



Challenges and strengths, thinking about 'street children'

The term 'street children' is often used as an umbrella category for street-connected children and youth. In this post, [Graham Pluck](#) discusses research approaches to street children, from those documenting their dire situation to those advocating their resourcefulness. However, if researchers are to effectively tackle street children's problems, facile distinctions should be avoided by acknowledging both their strengths and weaknesses, he writes.

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'Street child' is a common expression, usually referring to those young people visible in the urban centres of low- and middle-income countries. It is an expression understood by the public, and frequently used by NGOs appealing for donations from them. Of course, it is an overly gross classification, inevitably including children who have little in common. For example, children living with their families and attending school could be classified as street children if they also work unsupervised in the street environment. As could literally 'roofless' children, abandoned by their families and having no contact with NGOs or governmental agencies. The problem of classification stems from defining children by their environment; there are many reasons for a child to be spending much of their time unsupervised in a street environment.

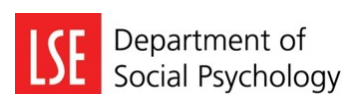
On the other hand, despite the heterogeneity of the groups described as 'street children', the NGO-based and academic literature paints remarkably similar images of 'street children' from around the world.

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High levels of substance abuse is one observation, particularly solvent abuse. In fact, it is remarkable that the combination of youth and low socioeconomic status is so closely linked to this one particular form of substance abuse. Another commonality is exposure to violence. A **review** by the London-based Consortium for Street Children highlighted this point- street connected youth around the world report experiencing high levels of violence and victimisation, and in similar forms. Of course, these are not surprising facts to those working in international development.



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It is easy therefore to fall into a facile response of pity, empathy and sympathy. I´m not suggesting that this is per se wrong, and certainly not that we should do the opposite of pity, empathy and sympathy (whatever that is). However, the emphasis on violence, trauma and drugs can trick people into thinking of the children too passively. Though clearly a caring perspective, it can be problematic as it obfuscates the achievements, resilience and strengths of the children.

Some researchers who have studied the backgrounds of the literally homeless ´street children´, have observed that many children living in the streets are there precisely because they actively choose it as a better option than staying in the family home. Indeed, it has been observed in some groups that the children who leave home for the streets fare better on measures of **mental** and **physical health** than their peers who stay home. This is not to say that street life is a bed of roses; it clearly is not. But if the choice is that, or physical or sexual abuse in the home, it may be a sensible option. Even without an abuse context, some street children achieve financial independence, allowing them to escape the often crippling level of poverty in their family unit. One **medical study** has even observed less malnutrition in street based compared to home based poor children.

Indeed, many writers, particularly anthropologists, have commented on the resilience and initiative of ´street children´. It is unproven, but it is

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feasible that in fact street child populations contain many of the strongest, most adaptable children, who become and remain 'street children' because of the initiative and resilience.

Furthermore, it has been argued that street life itself provides a life context that drives the development of children. We can easily image how the multiple dynamic challenges of street life could enhance a child's skills, as they face daily challenges not experienced by children in more privileged positions. As an example, a [psychological study](#) of homeless children in La Paz, Bolivia, found that they were better on a test divergent thinking than similarly poor, but never homeless children. This test was to think of alternative uses for common objects, such as a car tyre or a brick. We could speculate that the dynamic lives of the children had driven this development, as after all, creative and lateral thinking could be a useful asset when homeless. If nothing else, it challenges the assumption that street life and the often associated lack of schooling necessarily delay intellectual development. In a similar vein, various studies have confirmed that street child vendors in Brazil, who sell candies and other goods on buses and on the pavements, tend to have better mathematical abilities than non-working, school-attending children. So could street life be considered, at least sometimes, as a positive influence on child development?



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Now we are heading into another facile response, the romanticising of street life. It is all too easy to conceptualise street youth as young rebels, displaying their independence, initiative and strength. It is true that we must respect the independence, acknowledge the resilience, and foster the strengths. However, as I started this blog post, the very idea of a street child is too general. In reality, there are simply lots and lots of

children living in poverty in the world's cities. That is the basic fact. In general, they have very difficult and often dangerous existences. We must acknowledge both the positive and the negative. Problems are best solved when they can be seen clearly, free of prejudice and stereotype. It is essential to avoid the twin biases of pity and ennoblement.

About the Author

Graham Pluck is a Psychology Professor at Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador, where he also directs the Quito Brain and Behavior Laboratory. He conducts research in the nascent field of Social Neuropsychology, particularly in relation to mental health and cognitive function in low socio-economic status groups. He has previously conducted research and taught in the UK and Japan. His website is at: www.gpluck.co.uk

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Kate Bretherton March 18, 2015 at 8:27 pm - [Edit](#) - [Reply](#)

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