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Teenage Sexuality: A Survey of Teenage Sexual Behavior

Aaron Haas, Ph.D.

Macmillan Co., New York, 1979, \$10.95.

Teenage Sexuality is a somewhat voyeuristic account of the contemporary teenage scene as seen by Aaron Haas, Ph.D., a faculty member of the UCLA School of Medicine (Department of Psychiatry) where he teaches and supervises at the Human Sexuality Clinic. Haas' survey is one of the latest in a recent spate of similar disquisitions on adolescent sexuality. The trend represented by this increasing stream of published articles and studies is indicative of the growing interest on the subject.

Haas describes this book as a survey of the attitudes, preferences, expectations, and activities of 625 boys and girls, aged 15 to 18, on a variety of subjects, including petting, intercourse, masturbation, orgasm, virginity, homosexuality, fantasies, performance anxiety, pornography, parental attitudes, etc.

The sample in Haas' survey is supposed to be representative of teenagers throughout the U.S. But 90% of the sample studied reside in the southern California area (which immediately raises questions as to the soundness of his methodology).

Haas himself worries that his sample "might be biased in a liberal direction," because of the possibility that only the more liberal parents might allow their children to participate in the survey and "perhaps only the more sexually open adolescents would volunteer." But he reassures himself (and his readers) that this is not the case because "the responses ranged from liberal to conservative." It should be pointed out, however, that the spectrum of responses was, nevertheless, *heavily loaded* on the "liberal" side.

For example, 90% of the boys and 90% of the girls thought it was "okay" for a boy to fondle a girl's breasts (premaritally). Similarly, 93% of the 15 to 16 year-old boys and 98% of the 17 to 18 year-old boys thought it was "okay" to touch a girl's vagina. Also, 79% of the 15 to 16 year-old girls and 83% of the 17 to 18 year-old girls thought it was "okay for a girl to touch a boy's penis." (In contrast, less than 5% of the teenagers in Haas' sample held deeply religious attitudes.)

Another flaw in this study with which Haas did not, apparently, concern himself was the problem of investigator bias. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that Haas made any effort to cope with this problem at all. Indeed, the author makes little effort to hide his permissive attitude toward premarital coitus and other "liberated" sexual behavior among contemporary teenagers.

Although the book is ballyhooed as a "scientific milestone" and "the first solid point of reference of its kind in years," Haas himself admits that the "research" presented in his book "is not intended to be the definitive statement about adolescent sexuality." In contrast with the "scientific milestone" description, the book could more honestly be described as a thinly veiled attempt to pander to the

lower tastes of the young and the ignorant, while at the same time, to titillate the prurient interests of the reader with a lengthy and repetitious recitation of the sexual exploits of his young subjects.

On the other hand, the book is simultaneously advertised, with considerably greater accuracy as "a *Kinsey Report* or a *Hite Report* on young people" — "an explicit and revolutionary report on teenage sexuality." The dust jacket says: "*Teenage Sexuality* moves beyond dry statistics to shatter the cultural taboos surrounding teenage sex." In keeping with this latter description, the book frequently descends to a brazen, free-wheeling and explicit description by Haas' teenage voluptuaries of the varying degrees of ecstasy they achieved in a number of sexual activities, ranging from fondling to cunnilingus. (In this context, Haas informs us that many of his teenage subjects have learned the mechanics of sex from pornographic magazines, movies, etc.)

Haas justifies this brazen assault on traditional morality with romantic fatuousness ("for the most part, adolescent sexual expression is a vehicle for communicating caring and intimacy"), and maudlin declarations to the effect that "teenagers fall in love, too."

The dust jacket of this book extols it as the "first" study in which teens speak about their sexual feelings and behavior. But, as a matter of fact, it is not the first. In 1973, Sorensen did much the same thing that Haas is attempting, but Sorensen did it better. In fact, even though Sorensen's survey has flaws of its own, it remains the only available standard by which to measure any subsequent similar survey on teenage sexuality. Sorensen's work would appear to surpass Haas' survey in every way except in its appeal to prurient interests.

Haas makes little attempt to hide his advocacy of "the youth culture." He is obviously quite sympathetic to the natural rebelliousness of teenagers at the expense of parental authority. To put it mildly, Haas appears to be decidedly anti-parent. In describing and analyzing parents and parent-child relationships, Haas is too often guilty of oversimplification, sweeping generalizations, and blanket indictments.

