

The Character and Culture of American Families: Do Parents Need a Language of Virtue?¹

Jeffrey S. Dill
Eastern University
St. Davids, Pennsylvania, USA

Introduction: the Institutional Context of Character

The literature on moral education is largely framed within the reigning paradigm of psychology. (see for instance, Walker and Henning 1999; Cummings et al. 2010; Colby and Damon 1995; Hart and Yates 1997). This research has been helpful in deciphering many of the psychological processes at work in the development of individual character, but it misses other significant elements about the context within which character is formed and the larger social and cultural aspects of morality.

Emile Durkheim, the seminal figure in the sociology of moral education, argued that the significant social elements of morality were discipline and social attachment. For Durkheim, what is most important, or culturally consequential, about morality is its supra-individual authority. Building on Durkheim's work, James Davison Hunter argues that character is very much social in its constitution and is thus inseparable from the culture within which it is found. He observes that morality, like character, "is always situated—historically situated in the narrative flow of collective memory and aspiration, socially situated within distinct communities, and culturally situated with particular structures of moral reasoning and practice" (2000:11). Context matters in the formation of character, and these contexts are often found in cultural institutions like families and schools. Institutions serve as regulatory agencies and create webs of social relationships, norms, habits, and practices that constitute a "moral ecology"—an environment that shapes and patterns the moral life of the child. Character is not formed independent of these social and cultural settings, but this "situatedness" of morality is often taken for granted and not examined on its own terms. One understudied component of this moral ecology is the family.²

The Study

The *Culture of American Families Project* is a three-year investigation into the family cultures that are impacting the next generation of American adults, examining the cultural frameworks and diverse moral narratives that both inform and are informed by American family life. Specifically, this involves telling the complex story of parents' habits, dispositions, hopes, fears, assumptions, and expectations for their children. The data for this project were collected in two stages from

¹ This paper draws on a larger U.S.-based study of parenting and family life. See "The Culture of American Families Project" at www.iasc-culture.org/caf. See especially Jeffrey Dill, "The Culture of American Families: Interview Report", Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, December 2012.

² One leading scholar in the character education field noted this lack of attention to the role of the family: "A greater understanding of the relationship between parenting and character development is urgently needed" (Arthur 2003: 8). The attention in psychology has largely been devoted to schools, as Kohlberg and Piaget emphasized peer influences and saw parents as inconsequential after the early years. But even from within the field, recent pleas call for renewed interest in the family context. As one developmental psychologist put it, "the conceptual and empirical emphasis in our field over the last 30 years has been on children's moral development within the context of schooling. However laudatory this interest in education might be, the consequence is that the family context of moral development has been relegated to the sidelines" (Walker 1999: 261).

September 2011 to January 2012: first, a web-based survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,000 parents of school-aged children and second, follow-up, in-person interviews conducted with 101 of the survey respondents. This paper draws from these 90-minute, semi-structured interviews that explored the kinds of people parents want their children to become and attempted to elicit the explicit and implicit strategies parents employ in their habits and practices of scheduling, disciplining, motivating, and communicating with their children. All respondents in the interview sample were parents of school-aged children, the average age was 41 years old, slightly over 70 percent of the sample were female, about half had a college degree or more, about 58 percent were white, 20 percent black, 12 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent other race.

Parents Want 'Good' Kids

In the interviews, American parents made it clear that they wanted their children to be “good kids.” When asked how they want other people to think of their children, parents expressed desires for moral character in a variety of ways:

I believe you have to have a good heart first. I wouldn't want all my kids to be the top students and become attorneys and doctors, but be horrible people. I wouldn't want that...you've got to be a good person. You've got to be a good kid.

-Claudia Baez, married Hispanic mother of six children³

I want to know that he's a really nice boy and he's very kind and innocent and helpful.

-Natasha Rodriquez, married mixed race mother of two children

I have had instances where people have come up to me to say, “You know, your kids are so kind, or they're so respectful, or they're so honest,” and that makes you feel really good.

