

**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO VIOLENT KILLINGS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA:
FAILED PARENTING AND UNRESOLVED TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES
PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

The surge in violent killings in Southeast Nigeria had reached alarming proportions, affecting individuals across all socioeconomic strata. This theoretical study explored underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon, drawing on established literature to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding. The General Aggression Model (AGM) served as a theoretical foundation, showcasing the interplay between childhood experiences, parental factors, and situational triggers. This study suggested that failed parenting and unresolved traumatic experiences were pivotal factors in the development of violent tendencies. These early-life experiences, coupled with situational factors, contributed to the escalation of violence. The study recommended mandatory psychological evaluations for intending parents to ascertain their level of psychological readiness. Also, programs that promote positive parenting practices and policies which address these situational triggers should be developed and rigorously implemented in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: past traumatic experience, failed parenting, violent killing, trans-generational trauma, and psychological assessment

INTRODUCTION

South-Eastern Nigeria comprises five Igbo-speaking regions: Abia State, Anambra State, Ebonyi State, Enugu State, and Imo State. Natives of this region from time immemorial have been known to be guided by high moral principles and norms embedded deeply in their traditional ways of life, and a basic trait among them is the peaceful coexistence of all (Okafor & Nontasak, 2019). This unifying characteristic can be traced even back to the pre-colonial era when they had a well-institutionalized means of maintaining harmony and order such as the deities.

However, despite this rich cultural and philosophical peaceful heritage, South Eastern Nigeria has witnessed an alarming surge in violent killings in recent times, leaving communities devastated and in fear. This alarming surge in violent killings in South Eastern Nigeria has not only undermined the Igbo peaceful traditions, but it has to a large extent threatened the very core of the South East society.

This escalated violence has been closely associated with many factors such as the calls for secession by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (Sahara Reporters, 2020). Also, clashes between Fulani herdsmen and agricultural communities give rise to loss of lives (Daily Post, 2020). The violence further escalated, with series of dreadful

attacks carried out by unknown gunmen who targeted government establishments and military checkpoints within South Eastern Nigeria. Also worrisome are rising cases of violent killings allegedly related to kidnapping, cult activities, ritual purposes as well as inter and intra community conflicts leading to the loss of properties and lives in Southeast Nigeria.

The Multi-stakeholders Consultative Forum reported that in 2021 alone, about 254 lives were lost in 63 incidents; Ebonyi State recorded the highest violence incidence with 101 fatalities, followed by Imo State with 60 casualties, Anambra State recorded 37 losses, Abia State had a total of 33 deaths and Enugu state had 22 deaths—and the figures are still rising till date.

However, looking at this unprecedented violence, it can be deduced that some factors other than those highlighted above may have made the perpetrators more susceptible to these maladaptive behaviors. Among these other possible factors are failed parenting and past traumatic experiences.

Without a doubt, parenting style varies across families and societies with cultural backgrounds shaping the dynamics of these styles (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2024). Research has shown that parents play a crucial role in building the behavior of their children (Sarwar, 2016). In this regard, parenting styles that are detrimental to children's moral development, such as gross neglect or excessive strictness may have long-term consequences which come to light during young adulthood (Williams et al., 2010). In other words, when parents fail to provide a conducive, nourishing environment, and clear moral guidance, their children, when they reach adulthood, may be more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors including violence.

Furthermore, the persistence of violence in South Eastern Nigeria may be attributed in part to the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The region's history of collective trauma dating back to the colonial era, the Nigerian Civil War, and the ongoing political instability, may likely have contributed to the cycle of violence and mindless killings. Studies have established that traumatic experiences such as child abuse and socioeconomic trauma can increase the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in adulthood (Yao et al., 2023). Moreover, the perpetrators of these acts could be a manifestation of unresolved traumatic experiences which in turn may have altered their emotional reactivity or have numbed their sense of morality (Frewen et al., 2012).

