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From Victimization to Survival: A Criminological Review of 'A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive'

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ABSTRACT

This book review critically analyzes Dave Pelzer's 1995 Book 'A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive', a terrifying autobiographical tale of severe child abuse and survival. The story details how Pelzer's mother changed from being a loving parent to becoming a very violent person, causing him to endure years of mental, emotional, and physical suffering before being saved by school staff. In addition to narrating the incident, this study analyzes the dynamics of abuse inside the family system using important criminological concepts. The mother's actions are explained by the theories of social learning and strain, while the father's passivity and siblings' cooperation are explained by the theory of neutralization. The limitations of victim precipitation theory as it relates to child victimization are also discussed. The review further analyzes Pelzer's experience's broader implications for child protection regulations. Besides, it emphasizes how crucial Child Protective Services and the Mandatory Reporting Policy are to protecting children, especially when mandatory reporters like teachers and nurses step in. Dave's eventual release serves as an illustration of how institutional safeguards and prompt reporting can end abusive cycles. Simultaneously, the research highlights the theoretical limitations in understanding the complexities of child abuse, particularly when family dynamics and psychological problems interact. Through the integration of criminological theory and policy discourse, this analysis sheds light on the ongoing significance of multidisciplinary approaches in comprehending and combating child abuse, while also placing Pelzer's personal tragedy in context. It comes to the conclusion that although theories provide insightful information, effective intervention strategies are still essential for safeguarding at-risk children and

protecting their survival and rehabilitation.

KEYWORDS

Child Abuse, Victimization, Abusive Treatment, Child Protective Services, Mandatory Reporting

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Book ‘A Child Called “It”: One Child’s Courage to Survive’, Dave Pelzer (also referred to as ‘David’) describes how his mother, Catherine Roerva Pelzer, mistreated him from the age of four until he was twelve. The transformation of his mother from a loving parent to a brutally abusive character is described in the book as a significant and unsettling change in her personality. Here, Pelzer compares “the ‘Brady Bunch’ of the 1960s” to his pleasant boyhood in an apparently ideal home early in life. A kind and devoted housewife, his mother was proud of her family, their home and their outings, including picnics and camping excursions to the Russian River. David felt special when his father was him, who was a fire fighter and was a source of love and security for him. However, his mother’s behavior changed radically and that shattered the blissful family life. Unfortunately, traditional modes of punishment, such as being placed in a corner, were used at the beginning of the abuse and soon became severe. Soon after, he received “minor treatment” where his mother compelled him to repeat that he was a bad boy while smashing his face against a mirror.

David was gradually cut off from his family and he was no longer allowed to watch TV, play with his siblings and have meals with them¹. Then his mother started to call him “It”, he was referred to as “The Boy” and eventually completely dehumanized². He was forced to lie on a hot gas burner, eat his infant brother’s dirty diaper and drink ammonia and Clorox as part of the torture. Unable to handle the situation, David’s father separated and started to stay away. At this point, David felt deceived, especially following a knife incident in which his father remained involved instead of taking action. To withstand his mother’s mistreatment, David took some strategies but was regularly caught for wrongfully taking meals from classmates and the school cafeteria. He gradually became a robot, rarely revealing his emotions due to learning to distance him from the suffering. Due to repeated abuse, he started to think that he deserved the abuse. The

¹ Rosari D, Rahayu S, Wangsanata S A, Wulandari R & Rozi M F, ‘Violation of Children’s Rights in Dave Pelzer’s Trilogy: A Child Called “It”, The Lost Boy, and A Man Named Dave’ (2022) 4(1) Attractive: Innovative Education Journal.

² Pelzer D, *A child called “it”: One child’s courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

struggle of David came to end on March 5, 1973, when his injuries and questionable conduct were observed by the principal and school nurse and teachers, particularly Steven E. Ziegler³. They called police and police officer declared him free after he was placed under the custody of the San Mateo Juvenile Department⁴. Pelzer concludes his autobiography explaining how he was able to come out of an abusive cycle and turn into a devoted parent by giving his kids the actual support and affection he had never received.

2. CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

2.1 *The Mother: Social Learning Theory*

The social learning approach states that criminal and deviant behaviors are learned through social interactions much like any other behavior. This learning takes place through learning what they are close to, being rewarded or punished for behavior and by imitating or modeling others⁵. The Book by Pelzer narrates that David's mother, Catherine, had her own difficult relationship with her family, particularly with her strong-willed mother⁶. Her behavior in adulthood, yelling at her mother and refusing help, shows that she may have learned aggressive communication and a rude attitude from her past. The Book further narrates that her abuse of David became more aggressive after she was reported by the school and a social worker visited the home. She was also abusive to her other sons, who began to hit David and seemed to enjoy throwing their weight around. The mother's use of food as a weapon and her games where she made David eat spoiled food or his own vomit can be considered as a form of social reinforcement for what she considered his bad behavior⁷.

