



Research Article

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The Self-Concept of Street Children's Mothers in Understanding the Meaning of Life: A Phenomenological Study in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study is a daily experience of a life phenomenon. In this paper, we present how the self-concept of street children's mothers, who earn a living by allowing their children to work as beggars or street singers at the crossroads in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. It used a qualitative approach with phenomenological method to explore the self-concept of street children's mothers. The data was obtained through observation and interview with selected respondent, namely the mothers who have children in the 6 to 10 age group and who earn a living on the street and provide financial support for their family. The results suggested that the mothers of street children feel like their life is always underprivileged, causing unsatisfactory feeling in their own selves. It is considered as a fair occurrence when their children work on the streets, even though the mothers realize that such phenomenon is not right, nor suitable for children.

Keywords: *Self Concept, Mothers of Street Children, family, experience, children*

1. Introduction

Parents are crucially responsible to provide education and care for their children, because the characters of a child heavily depend on the social roles and supports from their parents who highly influence the children's development, comfort, and self-perception of their own. When interacting with their peers, teenagers start to be aware of their abilities and their needs while defining themselves and their purposes in life. They try to arrange their own plans for the future and find their own places in the society (Lichner, Petriková, & Žiaková, 2021)

The future of a child relies greatly on the role of a good mother. It is the hope of the world society that a mother should be able to overcome all of their problems, even when there is no support from the family, whether in the forms of motivation or childcare. A mother should struggle on their own to face any difficulties coming from both internal and external factors (Liss, M., H. Schiffrin,

2013). The roles of a good mother have been known by all mothers in the world, thus, some of them might feel guilty when realizing that what they do are not in line with the criteria of a good mother (David-Barrett et al., 2016) (Dunford, E., 2017) and thinking about their responsibilities as a mother (Martinez, P., M. Carrasco, A. Gonzalo, A. Blanco, 2011). The self-concept of a mother manifested in guilty feelings is related to the mother's responsibility and choices for their children which are often perceived negatively by the society (Cindy Lynne Miller and Shaelyn M. Strachan, n.d.)(Sutherland, 2010).

Self-concept is a term created by belief, organized in hierarchy, changed from time to time, and influenced by others, situations, and cultures (Pestana, 2014). This element may endanger someone's life if the self-concept is not established adequately, or at all, determining the future steps and acts in their life. The self-concept is an essential characteristic that seems to be a sustaining force for success in academic and social. The level of education has a considerable impact on how far the effect will go (Lichner et al., 2021).

The educational level of the street children's mother can affect their self-concept in seeing and observing their life, mostly by their parenting style that allows underage children to work on the streets as street singers or sellers; according to them, it is a common occurrence when children play on the streets and earn a living to increase profits. This condition is clearly not accepted by the ideal norms in the society. The findings of initial interviews indicated that they feel guilty when seeing their children cannot feel comfort in life. As a result, they are held responsible for consequential opinions in the society about children who earn a living on the streets and their mother who wait on the sidewalks of red lights; there appears to be a disparity between the roles of a good mother and parenting style.

In some parts of the cities in the world, the homeless and children who run away from their home are found living or working on the streets; they often become the victim of criminalization. The researchers, national corporations, and international groups of human rights activists reported that violence acts happen to many street childrens in the cities across the globe (Oduro, 2012). This condition shows that the lack of prosperity can affect someone to be present and working on the streets just to earn a living. The same condition is also found in Indonesia, particularly in Bandung, where underage children walk across the sidewalks and city intersections to work as street singers or sell tissues while being watched by their mothers from the roadside.

The mothers of street children went through such situation to provide financial supports for their families; thus, it is associated with the self-concept of a mother on how mothers see their needs related to the financial difficulties, life satisfaction, emotional pressure, and prosperity (Thoits, 2003) according to the mothers of street children, financial stability is the main factor that can protect them from any life difficulties and pressure in developing a self-concept and a high sense of belonging (Camilla Matera, n.d.)