In all, while political and security issues are partly the causes of the ongoing violence in the South East, predisposing psychological factors that make perpetrators vulnerable to such acts should not be ignored. Thus, exploring the relationship between parental inputs and traumatic experiences may provide substantial understanding for the purpose of curtailing the menace and preventing future escalations.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this study was to provide a theoretical explanation to violent killings in Southeast Nigeria using failed parenting as key thrust of argument.

Specifically, this study explored relevance of theories such as Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, Subculture Violence Theory and General Aggression Model to the understanding of violent killings in Southeast region of Nigeria, fuelled by failed parenting and past traumatic experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a theoretical research design and secondary data, aimed at exploring the relationship between failed parenting, past traumatic experiences, and violent killings in Southeast region of Nigeria. The study relied on a comprehensive review of existing literature, while General Aggression Model (AGM) was adopted as the theoretical framework.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Violent Killings

Violence refers to the use of physical force to cause harm to people (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025). This definition encompasses both physical and emotional pain, injury, and death. One key ingredient as portrayed in the above definition is that violence comes only through physical force. However, Krug et al. (2002) provided a more elaborate explanation: violence, according to Krug, is the intentional or premeditated use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another individual, group, or oneself, which often results in injury, death or psychological harm. In this regard, it is safe to assert that what makes up violence includes intention, direct or indirect actions as encapsulated as threats or actual actions, which are targeted to another person or oneself with the propensity to cause either physical or psychological pain. In the context of this study, violent killings can be operationalized as an act that encompasses various forms of homicide including but not limited to murder, execution-style killings, and assassinations.

Asides the sociopolitical and psychological factors underlying maladaptive behaviors are also biological mechanisms. When individuals encounter stress or a perceived threat, the body automatically triggers a fight-or-flight response (Arthur et al., 2011). This response is regulated by a specific set of neurons in the hypothalamus and brainstem which simultaneously activate the sympathetic nervous system and releases adrenal catecholamine. In other words, the human brain is programmed to respond to threats with violent behavior if necessary. Threats in this regard could imply the heavy presence of the military within the Southeast or improvisational pressure from the environment. With this now in mind, violent killings in South Eastern Nigeria can be conceptualized as a series of targeted attacks that result in the loss of human life. These killings are often characterized by political and economic motives. Additionally, it cuts across various inhuman acts such as armed robbery, kidnappings, cult clashes, and ritual killings.

Failed Parenting

Parenting involves the intentional efforts of both mother and father to build their children, instilling in them the moral, emotional, and psychological properties that will shape their later behavior and judgments. However, the concept of parenting is not restricted only to biological parents. This means that the science of parenting can be carried out by anyone in custody of a child. There is also a clear distinction between parenting and parenthood. Parenthood in this regard refers to the state of being a parent, whether biological, adoptive, or legal. On the contrary, parenting encompasses the behavioral, moral, economic, and psychological responsibilities and relationships involved in nurturing a child. Therefore, it is safe to say that while parenthood is static, parenting is dynamic and it involves care, guidance, love, communication, and support for the child. The lack of these psychological necessities is referred to as failed parenting.

Research has identified poor family upbringing as a contributing factor to societal problems.

Evidence from studies has consistently shown that flawed parental guidance and values have unimaginable consequences, including the perpetuation of insurgencies such as the ones going on in Northeast region of Nigeria (Orji et al., 2023). Additionally, Holden and Miller (1999) pointed out that there is a significant effect of parental values the children's behaviour. Failed parenting has also been linked to deviant behaviours especially when the child lacks emotional support in their formative years (John-Langba et al., 2006). Furthermore, inadequate parental monitoring has been identified as a risk factor for negative behaviours in children (Diclemente et al., 2002). When parents fail to give attention and feedback to their children's behaviour maybe as a result of work or mindful negligence, it affects societal values and hinders moral development (Oliogu, 2023).

The consequences of failed parenting can be far-reaching; in many instances, parents engage in behaviours that are detrimental to their children's moral growth, such as substance abuse, without regard for the impressionable nature of their young audience. The Igbo proverb "one person does not raise a child" portrays the importance of communal involvement in childcare. However, in modern times, many parents have adopted what can be termed and overprotective approach, neglecting to provide discipline when necessary. This failure to correct children's misbehaviour in turn affects their sense of morality.

