hastings Center for WorkLife Law carried out a content analysis of 119 print news stories featuring the “opt-out narrative” that ran between 1980 and 2006. Joan Williams (who directs the center) points out two major problems with these stories. First, they focus disproportionately on elite women, “the 3.7% of American women who are highly-educated white professionals with jobs in traditionally male-dominated occupations” (Williams, 2010, p. 13). This narrow focus ignores the substantial problems faced by the vast majority of families, who depend upon two (or more) incomes, and in doing so, makes it easy to portray work/life conflict as a “champagne problem” faced exclusively by elite women. In supporting this impression, the opt-out narrative makes it difficult to build a diverse coalition for progressive policy change on family welfare issues. Second, these articles tend to reinforce stereotypical associations of women with feminized caregiving and, conversely, of men with hard-driving commitment to paid employment. The “something more” than discrimination and exhaustion that Belkin points to for explanation of why women “choose” to stay home turns out to be a maternal predilection to sacrifice ambition on the altar of baby-love. Belkin uncritically cites her interviewees’ claims that “it’s all in the MRI” or “maybe evolution.”<sup>7</sup> Other articles cited by Williams (2010) quote women expressing dreamy affection for their babies, ignoring the economic implications. It is telling, as Williams points out, that work/life conflict articles nearly always appear in the lifestyles section of the paper, rather than the business section. The mismatch between the US workplace, which presumes an “ideal worker” who can shunt all caretaking work off to a spouse, and its workforce, most of which aspires to parenthood and depends upon two incomes to achieve family financial stability, is properly a major economic issue. In construing child-raising as a “lifestyle choice,” the media neglects to treat it as such. Child-raising is rendered a personal, not a political, problem.

A third problem is that this account says little about the long term effects on a mother and her children of her decision to leave paid employment. Whether or not men, women, and

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<sup>7</sup> In fairness, Belkin also cites Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, a researcher whose publications present a nuanced account of how evolutionary biology in the context of human cultures influences the decisions mothers make about how best to provide for their children. Hrdy’s work, however, which grows out of her study of infanticide, supports no unitary account of “what women really want.” Cf Hrdy (2000).

children were ever well-served by breadwinner/caretaker arrangements, women and children are poorly served by them now. As Williams points out, the mothers featured in opt-out articles tend to be interviewed at a particular moment: when they have just left work and had a baby. Over time, as marriages end in divorce, as mothers attempt to reenter the workforce only to face underemployment and sharply reduced salaries, the decision appears less rosy. In August 2013, ten years after Belkin's opt-out article first ran, the *New York Times Magazine* published a follow-up piece by Judith Warner, whose *Perfect Madness* had suggested in 2006 that US mothers' choices were considerably more constrained and hard to live with than the opt-out narrative suggests. In "The Opt Out Generation Wants Back In," Warner concludes that a handful of women, those with the most elite credentials, who made the most strategic choices about how to spend their time, were able successfully to reenter the job market after years home with children, but that most women who "opted out" had to take jobs with far lower pay and status, if they found jobs at all, even as many found their marriages frayed or gone.<sup>8</sup> Warner's piece disrupts the opt-out story, but the NY Times "Motherlode" blog's accompanying commentary maintained the line that mothers' decisions to leave their jobs represent women's commitment to nurturing and has been a progressive force. In "After the Opt-Out Revolution, Asking: How's That Working For You?," Times blogger KJ Dell'Antonia states (citing no actual numbers) that "many of us don't seem to *want* to push our way back in." Furthermore, she suggests that although "the structure of our lives isn't changing that fast, the way we talk about them is," and that this represents meaningful change.

What *has* changed in media accounts of work/family conflicts and how families negotiate them is an increased interest in fathers. The Great Recession, sometimes called the "Man-cession" because of its disproportionate impact on working men, somewhat disrupted the media's recrystallization of traditional gender narratives around work and family, although not to the extent the ballyhoo about "new fatherhood" suggests.<sup>9</sup> Critical analyses of the media's portrayal of fatherhood point out that although contemporary men are more likely to express the intention to do their equal share of childcare and housework, although more fathers are staying home with young children and more women are serving as their family's primary breadwinner, the traditional expectation that women have primary responsibility for child-raising remains well entrenched (Gregory and Milner, 2011; Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Gottzen, 2011). This is and ought to be a concern, but media focus on how responsibilities are divided within the family begs another important question. Why should the care and raising of children be divided between parents, rather than shared by parents and the wider community? Why, in other words, is child-raising so radically *privatized*?

