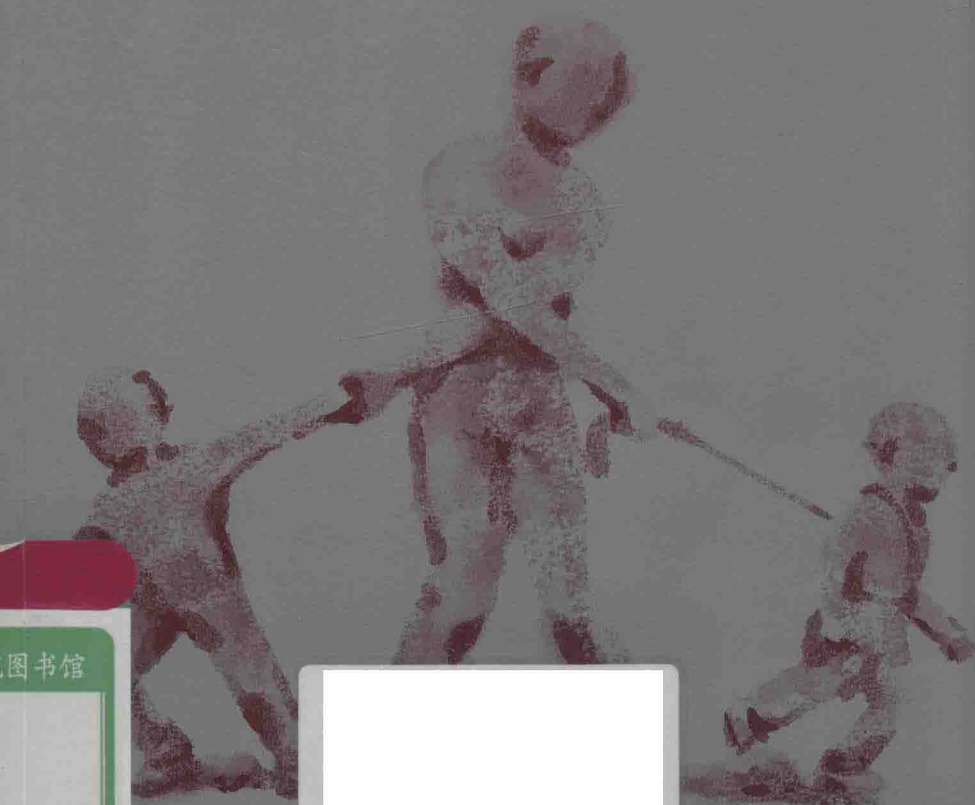# MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

## A Feminist Sociology of Childrearing

### JANE RIBBENS

# Mothers and Their Children

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# Acknowledgements

# Contents

# Introduction

Childrearing is a central part of the lives and concerns of the majority of women, particularly mothers. The experiences of those women who do not become mothers are also significantly affected by the centrality of childrearing for the identities of women, and there are widespread social expectations that closely relate the identity of woman with that of mother. Yet, in this key area of women's lives, we have largely allowed 'expert' ideas and theories to dominate public discussions and literature of childrearing. There has been considerable concern by feminists and others to highlight and counteract the takeover of childbirth itself by 'experts' (particularly by male-dominated medical professions), and yet we continually fail to listen to and respect what women themselves have to say about how they bring up their children. Indeed, this almost amounts to a failure to acknowledge that mothers do indeed have views that can be expressed and listened to at all.

Childrearing is a highly emotive and politically sensitive topic, one that is very hard to discuss without immediately making controversial assumptions. There are also more deep-rooted assumptions that we tend to take for granted, that are difficult to reflect upon at all. This book arises from a project whose original title was to have been, 'Bringing up our children'. It was a study that sought to be non-judgemental about differences in childrearing, and to question the assumptions embedded in the concepts we use to describe such differences. However, over time I came to realise that every word in that original title carries cultural assumptions: (1) that children are a separate category from other humans, (2) that they are in some sense a possession, or at least attached to particular individuals, and (3) that they need to be 'brought up' rather than just 'growing up'. Jane Lazarre – a white American woman, married to a black American – observes insightfully about her own attitudes to children and those of her husband: 'When all the intellectualising was said and done, James, the child of a poor family who had not given their children all the minute attention we continuously gave ours, still basically believed that we do not *bring* children up, they *grow* up' (1987: 163, emphasis in the original).

