An Appraisal of Street Children in Nigeria from A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to explain the nature and structure of street children in Nigeria from the perspective of social disorganization theory. Data obtained for the study were mainly secondary, while the methodology was qualitative. The paper concludes that the preponderance of street children in Nigeria cities is a function of inchoate, inconsiderate and lackluster policies of the government that have truncated the economy leading mainly the poor and their children to fend for their lives in any way possible whether legitimate or illegitimate. The failure of social institutions, norms, and values in a community will aggravate occurrence of deviant behavior giving way to protracted conflict with the legitimate institutions. Blocked aspirations and institutionalized goals by the same force that limits the available means of attainment will necessarily spur up negative feelings and reactions as seen in the case of delinquent children on the street in Nigeria and the area boys phenomenon which are often detrimental to the building and achievement of internal bond and cohesion necessary for the development of social and psychological strength of an economy.

Keywords: Nigeria, Theory, Street Children, Crime Control, Deviant Behavior

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of Street children is not only of developing countries but also experienced all over the world. Throughout the world there are children who have drifted away from their homes or families of orientation. They are commonly referred to as "run away" children (Campbell, 1999). Since their usual place of domain is the street, they are also referred to as Street children. UNICEF (2001) put the population of street children in the world at about 100 million.

Definitions of street children vary across countries and culture as do causes and the associated problems. Adams et al (1985) identified three types of Street youths/Children.
1. Runaway who left home because of perceived family conflict, alienation and poor social relations.
2. Throwaways who have been encouraged or asked to leave home; and
3. Societal rejects: Youth who appears to have been rejected by peers, family and teachers and are provided no immediate long-term services by public social agencies.

UNICEF in (2001) broadly grouped, street children into three different categories.
1. Children in (on) the street: These are youngsters who spend a substantial portion of their time in street usually as child workers, often with parental encouragement. They tend to maintain a strong family link, but may sleep out occasionally. Often, owing to the distance from their household to the place where they work or to enable them work at night where there may be less competition and better business.
2. Children of the Streets: These are those for whom the street has become a home, their primary environment for daily life.
3. The Children at high risk: These are Boys and Girls who live in absolute poverty in households that do not satisfy their basic needs. This group includes the abandoned children (Orphans) who have no home or family. They may spend time in the street to work or hangout, through this they are exposed to street culture, adult street worker gangs, vagrants, prostitutes and homeless families. The incidence of street children phenomenon has increased as a result of the depth of poverty in most of the developing nations as over 200 million Africans today live in wrenching poverty (UNICEF 2001)
According to Oloko (1992) in 1986 children who lived and slept on the street were rarity in Lagos, there were an estimated 8,000 of them by early 1990s in 1999, there were over 100 locations in Lagos in which children were found to be living on the street (Oloko, 1999). Social disorganization is a rather difficult term to define. It basically refers to the failure of social institution or social organization (e.g. family, school, business, police, real estate, group networking) in certain communities and or neighborhoods. It can also be referred as disruption of existing culture by social change, as shown by failure of traditional social controls, role confusions and conflicting moral codes.

Social disorganization is defined as an inability of community member to achieve shared values or to solve jointly experienced problems (Bursik, 1988). It is also defined as "A decrease in the influence of existing social rules of behaviour upon the individual members of the group. An area where social institutions, norms, values are no longer functioning. The term social disorganization refers to both an explanation of deviance and a state of society that produces it. It arose as a result of intellectual development that had taken place since 1910 in sociology. It rooted its explanation of deviance in social norms and community activities.

Crime and delinquency were seen as product of uneven development in society, with change and conflicts, which affects the behavior of those within it. Bernburg (2002). This theory emphasized that the society was organized when people are presumed to have developed agreement about values and norms, with behavioral regularity, social organization, social order, exist when there is a high degree of internal bonding to individuals and institutions in a conventional society. This cohesion consists largely of agreement about goals that are worth striving for and how to behave and how not to behave. Simply put Social disorganization is social disorder.

**Social Cohesion and Social disorganization from the Functionalist Perspective**

The functionalist perspective sees the stability of the society, as based on social values shared by the group members. These values provide the norms and guidelines for patterning social behavior and social institutions, as such the functionalist perspective tends to see relative consensus of value and stability in social institutions as characteristic of social organization.

