“S” Supposition Analysis: Genie

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Abstract

It is not every day that a true feral child is discovered. Since the discovery of feral children, scientists have been able to research many aspects when it comes to the aptitude and the actions of a human being who has lived in an environment that would seem unreal or impractical to the average individual. What would science be if it wasn’t for opportunities to learn? Genie was a feral child case that changed lives forever. She opened up doors for discovery in areas for many scientists and psychologists alike to help accept some open ended hypotheses that still remained to be tested. The many studies on Genie not only tested hypotheses and further studied proven theories, but it also gave a self-discovery check for the scientists involved on a personal level. Here is an analysis of Genie’s story and how it pertained to discoveries like the Critical Period Hypothesis and the Rh Blood Factor. After a brief description of Genie’s family and her life before and after her discovery, we get to look at Eric Lenneberg’s hypothesis and how it was tested in Genie’s rare case of child isolation. With his hypothesis and understanding about the Rh Factor and how both of these come together in Genie’s case, we can come up with our own analyses on what makes sense and just how much of these scientific discoveries can be proven in feral child cases like Genie’s.

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Imagine the worst possible case of neglect concerning a child growing up. What would cause a parent to treat a child worse than a wild animal is treated in a zoo or how monkeys are treated in an experimental laboratory? Unfortunately for Genie, she was treated in such a fashion. Recorded cases of child isolation and the discovery of feral children date as far back as 1344 A.D. A simple definition for “feral child” is a child that lacks proper socialization because of extreme abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment. Genie’s case was discovered, and it unfolded to the public’s attention in 1970. There are a few factors and pieces of information that should be understood in order to grasp the whole story: the Wiley family history, Genie’s recovery after she was found, the Rh Blood Factor, the Critical Period Hypothesis regarding language acquisition, and the “S” Supposition Analysis regarding the timeline of the discovery of Rh blood poisoning and the analysis of the critical period hypothesis and it being accepted in Genie’s case. Understanding the Wiley family first can shed some light to start the story.

**Genie and Her Family**

Genie’s father – Clark Wiley – His mother, Pearl, ran a brothel and gave him up as a little boy soon after his father was killed by lightning and he grew up in foster homes and orphanages. In Clark’s middle age, his mother came back into his life wanting to make up for lost time, and during that time, he grew very close to her. His mother was later killed by a drunk driver in a hit-and-run accident, and he was never the same afterwards. He grew very hateful towards the world and blamed the judicial system since they were so lenient on the drunk driver who killed his mother. He became extremely depressed and went beyond grieving and moved his family into his late mother’s two bedroom house where his family would live as slaves for the next eleven years (Rymer, 1993).

Genie’s mother – Irene Wiley – Cataracts and a detached retina caused her to be 90% blind in her left eye and completely blind in her right. Her blindness was caused when she was helping her mother with laundry and the wringer handle on the washing machine slipped and hit her in the head causing neurological damage. She was twenty years younger than her husband Clark when they got married in 1944 (Rymer, 1993).

Child #1 – Dorothy Irene Wiley – B. 06/02/1948 – Irene went into forced labor with Dorothy because she was severely beaten by Clark. Dorothy was born a healthy girl, but because of her frantic crying, Clark wrapped her in a blanket and put her in a desk drawer out in the garage and left her to die at the age of two and a half months (Rymer, 1993).

Child #2 – Robert Clark Wiley – B. 09/15/1949 – He died of Rh blood poisoning two days after his birth (Rymer, 1993).

Child #3 – John Wiley – B. 03/11/1952 – At the age of four, he was removed from his home by Clark’s mother and two years later he watched her get hit and dragged down the street by a drunk driver. John went back to live with his parents where Clark blamed him for his mother’s death. John died at the age of 58 on February 18, 2011 (Rymer, 1993).

Child #4 – Susan M. Wiley (aka “Genie”) – B. 04/18/1957 – “Genie” is a pseudonym for a child who has lived in extreme isolation. Like a genie lamp, she was contained in a controlled environment for many years and then she popped out into society. During Genie’s first twenty months of her life up to the tragic death of her grandmother, she was not forced into extreme isolation as she experienced the majority of her childhood. After the death of her grandmother, Genie and her parents moved into her late grandmother’s house and that is where the extreme case of neglect took place. Every single day for the next eleven years she lived a life that was unthinkable. She spent all of her days on an infant’s potty chair where she was strapped down by a homemade harness that was sewn by her father and she was only able to move her hands and feet. Sometimes she was forgotten about and she stayed like that all night. When she was removed from her potty chair, her dad put her in a sleeping bag that was barely big enough for her to fit in. It was essentially a straightjacket so she could not move her arms or legs. She was then placed into an infant’s crib with homemade wire mesh sides and a wire mesh top that had latches locking her inside. Her father hated noise, so there was not a working television or a radio in the house and the only noise Genie would hear would be her father swearing and yelling. There was not anything for her to listen to, so her brain was not able to grow properly because of the lack of noise stimulation. Her diet was insufficient as well. She was given occasional baby food, a little cereal, and once every now and then, a soft boiled egg. Her father would impatiently come in to her room to feed her and he literally shoved the food down her throat. Often Genie would choke on her food and throw it up. If she did throw up, he would rub her face in it while screaming at her. Occasionally her hunger would get so bad that she would yell sounds from her potty chair because she needed to be fed. Her father would then charge in the room and beat her with a wooden stick that was conveniently propped up against the wall in her room. She learned to never make a sound (Rymer, 1993).

