

Adult-Child Sexual Relations in Cross-Cultural Perspective

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From what reliable ethnographic information on sexual patterns we have, it appears that there is embedded in most human cultures an abhorrence of and prohibition against sexual relations, especially coitus, between adults and children. Even in so-called sexually permissive cultures (Ford & Beach, 1951) which allow, even encourage, heterosexual play and more serious relations among preadults from an early age onward, there is no evidence that "permissiveness" extends to sexual relations between adults and children.

However, when one searches the corpus of ethnographic data concerned with sexual behavior, one is struck by the fact that even the very best observers say virtually nothing about attitudes toward adult-child sexual relations. Only occasionally one encounters an anecdote about a deviant individual of such and such group who sexually molested a child and was duly punished by an outraged society. For the most part, however, one must assume from the absence of specific information to the contrary that adult-child sexual relations are not only forbidden by the culture that is described, but from the point of view of that culture, such relations are also so far out of line they are unmentionable.

Of course, a powerful influence against and abhorrence of sexual relations between adults and children emanates from the incest taboo, which is often relevant because so much sexual abuse involves close relatives, especially fathers with daughters. However, the incest taboo is primarily a regulation that establishes permissible and nonpermissible categories for sexual relations—and, of course, marriage—insofar as the degree of biological relationship between heterosexual partners is concerned. Age differences are not an essential component of the incest

cultures a matter of great concern. Because of this, sex is always enveloped with a rich cultural complex of beliefs, evaluative criteria and regulations, as well as pre- and proscribed practices.

Among the cultures for which we have relatively good data on sexuality and related matters, there are a few that have captured the attention of anthropologists and others interested in sex studies, because they are so distinctive and different from others in matters pertaining to sexual socialization and marriage. They also seem to constitute extreme, or limiting, cases where sex relations between adults and children are concerned. The best known of these cultures belong to some Aborigine groups of Australia in which there was (and perhaps continues to be in attenuated forms) a type (but not the only type) of marriage in which prepubescent girls are married to men who are considerably older. Sometimes termed "gerontocratic marriage," these fully legitimate marriages involve sexual relations between a husband and a much junior wife, who is still a child, so to speak. Needless to say, both Christian missionaries and European settlers in Australia have often regarded this singular form of marriage as quite offensive.

The best ethnographic description and analysis of this type of Australian marriage is by Jane Goodale (1971) in her account of the Tiwi who live on Melville Island, North Australia. Betrothals of first marriages of most females are made even before those females are conceived. In fact, such a marriage contract is made when the as-yet-to-be-conceived girl's mother commences menstruation. Of course the mother, in like fashion, was promised when her mother had reached menarche. Once the marriage contract is made, the husband-to-be, who is an adult, works with his future mother and father-in-law as a member of that family, with the expectation that when a daughter is born to them, she will be given to him as a wife. There is no fixed chronological age at which the young girl is given to her designated husband, but it occurs after she is able to take on some household and other economic responsibilities, but well before her first menstruation. For the Tiwi she is still a child, albeit an older child. When her father decides that she is mature enough, the young girl is merely taken to her husband and instructed to reside and sleep with him. This is not an abrupt change of residence for the young girl, for her husband has been a part of the same family camp for some time, and the young wife is still surrounded by those with whom she has always lived. Goodale describes the process:

Soon after the *alinga* [young girl] moves to her husband's fire he begins her sexual instruction. From all accounts this appears to be a very gradual process. He begins by deflowering her with his finger, and perhaps only after a year does he have actual intercourse with her. Sexual intercourse is

considered by the Tiwi to be the direct and only cause of breast formation, growth of pubic and axillary hair, menarche, and subsequent menstrual periods. (1971, p. 45)

Later, when the girl experiences her first menstrual period, the physiological event is ritually noted, and her future daughter is promised in marriage to a specific man who is already an adult. Thus, the young wife is simultaneously recognized as both a potential mother and mother-in-law with a dutiful son-in-law to serve her and her husband.

As mentioned already, versions of this kind of marriage were once found among many Australian Aborigine groups (Berndt & Berndt, 1951; Gale, 1970; Kaberry, 1939; Rose, 1960). From our ethnocentric perspective, one of the most notable aspects of these so-called gerontocratic marriage patterns is the absence of trauma when the young girl is taken to assume her position as wife of a much older husband.

A different sort of patterning of early sexual relations is found in some societies of New Guinea. This involves boys, not girls, is homosexual not heterosexual, but, again, is directly associated with beliefs about sociological and physiological maturation. The best description of these patterns, by Herdt (1982, 1987) is with a people the author calls the Sambia. In brief, the pattern is as follows:

Seven-to-ten-year-old Sambia boys are taken from their mothers when first initiated into the male cult, and thereafter experience the most powerful and seductive homosexual fellatio activities. For some ten to fifteen years, they engage in these practices on a daily basis, first as fellator, and then as fellated. Elders teach that semen is absolutely vital: it should be consumed daily since the creation of biological maleness and the maintenance of masculinity depend upon it. Hence, from middle childhood until puberty, boys should perform fellatio on older youths.

