

History Repeats Itself: Huron Childrearing Attitudes, Eurocentricity, and the Importance of Indigenous World View

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In an attempt to address the lack of historical research on Native Canadian children and Aboriginal forms of learning, this article reports on an investigation into 17th-century Huron-Wendat childrearing practices. This study reexamines the few, yet popular interpretations of the Huron childhood experience. Overall, the article concludes that contrary to widespread belief, the historical depictions of disrespect and freedom associated with Huron children are false. Accordingly, a new definition of childrearing practices is contrived exposing their circular and truly complex nature.

Although children constitute a significant portion of any society, perceptions of childhood may vary from one society to another. Due to Canada's historical links with Europe, it is not surprising that most of the reports on the Canadian childhood experience are expressed through, and influenced by, European philosophies (Pleck, 2006). According to John Locke, "the child's mind was an empty slate upon which parents and instructors could write their lessons." Jean-Jacques Rousseau also describes childhood as a period when children are "by nature innocent beings who should enjoy a carefree period before having to assume adult responsibilities" (Pleck). Perhaps it is in the light of this Eurocentric influence on depictions of Canadian children that as Mohawk writer and reporter Lazore observes, "the subject of Indian child life has only been lightly treated by ethnologists" (p. 5). In an attempt to address this lack of historical research on Native Canadian children and education, this article reports on an investigation into the traditional Huron-Wendat childrearing practices of the 17th century. In addition, I reexamine the few, yet popular interpretations of the Huron childhood experience. I conclude that contrary to widespread belief, the traditional historical perceptions of disrespect and freedom associated with Huron children are false. This article thus recontextualizes the childrearing practices of the Huron, exposing their circular and truly complex nature.

The first task of this study was to examine and summarize the primary accounts of Huron childhood. The sources include observations made by Samuel de Champlain (1619), Gabriel Sagard (1632), and the *Jesuit Relations* written from 1610 to 1791. An investigation into how Huron children have been portrayed in the secondary sources follows. This section focuses

on the works of Tooker (1964), Trigger (1976), and Sioui (1999). The third and final section examines the validity of three sets of assertions expressed through the contemporary works of Tooker, Trigger, and Sioui.

Primary Observations:

Champlain (1951), in his *Description du Pays et Moeurs des Hurons*, includes a description of the Huron childhood experience. He begins his discussion with a detailed description of the cradleboard that mothers use to carry infants. Champlain touches on the design, the effectiveness, and the popularity of these cradles. The description of the cradleboard takes up most of Champlain's discussion, but he concludes with a critique of the so-called indiscipline of Huron children. He states,

Les enfants sont fort libertines entre ces nations: les pères, et les mères, les flattent trop, et ne les chastient point de tout, aussi sont-ils si meschants, et de si perverse nature, que le plus souvent ils battent leurs mères, et autres des plus fascheux, battent leur père. (pp. 231-232)
The following English translation is my own. "The children of these nations are extremely free: their mothers and fathers flatter them too much, and they never reprimand them even though the children are so bad that they often hit their mothers and even worse, some of them fight their fathers."

Thus Champlain depicts Huron children as free to act as they please unconstrained by any fear of parental discipline including physical punishment.

Sagard's (1939) interpretation of the Huron childhood experience elaborates further on Champlain's assertions. He too describes the cradle for infants as well as the "lack of decency" and "complete freedom" of Huron children (p. 131). In addition, Sagard describes the birthing procedure, the relationship between children and parents, how children were named, how children were dressed, games played, daily practices of girls and boys, and the sexual behavior of young Huron girls. Overall, Sagard's observations stress three main characteristics of Huron children: that children were free to do as they pleased, that young pubescent girls were promiscuous, and that Huron parents had great affection for their children. In support of his first theme, Sagard describes how children were allowed to run naked until the age of 10, received no form of punishment from their parents, and filled their days playing games. This report illustrates a childhood filled with fun and frivolity with little responsibility for anyone. Subsequently, Sagard dedicates a significant part of his account to the fact that the Huron encouraged premarital sex. He blames the girls for this practice, stating that if the girls would not offer themselves to the boys, the practice would not exist. His final assessment is frequently restated throughout this account. Huron parents, Sagard concludes, "loved their children dearly" and they were "very fond of their children" (pp. 130, 127). His overall opinion of Huron childhood is thus summarized:

They are for the most part very naughty children, paying [parents] little respect, and hardly more obedience; for unhappily in these lands the young have no respect for the old, nor are children obedient to their parents, and moreover there is no punishment for any fault. For this reason everybody lives in complete freedom ... Bad example, and bad bringing up, without punishment or correction, are the causes of this lack of decency. (pp. 130-131)

