An Analysis of Finding Fish by Antwone Quentin Fisher

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Abstract

Finding Fish is Antwone Fishers completed puzzle of his life. He has been able to analyze each step of his development in such a way that leaves room for further analysis. In conjunction with the class I am taking, Human Growth and Development, I have been able to provide such an analysis. I will analyze his development using what I have learned in class, reading the assigned text, as well as supplementary materials given in class.
Finding Fish is a heart wrenching memoir, and a fascinating look into the development of a man from the dregs of the child welfare system in the 60's and 70's. His Memoirs begin at the earliest stages of his development, to early childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood; including reports from the various social workers assigned to his case throughout his life. This is my analysis of his journey and the impact of his circumstances on the developmental process.

**Birth to Age 2**

Antwone Fisher became a ward of the state shortly after his birth on 08/03/1959. For the first two years of his life, he was under the care of Mrs. Nellie Strange, who was a kind woman as far as I can gather from the social workers' reports. They told of Antwone smiling a lot and boasting his love for pancakes and mashed potatoes. This adequate attention in two of the most important years for human brain development, likely contributed to his high intellect, relative resiliency, and overall success. (Berger, K.S. (2010), pg 90-91/Focken,9/10/2013) Sadly, due to the strong emotional connection forged in those first two years of his life between Antwone and Mrs. Strange, she felt it necessary to release him back into the arms of the state.

**2-10**

Upon reentry to the state child welfare system, Antwone was placed with the Pickett family. They consisted of an older black couple who had already raised most of their children, with only two left in the house, and two other foster children close to Antwone's age. Mr. Pickett was a preacher with his own church, and Mrs. Pickett worked cleaning houses part time. During this time, he was forced to cope with emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as well as neglect. Though he showed remarkable resilience, it did have an impact on his schoolwork and social life. In the sixties, when this abuse began,
researchers were only just beginning to grasp the prevalence of child maltreatment. Prior thereto, most people thought child abuse was rare and was usually perpetrated by someone the child did not know. (Berger, K.S. (2010), pg 190) Since most people weren't aware of the warning signs, and children almost never understand much less report the abuse, little Antwone's plight went mostly unnoticed.

Early on, he began to develop some of the coping skills that would help him get through his time with the Picketts. The first, was the ability to disassociate himself from what was happening. He retreated into fantasy to live in a nicer world where he was able to have some control. He also learned to re-frame situations when he was quite young, learning that his reaction to a situation was at times, the only control he could have. Throughout most of his childhood/adolescence, he maintained a hope that one day his real family would come claim him. That he would have a better life if he just held on a little longer. I believe this was a key to his resilience.

Beginning with his earliest memories, Antwone felt as though he were an “Uninvited Guest” on this planet. He suffered from a constant barrage of verbal attacks, mostly from “Mizz Pickett” (The name he was expected to call his foster mother). At this time in his development, when he was forced to rely on this woman for his sense of stability and validation, she did nothing but tear him down. This made it impossible for him to build an identity, which made him even more dependent on her, especially in his first eight years with them.

Even though the cultural norms at the time were much more lenient regarding punishment for children, the severity of the abuse would make it more than apparent quite early to Antwone that the way he was treated was neither normal nor acceptable. Even though he knew this, the combination of religious indoctrination and constant put-downs (being called “nigga”, accused of thievery, etc.), he developed a warped self-concept; understanding himself as an inherently bad person who would eventually burn in hell. This being due to the fact that when children begin to build their self-concept, it usually mirrors their perceived caregivers' interpretation of themselves. (Berger, K.S. (2010), pg 274)
While describing his early years, Antwone explains that the emotional abuse had more of an impact on him than the physical abuse. The physical abuse did have lasting effects on him. He writes that he was skittish to have anyone touch him at all, because he associated all touch with the physical abuse he suffered. Though the abuse was so far outside what might have been socially acceptable even at that time (tying the children up in the basement for hours before whipping them, literally beating them unconscious, etc.), there was no mention in the book of anyone having either reported or questioned any marks seen. As I mentioned previously, it wasn't something people paid as much attention to at that time, a black eye or a fat lip might be quickly dismissed as a result of normal little boy hijinks.

The sexual abuse began as early as he can remember, around the age of 3. The perpetrator was his babysitter, Willenda, a young woman in her twenties who lived in the neighborhood. Early on, he learns to cut down the amount of time he spends in the same room with her alone to decrease the chance of the inevitable abuse. This does effect his sexual development somewhat in that while he develops strong romantic inclinations, they do not manifest physically in any way until he is in his early twenties. Part of that may be due to his early understanding that sex can/likely will lead to another unwanted child in the world, which, for understandable reasons, was a less than palatable idea. It also added to his sense of helplessness and anger that continued to deplete his self-esteem and warp his self-image.

