“GENIE”: THE FERAL CHILD

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First: A History Lesson

- Feral child refers to a child that has been raised outside of human contact – or in the “wild”.
- Romulus and Remus – The founder of Rome and his brother were thought to be raised by wolves.
- Victor – the wild child from France
- Because of these myths of feral children and proven examples, research on nature vs nurture became important: two major studies

https://youtu.be/cymZq1VblU0?t=13m28s
Irene Wiley

- Born around 1920.
- Originally from Altus, Oklahoma, primarily raised by family friends and father.
- Mother was stern and unloving.
- While doing laundry with an old-fashioned wringer washing machine, the crank slipped and hit Irene in the head, causing neurological damage and eventually would cause almost total blindness.
- Dust bowl forced her family to seek work in California, but the family was struggling worse than before due to the great depression.
- She met and married Clark Wiley for financial stability.
Clark Wiley

- Born in March 29th, 1901.
- Clark grew up in the pacific northwest.
- His mother was barely around and was said to have run a brothel.
- He was described mentally unstable.
- When he met Irene, he was unemployed but soon found a job as a machinist during WWII where he made a decent amount of money.
- Clark controlled Irene in her daily life at first, and was extremely overprotective.
- Clark was also known to never want children. He thought they were too noisy.
- Irene would later say that her life came to an end on her wedding day.
First Child: Dorothy Wiley

- Irene became pregnant with her and Clark’s first child 5 years into their marriage.
- Late into the pregnancy Clark beat her severely, resulting in her being hospitalized.
- While hospitalized, she went into labor and gave birth to a healthy girl.
- Dorothy Wiley was born June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1948.
- At 2 months old, Dorothy was wrapped in a blanket and put in the garage due to her crying, and later died.
- Cause of death was suspected to be exposure, but exact cause wasn’t determined.
Second Child: Robert Wiley

- Clark and Irene’s second child, Robert Wiley, was born on September 15th, 1949.
- Robert died days later.
- Some sources say his death was due to Rh blood poisoning due to the parents’ incompatibility.
- Others say he died choking on his own mucus, and was thought to have been Clark’s fault.
Third Child: John Wiley

- Their third child, John Wiley, was born on March 11th, 1952 (February, 2011).
- Was slow to develop due to severe neglect early in childhood.
- He was said to have been slow to walk and was not toilet trained by age 3.
- Clarks grandmother took John in for several months to get him to the developmental stages he should be at by his age (4 at this time).
- John would develop into a normal child and adult.
Fourth Child: Susan Wiley

- Better known as Genie (given to her by Susan Curtiss to protect her identity at the time).
- Born April 18th 1957.
- She also had Rh poisoning but had a blood transfusion.
- First medical exam reports state that she was “slow” and a “retarded little girl with kernicterus” – condition from botched blood transfusion causing brain damage.
- Clark took the doctor’s word to mean that she was extremely disabled and that she needed to be sheltered from the world.
Death of Clark’s Mother – The Start of It All

- Clark was extremely close with his mother.
- Irene referred to her as a pest. “....never became more than a secondary allegiance in his life.”
- She was involved in a violent hit and run while taking John to get ice cream, was dragged down the street, and was almost unrecognizable by the time Clark arrived at the hospital.
- The driver of the car, a drunk teenager, only received probation.
- Angry and depressed over the teen’s sentence and his mother’s death, Clark felt the world didn’t matter and he plunged him and his family into isolation.
The Wiley Household

- He moved the family into his mother’s two bedroom home in Temple City, CA.
- He left his mother’s bedroom as a shrine and forced the rest of the family to sleep in the living room – except for Genie.
- Because of Clark’s hatred of noise, any conversation was kept to a low volume – with an exception of Clark’s fits of cursing rage.
- John was only allowed to leave the house for school and to play with a neighbor, but was otherwise held hostage.
- Because of Irene’s partial blindness and developing cataracts, she was completely dependent on her husband.
- Clark threatened the life of John, Irene, and her family if anyone were to tell anyone about Genie.
Genie’s Room

- Genie was the only one in the house with her own bedroom.
- Clark said he did this so the world wouldn’t take advantage or exploit her.
- Her room was located next to the bathroom.
  - It was thought that the only auditory stimulation she had were the sounds coming from the bathroom and an occasional airplane flying overhead.
- Room contained only a crib, a toilet training chair, and a rain coat that hung up on the wall.
- She was left harnessed into the chair during the day and could only move her hands, fingers, feet, and toes.
- At night she was put in a straitjacket-like sleeping bag and put into a cage-like crib covered in chicken wire.
Clark told the family to keep their distance from Genie and to not interact with her.

