The Rearing of Slave Children and Their Parental Relationships Before and After Emancipation

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"The craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that, unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or to cynicism."

I. INTRODUCTION

The discipline of studying, researching, and interpreting history is very important, not only in understanding events of the past, but in explaining or better comprehending present conditions and phenomena, and to predict the future. A careful examination of the experiences of slave children in the U.S. is necessary to give us insight into their development. With this knowledge, we can better understand and foreshadow the experiences of adult slaves and how they struggled and coped with their bondage on a daily basis. Surveying the experiences of slave children is necessary and important in understanding the whole slave experience of African-Americans in the U.S.

I will focus on the rearing and disciplining of slave children and the relationships they had with their parents from approximately the late 1700s to early 1800s. This time period is before the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, but after the development of an African-American subculture, through approximately the first decade after Emancipation. By understanding their experiences and development through the early formative years of their lives, through their upbringing and the relationships or lack of relationships they had with their parents, we can better understand their psychological, emotional, and social development. I aim to discover whether or not there were differences in the rearing of African-American children and the relationships that were established and bonds that were formed with their parents before Emancipation and after Emancipation. I contend that after Emancipation, children had better experiences in terms of how they were raised and were able to form closer and more intimate bonds with their parents. It is necessary to begin by describing the importance of slave children to their slaveowners, in terms of profitability, and the factors that determined their status as slaves.
Children whose parents were slaves automatically took on the slave status, as well. Early on, slaveowners realized the value of women because of their reproductive capabilities. "A slave woman was both the nucleus of a labor force and the producer of wealth that increased rapidly." The more children a woman had, meant more property and profits for the owner. "In the decade before the Civil War, her child was worth $100 at birth, $500 at the age of five. The dollar-and-cents value of a good 'breed woman' was well known in the quarters." According to Tempie Herndon, who had nine children before Emancipation:

"I was worth a heap to Marse George 'cause I had so many chillen. De more chillen a slave had de more day was worth. Lucy Carter was de only nigger on de plantation dat had more chillen den I had, but her chillen was sickly and mine was muley strong." To increase reproduction, female slaves were sexually exploited and forced into cohabitation and pregnancy.

"... they took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies." According to historian Herbert Gutman, from his research conducted on the women of the Good Hope Plantation of Orangeburg, South Carolina, "the ages twenty-three women whose first children were born between 1824 and 1856," averaged at "19.6 years. Three were not yet sixteen, and fourteen were between seventeen and twenty." According to historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., "many slave girls became mothers at thirteen and fourteen years of age. By the time they were twenty, some young women had given birth to as many as five children." In some instances, mothers who bore their owners ten or fifteen children were granted freedom. Gutman mentions that the statistics on the ages of southern white women at the birth of their first child were insufficient to compare with the female slaves' ages. However, according to Moncure D. Conway, a Virginia slaveowner who became an antislavery critic, and who compared southern slave and free white women in the early 1860s, "the period of maternity is hastened, the average youth of Negro mothers being nearly three years earlier than that of the free race." It was socially acceptable for young slave girls to have their first child
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out of wedlock. Furthermore, it proved a young girl to be worthy and functional since slaveowners were less likely to sell them after they demonstrated their fecundity.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, we can deduce that slave women had children at an earlier age than white women because children became additional assets and property for the slaveowner.

Children who were the products of miscegenation or sexual relations by members of the free white and enslaved black races, usually where the mother is black and the father is white and a member of the slave-holding class, inherited their mother’s slave status. White men taking on female slaves as concubines was very common, and according to Franklin and Moss, in New Orleans, it “became so common as almost to gain social acceptability.”\textsuperscript{11} Franklin and Moss also state that by 1850, out of the total slave population of 3.9 million, there were 246,000 mulatto slaves, and by 1860, out of the 3.9 million total slave population, there were 411,000 mulatto slaves.\textsuperscript{12} Some white men showed no feeling towards their slave children and did not treat them any different than the other slaves, whereas other white men went as far as emancipating and providing for them.

Therefore, it is evident that children were highly valued. Slaveowners would not have to buy more slaves if the slaves they already owned had offspring. The owner benefited from the birth of slave children and provided for them because they became his property and could enhance his productivity and profitability.