**The Discovery of Genie**

The case of the authorities finding Genie was actually a mistake brought on by her mother. Three weeks before Genie was found, Irene left her abusive marriage and went to live with her parents. Irene found herself, with Genie in one hand and her mother in the other, walking into a social services office when she was really wanting the services for the blind. She was not even there for Genie. The office worker immediately noticed Genie and her condition and notified her supervisor. At the age of 13, Genie had the build of a six year old child. She weighed only fifty-nine pounds and was only fifty-four inches tall. She had a hard callus around her buttocks and she nearly had two sets of teeth. She showed no perception of hot or cold. She only understood the words “red,” “blue,” “green,” “brown,” “mother,” “walk,” “go,” “door,” “jewelry box,” and “bunny.” Her productive vocabulary was limited to only “Stop it,” and “No more!” After the accidental visit to social services, a social worker paid a visit to the home and afterwards admitted Genie to a hospital for malnutrition. The puzzle was pieced together after a few more days of investigating by the authorities that led to the arrest of Genie’s parents and to the permanent removal of Genie from her home and into a recovery hospital for children (Rymer, 1993).

**The Treatment of Genie**

She was brought into Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles on November 25, 1970. Genie grabbed the attention of every scientist, psychologist, psychiatrist, and social worker in the world. Genie’s isolation case was a special one to them and they had never seen a case so severe. There were mixed emotions from many scientists as to what was going to be the best treatment for Genie. There was a prolonged meeting with the people in charge at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The meeting regarded whether or not they should proceed with testing or be concerned for Genie’s personal welfare and recovery. Fortunately for the doctors, a film was brought to theatres regarding a feral child who had a lot of the same characteristics and demeanor as Genie. The movie, *The Wild Child,* was about a boy named Victor. He was found in 1800, and he was treated by a young physician, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who worked with the young boy for five years. It was through his research that inspired the doctors in Genie’s case. It was very important for scientists to be able to build their own research and hypotheses off of Genie’s situation. For years, it seemed like a selfish act for many because they were more concerned about their research and what they could learn as opposed to Genie’s welfare. That was not all together true for some like Susan Curtiss and the Rigler family who took her in and worked with her on a linguistic, cognitive, and personal level. They grew to love Genie only to be shut out of her life in the end. After many trials and tribulations, Genie went through about five different foster homes and hospitals before her final place that she currently resides at and continues to remain anonymous (Rymer, 1993).

**Critical Period Hypothesis**

The Critical Period Hypothesis states that the first few years of life are crucial time to first-language acquisition if presented with adequate stimuli. If language input does not occur until after the child has reached puberty, he or she will never achieve a full command of language, especially grammatical systems or syntax (Lenneberg, 1967). In linguistics, syntax is the set of rules, principles, and processes that govern the structure of sentences in a given language. Lenneberg states that there are maturational constraints on the time a first language can be acquired. In his “critical period” hypothesis, Lenneberg tied the “critical period” to the lateralization of language (localization of language to one hemisphere of the brain). First language acquisition relies on neuroplasticity.Neuroplasticity, also known as brain plasticity, is an umbrella term that encompasses both synaptic plasticity and non-synaptic plasticity. It refers to changes in neural pathways and synapses due to changes in behavior, environment, neural processes, thinking, and emotions. Lenneberg also states thatif language acquisition does not occur by puberty, some aspects of language can be learned but full mastery cannot be achieved (Lenneberg, 1967). According to Susan Curtiss, a linguistic psychologist and professor at UCLA, Lenneberg’s hypothesis was proven correct and that Genie missed her acquisition window of acquiring a first language. Therefore, this was the reason why she was unable to learn proper grammar. Genie was able to learn many vocabulary words, but she was unable to put sentences together, or in scientific words, learn syntax. Even though a person could figure out what she was trying to say, her sentences were not grammatically correct. The majority of Genie’s progress was within the first year and a half of her hospitalization and working with other doctors in the linguistic field of study. The progression of her vocabulary slowed down to a crawl. Eventually, Genie became mute and resorted more to sign language for her main form of communication.

