



Child-Rearing Research in Communes: The Extension of Adult Sexual Behavior to Young Children

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Conceptions of child rearing and changes in age-grading generated by the conditions of communal living have been our major research focus. We are interested primarily in ideas and the relationship of those ideas to the social contexts that support or undermine them. What seemed most salient to us, particularly in rural commune studies, was the extension of the principle of equalitarianism to chronological age, age being perhaps the last major ascribed barrier, race and sex being successfully under attack already.

We noted age equalitarianism with respect to drug use, sexual behavior, work, a voice in the political affairs in the commune, and the rights of children to settle their own quarrels and resolve their disagreements without adult interference. We have at least two fully verified cases of sexual intercourse between six-year-olds and eight-year-olds; two not fully documented cases of intercourse between children and adults; and one instance of multiple rape of a small girl by several boys only slightly older. In this instance, the parents of the girl expressed anger, although not furious rage, at the boys, making it clear to the researcher that their anger was not about the sexual relations, but rather about the fact that the boys had forced her. She had willingly engaged in sexual intercourse previously.

Parents and other adults do seem to have mixed feelings about the sexuality of their prepubertal children. Coming from backgrounds where feelings about such matters are deeply socialized, it is not surprising that communal adults are sometimes surprised, even

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shocked, to hear about the sexuality of their children. Neither is it surprising that given their favorable predisposition to *natural* morality, they would examine their own shocked response and test it for *natural* virtue. Often they cannot explain their initially shocked response. If sexual behavior seems to do no visible harm to children, the burden of argument tends to fall on those who disapprove of it. Like the rationale for drug use by children, the appeal seems to be to some *natural* sense of propriety. The rationale expressed is that if we, as adults, believe that making love is a good thing, and if the children want to participate in something that we have found rewarding or beautiful, and if there is no persuasive evidence that what is good for us is bad for them, then "let us not obstruct erotic equality because of race, creed, color, or age."

In these circumstances communal adults accept childhood sexuality as part of the pattern of equalitarianism between the two generations. There is a strong predisposition by hip communards to assume that a relationship exists between a child's expressed interest in a given kind of behavior and a probable incipient competence to engage in that behavior. Fresh from the conflicts with campus establishments from whom they demanded "a right to participate in the decisions that shape their lives" and met with such rebuttals that they were too young, too inexperienced, too incompetent to shape university curriculum or to judge the competence of professors, hip communards might well be receptive to the idea of children's rights and children's liberation; at the very least, they are sensitive to the self-serving character of argument by elders for the exclusion of the young on the grounds of an imputed incompetence.

The process is complex because the interactions between ideological postures and the pressures exercised by social contexts sometimes weakens and sometimes strengthens ideological convictions. For example, the hip communal bias against technology may yield to the situational utility of the chain saw in a cold winter; and the ideal of hip brotherhood may be weakened by the need to exclude drug-abusers or frivolous hippies from serious communal enterprises. On the other hand, social contexts sometimes affirm and reinforce initial ideological convictions. For example, the development of primitive survival skills by rural communards may strengthen their belief in the imminent doom of urban middle-class life, and their possession of such skills increases their confidence in their ability to survive urban apocalypse. Similarly, the favorable predispositions of the counter-culture toward candor in interpersonal relations are reinforced by the close quarters and the dense interactional texture of communal living, which make it objectively difficult or impossible to hide or disguise feelings.

Much the same relations are applicable to what we call the inclusion-disattention patterns of child raising. In rural nonreligiously oriented communes, inclusion of the children (beyond the toddler stage) in the activities or rights of adults is general practice. Disattention because of the inclusion is routine, and the inclusive behavior is therefore not especially noted or notable. With the closeness of living quarters, the hippie children, like ghetto children, are exposed to sex between their parents and other adults at an early age. The physical setting reinforces the ideological feelings about candor and openness regarding sex. The parents and other adults are, themselves, young, and since stable nuclear family units are not modal, in the commune courtship and its equivalents are regularly in process. Moreover, babysitters are rarely used, so children get acquainted early with the erotic atmosphere of courtship.