On the other hand, considering the gaps, the social learning theory does not clearly explain the dramatic change in Catherine's behavior from a loving mother to a monster. The Book described her early life as seemingly normal and even joyful⁸. The theory here struggles to account for the sudden action of such extreme and massive cruelty, suggesting an internal psychological

³ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

⁴ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

⁵ Miller J M, Schreck C J, Barnes J C & Tewksbury R, *Criminological theory: A brief introduction* (4th edn, Pearson 2015)

⁶ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

⁷ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

⁸ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

disorder not completely addressed by social learning principles.

2.2 The Mother: Strain Theory

According to this theory, individuals are pressured into violent acts when they are unable to achieve socially acceptable goals through legitimate means⁹. Such frustration may bring a sense of normlessness. Now, from the Book, Catherine's determination of child control, alcoholism and a potential mental illness creates a strain; there was a barrier to achieve a perfect family ideal. Such strain might come due to external pressures, such as the absence of her husband. She used to release her frustration on David by making him the scapegoat for her unsatisfied life and family problems¹⁰. By targeting and torturing David, his mother found an outlet for her anomie and she had a feeling that she was in charge of the boy, David and her authority was being undermined, also fits this framework.

On the contrary, the Strain theory is mostly applicable to property crime and does not adequately explain the personal, intimate and creative nature of her psychological torture deeply¹¹. The theory relates more to motivation, but not to specific and horrible forms of violence she used to do.

2.3 The Father and the Siblings: Neutralization Theory

Here the Neutralization theory states that people who engage in deviant behavior develop certain techniques to temporarily silence their inner morality and rationalize their unlawful actions¹². These techniques allow them to drift between conventional and criminal behavior without internal conflict¹³. In terms of this theory, David's father and his siblings denied their responsibility for their actions and rationalized their non-cooperation. Particularly, the father used to remain absent, which is similar to this theory to justify his inaction. He used to tell David to become a good boy and the abuse was the ultimate result of David's own fault. He further appeals to a higher loyalty, telling David that he could not intervene because he could not encounter his mother. However, he tried to help by sneaking food, which was little enough that he did not directly confront the mother and take full

⁹ Miller J M, Schreck C J, Barnes J C & Tewksbury R, *Criminological theory: A brief introduction* (4th edn, Pearson 2015)

¹⁰ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

¹¹ Miller J M, Schreck C J, Barnes J C & Tewksbury R, *Criminological theory: A brief introduction* (4th edn, Pearson 2015)

¹² Sykes G & Matza D, 'Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency' (1957) 22(6) *American Sociological Review*

¹³ Kaptein M & Helvoort M V, 'A Model of Neutralization Techniques' (2019) 40(10) *Deviant Behavior*

responsibility for his own silence. In addition, the brothers learned to save them by acting as if nothing was wrong and they joined in the abuse, torturing David on their mother's order, which they rationalized as a game¹⁴.

On the other hand, this Neutralization theory explains the reason, but it fails to entirely capture the complexity of David's father's internal conflict. The Book repeatedly revealed his sadness, fear and guilt, which contradicts the concept of his techniques to neutralize his feelings. He was not merely drifting between two worlds but was a man torn apart by his circumstances, often seeking comfort in alcohol¹⁵. This theory, however, does not account for the paralyzing fear that prevents him from acting despite his love and affection for his son.

2.4 Theory of Victim Precipitation

According to this theory, the victim bears some of the responsibilities for his own mistreatment¹⁶. This theory comes into action when the victim initiates certain active or passive criminal acts or possesses specific physical or social traits that make him a target¹⁷. The concept of victim precipitation is highly observed in the mother's actions as she consistently portrayed David as the reason behind his own mistreatment. David was informed that his punishment was imposed because he was bad. As he used to steal food, which is a crime and he would be subject to harsh punishment. His mother fabricated that David's injury was the result of his wrongdoings and he had scratched himself to seek attention. She blamed David as the reason for the problem between she and her husband¹⁸.