The third source of primary observation of Huron childhood is from the detailed accounts of Jesuit missionaries who worked among the Huron people before their dispersal in the late 1640s. Although descriptions of children unrelated to religious conversion or practice were rare, the Jesuits did specify that Huron parents loved their children very much. They described how the "Indian parents [clung] to their children and [couldn't] be separated for long" (Thwaites, 1959, vol. 52, p. 10). Moreover, the Jesuit records support the assertion made by Champlain and Sagard that children were "free to do what they [pleased]" (vol. 28, p. 49). Huron "fathers [had] no control over their children, no laws of the country control them, unless they [wanted] them to," the Jesuits observed (vol. 28, p. 49). The early primary observations of Champlain, Sagard, and the Jesuits thus describe the Huron experience of childhood as one filled with parental love, games, freedom, and merriment. Equally present was a lack of respect for adults, lack of punishment by parents, and lack of structure imposed by society.

Secondary Source Analyses:

The popular use of primary accounts of Champlain, Sagard, and the Jesuits by contemporary historians have led to specific perceptions of Huron childrearing practices. Ultimately, these late 20th-century interpretations perpetuate the observations made in the 17th century. In the light of the following historiographical analysis, it is important to note that this is by no means a critique of the authors cited. The focus is not on the academics themselves, but on the detrimental effects that Eurocentric ideology can have on those scholars who choose to study cultures informed by North American cosmology. Thus this article verifies the continuity in the evolution of ideas about secondary scholars on the Huron childhood experience and is not an attempt to disregard the fine contributions of long-time accredited practitioners in the field.

Tooker's (1991) publication *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615-1649* was one of the first attempts to create a scholarly synthesis of the Huron. In her depiction of Huron childhood, Tooker combines the observations of Champlain, Sagard, and the Jesuits and simply restates them, thus offering little analysis. In the case of the sexual promiscuity of Huron girls, Tooker's description emphasizes Sagard's judgment on the matter rather than trying to explain it. "The girls vied with one another as to which should have the most lovers" asserts Tooker (p. 125). Therefore, Tooker's approach to illustrating Huron childrearing practices is an amalgamation of the primary sources into a logical and "presentable" structure

from a Eurocentric perspective. She does not attempt to eliminate European prejudices and simply delivers the accounts as they were written down. As a result, it is not surprising that Tooker's interpretation includes all the same characteristics as the primary sources such as a description of the cradleboard, the birthing process, and premarital sex.

Just over a decade after Tooker's publication, Trigger (1976) wrote his own ethnohistory of the Huron people. In the marvelously detailed and informative pages of *Children for Aataentsic*, Trigger elaborates on the primary observations about the Huron. His approach attempts to shed light on why Huron children and adults acted as they did. For example, he touches on the issue of premarital sex. Rather than describing the girls as promiscuous, however, Trigger (1987) approaches the subject by describing the motives behind this Huron practice. He concludes:

Huron did not attach the same importance that we do to the distinction between married and not married. Instead, they encouraged various stages of experimentation and growing commitment that did not culminate in a stable relationship until children were born. (p. 49)

Trigger, therefore, notes the same common characteristics of Huron childhood taken from primary texts and attempts to eliminate the European attitudes and judgment associated with the primary sources. Despite this effort to distance his portrayal from the biased accounts of the religious missionaries and explorers, Trigger's description follows the same line as 17th-century observations. As in the primary reports, he states that children were welcomed and loved in Huron society. He then describes the daily routine of boys and girls. He includes descriptions of the cradleboard and the birth of children, as well as the practice of premarital sexual relations. Furthermore, Trigger's depiction of Huron childrearing asserts that because of the lack of control over Huron children, the children "received no formal training" (p. 47). By expressing this notion, Trigger perpetuates the idea that Huron society encouraged a childhood characterized by careless freedom.

In 1999 Sioui, a Huron scholar, published a "new" history of the Huron. In *For An Amerindian Autohistory*, Sioui (1992) takes on the innovative task of reinterpreting popular perceptions of Huron history and culture through a so-called auto-historical approach. As defined by Sioui (1999), this approach interprets Native history through Amerindian cultural values, with specific reference to Amerindian testimony. So what does this new interpretation say about traditional Huron practices of childrearing? Sioui states,

Children, as developing individuals, do not see or hear themselves being told how to think and behave by people invested with arbitrary powers, or by a system. Instead they simply have access to the abundant source of wisdom available to all, which comes from the ancient spirit of the people. Children can draw on it when and how they wish. (p. 36)

As a result, the latest historical interpretation of Huron childhood touches not on the material or physical aspects of childrearing as in the

case with Trigger and Tooker, but on the psychological and ideological aspects that influenced how children developed in Huron society. Children were individuals who had the right to decide how and with what knowledge they would approach life. In addition, children had unlimited sources of wisdom through their community's collective knowledge and were not constrained to what end they might access and make use of that wisdom. In essence, Sioui's description supports the popular notion that Huron children were free to do as they pleased, but interprets that freedom as a vehicle for unlimited opportunities for learning rather than unlimited opportunities for amusement and carelessness.