Throughout the duration of his time with the Picketts, he also suffered from neglect in all of it's terrible forms. The obvious one is emotional neglect in which Mizz Pickett refused Antwone all but the bare minimum of encouragement he needed to survive. She made sure that he was consistently reminded that he wasn't welcome in the house. She refused to buy him any winter clothes, toys, or anything that she might consider a luxury. She would keep the money she was given by the state for his allowance, and she even went so far as to take the money he would make doing yard work for
neighbors. The example of neglect that sticks out most to me was in his early teens when he was forced to live with a family to whom Mizz Pickett had sublet the house without Antwone's knowledge while she and Mr. Pickett went out of town for a few months. He had to fend entirely for himself during this time, and often went hungry. Another example, was the complete lack of guidance either parent gave Antwone or either of his siblings developmentally. As their bodies began to change, they were left to fend for themselves and come to their own conclusions about what was happening to their bodies.

Going into school, Antwone was happy to find an escape from Mizz Pickett, and initially did quite well. This new world quickly soured, however, when he found himself unable to make friends, and often got into fights at school. Pretty soon, his grades dropped, and he was forced to repeat the 4th grade as a result. The social climate at home was likely a direct cause of his inability to make friends/forge meaningful relationships. Understandably, this is a difficult thing to do when you can not trust even the people who are supposed to be your foundation. (Flocken, 10/1/2013)

10-13

When he entered 5th grade, he encountered a person that would change his life, at least for a short while. Her name was Brenda Proffit, his 5th grade teacher. She taught him how to interact with others in a loving, productive way, and to create friendships with the other students in the class. She was the first person in his memory to treat himself and his fellow students fairly and with respect. He began to grow some self-esteem and along with it, a sense of self, as indicated by his developing a sense of style made manifest by an Afro. This was also when his concept of romantic relationships began to change. He saw Mrs. Proffit interact with her husband in such a loving, caring way, that it struck Antwone that he'd never seen such a thing. He realized that this might be possible for himself someday. This idea was integrated into the tapestry he was weaving of what he wanted his life to be like, and gave him hope.

In 6th grade, with luck and the insistence of his classmate's parents the year prior, Mrs. Proffit
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continued as his 5th grade class's teacher. Even though he had made strides in developing self-esteem, his grades still had not shown much improvement. He would have been held back again, but Mrs. Proffit went out on a limb, and permitted him to enter the 6th grade. Through hard work, he was able to catch up, and raise his grades significantly. He began to have some hope that things could be different, and that he was capable of changing his situation. He used the analogy of an empty cup having been filled to describe the effect she'd had on his self-esteem.

13-16

Entering Junior High, he had the self-esteem, social skills, and determination to continue to do well in school, all provided by Mrs. Proffit. He became popular, and was able to maintain decent grades for the duration of junior high, despite the ongoing abuse at home. Having friends buoyed his self-esteem, and made it possible to continue the development of his identity and sense of self. Though he was finding it progressively harder to cope with the abuse at home, he drew strength from his peer group, and used them as an anchor. He was able to create a better world for himself by keeping his home life completely separate from his life at school.

Once he entered high school, the barrier he had created between the two worlds started to break down. He was forced to attend a different school than most of his friends, and his home life once again began to affect his education. Part of this was due to the separation from his friends, but mostly to his inability to compartmentalize his home life any longer and the cumulative stress from his home life. (Berger, K.S. (2010), pg 276) At this point, he described the aforementioned cup of self-esteem as having once more been emptied by Mizz Pickett. His grades began to drop once more as he sunk back into the depression that encompassed most of his childhood.

Shortly after Antwone turned 16, Mizz Pickett decided that she'd finally had enough of him,
found herself an excuse good enough to kick Antwone out, and forced him back into the care of the state. Though he was scared, he was elated at the prospect of never seeing the Picketts again. He was initially put into a boy's home which is his first encounter with racism from a white person, as he hadn't much exposure to them previously. From how he described his reaction to the experience, it left him angry and dumbfounded. From there, he opted to be moved to another boys school in Pennsylvania, which he was told housed about equal numbers of colored and white boys. Rather than just deal with the abuse, he had the self-esteem, and if nothing else, self-preservation to find a better situation for himself once it was time for him to be placed.

At his new school, he had impending adulthood to deal with. He knew that as soon as he turned 18, he was on his own. He began to set strict rules for himself including no sex, an early bed time, no smoking, alcohol or drugs, and strict organization. He fought to not only maintain good grades, but to study hard enough to pass the tests that would grant him an early high school diploma since he would be turning 18 prior to completion otherwise. I'm sure it helped that he was no longer in an abusive situation, and was given a greater degree of control over his life. In fact, he described tearing up when he received a gift basket of colognes and deodorants from the Child Welfare Office which signified his emergence into manhood.

