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ANALYSING THE CYCLE OF CHILD ABUSE: WHEN VICTIMS BECOME PERPETRATORS

The issue of child abuse and neglect is a deeply complex and distressing phenomenon that has profound implications on the individual lives it touches and society at large. The innocence and vulnerability of children make them particularly susceptible to various forms of abuse, be it physical, emotional, or sexual and the scars left by such experiences are deeply ingrained within the psyche of the victims, often manifesting in various adverse outcomes as they grow older.

The contentious hypothesis that 'the abused becomes the abuser' has sparked considerable debate among psychologists, researchers, and social workers. While it is true that some individuals who have suffered abuse in their childhood may exhibit delinquent or abusive behaviours in adulthood, it is overly simplistic and incorrect to assume this trajectory for all victims, since it is not a universal truth or corroborated with scientific evidence.¹ It is crucial to approach this topic with nuance and understand that while some may unfortunately perpetuate a cycle of abuse, many others overcome their traumatic experiences and lead positive, productive lives.

Understanding the Dynamics and Factors Shaping Abuse

A child might be beaten, whipped, burned or starved, or sexually abused and given no or limited capacity to provide real consent, creating fear inside their minds and leaving them in a submissive position of powerlessness. They can otherwise be pushed down emotionally, lashed out with words, while they are seemingly unaware that they are even being abused or they could have been

¹ Robert D. Stone, *The Cloudy Crystal Ball: Genetics, Child abuse, and the Perils of Predicting Behavior*, 56 VAND. L. REV. 1557 (2003).

witnesses to domestic abuse.² Parental aggression is often not noticed by society since children are not at an age to call abuse for what it is, since it is at the hands of a person they trust to take care of them, and realising far too late that is not something that happens to everybody outside the four walls of their house.

There can be a variety of factors that could change the course of the impact of such abuse. The age at which it begins, its severity, and duration significantly affect how it could potentially lead to criminal behaviour. Additionally, how the survivor perceives the abuse—whether through self-blame, shame, or stigmatisation—can aggravate mental health and delinquent tendencies. Understanding the dynamics between the victim and offender, particularly in cases where the offender holds significant emotional ties like a father figure, is crucial considering that betrayal of trust intensifies the emotional and psychological harm experienced.³ If they are not detected at the onset, it would remain to grow into having harsher consequences, and if proper psychological treatments are not provided, it would be a cause for criminal behaviour in adulthood.⁴

The Theoretical Basis for the Existence of a Victim-to-Victimiser Cycle

Silver and Dublin, in their study on child abuse syndrome referred abused children as ‘tomorrow’s murderers and perpetrators of other crimes of violence, if they survive’, which albeit a harsh, still remains as a possibility often substantiated by a number of theories. Researchers often place reliance on the *social learning theory* in an attempt to understand the cycle of intergenerational transmission of violence, assuming that children learn behaviours through direct punishments or rewards or by observing others.⁵ This theory posits that children who have experienced physical abuse learn to use anger and violence by witnessing their parents do so, carry the aggression on to their own children, and so and so and so forth, resulting in a chain that limits violence within generations of a household. They view aggression as a legitimate way to deal with anger, leading to complex trauma, affecting their ability to form healthy relationships in the future

² Noll J. G. (2021). *Child Sexual abuse as a Unique Risk Factor for the Development of Psychopathology: The Compounded Convergence of Mechanisms*. ANNUAL REVIEW OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY, 17, 439–464. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-11262>

³ Cathryn Hunter ((2014), *Effects of child abuse and neglect for adult survivors*, AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF FAMILY STUDIES, 2, pp.57-65

⁴ Id at 3.

⁵ Supra at 1.

and increasing the likelihood of experiencing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

Reviewing the Past - A Study in Numbers and Cases

In a different study, serial killers were examined to better understand the influences of victim sexual assault and early maltreatment. Researchers discovered that serial killers who were maltreated as children frequently sexually assaulted their victims before killing them.⁶ Citing examples of individuals from history, Albert DeSalvo who was known as the ‘Boston Strangler’ while on his spree. DeSalvo, who was vicious and sadistic, killed 13 women by strangling them. It is hardly surprising that he is one of the numerous serial killers who experienced sexual abuse given that his murders were notorious for being sexual in character. DeSalvo endured horrifying trauma as a result of his father selling him as a sex slave when he was a young boy. Or even before Jack the Ripper created shivers down one’s spine, in the 1880s, Troilokya Devi, a serial murderer from Bengal, was accused of drowning and murdering women in order to seek justice for the abuse she suffered and for being forced into human trafficking at a young age by her family.⁷

Widom (1989)⁸ Widom (1989) compared a sample of adults with a history of child abuse to matched controls, finding a higher risk of arrest, adult crime, and violent behavior in the abused group. In ‘*The Incidence of Child Abuse in Serial Killers*’⁹, the researchers observed various forms of maltreatment among serial killers, notably that abuse of all kinds in aggravate terms is six times that of the general population. As noted in *Child abuse, Neglect, and Violent Criminal Behaviour*, being abused or neglected as a child would increase a person's chances of having an arrest as an adult to 25% to 36%, the precise amount depending on the other risk characteristics.¹⁰

Does Violence Breed Violence? - The Conclusion

The notion of ‘the abused becomes the abuser’ might not apply to every case of crime or an

⁶ De Santiago Herrero FJ, Delgado CT, García-Mateos M (2017), *Serial killers: relation between childhood maltreatment and sexual relations with the victims*. EUR PSYCHIATRY;41, S585-S586.

⁷ Times of India, *Koli faced childhood abuse*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/koli-faced-childhood-abuse/articleshow/1812726.cms> (last visited on 04th Oct, 2022)

⁸ Widom, C. (1989). *Child abuse, neglect, and violent crimeful behaviour*. Criminology, 27(2), 251-271

⁹ Heather Mitchell and Michael G. Aamodt (2005), *The Incidence of Child abuse in Serial Killers*, JOURNAL OF POLICE AND crimeful PSYCHOLOGY, Volume 20, Number 1

¹⁰ Cathy Spatz Widom (1989), *Child abuse, Neglect, and Violent crimeful Behavior*, 27 CRIMINOLOGY 251

ironclad rule surrounding the issue; rather, it implies that individuals who have endured abuse and maltreatment during their formative years are more inclined to engage in criminal behaviour compared to those without, indicating that past victimisation can elevate the likelihood of future criminal conduct. Early child maltreatment and neglect have also been shown to have lasting effects on violent crimeful conduct, supported by the history of those who were arrested as violent offenders.

Although the present research indicates the existence of a cycle of violence, the link between both is not inevitable, keeping in mind the limitations of the research. When we run behind the perpetrator, leaving behind the child who was abused, we let fester a terrible wound that they continue to carry, the invisible scars they adorn. Addressing the impact of child abuse and neglect requires a multifaceted approach that includes research, education, intervention, and support systems. By understanding the long-term effects of such trauma, society can better support survivors in their healing process and work towards preventing abuse before it occurs, to not only protecting children and providing them with safe environments but also offering comprehensive support to adults who have been victims of abuse in their childhood. It's high time we break the cycle and create a new kind of history. (history, huh?)