

# Violence on street children: Looking through Erikson's psychosocial development theory

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## Abstract

Poverty, family breakdown, neglect, abuse or abandonment, are the common triggers for children to run away or be forced to leave their homes. This is a common phenomenon across the globe. While trying to survive on the streets, the children are often re-exposed to violence. To survive on the street, they must make decisions with significant implications for life, which is not usual for a child and or adolescents. Erikson, the developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, explains development as a lifelong project, proceeding from birth to death through the eight psychological stages. It is important to understand the life stages and the distinctive characteristics that comes along. However, it is also important to understand the life stages of street children which do not always align with the theory. This article aims to depict a global picture of street children. The examples from various parts of the world regarding the reason for moving to the streets and violence that they encounter. Furthermore, this paper looks through the lens of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and describe how these experiences can shape the life stages of street children. There are stark contrasts between the parameters of the theory when compared with children with conventional settings and the children living in an unprotected environment.

**KEY WORDS:** Global health; missing stage; psychosocial development theory; street children; violence.

## Riassunto

La povertà, la disgregazione familiare, l'abuso o l'abbandono sono lo stimolo che porta i bambini a fuggire o ad essere costretti a lasciare le loro case. Questo è un fenomeno comune in tutto il mondo. Mentre cercano di sopravvivere sulla strada, i bambini spesso sono esposti di nuovo alla violenza. Per sopravvivere in strada, devono prendere delle decisioni che hanno delle implicazioni significative per la loro vita, cosa che non è usuale per un bambino e per gli adolescenti. Erikson, lo psicologo e psicoanalista dello sviluppo, spiega lo sviluppo come un progetto lungo quanto la vita, che procede dalla nascita alla morte attraverso otto stadi psicologici. E' importante comprendere le fasi della vita e le caratteristiche distintive che avvengono. Tuttavia, è anche importante comprendere le fasi della vita dei bambini di strada che non sempre si allineano con la teoria. Questo articolo ha l'obiettivo di dare un ritratto globale dei bambini di strada. Gli esempi da varie parti del mondo riguardano le ragioni per finire sulla strada e la violenza che i bambini incontrano. Inoltre, questo articolo guarda attraverso la lente della teoria dello sviluppo psicosociale di Erik Erikson e descrive come queste esperienze possono formare le fasi della vita dei bambini di strada. Esistono forti contrasti tra i parametri della teoria quando comparati tra i bambini che si trovano in situazioni convenzionali con i bambini che vivono in ambienti non protetti.

### TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

*It is possible to understand the missing stages or how street children globally face violence can be trapped between the disparity between their biological and mental ages through Erikson's psychosocial development theory.*

**Competing interests** - none declared.

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## INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of street children is global and very disquieting [1], and particularly prevalent in urban areas. Whilst it is prevalent globally the issue is more acute in poorer countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa [1]. Currently there are about 150 million street children in the world and the number is increasing as the global population grows [2]. Poverty, family breakdown, neglect, abuse or abandonment, war, natural disaster or simply socio-economic collapse are identified as the common triggers that cause children to run away or be forced to leave their homes [2, 3]. Abuse (82%), neglect (62%) and peer pressure (36%) have particularly been identified as contributing factors children running away, in data collected by the United Nations [4]. Physical and mental consequences of the violence can hinder the development of the street children. Erikson, the developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, in his book *Childhood and Society* explains development as a lifelong project, proceeding from birth to death through the eight psychological stages. According to Erikson's stages of development, adolescence is a vulnerable stage. From this point of view, development depends on 'what we do'. This is the adolescence stage, which typically is in between the child and adulthood. According to the theory, if this stage is not navigated successfully then one may experience upheaval [5]. He stated, "anything that grows has a ground plan, and . . . out of this ground plan the parts arise, each having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole" (p. 92). It is noteworthy that not every stage can always be defined by theory. Erikson talked about eight psychological stages and the general behavior. It is important to understand the life stages and the distinctive characteristics that accompany these stages. However, children who are moving to the streets due to violence and neglect and having to live in the streets on their own and think of their survival every day, are trapped between some of the stages that Erikson talks about. There are stark contrasts between the parameters

of the theory when compared with children with conventional settings and the children living in an unprotected environment. Children living in unprotected environment often develop distrust due to the abuse and violence they experience from their caregivers. It is a contrast from Erikson's theory where he stated parents and siblings influence the development of trust. Children can only develop this ability when they are living in a protective environment. The aim of this study is to understand the psychological consequences of the violence on street children by applying and testing Erikson's psychosocial development theory.

## DISCUSSION

### *The global scenario of violence on street children*

A research study led by Iqbal in Lahore, Pakistan with twenty-six street children found that physical and psychological violence played a vital role for the children to migrate to the streets [6]. Number of children from this same group were abused emotionally, physically and even sexually by their friends and strangers while living on the streets. Ward and Seager [7] in a South African study examined the origins of homelessness among children, the dynamics of life on the streets, and core requirements. Push and pull factors were the reasons for children to move to the streets. They left home to escape intolerable situations and moved to the streets for hopes of better lives. Majority of the respondents expressed domestic violence and poor family relationship as some of the push factors. In a more in-depth interview, the girls articulated sexual abuse, typically by stepfathers, as the reason for them to move out. Poverty and loss of caregivers were some other common factors associated with the children moving to the streets.