At the time I began the research, in the mid-1980s, feminist

debates on motherhood were largely expressed in terms of the limitations women experience as a result of having primary childcare responsibilities (see chapter 2). There was some optimism that many men really were reassessing their own responsibilities for childcare, and that the way forward for women lay in equality within the worlds of paid employment. In the years since then, however, there has been increasing recognition, both in Europe and the United States, that there has been little fundamental change in men's childcare involvements, and that women have only entered paid work at the expense of accepting a 'second shift' (Bjornberg 1992, Boh et al. 1989, Hochschild 1990).

Furthermore, it has become increasingly apparent that women themselves value and prioritise their childrearing activities. While there have been striking changes in some aspects of childrearing (most notably the increase in births outside marriage), it is clear that most mothers still put their childcare responsibilities high on their personal agenda (Boh 1989, Gieve 1990, O'Donnell 1985, Judith Stacey 1986). A survey was conducted of the women readers of the progressive middle class British newspaper, the *Guardian*. This is a group of women we might expect to be at the forefront of change in gender roles, but even among these women, the conclusion was reached that, 'Probably the most staggering result of the survey was the high priority women continue to give to their families' (*Guardian* Women, 7 March 1991: 21). At the same time, the position of fathers in relation to their children's care has become increasingly anomalous, caught between ideologies of shared parenting and increasing trends towards absent fatherhood (Bjornberg 1992, Ribbens 1993a).

Public debates have raged (and continue) about the supposed demise or otherwise of 'the family'.[1] Yet children continue to be born, to live with and to be primarily cared for by their mothers. In Britain it is predicted that one in four children will experience divorce in their families before the age of 16, if divorce levels remain at their 1988–89 levels (Haskey 1990), while it is currently estimated that one in eight families with children is a step-family (Robinson and Smith 1993). On the other hand, in 1991, 85 per cent of dependent children were living in a household headed by a married couple (*Social Trends* 1992). In 1989 71 per cent of births outside marriage were registered by both parents, and of these, 72 per cent gave the same address (Cooper 1989). The majority of children live with their natural father at least until adolescence (*General Household Survey* 1982) and, on the whole, people continue to regard such domestic units as 'families'. We need to be very careful about how we discuss such statistical evidence, and

tease it out from the political positions embedded in the terms of the debates. In particular, as researchers, we may sometimes need to use the concept of 'the family', and at other times to deconstruct it (Bernardes 1985a, 1985b, Rapp 1979). Yet such deconstruction need not deny the existence of the family as a significant concept in people's lives, and indeed, I shall describe in chapter 3 how women themselves may actively work towards its construction as a meaningful social unit.

In this book, then, I shall argue the need for a specifically feminist discussion of childrearing, since this is such an important area for women's lives. I describe this work as feminist sociology, and both these terms are crucial. I have always found sociology to be a fascinating and fruitful discipline, and we need some of its insights to help build a different sort of analysis of childrearing. But sociology needs a full feminist input if it is to realise its potential contribution. In chapter 2 I set out the grounds on which I describe this work as feminist, and in chapter 9 I reassess some sociological issues for the difference that might be made by a feminist analysis of childrearing.

My own experiences of mothering occurred in a particular context, and I chose to conduct research on women living in quite similar circumstances to my own (see chapter 2). I am a white woman from a reasonably prosperous background. At the time of new motherhood, and for a further 16 years, I was married to a middle class white man, with a middle income range, living in owner-occupied housing in South East England. I willingly terminated my own employment at the birth of my first child, although I returned to part-time employment a year after his birth, continuing on through the birth of my second child, a girl. Motherhood was for me an overwhelming experience, and one which I have largely enjoyed (and continue to treasure). Indeed, at the time of writing (August 1994) I await the imminent arrival of a new daughter, and am thus embarking on motherhood again at the age of 43 and under quite different circumstances with a new partner. This volume represents the culmination of the resulting project that has spanned ten years of my life. It is not possible to incorporate all aspects of the original project within the limitations of one publication. What the book does represent is the core of the research – namely, listening to how mothers themselves talk about their childrearing, and exploring the preoccupations and perspectives that are apparent in their childrearing accounts.