This study focused on the formulation of problems regarding the self-concept of street children's mothers in understanding the meaning of life. It aimed to discover the mothers' self perception as well as the perception of the past and the future according to their experiences. Therefore, the researcher can find out the actual self-concept possessed by the mothers of street children. This study is highly useful to mediate a solution when dealing with social phenomena in Bandung, Indonesia.

1.1 Self-concept and at-risk behaviour

Self-concept is more likely to be a hypothetical construction rather than a factual mental unit (Shavelson, R. J., Hubner, J. J., & Stanton, 1976). Self-concept as one's summary of perceptions and assessments about himself (Blatný, 2010) focused on self-concept in the frameworks of cognitive psychology assumed as a mental representation of oneself. Studies on the growth of self-concept should focused on the broad principles and determinants of self-development, as well as the difficulties in identifying the authentic "me"—as much as the development of self-identity. (Blatný,

2010). Self-concept as 'the results of a complex self-assessment, evaluating the quality of oneself about their relationship with other people related to their own ambition and goals.' W. James is the founder of the self-concept domain, as well as he divided the conception into three personality aspects: I—self as more than just a spiritual activity subject, self—as an experienter, and self—as understood (Blatný, 2010)

Humans' activities in their surroundings have a significant influence on their personality and self. The magnitude of an individual's understanding of the meaning of their circumstances impacts their behaviour, which is connected to the individual's perceptions about themselves as a part of the overall system. The reinforcement of self-concept in teenage years is an important aspect because it can influence the future of individuals, their educational results and their own life (Poole, 1994)

According to many researchers, self-concept is comprised by three basic psychological aspects:

- Cognitive aspects, consisting of self-concept's content and structure. This is the summary of every knowledge about oneself, including the content, which is particularly organized in a cognitive way into a certain structure.
- Emotional aspects, related to the emotional relationship with oneself. The finality of emotional relationship with oneself crucially needs a reinforcement from their surroundings, especially from friends and family.
- Conative aspects, stating that during the development of self-concept, mental structure of oneself is considered one of the most focal reasons of their behaviors. This aspect is the main reason of mental regulations in individuals' behaviors (Blatný, 2010)

According to Zhan Smith & Wethington, self-concept is an important component of the whole system, which is comprised of the connection of identity, anxiety, melancholy, stress, and defense mechanisms. Based on the theories described previously, this research suggests that functional characteristics, which include self-treatment, impact the entire self-concept and help reduce the amount of hazardous behaviors in teens. Psychologists Smith reported that there is a higher tendency for passive managements of risky behaviors with a lower level of self-concept (Smith, M., Wethington, E., & Zhan, 1996). On the contrary, the higher level of self-concept predicts more active coping mechanism. Self-concept is also related to the fact that it can affect the condition of individuals from the inside as well as their surroundings. It is believed that they can influence, change, even adjust their situation with their needs.

1.2 Street Children

Streets are an important part of urban environment that serve as a public space for children because they are allowed to gather, involve in cultural activities, and interact with each other. White dan Wyn stated that streets are "important in the life of most youngsters regardless of their social backgrounds". In the context of urban living, excessive life and experience of children on the streets increase the risk of stigmatizing children as fragile victims that have no power to change their own society. However, in the real world, the relationship between children and streets are not always reduced into victimization and fragility. Historically, including today, the street has become the essential space for social change (for instance, from civil rights movement to occupation movement); children even serve as an important part of it (Tardy & Hale, 1998)

2. Methodology

This study focused on the mothers of street children in Bandung, West Java. It was found that underage children spending time on the streets to sing or sell something under the supports of their mothers who accompany and watch them from the sidewalks. This condition occurs because of many reasons, depending on how the self-concept of street children's mothers in understanding the meanings of life. The life on the streets are closely linked to the factors of economy, education, and

prosperity.