Near puberty the same initiates become dominant youths. Ritual helps remake their social and erotic identity, the bachelors becoming the fellated partners for a new crop of ritual novices. . . . Yet, in spite of this formidable background, the final outcome is exclusive heterosexuality—of a particular form. Youths eventually become sexually attracted to women. At marriage (c. sixteen to twenty-five years of age), they may even act as true bisexuals, for a time. With fatherhood, however, homosexuality should cease; thereafter men should engage only in heterosexual activities. (Herdt 1987, pp. 2–3)

The parallel between the New Guinea and Australian patterns is, of course, the relationship of the sexual behavior to the cultural "theories" about sexual and gender development. Boys in the latter case and girls

in the former are being molded into proper adults. These early sexual relations, in both cases so deviant from European and American cultural perspectives, are considered to be essential to overall maturational processes.

Unfortunately, from the published data on Tiwi and Sambia societies we can only guess as to what each would regard as the sexual abuse of children. Nevertheless, the two cultural case studies serve to illustrate the point that when considering the sexual abuse of children from a completely universalistic perspective, we must always keep in mind that each and every culture and subculture has its own (explicit and/or implicit) set of assumptions—a “theory,” so to speak—about gender development and the learning of appropriate adult sexual behavior. For example, in a society called East Bay, where I did some ethnography of sexual behavior (Davenport 1965), formerly, there had been a pattern of male homosexuality in which some older men often took, always with consent from their fathers, nonrelated boys as relatively permanent, passive sexual partners for anal intercourse. From a cultural perspective, the boys were understood to be substitutes for females, not homosexual partners as our culture would define them. In fact, the culture of East Bay did not recognize—that is, had no cultural category for—intimate male homosexual relationships as something separate from those involving women. A boy, rather than a man, was selected, because a boy was a minor, without an independent legal status separate from his father’s, hence he could be told what to do. Women in East Bay society also were minors in this legal sense. But the crux of the matter was that the passive homosexual role was not considered to be in any way damaging to a boy’s psychosexual development. Moreover, such a close association with an elder man, who was expected to be gentle, generous, and indulgent, could have a positive effect on the boy’s development. If, however, the elder man did not fulfill these role expectations, he would find himself accused of mistreatment, that is, abusing the boy, and, therefore, in serious trouble with the boy’s father and other senior male relatives who were responsible for his well-being.

In another context at East Bay, some of my informants were genuinely perplexed when I related to them how my own sexual socialization came about. They just could not comprehend the parental “conspiracy of silence” about matters pertaining to sex that was characteristic of my subculture in the United States. Because the sexual side of life ranked among the most important aspects of adult life at East Bay, they judged the failure of parents to instruct a young person thoroughly in proper sexual comportment to be incomprehensible. Yet, that so-called conspiracy of silence surrounding sex that was (and may still be) characteris-

tic of one United States subculture was also consistent with other ideas and assumptions contained in that subculture. As a configuration, those ideas and assumptions did constitute a consistent ideology, or cultural theory, about maturation and socialization.

Such cultural theories obviously give rise to expectations, which, even if not always precisely spelled out, are nevertheless essential parts of each individual's social reality. But these cultural realities are variable, society to society, and even over time in the same society. Any behavior that is deemed to be abusive is both inconsistent with the relevant cultural theory and, just as important, it is behavior that is unexpected and either contradicts the victim's sense of cultural reality, or creates a distortion of his or her perception of reality, or both.

In final analysis, the common factor in a cross-cultural approach to the sexual abuse of children is to be found, not so much in actual types or kinds of behavior (barring extremes such as would cause bodily injury), as in understanding incidents of abusive behavior in terms of their lack of fit, or inconsistency, with the relevant cultural theory of sexuality and the reality that such theories define. A victim of sexual abuse can be either an individual who is subjected to an experience for which he or she has not been socialized to expect or an individual whose socialization and social learning has been so different that it has produced a personal social reality that is at odds with that which others in the society hold and act upon.

Regrettably, we do not know the full extent of intercultural variability, now or in the past, regarding theories and realities of sexuality. Neither do we know where the limits of cultural variability consequent human flexibility in these matters lie. The Tiwi and Sambia examples summarized in this chapter merely give us a sketchy idea of behavior patterns, in small tribal societies, which our cultural norms would classify as unacceptable, possibly abusive, but which in their own cultural contexts are fully consistent with the underlying theories of sexuality. While this relativistic cultural point of view provides a broad perspective in which to understand panhuman variability in sexuality, it is not an appropriate perspective with which to view and confront such heinous deviances as the sexual abuse of children within individual societies and cultures. For that undertaking we must take as given what the particular culture offers as the underlying theory, or agreed-upon principles, and search for the factors that produce inconsistencies that are judged to be abusive. Unfortunately, this is not an easy procedure in a culturally complex society, such as our own, with several or many discernible subcultures of sex. Despite such subcultural variation, we fully expect to find much agreement in what constitutes the sexual abuse of children.

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