

Review

The menace of begging in Nigerian cities: A sociological analysis

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Despite the concerted efforts of scholars, government, media and general public to tackle the problem of begging in Nigerian society, the problem seems intractable especially in our cities. Against this background, this study examines begging from different social perspectives and discovered that the problem of begging is multidimensional. The study also observed that past research exercises on the subject matter could not achieve much because it lacks focus on the social forces behind begging. This study therefore provides sociological foundation for future research on the problem of begging in Nigerian cities.

Key words: Begging, poverty, social deviance, urban ecology, anomie.

INTRODUCTION

Cities across the world are confronted with diverse and complex problems which have socio-economic and physical implications for cities' dwellers. These problems as experienced by cities of less developed countries are enormous and multidimensional in nature (Jelili, 2006). One obvious manifestation of these problems, especially in Nigeria, is begging, that is the act of asking people for money, food, clothes e.t.c. (Jelili, 2006). The problem of begging is a social menace which has a negative implication not only for cities' economies, socio-physical environment but also for beggars themselves. The increasing population of beggars in Nigerian cities constitutes an eyesore or environmental nuisance and health hazards, particularly those carrying infectious and contagious diseases (Egeonu, 1988). Begging has serious implication for the city and national economy as beggars are not economically productive in any way since they contribute nothing to the economy (Jelili, 2006). It leads not only to social relegation of the city but also to that of beggars as well as stigmatization of the class of people and their relatives.

Expectedly, increasing academic attention has been directed to the problem of begging (Adedibu, 1989; Jelili,

2006; Ogunkan, 2009; Ogunkan and Fawole, 2009; Ogunkan and Jelili, 2010). The problem has also arrested the attention of governments at various levels. For instance, the Lagos state government made effort to tackle the problem of begging in Lagos by building rehabilitation centres to cater for beggars (Okoli, 1993). The media is not left out in this war against this menace as Newspapers occasionally report the problems associated with begging in lead articles (The Associated Press, 2008; Daily Triumph, 2010). It is unfortunate, however, that despite the effort of scholars, governments, media, and national and international organization, the problem of begging continues unabated in Nigerian cities.

While the efforts of various stakeholders to combat the problem of begging in Nigeria cities are commendable, it must be understood that the problem of begging is multidimensional in nature and needs multidimensional approach to examine. This is the focus of this study which applies diverse but relevant sociological perspectives to analyze the menace of begging in Nigerian cities.

PROBLEM OF BEGGING IN NIGERIA

The attentions of sociologists, geographers, urban economists and urban planners have been drawn to the

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problem of begging in Nigeria. The population of beggars on Nigerian streets is growing exponentially. Beggars are highly visible in public places, commercial centres, residential neighbourhood (Osagbemi, 2001) and worse still on campuses and inside buses (Jelili, 2006). The potential threat of begging to Nigerian societal fabric is obvious in its negative implications to social, environmental and economic survival of the country.

Beggars constitute social threat to Nigerian society especially in the cities. They portray a bad image to outsiders or strangers. Some criminals hid under the guise of beggars to perpetuate their evil deeds. They are at times used as instruments by mischief makers, who use them to vandalize public properties and utilities built with nation's resources (NCFWD, 2001). The nefarious activities of those fake beggars such as criminals, area boys" and thugs constitute one of the sources of civil unrest to the city dwellers. Begging also constitutes economic threat to the society as beggars are not economically productive in any way since they contribute nothing to national economy (Adedibu, 1989; Jelili, 2006). The city and national economy is retarded as considerable proportion of beggars population depend on the already overstretched workforce.