Several of the communes we studied preferred home births where children are routinely present, watching fascinatedly as babies are delivered, sometimes assisting, and usually participating in chanting and other rituals accompanying the ceremony.

The pattern of inclusion of children does not seem to reflect any explicit and deliberate policy of child raising. It is, rather, seen as emerging naturally from the lives that they have to live, needing no explanation or justification unless questions are raised about it. The ordinary responsibilities of child care do not mesh easily with courtship or with the quest for a broadly defined personal freedom and other spiritual quests in which many in the commune are engaged. A philosophy of child care that diminishes the apparent need for, or even desirability of, child care itself, that emphasizes the natural intelligence or competence of children, reduces thereby the degree to which child care may be self-implicating for the parent. It reduces the degree to which one's reputation in the community is contingent upon how "successfully" one manages one's children, thus preserving the freedom and mobility of adults, even in the midst of fertility and poverty.

Conceptions of what children are and ideas about child raising almost always reflect the interests of parents, and these interests are likely to reflect the constraints exercised by social structures larger than the family. Most theories of child rearing assume the existence of middle-class families, and depend on the presence of full-time mother-homemakers, part-time fathers, functional equivalents like nurseries, day-care centers, schools, teachers, and other professionals who apply the principles of child rearing and do the deliberate work of socializers. Communards tend to believe in the benignity of nature's unseen hand; younger children are regarded as essentially healthy plants needing only a little sun and a little water to grow up straight and tall.

Therefore, it does not, in retrospect, seem remarkable either that prepubertal children show interest in sex or that some of them seem ready to seek sexual partners. Nor does it seem surprising that rural communal living should produce an apparent reversal of the hundred-year-old trend in Western industrialized societies toward the prolongation of childhood and other less-than-adult statuses.

We have been impressed with the tendency toward gravity and seriousness in the demeanor of boys, perhaps eight or nine years old, who ape the styles of their male elders in physical posture and linguistic patterns, at home during periods of leisure or in public places like cafés, taverns, fairs, and local dances. These eight- or nine-year-old boys are "very cool," indeed. Imputed with naturalism and spontaneity, childlike innocence combined with the tendency for children to ape their elders produces a minimum visual difference between them, reminiscent of a Breughel painting, a reversal of the modern trend of age-segregation and sharp differences in age-graded norms for behavior.

Our original research design did not include any special attention to gender differentiation, but the feminist movement in the counter-culture necessarily brought it to our attention. The extension of communal belief in equalitarianism, for example to the sexual division of labor, is complex and difficult. The conditions of creating primitive settlements obstruct the decline of stratification by sex in contrast to age stratification. A lot of the necessary work in creating primitive settlement involves heavy labor and the men "naturally" drift toward this work, and the women correspondingly toward traditional rural female roles. This does not happen by deliberate ideological design. Commune women who want to do so-called male heavy work, or to exercise strong leadership roles, are not discouraged from doing so by any pressures, subtle or not, that we were able to detect. Nevertheless, some anarchist communes have been criticized by feminists as being "male ego trips" in which women are systematically victimized by "macho" males who possess the important skills of survival in the country and hence command harems of dependent young women. There is some truth to this image.

In a pioneer generation, there is a lot of suffering, casualty rates are always high, and there are inevitably painful discrepancies between what one is socialized to feel and how one's ideological convictions constrain one to act. Very few communards live much above the level of bare subsistence, and although they may affirm female equality, they cannot afford the luxury of affirmative action programs. For women who go into communal scenes strongly qualified, there are no obstructions to their opting for "male" roles;

there is little or no gender prejudice. However, when they come in confused and unskilled, they tend to drift toward the kitchen.

Part of the strength of the religious movements, such as the Jesus movement in what used to be the counterculture, rests on the traditional protections they provide to vulnerable and unskilled young women. My impression is that the Jesus movement and some of the Eastern religious movements have attracted the kinds of young men and women who are more deeply alienated, who have been most hurt by bad drug and sex experiences. One of the things that these traditional religious communities do for victimized and exploited young women is to give them the traditional protections afforded women.