III. THE REARING AND DISCIPLINING OF SLAVE CHILDREN AND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE EMANCIPATION

There are some contradictions among historians as to the treatment of slave women during pregnancy, the tasks that were required of them, and the “lying-in time” they were given after giving birth. According to Blassingame, “a slave wife usually continued her back-breaking labor until a few weeks before her child was born.”\textsuperscript{13} However, according to Genovese, “women would have their tasks lightened or cut in half during the last month of pregnancy and then would not be expected back at work until a month after delivery.”\textsuperscript{14} Other historians, such as Webber, Sterling, and Jones state that the lying-in time could be anywhere from “two weeks to a month,”\textsuperscript{15} “three to four weeks,”\textsuperscript{16} or “four or six weeks,”\textsuperscript{17} respectively. This lying-in time was crucial for the mothers to establish bonds with their children and to properly nourish and feed them during their first few weeks of life. It was also a chance for the mothers to rest and recover from the usually laborious delivery. Overall, I think the amount of time given to the women varied and depended on the slaveowners and their knowledge of the importance of rest time for the mother and child.
Most babies spent a very limited time with their natural mothers, if any. "Landon Carter permitted his slaves to leave the fields three times a day to attend their babies; the women thought five times would be proper and caused themselves no little trouble by lying or trying to maneuver the overseer into giving them more time." Three or four times became the standard during the nineteenth century. Most mothers suckled their babies for at least a year and usually longer. Many women only saw their children for a few minutes at night and on weekends. Some slaveowners did permit mothers to finish their duties early in the afternoon so that they could spend the remainder of the day their children. Their husbands were then usually required to work overtime and make up the slack caused by their wives' partial absence.

Most of the large plantations in the South had plantation nurseries that were headed by older slave women who were no longer very useful to their owners. Within these nurseries, there was usually a sleeping room and a room for playing and eating. An anonymous planter in Mississippi describes the nursery arrangement:

"A large house is provided as a nursery for the children, where all are taken at daylight, and placed under the charge of a careful and experienced woman, whose sole occupation is to attend to them, and see that they are properly fed and attended to, and above all things to keep them as dry and cleanly as possible, under the circumstances."

Many slave children were also raised and cared for by their older siblings or other older children on the plantation. On some plantations all the nurse did was supervise the older children. An ex-slave observed, "Some of us children that were too small to go to the field had to stay around and take care of the slave babies. This was my job at times. Whenever the babies got to crying too much I would go and call their mothers from the field to come and suckle them." Another former slave, Elizabeth Hines, recalls being breastfed and reared by an older sister after her mother's death. Boys also helped in nursing babies. "Nelson Birdson of Alabama indicated that the first work he remembered doing was 'nussing a baby boy.'"

Despite the fact that slave mothers could not spend as much time with their children as they would have liked to, some were able to establish strong bonds and attachments to their children and many made sacrifices for them. When Harriet Jacobs was about to be separated from her children for the first time and realized that she was helpless, she stated, "I had a... mother's love for my children; and resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will." She felt such a strong attachment to her children. Thus, her determination gave her strength to endure the separation.

Many former slaves that grew up within the slavery system before
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Emancipation had strong recollections of their mothers. Adeline Willis recalls, “The first thing I recollect is my love for my Mother—I loved her so and would cry when I couldn’t be with her, and as I grewed up and kept on loving her just that a-way even after married and had children of my own.”

The importance of mothers in families and with respect to their relationships with their children is also evident through a lot of slave spirituals. Several slave spirituals are about the longing of slaves to be reunited with their mothers in heaven. Furthermore, when small children saw their mothers being flogged, they would frequently fight the overseers. Many slaves also refused to leave their mothers when given the chance to escape. “As a young slave, William Wells Brown did not run away because he ‘could not bear the idea’ of leaving his mother.”

Mothers also made many sacrifices for their children. A former slave, Agatha Babino, recalls her mother taking a beating in her place. “My ma say for her not to beat me, she take de beating. So dey beat my ma.” Another former slave recalls being hidden by her parents from a patrol. Charles Ball recalls his mother dividing the food among the children and going supperless herself. The emphasis here is placed on mother-child relationships because, in most cases, a mother and her small children were often kept together, whereas a father was more likely to be sold away from his children.