The environmental implications of begging is made manifest not only in beggars' tendency to obstruct free flow of human and vehicular traffic but also their high tendency to generate dirty materials either as waste or as parts of their belongings to their regular routes and stations (Jelili, 2006). Although, the negative implications of begging discussed above have generated research efforts of various scholars, much has not been done on the social aetiology of this social phenomenon.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

A convenient starting point for discussing issues on begging is to attempt, define and clarify the ambiguity associated with the definitions of begging. Generally speaking, "to beg" is to approach somebody for help. Though, this definition provides a foundation meaning of begging, it cannot be passed for a working definition of begging. Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) define begging simply as asking passers-by for money in a public place. This definition is not comprehensive enough to reflect all activities of the beggars. For instance, beggars may approach people not necessarily for money alone but also for food, clothes etc and this activity may not necessarily take place in public places, it may take place anywhere. The definition of begging as provided by Wikipedia (2009) presents begging as requesting something in a supplicating manner with the implication that a person who is begging will suffer emotional and or physical harm.

An extensive investigation into the problem of begging

has faulted this definition. Not all beggars use supplicating words to beg. As observed by Ogunkan (2009), some beggars use insults, profanity, or veiled threats in aggressive panhandling. The Caucasian colored beggars from Chad and Niger Republic also intimidated their targeted donors into giving alms by "clinging" unto them (Esan, 2009). These evidences have created loopholes in the definition presented by Wikipedia (2009). Jelili (2006) presents begging as the act of asking people for money, food, and clothes etc as gifts or charity. He conceptualizes begging to involve not only individual but also organizations or countries which he tags "corporate begging". For the purpose of this study, we shall rely on this definition, however, this study shall focus on begging as it involves individual conceptualized here as street and house to house begging. This will assist in reflecting the image of begging and its implication for the social, economic and environmental survival of the country.

The existing literature on poverty has it that a universally acceptable definition of poverty remains elusive, because it is more easily recognized than defined (Mafimisebi, 2002). This is why a wide variety of definitions have been put forward to reflect different dimensions or contexts within which it is defined. In general, however, two approaches of defining the concept are observed in the literature. First, poverty is observed in either absolute sense or relative sense. In absolute sense, poverty is seen, according to Akinbola (2002), as a state of not having or not being able to get the necessities of life; it is the situation of lack of access to resources needed to obtain the minimum necessities required to maintain physical efficiency (Okunmadewa, 2001). Second, from its multidimensional perspectives, poverty is seen as a physiological deprivation, a social deprivation, or a human deprivation. The physiological deprivation refers to poverty of income and basic human needs. Social deprivation, on the other hand, refers to the lack of basic capabilities to live a long and healthy life with freedom or lack of resources required for participation in social activities. Human deprivation, on the other hand, is denial of right and freedom or lack of dignity, self-respect, security and justice (Mafimisebi, 2002). Due to the interrelationships among these various dimensions and approaches to defining poverty and for comparison purpose, the global community has adopted income as a measure; and by this measure, an income of one US dollar per day per person (Hauser and Pilgrim, 1999) is observed to indicate poverty.

To sociologists, the concept of deviance does not mean pervasive or depravity. The term deviance is used to describe any behavior that violates the standard of conduct of expectation of a group of a society (Schaefer, 2004). Deviance involves the violation of group norms which may or may not be formulated into law. It is a comprehensive concept that involves not only criminal

behavior that are not subject to prosecution. According to Haralambus and Alburn (2000), deviance is an act which does not follow the norms and expectations of a particular social group. It is the violation of group's norms, expectation and values. Social deviance takes many forms and reflected in juvenile delinquency, corruption, prostitution, exam malpractices, and drug abuse. These acts are also social problems in the sense that their manifestations constitute major problem for the society. In other words, deviance constitutes serious destruction and interruption in the social and moral value of the society.

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BEGGING IN NIGERIAN CITIES

In attempting to understand social behavior or social phenomenon, Sociologists are guided by a set of ideas which attempt to explain how an aspect of social life works. Social reality requires explanation in order to promote understanding on how it works, how it is organized, how it is sustained and how it changes. However, Sociologists do not view social issues with a single "lens"; they have different approaches to the study of social phenomenon known as sociological perspectives.

To reflect the multidimensional nature of begging, this study, examines begging from different social viewpoints upon which it is analyzed using diverse but relevant sociological perspectives.