A "social phenomenology" was used in the investigation to describe and manage the classification of interactions. The phenomenological approach explores the significance of life experiences concerning a subject or phenomenon for a group of people. The objective of phenomenology is to investigate how people experience events in awareness, cognitive, and perceptual activities, as well as how these experiences might be evaluated or appreciated aesthetically (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020). The approach chosen for this study is a qualitative method, performed by directly interviewing the mothers of underage street children in the intersection with the aim of gaining information needed by the researcher.

The researcher also observed every activity of the mothers while waiting for their children in the sidewalks of intersections in Bandung, West Java. This study used the interview and observation data to help the researcher gained deeper understanding and obtained more information regarding the self-concept of street children's mothers in understanding the meaning of their life. Each method was performed with the consent of the street children's mothers who willingly explained and answered all questions.

3. Participants

Ten mothers of street children were involved in this study. They were purposely selected after initial interviews by direct, face-to-face interviews. Although it was conducted during the pandemic, the research still complied with the health protocol. The researcher always asked for participants' consent by directly asking them whether they agreed to involve in this study after listening to the interview procedures. The data collection from the street children's mothers as key informants used the following classifications: all participants are the mothers of street children in the 35 to 50 age group (according to the obtained data), have underage children working on the intersection by selling something or being street singers, hanging around on the streets all afternoons, and have worked for more than one year.

Respondents in this research were 10 moms who were interviewed one by one and given demographic information as indicated below.

Table 1: Characteristics Demographic

Characteristics	N	%
Age		
35-40	5	50%
41-45	4	40%
46-50	1	10%
Mothers' Educational Background		
Ungraduated	4	40%
Elementary	3	30%
Junior High School	3	30%
Children Age		
7 Years Old	1	10%
8 Years Old	2	20%
9 Years Old	4	40%
10 Years Old	3	30%
Length of children working on the streets		
1-3 Years	10	100%

Data collection technique used in the phenomenological research is in-depth individual interviews. The interview was performed in a relatively long duration, giving the informants a chance to answer each question openly. When organizing the interview guides, critical words for each question must

be defined, discussed, and clarified, so that the goals and purposes of the research can be clearly represented. The position of each keyword or focus of question mainly determined the focus of the research as well as the kind of data that needed to be collected (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020).

4. Result and Discussion

Self-concept is a way of perception towards oneself which later influences daily actions and behaviors. It highly affects one's success and failure when facing and experiencing life. Self-concept also serves as one of the most significant stages in the psychological, mental, and social aspect development of an individual (Lichner et al., 2021). Every individual has definitely faced difficult times in their life, especially in the mental and psychological development from children, teenagers, until they become adults (Reel, 2018). During the individuals' mental development, parents, teachers, as well as family and other close relatives have significant influences in constructing self, starting from how the individuals see themselves physically, relive their past experiences that affect their self-esteem, their hopes for the future, as well as their behaviors in living everyday life (Lichner et al., 2021).

Self-concept is created by a hierarchically organized belief that changes from time to time as well as influenced by others, situations, and cultures (Pestana, 2014). Focusing on the self-concept of street children's mothers in Bandung, this study found some mothers who were raised in a good financial condition. They successfully developed themselves while going through a sufficient mental development. Therefore, when they are faced to a difficult situation with no financial supports from their parents, the mothers of street children can do something useful to change their destiny and realize their wish for a better future. However, some other mothers who were raised in a comfortable life have not learned to work; they always rely on other people who support them, so they cannot get out from that comfort zone. In the end, they experience life like the way it is with no intention to change their destiny; they tend to live the rest of their life as a part of underprivileged groups, as stated by one of street children's mothers in Bandung.

An imperfection in the self-concept construction more or less influences an individual's view of the future and their own self-esteem (Lichner et al., 2021). Self-concept is one of the main factors that support the individual's success of living their life. It consists of a wide spectrum related to the agreement of "self", including self-concept, self-image, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. This is about a construction of oneself, focusing on all determining factors in an individual. Every 'self' construction is important throughout their own development. Each of them is required for an organism's overall optimum performance. The concept of "self" as one of their own includes the past, present, and future. Individual construction evolves over time during life. Teenage years are a specific period to build such construction. The concept of "me" is a complex personal structure while its development is considered sensitive during this period. It also needs intensive cognitive works.