Summary of Primary and Secondary Source Analysis

Although each depiction of Huron childhood, whether a primary or secondary interpretation, has its unique features, a number of assertions have been popularized and perpetuated over the last 400 years. With the exception of Sioui's, for example, all accounts discuss physical aspects such as birth, the physical description of the cradleboard, and the presence of premarital sex. Equally repetitive are the notions that Huron parents adored their children and the fact that children were not subject to discipline for misbehavior, with a special emphasis on the lack of physical punishment. The daily routines of boys and girls are also consistent throughout these accounts. Girls were described as being given a pestle with which to pretend to crush corn, and boys were given bows and arrows to play hunting games (Tooker, 1991). Finally, even Sioui's unique take on Huron childhood does not escape the consistent portrayal of Huron children's freedom to do as they please.

Assertions Denied or Verified?

Taking into consideration the repetitive nature of this historiography, it may be that certain aspects of the Huron childhood experience have been assumed to be true because of their continual repetition rather than their historical accuracy. If these aspects are indeed misinterpretations of reality, then the perpetuation of these assumptions has led to a popular portrayal of Huron culture that is false. In the light of this possibility, three main assertions about Huron childhood need further investigation. The first avenue of examination explores Tooker's (1991) case that Huron children had no respect for their parents and elders. The second avenue of research looks at Trigger's (1987) premise that Huron children received no formal training. And the final investigation focuses on Sioui's (1999) claim that Huron children were free in the sense that no system was in place to tell them how to act or what to think.

The methodology guiding this examination is inspired by the concept of *auto-history*. Although some may view this strategy as exclusive (i.e., it is reserved for Native people to write about Native people), I demonstrate how an auto-history may be applied by any researcher devoted to expos-

ing a historical reality rooted in Amerindian principles and perspective. In brief, an auto-history should not be confined to selective authorship by Native peoples, nor should it be restricted to the field of Native studies. Rather, this is an approach that can be applied to numerous studies and is often the norm for historical investigations on Europeans and their American descendants. The originality of Sioui's approach is in his emphasis on the cosmological paradigm of his human subjects, along with their values and unique concepts of their place in the world. Whereas some scholars have applied Native perceptions of politics, kinship, ecology, and economy to explain various historical narratives, Sioui grounds his interpretations in a combination of cultural frameworks based on a much broader understanding of the spiritual and philosophical aspects informing Native prerogatives and actions. To this end, in the following analysis I use an auto-historical approach in the hope of not only exposing a history more true to the Huron and their children, but the importance of reexamining records with new insight.

Tooker's (1964) premise that Huron children had no respect for their parents and Elders must be reexamined. Although this statement is supported by the observations by Champlain indicating that children beat their parents, observations by Sagard (1939) that children paid parents and the elderly "little respect" (p. 130), and the Jesuits' account that "fathers had no control over their children" (Thwaites, 1959, vol. 28, p. 49), they contradict all that is known about Huron ideology and culture. The Huron believe in the Sacred Circle of life, where all things are equal and all people are equal. This concept has no limitations as to age; therefore, the Huron recognized the equality of the individual in society whether they were 2 years old or 42 (John, 1994). According to Sioui (1999), "all those within the Circle recognize each other as kinfolk to be treated with respect. Failure to do so means exclusion from the Circle" (p. 121). Thus Huron children, as well as their parents, were subject to social and spiritual pressures to be respectful to everyone. This mentality would not have accepted continual disrespect of children toward their parents. Moreover, there was a significant emphasis on the respect due to Elders in Huron culture. Elders were members of the community who were respected for their wisdom. It was the Elders' responsibility to pass on and store communal information for the people. As a valued member of Huron society, it is unlikely that such a person would be subject to disrespect from the community's youth. Perhaps primary observers of Huron children based their conclusions on isolated events where children displayed inappropriate behavior toward their parents and Elders. Therefore, once again a characteristic popularized by repetition proves to be based more on assumption and generalization than on historical and sociological fact.

