



# From 'good' babies to 'bad' mothers: multiplicity, choice and the burden of interpretation

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## Good babies and bad mothers: the narrative shift

- How expectations of mothers and the intensity of mothering has changed, 1945-2004
- Changing expert discourses about the form and goal of children's socialisation
- A mother's responsibility to ensure desirable characteristics – the women's notions mirroring professional opinions
- In each successive time period, increasing possibilities in childrearing practices and methods



## The Research

- Kinship and expert advice in the process of learning to mother
- 33 interviewees: mother-daughter pairs in Scotland, both mothers
- White, British, mainly middle-class, relatively well-educated and non-religious
- Professionally published childrearing literature
- 1945-1960; 1961-1980; 1990-2004



## The Two Terms

### *Habit Training:*

The establishment and performance of care for babies and very young children, e.g. sleeping, eating toilet training.

### *Socialising Discipline:*

How to behave inside and outside the home; interactions with family, friends and strangers; values, attitudes and personality characteristics.



## First Cohort: adult-like management 1945-1960

- Post-war anxiety → parental discipline and responsibility weakening.
- Published childrearing advice inflexible.
- In expert discourse, the main objective of habit training was for a baby to fit into the adult patterns of life.



## Cohort One: adult-like management 1945-1960

- Interviewees did expect even very young babies to follow routine – mother set the structure.
- ‘Successful’ training → the child fit into social conventions of adult world.
- This led to proper socialising of older child, where ‘spoiling’ was avoided by instilling obedience.

## Cohort One: adult-like management 1945-1960



Especially when they were younger, I was quite strict really. When they're quite small, such strictness takes hold, so that when they're older, I just assumed they would be sensible, like my own mother did with us. I assumed they would have common sense ... an older child would reject a repressive regime of strictness, but when [they're] small, it was easier.

Allison, 74.



## Cohort One: adult-like management 1945-1960

- None of the interviewees spoke of being a 'bad' mother.
- The least amount of influence from media besides GP, midwives and health visitors.
- The baby's actions the focal point, thus 'good' babies.
- 'Good' baby = non-demanding, placid, content, who did not cry often.
- Fewer demands meant a mother had to deny her child less, meaning less anxiety and guilt.



## Second Cohort: controlled flexibility 1961-1980

- The 1960s and 70s often referred to as the 'permissive years' as there was some liberalisation of sexual behaviour, the family and the arts in Britain.
- Increasing flexibility in childrearing might be viewed as an extension of changing moral values.
- Control still important, but experts paid increasing attention to a child's individual character.
- 'Timing' and 'readiness' key concepts as developmental paediatrics and psychology gained recognition and influence.



## Second Cohort: controlled flexibility 1961-1980

- Interviewees split: some spoke of strictness, others felt they were less rigid than previous generations.
- While there was still references to 'good' babies, anxiety over being a 'bad' mother was also expressed.
- Many women echoed professional literature by questioning 'when do I do it'?



## Second Cohort: controlled flexibility 1961-1980

- In socialising discipline, expert literature stressed children's emotional and psychological stability.
- 'Love' became a reinforcement for the mother-child relationship, so that cooperation based on affection important.

'The principle of discipline should be that the child wants to behave well because it does not want to lose its parents' favour ...'

Illingworth 1969: 399



## Second Cohort: controlled flexibility 1961-1980

- For the women, the notion of the individuality of each child influenced their socialising discipline practices.
- Many mothers remembered the lack of personal recognition in their own upbringing.

‘I don’t think you can set rigid rules for all children, they’re too different’.

Lorna, 52.



## Third Cohort: happy individuals 1990-2004

- Coming into the 1990s → emphasis on parent's duties towards their children. Alongside this, the state's loss of any assumptions about the relationships between mothers and fathers.
- From 1992 onwards → increasing multiplicity in family forms and ideologies.
- Given these changes, professional literature concentrated on the quality rather than the form of the parent-child relationship.
- A multitude of approaches, flexibility and 'shopping around' related to the personality of each child.



## Third Cohort: happy individuals 1990-2004

- The multiplicity of approaches talked about and tried by interviewees indicates the extent of choice.
- Optimum routine one that suits both mother and child with least amount of stress.
- Women's references to 'feeling like a bad mother' often stemmed from the dissonance between the approach a mother wanted to take and which method they had to employ.



## Third Cohort: happy individuals 1990-2004

‘Some of it [the advice] I read – and even by the time Katy was, say, 8 weeks old – I just thought, ‘nope, she’s not that kind of baby’. Some were saying by 3 months, just leave her to cry, but I knew Katy would work herself into hysterics, so then I just steered clear of advice that took that tactic’.

Eileen, 30.

- This was despite Eileen also telling me she wanted a regular routine.



## Third Cohort: happy individuals 1990-2004

- Narratives on socialising discipline focused on a fluid, interactive and reflective process.
- Compared to older cohorts, the children had much more influence in the disciplining process.
- Mutual satisfaction in the mother-child relationship meant 'success' in the socialising.
- More references to letting children 'have a say' or 'spreading their wings'.
- Meant to build up child's self-esteem, ensuring they are 'kind', 'generous' 'open-minded' – all goals mentioned.

# Concluding Discussion



1. A shift in the moral undertone of childrearing, from the mother preventing her child from being 'demanding' in the 1945-1960 period to the mother doing her utmost to preserve her child's ego and the quality of the mother-child relationship by the period 1990-2004.
2. As the intensification of a mother's duty in socialising her children increased, many women sought outside advice, which was steadily multiplying (and was often conflicting).
3. These factors together manifested in more women's narratives revealing feelings of 'flawed' mothering.

## Concluding Discussion



- This concurrence of the intensification of a mother's socialising/childrearing and the proliferation of possible methods → locates any long-term difficulties or problems as a failure on the mother's part to employ the proper practices.
- Thus, there is a greater burden of interpretation on the mother to know her child and act accordingly.
- This burden of interpretation is expected when a child is still very young, for it is the means by which a mother secures a harmonious relationship with her child.



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