Warmth and wealth: re-imagining social class in taxonomies of good parenting

Tracey Jensen

In the past decade, an absolute faith has been planted in the power of practices of 'good parenting' as the key to unlocking aspiration and compensating for social and economic disadvantage. 'Good parenting' is a term so amorphous in itself that it is possible to project a myriad of meanings upon it and to define it in a variety of convenient ways, which a canon of self-appointed experts have already done, while a growing cacophony are doing now. The faith in good parenting to mediate all other factors of disadvantage forms part of specific social and political agendas surrounding social inclusion and poverty, yet its place within these agendas is made invisible through recourse to a growing 'evidence base' which is imagined to be objective and untouched by those agendas. The bulk of the contemporary evidence base is itself funded, commissioned and orchestrated by the same political actors who insist upon the significance of 'good parenting' above all other factors and who advise policy makers to those ends.

Of course, the problematic aspects of this self-assessment have not prevented the zealous politicking of intimate family relationships. The 'officialising' of a cultural renewal of parenting has political roots in the New Right and in the 'back-to-basics' moral crusade of John Major's mid-nineties Conservative government, who have always located the nation within private families rather than communities. However, the renewal of parenting has been entrenched as the bulwark of the social investment state on the political left *as well as* the right; or more specifically the new left of New Labour and Tony Blair, whose very public fatherhood during his time serving as Prime Minister seemed to cement his Cabinet as the voice of 'hardworking families' (Chambers, 2001). This entrenching of parenting as the principle site for social renewal has far outlived the man who was its most passionate advocate, and the baton appears to have been taken up by David Cameron, leader of the Conservative party and now Prime Minister¹. At a child development event in January this year, Cameron repeated the contemporary notion that it is what parents *do*, above all else, that effects the life-chances of their offspring. It is what parents do, rather than who they are, that matters (Williams, 2004) as we can see

clearly in the contemporary fashion for speaking of 'parenting' as a verb rather than an ontological category. Applying Cameron's logic to his own childhood, it was the effective parenting he received, or rather what his parents *did*, that resulted in his biographical trajectory to, some weeks ago powerful political leader of the Opposition, and now Prime Minister rather than the social and material resources his parents were able to mobilise as a result of *who* they were (social capital networks, his private education and so on). We might read Cameron's comments as a positive deconstruction of social class and privilege, an empowering challenge to notions of parental worth, in that anybody, rich or poor, can be a good parent or do parenting well. We might equally interpret his comments as an evasion of privilege, his own and others, as a refusal to engage with socioeconomic difference and the difference it makes. We might read it as a refusal to name, engage with and take seriously the injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb, 1973) or the classed distortions of moral sentiments that too often leave oppressed classes in the double-bind of being pathologised or patronised (Sayer, 2002). Cameron did refer, somewhat obliquely, to the difference that material resources and wealth might make in his speech, but only to roundly dismiss it:

Of course there is a link between material poverty and poor life chances, but the full picture is that that link also runs through the style of parenting that children in poor households receive. Research shows that, *while responsible parenting is more likely to occur in wealthier households*, children in poor households who are raised with that style of parenting do just as well. *What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting*.

Cameron, 2010, speech to *Building Character* launch at Demos, italics added Although Cameron acknowledges (as he must) the links between poverty and poor life chances, these are certainly not the terms in which he wishes this debate to happen. It is not, he argues, the *wealth* of wealthier households that enables them to transmit aspiration and success to their children, but their *responsibility*. He both refuses to speak of wealth and invites us to talk instead of responsibility as a proxy for wealth. This sort of talk is not simply an evasion of socioeconomic class; it is also part of a much longer and broader rewriting of the very terms of social differences and inequalities, a rewriting which goes back to distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Those

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parents that fail to inculcate success within their children are not victims of structural inequality but are 'failures in self-governance, unable or unwilling to appropriately capitalise on their lives' (Gillies, 2005, p837).