Begging: A product of urban poverty

In Nigeria, poverty is a social problem as considerable number of the population is affected by this scourge. For instance, an estimate by World Bank (2000) indicates that over 45% of the country's population live below the poverty level while about two third (2/3) of this group are extremely poor. Although, the studies conducted by Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) conducted between 1980 and 1996 determined that poverty was more pronounced among rural than urban dwellers. Recent trends in the country, however, suggest that urban poverty is increasingly becoming a problem. The incidence of urban poverty in Nigerian society can be viewed as the root of many social ills in Nigerian urban centres. Such social menace includes begging and other related anti social behavior.

The psychological effect of poverty on individual strips him of his self respect and human dignity. One important manifestation of this, especially in Nigeria, is the involvement of considerable number of its population in begging. Gans (1995) draws on Functionalist perspective to analyze the existence of poverty and maintains that the

existence of the poor actually benefited various segments of the society. In Gans' view, poverty and the poor actually satisfy positive functions for many non poor groups of the society. The presence of the poor means that society's dirty works, physically dirty or dangerous, deadened and underpaid, undignified and menial jobs, will be performed at low cost.

The existence of poverty provides jobs opportunity for occupations and professions that service the poor. It creates both legal employment (Public Health Experts, Welfare care workers) and illegal employment (Drug dealers). The existence of the poor guarantees the higher status of the affluent. In the similar vein, Ogunkan (2009) articulates the Functionalist perspective on begging as a product of poverty. He argues that begging performs some identifiable functions seem need by the society. The existence of beggars helps the society to "fulfill" social, religious and economic obligations. By giving alms to beggars, most Nigerians perform religious obligations as major religions in Nigeria encourage the giving of alms to the poor and the needy. Beggars are readily available in meeting this religious responsibility. Begging provides employment opportunity for members of the society. Rather than seeing begging as a product of chronic poverty or physical handicap, some people take to begging as a profession (a means of earning livelihood). It is therefore, not surprising to see a well dressed, able bodied men and women in Nigerian streets and public places using different styles to beg for alms. The existence of beggars also creates job opportunity for some members of society. Jobs are created for Welfare care workers, Public health experts, law enforcement agents in rehabilitation of beggars and in enforcement of anti-begging regulations.

As observed by Esan (2009), the "babiyyala" beggars are entertainers who wander street, sing begging. Because they entertain people, they therefore, seem to receive more favour than others (Esan, 2009). The house to house, occasional Friday- Islamic- singing "alfas" in the northern Nigeria also fall into the group of beggars that sing, that is beg to entertain people. (Jelili, 2006). Some categories of beggars are therefore, entertainers. Although, Ogunkan (2009) maintains that begging does perform certain functions that society needs, he does not judge begging to be a desirable or legitimate form of social action but support the view of functionalists which seek to explain how an aspect of society frequently looked down upon can nevertheless manage to be passed from generation to generation. From a Marxian perspective, poverty in capitalist society like Nigeria is a manifestation of system of inequality- an inherent feature of capitalism.

Karl Marx's works provide a philosophy upon which conflict theory rests. According to Marx, in a capitalist society, wealth is concentrated in the hands of a minority capitalist class while the laboring classes are forced to

Table 1. Modes of individual adaptation.

Mode	Institutional means (hard work)	Societal goal (acquisition of wealth)
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	--	+
Ritualism	+	--
Retreatism	--	--
Rebellion	+_	+_

Note: + indicates acceptance; - indicates rejection; +_ indicates replacement with new means and goals.

sell their power in return for wages in the open market. It is through the expansion of Marx's work that sociologists now apply conflict theory to all aspect of society.