In the study of the street children's mothers in Bandung, the researcher found three components of self-concept in the participants. The first self-concept component is an image of how the mothers see themselves, which is a perceptual representation of the physical aspects they owned. Some mothers see themselves as great women, born and raised in a sufficient condition with no disability, so they can earn a living and recover their life which is currently below the poverty line. They have a belief that if they put a lot of efforts and work to the bone, their life would be better in the future. Therefore, they highly focus on works and watching their children work on the streets as well. Some mothers also assumed that the reason why they and their children experience poverty is because of their poor physical condition, so what they have experienced will not change a bit.

"Since I was a child, I already on the street, never have a home to live and been ill most of the time. People also said that my physical condition is too weak to do anything. I have never checked it to the hospital because I am poor and don't have any money to go. People said that hospital is free for poor people like me, but I'm not sure. I can't fight my destiny because I have been poor and ill since I was a

child. So be it, I feel like I don't need to have many wishes except accepting my fate." (Interview Result with Participant 4)

A negative assessment given to oneself results in a low self-appreciation (Dan Olweus, 2014), depression (David S. J. Hawker, 2008), feeling loneliness, and experiencing psychosomatic symptoms (Kassebaum et al., 2016). An individual's perception towards their physical condition is one of the supporting aspects which can develop potentials and beliefs that their physical condition can contribute to a change, create positive behaviors, and motivate individuals to live their life. Meanwhile, negative thoughts about oneself such as saying that their physical condition is always ill and useless will reduce self-appreciation, making themselves feel weak and unable to do anything. As a result, it feels more difficult to live a good life.

The second self-concept from the mothers of street children is related to the way they perceive their past, the reason why they allow their children to work on the streets, the ability they own to change their life, and the image of ideal future that will be faced by their family. Some participants of this study stated that they experienced a happy childhood, as presented by Participant 2 below:

"I was raised in a village by parents who always fulfilled the needs of their children. When I was a child, I didn't experience difficulties to work or earn a living. I enjoyed a happy childhood with my peers. There's no way I could imagine that my children and I must work on the streets like today, all of these things feel like a nightmare to us, but I can't do anything because poverty is the reason why it all turned like this." (Interview Results with Participant 2)

The self-concept of ability is defined as an individual's belief regarding their competences in particular domain (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), with their past being one of them. Childhood is an initial phase of development for an individual; mental health problems often come up during the transition stage from children to adults (Haula & Vaalavuo, 2021). The consequences of mental health problem will influence negative behaviors of an individual, especially those who were raised below the poverty line with low educational level (Knapp, M., T. Snell, A. Healey, S. Guglani, S. Evans-Lacko, J.-L. Fernandez, H. Meltzer, 2015). Mental health problem seems like an entwined devil's circle; parents who were raised on the streets and thinking that the street is a sufficient space for living will raise their children in the same way. There is a possibility that such condition will always happen continuously, as stated by Participant 4 below.

"For me, streets are like a big playground. Since I was a child, I have been on the street, even thinking that street is a home with my parents, husband, and children. I was raised on the streets; my children were born on the streets. In the past, my parents taught me how to work on the street, so now I teach my children, too, how to survive on the streets by working. More importantly, they should always be honest and not steal anything." (Interview Results with Participant 4)

Many studies stated that the problems of mental development during childhood will influence the mental state of an adult (Haas, 2006)(Smith, 2009)(Warren, J. R., L. Knies, S. Haas, 2012)(Hakulinen, C., M. Elovainio, M. Arffman, S. Lumme, S. Pirkola, I. Keskimäki, K. Manderbacka, 2019). Childhood problems occur because of parents' inability to provide financial safety and prosperity, so their children must work to provide financial support for the family, even though some parents claimed that children are not obliged to earn a living; they only give a little financial help for the family.