The focus on "who does what" in heterosexual, two-parent families with children maintains the fiction that how children's material, intellectual, and emotional needs are met is a matter to be resolved within the confines of a private, family sphere. It upholds the heterosexual two-parent family as functional and normative, in spite of divorce, remarriage, single-sex partnerships and marriages, and increasing rates of childbirth outside of marriage, which make "family" a fluid and shifting signifier, for empirical as well as discursive reasons. It presumes a

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<sup>8</sup> Because it is a follow-up, this article maintains the original's focus on elite women. It features a new cast of interviewees, Warner notes, because none of the women profiled in Belkin's (2003) original story were willing to be included when Belkin contacted them in 2013.

<sup>9</sup> I have addressed this in more detail in Shuffelton (2014).

level of economic stability within the family such that parents have real choices about how to spend their time and share responsibilities. And it maintains the fiction that all children have a parent available full-time to support their educations, long after the socio-economic conventions that propped this up have been replaced. Like earlier “opt-out” stories, current accounts of “breadwinner moms” and “stay-at-home dads,” which have become popular since the 2007-08 recession, focus on the minority of families who are and have remained married and are able to sustain their families on a single income, which is to say, a small sliver of American families. A New York Times piece from December 2013, for instance, looked at the lives of “Wall Street Mothers, Stay at Home Fathers.” Most of the piece is about “role reversals” and “feeling excluded,” i.e. how men and women felt about rearranging the conventional distribution of labor within the family. Only in the last paragraph, where it described the female bankers’ supervisor as sounding “both kind and calculating” in her appreciation of stay-at-home fathers, did the article acknowledge the affects of containing rearrangement within the family: “the more domestic responsibility the men are willing to assume, the more their wives can help the bank make money.”

### **Parental Involvement**

The confinement of responsibility for children to the household creates opportunities for capital in farther-reaching ways as well. Media accounts that normalize a binarized breadwinner/caretaker arrangement establish as normative the unpaid, and therefore (within a socio-economic arrangement that devalues all that is unpaid) “under-utilized,” time and labor of a caretaker, a theoretical pool that exists as a resource. The unpaid labor of parents becomes, then, something to capitalize. This section considers a media narrative that complements the opt-out story: parental involvement. If, as breadwinner/caretaker arrangements premise, households include at least one parent with resources of time dedicated to children’s upbringing, that time is available to schools, enabling them to rely upon the unpaid labor of parents rather than pay professionals for the work.

How exactly are those well-off two-parent families with childcare options raising their children? Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods*, also published in 2003, gave an answer which was picked up and often misinterpreted by national media. In her study of contemporary child-raising and social class, Lareau contrasted a middle class style of child-raising that she calls “concerted cultivation” with the approach of working class and poor parents, which she calls “the accomplishment of natural growth.” Because middle class parents believe it to be their responsibility to cultivate a child’s talents, Lareau found, they spend considerable resources of time and money on scheduled activities for children, on cultivating a child’s verbal agility, and on disciplining children in ways that shape children’s perceptions of themselves as empowered choice-makers. Lareau’s analysis, informed by Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, concludes that through their involvement in their children’s everyday lives, privileged parents were able to leverage and pass down cultural capital that enabled their children to maintain their high socio-economic status. In contrast, poor and working class parents were equally dedicated to their children’s welfare but at a socio-economic disadvantage that even their best efforts could not reliably overcome.

All the parents profiled in *Unequal Childhoods* are involved in their children’s education. Their involvement, however, takes different forms. Lareau herself is careful to say that she does not believe either approach to raising children to be “better,” and she points out advantages and

disadvantages of each. This message, however, was largely missed by the media, which focused on the strategic advantage of concerted cultivation and started asking how poor and working class children could be equipped with the interpersonal and emotional skills middle class children were acquiring at home. In his 2006 op-ed response to Lareau's book, for instance, David Brooks (mis)understood her book's message to be that "the core issue is that today's rich don't exploit the poor; they just outcompete them." Like other commentators, he normalizes middle class parenting, suggesting that "if we could teach the weakest parents to behave like average parents — by reading more to their kids, speaking more, using consistent, encouraging discipline — then millions of children might have more secure attachments, more structure and better shots at upwardly mobile careers." (With approximately half of America's families living in or near poverty, the "average" to which Brooks refers can only be his perception of ordinariness.) To treat middle class cultural capital as a means to social mobility, of course, entirely misses Bourdieu's point, reiterated by Lareau, that the characteristics middle class children acquire function as capital only within a hierarchical system that recognizes them as such, and that, like any currency, their value would drop if they were more commonly available. Yet Lareau's study has been incorporated into the discourse of parental involvement and taken as further evidence that all parents ought to support their children's educations in the culturally distinctive ways better-off parents do.