Talking about social inequalities in terms of material resources has been rendered particularly crude, out-dated and unsophisticated within contemporary political culture, as has talk of 'class' itself (Skeggs, 2004). Instead, the story goes, we must complicate and mystify our discussions around inequalities and where they come from, and talk about ever more intangible elements of the mobility formula. The concept of social class must itself be modernised. The enthusiastic embrace of the concept of 'social capital' by policy makers illustrates more than a wilful misreading of Bourdieu; it also demonstrates the appetite for taking social action around inequality away from stubborn concentrations of congealed wealth and towards cultural and intimate conduct and the realm of private life. Lauren Berlant (1997) has called this process the 'privatisation of citizenship', producing an 'intimate public sphere' in which citizenship and public voice has become reconfigured as the sum of the private acts and values of individual subjects. This 'intimate public' is for Berlant traditionalist, nostalgic and directed towards the family sphere, a downsized version of citizenship in which 'the family' is implicated ever more intensely within the blueprint of the nation. It is little wonder that 'parenting' has absorbed such profound significance in terms of this intimate citizenship, imagined to be both the cause of and solution to so many social and structural inequalities. Although the term 'parenting' might imply genderlessness, the parent at the centre of this activity remains resolutely female. The mother once more has become the 'invisible pedagogue' (Skeggs, 1997, p43) to the nation.

I want now to reflect upon the seductive power of numbers in the growth of the evidence base around 'good parenting' and what it might achieve. I pay attention to one example of this evidence base, the Demos report *Building Character*, a literature and policy review and statistical interpretation of data produced by the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) by the think-tank Demos of data produced by the Millennium Cohort Study. The MCS is a large-scale, longitudinal study carried out by the Centre of Longitudinal Studies, which examines the development of children born in the same

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week of April 2001. The data was collected in three 'sweeps': when the children were eleven months old, three years old and five years old. *Building Character* is just one of a number of statistical analyses carried out using this data. I suggest that the evidence base produced here is perhaps more flimsy than the final Demos report implied. Certainly, the ways in which the report's indicative findings have been interpreted publicly, by both the press and by politicians, are distortions of the statistical strength of the findings. I am interested in the reasons why it is that these less cautious interpretations have gathered such momentum. In particular I want to draw attention to the shift from 'wealth' to 'warmth' as an object to be known and upon which policy is to now be directed; and what this shift might mean for the parents its findings are projected towards and the policy that is emerging in response to it.

Building character, building taxonomies

The Demos analysis of the MCS sought to examine the ways in which parents 'build character' within their children. The definition of character in this context referred to quite specific personal attributes, principally empathy, application and self-control². This definition is in itself partial and contestable, existing within specific normative frameworks and orientations to the future. The significance attached to self-control, for example, reifies the distinction between the pursuit of immediate gratification and the ability to defer gratification, long held to be an explanatory difference between workingclass and middle-class subjects and their relative social successes. The 'soft skills' included within the Demos definition of 'character' are tied to specific frameworks for making sense of success, mobility and aspiration, which normalise a reflexive latemodern agent, assumed to be middle-class (Savage, 2000). Absent from the definition are many other attributes which we might reasonably wish to include under a broader sense of 'character'; self-acceptance or interdependence, for example³. Such facets fit within other classed frameworks of value, but are unrecognised and unacknowledged. Notions of 'best practice' parenting are thus already inscribed within classed systems of meaning and value, from the very moment of definition. The field of parenting expertise has

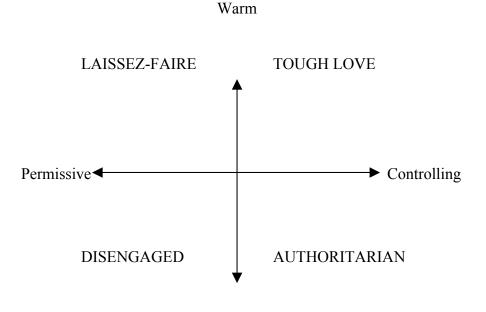
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already been colonised by developmental specialists whose psychometric tools permit them to offer an 'objective' account of natural or normal development, even as these accounts are constructions based on narrow normative assumptions (Holt, 2008).