Although Trigger's assumption that there was no formal training for Huron children may be supported by Sagard's (1939) observation that the

children just “[played] and [gave] themselves a good time” (p. 133), the reality is that there was a specific approach to training young Hurons for their future responsibilities. Boys were trained at an early age to use a bow and arrow and to fish. To some this may seem a hobby or a waste of time, but to the Huron this was a skill essential to their survival. In the 17th century, the Huron still relied on hunting to provide both food and clothing (Tooker, 1991). So the ability to use a bow and arrow effectively allowed Huron boys to provide sustenance for their families and community in the future. Equally important was the use of the bow and arrow for protection. War against neighboring tribes, usually the Iroquois, was a reality for the Hurons, and thus so was the need to have trained warriors to protect their people.

Girls were also subject to specific training. They were trained in the responsibilities of domestic tasks from an early age. Sagard (1939) describes these as “trifling and petty household duties” (p. 133). Champlain (1951), however, gives a detailed account of the many essential jobs that women performed in Huronia. Women not only took care of domestic chores, he marvels, but were also in charge of agriculture, provisions, making fishing rods, nets, and clothing, among many other things. Girls often began their training with a pestle that they were given as young toddlers. This was specifically described by Sagard as a tool for training little girls how to pound corn. Thus both boys and girls were trained for their adult responsibilities from an early age. Through observation, practice, and the use of implements such as bows and pestles, children were trained daily for their future.

In addition, although the ability to perform physical tasks was an important part of Huron training, knowledge about Huron culture and philosophy were equally part of a child’s preparation for adult life. Huron children had to learn how to communicate orally. Because trade and politics were based on oral agreements, the ability to express oneself effectively and articulately was key to the quotidian functioning of Huron society’s economy and government (Trigger, 1987). Huron children also needed to be trained in using their memory. Because the Huron were a culture based on oral traditions, everything had to be memorized from geography, details of treaties, speeches, names, events, and mythology. The Huron had to remember all aspects of their society in order it to function.

Huron training also required knowledge of social etiquette, with an emphasis on “behavior, discretion, and modesty” (Trigger, 1987, p. 48). For example, “it was a serious breach of etiquette to set one’s foot in a house while a feast for a sick person was going on” (Tooker, 1991, p. 57). If a child did not comply with the various social expectations, he or she would be chastised by the entire village and would lose respect in the community. Consequently, it was through the calculated training of

Huron girls and boys in vocational skills, oral tradition, memory, and cultural etiquette that they were able to perpetuate and maintain Huron society in their adult years. The formality of this training cannot be compared with European standards of the time, but to the formal or recognized importance and consistency of the subjects taught. All lessons learned were essential to Huron survival. In addition, the fact that this training started "as soon as they began to walk" and was "usual and daily practice" affirms that although this education did not take place in a school, it was perhaps more thorough and formal as it permeated every hour of a Huron child's young life (Sagard, 1939). As a result of this analysis, the notion that there was no *formal training* for Huron children becomes questionable.

Finally, the perception that Huron children were not subject to a system of control over their actions must be reevaluated. Both Sagard (1939) and Champlain (1951) attribute the notion of liberty to Huron childhood. Sagard blatantly states, "everybody lives in complete freedom" (p. 131), and Champlain is equally obvious observing, "the children of these nations are extremely free" (p. 231). Sagard also indicates that there were no constraints by society to control the bad behavior of children. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there was no system to check and influence children's actions. Although it is probable that Huron adults did not reprimand their children through physical punishment due to the belief that it was wrong to "coerce or humiliate an individual publicly" (Trigger, 1987, p. 47), the Huron did have other ways to control behavior. They constructed an elaborate system supervised by the entire community and checked by morality. In the constructs of Huron society, children were not only subject to the approval of their parents and immediate family, but of the entire community. According to Lazore, the raising of a child was the entire tribe's responsibility. The community was mandated to help each child grow into the best person that he or she could become. So each child was an investment in the community, and each member of that community had an equal desire to see that individual grow and develop in a way that might benefit the society in the future. One can imagine the pressures children might experience if their entire community took on the role of parent. There would be little time for misbehaving if everyone was watching them and expecting them to learn and develop into skilled and knowledgeable men and women. In addition, the communal pressure on the individual was accentuated by the fact that "the public had to make amends for the individual" (Thwaites, 1959, vol. 28, p. 49). If one person committed an offence against someone else, the entire community was held equally responsible.