Because there has been considerable media attention to parental involvement, over several decades, I can only highlight a few telling examples. Paul Tough's New York Times Magazine articles, which he later turned into two well-selling books, told interrelated stories. In *Whatever it Takes* (2009), Tough tells the story of Geoffrey Canada's campaign to get Harlem parents to raise their children in the same ways as the well-to-do. Like many other mass media accounts of education, it focused on an individual leader's successes to make the case that all schools could and should copy a single, replicable method, regardless of context. Canada's successes have been used, by the Obama administration and other supporters of charter schools, as further reason to disinvest in public schools and invest private capital in a handful of selected "promise zones" and charters. In his second book (2012), Tough highlighted University of Chicago economist James Heckman's research on "cognitive" and "non-cognitive" skills, as well as Angela Duckworth's research on "grit." Both accounts attribute school success to personal qualities that children can learn, and in the media accounts of the research, the question quickly becomes "how can poor children be taught to be like their middle class peers," with no consideration of whether they should be, or whether this is a legitimate project in a democracy. Responsibility is first laid on the parents, who, when they are not Lareau's middle class, often teach their children relational habits different from those that support a version of schooling dedicated to preparing children for professional jobs. Their purported "failure" is taken as warranting school-based intervention. In turn, this is then used as a warrant for charter schools, which can discipline the relational habits of their students more effectively than neighborhood public schools. The purported "failure of parents to be involved in their children's education," that is, becomes grounds for school privatization and the disempowerment of parents, educators, and community partners.

To policy-makers working under fiscal constraints, parental involvement is an attractive means to accomplish two ends. Capitalizing on parent's "free" time and labor enables schools to increase the time children spend on school-assigned tasks, without necessitating payment for domestic educational work. Second, within a neoliberal context that focuses on the context-free individual, parental involvement discourse "effectively shifts the 'blame' for lack of educational

achievement onto parents, especially mothers, and off policy-makers and, to a less extent, practitioners. . . . The doctrine of personal responsibility performs the neat trick of transforming the victims of poverty, discrimination and poor schooling into irresponsible parents who are solely responsible for their children’s educational failures.” (Dudley-Marling, 2001).

In a throwback to early industrialization, parental involvement functions as a kind of unpaid educational piece work. It transverses the private domain of the home and the public domain of schooling by shifting into the household some of the work that might otherwise be done in the public sphere, subject to collective oversight and negotiation. (Alternatively, were it not transferred to parents, where it functions as a marker of class distinction, much of it – e.g. the organization of school dances, management of sports team schedules, music lessons – might not be done at all.) Whether carried out by mothers, fathers, or no one at all, however, parental involvement discourse works to divest public institutions of responsibility for critical aspects of children’s education. Beyond homework, dimensions of education that are now being farmed out to parents include responsibility for arts and music education, physical education, socio-emotional learning, and even the provision to schools of basic financial support, either through in-kind donations of supplies or through contributions to school-based non-profit organizations. Schools in well-off communities, whose parents have the resources to engage in concerted cultivation and to provide sufficient financial support to local schools, are able to get the task done – on the shoulders of parents, especially mothers – and maintain their traditional public schools. When impoverished parents do not meet the normative vision of families, and of parenting, their children’s ill-fit with the school system is taken as a warrant for private capital to move in.

The political is also personal here. Concerted cultivation is a mode of “parental involvement” that depends on a significant contribution of unpaid parental labor, which in point of fact has been disproportionately maternal labor. Although some fathers are their children’s primary caretakers, overall mothers spend more time taking care of children, and they feel more responsible for doing so, more guilty when their efforts do not work as planned (Dudley-Marling 2001, Hutchison 2012). The work of managing children’s complicated out-of-school schedules falls mainly on mothers, as does the emotional labor of coaxing children through homework, maintaining relationships with school personnel and other members of the school community, and helping children navigate transitions within the school system. Although sociologists have pointed out the gendered dimensions of this labor for several decades (Smith 1998; Dudley-Marling 2001; Lareau 2003; O’Brien 2007; Hutchison 2012), the gender-neutral term “parental involvement” that continues as a trope of policy discourse ignores this research. The opt-out story lays the groundwork for increased maternal labor driven by feelings of inadequacy, by portraying child-raising as a “personal choice” that indicates something about a woman’s essential nature, while the term “parental involvement” rhetorically voids this labor of its gendered, as well as classed, implications.

