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Sociology of Mental Disorder

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*A Boy Broken Reflection*

*A Boy Broken* is such a powerful story that raised many emotions in me throughout the reading, and can help so many people in many different ways. While reading the book, I cried, I felt happy, I felt so much love from parent to child, and I also felt angry at times. I was angry that some people were taking advantage of Doug's vulnerable state during his time at Madden. I was sad so many times throughout the book, such as when Doug showed up to his dad's house scared that he was going to be harmed because people thought he was gay, when he lived on the streets for a couple of weeks, when he got in a car accident, and also when reading about Melissa's story. I was so heart-warmed by the love that you had for your family and how much support you gave to Doug over the years, as well as the note you wrote him many years after his death. I was joyous when he was doing so well for himself, progressing, getting jobs, hanging out with his friends, and making a connection with Abby. This book was an emotional roller coaster, and there are so many benefits that this book will have as more people read it. This book is a big step in reducing stigma around mental disorders, and it can be a guide to help family members of people diagnosed with one to get through the process.

The book talks about how the goal is to help people in similar situations, such as family members of people with mental disorders. I think that this book has the potential to not only help family members and loved ones of people with mental disorders, but can also help anybody who reads it, having any sort of connection to mental disorders or none at all, because it can give

them insight into the misconceptions that people have about mental disorders and how people with them can act, as well as discussing the severe stigma that surrounds mental health and affects so many people with connections to mental disorders. Teaching people about how the stigma can affect family members of people with mental disorders, as well as the people with the disorder themselves, is really important because it is a step in the right direction to get rid of the stigma.

This book helped me to understand the mental disorder of schizophrenia better as a whole, which is really important. I think this could be one of the most powerful outcomes of this book in reducing the stigma around schizophrenia, specifically. Before reading this book, I knew what schizophrenia was and the symptoms of it from learning about it in class, but I still had my misconceptions about it. Society's view of schizophrenia is with fear because people think that someone with schizophrenia may harm them. This comes down to society being afraid of the unknown, because people aren't informed about schizophrenia and how it affects people with it. I am guilty of these views and being afraid of perceived schizophrenic people. Reading this book, though, showed me that I have misconceptions. Following Doug's journey was eye-opening because Doug was not this scary character who was constantly talking to himself and being violent, instead, he was a neat young man who was trying to get by, made friends with some people on the street, had many times when he was really trying to make good of himself and do better as well as get better, and loved his family. I now know how skewed our views are about people with schizophrenia, and I will never again have preconceived notions about people with schizophrenia, or any mental disorder for that matter. I think, and hope, that many of the people who read this book will also become enlightened on the subject and will look at

schizophrenia in a new way, which is such a big step to breaking down the stigma surrounding schizophrenia and mental disorders as a whole.

You talk about how the goal of this book is to help anyone, and you put emphasis on helping people in a similar situation to you to get through these uncertain times. I am hopeful that this book will achieve its goal because I think readers in similar situations to what you went through will find the book so helpful in getting them through their journey and staying supportive of their child or loved one with a mental disorder, and knowing that it is a roller coaster and not to give up on the disordered person. I think it will be similar to, but also go beyond, how the book *Surviving Schizophrenia* helped you out a lot while you were having to navigate those times. Having you discuss the way that Doug progressed and then had setbacks shows that it is not just constant progress, and it will hopefully prepare other parents of children with schizophrenia and maybe other mental disorders as well for their journey, not to expect constant progress, to be ready for the setbacks, and to be supportive the whole way through.

One part of the book that I found really interesting and important was when you were discussing the grief process when it comes to finding out your child has a mental disorder, rather than the types of grief that people see as “normal,” such as the death of a child. You describe this really well in the book, detailing it as losing a child in a different way, not to death but to a mental illness because “the disease alters the child they once knew”(Engelman, 2023). There are so many reasons why the grief process for this situation is much different from the process when it comes to a death. The stigma surrounding mental illness causes the loved ones of people with mental illness to usually keep the knowledge of the illness to themselves, which, in turn, is harmful to the grief process because it doesn’t allow everyone else to give support to the grieving people. Mental disorders are not linear processes, and they have many ups and downs, with