Social cohesion in the society checks the value conflicts, social disorganization and deviance in the society. When value commitments are weak and generally ineffective; social roles and patterns of interaction become confused and social disorganization result. That is, social standard and social rules loses their meaning and fail to provide guidelines for social conduct. From the functionalist perspective social disorganization occurs where there is homelessness, cultural conflict or breakdown in social system such that individuals, and groups needs cannot be adequately met and social values and rules in which stability of social institution rest is disrupted.

**Social structure, Anomie and Social Disorganization**

Merton (1968) defines culture as the organized set of normative values governing behavior which is common to members of a designated social group or society and social structure as 'that organized set of social relationship in which member of the society or group are variously implicated. According to Merton (1968:216) anomie occurs when there is an active disjunction between the cultural norms and goals. There exists therefore, the socially structured capacities of members of the group to set in accord with them. The structure of the society is such that some people are unable to set in accord with the normative values. The culture calls for some types of behaviors that the social structure prevents from occurring.

Robert Merton advanced a theory of how cultural value could possibly lead to crime or deviant behavior. According to him it is only when a system of cultural values extols virtually above all else, certain common success-goals for the population, while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching this goals for a considerable, part of the same population that deviant behavior or anomie arises in a large scale.

For Merton there are culturally defined goals as frame of aspirational reference and the presented means of achieving these goals. He argued that there are certain values which the society place in individual members and these values can be pursued through legitimate means. However, by
the individuals position within the social structure many people are prevented from achieving success goals because they do not have access to legitimate means of achieving the goals for example if one is born into the lower social economic class and as a result is able to acquire at best, only primary or high school education, then one’s chance of achieving economic success in the generally accepted way are slim or limited, under such circumstances deviant behavior exist in order to achieve the set goals. Individuals then think of alternative and sometimes illegal means of achieving economic success. Especially in society where material wealth has become the major yardstick for measuring success and where people have little or no regard whatsoever for rule of the game. One’s position in the social structure determine the modes of adaptation; whether one uses legitimate or illegitimate means towards the approve goals. Merton identifies five modes of adaptation; conformity, Innovators, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion.

**The conformists** are those that accept and hold fast to both means and goals stipulated by the society and they strive for success through the approved channels, they are law abiding citizens.

**The Innovators** are those who hold fast to the approved goals but reject the means approved for the attainment of goals and devise alternatives one for the attainment of the goals. (Robbers, Fraudsters, smugglers). The lower class people are most likely to seek success by resorting to illegitimate means because of their lower educational qualification, which only offer them low status job.

**The ritualists** are those who hold fast to the means but resign from the goals. These set of people adhere to rules that stipulate the proper correct way of doing things.

**The retreatist** are those who reject both goals and means with total resignation, these are outcast, the drop out who are outside the social boundary of their society. They are alcoholics, psychotics, drug addicts.

Lastly the **rebels** are those who reject both goals and the means but vow to establish a new social order. Anomie and Social disorganization theories show that it is the apparent disjunctions in the social structure which made it difficult for majority of the population to achieve success through the culturally approved means, this also explain the poverty factor, it is the lower class people who are most likely to be caught in anomie situation because they are the people who are engaged in the low status jobs which do not offer much material rewards. They are unable to feed well and in most cases cannot afford the basic necessities of life. The street children fall into the group of innovators who abandon the culturally approved means and substituting them with their own. However they still subscribe to the goals of the society Aderinto (1996.)

**SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY: THE CHICAGO SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES:**

**Social Ecology**

Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1920) introduced an ecological analysis of crime and delinquency causation. Ecology is the study of animals and plants and how they relate to one another in their natural habitat. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1920) then examined area characteristics instead of criminals’ explanation of high crime. They develop the ideal natural urban areas, which extended out from downtown central business district to the commuter zone at the fringes of the city. Each zone had its own structure and organisation characteristics and unique inhabitants. The Chicago school refers to a group of professors associated with the department of sociology at the university of Chicago from 1920-1932.

These professors include, Small, Thames s, Mead, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Farris, Ogburn and Wirth, in addition Thrasher and Sutherland linked for a while with the Chicago School professors while Shaw and Mckay Everett and Helen Hughes and Saul Alinsky were product of Chicago School (Students of Chicago school professors). They observed that crime rate declined from city centre to the periphery of the city and that the highest crime rate was found in the zone of transition the next zone to the city centre, central business district.
This transition zone was characterized by physical decay, poor housing incomplete and broken families, high rate of illegitimate birth and unstable, heterogeneous population. The residents were at the bottom and of the socioeconomic scale with low income, education and occupation. In addition to high rate of delinquency, this area had high official rate of adult crime, drug addition, alcoholism, prostitution and mental illness. All these forms of deviance and lawlessness were interpreted as the outcome of social disorganization within this urban area.

