Attachment intervention through peer-based interaction: Working with Istanbul's street boys in a university setting

H. Özden Bademci [a,*,1], E. Figen Karadayı [a], Felicity de Zulueta [b]

[a] Maltepe University, Marmara Eğitim Köyü, 34857 Maltepe, Istanbul, Turkey
[b] Kings College London

ABSTRACT

Street youths are a particularly vulnerable group because of early experiences of emotional and physical neglect and abuse which can make them difficult to approach. Traditional interventions such as 1 h weekly therapy sessions do not meet their needs. This article describes a creative and novel approach to the rehabilitation of street children implemented during the To-Gather with Youth Project (TYP) under the aegis of the Research and Application Center to Support Children/Youth Living and Working in the Streets (SOYAÇ) at Maltepe University in Istanbul, running in collaboration with state-run care institutions for boys since 2010. The approach consists of a peer-based supportive model that provides adolescent boys care with emotional and social security through attachment relationships that they develop with university students. The teaching staff and students of the psychology department constitute the core group running the program, which also includes workshops assisted by teachers and students from humanities departments such as philosophy, drama, and radio. These workshops are organized to promote the psychosocial and cognitive development of the participating street boys as well as to enable their direct access to the public through their art and photography. Based on a qualitative analysis of narrative interviews with boys and detailed observational reports by project volunteers, we identify several mechanisms that we believe contribute to change in the boys, including the development of secure attachment relationships with a trusted adult, a child-centered approach, and a socially safe environment created by peer-support in a university setting. The boys and volunteers also reported incidents and feelings that seem to suggest that the boys' have increased their capacity to regulate their emotions, sense of self-esteem and resilience, and desire to develop their lives in the future. This paper offers this intervention as a feasible service model for the rehabilitation of street boys in other cities.

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1. Introduction

I ran away from home and came to Istanbul four years ago because my step dad didn't want me to go to school. He forced me to work instead. But I ended up living in the street. I lost everything. I am nothing now.

[A 13-year-old.]

We do nothing in the care center. We get extremely bored there as the time never passes. They [referring to the care center staff] are not interested in us at all.

[A 14-year-old.]

The Research and Application Center to Support Children/Youth Living and Working in the Streets (SOYAÇ) was established at Maltepe University, Istanbul, specifically to improve the quality of life of street children under state care and to increase public awareness of the street children's predicament. The founders and managers of SOYAÇ have from the outset prioritized bringing the "voices" of street children in state care to the public as directly as possible to overcome a tragic silence; a silence that ensues when the public and professionals, continue to reinforce the children's view that they are "nothing"; or at least, nothing but a *problem*.

In the general literature on "street children",[2] the children's thoughts are rarely if ever represented. Research into the growing social phenomenon of *street children* has so far been limited to studying its socioeconomic and demographic causes or these children's tendency to abuse substances (Bademci, 2012; Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). Psychological research in this field has also been rightly criticized

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 216 626 1050x2212, +90 544 559 8355 (mobile).
 E-mail addresses: ozdenbademci@hotmail.com (H.Ö. Bademci),
fkaradayi@maltepe.edu.tr (E.F. Karadayı), felicity.dezulueta@gmail.com (F. de Zulueta).
[1] Permanent address: Marmara Eğitim Köyü, 34857 Maltepe, Istanbul, Turkey.

[2] This article uses the term "street children" only in reference to those living in the streets, who, unlike children working in the streets, have no home to go back to at night, having problematic or no ties with family.

by social construction theorists for "pathologizing" these children's attitudes and behaviors through the use of developmental scales and psychological tests which result in the boys being labeled as "deviant" or "problematic" (Kirton, 2009). There have been very few studies aimed at understanding why these street children behave as they do by giving them a voice to describe their experiences, ideas, or emotions, even though such an approach could provide us with invaluable information when developing appropriate service models and seeking to undo the social marginalization of this group (James, 2007). As the boy quoted above points out, the care of street children provided by the state often focuses mainly on provision for their physical and educational needs without addressing their emotional needs (Bademci, 2012). Nevertheless, we believe that a therapeutic approach which takes into account the boys' affective needs is central to their rehabilitation.

Street children often feel alienated from the very institutions available to help them develop. They alternate between the street and the care centers to which they are sometimes punitively denied re-entry after escaping, and they often have to return to the streets after disappointing attempts to rejoin their families. Some of these boys are also illiterate. As the care center service includes their registration into local schools and follows up on their attendance, some boys do go to school. Nevertheless, there are several shortcomings of the Turkish educational system in relation to its service to these children: the boys experience frequent temporary dismissals from school largely for behavioral reasons; due to these and other interruptions to their school career, the boys often face marginalization by fellow classmates, who are invariably more skilled and younger; and, as the system rarely attempts to find solutions to such problems, the boys are academically unsuccessful, which alienates them still further from formal education. Because of these negative experiences, these youths are often depressed, lacking self-confidence and confidence in others, and without goals or motivation (Bademci, 2012; Bademci & Karadayı, 2013). SOYAÇ interventions are therefore designed on the one hand to ensure the continuity of the boys' residence in care centers and, on the other, to give them emotional support in an educational setting to help them learn new skills, develop a sense of self-worth, and imagine a brighter future for themselves.