Street children are treated like outcasts by society and they are the victims of sheer poverty and violence. It has been mentioned that children usually run away from their homes to avoid violence but, ironically, they end up

facing similar situations when they are on the streets. Through professional experience and observation, it has been gauged that they are the victims of thugs, sex offenders, pedophiles, and other illicit members of the society. Worldwide, home entrapment and family factors have been identified as correlates for running away from home. In the USA, familial conflict, alcohol and substance abuse, parental strictness, and abuse and neglect were present in the home environment of runaway children [8]. In the UK, family conflict and problems encountered at home were found to be the most common factors for teenagers to run away and live on the streets [9,10]. A research report from Peru noted that family violence and child mistreatment were the precipitating factor in 73% of cases of children migrating to the streets [11]. A research in Bangladesh also revealed that children who move to streets do so because of violence and abuse within the household and local community [12].

Evidence suggests that under extreme conditions of poverty and desperation parents sell or abandon children. The ones that are sold tend to be of very young age; those who are abandoned are usually at a later stage of their childhood [13]. The cultural preference often dictates the gender of the child who gets abandoned. In India and China, for example, male children are preferred while in Cambodia female children are preferred [13]. Nevertheless, it is often the lack of food and resources that influences parents to abandon their children. Evidence further shows that, a large number of children come to the city to earn and to support their families [14]. In Zimbabwe, more than 35% of street children had left home to earn and support their families [14]. In India, a Department of Education study noted, that there were about 100,000 street children in New Delhi alone, who had come to the metropolis from neighboring states in search for work. These children worked in small industries and informal sectors that depend heavily on child labor [14].

Researchers in various nations in Africa, Asia (India, Bangladesh), South America (Peru)

and Europe have articulated violence to be part of the everyday lives of the street children [12, 15, 16]. Children with prior experience of victimization records are more likely to be re-victimized when they move to the streets [9]. Girls suffer from various types of violence, particularly sexual abuse [17, 18]. Finkelhor estimated that about 25% of girls and 10% of boys suffer sexual victimization before the age of 18 years [18]. Several studies also have concluded that every day many of the street children, especially the girls, are subject to violence [20–22]. It is also reported that experience of violence has impacted both psychological and physical well-being of children [23].

#### *Looking at violence on street children through Erikson's psychosocial development theory*

When seen globally, it is evident that children move to the streets due to the hardship and violence they experience in their homes. They are neglected by their family members, who are supposed to protect them. They are further victimized after moving to the streets. Erikson in his theory stated that, parents and siblings influence the development of trust, autonomy and initiative, while the society contributes to the development of conscientiousness [5]. The various studies that have been discussed earlier show that the children are abused by their caregivers, as well as by adults while living on the streets, which can contribute to distrust. They may feel betrayed by the adults in many ways. They are deprived from love, affection, respect and their basic needs. Distrust may also lead to insecurity. Due to the lack of the ability to trust and depend on others, it is difficult to envisage these children engaging in a functional loving relationship in future.

Erikson emphasizes that each part of the personality needs to be nurtured in its due time. If it is not done when it is supposed to be done, then the rest of the individual's personality development is unfavorably altered. It will also hinder the rest of the potential that an individual may have. Therefore, if the adolescence stage is not guided or protected pro-

perly then an individual may not be able to deal with reality in a positive way. The future may be destroyed, and the individual may always remain confused about his/ her identity. Street children are treated as outcast by society. They are constantly getting negative messages from society about their identity. They feel they lack an identity. The psychosocial development theory claims that the members of a person's social environment, and others not only influence the development process but also carry powerful societal messages [24]. Therefore, it points to how the development process of street children can be hindered due to the negative effects in their lives. Additionally, the trauma that they carry due to violence may also impact negatively in their development process.

Erikson presents human psychosocial needs and developmental needs. He describes the various interconnecting stages that human beings go through in their lifetime. The various studies that were discussed earlier shows that the abandoned, runaway children were deprived from many of the psychosocial and developmental needs. They were in one of the most crucial stages of life, as mentioned by Erikson. Hence if the needs could be met at this stage, they would be able to reach actualization and would be able to develop a sense of positive self.

Erikson recorded his observation few decades ago and by observing children living in protective environment [5]. Erikson indicated adolescent stage as one of the most vital stages of human development and their usual characteristics. However, he has not mentioned about adolescents who are more mature mentally compared to their biological age and must make survival decisions at the age of 13 and 14 living in harsh environment. Kaiser and Sinanan [25] conducted a study with female street children who migrated to the streets after being abused and neglected by their family members. After coming to streets, they were re victimized. They experienced sexual violence and gang rape. After experiencing sexual violence multiple times, they decided

to become sex workers. They felt they were worthless and their existence was unnoticeable. They had to make this choice for survival. They were confused about their identity, which was convoluted with stigma, shame, fear and isolation. Erikson did mention about role confusion at this stage, however, did not mention how the impact could be if the children was growing up in such harsh environment. The street children are rather trapped in between their biological and mental age. They must think about their daily survival, when they are supposed to enjoy their childhood. They are unaware of the meaning of childhood. Unfortunately, they dream about a safer future filled with love and respect, which is usually established and taken for granted for many children of their age.

## CONCLUSION

Children run away from their families, as their parents cannot provide for them adequately due to acute and chronic poverty. They are also the victims of domestic violence and sheer neglect. They migrate to the streets of the city in search of a better opportunity but unfortunately are re-victimized. The street children are vulnerable to all sorts of abuse. Erikson in his psychosocial development theory explains development as a lifelong project, proceeding from birth to death through the eight psychological stages. Erikson emphasizes that each part of the personality needs to be nurtured in its due time. If it is not done when it is supposed to be done, then the rest of the individual's personality development is unfavorably altered. This paper tried to look at the childhood/ adolescence stages of street children through Erikson's theory. Street children usually migrate to the streets at one of the most vulnerable stages. Unfortunately, they must make decisions for survival, and perform like adults, which is not ordinary for children at this stage. As a result, street children miss one of the developmental stages of their lives. The violence they experience and the lack of trust that they may develop can have a significant impact in their later stages of life.

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