The low crime and delinquency rates in the higher level socio-economic residential areas were attributed to the uniformity of values and norms towards child care and low enforcement. This trend was due to a variety of factors, social economic, and cultural and including family breakdown existence of conflicting moral, ethical and professional values, high population turnover and among others weak and ineffective social control by the police and family institution.

High crime area (the down town or red light district of cities) are dominated by the low-income earners and, were characterized by system of competing and conflicting morals, ethical and professional values. These forced children to face varying degrees of confusion as to what society expects from them. Even though conventional traditions and institutions are dominant, delinquency has developed as a powerful competing way of life according to Shaw and Mackay(1942)

"it derives its impelling force in boy's life (street life) from the fact that it provides a means of securing economic gain, prestige and other human satisfaction and is embodied in delinquency group criminal organisations many of which have great influence power and prestige (Shaw and Mckay 1942 in Smah, 2004).

As a result the children are exposed to several competing criminal and delinquent sub-culture entities which make it easy for them to align with existing criminal and delinquent patterns and value system. According to Shaw and Mckay (1942) the existence and sustenance of criminal and delinquent values and norms are mediated and symbolized by groups such as adult criminal gangs.

Social disorganization theory was an outgrowth of the studies urban crime and delinquency by sociologists at the University of Chicago. In the 1920s and 1930s Clifford Shaw and Henry Mckay noticed that there were marked differences in the crime rate in various parts of the city. They develop a model to study crime rate using Burgess concentric zones model. The concentric zone model was based on dividing the city into five concentric circuits the first starting at the centre of the city in the core business district each of the next circles then expanding out. There were five zones; zone i, (central business), zone ii, (zone in transition), zone iii (working class homes), zone iv (middle class home) and zone v (commuters).

The Chicago studies plotted out the residential location of those youths who had been referred to juvenile court from different areas of the city. These studies showed that the distribution of delinquents around the city fits a systematic pattern. The rate of delinquency in the lower-class neighborhoods were highest near the inner city and decreased outwardly toward the more affluent areas. The inner city neighborhoods maintained high rates of delinquency over decades, even though the racial and ethnic makeup of the population in those areas underwent substantial change. The same pattern of declining rate of delinquency as the distance from the inner city neighborhood increased was found within each racial or ethnic group (Shaw and Mckay; 1942, 1969).

These findings were explained by reference to a theory of Urban ecology that viewed the city as analogous to the natural ecological communities of plant and animals (Park et al, 1928). The residential, commercial and industrial pattern in urban settlement was described as developing an ecological pattern of concentric zones that spread from the centre toward the outermost edge of city. Directly adjacent to the Commercial and business core of the city was a 'zone in transition', which was changing from residential to commercial. It was in this area that the highest rate of delinquency was found.

This transition zone was characterized by physical decay, poor housing, incomplete and broken families, high rate of illegitimate births, and an unstable, heterogeneous population. The residents were at the bottom end of the socioeconomic scale, with low income, education and occupations. In addition to high rate of delinquency, this area had high official rate of adult crime, drug addiction, alcoholism,
prostitution and mental illness. All these forms of deviance and lawlessness were interpreted as the outcome of social disorganization within this urban area. The Chicago sociologists emphasized that residents in this area were not biologically or psychologically abnormal. Rather, their crime and deviance were simply the normal responses of normal people to abnormal social conditions. Under these conditions, criminal and delinquent traditions developed and were culturally transmitted from one generation to the next. Industrialization, urbanization and other social changes in modern society were seen by the Chicago sociologists as causing social disorganization by undermining social control exercised through traditional social order and values.

**SOCIAL DISORGANISATION VARIABLES**

Social disorganization variables include; residential instability, ethnic diversity, family disruption, economic status and population density or size.

**Residential instability** - The rate of juvenile violence in the communities would increase as the rates of residential instability increased. When population of an area is constantly changing, the residents have fewer opportunities to develop strong personnel ties to one another and to participate in community organisation (Bursik, 1988).

**Ethnic diversity** - According to social disorganisation theory, it could be expected that as in urban areas, rates of juvenile violence would be higher in communities with greater ethnic diversity. According to Shaw and Mckay (1942), ethnic diversity interferes with communication among adults. Effective communication is less likely in the face of ethnic diversity because differences in custom and a lack of share experience may breed fear and mistrust (Sampson and Groves, 1989).

