

# A boy called it psychology essay



Some researchers have suggested that human beings are born with no concept of their own identity – they are ...born with a blank slate for identity. Vignoles also suggests that whilst this may be true for the cognitive aspect of Identity, it is not true for the social aspect of identity; a child is born into a world where social relationships and groups have already been established by his or her family, and such will influence the child's identity. Identity includes ' the individual self, the relational self and the collective self' (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Gregg, Sedikides & Gebauer, 2011). That is, one's identity is established through both interaction between subjective mental representations of oneself and contextual social interaction processes.

This essay will examine factors that affect identity by drawing on social psychological theories in an attempt to explain the behaviours of two characters in A Child Called ' It' (Pelzer, 2000), an autobiography written by Dave Pelzer about the childhood abuse that was inflicted on him by his mother.

Identity Motives have been defined as ' pressures toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the process of identity construction' (Vignoles et al., 2006). Self Enhancement can be defined as the motive to evaluate oneself positively, by favouring positive analyses of oneself over negative analyses of oneself (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). People do not only have mental representations of themselves as they are now or were previously, but they also have mental representations of how they may become and in doing so they may desire positive outcomes for their future selves. Thus people may self-enhance either by ' self-

advancing [to increase positivity of one's current or future identity] or self-protecting' [to avoid, reduce or prevent negativity of one's current or future identity] (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs (2001) suggest that it is more important to protect ones current identity than to improve it. It is suggested that this is because the contradiction between the current self and the self that one may fear becoming, predicts emotional states better than the difference between the current self and the desired self (Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003; cited in Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

Sedikides & Gregg (2008) also suggest that one self-enhances aspects of identity that are most important to them. For example, one may care about being successful in their current job and so they will self-enhance when identifying with it, but they will not bother to self-enhance about a strangers job as it is of no importance to oneself and it is also intrinsically, socially acceptable not be successful at someone else's job.

Throughout chapter two of ' A Boy Called It' (Pelzer, 2000), Dave describes Catherine, his mother and her behaviour before she became abusive. There are many examples which describe various ' perfectionist' tendencies that Catherine seemed to adopt. Dave describes his mother as a ' clean fiend' and describes how on numerous occasions, she would make more of an effort when his father was home from work – even when she was ill – by cooking new meals and dressing well. Dave goes on to describe how his mother ' meticulously attended a small flower garden', and how his family would drive around their neighbourhood after decorating their home with Christmas decorations and look at the other neighbours' decorations.

Catherine was a housewife, so one could suggest that being a 'good' housewife is what she felt was an important aspect of her identity. Thus, it is possible that she was trying to maintain or improve those aspects of being a housewife mentioned previously, of which Dave suggests she had already perfected. Sedikides & Gregg (2008) suggest that when people self-enhance they can be extremely optimistic about their future. Dave described how his mother would talk about 'her ideas of bigger and better things for the next Christmas' (Pelzer, 2000). Research on identity suggests that one encompasses material possessions as part of their identity; thus, Catherine is most likely enhancing her house as a means of self-enhancing her identity. She may have been striving to self-enhance by inflating perceptions of herself and comparing herself with her neighbours. It is also possible that she believed her house was better than her neighbours and so in comparing herself to them (whose homes were not as nice) she would have successfully self-enhanced. It was ... that suggested that when self-enhancing, people are likely to compare themselves to those who are perceived as less fortunate. Klein (1997; cited in Sedikides & Gregg, 2008) suggests that social reality may be cognitively absorbed so that self-evaluation may always implicitly occur in comparison with imagined others. It is possible, that Catherine created imagined others to compare herself to. This may explain why she also made such strong efforts inside the home, where no one else could see her actions.

However, it is also likely that Catherine was acting collectively. In chapter 2 (Pelzer, 2000) Dave mentions how his mother cried at Christmas and when asked why she said she cried because she was so 'happy to have a real

family'; this shows how Catherine intrinsically categorized herself as part of a group. Thus, it may be that Catherine's constant maintenance and improvement of her home may have been to inflate perceptions of the family's (group) identity to neighbours (outgroup members).