Furthermore, some parents who exhibit abusive tendencies resort to verbal and physical aggression, as well as aversive measures such as starvation without justification. These actions can inflict lasting emotional injuries on some children. Another disturbing trend is the willingness of some parents to compromise their children's moral values for their economic gain; regardless of economy difficulties, parenting is a duty of which there should not be a justification for failure. For instance, encouraging and supporting cybercrime, such as "Yahoo" fraud, can perpetuate a culture of dishonesty, lack of empathy, and disregard for human life.

Past Traumatic Experience

Past traumatic experience has been conceptualized in various ways throughout the psychological literature: According to Van Der Kolk (2014), traumatic experiences are events that overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life and create a sense of helplessness that persists in the body and mind long after the event has passed. He emphasizes that trauma is not just an event which took place in the past, but is also the imprint which that experience has left on the mind, brain, and body. Herman (1992) further sees traumatic experiences as events that overwhelm ordinary human adaptations to life. She emphasizes that traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. The key aspect is that these events render victims helpless by overwhelming their ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. In the same vein, Terr (1991) sees traumatic experiences as external events that create an internal change in the individual's physical and psychological response systems, leading to lasting psychological consequences. Levine (1997) approaches trauma from a somatic perspective. He defined it as any experience that overwhelms the nervous system's capacity to respond effectively and resolve the event's impact. He emphasizes that it's not the event itself that creates trauma, but rather the individual's inability to complete the natural physiological responses to that event. Porges (2011) conceptualizes traumatic experiences from neurobiological perspective, defining them as events that trigger prolonged activation of defensive physiological states, disrupting

the individual's ability to feel safe and engage socially. It can be deduced from the above definitions that traumatic experience is a distressing event or situation that causes significant physical, emotional, or psychological harm. It could be a one-time event or a series of events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope.

Van der Kolk (2014) argues that childhood trauma fundamentally alters both brain development and emotional regulation capabilities, potentially creating a foundation for violent behavior. His research demonstrates how trauma-induced alterations in the limbic system can lead to increased aggression and difficulty controlling impulses. Herman (1992) further introduced the concept of “complex trauma,” suggesting that prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences, particularly during developmental years, creates patterns of behavior that may include violence as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Widom's (1989) groundbreaking longitudinal studies established strong evidence for the “cycle of violence” hypothesis, showing that individuals who experienced abuse in childhood were significantly more likely to engage in violent behavior as adults. However, she emphasizes that this is not deterministic — many trauma survivors never become violent. In the same vein, Perry and Szalavitz (2017) detailed how trauma affects neural development, particularly in areas responsible for impulse control and emotional regulation. Their research indicates that trauma-induced changes in stress response systems can create a heightened state of arousal, leading to increased aggressive responses to perceived threats. Gilligan (2001) approaches the trauma-violence connection from a sociological perspective, arguing that social shame and humiliation compound individual trauma, creating conditions that make violence more likely. He emphasizes the role of social structures in either mitigating or exacerbating trauma's impact on violent behavior. Bloom (2013) presents the Sanctuary Model, demonstrating how understanding trauma's role in violence can inform more effective intervention strategies. She argues that addressing underlying trauma is essential for violence prevention. Recent work by Ford and Courtois (2020) integrates multiple theoretical perspectives, suggesting that trauma's impact on violence operates through multiple pathways - biological, psychological, and social. They emphasize the importance of considering both individual and collective trauma in understanding violent behavior.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)

Social learning theory was introduced by Albert Bandura, a Canadian American psychologist, in 1977. The theory is based on the idea that individuals learn through their interaction with others in a social context, specifically by observing the behaviour of others. Individuals assimilate and imitate a behaviour especially if their observational experiences are positive ones or include the actual reproduction of the observed motor activity. In social learning theory, learning takes place as a result of observation, imitation, and modeling. A model here is the individual being imitated.