This article focuses on the four years of work on the To-Gather with Youth Project (TYP) in partnership between SOYAÇ and two state-run care centers for street boys[3] in Istanbul. This project has enabled us to access the personal lives of a group of boys living in state care after a period of living on the streets of Istanbul, and who are at ongoing risk of returning to this dangerous lifestyle. This access has helped us to discover what they are capable of doing and, most importantly, how resilient they have been in overcoming their difficulties in order to survive. We are presenting the results of our approach as a potential model for enabling street children to increase their self-worth and confidence, become socially integrated, and develop their underlying skills and talents.

In what follows, we first explain the conceptual framework of the intervention in general, and attachment theory in particular, before giving an overview of the work of the TYP. We will then present aspects of the project and its approach drawing on the reports and statements of the student volunteers and in-depth interviews with the participating boys.

2. Rethinking street children's experiences: a theoretical grounding for SOYAÇ interventions

In order to be able to develop the most appropriate interventions for the psychological, cultural, political and socioeconomic rehabilitation of street children, it is necessary to appreciate their reasons for leaving home both from a social and a psychological perspective (Corby, 2005). In Turkey and other contexts described in international research (Grundling & Grundling, 2005), the factors that contribute to children leaving home may include poverty and social marginalization, loss of support from an adult family member, and a history of domestic violence or abuse and/or neglect (Duyan, 2005).

Firstly, socio-economic changes in Turkey such as structural adjustment and internal migration (Altanis & Goddard, 2004) may contribute to difficult circumstances for families, such as social exclusion and poverty (İçduygu & Keyman, 2000). Similarly, Corby (2005) has outlined three concentric areas of study required when working with individual street children: 1) the family interactions at home in order to overcome the vicious cycle of violence; 2) the level of family dysfunction and interfamily dynamics, and; 3) the destructive or supportive forces in the family's social environment. Such a view supports the street education approach, whereby street youths are understood as normal individuals forced by social inequality to survive under difficult circumstances. The street education approach thus argues that the street children phenomenon is as much (if not more) related to structural dysfunction as to personal pathology (Carizosa & Poertner, 1992). Furthermore, the approach holds that these young people are able to enter a phase of change and development once positive conditions are made available.

Nevertheless, when children take to a life on the streets, it is usually a last resort. It may be true that many street children's families are simply unable to cope, but children may also be fleeing a family environment that is neglectful or even abusive. In addition, mistreatment in early life can leave children with long-term emotional and cognitive difficulties that make supportive relationships with adults harder to maintain. In the psychiatric literature, such problems are known as "developmental trauma" in children or "complex trauma" arising from attachment problems in early life (van der Kolk, 2005). It is well established that the attachment relationship that develops between the infant and his primary caregiver is very important in shaping subsequent personality and behavior (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1968; Harlow, 1974; Main & Hesse, 1992; Porges, 2006; Reite & Field, 1985; Robertson & Bowlby, 1952; Schore, 2001). Emotionally neglectful caregivers are often traumatized women suffering from the effects of domestic violence, and can be unresponsive or even violent in relation to their infant (Holta, Buchleyb, & Whelan, 2008). Abusive caregivers may subject infants to physical or even sexual violence. All such experiences leave the vulnerable infant in a state of total terror and confusion. Cicchetti and Beeghly's (1987) study of traumatized boys revealed that 80% exhibited "disorganized" attachment patterns. In Main's Strange Situation tests, traumatized one-year-old infants displayed a similarly unpredictable response in relation to their caregivers, sometimes freezing in trance-like states (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Main & Hesse, 1992). Such children live in a state of fear bordering on terror. Traumatized children often survive by "forgetting" the horrific experiences that led them to "freeze" and thereby escape mentally from their terrifying parent (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010).

As they grow, children traumatized as infants demonstrate limited ability to regulate their emotions or empathize or project themselves in the minds of others. Such children are slow to trust, suffer from feelings of worthlessness, and often respond with amygdala-dependent "fight or flight or freeze reactions" (Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000, pp. 907). Even in apparently normal situations, certain sights, sounds, words, smells and feelings (such as shame) can trigger the reliving of an earlier traumatic experience, which they may then attempt to ward off through violence (Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000; Szalavitz & Perry, 2010). Their aggressive responses are commensurate with the level of stress that they feel as they focus on "survival-in-the-moment" as part of their "survival circuit" (Saxe, Ellis, & Kaplow, 2007). The psychological defense mechanisms that enable these survivors to cope include forms of dissociation such as depersonalization, alienation from the self or emotional numbing in anticipation

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[3] The term "street boys" is used to refer to the adolescent and young adult boys who attended our project, and for whom the term "street children" might seem inaccurate. Girls in similar situations are kept separately in different residential care centers and it is even more difficult to gain access into these organizations to initiate projects. Here traditional Turkish culture plays a very important role.