Marx's analysis of capitalist society was modified to apply to modern capitalism by Dahrendorf (1959). In modern capitalism, he classifies not only the bourgeoisies – owners of the means of production – but also the managers of industries, legislators, the judiciary, heads of government bureaucracies and other as the most powerful groups in the society thereby merging Marx's emphasis on class conflict with Weber recognition of power as an important element of stratification (Cuff et al., 1990)

Marxist approach to the study of class is useful in stressing the important of stratification as a determinant of social behavior and as observed by Gerth and Mills (1958), the existence of social problems, like begging, is a product of unequal access to life chances that is, people's opportunities to provide themselves with material goods, positive living. By implication, the existence of beggars in Nigeria reflects inequality generated by capitalism.

Then, the question is, what are the governments doing to address the problem of begging in Nigeria? Adedibu (1989) answers this question when he affirms that government has not made any meaningful provision to address the problem of begging in Nigeria. He observes that instead of government to rehabilitate beggars by offering them shelter and productive employment, they are cleared off the streets during international meetings which brings nationals from developed countries to Nigeria.

But after such meetings, beggars return to streets. It is unfortunate that government could not take care of the socio-economic, health and mental rehabilitations of beggars while expending huge amount of funds to programmes that benefit the rich and political class. This treatment of the beggars by the government gives credence to the belief of the Marxists that the existence of social problem in the society is the reflection of exploitation and oppression of the powerful class over the disadvantaged.

Begging: A social deviance

Begging is a social deviance, especially in Nigeria, because it negates the norms, expectations and values of the society. For example, in Yoruba culture, hard work is highly valued, therefore, begging in its absolute sense is not popular and beggars are usually looked down upon as belonging to a group of wretched persons in the society (Jelili, 2006). The Ibos shared this same belief but among the Hausas in the Northern part of the country, begging has religio-cultural backing and encouragement. The situation describe by many observers (Ammani 2009, Mudanssir, 2010) as religio-cultural misconception.

Despite the confirmation of begging as a social deviance, the population of beggars on Nigerian streets is growing exponentially. They become highly visible in Nigerian cities. How could one explain this phenomenon? The works of Merton (1968) provides basis to explain the growing population of beggars in Nigerian cities.

Merton (1968) adapted Durkheim's notion of anomie to explain why people accept or reject the goals of a society, the socially approved means of fulfilling the aspirations or both. For instance, an armed robbers and a lawyer have one thing in common. Each is working to obtain money but pursue different means to achieve their objectives. This example illustrates that behaviour that violates accepted norms may be performed with the same objectives in mind as those of people who pursue more conventional lifestyles. The modes of individual adaptation, as presented by Merton (1968) are reflected in Table 1. According to the table, "conformist" accepts both the overall society goals and the approved means. The "innovator" accepts the goal of the society but rejects the approved means of achieving it. "Ritualist" abandons the goal but become compulsively committed to the institutional means. The "Retreatist" basically withdraws from the goal and the means the society. The final adaptor, the "rebel" feels alienated from dominant means and goals, therefore seeks to create a new social structure. Having withdrawn from the goals and the means of the society, beggars are typically portrayed as "retreatists". It is extremely difficult to be affluent through begging, the means that negates the institutionalized means (hard work) of achieving success. The theory helps us understand begging as socially created behavior, rather than as the result of momentary pathological impulses.

Begging is simply defined as a means of asking for money, food, clothes and so on (Jelili, 2006). By this definition, one wonders why asking for money, food or clothes by an individual is considered a deviant behavior while similar action by another individual is considered a normal behavior. We can understand such discrepancies by using an approach to deviance known as "labeling theory". The theory also known as societal-reaction approach seeks to explain why certain people are viewed

as deviant while others whose behavior is similar are not seen in such harsh term. The approach made popular by Becker (1963) is summed up with this “Deviant behavior is behavior that people so label”. This approach explains deviance as a social process whereby some people are able to define other as deviant. It emphasizes that the deviance is relative and as such, it is not until a label is given to someone by someone else in a given social power that the person actively becomes a deviant. The theory reminds us that it is not the behavior itself that determines deviance but the response to an act. The act of asking people for financial or material assistance is just a normal behavior but becomes a deviant act because it is culturally labeled.

