Variables in the Conflict between the Generations: India for Comparison

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Summary. Eleven social conditions are postulated to accentuate conflict between children approaching adulthood and their parents. Conservative East Indian people without those conditions have a minimum of inter-generation hostility, at a high price. Modern Indians are discovering dissention with their children as they change.

Résumé. On admet que onze conditions sociales accentuent le conflit entre les enfants approchant de l'âge adulte et leurs parents. Les Indiens de l'est conservateurs, sans les dites conditions, ont très peu de conflits de générations, alors que les Indiens modernes sont en train de découvrir des dissensions avec leurs enfants à mesure qu'ils changent.


To better understand the mounting distress experienced by Americans in the relationship between young people and their parents, the authors have sought to examine those influences in a society that accentuate or diminish the problem. For this purpose we have studied and visited India where the conditions and the results of parent-child interactions are strikingly different. Then, from the perspective obtained, we have analyzed social variables that effect the severity of the unwelcome conflict. For clarity we will first present a list of the cultural characteristics which increase the hazards. Then, to demonstrate the origins of our hypotheses, we will describe the contrasting circumstances of family life for traditional Indians and its variations among their modern countrymen.

Some degree of conflict is universal between adults and young people who are becoming adults (roughly between the ages of 13 and 23). All love relationships include hostility, and favorable interactions are those in which the stress is a small proportion of the total experience of each. Increased tension is added when parents and children profoundly change their relative roles while they continue to be important to each other, a combination that engenders anxiety and hostility. Adolescents need to experiment, try out new ideas, and act for themselves, even at the expense of discomfort for their parents. Parents have become accustomed to responsibility for their children's behavior, and give up the control reluctantly.

Conditions Increasing the Conflict

Though some measure of disruption in families is unavoidable while children are growing up, the extent varies with several characteristics of the milieu.

The degree of open conflict experienced by those involved is accentuated by various interrelated conditions, among which the following cultural factors have a significant place.

1. Multiple social influences in large populations of diverse origin and various socioeconomic levels provide a wealth of choices which promote the likelihood of differing opinions in the same home, in contrast to the small ingrained social environment of an enforced ghetto, a voluntarily isolated elite, or a geographically separated village.

2. The open society with relatively great permissiveness encourages communication of the various lines of thinking available in the community and the expression of hostility when necessary for differences of viewpoint. In a closed society one opinion on a subject is held correct and deviation is suppressed.

3. Equalitarianism allows respect for individual thinking which permits children to have their own ideas even in opposition to those above them in the power structure, whereas under authoritarianism people must follow the lead of the influential elders such as parents. This is assuming that uniform and consistent authority prevents independence, although when it is applied irregularly in a permissive community it sparks rebellion.

4. Self determination requires of youths that they establish their own place in life in many respects, which may be a harsh demand that some cannot meet. Children who grow up into extensive choice do develop their own opinions but at the expense of self doubt and perhaps chaos or failure. Where much is determined for them ahead of time the strain of making their own way is reduced.

5. In a changing culture values and practices shift between the time parents form their life-style and
while the period of discord is being lengthened how they will work out their sexual lives. But it also engenders economic tensions between long term continuity even between the generations.

6. Independent employment of grown children promotes economic separation and personal freedom in many ways unavailable, for instance, to a farmer's son in a poor community who must settle with his father or become destitute. A young man with a job can disagree with his relatives if he so chooses, whereas the same person working with the family business, and with little other opportunity, cannot. Income permits current self sufficiency, as capital maintains long term continuity even between the generations.

7. Minimal family size, limited to a married couple and their few children results in personal freedom unknown in joint families with their many unchosen permanent relationships. But a home with only two adults, limited to a married couple and their children, combined with distant employment of at least the husband, and recreation away from home for both, allows more possibility of a child's receiving limited contact and affection, whereas the joint family system surrounds a child with caring adults.

The close relationship of a child with only one man and one woman becomes highly intense so that any disturbance in either of them seriously effects the child's environment. Easily available divorce is the expression of one kind of freedom. But it reduces the reasonable minimum of two adults to one, while that one has more need to work and play elsewhere. In a small busy family there is more chance for loss of full gratification throughout a child's early years, which leaves him with resentment, insufficient security, and little respect for his elders by the time he enters his teens. He is then ill prepared for the challenges of approaching adulthood and is already at odds with his parents.

8. Prolonged adolescence occurs in a country that offers higher education and time for all young adults to find themselves. It creates the advantages of a moratorium for youth, a period in which to re-evaluate their beliefs, and to experiment. The resulting development of new ideas stimulates dissention while the period of discord is being lengthened simultaneously.

9. Alienated adolescence without a functional place in the society or a significant economic contribution means that young people with adult capacity lack adult responsibility or satisfactions, feel discontent, restless, and critical of themselves and the establishment in which they have no real place. It also engenders economic tensions between long dependent children and their parents.

10. Confused sexual standards in the population occur where people have considerable choice as to how they will work out their sexual lives. But accompanied by relatively late marriage they set the stage for sexual variations, uncertainties, and ambivalences in the young adults themselves as well as for disagreement with their parents.

11. Social reinforcement increases either placid or contentious relations between old and young. A growing child is influenced by his contemporaries to express his defiance if they do, or conform if that is the mode. Similarly, the parents are just as effected by the degree of permissiveness or control of other adults around them. Whatever is the tendency in the community is increased by communication. Since all the people involved are ambivalent about conflict versus compromise it is possible for social pressure to materially influence which is manifest.

The cultural phenomena described, except for 9. and 11. are expressions of freedom and growth. Those two interconnected common denominators are considered by many to be highly desirable in themselves. They seem to be linked with modern industrial living and are developing in diverse places throughout much of the world [5, 10, 36, 38]. The joint family, social isolation of small communities, and relatively slow cultural change fit pre-industrial living well, but are shifting in areas which are increasingly involved in the present complex economic world [26, 38]. As the change occurs new stresses arise to effect the relationship of youth to the older generation [3, 5, 24, 36]. India is by no means the only possible example to present for study.

India: The Conservative Majority

The cultural setting in India differs so broadly from our own that it is hard for us to picture how Indians live and think [4, 8, 14, 39, 46]. However, their social institutions will be presented here only when directly applicable to the process of growing up without any attempt at a rounded description of their civilization. Eighty percent of the more than 500 million people live in villages much as they have for centuries [19, 33]. Modern improvements and opportunities do not reach the core of their lives, as schools, land reform, and politics do not fundamentally effect customs, morals, or family at first. Some city dwellers remain in enclaves of their own making where they are able to protect the substance of their old practices and beliefs against the encroaching environment. For the conservative majority new influences are real but minor in that they leave the old culture mainly intact. Consequently most people in India have personal contacts with no more than a small number of others living in similar circumstances who provide only modest stimulus of new ideas.

An outstanding characteristic of conservative Indians' families is the unending affection shown to infants. Women do not try to hide the appearance of pregnancy but consider it a sign of accomplishment, then later experience nursing as a pleasure,