**Rh Blood Factor**

Rh blood poisoning is when the mother’s blood is not compatible with the blood of a fetus. There are several symptoms that can occur with the fetus. Most conditions that occur are poor brain development, learning disabilities, epilepsy, spina bifida, cerebral palsy, and still-born birth (Gravelle, 1990). Genie was given a blood transfusion soon after birth. Unfortunately for Genie, she was born ten years too early to be given the proper anti-D antigen serum. After the discovery of the Rh factor in 1940, it did not get a public mention until 1947. It took a little more than twenty years for scientists to provide a proper antigen serum to fight against and prevent Rh blood poisoning. The first year for successful public trials was 1968. Today, Rh blood poisoning is no longer a threat because doctors can diagnose the problem early during pregnancy (Bakalar, 2011). A possible hypothesis could very well be that Genie was born with a brain defect because of having Rh blood poisoning at birth. Was her blood transfusion effective at all to prevent any damage to her brain after birth since the antigen serum wasn’t brought forth until 1968? Could it be possible that Genie had a cognitive development disorder or that she could have been mentally handicapped from birth? These factors could have played a big role in Genie’s poor language development after she was discovered at the age of thirteen. Because of these factors, is it possible that Eric Lenneberg’s “Critical Period Hypothesis” of language might not have been totally proven correct?

**“S” Supposition Analysis**

The “S” Supposition Analysis can be easily defined as “Sanderson’s supposed analysis.” It was told to me personally by Susan Curtiss that Eric H. Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis was accepted in Genie’s case. According to Curtiss, Genie was reported by her mother to have begun to speak words close to the time she was confined (20 months), and then to have stopped shortly after her confinement. Curtiss also believed that in the mother’s report that Genie had started to speak words before her confinement, if true, would be strong evidence against a diagnosis of mental retardation for Genie, since no mentally retarded child begins to talk at the age of 20 months. The key words here are, “if true.” Even if Irene Wiley’s documented testimony still exists, how can a scientist accept a hypothesis off of mere speculation when there is no certainty that Irene Wiley was telling the truth in the first place? With Irene’s psychological issues, blindness, and allowing her child to be isolated, starved, and beaten for more than eleven years, it could be hard to accept anything that she says to be completely true. However, I am not rejecting what Susan Curtiss accepted to be true off of merely analyzing Irene Wiley’s capabilities. I can possibly suppose that Lenneberg’s hypothesis was not accepted or rejected by Genie’s case. How could Genie’s case accept Lenneberg’s hypothesis when perhaps Genie was born with Rh blood poisoning before the proper anti-D serum was introduced to the public for hospital trials? It was said that Genie was given a blood transfusion after her birth in 1957. The blood transfusions given before 1968 could not guarantee that the child would not be born with a birth defect. A blood transfusion given after birth could not be 100% because the child has gone full term in utero, and the mother’s antibodies had been given plenty of time to attack the red blood cells of the unborn baby, which could result in hemolytic disease. It was not until 1968 when mothers could be tested during a certain period in their pregnancy and then given the proper serum to help prevent harmful antibodies from occurring to damage the unborn child. The possibility of Genie being born with a mental handicap cannot be ruled out due to the timeline of Rh blood poisoning’s discovery and when the proper serum was available. Therefore, it is a possibility that Lenneberg’s hypothesis cannot be accepted in the case of Genie.

The story of Genie is a tragedy to say the least. There is no practical reason that can excuse her father for his actions and how he treated Genie and the rest of his family. There are many psychological factors that are involved that can cause individuals like Clark Wiley to react upon impulse and brutalize the innocence of children. It makes a person wonder just how many other cases out there are like Genie’s case that are not recognized or even discovered. The reality of these extreme cases of child neglect and abandonment are very real and should be taken seriously. However tragic Genie’s case may be, it was a miracle that she was found and taken out of her abusive childhood home. The possibility that Genie had a mental handicap from birth cannot be ruled out due to her diagnosis of Rh blood poisoning. It was told by more than one doctor that she was, in their words, “retarded from birth” (Garmon, 1994). As for Genie’s case, it is a possibility that Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis could not have been accepted because of Genie’s cognitive disability that began at her birth from being born with Rh blood poisoning. Ultimately, what would have been the best treatment for Genie? It could be easy for a researcher to think that most of the doctors were more concerned about themselves and what they were able to learn scientifically than Genie’s personal welfare. What are the rewards and what are the risks for conducting these experiments on feral children at a certain age? All feral children should be psychologically evaluated and their whole past should be internally studied before any further testing be permitted. Sometimes what doctors think they can learn can backfire at the cost of a child’s rehabilitation. In Genie’s case, it appeared she was smothered by testing, and she possibly did not have the opportunity to settle with one person or family and make that solid connection in order to heal properly from her past.

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