The emphasis is therefore upon the voices of the mothers themselves in relation to the upbringing of their children – what I call an 'insider perspective'. I shall argue that we also need an

'outsider perspective' to develop a full picture and analysis for a feminist sociological understanding of childrearing. While the second and last chapters point to some of the issues raised by such an 'outsider' analysis, material from the original report (Ribbens 1990a) concerning the overall context and circumstances of the lives of the women I interviewed has been largely omitted. I have paid sustained attention elsewhere to the complex, localised and quite self-contained social worlds in which many of the women I interviewed lived their daily lives with their children (Bell and Ribbens 1994). I also pay more attention elsewhere to the analysis of women's position and experiences of being a mother (Ribbens 1990a, 1993a); while the difficulties of finding an appropriate language for describing women's domestically based lives are discussed in Edwards and Ribbens (1991). Mothers' perspectives on their children's lives in relation to schools and education are discussed in Ribbens (1993a and 1993b).

These aspects of women's lives with their children have received very little research attention, though they all constitute important features within which women develop their childrearing concerns and perspectives. What I am able to set out in some detail in this present publication is the main focus of the research, which is what mothers have to say about how they bring up their children. I pay less sustained attention here than in the original report to any explanations we might develop about variations in women's childrearing perspectives, although, again, I do point to some of these issues in the opening and closing chapters. The heart of the book, then, is based upon the women's own voices as they talked about their children. In this undertaking, I move between broader themes concerning the cultural understandings and social contexts for contemporary Western childrearing, and more detailed and individualised accounts of the women's lives and concerns with their children.

Chapters 1, 2 and 9 are the places to look if you are interested in how I place the present study in relation to existing psychological, sociological and feminist debates, both theoretically and methodologically. In chapters 1 and 2, I thus set out my argument that there is at present an enormous gap in sociological and feminist discussions. Women's everyday concrete experiences in their lives with their children have been largely overlooked and have certainly not been considered on their own terms. This gap, for reasons which I also elaborate in chapter 1, is not one that can be filled by the psychological literature on child development. The one way in which the social circumstances of childrearing have been extensively examined in the existing literature is through debates

concerning social class patterns of childrearing. I examine these debates in some detail to reveal their fundamental weaknesses, and demonstrate how they are based upon assumptions which continue to marginalise women's lives within core sociological debates. I thus set out my case for a specifically feminist sociological study of childrearing. Chapter 2 also includes a discussion of methodological issues related to these theoretical concerns, and provides some background to my own study. Chapter 9 reviews the material presented in the main part of the book, but also returns to some of the issues raised in the first two chapters, as well as extending the discussion and analysis further.

Readers who are not interested in these wider debates may decide they would prefer to launch straight into the discussions about childrearing that constitute the heart of the book: chapters 3 to 8 inclusive. Chapter 3 discusses cultural themes of individuality, family and childhood, while chapter 4 explores mothers' concerns with their children as social beings via their acceptability and involvement within informal and localised social contexts. Chapters 5 and 6 present detailed case-study 'portraits' of the childrearing accounts of four mothers, setting out each account as a more or less coherent whole and also exploring both their similarities and their differences overall. Chapters 7 and 8 broaden out the discussion beyond these women, while still paying direct attention to childrearing issues, in terms of the images of children that mothers draw upon and evoke (chapter 7), and how these different images are elaborated in relation to concrete issues of time, control and independence as significant childrearing themes (chapter 8).

Overall, I hope to show that the feminist sociological study of childrearing can reveal and respect the diversity of women's own childrearing views, a diversity which is rooted, not in contrasts between 'good' and 'bad' mothering, but in much wider issues of social and political philosophy. I hope therefore also to show that any sociological theorising which marginalises the lives of mothers and children is not only sexist but also seriously flawed.

## Note

1. For examples of how academic opinion can diverge on this matter, see Chester (1986), and Bernardes (1985a, 1985b, 1986b, 1987).

# Part I
# Childrearing in Context

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# 1
# Childrearing, Psychology and Sociology

In order to establish the case for the feminist study of childrearing, I begin by examining prevailing discourses within psychology and sociology, starting with a discussion of psychological approaches to 'child development', and moving on to examine how sociologists have discussed 'socialisation'. Throughout these debates, I refer particularly to issues surrounding social class patterns of childrearing, which, I suggest, highlight the deficiencies in existing psychological and sociological approaches, revealing how these disciplines have marginalised women's perspectives and experiences.