The theory also explains that social class plays an important role in labeling an act as deviant. For instance, a poor man who approaches people for financial assistance may be labeled a “beggar” while similar action by politician to finance his electioneering campaign may be seen as a fundraising. Although, labeling approach does not fully explain why certain people accept a label or reject it. However, it goes a long way in explaining why some set of people in Nigeria are classified as a set of beggars. For instance, almajiris, maula (Hausas), bororo (the Caucasian colored Chadian), the infirmed and disable people, the old people, destitute etc are labeled “beggars”, irrespective of whether they beg or not.

Begging: A product of urban ecology

In its socio-spatial analysis, begging has been confirmed as a function of urban ecology (jelili, 2006; Oladepo, 2006; Ogunkan and jelili, 2010). Urban land use activities greatly influence the spatial distribution of beggars in Nigerian cities, with the favorable land uses as commercial, transport, and public uses (Ogunkan and Jelili, 2010).

However, this depends on how organized a place is. Thus a less organized commercial or public area where informal activities are predominant tends to attract more beggars than an organized one. The spatial distribution of beggars in Nigerian cities can be explain using the descriptive and prominent classical theories of urban ecology as express by Burgess (1923), Hoyt (1939) and Harris and Ulman (1945) in concentric, sector, multiple nuclei respectively.

The concentric theory, articulated by Ernest Burgess (1925) was among the first attempt to investigate spatial pattern at urban level. The theory states that as city grows, it expands radically around the Central business District (CBD). Surrounding the CBD are succeeding zones that contain other types of land use that illustrate the growth of the urban area over time. The distribution of beggars in Nigerian cities is a reminiscence of Burgess’ concentric theory. For instance, jelili (2006) confirms that

most of the wards with high incidence of beggars in Ilorin are found at the centre of the centre of the city while those with low incidence are found at the outer layers. Oladepo (2006), Ogunkan and Jelili (2010) also observed similar pattern in their study at Osogbo and Ogbomoso respectively.

Hoyt (1939)’s sector of urban land use was an expansion of concentric theory. The theory examines the influence of transport axis in the distinctive district which often form the wedge shaped sectors. Hoyts (1939) suggests that zones expand outward from the city center along railroads, highways and other transportation arteries. He theorized that cities tended to grow in wedge-shaped pattern-or sectors-emanating from the central business districts and centered on major transportation routes (Wikipedia, 2009). The sector pattern of incidence of begging was reflected in high incidence of begging observed along transport corridors in Ilorin (Jelili, 2006), Osogbo (Oladepo, 2006) and Ogbomoso (Ogunkan and jelili, 2010)

The multiple nuclei theory propounded by Harris and Ulman (1945) is an amalgam of concentric and sector theories with the addition of multiple nucleus. In their view, not all urban growths radiate outward from a Central Business District. Instead, an urban area may have many centers of development, each of which reflects a particular urban need or activity. The concentration of beggars along different sectors, such as the central business districts, transport corridors, markets, religious centers, motor parks etc in the cities of Ilorin, Osogbo and Ogbomoso (jelili, 2010; Oladepo, 2006; Ogunkan and Jelili, 2010) is a reflection of multiple nuclei pattern and a reminiscence of Harris and Ulman (1945) theory of multiple nuclei.

It follows, therefore, that urban ecology determines the spatial distribution of beggars across the city. In Nigeria, begging activities is more concentrated in commercial, public and high density land use and other types and forms of land use as these are features of the central areas and junctions of major transport corridors of most Nigerian cities.

CONCLUSION

Apart from the obvious fact which suggests that begging is a social malaise, the sociological investigation into the problem of begging appears to have been jettisoned amongst several authors. This may be responsible for the failures to provide effective solution to the menace. Begging is a social problem and its understanding, explanation, and prediction require a thorough knowledge of the social forces that promote it. Any attempt to confront the problem in isolation of social measure is not likely to yield positive results. This study, therefore, provides a sociological direction for future research in begging.

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