In most cases, mothers and children had one owner and fathers had a separate owner. Fathers were not useful in terms of nursing because “in dem days no bottle was given to no baby under a year old.” This made it difficult for fathers to establish strong bonds with their children. They had a less powerful presence and influence on the children than resident parents. However, many fathers and husbands, whenever possible, made an effort to visit their wives and children. One former slave recalls, “My pappy...had to git a pass to come see mammy. He slipped in and out ’nough times to have four children.” Another former slave, Millie Barber, recalls, “My pa...come sometimes widout de pass. Patrollers catch him way up de chimney hidin’ one night; they stripped him right befo’ mammy and gave him thirty-nine lashes, wid her cryin’ and a hollerin’ louder than he.” Some males were only permitted to visit their wives and children during holidays.

Fathers that were able to stay with their children played important roles in their development and learning. They would teach their children how to read and write, how to dance, sing, tell stories, and make and play a variety of musical instruments. They often played an important role in the transmission of family history and the history of Africa and slavery. Fathers helped in instilling religious values and beliefs in their children. They also passed on practical skills, such as hunting, trapping, how to make brooms, how to mend broken objects, etc. to their children. Slave songs and spirituals also reflected the importance of fathers in children’s lives. They were usually about the return of fathers or the reunification of families in heaven. In the absence of biological fathers of children, many other men would take on the role of surrogate father, such as uncles, or grandfathers, or other unrelated men.
A lot of former slaves had fond memories of their fathers. One former slave recalls, “I loved my father. He was such a good man. He was a good carpenter and could do anything.” Another former slave, Austin Steward, remembers his father as “a kind, affectionate husband and a fond, indulgent parent.” Elijah Marrs made this statement about his father: he “was always my friend when I thought trouble was in the air; he was my only refuge.”

Slave parents also did their best at disciplining and instilling values and morals in their children at an early age. Gracie Stafford, a slave on the Myrtle Grove Plantation, recalls, “When I was growing up, we wus taught jus’ lak’ white folks to keep our knees together an’ our dresses down an’ never to cross our legs. An’ we wore long dresses, too, but folks had raisin’s their. According to Blassingame, “One of the most important lessons for the child was learning to hold his tongue around white folks.” This was especially necessary on plantations where slaveowners would try to get children to spy on their parents in the slave quarters and report everything that was said. Another important lesson that parents enforced was respect for slave elders. Some slaveowners even felt that slave parents were too strict and hit their children too hard. This shows how highly discipline was regarded by slave parents.

Some slaveowners also felt that they had a right to discipline slave children. Former slave A.J. Mitchell remembers when his master, Jack Clifton of Arkansas, disapproved of any of the slave children’s behavior, he would “make us younguns put our head ‘tween his legs and put that strap on us.” This is also evident from the 1857 conviction of a planter for manslaughter in whipping a thirteen-year-old girl. The Supreme Court of Georgia ruled that “a girl of that age ought not to be hit with anything more than a switch.”

Overall, although some parents were able to establish relationships with their children and be active in encouraging their development, many were not. The slaveowners stifled relationships that could have been formed; if it was not by separating parents and children through selling them to different slaveholders, then it was through overwork and long hours in the fields. Adult slaves usually worked from sun-up to sun-down. After work in the fields, adult slaves would come home and attend to household chores, such as weaving, cooking, fixing their homes, etc. By the time children saw their parents, it was just about time to go to bed. Many former slaves that were raised under slavery recall having spent very little time with their parents. Tom Singleton recalls that adults “were too busy to talk in de daytime, and at night us wuz so wiped out from hard work (us) just went to sleep and never talked.” Furthermore, parents did not have full rights or full control over the disciplining and rearing of their children. Since all slaves were viewed as property, including children, technically the owners owned the children and determined who would raise them. They took it upon themselves to discipline the children when they felt it was necessary.
IV. THE REARING AND DISCIPLINING OF SLAVE CHILDREN AND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AFTER EMANCIPATION

With the abolishment of slavery, children who were once slaves were no longer slaves and children who were to be born from former slaves were born free. The abolishment of slavery automatically gave these children the status of being free. Of the four million slaves that were emancipated, one million of them were children. These children were born into slave communities and, up until Emancipation, experienced their childhoods under the conditions and framework of chattel slavery. Their experiences thus far were shaped by the slave subculture that emerged, and this set them apart from other nineteenth-century American children.