**Family disruption** - Research in urban areas has found that delinquency rates are higher in communities with greater level of family disruption. Sampson argued that unshared parenting strains parents' resources of time money and energy which interferes with their ability to supervise their children and communicate with other adults in the neighbourhood. The incidence of street children could be linked to family disruption at Nigeria Society. Maduewes (1990) A child is not likely to take to the street if the parents shared their resource of time, money and energy with their children. Children whom parents shared the time, money and energy with are not usually deviant.

**Economic Status** - Juvenile violence are higher in urban areas with lower economic status. The role of economic status in social disorganization is based on patterns of growth in urban areas growth leads to the physical, economic and social decline of the residential areas closest to the central business district. These areas the become most readily available to the poor and to groups who migrate to the areas. As a result, areas with the lowest average socio-economic status will also have the greatest residential instability and ethnic diversity, which in turn will create social disorganization. (Bursik and Grasmick 1983).

Population density - Although evidence of a relationship between population density and urban crime and delinquency is inconsistent. High population density creates problems by producing anonymity that interferes with accountability to neighborhood. In the less dense rural areas, it may be social isolation, instead, that limit social support to monitor children and respond to problem behaviour.

Sampson (1983) suggested that density might be more important in terms of opportunities for offending because of greater distance from targets and from potential companions in crime. There are greater opportunities for crime and delinquent behaviors in highly populated areas because most of the act may not be easily noticed because of the population density. This could be used in explaining why more crime and delinquent behaviors are reported in areas like Oshodi Ajegunle Ojuelegba and mile 12 areas of Lagos.
Impacts of Social disorganization on Social Index

According to Marx economy forms the infrastructure upon which other superstructures rest, hence a critical analysis of social disorganization start from the economy (Cohen, 1968 in Okafor and Bode Okunade 2004).

Economy - Before and during the colonial rule Nigeria economy was agriculturally based. Nobody was thrown into a prolonged period of unemployment. And so the contingency of unemployment in the degree that could lead to poverty in families and home desertion among the children was unknown (Aderinto, 1996) in the traditional setting the cultural and social organization also inform the mode of production and distribution of resources. The needs of members deprived of housing/shelter, food, clothing and protection were met by all members of the group collectively.

The mainstay of the economy of Nigeria from 1970 is oil. Unfortunately, all the refineries in the country are either not working or working below capacity and this have always been cited as the main reason for increases in prices of petroleum products. This over dependent on oil has occasioned the collapse of all other sectors of the economy. Consequently, the level of poverty dependency, desperation and anger is on the rise just like unemployment with the attendant increase in all kinds of crime including insecurity of lives and property. Importation of finished goods and exportation of raw materials came with colonization. Instead of development of appropriate technologies to manufacture the imported goods from the local raw materials which Nigeria export, the colonial masters encouraged export of local raw material for their own benefit.

The prolonged military rule from January 15th 1966 did not in any way help Nigeria economy. Even with the democratization of the polity the economy has not fared any better because the civilians also recycle the structural adjustment program initiated by the military in late 1980's. The politicians also introduced measures such as deregulation policy, devaluation of Naira, and privatization of government investments. With these policies in place, the value of naira continues to depreciate unabated, companies and businesses closed down every day turning into the already crowded streets, more unemployed people, fresh graduates who left universities and other higher institutions to join a long queue of applicants (NICEF, 2001). The deteriorating nature of the Nigeria economy brought high incidence of unemployment and poverty which leads to high rate of prostitution, economic crimes, corruption, street hawking, home dissertation, thefts and other social crimes and disaffection (UNICEF, 2001).

Polity - The military intervention in Nigeria politics has contributed a lot in weakening structure of Nigeria political institution. The military dictatorship had surreptitiously destroyed Nigeria political landscape. The democratization of the polity in 1999 has not really changed the situation for better as attention to governance is very poor. The government institution has collapsed consequently: government has abdicated its social welfare responsibilities to the Nigerian people with the privatization policy. Several components of public welfare (health care delivery, water and power supply and urban sanitation) collapsed.

The policy of privatization involves the withdrawal of government from participating in the economy. The implication of this withdrawal is collapse of the economic institution. The army of discontented and disgruntled citizenry especially among the youth, pervasive poverty and wide spread unemployment, inability to pay pensioners, and delays in salaries are all evidence of the collapse of economic and government institutions (Akpotu, 2004).

