

## The Enduring Imprint of Abuse

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**Abstract:** This paper will focus on various theories crafted by psychologists — predominantly Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson — and how they intersect with and relate to modern examples of child abuse. Initially sparked by a personal concern for the universally endemic problem of child abuse, the research centers on mainly three objectives: 1) to examine specific cases of child abuse and its relevance to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, 2) to inspect the parameters of what constitutes as abuse, and 3) to grapple with a loose understanding of child abuse filtered through two different sociocultural contexts. A misunderstanding and neglect in psychosocial stages in premature development results in early traumas, which entails most cases of child abuse. In turn, three types of abuse — neglect abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse — are mostly responsible for various mental illnesses. With its key components contingent on a thorough analysis of a dialogue between premature social developments from birth to age of seven and psychoanalytical theories presented by Erikson, this research paper initially aims to survey the correlation to early traumas and the resulting psychiatric symptoms of mental disorders: the first goal of the study is based on case-studies guided under the supervision of Dr. Dominik Riccio. Secondly, this paper aims to analyze the borderline between abuse and discipline based on an exhaustive investigation of symptoms of early trauma. Lastly but not least, there will be a focus on how children are treated in two different cultures — American and Korean — and how certain timeless essential aspects in child-rearing remain necessary regardless of sociocultural contexts.

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### 1. Introduction

We have witnessed child abuse throughout history, on every continent and in many different forms. Abuse and mistreatment of the underdeveloped — that is, those who have yet to become mature, independent and self-sufficient — is a subject that calls for immediate attention, especially as it becomes a self-perpetuating cycle if not addressed. We constantly hear of cases where parents experience child abuse and in turn end up abusing their own children. Many point to the failure of helping children develop during their developmental stages to be akin to child abuse. Unquestionably, we need to analyze specific causes and determine the parameters of what constitutes child abuse. A misunderstanding and neglect of the psychosocial stages in premature development results in early traumas, which in turn is frequently responsible for various mental illnesses that develop later in life. Through a thorough analysis of premature social developments from birth to age seven, and of psychoanalytical theories presented by Erikson, this research paper aims to survey the correlation between early traumas and the resulting

psychiatric symptoms of mental disorders. The first section recounts several case studies under the supervision of Dr. Dominik Riccio. Secondly, this paper aims to analyze the borderline between abuse and discipline based on an exhaustive investigation of symptoms of early trauma. Last but not least, there will be a focus on how children are treated in two different cultures — American and Korean — and how certain essential aspects in child-rearing must remain necessary regardless of socio-cultural context.

### 2. Freud and Erikson's theories

Before examining the parameters of what constitutes child abuse, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what kinds of theories psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson developed. First of all, the notion of child abuse depends heavily, if not only, on whether the parents answer the needs of their children before their children reach teenage years. Child abuse is a problem that can be understood negatively: the cause of mild and neglectful abuse is a lack of care or insufficient supply of what's required in the upbringing of children from the parents. That is necessary in proper child rearing and what kinds of

neglect of parental responsibilities constitute abuse? The answer to this preliminary question can be found in Sigmund Freud's psychosexual and Erik Erikson's psychosocial theories.

Freud's theory of child development revolves around the relationship between experiences of first to seventh years of life and later life. In a nutshell, Freud argues that early trauma is primarily responsible for the development of defenses that causes us to repeat the behavior and patterns, mainly due to lack of awareness of them. He coined the term *repetition compulsion* to describe this phenomenon and engaged the readers in a dialogue where he outlined five stages in children's psychosexual development. In the first stage, the oral stage, the child discovers the world through its mouth; all kinds of pleasures come from the mouth. Examples include but are not limited to sucking on toys or mother's breasts, eating and trying different food, etc. This stage is theorized to occur until the age of one. During the second stage, the anal stage, the child derives pleasure from urination and defecation, that is, mainly through the urethra and anus. According to Dr. Riccio, most parental missteps were taken during the third stage — the phallic stage. During this phase, male and female children find pleasure through their genitalia. A crucial sub stage in this phase is related to the Oedipus conflict: a normal development dictates an inherent sexual attraction in children for their respective parents. This stage is perceived to occupy ages three to five. The fourth, the latency stage, is analyzed by Freud as a significant turning point for children to develop into semi-adults. From age five to seven, children experience an exponential increase in sexual curiosity and pleasure; however, Freud argues that children should be chaperoned by the parents to redirect their sexual curiosity into a curiosity of the whole world. He argues that it is crucial to foster the child's desire to expand the curiosity and explore the world. Last but not least, the genital stage unfolds as the child reaches the age of seven. As the child retains a sense of rationality, he or she learns to appreciate the mother and father as genuine and complete entities and starts to build relationships based on intellect, sociability and warmth. During this stage, children enter the adolescence phase, which enables them to gradually prepare to procreate. According to Freud, the genital stage endures into adulthood. The connection between Freud's psychosexual analysis and what is necessary in child-rearing to avoid future traumas and second-hand abuses is clear: without parents heeding their children's psychological and sexual tendencies during each stages, child abuse, early traumas and the resulting array of mental disorders is unavoidable.