Chapter 3 denotes the period of time in Dave's childhood where his mother became abusive (Pelzer, 2000). Dave describes how his mother would spend the entire day watching television, moving only to get another drink or to reheat food and he described how she had eventually come drink alcohol daily. Her violence towards Dave also increased in severity, resulting in an occasion where she broke Dave's collarbone. This change in Catherine's behaviour may be a result of an inability to satisfy the motive to self-enhance. Self enhancement is seen as an important method of maintaining or increasing ones self-esteem.

Self Esteem has been of large academic interest with more than 15000 articles on the topic published over the previous 30 years (Crocker & Park, 2004). The desire to feel worthy shapes ones identity and is seen by some research as a primary need or motive (Maslow, 1968; cited in Crocker & Park, 2004). Emphasis has been on increasing self-esteem, because high self-esteem is believed to have many positive psychological effects.

It has been proposed that high self-esteem provides consistency between the actual self and the desired self (Leary, 1999). According to Sedikides & Strube (1997), self-esteem may be increased through self-enhancement. Thus, with Catherine's desired-self becoming harder to achieve (because she

had already improved things in her life so much), she may have felt that she was no longer able to self-enhance and achieve her desired-self.

One could suggest that Catherine's abusive behaviour was a result of low self-esteem. One view suggests that people with low self-esteem act violently by aggressively dominating others as a means of self-enhancement (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996). It has also been suggested that one's level of self-esteem can provide oneself with a measure of 'the adequacy of the self' (Bednar, Wells & Peterson, 1989; cited in Leary, 1999). Thus if Catherine felt inadequate, she may have adopted violence as a means of gaining self-esteem as suggested by Toch (1969/1993; cited in Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996). Feelings of inadequacy also results in loss of perceived efficacy; which can also cause feelings of lower self-worth.

Interestingly, Oates & Forrest (1985) suggest that mothers become abusive as a result of low self-esteem. Baumeister, Smart & Boden (1996) suggest that people with low self-esteem may direct their violence towards targets that are weak and helpless. They suggest that low self-esteem causes the violent person to seek a victim that is unlikely to retaliate. In Catherine's case, she may have chosen to target Dave not only because he is her child and is unlikely to retaliate, but because she may have perceived him as the weakest child.

Despite the large quantity research suggesting low self-esteem contributes to negative behaviour and high self-esteem contributes to positive behaviour, Baumeister, Smart & Boden (1996) suggest otherwise. When comparing mothers, they found no difference in self-esteem levels between

those mothers that became child abusers and those in comparison; concluding that low self-esteem was not a risk factor for potential abusers. More recently, Baumeister et al. (2003) suggested in a review on self-esteem, that low self-esteem does not cause violence or substance abuse, as one may have inferred from Catherine's behaviour.

However, research into 'Perfectionism' by Hewitt & Flett (1991) may provide further support for the contribution of low self-esteem to Catherine's behaviour and the little success she had in self-enhancement satisfaction. They suggest that 'Socially Prescribed Perfectionism' involves one's perception that significant others have unrealistic standards and expectations and they apply pressure on oneself to be perfect. Catherine strived to impress her husband, even when she was ill (Pelzer, 2000), suggesting that she may have perceived that he was imposing such pressures on her. Hewitt & Flett (1991) also suggest that Socially Prescribed Perfectionism results in discrepancies between the real self and desired self; it involves 'striving for self-improvement'. Feeling that someone has imposed pressure on oneself to achieve unreachable goals, will incur feelings of failure, thus increasing the gap between the desired-self and real self. It is also possible that Catherine had 'Other Oriented Perfectionism' (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This involves one setting unrealistic goals for another and having exceptionally high and unrealistic expectations of this other person. Either version of Perfectionism may explain Catherine's abusive behaviour towards Dave. Catherine's feelings of failure caused by Socially Prescribed Perfectionism could have resulted in low self-esteem, thus increasing violent tendencies as previously mentioned. Catherine may have also set unrealistic

standards for Dave, and his inability to achieve such standards may have contributed to the hostility towards him.

So far, discussions have been focused around the possible reasons for Dave's mother's abusive behaviour. Now, one will focus on a theme that is prevalent throughout the book related to Dave himself. That is, Dave's longing for acceptance and belonging.

