

Vincent, C et al (2007) *Childcare, choice and social class: Caring for young children in the UK*

Carol Vincent and her colleagues wanted to look at the ways in which mothers in different social classes experienced their lives. Over a 5-year period they focused in particular on childcare and how different mothers chose childcare for their young preschool children. One of their research projects was comparing working-class and middle-class mothers in inner London. The researchers aimed to explore the decisions they took about taking on paid work and finding childcare, the types of childcare used by working-class parents, and the relationship between the mothers and the carers. 5

The researchers selected two areas of London for their research which had a very mixed social class make up – Battersea and Stoke Newington. They accessed a sample of mothers through visiting various different settings: nurseries, playgroups, local libraries and parks. From this, they found a sample of volunteers who were willing to be included in their research. Vincent also used snowball sampling to increase the sample size. They gave all participants a leaflet explaining who they were and what they wanted to talk about. If the mothers agreed to take part, they met them at a place of their choosing (usually their homes but sometimes a nursery or a local café). 10

In the end, there were 55 interviews with working-class mothers and 71 with middle-class mothers, all of whom had at least one child under the age of five. Participating parents were from different ethnic backgrounds. They were categorised based on their job (or their last job if they weren't working), their educational qualifications and their housing. There were 35 working-class and 60 middle-class mothers in paid employment (most of whom were part-time), and 20 working-class and 11 middle-class mothers were at home full-time with their children. 15 20

Vincent et al. carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews which lasted between one and a half and two hours, and recorded these (with permission). The questions were based around the mothers' decisions to work/not work and their use of any childcare.

The researchers found that there were pressures on all women to be 'good mothers'. These pressures were felt whether the women were 'stay-at-home' mothers or were in paid work. Those mothers who stayed at home did so mainly because they believed that mothers 'should' be at home with their young children, that they were being 'good mothers' by not letting someone else bring up their children. Other reasons included lack of childcare that they felt they could trust. However, staying at home often resulted in feelings of isolation, particularly for the working-class mothers. Charlie, a young working-class single mother in Battersea, described the first year of her daughter's life: 25 30

'It was boring, there was nothing to do, nobody to talk to. I got hardly any visitors... so it was hard. I didn't really go out, I just went out to do my shopping, do my laundry and that was it.'

Concerns about the type of childcare elicited the most emotive responses from the mothers. The working-class mothers' anxieties and disapproval focused on 'stranger' childminders, compared to middle-class mothers who were more anxious about putting babies in nurseries. The working-class mothers were fearful about their child's safety and commonly opted for nurseries, rejecting childminders unless they were previously known to them. 35

'Because I've seen people doing childminding, and they've got these children, they've got these children all over the place: that market here, that market there ... Sometimes it's raining, the child hasn't got no hat on their head, and sometimes it's cold ... and things like that kind of put me off getting a childminder.' (Diana, working-class mother, Stoke Newington). 40

Vincent et al. conclude that in order to fully understand childcare policies and families' experiences of care, an analysis which includes social class and the workings of the childcare market is needed. 45

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