The third self-concept is related to the psychological concept of street children's mothers. It belongs to the behavioral components, including feelings, future prospects, self-esteem, and self-perception that are experienced by the mothers of street children.

"I know I'm poor, so now I'm embarrassed to go back to my hometown and see my family. That's why I always try and guide my children to study higher, as high as possible, because education is important for me. I'm stupid and poor, but I wish that my children will be smart and able to change their life as well as

my life as their mother. We won't be poor forever if we keep trying, we will have a better life. I hope that my children won't be poor like me, they can go forward and have a better job in the future." (Interview Results with Participant 1)

Feeling or affection component is related to what individuals feel as a result of other individuals' stimuli and behaviors towards themselves. In general, the mothers of street children in Bandung have the same experience which is being underestimated. However, each mother has different reaction towards others' behaviors they received, depending on individual strength, as happened to Participant 4 below.

"I don't hope much for a living I'm going through right now, because since I was born, I have been feeling ill all the time while living below the poverty line. So yeah, I accept that willingly and spend these days like usual, hoping that my children will not follow my step of having a lifelong poverty, but I don't know the right way to do it. The initiative to work even came from my child who felt sorry for me, seeing me in endless difficult times, so he suggests that we should work on the street as a solution to this poverty situation. I finally follow and accompany him to the street, walking while looking for a way to be entertained." (Interview Results with Participant 4)

The relationship between the street children and their mothers are extremely close, considering that they never be separated from each other. Unemployed mothers have more time to spend with their children compared to the fathers. The intimacy between parents and children will make their feelings connected with each other (Perry, Ettinger, Mendelson, & Le, 2011), thus, children can feel what their mothers feel until they have some kind of obligation to do something for them; this condition also works the other way around. The close relationship between mothers and children in the context of street children' mothers in Bandung became the reason why mothers always bring their children anywhere they go. They also think that being on the street is a part of mutualism activities between the children and the mothers. They feel that it is not a bad thing to bring their children to the streets and work there once in a while, as expressed by Participant 7 below.

"After losing my parents, I don't know what to do and what I hope for the future. When I was a child, I lived sufficiently. Until I got married and had children, I still lived like that because my parents worked as sellers with a couple branches of business in some places, so they didn't have any difficulty to support the family financially. However, when they passed away, I felt confused about what I should do because I never helped my parents and didn't understand how to run their business. I asked my children to the street to earn a living for our daily needs, and I see that when they are the one who work—like being a street singer or selling tissue—they gained more money than I did. Perhaps, when people see little children, they feel more compassion and need to buy the things my children sell. Therefore, I let them on the streets, but still accompanying them in case there is the Municipal Police carrying out a raid out of the blue. I hope that my children can be a way to change my destiny, although I didn't hope that much." (Interview Results with Participant 7)

Parental supports and social environment are an important aspect for an individual's comfortable life since childhood; how they see themselves and how their surroundings treat them will shape the individual's behaviors. The mothers of street children have different view of themselves, mostly initiated by how they were raised and treated by their parents and close relatives. Some mothers feel that they had a strong physical condition and more prominent than their childhood peers; such feeling came up because they were raised in a family with financial stability and had not been forced to work as a child. However, there were some other mothers who had been poor since childhood with no prominent aspect of life, thus, they feel no need to think about what will happen in the future. All mothers of street children in Bandung, Indonesia pin a great hope to their children, such as wishing that the children can reduce their burdens as parents and if they receive higher education, they can change their own life and will not live below the poverty line like what their parents had experienced.

There are three determining factors of an individual's behaviors; the first one is an internal behavior, arising from consequences in their lives and desires, the second one is social norms from their environments, and the third one is behavioral controls which refer to the ability to hold up their emotions while interacting with other people in their surroundings (Snippe, Peters, & Kok, 2021). The self-concept in this study is presented in the following figure.