Erik Erikson's theory unfolds in a different manner, but nonetheless highlights the importance of

parents' roles in rearing mentally well and healthy children. Unlike Freud, Erikson focuses more on the social aspects of children's psychological developments. In the first year of life, according to Erikson, the child learns to be connected to the mother or, more generally speaking, anyone who occupies the role of loved one or caretaker. During this first stage, if the child is not loved or nurtured, he or she fails to learn how to connect with others and severe consequences follow. A common example of such is schizophrenia —often caused by traumatic experiences linked to the absence of social connections. In cases where babies identify with the mother but the mother fails to react or respond, a sense of connection, intimacy, and evidently, security, is lost. The baby normally reacts to this lack of connection by crying and expressing frustration. However, once babies encounter an abnormally prolonged ignorance and absence of mutual interaction, they cease to cry. According to Erikson, babies are not as ignorant as we assume: they have the capacity to recognize negligence, accept reality and give up on hoping to receive further attention. The second stage as analyzed by Erikson regards discipline. Once the first stage is safely and securely accomplished —that is, the baby is genuinely loved by the mother — the child cooperates with the mother to learn, for instance, how to use the toilet. The process of establishing security and affection is indispensable to child rearing. Disheartening cases where the mother leaves the child unattended and the child as a result suffers discomfort in wet diapers for several days count as examples of neglect abuse. The third stage in Erikson's stages of development deals with attributes and tendencies covered by the two stages propounded by Freud — the phallic and latency stages. Unsurprisingly, Erikson names his last stage the phallic stage, during which the child derives pleasure from the phallus and related sexual activities he or she engages in. During this stage, Erikson argues that the parents have the responsibility to teach the child to control and subdue their sexual drives and to engage in sexual activities in private.

Both Freud and Erikson provide thorough and critical analyses of the psychosexual and psychosocial development in children. The contingency of certain desires, needs and tendencies in child development to what is necessary in child-rearing is clear: parents are fully responsible for having a "good enough" understanding of what the children are ought to learn or control at each stages, as much as how to deal with premature sexual and social dispositions and establish a strong, firm and supportive connection with the child until roughly the age of seven.

### 3. Two case studies of child abuse

The case studies were guided under the supervision of Dr. Dominik Riccio as he shared his accounts based on his personal encounters with patients who suffer early traumas and mental illnesses. The first episode revolves around an 18-year-old boy named Rob. Rob, born to a mother who developed diabetes during pregnancy, led a relatively stable and mentally healthy life early on. Although his mother showed symptoms of diabetes, she was a “good enough” mother and managed to meet the most basic, fundamental requirements for child-rearing. However, Rob’s father maintained a minimized personal connection with his son mainly due to his packed working schedule and introverted personality. By the time Rob reached his second and third years of age, the situation did not seem to improve much: his mother was prone to project her internalized hate, frustration and disappointment against males in general and, in turn, against her own son. Rob’s mother’s own father, as well as her brother, were abusive and misogynistic. Despite “good enough”-ly fulfilled maternal obligations, once Rob turned three years old he began to form a sense of identity and independence; his mother would argue with and swear at him often. Simply put, his mother was unwilling to endow yet another male with independence, authority and power. Rob, unable to understand his mother’s aggressive behaviors, acted out in response and would provoke the mother intentionally. His father left the marriage when Rob was about four years old. Starting at three years of age, Rob was rebellious and had frequent fights with his mother. His ability to be proud of himself was seriously compromised by his mother, who shamed him.