The Demos report defines 'character' in the report as a set of skills rather than a moral disposition. These skills can be known through their enabling of 'good life outcomes'. In short, 'character' is that which facilitates social success. The implication of this narrow definition is that issues of opportunity, equality and fairness become a matter of inculcating the 'right' personality. The successes of middle-class children, in institutional settings such as schooling, can be reduced to the competent parenting they have received and to the instilling of good character within them, rather than the confidence that their parents have in negotiating with teachers or demanding additional learning support, parents' knowledge in navigating/playing the appeal system for the best school places, or their ability to pay for additional tuition to prepare for entrance examinations or national qualifications (Gillies, 2007; Reay, 1998). Social justice, recast as simply engineering 'better character' in the lives of those at the bottom, becomes an individualistic policy intervention in the intimate lives of the socially excluded themselves (Haylett, 2000). Sharon Gewirtz (2001) asks with mock exasperation, 'why can't working-class parents behave more like middle-class ones?'

Having defined its interest in character within the parameters of good life outcomes, the *Building Character* report proposes four distinct parenting styles: toughlove, laissez-faire, authoritarian and disengaged. These styles fit upon two axes: responsiveness (warm-hostile) and demandingness (permissive-controlling), to form a grid of parental style, shown below (Figure 1):

Figure 1.



Hostile

According to this grid and the accompanying description in the report, tough-love parenting is warm, responsive, assertive without being aggressive or restrictive, and uses reasoning rather than punitive disciplinary methods. Laissez-faire parents are highly responsive, non-confrontational and non-traditional, running lenient and democratic households. Authoritarian parenting is rule-based, values obedience and structure, and uses firm discipline, with little regard for the feelings of children. Disengaged parents are 'hands-off' and low in warmth and discipline, and at the extreme end would be considered neglectful.

On the basis of these parenting styles, Demos examined the associated 'child outcomes' of children whose parents exhibited a clear preference for one particular parenting style. These child outcomes are based upon a 25 point survey, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which captures data on the development of three key character capabilities already mentioned (application, self-regulation and empathy). The *Building Character* report suggests that a clear hierarchy of value emerges in relation to

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these child outcomes, with children of 'tough love' parents two and a half times more likely than those with 'disengaged' parents to score within the top fifth for the SDQ child outcomes. Similarly, the children of disengaged parents were found by this analysis to be three times more likely than children with 'tough love' parents to score within the bottom fifth for the SDQ child outcomes. Between these two, children with 'laissez-faire' parents did better in child outcome scores than those whose parents were 'authoritarian'. In other words, the report suggests that parenting style is, in its own right, the most significant factor in terms of how children score in child outcomes. I want to raise two key points in relation to this taxonomy.

First, there is an important absence in the Building Character report of any reflexive discussion about what to do with the 'residual', the MCS data which did not fit into any of the categories; the parents who did not follow any parenting style as defined by the Demos grid. This is a highly significant point, given that the 'residual' was larger than all the categories put together. Fifty-nine percent of the parents who formed part of the data set did not fit into any of the categories squarely, but the only discussion made of this was that these residual parents serve as a 'base category' from which comparisons might be drawn; however, none are. How useful, then, is a taxonomy when the residual, the 'not otherwise recognised' (Star, 1998) or 'other' category is, in fact, the category that the majority of people fall into? Data does not pre-exist taxonomies, but rather the taxonomies themselves – the ways in which we divide up and classify – create data. As Ian Hacking (1990) argues in his Foucauldian critique of census-making, categories are invented that people can conveniently fall into. Far from reflecting divisions in the world that are somehow out there, waiting to be counted, the Census produces the systems of division through which the world can be 'known'. Classification is a process, rather than a reflection, and *Building Character* is as much building these taxonomies as discovering them

Taking into account the size of the residual, those parents whose parenting style was not clear or definite, not classifiable within the grid or not otherwise recognised, the report's findings regarding child outcomes become less numerically impressive. The report implies a clear hierarchy of value between parenting style and percentage of **Tracey Jensen**.