If she would attempt to get attention by making noise, Clark would beat her until she stopped. She learned to keep silent and to suppress vocalization entirely.

Clark would keep the wooden board he beat her with in the room with her.

Her “toys” included a rain coat, parts of the TV guide, empty food containers, and empty thread spools. Plastic material would later become very important to her.

The “toys”, floor, harness, and her own body were said to be her only sources of tactile and visual stimulation for 10 years.

Only given baby food, cereals and sometimes a soft-boiled egg. She was fed quickly to limit contact with her.

If she were to spit up the food or choke, her face would be rubbed in it.
The Discovery of Genie

- Irene took Genie and left her husband in October, 1970 to live with her parents nearby.
- 90% blind in one eye, 100% in the other due to cataracts and the earlier injury.
- Irene (with Genie) went to the welfare office seeking the services for the blind office, and instead walked into social services.
- A worker had noticed Genie and described her as a “small withered girl with a halting gait and a curious posture – unnaturally stooped, hands held up as though resting on an invisible rail.” – the “bunny walk”
- The worker reported this to her supervisor, thinking the girl was an unreported case of autism.
- She estimated Genie to be 6-7 years old, when she was actually 13.
Initial Investigation

- Police soon took Genie to the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles for treatment of extreme malnutrition.
- Irene and Clark Wiley were arrested for child abuse.
- Upon examination at 13 years old:
  - Weighed 59lbs and 54in tall (4.5 ft) – Avg 13yr weighs 100lb and is approx. 5ft tall.
  - Incontinent
  - No solid food, barley could swallow
  - Couldn’t focus past 12 feet
  - Could not cry
  - Constant salivation, spat indirectly
  - Hard callus around her bottom
  - Two nearly complete sets of teeth
  - Couldn’t fully extend her limbs
  - No perception of heat or cold
- Understood “blue” “red” “green” “brown” “mother” “walk” “go” “door”
- Only could say the words “Stopit” and “Nomore”
- Terrified of dogs.
Clark’s Death

- November 20th, 1970, the morning of Clark and Irene’s court appearance.
- Clark committed suicide at the age of 70.
- He wrote two notes:
  - First, to the police telling them John was out playing in the yard and doesn’t know what’s about to happen.
  - Second, a letter for John only. It said: “Don’t take that shirt back. It’s for my funeral. You know where my blue shirt is. Underwear in hall closet. I love you. Goodbye and be good. –Dad”
- All he wrote to anyone else was, “The world will never understand”.
The Publicity of Genie’s Story

- Genie’s story got as much attention as the Charles Manson murder trials, the My Lai Massacre soldier acquittals, the bombing of Hanoi, and Ronald Regan’s policies.
- Genie’s story was so interesting that the National Institution for Mental Health (NIMH) funded a research team that consisted primarily of James Kent, Susan Curtiss, Jay Shurley, and David Rigler.
- Susan was a linguistics graduate student at UCLA.
- James was an expert on child abuse.
- Jay was an expert on social isolation.
- David was a psychologist at the Children’s Hospital.
- All cared about Genie and wanted her to be introduced to the world around her, as well as collect as much information about her as possible.
Kent’s Assessment

- Kent first met with Genie in the Children’s Hospital where he noticed she was extremely curious of different sounds and objects.
- Kent also noticed that she had the motor skills of a two-year-old, and found that most of her dexterity was in her finger tips.
- Although Kent thought her progress would be promising, he noted that she was the worst case of child abuse he had ever seen in his life. – Even worse than a deaf child who grew up with a cult of ritualistic murderers and prostitutes, who he considered a “normal” child compared to Genie.
- She would also scratch at things, tear paper, or scowl. She would become angry and scratch at her face, violently blow her nose into her clothes, and even urinate.
- Through all her anger she never made a sound or projected her anger outward.

https://youtu.be/pz7Ly08hJmk?t=3m19s
Jay Shurley

- “You cannot achieve sensory isolation without social isolation... For an intact, developed human being, the richest source of sensory contact is input from a fellow human being.”