At times, he also seems contradictory. While he accuses parents, at one point, of too much suspiciousness, or an overdone practical realism as to the extent of sexual activity going on among their teenage children, at another point he accuses them of too much naivete, or excessive idealism, on the very same issue. It would appear that he can't have it both ways.

In this context, it is ironic that Haas thinks that the most important chapter in his book is the one on teenagers and their parents (because, as noted, this is where his views are particularly erroneous and offensive).

Haas' anti-parent stand is even more disturbing when one is reminded of how crucial the family's role (or lack of it) really is in the area of teenage sexual behavior. Kantner and Zelnik found that teenage girls living in fatherless families were 60% more likely to have had premarital intercourse than those in two-parent homes. And girls who said that they confided in their parents were substantially less likely to have had premarital intercourse than those with little parental communication.

On the question of parental communication, Haas' attitude toward parent-child differences is most annoying. He seems to dwell on, to delight in, and to encourage intergenerational conflict to the detriment of all concerned. As has been well pointed out by other observers, when adolescents self-consciously view themselves as a generation apart, they tend to emphasize (and often to exaggerate) their uniqueness and their discontinuity from previous generations. They then may imagine themselves to be completely self-created, or completely original in their insights and perceptions.

Some observers (Lorenz among others) are alarmed at the thought that a whole generation of young people might not want to be like their parents, and thus

might fail to transmit to future generations a precious treasury of adaptive recipes for living. Those authors point out that we are not, at present, in a position to adequately assess or appreciate the overall value to our society of this treasury of traditional rules and standards, which so many modern opinion-leaders, like Haas, seem so eager to repudiate with so little regard for ultimate consequences.

In light of these concerns, it is most distressing to watch the efforts being made nowadays (by Haas and other like-minded writers) to separate teenage children from (for the most part) the wholesome and stabilizing influence of their parents in an era in which teenagers face a kind of "reverse peer pressure" from yesterday — a pressure to lose, rather than to maintain, their virginity.

This pressure is based on the entirely false impression that "everybody's doing it"; and that anyone who is a virgin is out of step with the times. This is indeed a subtle, but potent, pressure on impressionable teenagers (especially in the early teens). Furthermore, it is just such "peer pressure" which has undoubtedly contributed to the currently worsening epidemic of teenage sexuality, venereal disease, and premarital pregnancy which abounds in our land.

Haas' survey indicts itself as another example of the many attempts being made nowadays to justify the pursuit of unbridled sexual activity for its own sake. An implicit part of all such efforts is the attempt to unfairly and dishonestly distort traditional sexual morality and make it appear to be some hideous form of spiritual or psychological enslavement from which we all need to be "liberated."

In so dishonestly setting up traditional morality as a caricature of its true self, Haas is tacitly giving encouragement to those who continue to reject it. Conversely, nowhere does he really come to grips with the important issues of authentic responsibility, altruism, constancy, fidelity, self-sacrifice, true commitment, and a lasting mutual respect. Instead, the mutual release of sexual tensions seems to be the primary (if not the exclusive) goal in mind.

In this context, Campbell has pointed out that present-day psychology and psychiatry in all their major forms are more hostile to the moral teachings of traditional religion than is scientifically justified. Furthermore, psychology and psychiatry not only describe man as selfishly motivated, but implicitly or explicitly teach that he *ought* to be so. Psychologists almost invariably side with self-gratification and against traditional restraint.

As Campbell points out (and documents), psychology and related disciplines may be contributing significantly to the undermining of the retention of traditional moral values, which (never mind their religious origins) may have considerable pragmatic value to us all, as individuals, and as a society.

The dust jacket of *Teenage Sexuality* touts the book as a "major contribution to the growing public dialogue about sexuality in our present culture." It is also advertised as a "humane and hard-headed report," and as "more than a study of teenage sexuality. It is a study of society itself." But, as indicated above, I believe this book is actually a highly overrated and rationalized account of the subject, and it tends more to titillate than to offer any new insights or information.

Whenever a book like this comes out, proclaimed as a frank new look at the subject, anyone who is critical of it is accused by its *avant garde* defenders as being unable to face the truth or reality. But the truth about this book is that it really is terribly vulgar, and, at times, even salacious. Moreover, whatever else it might be, it certainly is not a "scientific milestone"; and the thinking is not "new."

This book is not quite what it purports to be. I therefore cannot recommend it. In fact, it represents the horrible example, *par excellence*, of the kind of destructive "help" that we could well do without, as we begin to move away from the "Me Decade."

— James H. Ford, M.D.
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