-Leah Carder, married white mother of three children.

Clearly, parents articulate a moral sense when discussing the kind of people they want their children to be.⁴ This is not necessarily surprising; it is hard to imagine parents saying they want *bad* children, or children *without* character. But the way that parents talk about this moral sense, how they arrive at their desired qualities, and the strategies they use to develop them seem to reflect deeper cultural changes. The moral culture of parenting in America that emerges from these interviews suggests key tensions and contradictions inherent in late-modern, Western societies.

Prioritizing “Thinking for Yourself”

Parents in the United States place a high degree of value on raising “independent” kids. For well over twenty years, in an annual survey question asking parents their most important desired quality for their children, “thinking for himself or herself” is the top priority by far. (The trend appears to go back even further: parents in the Middletown studies from the 1920s also consistently ranked independence and thinking for oneself as a top priority.) Some scholars suggest this focus on thinking for oneself shows that parents value autonomy in their children,

³ All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

⁴ This desire is also evident from the survey data. Parents rated “honest and truthful” and “persons of strong moral character” as the two highest aspirations for their children's future, see *Culture of American Families: A National Survey*, accessed at iasc-culture.org/caf

rather than obedience and conformity (Alwin 1988). Some even go so far as to cite the focus on independence and autonomy as evidence of a “narcissism epidemic” (Twenge and Campbell 2009): if parents value autonomy, the argument goes, they will let the kids push them around and it will ultimately lead to spoiled, entitled generation.

Parents in our study do indeed highly value independence and thinking for oneself, but what they mean by that is not what one might expect. It is most often *not* a vision of unbridled self-fulfillment.

We replicated the survey question, referred to above, in our interviews. 60% of parents in our sample selected “thinking for himself or herself” as their top priority, another 20 percent rank it second; only 10 percent list obedience first. The majority of all parents in the interview sample, regardless of education level, rank “thinking

for yourself” as the most desired quality for their children; it is, by far, the highest ranking choice for all parents. (However, parents with a college degree or higher are more likely than less educated parents to rank “think for yourself” first. See Figure 1) After parents selected the order of their desired qualities, we were able to go further than previous studies and ask them why they prioritized the way they did. Parents went on to explain what thinking for yourself meant to them.

A minority of parents we interviewed (28%) explain thinking for yourself as self-fulfillment: they wanted their children to pursue their own dreams and do what made them happy.

But a majority of parents (72%) have a different understanding of thinking for yourself. For these parents, thinking for yourself is actually about following a moral standard beyond self-fulfillment. This group falls into two related but slightly different categories. For one group (23% of the total), “thinking for yourself” means resisting peer pressure, not following the herd, and not following certain things that parents judge to be negative influences. Although it is implicit in the resisting peer pressure view, many other parents (49% of the total) make explicit the belief that thinking for yourself is a form of doing the right thing—the “right thing” as usually determined by the parent (see Figure 2). For these parents, thinking for yourself means utilizing an internal moral compass that helps navigate through life on the right path. Where did parents expect their children to get that moral compass? From themselves. In the parents’ minds, if their children were appropriately “thinking for themselves,” they will have thoroughly internalized the parents’ moral framework.

