

The Child in Today's Culture

JOHN GILLIN

John Gillin, professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, discusses the role of the child in American society from the viewpoint of the anthropologist. He points out the lack of research dealing with the psycho-cultural problems of childhood in the United States and makes a plea for additional investigations in this area.

SOMEONE HAS CALCULATED that there is more atomic energy in a four-year-old child than in the bomb that flattened Hiroshima. Most parents, kindergarten teachers, and baby-sitters would agree without further argument.

Whatever the exact number of foot pounds generated by the young organism may be, the principal problem of child rearing in any society is essentially a matter of harnessing, motivating, and directing that energy into channels that will be of most benefit to the child and to other members of the society in which he lives. Furthermore, this must be accomplished in such a way that by the time he reaches maturity, the person—in contrast to domestic animals and to machines—is capable of performing the “harnessing” and “directing” of his energies for himself according to the approved expectations of his fellows.

In each society this task is accomplished—well or badly, as the case may be—by participation of children in

the cultural patterns of the group. It is when one considers the “approved expectations” of our own culture that the problem of socialization, or enculturation, of children in that variety of Western Civilization found in the United States begins to reveal its complexity.

Growing Up in Simple Cultures

In tribal, peasant, rural, and other relatively simple cultures of comparatively homogeneous populations, a single pattern of expectations is laid upon the average mature individual, sex and age considered. Certain differentiations are expected of the two sexes in all cultures, even the simplest. But when these are taken into account, any individual can be trained for his mature role by a single, undifferentiated set of patterns. Where it is considered appropriate for a man or woman to be a jack-of-all-trades, even the specialized patterns of the culture are known to and practiced, at least some time dur-



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ing life, by all adult members of the same sex, although certain individuals may develop more proficiency than others.

Becoming a Kwoma in New Guinea or getting to be a San Luis Indian in Guatemala is essentially a matter of being trained in a single way of life. The patterns expected of adult A are also expected of B, and so on.

Most homogeneous societies that are known historically to be of this type with "simple" and consistently integrated cultures are also stable. Typically they are not subject to rapid changes and the need of new adaptations. As the matter is expressed in some "backward" sections of our country, "what was good enough for pappy is good enough for me." From the viewpoint of such relatively stable cultures, therefore, parents and other cultural surrogates may be reasonably certain that the preparation they give their children now will prove to be fairly adequate fifteen or twenty years hence when the children undertake the responsibilities and seek the satisfactions of their adult roles.

Through trial and error most such societies (although not all) appear to have developed child-rearing techniques consistent with the expectations of the adult status as defined in the culture. In such circumstances something like a one-to-one correlation between the culturally structured experiences of childhood and the expected patterns of activity, motivation, and thought in adulthood can be achieved. One type of child rearing, if adequately adjusted to the requirements of maturity, is sufficient for all candidates for adult status.

Growing Up in the American Culture

In our own situation, the problem does not seem to be so simple. We have only a handful of attempts to study scientifically our own culture in the same objective, configurational, and detailed manner that anthropologists have repeatedly applied to the examination of other cultures. And no scientific analysis of the American culture as a whole is on record. However, American sociologists certainly have thoroughly analyzed "social groupings" and "institutions." Any college sophomore should be aware of the great variety of approved roles for the average American. And what is more, there is no guarantee, on the basis of recent history, that the roles, requirements, and expectations governing the behavior of American adults at the present moment will remain unchanged by the time our children reach adulthood.

Demands on Children and Youth

Space is lacking to go into details; but in a simplified way we may consider some of the complications of preparing a child for life in our culture.

☞ He or she is expected to be a "good American," that is, to practice certain overt and non-overt (attitude, thought, and fantasy) patterns of behavior universally required of all members of our society.

☞ He or she is expected to behave according to the patterns considered proper to his class and position. But classes are relatively open, and it is considered appropriate for an individual to be "upward mobile" (unless he belongs to the "upper upper" class). Thus it is not enough to train the young individual *only* in the "proper" expectancies of his native class, but he must also develop the flexibility to make a change in class status.

¶ All Americans, except those content with the rewards of the unskilled laborer, need specialized occupational training; for every means of "earning a living" in our cultural system, except unskilled labor, is specialized to some extent in the cultural sense. Yet the variety of jobs and professions is so great, and many of the patterns of the respective specialties themselves require such prolonged learning and practice for mastery, that no family or school can hope to train its children to be proficient in all. Furthermore, "conditions" may require the individual to change his occupation several times during his career.

¶ Our culture includes a number of "phases" or "subcultures" which represent adaptations to different types of situations. We may mention (a) urban culture as over against (b) rural culture. And we must also consider the subcultures of the (c) various geographical regions of the country (South as contrasted with New England, and so on).

However, it is characteristic of American culture that it fosters a permissive attitude not only toward social, but also toward physical mobility of individuals. Studies of internal migration show that only a minority of Americans spend their whole lives in the community of their birth. What kind of child training is best for the country boy or girl who later moves to the city, or for the Southern child who spends his adult life in the Middle West or in New York? How can we train the individual to adapt himself satisfactorily to new conditions when he moves away from his kinsmen and former neighbors?