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children scoring in the top fifth for child outcomes: tough love at the top, followed by laissez-faire, authoritarian and finally disengaged. This hierarchy was lent visual (or 'objective') weight through the enthusiastic use of graphs and figures that appear to represent an unmistakable ordering of parenting style preference (see for example Shields, 2009). However, when these outcomes are taken within the context of the entire MCS cohort, these patterns become less clear and fall in less of a hierarchy. Child outcome scores are not best explained with reference to parenting style, simply because most parents do not fall within the parameters of a parenting style.

Second, the Demos report insists that its findings around child outcomes are based around warmth, not wealth; that there was no correlation between socioeconomic class in any conventional sense and the patterns of SDQ scoring. 'Tough love' parents, Demos insist, were represented across the social spectrum, and wherever they were found on this spectrum, child outcomes were more likely to be higher. As I have already suggested, when taken in the context of the entire cohort (as I would argue they must be), these patterns are less impressive and less clear. But significantly, there is a classed pattern to the findings, even as Demos insists upon the significance of warmth not wealth. 'Tough love' parenting was found, by this analysis, to be more likely in wealthier households, and 'disengaged' parenting more likely in poorer households. This classed pattern, and the failure of Demos to interrogate it fully, is possibly an indication of the methodological problems involved with using parents as proxies. The SDQ survey is a self-report questionnaire, and in this instance no corresponding participant observation was used to triangulate data. This raises thorny issues around perceived parental competence, confidence, and the self-esteem of parents themselves and the impacts these effects may have had upon the data. The perceptions around one's capacity to 'parent' is rooted within the complex webs of the psycho-social, marked deeply by classed, gendered and raced biography, history and memory and also by popular notions of who is to be valued as a parent. It is problematic to assume that the SDQ survey can be cleansed of social class in the ways imagined by Demos. As other research around parenting has compellingly demonstrated, middle-class parents are more likely than their working-class counterparts to describe themselves as competent and confident and to creatively account

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for challenging aspects of their children's behaviour (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Reay, 1998; Gillies, 2007). These classed complexities could perhaps be captured by the SDQ self-report methodology, but they are certainly not considered in the Demos parental taxonomy. These psycho-social effects, and the very brief references to them relegated to a footnote, reveal the fantasy of objectivity that haunts the 'evidence base' that is growing around the intimate sphere, particularly in relation to parenting.

Tough love in the emotional field

The category of 'tough love' parenting, in the *Building Character* report celebrated as the most positive parenting style, merits a closer examination. What function does it serve? What does it perform within this taxonomy of parenting style? The label 'tough love' is perhaps an empty signifier, onto which we might project our own meanings regarding the appropriate balance between warmth and discipline, the mysterious alchemy that might facilitate 'good child outcomes', social mobility and aspiration. It is also a 'feel-good' term, and this positivity and emptiness makes it a powerful signifier. It crops up in many different places, in intimate and political spheres and in the intimate public (Berlant, 1997, Plummer, 2003). 'Tough love' is a philosophy, a set of ethics and an orientation to the world employed by both parents and politicians, implying the capacity to arbitrate, the will to instill fairness and the capacity for warmth, simultaneously.

The absence of tough love, or what has become known as 'poor parenting', has been politically aligned over successive discussion and consultation documents – particularly in the flagship Green paper *Supporting Parents* (Home Office, 1998) – with 'social exclusion'. This chimes with wider discursive shifts in political action, from concerns about structural inequalities that shape individuals in complex ways, to a more simplistic model of inheritance, one which places culture, rather than structure, as the cause of inequality and considers cultural defects to be transmitted (Levitas, 2005). Fractured communities and poor parenting continue to be regarded as the principle causes of crime and delinquency, and in the discussion document *Parenting*, commitments to 'good parenting' were held up as social investments that must be made in order to change

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the moral climate. It was argued in this document that in order for the moral climate to flourish, government had to 'get tough' with its citizens, just as parents must 'get tough' with their children. The time of leniency, as it has been narrated, is over, and responsibilities must come before rights. Parental responsibilities in particular had to be fulfilled in exchange for rights – or more accurately, in exchange for 'opportunities' (Fairclough, 2000). Tough love is a moral rhetoric which is principally based around nostalgia for a golden age of parental authority (Coontz, 1992), imagined to have happened sometime between the austere Victorians and the permissive 'anything-goes' post-war period (Squires, 2008: 20) a period considered to have been newly affluent, morally confident, and bound together by a social fabric now considered torn.