## Psychology and childrearing: 'child development', 'socialisation' and 'social class'

Psychological discussions of childrearing have been steadily elaborated in recent decades, and childrearing has been increasingly defined as a psychological process (Newson and Newson 1974). Nikolas Rose (1989) has traced the history of such psychological 'discourse', and argued its pervasive impact on everyday family lives. Developmental psychology can itself act as a form of social regulation (Ingleby 1986), and Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) suggest that expert theories of appropriate childrearing can be a source of oppression to women.

The nature of childrearing, and what counts as 'good' childrearing in public debates, may be increasingly conceptualised and evaluated by experts, very largely from one particular gender, class and racial group (Phoenix 1987). Certain theoretical psychological ideas may be taken up because 'they give scientific

legitimation to significant cultural or political values' (Dingwall and Eekelaar 1986: 67). These ideas are then used to define appropriate maternal behaviours, and indeed, to extend the range and content of maternal roles. There has been increasing emphasis on mothers' roles as educators (David 1988) and health workers (Stacey and Davies 1983). There has also been a growth in Britain of new organisations and movements concerned with how parents (mothers?) should bring up their children (for example, Exploring Parenthood, the Dobson tapes and the Dreikurs movement),[1] some of these organisations being based in the United States. Morgan (1985) suggests that family matters generally have been increasingly medicalised, taking them out of the realm of 'lay' expertise. Furthermore, it is mothers in the more vulnerable social groups that are most likely to be negatively evaluated by such discourses, and subjected to the imposition of expert-defined models of 'correct' mothering (David 1988, Edwards 1992, Jane Lewis 1986) (perhaps because they are more resistant to expert ideas?). Indeed, in Britain at the time of writing, an expert report recommended that child benefit payments should be dependent upon attendance at parenting classes (Abrams 1994). As one journalist commented, the Year of the Family could feel like the Year of Parent-Bashing – 'We're arguing about who controls the next generation' (Freely 1994: 24).

Yet psychologists actually know very little about how children are brought up in their everyday social settings, and even less about how mothers themselves regard their childrearing (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). The significance of the social contexts of childrearing has been increasingly recognised by some developmental psychologists (e.g. Bronfenbrenner 1979, Martin Richards 1974, 1986, Woodhead et al. 1991), yet it seems that psychology lacks the theoretical and methodological tools to know *how* to incorporate an analysis of social context as *intrinsic* to the developmental process, rather than just the 'icing on the cake' (M. Richards 1986: 1).

Bronfenbrenner in particular has argued that: 'Much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is *the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest periods of time*' (1979: 19, original emphasis). Bronfenbrenner's own analysis concerns a complex hierarchy of 'nested' social settings as the context for individual child development. There are considerable difficulties with this approach, however, linked to his rather functionalist form of social theorising. There is a danger of describing social contexts as though they exist independently of the people who construct them, and of regarding

'subcultures' as providing clear-cut boundaries for social contexts, rather than considering the possibility that boundaries are themselves social constructions, whether of members themselves or of academic observers.

It seems that the biggest difficulty for a social psychological account of childrearing is that it starts from the notion of the 'individual' child, and cannot overcome the fact that from the outset it splits the individual off from the social, rather than seeing the individual as intrinsically social (Ingleby 1986). In a major review of the literature on the social formation of personality, Burkitt concludes: '. . . the basis of human difference and individual identity is to be found within society, in the social relations that exist between individuals . . . when we look at society and the individual we are viewing exactly the same thing – social being – from two different angles . . .' (1991: 189).

The notion of 'the individual', which is so central to psychology (Adlam et al. 1977, Harré 1986), is itself a particular feature of post-industrial Western culture (see chapter 3). Furthermore, the notion of 'the child' is also increasingly recognised to be culturally specific, such that 'childhood' itself is open to analysis as a social construction (Alanen 1990, James and Prout 1990, Qvortrup et al. 1994, Wartofsky 1981). This is not necessarily to argue that developmental psychological theories are 'wrong', but we need to consider that they are developed within particular cultural groups and processes and so necessarily have limitations. Some psychologists are themselves concerned to acknowledge these limitations (Triandis 1987, White 1981).