After Emancipation, former slave parents had more control over their children’s rearing and disciplining. As a result, stronger parent-child relationships were formed. Women did not have restrictions as to how much time they could spend with their children after giving birth. There is evidence of women withdrawing from fieldwork after Emancipation. Theodore Wilson examined 1865 and 1866 plantation records in Louisiana and concluded “the greatest loss to the labor force resulted from the decision of growing numbers of Negro women to devote their time to their homes and children.” Sharecroppers’ wives had more flexibility in terms of when they would care for their children during the day. Some women worked in the fields and watched their children at the same time. Others found this to be difficult depending upon the age of the child. At any rate, the family could work together and help each other when a new baby was born into the family. In many cases, older children still played an integral part in raising and rearing younger siblings because mothers were forced to work to help make ends meet.

Some mothers were able to work at home, as laundresses or seamstresses. This allowed for greater flexibility in terms of childcare provisions and taking care of the home. Some mothers that worked outside the home may have been required to return to work by a certain time or they would be laid off. A small percentage of women who were the wives of skilled workers, ministers, or officeholders could stop working and devote all their time to their children and homes. Despite the fact that available resources for prenatal care were limited, mothers could also choose the care they desired and could choose their midwives. Many families, however, could not afford the services of midwives at all. Overall, mothers had more control of the time they could spend with and care for their children.

Emancipation allowed for further development of mother-child relationships. It also enabled slave families to reunite. Judge Hugh Lennox Bond of Maryland observed, “In the large slaveholding counties, there was an exchange of masters. Husbands joined their wives on neighboring farms, and wives their husbands and children.” A former slave describes his reunion:
“First my mother and de young chillun, den I got back. My uncle, Jose Jenkins come to Beaufort and stole me by night from my Missus. He took me wid him to his home in Savannah. We done been freed; but he stole me from de house. When my father heard I wasn’t wid de others, he sent my grandfather, Isaac, to hunt me. When he finds me at my uncle’s house, he took me back.”

A Freedmen’s Bureau officer observed, “Every mother’s son seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children.” Another former slave describes his reunion with his mother:

“After de war my ma come to de place an’ tol’ de marster she want her chillun. At firs’ I was scared of her, ’cause I didn’t know who she was. She put me in her lap an’ she mos’ nigh cried when she seen de back o’ my head. Dey was awful sores where de lice had been an’ I had scratched ‘em. Us lef’ dat day an’ went right on to Tuscaloos. My ma had married again an’ she an’ him took turns carrying me when I got tired.”

After Emancipation, with the reunion of families, there were more families with both parents. Children also had more opportunities to establish relationships and to get to know their fathers. Both parents could actively take part in the upbringing of their children which led to stronger parental bonds and more stability in the children’s lives. Parents also had more control in disciplining their children. Former slaveowners or other members of the white race, technically, could not discipline African-American children. Prior to Emancipation, white slaveowners felt as if they had a right to discipline slave children because they were their property.

Overall, in terms of the rearing, disciplining, and the ability for relationships to form between children and parents, Emancipation gave former slave parents, more control of the relationships, bonds, and attachments they formed with their children, as well as more control of their children’s discipline. They could spend more time with their children. Mothers especially could spend more time nursing their babies and in developing the necessary bonds and attachments that are so crucial during those first few months and years of their children’s lives. Fathers could also spend more time teaching their children skills and telling them stories.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, children had better experiences in terms of how they were raised and were able to form closer and more intimate bonds with their parents, after Emancipation. Mothers could spend more time with their children. Children were no longer being separated and sold from their
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parents. Families were reunited, which gave children the necessary grounding, attachments, and identification to a group of people. Children were no longer being disciplined by cruel owners and parents had more control in the disciplining of their children.

Future areas of research that need to be investigated to determine whether or not slave children actually were provided better environments and had better developmental experiences after Emancipation are: a) their basic necessities and provisions, such as food, clothing, housing; b) illnesses and the rise or fall in infant and child mortality rates; c) their social interactions with siblings and white children in the context of play and daily encounters; d) psychological development through the realization and rationalization of, and coping with their state of bondage; and e) work requirements and expectations, such as minimum age requirements, basic work duties and differences in expectations based on gender, training, selling of, hiring out, and apprenticeships. Examination of theses areas will provide a more encompassing understanding of the experiences of slave children.

Bibliography


**Notes**


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