- He noticed Genie acted like a blind child.
  - *Held objects and peoples’ hands to her face*
  - “*Bunny walk*” – *hands out in front – is what people do when they do not entirely believe their eyes.*

- Shurley monitored Genie’s brain with electrodes while she slept to see if there was a reason to do research on Genie in the first place.

- If Genie was mentally retarded she wouldn’t be a good case for cognitive development.
Within her first days at the Children’s Hospital, Genie had already begun to help herself get dressed in the morning. She was also voluntarily using the toilet, although her incontinence persisted.

After two weeks, she was ready for the outside world and was introduced to the hospital’s rehabilitation center, which had a yard and a play area that she was free to roam in.

“While the other children learned creative discipline, she learned freedom.”

She discovered for herself that if she dropped or even broke something, she was not punished – she was encouraged to repeat the action. Kent said this was her most sustained reaction and it made her laugh and smile.

Some hospital staff were worried that Genie might take the encouragement too far and become destructive, but Kent assured them that Genie’s actions were “attempts at active mastery of formerly traumatic situations.”

Genie was also learning to express her anger outward by hitting, throwing objects, or using other objects to make noises she could not make. This was seen as a development in outward expression.

Developed a sense of self – she got angry when she saw another girl wearing the dress she had worn the previous day.
Genie’s Social Progress

- Genie was developing a sense of possession – hoarding books, cups, or anything plastic.
- She would take daily walks with Kent or trips to the park to expose her to the outside world.
- Genie was curious about Kent and was happy to see him when he arrived, but did not show that she distinguished him from anyone else or that she missed him in his absence.
- After a month of walks and trips to the park, Genie was starting to show a distinct expression when Kent would leave her, and after another month, she grabbed his hand to stop him from leaving.
- From then on, she would grab him and have him sit beside her whenever it was time for him to go.
- Researchers also noticed she formed more attachments with adult men (didn’t care for other children), especially with beards.
- Made many attachments to other hospital workers: Jean Butler “Miss Butler” or “Mibbi”, the handyman, and a couple of the cooks.
- During an earthquake, Genie had run into the kitchen and turned to one of the cooks. The cook said she began verbalizing so profusely that if there had been one more tremor she would have achieved normal speech on the spot.
Learning New Words

- Most of Genie’s curiosity was for naming objects and things around her. She would become angry if someone didn’t immediately name an object she pointed to.

- She was taking in more information than her brain could produce.

- Making incredible progress!
  - A boy was holding two balloons and when asked how many balloons he had, he said “three”. Genie looked startled, and gave him another balloon for his answer to be correct.
  - Gaining a year of development every few months.

- “She was not retarded, it was clear as day... her lights were on”.

- Genie was more confident, more assertive in her seeking of knowledge and words, and loved horseplay – her favorite being when someone would pretend to drop her.

- Curtiss said that Genie will be the one to prove the critical period theory incorrect.

https://youtu.be/pz7Ly08hJmk?t=9m17s
Genie and Curtiss

- Up until this point in time, Curtiss had only seen Genie though the video tapes from Kent and Shurley.
- Curtiss and Genie developed a close attachment.
- Genie was starting to develop a conversation-like communication, but using very little words and mostly non-verbal communication.
- Curtiss began to spend her all of her time with Genie, even described as obsessed.
Jean Butler vs. Team Genie