If psychological theories of child development are culturally limited, how do they come to appear as if they have universal scientific validity? This largely occurs through the concepts used, which obscure the assumptions upon which the theories are based. I have already noted the questions that are now being raised about the concepts of 'individual' and 'child'. There are further questions to be considered. The notion of 'development' itself implies moving onwards to a more desirable situation – 'to come or to bring to a later or more advanced or expanded stage' (*Collins Concise Dictionary*). Concepts such as 'growth', 'development' and 'maturation' can give writing a spurious appearance of objective assessment (Cole 1981), unless we question *what counts as development*, or growth – what are the goals towards which children are said to be growing, and by which childrearing practices may be evaluated? The feminist psychologist, Carol Gilligan (1982), has made a highly influential critique of the gendered terms of reference of traditional theories of children's

moral development, which define the goals of such development in terms based upon masculinist concerns. Similarly, Woodhead (1990) provides a telling analysis of the different ways in which the concept of 'need' may be used, so that value judgements may be hidden within arguments about apparently inherent imperatives in children's natures. Such theories may lead to judgemental attitudes about different approaches to childcare, due to the failure to recognise the value-laden aspects of some of the most basic underlying terms. The emphasis upon apparently 'objective' and 'scientific' research methods within psychology serves to further mask such underlying assumptions and impede cross-cultural research (Taft 1983).

Such hidden value judgements are particularly apparent in psychological descriptions of social class differences in childrearing and in parental values. Such patterns have received considerable attention within psychological research, for example Duvall (1946) and Bronfenbrenner (1958) in the United States, and Newson and Newson (1965) in Britain.[2] There are considerable difficulties with this work, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of value judgements that are hidden within an apparently universal scientific discourse. These difficulties concern an oversimplification of complex data and an over-reliance on structured methodologies, leading to evaluative judgements of differences in childrearing that appear objective while being based in cultural values. These judgements are then fed into professional expertise and used to drive further research based on similar assumptions.

The first difficulty, then, is the tendency to overlook the complexities of the data. Social classes are frequently dichotomised into two clear-cut categories – middle and working class. This leads to a neglect of variabilities within these categories, including curvilinear relationships between childrearing and social class, and data that show no social class patterns at all. Yet a close examination of much of the data on patterns of childrearing reveals that such complexity is common (see e.g. Newson and Newson 1976, 1978, Newson and Lilley 1989). The position of women married to routine white collar workers appears to be particularly ambiguous, while social class differences are often only clear-cut between the extremes of the classification systems (e.g. Blaxter and Paterson 1982). Examination of data on how social class patterns in childrearing have changed over time (e.g. Newson and Lilley 1989) also reveal complex changes that appear quite random and difficult to explain. In a review of social class and socialisation, Kerchoff concludes: '. . . although social class seems to be an important variable throughout the socialisation process, it can explain only a

rather limited amount of the variation in the process and the outcome' (1972: 125).

The second difficulty in these debates is the heavy reliance on structured methods. Whether relying on interviews or observations, researchers are inevitably making prior assumptions about what are the relevant questions to ask, or what they are to observe and how to categorise these observations (see e.g. Laosa 1981). Although Newson and Newson at times suggest that their work has 'existential and phenomenological roots' (1978: 14), they offer no theoretical explanation for how they came to choose the topics for inclusion within their highly structured questionnaires.

Pearlin (1972) also used highly structured questionnaires for his cross-cultural study of childrearing. After administering his American-based questionnaire to Italian parents, he concluded that there was an absence of differences between the American and Italian data. However, his additional less structured interviews and qualitative discussions hint at other unexplored cross-cultural contrasts: 'The concept of personality is not relevant among Italians ... the parents seem free from conflict or ambivalence concerning the way they raise their children' (1972: 50).

There is a striking absence of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1968), and a lack of concern with the *conceptual roots of empirical work* in research that considers the part played by parents in childrearing. Ethnographers warn us that 'social scientists must take care not to become straitjacketed by the social circles in which they move' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 21). Without such recognition, we find the third difficulty in this body of research is that it leads on, almost inevitably, to culturally based evaluations about good and bad parenting that are presented as objective descriptions.

Sometimes such evaluations are contained in the language used for apparently 'scientific' descriptions of children's 'needs', but the result all too often is that the childrearing of groups lower in the social hierarchy comes to be seen as both stupid and morally degenerate. As Yuen (1985) discusses, a significant aspect of power is to be able to discredit others' versions of reality. This can be seen clearly in the various typologies that have been developed to describe parenting behaviours. Waters and Crandall (1964 – discussed in Laosa 1981) described differences in maternal behaviour in terms of higher class mothers being 'less dictatorial', 'less severe' and less 'restrictive'. Shaffer and Brody (1981 – discussed in Laosa 1981) classify different styles of parental discipline as power-assertion, love-withdrawal and induction (that is, reasoning), and then examine the effects of different styles on

moral development. Is it any surprise that they found that induction best facilitated moral development and was found most often in the middle class, while power-assertion was least associated with moral maturity and was found most often in the working class?