Critics of neoliberal school privatization have tended to focus on the ways in which public resources that had previously been spent on the education of children -- going to teacher salaries and benefits, maintenance of school facilities, and the provision of a full curriculum – are now being transferred to private investors, through expenditures on technology and standardized tests, charterization, and tax relief that benefits corporate shareholders. These are important aspects of privatization and demand scrutiny. What I hope to have established in this and the previous section is that school privatization has a familial and gendered dimension as

well. The ideology that holds mothers individually accountable for children's education both undergirds other modes of privatization and is a problem in its own right. As Dudley-Marling's research on mothers and fathers of children experiencing "school trouble" shows, the gendered convention that places responsibility for children firmly on *mothers* means that mothers take personally the message that their children are failing. Dudley-Marling's most poignant observation is that "The mothers interviewed for this study, all of whom had children who struggled in school, made it clear that the demands of schooling had diminished the quality of their lives by stealing from them many of the pleasures and personal satisfaction of being women and mothers." As for those mothers whose children succeed in school, whatever satisfaction they feel still comes at a cost, whether they have given up an independent career for the sake of child-raising, or simply all their available free time. Insofar as the source of all this guilt, unhappiness, and crushing obligation is the privatization of responsibility for children, "equal opportunity parenting" that positions fathers, *but not the public*, as equally burdened is no answer at all. Setting up barriers between public and private perpetuates this particular injustice rather than addressing it. It is more useful to recognize the full implications of the feminist message and politicize the personal.

## Conclusion

There is an important difference between Hanisch's call to bring down the barriers between personal and political and the neoliberal call to privatize everything. To say that the personal is political is to call for collective action, for shared responsibility for human well-being, and for a legitimate political process of decision-making. Neoliberal market advocates demand the opposite: the delegitimization of collective action, the individualization of responsibility, and politics replaced by market forces. As this paper noted at the outset, neoliberalism's critics often adopt anti-erosion metaphors and suggest that shoring up the public requires effective embankments against the private. This paper has argued that, given the history of separate spheres ideology and its insidious reinstantiation within neoliberalism, the anti-erosion approach is flawed. It is flawed because private and the public are not static entities to be held apart, but rather shifting and co-constructive signifiers. To extend the ecological metaphor, they meet and move like coastlines in response to socio-economic forces; land is a different sort of thing than water, but where land and water meet, the borders are in flux. It is, of course, possible to stop the reconfiguration of territory by erecting dams and seawalls, but these technologies promote some interests at the expense of others – beach-house owners, for instance, at the expense of creatures dependent on access to both land and sea. A better approach is to abandon wall building and consider the process, as well as the needs of life on land and in the water. Biologically, we are not amphibians, but we are amphibious in regards to public and private. This is perhaps particularly true of those who, at home and in schools, engage in the reproductive labor of child-raising, which is both a deeply personal undertaking for parents and one in which the public has a vested interest. Because we need to live well in public and private domains, we cannot afford to skip the politics and go straight to technological solutions.

Some history is useful here, as the family is frequently treated as so quintessentially private that only foolhardy radicals and dreamers (along the lines of Plato, perhaps, or Rousseau) could accept the influx of publicity. Relationships between spouses and between parents and children are considered some of the most "personal" relationships we have, relationships in which we can retreat from our public personas. This configuration of the family as

personal/private, however, is a uniquely modern, Western experiment. Stephanie Coontz (2006) traces how marriage – which has been a near-universal human practice used to establish the parameters for raising children and managing wealth through inheritance – has been reconstructed as a personal, private relationship only in the West for the past two centuries or so.<sup>10</sup> Relationships between spouses and between parents and their children have historically been matters of public concern, subject to the oversight and management of in-laws and the wider community. Inasmuch as they are subject to institutional regulation by religious institutions and the state, they still are. As Coontz (1993) makes clear, the contemporary private family has also, ironically, depended on the provision of public resources, including public education, public housing policies, and entitlement programs for the elderly. The private family, in other words, is both historically anomalous in its current form and, in its dependence upon public supports, always a public/private hybrid.

The question, then, is not whether raising children and passing along an inheritance to them -- essential functions of education, and of school systems devised to carry it out-- is a private or public matter but rather how public provision and oversight can support the personal investments of individual parents. This is a political question, as well as a personal one. The answers available shape not only public institutions like schools but also the lives and relationships men, women and children can have independently and together. At present, this paper has argued, media narratives around women's paid employment and parental involvement suggest that the answers are fixed – by women's biology, by market forces, by individual psychology, and in each case by authoritative knowledge regimes whose answers ordinary citizens can only accept as inevitable. But no answers are inevitable. They are collectively determined through human action, and as such, awash with politics through and through.

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<sup>10</sup> In her extensive research, Coontz (2006) found only one social group that had nothing recognizable as marriage. She did, of course, find vastly diverse arrangements for raising children, distributing resources and responsibilities within and among families, and designating appropriate marriage partners.

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### **Author**

Amy Shuffeltown is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago.

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