

Comparative Analysis of Childhood in Hudson River Valley

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“The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused.”¹ According to research, childhood exists as a social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time. Every aspect of childhood including household tasks, leisure time and play, education, relationships with parents and peers, as well as paths to adulthood has been changed over the past four centuries.² Both the classification and understanding of childhood have varied with regards to fluctuating cultural, demographic, economic, and historical positions.³ As a result, certain themes and patterns of childhood in the Hudson River Valley and our country as a whole emerge. By tracing the ever-changing power relationships between parents and children, especially parents’ increasing psychological investment and speculation of their children, this paper will evaluate the aspects of colonial childhood in the Hudson River Valley, during the 17th and 18th centuries in comparison to contemporary childhood in New York and America as a whole during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Studying Childhood Through The Psychogenic Theory of History

The implications of deliberately studying the experience of childhood can be attributed to the inattention such research has sustained for centuries. Based on the mass of evidence regarding childhood that have been hidden, distorted, softened, or ignored, one could argue that the years in which childhood is embodied seemingly and consistently get played down. Additionally, formal educational content is endlessly examined, and the subject of emotions is avoided by stressing child regulation and avoiding the home.⁴ However, by examining the

¹ Lloyd deMause, “The Evolution of Childhood,” in *The History of Childhood*, (New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974), 1.

² Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), viii.

³ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴ deMause, “The Evolution,” 5.

psychological principles that apply to contemporary adult-child relations, it facilitates the contextualization of what colonial childhood might have seemed.⁵ According to psychoanalyst Lloyd deMause, there are specific moments, when studying childhood that seem to most affect the psyche of the next generation. In other words, deMause studies the relationship between parents and their children by identifying the reactions a parent selects when faced with a child in need of something.”⁶ Within this scenario, deMause contends that an adult has three major reactions to select from.

Firstly, the parent could choose a projective reaction whereby the parent treats the child as a vehicle for projecting the inner substances of their own unconscious.⁷ Secondly, the parent could decide on a reversal reaction whereby the parent uses the child as a standby for an adult figure important in the parent’s own childhood.⁸ Finally, the parent could choose an empathetic reaction whereby the parent has the ability to empathize with the child’s needs and act to satisfy those needs.⁹ By employing this psychoanalysis to the experience of childhood and their relationship with their parents, deMause claims that in the past, parents generally went with the first option in which children were used as a means of projecting the parents’ innermost conscience.¹⁰ Using this theory, children existed in the 17th and 18th centuries only for the satisfaction of fulfilling the parental needs and it was in fact the “failure of the child-as-parent to give love which [essentially] triggered the actual battering.”¹¹ Therefore, the adult’s inability to regress to the level of a child’s need and correctly identify it without an admixture of the adult’s own projections explains the behavior of parents and the relationship between children and their

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 6

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

parents.¹² However, when analyzing colonial childhood in America, Puritan parents sought to maintain enough distance from the child's need in order to supposedly satisfy it.¹³ That being said, the first parents of America simultaneously selected and employed projective as well as reversal reactions. By doing so, Puritan parents produced an effect in which their children were perceived as, on the one hand, personifying the adult's projected needs, conflicts, and sexual feelings, yet at the same time, embodying a mother or father figure.¹⁴

European Childhood during the 17th and 18th Centuries

With regards to the experience of children in European society, the problem of accidents to children reveals the rationale as to why adults in the past were such poor parents.¹⁵ According to deMause, accidents used to occur in great numbers as a result of children being left alone frequently and constantly. It is interesting to note that this absenteeism among parents continued throughout the 17th century and ended only during the 20th century.¹⁶ Moreover, parents failed to have concern with regards to preventing accidents since the notion of guilt was seemingly absent; this is a direct cause of the adult's own projections that they feel have been punished with the presence of, rather than concern, for their children's wellbeing.¹⁷ Evidence of maltreatment and neglect are continually present and predominant, although there were many exceptions to the general pattern.¹⁸ According to deMause, up to about the end of the 18th century, the average child of wealthy parents spent his earliest years in the home of a wet-nurse, returned home to the care of other servants, and was sent out to service, apprenticeship, or school by age seven, so that