Research on Childhood Needs

In short, many cultural patterns and institutions which provided frameworks of stability and security for individuals in a former generation can no longer be relied upon, at least not in the old-fashioned manner. The American must be prepared to handle himself as an adult in many situations with which he has had no direct experience as a child.

And he must be able to adapt himself to cultural and social changes without jeopardizing his own security, if he is to avoid frustration, disappointment, and other types of personal and social maladjustment.

These, to mention no others, are some of the problems posed for the child in the American culture of today when viewed from the point of view of social anthropology. Yet we know almost nothing scientifically as to how these problems should be met. It is perhaps for this reason that there is such confusion and so much variety in the advice given to American parents on the current scene.

American science has done an admirable job in the fields of physical development, nutrition, and diseases of childhood. Reliable scientific advice and techniques are available which will practically guarantee that, if followed, a child may be raised to adulthood as a well-developed physical specimen.

Psycho-social problems of childhood

But very little is reliably known about how to develop a child's personality and his techniques of adaptation in our complex American culture. This is mainly because little scientific research has been directed toward specific psycho-cultural problems of childhood in the United States. Considerable success has been achieved by psychiatrists and child psychologists in helping maladjusted children—once they become maladjusted. But only general—and often untested—principles are available for the *prevention* of maladjustment and for the development of well-balanced adults.

*Rearing children
in various subcultures*

We need to know how children are actually reared in real-life situations in the various subcultures of our country. This knowledge must go beyond the usual "survey" of home conditions which includes merely diet, sanitation, hygiene, and economic status. Needed are intensive studies of the constellations of the rewards and punishments laid upon children, the manner in which they impinge upon the individual, the content of attitudes and mental patterns that are inculcated (often on the unconscious level), the roles which children play in the cultural situation, the development of fears and anxieties, the definition of "responsibility" in children, the handling of aggressive behavior, the encouragement or inhibition of responsiveness, how "ambition" and level of aspiration are developed or neglected, and many other matters of a similar nature.

Once such information is at hand respecting the cultural procedures relating to children from the various regions of the country, from the various social categories and classes of the population, we shall be in a position to analyze the inconsistencies between the culture of childhood and the cultural requirements of maturity. And then we shall be able to devise procedures which may perhaps prove as reliable and successful in the preparation of the personality for full participation in the culture as those of the nutritionists, physical educationists, medical men, and sanitary engineers have proven in the training and care of the healthy mature organism.

A Research Proposal

In the Eighty-first Congress a Child Research Bill was introduced for the very purpose of providing funds for a modest amount of investigation of psycho-cultural aspects of child rearing in American society. Its purpose is to fill in the gaps in scientific knowledge which have been alluded to above. In the Senate the bill is known as S.904 and in the House of Representatives as H.R.4465.

It would provide the sum of only \$7,500,000 to be distributed to a selected number of qualified research organizations throughout the country in order to carry on this sort of research concerning our "most important resource"—the children who will be the citizens of tomorrow. The studies would be carefully planned and would be reviewed by a fifteen-man scientific advisory committee consisting of the outstanding experts of the country. Overhead and bureaucracy would not be involved, for the work would be "farmed out" to research institutes and universities already possessing facilities and staff.

Over a five-year period of intensive research there is every reason to believe that many of the questions I have mentioned would be answered scientifically and many of the obscurities regarding the why's and wherefore's of childhood and later maladjustments would be cleared up. Furthermore, the program would provide training in the field of the psycho-cultural aspects of child life for a considerable number of young scientists who would continue to make the study and solution of these problems their life careers.

No audible opposition to the Child Research Bill has been expressed by members of Congress, except on grounds of economy. When one considers that the cost of the National Military Establishment is about \$300,000,000 *per week*, the "economy" argument is not impressive in opposition to an appropriation of \$7,500,000 for the purpose of providing scientific information regarding American children, information which can be expected to lead directly to the development of "better citizens" and of adults

more adaptively adjusted to the American type of culture.

At the time of this writing the Child Research Bill has not been passed, and its passage during the First Session of the Eighty-first Congress seems doubtful. If, by the time this article appears in print, no action has been taken, it would doubtless be of interest to many readers of this journal to write their representatives in Congress urging its passage. When it does become law, our readers will wish to follow the scientific work as it progresses.

Curriculum Issues in Elementary Education

HENRY J. OTTO

In this article Henry J. Otto, professor of elementary administration and curriculum at the University of Texas, discusses seven vitally important issues which require consideration as curriculum revision proceeds in the elementary schools. To the extent that curriculum workers come to grips with fundamental issues like these discussed by Professor Otto will they be successful in developing more adequate programs for boys and girls.

SINCE EVERYONE KNOWS that the school curriculum should be kept up to date, we can dispense with the preliminaries dealing with the need for curriculum revision and launch directly into a consideration of some of the issues which require consideration as curriculum revision proceeds. The issues discussed in this article are not intended to be all-inclusive in number or scope. They are merely *some* of the issues which the writer believes are worthy of consideration at this time.

Fundamental Reorganization and Synthesis of the Entire Instructional Program. Most efforts at bolstering segments of the elementary school curriculum will meet with discouraging results until there is a basic attack upon a fundamental reorganization and synthesis of the entire instructional program. A brief look at the facts will suggest the importance of this issue. Prior to 1800 only two subjects, reading and writing, were commonly taught in elementary schools in the United States,

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