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A Boy Broken- A Reflective Essay

Throughout the exploration of the sociology of mental disorders we have read the textbook by William Cockerham that depicts a research based writing that delves into mental disorders in a predominantly clinical and academic tone. The book, *A Boy Unbroken* by Douglas Engelman takes a much more personal look into the life and story of not just an individual who is struggling with a mental disorder, but at the support of their family and the effect it has on the rest of their lives. *A Boy Unbroken* seeks to educate and aid those who are struggling with mental disorders and their caretakers by letting them into the world of Douglas Engelman and his son, Douglas Jr., as he is diagnosed and treated for schizophrenia. There are many components of this book and the writing style of Dr. Engelman which contributes to such a moving and emotional journey. The switch in the tone between sociological thinking and education, to the emotional toil of his own family, the emphasis that is placed on the caregivers, and the descriptive emotional nature of the book make it an amazing depiction of mental health and the impact that it has on the people around those affected.

Those who have experience with sociology and mental disorders in a research or academic setting can take away skills and knowledge about how to treat those who have been diagnosed with mental disorders. However, I don't think that many people have that educational background. Books like *A Boy Broken* are incredibly useful tools that aid in understanding and can be helpful to those who are struggling. While Dr. Engelman focuses on the emotional and personal side of his story, he also includes aspects that are more clinical. When introducing the idea of stigma, Dr. Engelman talks about labeling theory and how it relates to social norms from a sociological perspective. This can help to gain insight about how outside individuals may react

to someone with a mental disorder and how deeply integrated this social stigma is within our society. This stigma also radiates to the family of those who are mentally ill which is incredibly hard to deal with. Additionally, when talking about perceptions of those who have mental disorders there is a degree of fear that they might act violently. Dr. Engelman also breaks this down in the book. Engelman states that “ a very small number of individuals found to be severely mentally ill commit any violent acts in a year’s time” (Engelman, 2023, p. 34). This depicts the difference between reality and stigma. While individuals may believe that those with mental disorders may act violently, in research, this is uncommon. This stereotype of those with mental disorders as violent individuals can prevent them from getting the treatment and the support that they need. Even Dr. Engelman in the book, talks about how he and his wife Wendy, were apprehensive to have his son around their smaller children. I also grew up with this stereotype that those who are struggling with mental disorders can be violent and that I need to be cautious around them. However, there are many factors that contribute to violence and there needs to be a change in this mindset. Through my classes I know I have learned to think differently and this book can help others to broaden their understanding too. If this stigma continues, it takes away opportunities for those who are struggling with mental disorders to return to normal life and be around the people that they love and who love them.

It takes a great amount of strength to write about someone who is struggling with mental health as their life is full of difficulties and it is hard to let people in when you are struggling. I have read books in the past where those who are struggling with mental disorders tell their story and their experiences. However, this is the first story I have read from the perspective of the caregiver. Caregivers are incredibly important and their stories often get overlooked. Reading about everything that Dr. Engelman went through to provide for his son and help him get better,

and the mental and emotional effect that it must have had on him was very impactful for me. Dr. Engelman talks about the deep relationships that can develop when caring for family, but it also takes an emotional toll. As a caregiver, you are responsible for pushing them to go to treatment and trying to maintain consistency within their life. It can produce some trying moments especially if someone does not want to be treated or is completely unaware of the way that they are acting. In the book, Dr. Engelman talks about making sure that Doug Jr, is taking his medicine and checking in with him about going to the therapy sessions. My mom constantly has to check in with my grandmother to make sure that she stays consistent with taking her medicine and making sure that she goes to her appointments. I can see the way that it wears on her. If my grandmother does not take her medicine, I can see how it stresses my mom out and how she worries for her mom. It is especially difficult when someone has no experience caring for someone in that capacity. It is a constant learning curve and often families and individuals turn to resources like the internet and books to learn. Books like *A Boy Broken* can provide support and community, letting readers know that there are people out there who have made this commitment and are going through this journey. I knew from the start of the book that it would focus on the caregiving of Doug Jr., but the reality was so much more impactful and emotional due to their close relationship.

Dr. Engelman opens the book with the life changing moment where he receives the phone call letting him know that his son has died. This sets the emotional tone for the rest of the book as truthful, open, and intense. Dr. Engelman does not shy away from the harsh reality that he and his family went through and I think it's incredibly impressive to be able to express this story and not shy away from any of the reality or the missteps. Throughout the book, Engelman retells various defining moments that he remembers with his son as he got diagnosed and treated for

schizophrenia. For example, in the first chapter, he talks about the moment where Doug Jr. told him about his hallucinations for the first time after having a psychotic break, and how Dr. Engelman was “overcome with fear and confusion” and a “need to understand what is going on” with his son (Engelman, 2023, p. 9). This display of emotions, the confusion, and the need for clarity are so important for so many people who go through this discovery. Especially when it comes to mental disorders like schizophrenia which have such extreme symptoms like hallucinations or when the diagnosis feels out of character, there are often feelings of confusion. I have people in my life who, when they began to experience symptoms of mental disorders, my family did not know what to do and did not know how to feel or react. Later in the book when Doug Jr. disappears from the Madden group home, Dr. Engelman talks about the worry that he feels for his son and the guilt that he feels for denying Doug Jr. a place to stay earlier in the chapter, and driving him back to Madden where he eventually leaves without telling anyone. He employs this “tough love” throughout the book in an effort to get Doug Jr. to go to treatment and take his medication, but there are doubts about making the right choices. Many parents struggle with the worry about making the right choices for their children. I imagine it is so much worse when your decisions have such an impact on your child’s mental health and overall wellbeing. I know my family has worried about how to treat the mental health issues in my family. They worry about what treatment would work the best and how they can be supportive and accepting too. One of the moments that also stuck out to me emotionally was the chapter on shame and stigma. Even as the world progresses, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding mental disorders. Dr. Engelman talks about how he would tell his neighbors and friends a version of his son, leaving out the mention of his mental health and struggles. He encompasses this internal struggle of shame and stigma when he says “I was torn between the need to focus on him, support and

love him, and at the same time hide him from friends and family” (Engelman, 2023, p. 39).

Having depictions like these that showcase the variety of emotions that one goes through is so important for those who can relate to this book. It made me sad that there are so many people who can relate to the shame and that there is still a barrier surrounding conversations about mental health. These are just a few of the many examples of high emotion events where Dr. Engelman does not shy away from telling the truth, which contributes to the impact of the writing and his story. I cannot imagine what any of this felt like as I have never had these experiences to this degree, but Dr. Engelman does a great job of taking us along with him.

Overall, I have never read a book like this. It draws you into the journey of Dr. Engelman and his son and their journey along with the rest of the family through mental health struggles. It goes into the symptoms specifically of schizophrenia which traditionally has a more negative sociological impact compared to other mental disorders. Dr. Engelman's writing also touches on the academic and sociological side while focusing on the personal relationships and emotional component to give hard research on the studies being done around mental disorders. Additionally, all of the descriptive and emotional moments, and the emphasis on the caregiver and their journey accumulate into a book that draws you in and helps individuals feel seen.

Engelman, D. J. (2023). *A Boy Broken: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Mental Illness, Loss, and a Search for Meaning*. Kindle Direct.