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

the amount of time parents actually spent raising their children tended to be minimal if not nonexistent.¹⁹

The institutional abandonment practices by parents on the child, the informal abandoning of young children to other people by their parents occurred consistently and frequently up until about the 19th century.²⁰ Parents of European society during the 17th and 18th centuries provided all types of rationality in order to justify giving their children away. As for the rich, who actually abandoned their children for a period of years, even those experts who thought the practice bad usually did not use empathic terms in their treatise, but rather thought that the blood of the lower-class wet-nurse entered the body of the upper-class baby, “milk being thought to be blood frothed white.”²¹ Though it was well known that infants suffered in terms of mortality at a substantially higher rate while at wet-nurse than at home, parents would grieve for their children’s death; however, regardless of the previous fatality, parents feebly offered their next infant.²² In addition, there are many indications in the sources that children as a general practice were given insufficient food. According to deMause, children in both impoverished and wealthy families were offered meager allowances of food regardless of their socioeconomic status within society.²³

Another important element of childhood during the 17th and 18th century was the emphasis of control when parenting youth. According to research, parents of this era in Europe tended to exert a significant degree of control over their children. One of the various methods of control used by parents was the act of frightening the child with ghosts in order to argue for the

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 34.

²² Ibid., 34.

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child's projective characteristics.²⁴ For instance, after the Reformation, religious figures were symbolized and represented as terrifying creatures such as the bogeyman in order to terrify children. That being said, God allegedly held individuals over the pit of hell in the same manner that one holds a loathsome insect over the fire.²⁵ However, when religion was no longer the focus of the terrorizing campaign, figures that were closer to home became exploited to perpetuate this installation of fear into the child including fictional creatures as well as historic figures of the time.²⁶ The exact frequency of use of such concrete figure in the past cannot as yet be determined, although there were often spoken of as common.²⁷ Interestingly, another key aspect of parenting and this continued obligation to terrorize children involved the employment of corpses. During the 17th and 18th centuries, there are countless accounts documenting how children used to be taken on visits to the gibbet so that they could inspect rotting corpses hanging there; this tactical methodology was used in order to visually deliver compelling and memorable moral stories.²⁸

While reflecting upon and evaluating such practices in comparison to contemporary childhood, one would evidently feel disgusted and shocked by these elements of childhood and usages employed within parenting. However, it is essential to maintain a distinction between comparative analysis and anachronism, meaning that what is not often realized is the effect that these experiences had on the actual children. Scenes can be taken from real life and formed an important part of childhood in the past. Projective care always requires the first step of projection of the adult's own unconscious into the child, and can be distinguished from emphatic care by

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

being either inappropriate or insufficient to the child's actual needs. Projective care is sufficient to raise children to adulthood.²⁹ The continuous shift between projection and reversal, between the child as devil and as adult, produces a double image that is responsible for much of the bizarre quality of childhood in the past.³⁰

In terms of sexual and physical abuse, even such a simple act as bonds of empathy with children who were beaten was difficult for adults in the past. "Kissing, sucking, and squeezing the breast are but a few of the uses to which the child as breast is put; one finds a variety of practices."³¹ Those few educators who, prior to modern times, advised that children should not be beaten generally argued that it would have bad consequences rather than that it would hurt the child.³² Yet without this element of empathy, the advice had no effect whatsoever, and the children continued to be beaten as before. According to deMause, physical abuse toward children remained a predominant issue not because parents in the past did not love their children, but rather it was due to parents' lack of the psychic mechanism necessary to empathize with their children.³³

Colonial Childhood in the Hudson River Valley

"The first pre-modern childhood, which roughly coincides with the colonial era, was a period in which the young were viewed as adults in training. Religious and secular authorities regarded childhood as a time of deficiency and incompleteness... Infants were viewed as unformed and even animalistic because of their inability to speak or stand upright."³⁴ The Puritans believed that parents were responsible for their children's spiritual upbringing;

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 19.

³² Ibid., 16.