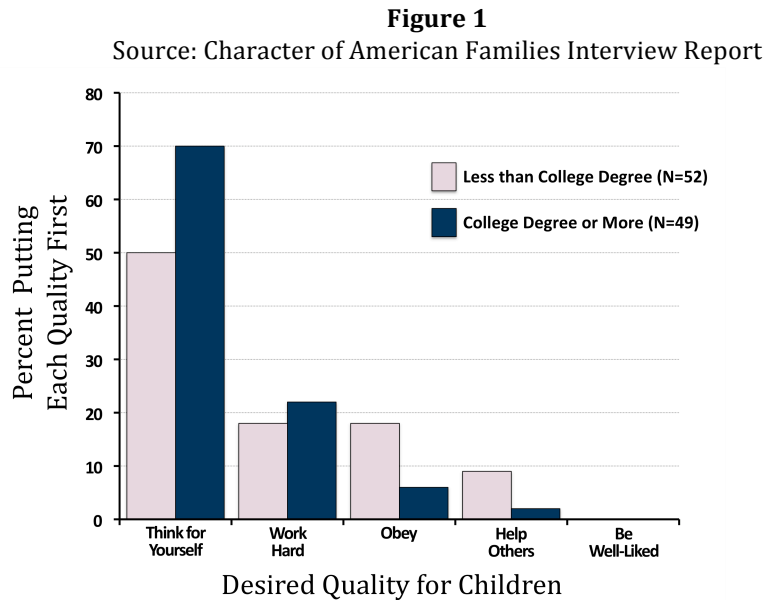
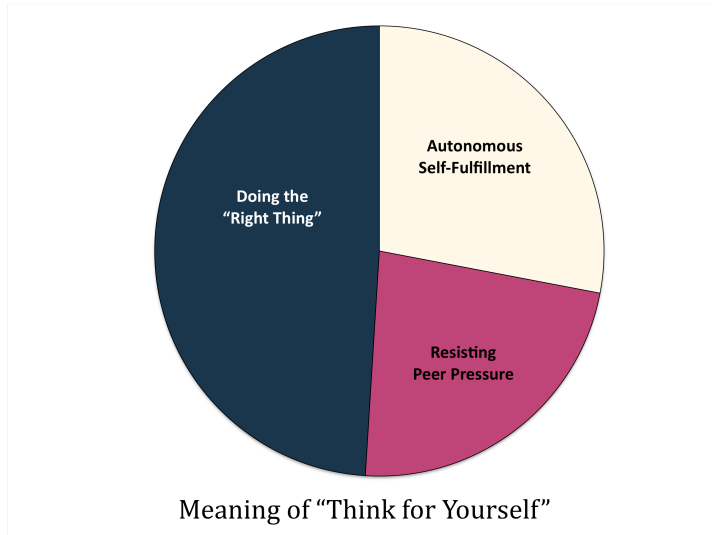


Figure 2

Source: Character of American Families Interview Report



In an uncertain world where no one can be trusted, parents see “thinking for yourself” as a top priority to impart to their children. For a majority of parents, this does not mean autonomous self-fulfillment, but rather an internalized moral code that enables the child to do the right thing. They thus employ the language of autonomy and independence, but their concern appears to be to instill some form of character and virtue in their children.

Parents in the study seem compelled to prioritize “thinking for yourself.” They naturally look to this language to capture their desired qualities,

and they believe that this skill, or character trait, will help their children navigate an uncertain world. Yet many parents articulate thinking for yourself in moral language of right and wrong and even as internalizing parental moral frameworks. Parents do not appear to want children who are independent of the parent’s own moral system, autonomous from the parent’s sense of right and wrong. They *want* their children to do the right thing, which, presumably, is not narcissistic self-indulgence. Parents seem to have a moral sense that is reflected in the way they talk about desired qualities for their children, and they want their children to grasp this moral sense. They want to impart specific knowledge and behavior that their children will follow. Some might call that obedience or even conformity. Yet parents feel compelled to use the language of autonomy that connotes, at least in the popular imagination, a kind of expressive individualism, distancing themselves from the language of obedience and authority. This appears to be a symptom of their ambivalence and discomfort with moral authority. Parents may value a kind of cultural myth of individualism deeply rooted in modern American view of the world, but they still want their children to know right from wrong and to internalize the parents’ own morality.

Character Formation and a Language of Virtue?

Parent-child relationships—in one way or another—are about some degree of influence, control, and conformity. Parents today appear much less comfortable with the authority this requires, and thus use more culturally acceptable language to talk about their relationships with their children. And yet, even as they employ a language of autonomy, independence, and self-fulfillment, they seem to be appropriating that language to describe the necessary parental task of shaping and forming their children into the kind of people parents think they should be. Late-modern parents appear to use more individualistic language to describe their desired qualities for their children, but the goal remains conformity.