- Genie began taking trips to Butler’s home, who was one of her teachers at the rehab center.
- Genie then began living there when a German Measles outbreak started to spread.
- Curtiss, Kent, and Dr. Rigler (another researcher), made frequent visits to the Butler home to document Genie’s progress.
- Butler wanted to be the next Anne Sullivan.
- Butler wrote in her journal about Curtiss, “…she followed the child and hovered over her most of the day. She had a notebook handy and discussed Genie’s speech and lack of it and her eating habits in a critical manner in front of her.”
- Genie developed a fondness for masturbation around this time and was unaware of modesty. Kent encouraged the behavior (according to Butler) because he didn’t want to confine her, which he later denied.
- Arguments soon erupted between the researchers and Butler, to which Sue Omansky from the Department of Public Social Services expressed her concerns on Genie’s use as a guinea pig and thought the researchers were using her to gain fame.
- Sue was ultimately, by law, her guardian. It was her job to find a suitable home for Genie instead of the hospital setting.
- Rigler, who had previously witnessed the extreme terror Genie had towards dogs, brought a Golden Retriever puppy to the home around 8pm. He led Genie outside and had his wife place the 10-12 week old puppy on the lawn. Genie then ran back into the house, slammed the door, and watched the dog through the window.
- After the Riglers left, Genie stayed in bed for two hours, frequently used the bathroom (a sign of fear for her), and repeated “No dog” “Scared” into the early morning hours.
Removal from Butler’s Home

- Under the care of Jean Butler, Genie had shown remarkable improvements.
- Despite her still underdeveloped language, she was developing into a normal child.
- Genie was wetting the bed less often, saying “yes” to appropriate questions, and was able to verbally announce she was angry by saying “angry” and expressing her anger by hitting a large plastic inflatable clown. – verbalizing her anger and saying “yes” had never been achieved before.
- Butler wanted to be Genie’s foster mother more than anything else and applied to be her foster parent.
- Rigler, because of Butler’s lack of cooperation with the research team, wrote a 10 page letter to Butler.
- In the letter, Rigler explains that although he thought Butler would be a good foster mother, the financial aspect of caring for Genie would be impossible, and that she should be returned to the rehab center.
- The Department of Public Social Services soon denied Butler’s application to be Genie’s foster parent, and was taken back to the rehab center. The DPSS had also made claims, after talking with the Children’s Hospital, that it was against hospital policy to put patients in homes of people that work for the hospital.
Rigler’s Home for Genie

- Rigler and his wife Marilyn told DPSS that if no other home could be found for Genie, they would take her. She ended up in the home for 4 years, even though Dr. Rigler worked for the Children’s Hospital.

- They lived in Laughlin Park, where movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Anthony Quinn, Lily Pons and Chick Corea have lived.

- Genie adjusted to the puppy over the first couple of days through exposure therapy. The dog was first exposed to Genie behind a sliding glass door, and ultimately Genie was comfortable enough to touch the dog’s tail.

- Curtiss still continued to make observations about Genie. She claimed Genie had become lazy and that she had the capabilities to form sentences, but her behavior hindered any progress.

- Curtiss also noticed that Genie began to listen to people instead of just hear them. Curtiss had been reading her stories without any indication that she was paying attention. One day her facial expressions changed with the story, and she soon began eavesdropping on others in the home while interrupting with her own comments.
Waiting for A Breakthrough

- By 1972, researchers expected to see the “explosion” of language usually seen after the two-word sentence phase during child development. The explosion never came.
- Genie was still using two to three word sentences, and often putting the words together into one. “Monday Curtiss come” turned into “Munkuh”.
- She could answer questions, but not ask them. When she was forced to, they came out: “Where is may I have a penny?” or “I where is graham cracker on top shelf?”
- Her non-verbal communication was far more advanced, with a different gesture for everything. – pleasure would be indicated by putting two of her fingers in her mouth and then rubbing them on Mrs. Rigler’s nose. She was also efficient with sign language.
- It seemed that her linguistic development had plateaued.
The Dog Finally Explained

- Genie began talking about memories of her father’s abuse and even began telling lies.
- “Father hit big stick. Father is angry.” “Father take piece wood hit. Cry.”
- It was becoming clear that she was remembering things from her past that she could now talk about.
- Since Genie’s discovery, her fear of dogs could never be explained.
- One day while flipping through a magazine, she across a picture of a wolf, and was literally frozen with fear and could not talk.
- The Rigler’s had the opportunity to talk to Irene, who had been in contact with her daughter from day one of treatment, and she explained that on the rare occasion Clark interacted with Genie, he would imitate a dog by barking and growling at her. He would also stand outside her door and bark.
- Jay Shurley explained Clark’s behavior (as quoted from the book): “‘All I can think is that it had to do with Clark’s appointing himself his daughter’s guardian’...‘he was going to protect Genie from the world, and at the same time he was punishing her with his protection. And people are often guarded by their dogs.’ He shrugged. ‘So he became a dog.’”
The research team understood the importance of not only keeping Irene up to date with Genie’s progress, but to maintain and strengthen their relationship.