' For years I have been the outcast of ' The Family" (Pelzer, 2000). This quote is just one of many which depict Dave's feelings of rejection throughout his childhood. The abuse from his mother escalated over time, and she seemed to have control over the entire family. So much so, that even Dave's father – who was initially opposed to the abuse and tried to defend Dave – allowed Catherine to carry on abusing Dave without attempting to stop her. At the height of the abuse Dave was receiving, he had to sleep in the garage on an army cot bed and he received little or no food for days on end. No one in Dave's family attempted to feed him; they simply ignored the fact that he was in the garage (- or at least from Dave's perspective they did so).

Baumeister & Leary (1995) propose that all human beings have an innate need to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. Much research on Identity Motives has noted a motive for belonging. As a motive, one should expect to see goal directed behaviours aimed at satisfying the need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). ' It's so important for them to know that I'm not a bad boy. I want so much to be liked, to be loved' (Pelzer, 2000). This quote refers to a time when Dave is called to the principal's office because the teachers' have called a police officer to take Dave into care. Dave believes



that they know about his mother, but he is afraid that the teachers think that he deserved the abuse from his mother for being a ‘bad boy’ and he believes that he is so bad that the police officer is taking him to jail. Dave’s thoughts show that he wished to satisfy this motive for belonging.

Baumeister & Leary (1995) proposed a belongingness hypothesis that predicts that bonds should form easily under normal circumstances, and one should be reluctant to break social bonds. They suggest that belongingness is a fundamental need, thus, socially deprived individuals should show signs of maladjustment, stress and behavioural pathology.

Baumeister & Leary (1995) also predict that a minimum number of relationships are required to satisfy the motive and after they are acquired, less satisfaction is experienced on the formation of extra relationships. They suggest that people need frequent contact with another person that is preferably positive, but at least does not involve conflict; people need to perceive a bond; and the person must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare.

Richman & Leary (2009) suggest that when people receive negative reactions from others, such reactions are threats to the goal of being valued and accepted and whether these threats is implicit or explicit, they have the potential to lower one’s self esteem.

At school, Dave was ostracised by the other children – ‘The entire room lets out a howl at me – the reject of the fifth grade’ (Pelzer, 2000). ‘Ostracism [is] the act of being excluded and ignored (Williams, 2001; cited in Zadro, Williams & Richardson, 2003). Williams (1997, 2001; cited in Zadro, Williams

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& Richardson, 2003)) proposes four needs that can be threatened by ostracism: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. In fact Zadro, Williams & Richardson (2003) found in their study that ostracised participants reported lower levels on the measures of these four needs. Interestingly, the task that participants completed only lasted 6 minutes and yet they still reported lower levels of the four needs. As a result, the experimenters concluded that humans have an early warning system hardwired into their brain that is quick to perceive exclusion.

Being a victim of ostracism is associated with social-psychological adjustment problems, including internalising problems, and externalising problems (Sebastian et al., 2010). One could suggest that Dave was in fact suffering from depression; 'I have given up on everything in my life, including escaping my misery through my schoolwork'. Much of the research mentioned suggests that when belonging is threatened, one's self esteem is reduced. However, one can infer that if self-esteem is threatened or the motive for self-esteem is not satisfied, it is possible that the individual will struggle to form adequate relationships that can satisfy the need for belonging. Therefore, one must suggest that better synthesis across the two motives is tackled in future research as it is not entirely clear from the literature whether there is a causal relationship between the two motives.

There is a strong link between all of the topics discussed, with self-esteem in particular being at the centre. Self-esteem seems to be the core identity motive as it correlates with so many other motives. When self-esteem is low, one is motivated to self-enhance their identity but if one cannot satisfy the need to self-enhance, self-esteem is reduced. As mentioned, it is clear that <https://assignbuster.com/a-boy-called-it-psychology-essay/>

synthesis between motives could be clearer, despite previous attempts and studying them together (Vignoles et al., 2006, 2011).

The story of Dave Pelzer is an extremely complex one, and finding psychological explanations for the behaviours of Dave and his mother would take a lot more analyses. But, from the topics discussed, one is provided with at least an insight into how social identity can affect behaviour; even those behaviours which are extremely difficult to conceive.