This could be merely a different means to the same ends—a softer and warmer parenting style to match the culture of late-modernity. But it is also worth examining what gets lost in this gradual shift in the language parents use to talk about raising their children. Parents want “good” kids and

they know they have a primary responsibility to make them good. But they appear less sure about what “good” means, and they are not confident they can name it. Parents have a moral sense without a thick moral vocabulary. They want their children to develop character, virtue, and what Aristotle called “phronesis,” or practical wisdom, but the language of therapeutic individualism does not give them the resources to name it. Of course there is nothing wrong with freedom, independence, and emotional intimacy, and indeed these may be better parenting priorities and strategies than earlier ones. But it begs the question: can parents achieve what they want—character and virtue—without a moral language to name it?

Throughout all of the interviews—3,500 pages of transcripts—the words “character” and “virtue” were only used a total of 26 times by 12 different respondents (by way of contrast, the word “independent” and variations was used 173 times by 60 respondents). We intentionally did not ask about character directly because we wanted to see if it would emerge organically. Parents clearly cared about the character of their children, and articulate a desire for “good” kids, but instead of using words like “character” or “virtue” they instead used descriptive words like “good heart,” “nice,” “self-respect,” or “self-reliance.” Are these words adequate substitutes for “character,” “virtue,” “humility,” “patience,” “wisdom,” or “courage”? That is difficult to measure, but words and language do convey meaning and ultimately shape human perceptions of reality. The words we use have the power to create the worlds we inhabit and the very legitimacy and plausibility of our social realities. This is especially true in the context of socializing the young. The words parents now employ, like the parental priorities and strategies discussed above, connote softer, more individualistic, and therapeutic meanings. We might think of them as less commanding or authoritative. The tension—or paradox—lies in the gap between the authority required to do what parents say they want—to form their children into the right kinds of people—and the language they use to describe it.

It is understandable that parents have moved away from a language of character and virtue. Such a language requires common meanings and shared understandings about the “good” and the authority of a coherent culture within which communities and families can form the young. Of course, it is precisely this authority that has gradually eroded over the last several centuries as our understandings of individual freedoms and liberties has expanded. And while much has been achieved by these expanded notions of freedom, it presents new challenges for socializing the young. This is the cultural environment in which late-modern parents find themselves. Parents need the authority required to form their children, but they question the very authority they need to accomplish their task.

Policy Implications

The findings in this paper demonstrate that 1) parents do care about the moral formation of their children, and 2) parents utilize a language of autonomy and individualism to describe their desires to conform their children to their own moral standards. This signifies challenging contradictions that lie in the deeper cultural context within which parents seek to raise “good kids.” Such tensions may be emblematic of more fundamental contradictions in the culture of late-modernity, and thus public policy solutions are challenging. There are no simple “quick fixes.” In this study, we were not able to draw any further conclusions from data that might point to the efficacy of character formation absent a thick language of virtue. This makes drawing policy implications difficult, and it should be noted that the following are merely gestures from limited data.

We do know that American parents have a moral sense without a moral vocabulary, and this seems at least somewhat problematic, especially if we assume an Aristotelian approach to character: character and virtue require the slow and deliberate work of habit formation and discipline. They do not emerge merely from parental preferences or wishes. They must be "put into" a person. The Greek etymology of the word "character" suggests something engraved, etched, or carved. Doing this requires the language to name it and give it meaning, substance, and legitimacy. This may seem far-fetched in a late-modern era where plausibility structures seem to lose their credibility, but it is still likely that parents need a language of character and virtue. If language matters for creating a moral ecology within which character can thrive, can policies and organizations work to educate parents toward this end? This too seems like a challenging task. Yet government policies that support and strengthen segments of civil society—especially moral communities—may be the most helpful step. As Hunter (2000) argues, thick moral communities may be the best incubators for the character needed for thriving societies, and these communities can provide the language, and the context and plausibility structures where it all "makes sense."

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