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ Mintz, Huck's Raft, 3.

contemporary parents hold themselves responsible not only for children's physical well-being but also for their psychological adjustment, personal happiness and future success. As birthrates fell and increasing numbers of mothers entered the paid workforce, parental anxiety intensified; fears for children's safety escalated, as did concern that they not suffer from boredom or low self-esteem. Above all, middle-class parents worried that their children would be unable to replicate their status position.³⁵

Contemporary Childhood in the Hudson River Valley

Then there is the pattern of recurrent moral panics over children's well-being.³⁶ Ever since Pilgrims departed for Plymouth in 1620, fearful that their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted in the Old World, Americans have experienced repeated panics over the younger generation.³⁷ Sometimes these panics were indeed about children, such as the worries over polio in the early 1950s. More often, however, children stand in for some other issue, and the panic over teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and declining academic achievement in the late 1970s and 1980s which reflected pervasive fears about family breakdown, crime, drugs, and America's declining competitiveness in the world.³⁸

“In certain respects, today children are more autonomous than young people have ever been. They have their own institutions and media, most now have their own rooms, and many teens have their own cars. Contemporary children mature faster physiologically than those in the past and are more knowledgeable about sexuality, drugs, and other adult realities. They are also more fully integrated into the realm of consumer culture at an earlier age.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., ix.

³⁶ Ibid., ix

³⁷ Ibid., ix

³⁸ Ibid., ix

³⁹ Ibid., x.

Yet from the vantage point of history, contemporary children's lives are more regimented and constrained than ever before. Contemporary society is extreme in the distinction it draws between the worlds of childhood and youth, on the one hand, and of adulthood, on the other. Far more than previous generations, we have prolonged and intensified children's emotional and psychological dependence. Children are far more resilient, adaptable, and capable than our society typically assumes.⁴⁰ We have segregated the young in age-graded institutions, and, as a result, children grow up with little contact with adults apart from their parents and other relatives and childcare professionals. Unlike children in the past, young people today have fewer socially valued ways to contribute to their family's wellbeing or to participate in community life. By looking back over four centuries of American childhood we can perhaps recover old ways and discover new ways to reconnect children to a broader range of adult mentors and to expand their opportunities to participate in activities that they and society find truly meaningful.⁴¹

Lloyd de Mause seeks to see how much of this childhood history can be recaptured from the evidence that remains to us."⁴² Psychogenic theory of history → comprehensive theory of historical change (central force for the change in history is the psychogenic change in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent-child interactions.⁴³ Hypotheses: the generational pressure for psychic change is spontaneous, originating in the adult's need to regress and in the child's striving relationship but also occurs independent of social and technological change.⁴⁴ The obverse of the hypothesis that history involves a general

⁴⁰ Ibid., x.

⁴¹ Ibid., x.

⁴² deMause, "The Evolution," 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

improvement in child care is that the further back one goes in history, the less effective parents are in meeting the developing needs of the child.⁴⁵ This would indicate that if today in America there are less than a million abused children, there would be a point back in history where most children were what we would now consider abused.⁴⁶ Psychic structure must always be passed from generation to generation through the narrow funnel of childhood, a society's child rearing practices are not just one item in a list of cultural traits.⁴⁷ They are the very condition for the transmission and development of all other cultural elements, and place definite limits on what can be achieved in all other spheres of history.⁴⁸ Specific childhood experiences must occur to sustain specific cultural traits and once these experiences no longer occur the trait disappears.⁴⁹ Covers some of the psychological principles that apply to adult-child relations in the past. Seeks to provide an overview of the history of...abandonment...beating, and sexual abuse as widespread practices in each time period.⁵⁰

DeMause argues that even contemporary child-beaters are not sadists; they love their children, at times, and in their own way, and are sometimes capable of expressing tender feelings, particularly when the children are non-demanding.⁵¹ The same was true for the parent in the past; expressions of tenderness toward children occur most often when the child is non-demanding, especially when the child is either asleep or dead. It is not love which the parent of the past lacked, but rather the emotional maturity needed to see the child as a person separate from himself.⁵²

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Ibid., 17.