Importantly however, 'tough love' rhetoric transfigures the parental authority of yesteryear, by combining it with warmth, compassion and understanding in a way that only the modern family of today is seen to truly provide. 'Tough love' is not simply the exercise of authority; it is envisioned to be more complex than simply what our parents and grandparents did. The Building Character report classified 'tough love' as quite separate from (and better than) 'authoritarian' parenting; the solution to the crisis of parenting is no simple return to the era of blind authority and unquestionable hierarchy. Respect is to be earned, not assumed and the ideal of the democratic family becomes a microcosm of the ideal of the democratic society. The fashioning of the good family as one in which relationships are managed democratically and produced through communication and through emotional management is illustrated in the power of notions such as the 'pure relationship', (Giddens, 1992) which foregrounds reflexive selfknowledge over familial domination and automatic generational power. The tenacity of these distinctly therapeutic notions and the mainstreaming of the ordinary neuroticisms of the middle-class family, have been considered by Eva Illouz (2007) to constitute an emotional micro-public sphere. As Illouz argues, the relentless communication of emotions and feelings – as no less than a marker of emotional health and self-competence - contributes to the decontextualising, objectifying and intellectualising of emotional life. These therapeutic languages – like the 'warmth' of parenting style which promises to free children of any social or economic disadvantage – are both neutral and subjectivist. They

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name complex and ambivalent emotions we feel deep within us, promise to make them knowable through language and offer to culturally train us in their proper expression. This, for Illouz, is emotional capitalism, and it has effected an entire army of professionals who have institutionalised themselves and made themselves indispensable. I would argue that parenting is simply the most recent of the intimate realms into which emotional capitalism is stretching.

And what is to be said of family subjects in this shift from wealth to warmth? Children are known in the *Building Character* analysis, as in many others, only through the 'child outcomes' that they are able to perform. Far from being a real category that can be examined and known, 'the child' in Chris Jenks' (1996) history of childhood is an ideological symbol, an object for the display of difference, a psychoanalytic category for the unearthing of motives, a personification of a part of the psyche, and a way of routinising theories of maturation and development. In short, the category of 'the child' tells us far more about adults than it ever will about children. Jenks argues that the ways in which children are treated is illustrative of social structure, of the achievement of civilisation and of the strategies through which power and constraint are exercised. Perhaps the way that children are operationalised through 'child outcomes' can tell us much about the position they occupy in contemporary society, as commodity fetishes and lifestyle markers, as public nuisances and sources of anxiety about incivility. The sensibilities of neoliberal parenting culture as set out here are profoundly limited with regards to the empirical messiness of actual children.

Moreover, the emphasis on the individualist and moralistic register of 'warmth' rather than sociological and economic 'wealth' also addresses parents (or rather, mothers) as little more than proxies for the outcomes of their children. In 'naming the crisis' as moral (Finlayson, 2010) and as a matter of character and of soft skills, rather than a crisis of the effects of competitive neoliberalism or inequality, these emerging taxonomies of parenting reinscribe social injustices within a poverty of character rather than poverty *per se*. Demos suggests on the front page of the *Building Character* report that "parents are the principle architects of a fairer society". This troubling statement rehearses the

impossible burden that parents are to absorb within a crisis of inequality that has been named as moral.

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³ Val Gillies suggested these alternative (and unrecognised) values in a panel discussion, 'Is poor parenting a class issue' at the Battle of Ideas, held in London, November 2008. (Also see Gillies, 2005, 2007)

¹ Cameron also performs his fatherhood as a central plank of his political life, posting webcam videos of himself discussing policy while doing domestic chores and fielding his children's demands (the ill-fated WebCameron).

² Importantly, Berlant (1997) sees an obsession with 'character', in the sense of moral decency, as centrally significant in the intimate (and infantile) citizenship afforded within the intimate public; this can be seen in the rise of personality politics (see Corner and Pels, 2004).