9 Implications – a Personal View

1 INTRODUCTION

The main aims of this study were to describe the everyday parental behaviour of a group of middle class couples and to develop a grounded analysis of the important elements in this process. As far as possible I have tried to allow my respondents’ accounts of parenthood to speak for themselves by using a style of analysis which, hopefully, has allowed me to examine critical features of their family lives without moving too far away from their original statements.

I have always been acutely aware of the problems involved in generalising from a small scale qualitative study and I agree with Lofland that:

The strong suit of the qualitative researcher is his ability to provide an orderly presentation of rich, descriptive detail. He can move close to a social setting and bring back an accurate picture of patterns and phenomenological reality as they are experienced by human beings in social capacities. He can discover, document and render patterns of social action, and make the participants of a social setting live for us as human beings. But the methods useful in attaining these goals render him less equipped to achieve other goals. These other goals are the ones normally attached to the methods and stance of the quantitative researcher, the supported specification of causes and consequences’ . . . [therefore] ‘the analyst is well advised to phrase his conjectures in a qualified way.’

Nevertheless, if this book has had value for the reader, he or she will undoubtedly be making his/her own conclusions about its meaning for middle class marriage and parenthood now and in

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the future. In this final chapter, therefore, I offer my own views about the implications of this research for the women, men and children who live in families similar to the ones I studied. This is not just an academic statement as we now have a child of our own and, as a couple, have experienced many of the challenges and decisions which were described by the couples in my group.

II THE DOMINANCE OF THE MOTHER ROLE

In the few years which have elapsed since the completion of the empirical part of this study the most pertinent changes which have occurred have been in social attitudes regarding the position of women. What was initially treated as the outbursts of a few ‘women’s libbers’ has developed in the 1970s into a general debate about the role of women in society, and a greater awareness, reflected in law, of discrimination on the grounds of sex. I am, however, generally pessimistic about the extent of real change in the family lives of women. I hope that an important contribution of this present study is to help to understand why, although a greater ‘consciousness’ might now exist about the subordination of women in the family, the everyday existence of most women continues to be much the same as ever. One of the crucial factors is, I feel, the continued dominance of the mother role in the lives of women.

My study was carried out with a group of intelligent, educated and often well qualified women. Most of them had active plans for returning to some form of paid employment after the children were at school, and some of them returned to work during the fieldwork period. Only a very small minority seemed to have embraced domestication \textit{per se} as the main focus of their lives for an indefinite period. Nevertheless, all of them had given up their jobs, if only temporarily, after the births of the children. In addition, their future work plans were being thought out in terms of arrangements which could accommodate their ongoing childcare responsibilities. Men might be ‘involved’ in taking a share of these responsibilities, but their work plans would not be fundamentally affected. Thus, my evidence supports and provides rather more detailed insight into the findings of several researchers that the woman continues to adopt the principal responsibility for childcare and organisation of surrogate