17-18

A few months before Antwone turned 18, he graduated and formed a plan to enter adulthood. He'd decided to start by living at the YMCA in Cleveland, find a job, and save money to go to art school. This plan quickly backfired when he discovered how dangerous staying at the Y was, and ended up working as a lackey for a pimp in exchange for protection and enough money to survive. This arrangement did not last long, as he discovered just how dark the business was. Soon, he was left with no choice but to live on the streets.

He described an other worldliness of being homeless. He felt like he didn't exist. Like he wasn't
a real person, because of the way people he encountered during this time would respond or not respond to him. This wiped him out completely, and once again, he felt powerless to affect change in his life, or anything else for that matter. He lost all hope, and though he spent some nights on friends' couches, he could not feel safe. The constant attention to basic survival put a hold on his development for this time.

18-29

The cold of winter forced him to take drastic action out of self-preservation. He signed up for the Navy with it's promise of travel, but more importantly, of food and a warm place to sleep. This was where his life really started to turn around. In boot camp, he began to see himself differently. He saw that he could complete the tasks asked of him as well, if not better than the other young men. He became more successful than he ever thought possible, and he saw that this was a result of his own hard work. He finally had control over his own destiny, and he was in an environment that facilitated and acknowledged his success. He served in the navy for 19 years, during which he was able to not only grow, but flourish into a man of his own design.

In his early twenties, he was stationed in Kyushu, Sasebo, Japan, where he met his first love, and was able to form his sexual identity. She was a local, so he was only able to spend a short time with her, but this was an extremely important time. They took things slowly, and he was able to extend his understanding of himself as a person and as a man. For the first time in his life, he was able to form a trusting physical and emotional relationship with a woman. He was beginning to see that his dreams of becoming the man he wanted to be were not only reasonable, but probable. He had to end the relationship when he was stationed elsewhere, but had the emotional maturity to handle the situation healthily.
Upon completing his last tour with the Navy, he had the confidence to venture out on his own and find a life for himself as a civilian. He began as a guard at a prison in LA, then went on to be a security guard for a movie studio. Complete with friends, his own apartment, and a job that afforded him the latter. He was completely self-sufficient for the first time, and he was happy. He'd come a long way both in proximity and developmentally from the streets of Cleveland. Having constructed a more solid self-image, he had established a small life for himself.

Though he was happier than he had ever been, he began to wonder about his biological family. After a miraculously short search, he found his aunts and uncles on his father's side, who then helped him to find and finally meet his mother. He developed close relationships with his aunts and uncles, but was unable to find enough common ground to have a relationship with his mother. Finding people with whom he shared DNA meant a good deal to him, and helped him to obtain the answers to questions that had been taunting him his entire life. Now he was truly able to move on.

Before he went on the trip to meet his family, he'd told his story to his manager at the studio he was working at, in order to convince him to give him the time off for the trip. His boss was so enthralled, that he then talked to some of the producers with the company. By the time he got back from his trip, he'd had several offers for the rights to his story to make a movie. He ended up refusing them all, and writing his own screenplay, which he was paid to write by another studio. Once that was completed, he stayed on the staff, and became a full time screenplay writer. In the process, he met his wife, and fathered the child he always wanted.

In the end of the memoirs, he has become exactly the man he always wanted to be: a good husband, father, and provider. When his daughter was born, he regained his sense of wonder, and through her, he has been given back the childhood that was taken away from him. Despite everything, he has achieved self-actualization.
References


Flocken, M. (Professor) (2013 Fall). *Human Growth and Development*. Lecture conducted from Salt Lake Community College, Salt Lake City
Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on what you learned about “real life” in doing this project. How has doing this assignment changed the way you think, feel or behave in your own life or career?

Answer:
I think the most important thing I learned was that regardless of circumstance, it is possible to take control of your life, and become the person that you want to be. This assignment has changed the way I think about life in terms of my goals. Lately I have felt a little overwhelmed about life, and what I have to do to get to where I want to be. This project has made me realize that being successful means paying attention to the process as well as the goal, because you never know where you may find something useful along the way.

2. How has doing this project enhanced your understanding of developmental psychology? How will you use this information in the future?

Answer:
This project has enhanced my understanding of developmental psychology by putting all of the pieces together for me to look at. I was able to dissect the life of a man, analyze the parts, and put it back together again. I have already begun to use this information to do the same with my own life, and perhaps find some of the answers I'm looking for as well. This information will also be quite useful for future projects and psychology classes.