3 Negotiation: the Development of Parental Behaviour

I NEGOTIATION

Being a parent involves continuously making choices and decisions about how to deal with one’s children. For many parents, however, this process is not a lone activity but is carried out intimately with another adult, one’s spouse. In this chapter I shall discuss some of the interactional and definitional factors involved in this mutual development of parental behaviour.

The underlying assumptions discussed in the previous chapter provided spouses with a generalised sense of their mutually-held reality of parenthood. The problematical nature of the process arose out of the fact that varieties of behaviour could be claimed as ‘legitimate’ in terms of these very broad assumptions. As Walsh has stated:

... the social world is also a world of multiple realities, in the sense that members may focus on social situations in different ways and thereby read (account) what are the same situations differently.¹

This applies as much to marriage and parenthood as to any other sphere of the ‘social world’. In order, therefore, to achieve some sense of acting in the same reality, each couple was engaged in a continuous process of negotiation. In Berger and Kellner’s terms they were continually correlating their individual definitions of reality.²

The main focus of the present study was to look at how spouses defined their social worlds and negotiated these definitions with other family members in order to achieve a subjectively satis-
factory construction of ‘being a parent’. This process of negoti­ating parental behaviour was characterised by the use of legitima­tions and legitimating tactics. These involved explaining be­haviour to oneself and others so that it could be seen to be compatible with the mutually-held reality being created. As Schutz pointed out, negotiation is a process of reassurance that the ‘right’ prescriptions are being applied. 3

The negotiation and legitimation of parental behaviour in­volved extremely complex exchanges of meanings at many different levels. For example, it is important to remember that the subjective meaning attached to a particular activity by a family member might bear little relationship to its actual practical con­tribution to the administration of family life, as assessed by the researcher. Throughout my fieldwork I was constantly reminded of this very important point. Occasionally respondents themselves defined certain actions as making minimal practical contribution, or as being ‘an indulgence’, but at the same time stressed their importance. During the analysis I realised that one aspect of the subjective importance of such actions was that they sustained belief in the various underlying assumptions which were crucial to the mutual reality being created. I shall give two examples to illustrate this point. Both deal with the reaffirmation of meanings: the first through the practical division of labour, the second through verbal communication.

Firstly, great importance was attached by respondents to the regular voluntary execution of various domestic tasks by the husband. 4 Many of these could be seen, objectively, to be simply ‘gestures’ whose importance was to sustain a belief in the fairness of the mutually shared domestic responsibilities. 5 The kinds of ‘gestures’ varied between families, as did the actual number and range of domestic tasks which the husband carried out. All couples, however, cited certain of the husband’s domestic activi­ties which, although often making a minimal practical contribu­tion, could be analysed as of great importance in sustaining the belief in fairness. The most frequent examples were that the husband made tea or coffee, or washed the dishes, in the evening. Other more complex examples were that he bathed the children in the evening, or looked after them totally for a short period. As will be discussed later, the exchange of meanings behind these various activities could be seen as of greater significance than the practical contribution of the task itself. 6