progress and setbacks throughout the journey. The family has to adjust to the reality that they are facing, where their child may not be set for the future they once thought, and the constant changes and challenges that the child faces over time make the grieving process much longer-term. I think that it is really important and helpful that you discuss this in the book and even state that, “often, our experience of loss and grief is not recognized or validated by society. The loss of a child to a diagnosis of mental illness, and the life-course trajectory it frequently predicts, is not understood by society in the same way as the death of a child”(Engelman, 2023). Parents who are going through this and read this book can be warned, in a way, that this is a phenomenon that happens, and they can be more expecting for it. I also think that this part of the book can really help a parent who is experiencing this because they can learn that keeping the mental illness a secret can impede on their grieving process, so they may be more inclined to tell people around them, which can be helpful to their grief because they are getting the support they need from others in the time when it is needed. As people who aren’t going through this experience also read this book, it can be so helpful to change the way that society defines grief-worthy situations, and it will hopefully make readers realize that people going through this are not getting the same reaction and support to their situation and grief as people who are experiencing the death of a loved one. This book can bring insight to readers to deeply support people who are experiencing the loss of a loved one to mental illness and hopefully create change so that, over time, more and more support and recognition are given to people going through this unique loss.

This book made me think about what I have heard regarding schizophrenia experiences in different cultures, because seeing how Doug’s voices were distressing and harmful is significantly different from those of these other cultures, and that can’t simply be a coincidence.

That is why I brought in further research, along with the evidence from the book, to figure out how the schizophrenia experiences are different across cultures and societies. Anthropologist Tanya Luhmann studied how schizophrenia affects people in Africa, India, and the United States. She interviewed people from each culture and found very interesting results. All of the respondents heard voices, but the voices in the West were vastly different compared to those of the Eastern cultures. Many of the people from India described the voices as family members, spirits, or even playful and entertaining. The people interviewed from Africa described the voices as good and having positive experiences with the voices. Very few people in these cultures describe schizophrenia and the voices as a brain disease or medical or psychiatric problem. The researchers found that religion didn't play a factor in the voices; rather, "the difference seems to be that the Chennai (India) and Accra (Ghana) participants were more comfortable interpreting their voices as relationships and not as the sign of a violated mind"(Parker, 2014). The way that schizophrenia is seen and treated in a culture can have a big effect on how patients with schizophrenia experience voices. This is demonstrated in this study by how voices are heard in African and Indian cultures compared to America, where the voices are violent and hateful. The research found that not one American described having positive experiences with their voices (Parker, 2014). Americans didn't know who the voices were that spoke to them, and many of them had really gruesome experiences with the voices. Americans see themselves as having a disease, and the voices are a symptom of that.

This is really important to connect to the book because in Doug's first psychotic break, he was talking about people dying, as well as when he was in the car with his dad, having a moment where he was bent over in severe pain. This is because the people he was hallucinating were hurting him as he was saying, "they can put their hands inside me," and, "stop them Dad, please

make them stop”(Engelman, 2023). This is similar to how the Americans in Luhrmann’s research described their voices, ““like torturing people, to take their eye out with a fork, or cut someone’s head and drink their blood, really nasty stuff.” Other Americans (five of them) even spoke of their voices as a call to battle or war – ““the warfare of everyone just yelling””(Parker, 2014). I think that this all comes back to how schizophrenia is seen and treated in the United States, and how, if we change the way it is viewed, we could change the experiences that patients of schizophrenia have with their hallucinations and voices. We could stop treating it like it is a brain disease and a very negative thing in society, as well as changing how therapists talk with the patients because, “one new approach claims it is possible to improve individuals’ relationships with their voices by teaching them to name their voices and to build relationships with them, and that doing so diminishes their caustic qualities”(Parker, 2014). Luhrmann discusses how violent and negative voices are not a certain symptom of schizophrenia; instead, this can be changed and helped with the reshaping of societal views.

In the end, it all comes back down to the stigma around schizophrenia and mental disorders. Stigma has such a big influence on how people with mental disorders and their loved ones go through their journeys. Stigma is so negative to how people are treated, how they are viewed, their grieving processes, and how or if they seek help. Shown in the study by Tanya Luhrmann, schizophrenia is experienced in a much lighter and nicer way in Africa and India than it is experienced in the United States because of the societal views on the disorder. Stigma plays such a big part in the experiences of people with mental disorders and their loved ones as well, and this book can help start to break down the stigma and create a better environment, as well as a better societal view on schizophrenia, and make the experiences of people with mental disorders better, because even a small positive change is a good one.

## References

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