Today Rob, currently a student at USC and highly intelligent, fails to acknowledge his competence and is rarely satisfied with his high academic performance and musical virtuosity. He suffers immensely from low self-esteem and still feels uncomfortable among peers and girls.

Rob’s sister, on the other hand, who is four years older, was wholeheartedly embraced and cared for by their mother. She received necessary and sufficient child rearing and remained mentally healthy. This case study indicates that early traumatic memories and experiences are wholly responsible for insufficient and inappropriate child rearing.

A second case study of abuse by neglect centers on an individual named Mark. Currently 16 years old, Mark is a troubled adolescent who smokes, does not take academic responsibilities seriously and is mentally unhealthy in general. Mark is known to have reported early symptoms of depression since age of 12. When Dr. Riccio consulted Mark, it was evident that a significant cause of Mark’s depression was his

mother’s neglect. According to Mark, his mother used to return home late at night after finishing her occupational duties. Even when she had the extra time to take care of her children, she supposedly focused solely on Mark’s sister, who was much younger than he was. Despite the lack of specific incident of physical abuse, Mark suffered immensely from depression and loneliness since his early teenage years: he would be home alone watching TV, eating occasional meals by himself, spending most of his free time playing video games with minimal or even complete absence of engagement from his parents. Mark did not get the chance to build an intimate relationship with his father because his father himself was not able to build close relationships with his parents either —Mark’s father had been verbally and physically abused by his mother.

Based on both cases of child abuse and a close inspection of the causes and backgrounds for such troubling premature traumas, it is clear that the source of child abuse is twofold: on the one hand, a neglect of what’s necessary in child rearing and on the other hand, unresolved and unheeded traumatic experiences in parents themselves.

### 4. Cross-cultural analysis: America and South Korea

Our shared backgrounds and collective international academic environments, both in Seoul and in America, sparked our interest in taking a cross-cultural approach to understand psychological and sociological components in child abuse. Evidently, standards for child-rearing, discipline, bars of expectations in academic achievements differ to a great extent in Korea and in America. South Korean culture is dominated by authoritarian expectations and Confucian ethics. Familial values, social hierarchy, obedience and respect for elders, social harmony, and countless other attributes and values define the Korean community. Unlike in the United States, expressing one’s genuine opinions and speaking or acting out is not deemed to be a merit.

Together we attend an array of schools, from New York to Seoul; our fascination with the Korean paradigm of child-rearing comes from correspondence with students and friends at Yongsan International School of Seoul. Currently there is a distinctive, yet ever expanding, world of “third culture kids,” those contemporary global hybrids who have grown up under the influence of more than one national background simultaneously. Certain private schools abroad specialize in offering American curriculum in English-only settings, and therefore foster sometimes-contradictory American and Korean cultural values. In South Korea in particular, schools such as Yongsan International School of Seoul exemplify the paradoxical overlap of these two worlds. YISS is a

melting pot of Western and Korean culture. The faculty is 100% foreign, whereas the student body is almost all ethnically Korean. The curriculum at YISS follows the American standard; however, the social atmosphere is very much instilled with the Korean style, drawn from Confucianism. Despite the international disposition of the community, students are expected to cater to a sense of formality and obligation to teachers and elders within a hierarchical system, all while adhering to the stringent academic standards and competitiveness typical of a Korean environment.

Is one culture more conducive to abuse than another? It would seem that neglect is not limited by national boundaries, but more driven by an almost intoxicating fixation on success, hard work, and often a byproduct of overly prioritized work schedules. Therefore, it is conceivable that in both nations child neglect and neglectful abuse are equally prevalent, given the upwardly mobile culture of these parallel worlds.

The most heavily-exported American commodity is not tech; it's culture. In this community of internationals, American values are both emulated and

desirable among youth and adults alike. Students and teachers are on friendly and casual terms, and experimentation and risk-taking are prized over dutiful rule following. Students are used to the exacting discipline and social obligations of a Korean world, but also inspired by the flexible innovation and adventurous rule breaking of the West. The core of this duality is where this interesting crossover community originates, and is forced to make its home.

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