Newson and Newson describe permissive, and later authoritarian/democratic, dimensions (1965, 1978), and Raphael-Leff (1983) describes mothers as facilitators or regulators. In Maccoby and Martin's two-dimensional typology (1983), one dimension classifies parental characteristics as parent-centred, i.e. 'rejecting and unresponsive'. This leads on, not surprisingly, to a discussion of 'parental failures', which describes what is 'lacking' in such parenting – 'The frequent occurrence of situations calling for firm control implies that socialisation is already off to a bad start' (1983: 70). Such valuations implicit in the words used to describe parenting and parenting typologies transform and distance them from the ways in which mothers themselves construe their own behaviour, thus alienating women from their own common-sense understandings. In this sense, these expert typologies are more heavily based on second order constructs, rather than being grounded in social actors' own constructs (chapter 2). Baumrind (1967, 1972, 1975) describes permissive, authoritarian and authoritative types, a typology which is both implicitly and explicitly evaluative. It is not expressed in terms which women/parents themselves might use, precisely because the methodology does not seek to consider the meanings that behaviours hold for mothers/ parents themselves. Furthermore, her discussion takes no account of variable social contexts,[3] rather assuming *a single set of valuable qualities* for children to develop within a monolithic American society. Hammersley (1979) discusses in more general terms how ethnographic analytic concepts may differ from traditional concepts in precisely these ways.

Sylva and Lunt (1982) offer descriptions of 'good mothering'. Relying heavily on naturalistic observations, they describe good mothering as requiring sensitivity, consistency, stimulation and responsiveness. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) discuss how notions of 'sensitive mothering' have been promoted since the 1940s on a conceptual basis of 'attachment' which ignores the political and theoretical issues underlying such a concept, while women who fail to devote themselves to the baby's 'need for attachment' are pathologised as egocentric (Phoenix and Woollett 1991).

Childrearing may also be judged by reference to what contributes to 'success' within the existing institutional arrangements of Western societies, particularly educational success. Educational

institutions are themselves built upon the cultural assumptions of some groups in society rather than others (Henderson 1981, Keddie 1971), and yet it is these particular educational evaluations that are used as the basis for measuring children's mental abilities (Henderson 1981). The power to define what is good childrearing may constitute part of the 'cultural capital' which the middle classes can pass on to their children (Bourdieu 1973, Tulkin 1975).

It is very clear that Newson and Newson (1978) regard working class parenting as inferior when it comes to relative advantages in wider social life. However, their discussion does not question what counts as education and cultural capital, or how *their own construction* of childrearing may inter-relate with constructions of educational pedagogy to create a neat but apparently 'objective' package of working class inability to profit from the educational system. It is particularly apparent in their discussion of home and school (Newson and Newson 1977) how they are constrained within both psychological and educational concepts. They do not consider that educational goals may themselves reflect middle class cultural values – that written culture is more highly valued than oral culture, that intellectual ability is more highly valued than practical ability, and that abstract knowledge is regarded as distinct from concrete knowledge (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989).[4] Contrast the following discussion of what counts as 'brains', given during the course of my own study:

> Sharon wasn't much of a scholar, she couldn't add two and two and she couldn't really write very much, but in fact she was much brainier than what Janet was, 'cos Janet couldn't use her hands all that much, but Sharon could. She had brains for working. She could put anything together . . . I think I'm actually the same, could *do* it in the practical but can't do it in the verbal. (Grandmother)

Laosa (1981) points out that much observational work on mother–child interactions has been directed at explaining differences in school performance among different social groups, so that their implicit agenda is to discover how lower class socialisation is deficient. The cultural circles between middle class/better educated mothers, middle class researchers and middle class educational institutions may all *reinforce each other* in their implicit evaluations and understandings of what childrearing is all about. Walkerdine and Lucey suggest that: 'Science claims to tell the truth about natural mothering but it is founded upon a set of fantasies and fears of what is to be found in the working class' (1989: 29). Furthermore, Gans (1962, discussed by Tulkin 1975) suggests that middle class researchers pathologise working class childrearing