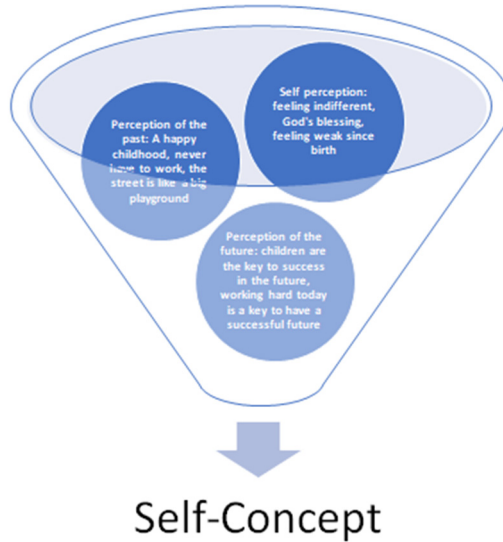


Figure 1: Self Concept

Source: The Researcher's Analysis, 2021

In the case of street children's mothers, the self-concept was shaped as a result of communication experiences gained by them, including how they perceive themselves, the past experiences when they were raised, and the way they live their lives to determine the future. Some mothers of street children perceive themselves as someone with a strong physical condition and being blessed by God. Therefore, despite living in poverty, they are capable to overcome any challenge and change themselves. This belief is motivated by the responsibilities of a mother, arising after their life changes from being single into having a family and children (Kroger, 2015) while participating to earn a living—which is actually a father's duty (Svensson & Frisén, 2021).

The self-concept of street children's mothers is divided into two types: positive and negative self-concept. The positive self-concept comes from the belief that the mothers of street children were born with enough blessing and abilities to keep trying and doing positive things because they want to change their unfortunate and unhappy lives into a better future if they make an effort to change their destiny. Meanwhile, a mother with negative self-concept always believed that she was born unlucky with a weak physical condition, thus, she felt that for evermore, she will be poor and sick. This kind of self-perception which revolves around the belief that she is an unlucky person will also influence her mental health as well as arise a feeling of inferiority and inability to control herself from being ill continuously (Knox, Norris, Lewis, & Rahman, 2021). It is caused by the power of mind which constantly affects herself (Williams, J. M. G., & Kuyken, 2012).

The self-concept consists of three basic psychology, including a cognitive aspect which is believed as a process of self-interpretation (Lumma, Böckler, Vrticka, & Singer, 2017), emotional aspect, and conative aspect. All of them will shape a self-identity brought by every individual when interacting with other people. Developing identity includes building a self-coherent feeling at any

time, place, and situation, as well as integrating all of them in one part called self-identity (Syed, M., & McLean, 2016). For the mothers of street children in Bandung who have positive self-concept, what the world say about them was not perceived as a burden that should be taken seriously. Instead, the label of being poor and relentless for allowing their children to work on the streets is perceived by some mothers as a kind of strength that motivates themselves to go forward and prove that those assumptions are wrong. The identity is considered as a life domain (Fadjukoff, P., Pulkkinen, L., & Kokko, 2016), refers to a process of how that identity is developed over time and how every experience is felt by the individual (Gallihier, R. V., McLean, K. C., & Syed, 2017) while exploring themselves as a result of interaction with other people (Syed, M., & Nelson, 2015).

5. Conclusion

In the study on the self-concept of how street children's mothers in Bandung, West Java, understand the meaning of their life, the researcher found three components of self-concept reflected in those mothers:

1. The self-concept of how the mothers see themselves as a perceptual reflection of their physical condition. Some mothers feel that they are great women who were born in a good and able condition, enough to work and improve their current condition of living below the poverty line
2. The self-concept of street children's mothers is related to how they see their past, the reasons why they allow their children to work on the streets, the ability to change their life, and the image of the future that will be faced by their family.
3. The self-concept concerns about the psychological effects of street children's mothers which consist of the components of behaviors, feelings, future prospects, self-esteem, and self-perception they own.

6. Data Availability Declaration

The datasets that support the conclusions of this research are accessible upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to the privacy of study participants, the data is not publicly accessible. However, the data was collected using approved processes and research ethics agreed upon by both the researcher and the informants.

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