Irene had the house remodeled to less resemble a prison and to look more like a home.

The Rigler’s made weekend trips with Genie to her mother’s house.

The interactions made both Irene and Genie happy, although Genie was slow to warm up at first.

Irene underwent surgery to remove her cataracts.

She could now see and wanted to see Genie for the first time in her teenage years.

Irene was shy to show emotion in front of the researchers, and pulled Genie off into another room, where she hugged her in private.

With her new sight she noticed how different she was from the researchers and while some researchers attempted to be friends with her, others did not.
NIMH Defunds Genie’s Research

- 1973, Butler was back in the picture.
- Butler was making a case against Rigler and produced evidence that Genie had been making no progress with them in recent years, even that she was declining.
- She also made claims that the Rigler’s were exaggerating the progress Genie was making, saying that what the Rigler’s said Genie had never done before their care, she had (dressing herself, setting the table, cleaning herself).
- By 1974, the National Institute for Mental Health defunded the research on Genie because of the little progress made and that “the research goals projected probably will not be realized.”
Although there was disagreements among the researchers, one thing could be agreed on: Genie needed to be part of a family and to develop a secure attachment for healthy development.

At the age of 18, Genie was moved from the Rigler’s and into the care of her mother.

Before long, Irene could not care for Genie and requested she be moved to a foster home by the East Los Angeles Regional Center for the Developmentally Disabled.

She moved from one foster home to another, with no freedom of expression or progress.

One foster parent attempted to ease Genie’s constipation through manual extraction with an ice cream stick, and left Genie so traumatized she didn’t speak for 5 months.

Another foster home punished her for vomiting, and threatened to never let Genie see her mother again – who at this time was very attached to. She refused to open her mouth to eat or speak, and was soon hospitalized.

Curtiss and Regler frequently visited Genie, and were very aware of how she was treated, and attempted to help with very little results.
Genie expressed her longing for the Rigler’s, especially Marilyn. She also said she missed her mother. With every move she would become more confused and traumatized. She felt that she was moving so often because she had been a “bad girl”. Curtiss at the time was the only constant attachment to Genie, although she focused on her language development and writing her book and dissertation at the same time. After her book *Genie* was published, Irene was upset and filed a lawsuit against Curtiss, claiming that her information was not inaccurate, but the only way she could have gotten the information was from private therapy sessions. She filed the suit against her therapist Vrinda Knapp and her supervisor Howard Hansen, Rigler, Kent, Cutriss, and Children’s Hospital for confidentiality infractions. Irene also accused the researchers of “subjecting Genie to extreme, unreasonable, and outrageous intensive testing, experimentation, and observation under conditions of duress and servitude.” Irene lost the lawsuit, as the researchers’ argument was that Genie not only enjoyed the research, but encouraged her own progress and development.
Where is Genie now?

- Despite the outcome of the lawsuit, Irene was still enraged.
- The settlement of the case was under the condition that she was not to deprive the researchers of Genie.
- Irene hid Genie away from the world, with only Jay Shurley being allowed to see her.
- Irene put her into a home for mentally retarded adults and is visited by her mother once a month.
- As of 2008, she was 51 years old. She is in psychological confinement as a ward of the state, which would be her 6th foster home.
- She is again speechless, and no one knows her current whereabouts or condition.
Discussion Questions

Are we a product of our genes or our environment? Further, is language innate or learned?

If not for her father’s abuse and isolation, do you think Genie would have led a normal life? Do you think the abuse was at fault, or her mental retardation?
Was the research on Genie ethical? Do you think the researchers saw her as a human being or as a test subject?

Did the researcher’s use her for selfish gain or to gain information to help society?

Do you think any safe guards could have been in place to prevent something like this from happening again, given that all of the progress Genie had made was ultimately erased?

Any questions for me?