Family - The system of organizing the family in pattern of kinship and extended family is significant towards understanding crime prevention and control in the traditional Nigeria setting. Pre-industrial societies adopted the extended family pattern which could be very large including head of family, his wives and the children and sometimes married children together with their multiple spouse and children. The traditional society was characterized by a tradition of common origin, control of members of the family was simple but effective and in most cases democratic. The family which was the source of stability and social control was united under the control of the oldest person. The African
by nature understand and respect the role of elders in the society. The elders on the other hand protect the interest of members of their communities. In the traditional setting there was no member deprived of housing/shelter, food, clothing, protection. Basic needs were met by all members of the group collectively.

The traditional society was group-oriented members of the extended family that contribute and support the family. The traditional environments unite the inhabitants into an integrated whole and goals were defined in terms of socially desirable goods and reward rather than material gains. The traditional societies have the ability to provide the less privilege families and to halt their children from drifting to the street or from engaging in extreme behavioral attitudes (Aderinto, 1996). As a result of increasing urbanization industrialization and market economy, all the structure that kept people together in the pre-industrial (pre-colonial) days were weakened. People began to move to the cities in search of jobs and better conditions, hence the influx of people into the cities where money economy prevails.

In the urban centers, different political social and economic organizations are in place, relationships were strictly superficial and individualized. The maxim “Be your brother’s keeper” which existed in the traditional societies became changed to” everyone for himself. God for us all” The extend family system was weakened while Nuclear family system was encouraged, hence the less privileged, orphans which the extended family system cared and support are left alone in terms of care for their needs. This resulted in a lot of their drifting to the street. Individuals now provide for themselves and their immediate family member as against the group responsibility in the traditional extended family system.

Summary and Conclusion

Family disorganization creates a harsh socio-economic condition for the youth and thus affects their education and general well-being. The inability of the government to fulfill its own part of the social contract to the civil society by providing all the necessary infrastructures and make the business environment conducive for business to grow and flourish erodes the economic power of most families to the extent that it has become very difficult if not impossible for some families to take adequate and proper care of their children. The resultant effect of this harsh environment, the children and youth now find themselves in a situation of hopelessness which pushes them out of their homes to fend for themselves in cities, where they have nobody to care for them.

National Child Welfare Policy in Nigeria (1989) among other things stated that the Nigerian child should have access to adequate housing, health care delivery, education, nutrition which would provide the child enabling environment for the total development of his/her personality his capacity for coping with challenges of contemporary living to ensure a satisfactory overall life quality that will enable the child to make maximum contribution toward the development and well-being of the country, Nigeria. The reality in Nigeria and Lagos in particular, is that the child is dented of the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for social and skill development which he/she would need for his overall contribution to the development of the state and the country as the case may be.

The peridious situation in which an average Nigeria child finds him/herself is not only unhealthy for the economic development of the nation, it poses a threat to peaceful co-existence of the entire society because some of these children will want to achieve their legitimate goals in life through illegitimate means because of the limited opportunities/resources at their disposal.

This paper attempts to explain the pervasiveness of street children in the light of the social disorganization theory. Here child labor is seen as a class problem and the incidence of street children follows the class structure. Nigeria society is a highly stratified society. It is stratified into the upper middle and lower class. The lower class consist of the majority of the 170 million Nigerians who live in poverty and according to the state of the World's children (1997) exploitation and poverty are the most powerful forces driving children into streets NPC (2006).

It is important to state that the problem of street children is becoming pervasive because the proportion of Nigerian living in poverty and even below poverty line is increasing alarmingly due to
the privatization and other social and economic policies of the government. In other words poverty in a capitalistic economy is occasioned by the unequal distribution of incomes. This justifies why children take to streets and they were offered jobs instead of their parents. Because children can be paid less, more profit can be made (Ibiezuge and Ibobor, 2004).

The application of social disorganization theory to explain the incidence of street children in cities is therefore relevant, especially that it explains and shows the various problems associated with the development of urban societies in western world. Also it is a veritable basis for understanding the distribution of common deviance and crimes in Nigerian cities, particularly with respect to variations such as in the high and low dichotomy of socio-economic residential areas. With the Nigerian urban societies undergoing massive socio-cultural and economic changes the theory is helpful in the explanation of social change, particularly crimes and delinquency.

Social disorganization theory hypothesized that social order, stability and integration are conducive to conformity whereas disorder and disintegration takes place when there is dissociation between valued cultural goals and legitimate societal means. The more disorganized a group, community or society, the higher the rate of crime and deviance.

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