In addition to the collective pressures from the community, there was great pressure for Huron children to conform to the moral code of their people. The values of respect and equality are highlighted above through

the Huron belief in the Sacred Circle. It must also come to light that these characteristics were “not a calculated maneuver, but a requirement imposed by membership in the Circle” (Sioui, 1999, p. 121). Accordingly, because of the Huron belief in the Circle, they were required to conform to and protect its value system. Morality was complex in Huron society, and children were expected to know and respect the principal points of this moral code. These points are simplified and summarized by Sioui (1999) as follows.

1. We [the Huron] must love and care for our children or those entrusted to us ... 2. The harm we do to our children always becomes known in the end ... 3. We are always punished for the harm we do others ... 4. We should not look down on the poor and the powerless ... 5. We must not fight fire with fire ... 6. Nothing succeeds like personal effort and valour ... 7. Vanity is a pitiful trait in the individual ... 8. All that glitters is not gold ... 9. Recognizing the place of animals in human existence is not only a matter of ethics but a question of survival ... 10. Generous acts that reciprocate animal generosity in fact reflect a highly ecological form of thought ... 11. Animals are not the only non-humans to give messages or special powers to their human kin ... 12. Stones occasionally have considerable powers ... 13. Shamelessness—an insult to the intelligence—leads to death for the offender ... 14. The use of powers with evil intent (witchcraft) is always discovered and punished by death ... 15. When gambling becomes an addiction, it leads to degeneracy ... 16. A lazy man is not only an object of ridicule—he will not find a wife ... 17. The young woman who refuses too many suitors may regret her behaviour ... 18. Greed is its own downfall ... 19. The bodies of those who die far from home must be brought back and buried according to the prescribed rites ... 20. One must not attempt to recall to earth those who have departed for the soul world. (pp. 36-40)

These 20 points served as moral guidelines for the Huron. It is a system built around a circular approach to life and human interaction with the world. According to Jesuit accounts, Huron children could decide whether they wished to follow these guidelines (Thwaites, 1959). But the reality was that if they did not adhere to this moral code, they would have to face potential ostracism from their society as well as the blame for the entire community’s obligation to make amends for their transgression. Consequently, through a reexamination of the complex moral codes, ethical requirements, and communal vested interest in the individual, it seems that there was indeed a system based on social constructions and control. Children’s actions did not go unchecked; rather their behavior was keenly observed and their approach to life defined through moral cosmology.

Discussion

The results of these analyses deserve further comment. Perhaps the initial reaction to such findings is indifference. The misrepresentation of Native peoples is nothing new. Of course, many histories of Indigenous people have been altered and misunderstood by historians. Despite the existence of human error and misrepresentation in Amerindian scholarship, these studies are nonetheless important and crucial to expanding our knowledge of Native society. The works of Tooker, Trigger, and Sioui are examples of attempts to educate others on the Native peoples of the past.

Paramount to anyone interested in learning about Huron culture and heritage, their discussions are informative and represent essential accounts of the Huron. Moreover, they embody a point of departure for subsequent investigations offering alternative versions.

Accordingly, after reviewing the original references to Huron child-rearing practices made by primary observers, in conjunction with an auto-historical approach, a new history of Huron childrearing emerges. Contrary to the conclusions that children had “no respect for parents,” and that there was “no formal training” involved in the childrearing process, one might offer the following interpretation.

Although the childrearing practices of the 17th-century Huron did not involve formal schooling or social etiquette familiar to European styles of childhood education, Huron children were exposed to a rigorous training program from an early age. This training was heavily influenced by the involvement of the entire community. Because of ideological perceptions of the self, children were regarded as equal members of society able to teach as much as they were able to learn. Choices were not made for children, as they were encouraged to make decisions for themselves and deal with the consequences. Parents exercised influence through social mechanisms applied to all members of the community, but were by no means arbitrators of their children’s lives.

Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be derived from this investigation. The first is the recognition that because a certain description has been repeatedly presented in popular historical discourse does not mean that it is true. This leads to the second conclusion that historical interpretations of Amerindian history must be revised. The primary written sources must be reevaluated with an approach based in Amerindian autohistorical analysis. This process will expose other misconceptions that have been perpetuated and displayed as historical fact. In regard to the historical portrayal of Huron children, I conclude that Huron childrearing did consist of a formal training procedure. Children were respectful to their parents and Elders, and there was a complex system of checks and balances to control and guide the behavior of Huron youth. Certainly the primary observations by Europeans such as Champlain, Sagard, and the Jesuit missionaries are invaluable. They include first-hand written accounts of Huron activities, culture, and interaction. It is in response to the absolute importance of these sources that historians must take extra care when attempting to apply them to non-European cultures. Much as how the Huron children acted in accordance with the Sacred Circle, primary observers wrote within the constraints of their own society’s perception of the world.

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