Similarly, the way David's father responded represents a kind of assistance to his wife's inhuman torture of David. He decided not to make his wife upset, even being aware of her abusive treatment¹⁹. He considered the matter as it did not exist and failed to recognize it, which serves as justification for his passivity and lack of intervention. Since he did nothing to save his son from continuous mistreatment, his behavior falls under the passive

¹⁴ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

¹⁵ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

¹⁶ Petherick W, Kannan A & Brooks N, 'Victim Precipitation: An Outdated Construct or an Important Forensic Consideration?' (2020) 21(3) Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice

¹⁷ Doerner W G & Lab S P, *Victimology* (8th edn, Routledge 2017)

¹⁸ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

¹⁹ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

form of victim precipitation. Besides, David is victimized by his brothers as they actively took part in sufferings rather than being passive spectators. They used to hit David and enjoy throwing weights around him. This participation can be a type of secondary victim precipitation.

Now, considering the gap, victim precipitation is based on the concept that he/she did something to cause the crime²⁰. However, David had little responsibility here as he was only a young child, and his deeds like stealing food, were not desperate attempts but means to survive. So, the possible allegation of crime he might have committed is somehow outweighed by the abuse. Moreover, the mother's sudden change from a loving parent to a cruel mother cannot be explained by victim precipitation. The pathological nature of her abusive actions cannot be precisely explained by this theory of victim precipitation. In addition, victim precipitation assumes that victims may have a choice to avoid or escape the situation²¹. But David, as a child, was completely dependent on his abusers and had no real means to escape. This theory has overlooked the lack of authority and David's state of helplessness, making it unsuitable for the proper explanation of his victimization.

3. CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES AND MANDATORY REPORTING POLICY: ADDRESSING CHILD VICTIMIZATION

3.1 *Child Protective Services*

At this point, it is notable that one program and policy that directly focus on the victimization addressed in *A Child Called "It"* is Child Protective Services and Mandatory Reporting Policy. Here, the Child Protective Services is a government agency that is responsible for investigating of child abuse and negligence report, safeguarding children from further harm and providing services to families²². Child Protective Services may have different names in various states, but the prime mission remains the same, which is to protect children. In the context of the Book, the Child Protective Services could be the agency that would receive the report from David's school and could start an investigation. Their role is not only to separate a child from an abusive environment, but to determine if abuse has taken place, assess the risk to the child and make necessary interventions for ensuring the safety of

²⁰ Doerner W G & Lab S P, *Victimology* (8th edn, Routledge 2017)

²¹ Petherick W, Kannan A & Brooks N, 'Victim Precipitation: An Outdated Construct or an Important Forensic Consideration?' (2020) 21(3) *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*

²² Doerner W G & Lab S P, *Victimology* (8th edn, Routledge 2017)

children²³. From the Book, it was found that David was placed under the custody of the San Mateo Juvenile Department, which provides a similar service.

3.2 Mandatory Reporting Policy

In the arrangement of Mandatory Reporting Policy, there is a requirement of particular professionals like mandated reporters, who are assigned to report any sort of suspected child abuse or neglect incident to a central office. These reporters may be those professionals who have regular contact with children due to their employment, such as nurses, teachers, social and medical workers²⁴. The Book's event was set in Daly City, California, in 1970 and California had enacted mandatory reporting laws in 1963. The mandated professionals were the physicians to report the physical abuse. Gradually, the law was amended, expanding the definition of child abuse and providing a list of mandated reporters, including a wide range of professionals.

It is notable that David's rescue was a direct result of the Mandatory Reporting Policy. The school nurse, the principal and the teachers, Miss Woods and Mr. Ziegler, are mandated reporters²⁵. The school nurse saw David's bruises, tattered clothing and questionable stories regarding his injuries. Later on, Mr. Ziegler also noted David's struggle and took special interest in him, which led them to report their concerns to the authorities. Due to the diligence of the nurse and the collective efforts of the school, a report was successfully made that gave David freedom. This Book highlights the crucial role these individuals play in breaking the cycle of abuse and putting the law in action.

4. CONCLUSION

An intense and unsettling story of child abuse, resiliency, and survival can be found in Dave Pelzer's 1995 Book 'A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive'. This review demonstrates the explaining ability and limitation of theoretical frameworks in comprehending family-based violence through the application of numerous criminological theories. Furthermore, the review emphasizes how important mandatory reporting guidelines and child protection systems are to halting abusive actions and ensuring the safety of children. Last but not the least, Pelzer's story highlights the terrible consequences of

²³ Doerner W G & Lab S P, *Victimology* (8th edn, Routledge 2017)

²⁴ Doerner W G & Lab S P, *Victimology* (8th edn, Routledge 2017)

²⁵ Pelzer D, *A child called "it": One child's courage to survive* (Health Communications 1995)

abuse as well as the crucial role of prompt action, social responsibility, and supportive laws in rescuing children who are at risk.

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