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Parenting: Concept and Praxis

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## *Summary*

For most people parenting is a crucial experience. We enter the world via our parents; we learn what it is to be a child, a human being in that particular time-space-people context. We carry our parents' legacy from conception to death.

The questions central to this research concern the concept and praxis of parenting. Why is parenting so important for human being? What do terms such as loving, caring, nurturing, mean? What does it mean to be a 'family', a 'mother', a 'father'? What of power in families? How do parenting relationships differ from other forms of relationship? How does parenting 'fit' in society? The task I set myself was the comprehension of parenting. I wanted to grasp as much as I could about the definitions, ideas, practices which people use in their everyday lives, and I wanted to understand these in society.

The work is a theoretical one. The phenomenological method underpins the total process; the introduction, the field research, the analysis of data, the writing. Phenomenology, as I understand it, is concerned essentially with uncovering meaning. I wanted to learn the meaning of parenting praxis in society in order to develop a theory of parenting which could be used as a catalyst, and provoke questions which I believe are critical for human being.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first is the preparation or journey into the research. Time is spent on defining such basic terms as 'body', 'self', 'perception', in building an ontological and methodological framework sufficient for my needs.

Portraits of the six families with whom I lived are presented in triptych form in the middle part of the thesis. I wanted, needed, to immerse myself in people's lives, not simply to visit and ask questions which they may/may not have been

able or willing to answer, but I wanted to become part of their lives, albeit for a short time. Then I could hear, see, taste, feel .. what it is like to be in their family. People are revealed warts and all, and parenting shown to be complex, ambiguous, tedious, awesome ..

In the third part of the thesis focus is on parenting-in-society. C. Wright Mills' questions anchor the discussion of the history of parenting, and on parenting in Australian society. The concept and praxis of parenting is un-covered, and shown to be an ongoing social construction. I argue that the particular construction, this ordering of power, this definition and conceptualisation of parenting, is brought about by a systematic orchestration, an ordering of people's lives which inhibits full realisation of human being. The liberal democratic ideology fuels this construction, and contradictions inherent in parenting praxis are denied, deflected, dismissed by reference to this ideology.

*Statement*

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted to any other university. The thesis contains no material published elsewhere, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

*marg gilling*

Margaret Gilling

## *Acknowledgments*

Many people gave of their time, their space, themselves in this research. The English language, any worded language, is unable to carry the respect, gratitude, humility which I feel. To these people, especially to the six families with whom I lived, I can but say thanks, and pause, in silence, in memory of these times.

Of mentors:

Some you 'study'; some you learn from; some corroborate you; some 'stimulate' you; some are gods; some are brothers (sisters), much closer than colleagues or gods; some choke the heart out of you and make you dubious of ever reading or looking at work again ... \*

Some enable: Peter Hiller, supervisor and friend, was/is always an enabler. I thank him for that.

And Lex Grey (1961/62); Jan Pouwer (1970/71); Fiona Mackie (1978 ...).

To Margaret Robinson, friend and a very special wizard on the typewriter, thank you. To Glen Chandler, Michelle Anderson and Robyn Mita; thank you for your enthusiasm, balance and practical help.

To other friends .. and my parents, Don's parents, and 'the family' .. thank you for being you. How richly blessed we have been in human wealth. Without your support I could not have stayed the course.

To Don, a special wording: the term husband is an insult. Don is more than that: he is friend, colleague, lover, anchor, stirrer, challenger, nurturer .. our relationship grew through this research.

---

\* Agee (1939)1966:321 (brackets added).

To Simon, Michael, Ana: thank you for sharing, for teaching, for your patience and resilience: the tears when I left (Simon), the closing-off (Michael), the strident instruction 'Mum, you come home' (Ana). I gambled on our working as a family in the hope that I might learn, and therefore more ably seek to change the world.

1. Bracketing is a key process in this research. In phenomenological terms, it means that the word is being placed under the vivisector. It is

... the technique of phenomenological reduction, whereby the object under study is placed in a special kind of systematic doubt ('bracketed') as to its contingent and theoretical characteristics.

Lafferty, 1977:140

In Part 1:3 the process is explained and used in a deliberate, formal sense: that is, words are bracketed and defined. At other times, a word is bracketed, and the single inverted quotes are used simply as an alerting system; they indicate - this word has an alternative meaning, or multiplicity of meanings.

2. The use of two periods .. after a word means I have given space for the emergence of other meanings. For example:

Sociology is concerned with people: how they live, where they work, what they value, how they play, when they celebrate, what they worship .. and why.

p.1

Three periods ... means words have been omitted. This is the standard use.

3. In the text and bibliography some books are given two dates of publication - the original date, and the date of the particular edition I have used. For example:  
C. Wright Mills (1959):1970. In the normal use of the Harvard system I found the use of the second date only gave an unrealistic picture of the text. Books, like people, are products of their time.
4. In the thesis, a number of different timesteps are

used.

this is used for people interviewed for the research;  
*this* is used for people I lived with.

5. At times in the text I use an unusual form of expression. For example:

The questions sociologists ask, the kinds of answers they create; how they search, where they re-search ..

p.1

... for I want/ed to comprehend both parenting  
'praxis' ...

p.3

The first example illustrates how words can be changed in order to focus on meaning; the second is used to straddle tenses, in this instance past and present. The reasons for this will be made clear in Part 1:3.