In the context of social learning theory, failed parenting can be understood as a lack of positive modeling and reinforcement. When parents fail to provide a conducive and loving environment, the children may not develop the appropriate social skills, empathy, or emotional regulation. This can lead to aggressive behaviour. They may learn to see violence as the best way to resolve conflicts. Additionally, traumatic experiences such as being victims of neglect or abuse, or

witnessing domestic violence of any kind can have after-effects as adults. Bandura noted that observing violent behaviour can lead to the acquisition of aggressive scripts, which can guide future behaviour (Bandura & Walters, 1977).

Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism suggested that behaviour, environment, and personal factors interact and influence one another, which implies that violent killings in southeast region of Nigeria may have been influenced by environmental factors such as conflict, poverty, and lack of opportunities. These environmental factors are then shaped by personal factors like individual experiences, trauma, and or lack of education. Consequently, personal factors are influenced by behavioural factors like adopting aggressive behaviours as the best way to resolve a conflict. In other words, Smith (2020, p.14) asserted that "behaviour, the environment, and personal factors internal to the individual have a reciprocal influence on one another", which means that events that impact one of these aspects will ultimately impact others.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby and Ainsworth, 1969)

Attachment theory was proposed by Bowlby and Ainsworth in 1969, and suggested that the quality of the attachment relationship between a child and their caregiver has a strong influence on the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The theory suggests that a secure attachment relationship is characterized by responsiveness, sensitivity, and consistency, which enables the child to acquire or develop trust, a sense of security, and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1969).

On the other hand, failed parenting, which is the lack of sensitivity, responsiveness, and consistency, can lead to insecure attachment relationships. According to Ainsworth (1969), an insecure attachment is linked to a range of negative outcomes which include emotional dysregulation, violence, and aggression. Research has shown that children who experience trauma, parental neglect, or abuse are more likely to develop insecure attachment relationships, which can increase their risk of engaging in violent behaviour later in life (Bowlby, 1951). Furthermore, the political and economic hardship and marginalization of the Southeast region, coupled with the traumatic experiences of the Biafran war, may have contributed to an inter-generational transmission of trauma. This trauma may have been passed down to younger generations through insecure attachment relationships with their parents, who themselves experienced trauma during the war.

Subculture of violence theory (Cohen, 1972)

According to Cohen (1972), youths develop a cultural style of violence as a means of coping with their circumstances and resisting any form of dominant societal values. This subculture arises as a way for them to show their dissatisfaction, anger, or frustration with their immediate environment that they feel powerless to change.

In the context of Southeast region of Nigeria, some factors like military brutality, separatist ideologies, political oppression, marginalization, unemployment, and poverty can contribute to the development of a subculture of violence among the young population. These individuals may have turned to violence as a means of expression, subjective dissatisfaction, and a form of resistance against the dominant culture that oppresses them. Within this subculture which is deeply rooted in the belief that violence is the only way forward, the violence itself becomes an

approved means of expression.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The General Aggression Model (GAM) is a comprehensive and integrative framework for understanding the factors that contribute to aggressive behaviour, including violent killings (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). According to this model, aggression is the direct result of the interaction between situational and personal factors, which influence a person's internal state, judgment, and behaviour. GAM posited that aggression is the result of the activation of aggressive thoughts, feelings, and biological arousal that are influenced by both the distal and the proximal processes.

Distal processes are the long-term factors that shape an individual's aggressive tendencies, such as traumatic experiences, exposure to violence, and poor parenting styles. On the other hand, proximal processes refer to the immediate situational factors that trigger aggression. In the context of this paper, failed parenting and past traumatic experiences can be seen as distal processes that can influence the development of aggressive tendencies. Failed parenting which is characterized by inconsistency, neglectful parental practices, and abusive demeanour can lead to aggressive cognition and behavioural scripts, perceptual schemas, and attitudes that promote violence (Bushman & Anderson, 2009). The same can be said for past traumatic experiences, such as exposure to violence or abuse (Carnagey et al., 2007). Furthermore, proximal processes such as situational factors can then trigger aggressive behaviour, and factors such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality can create an environment that fosters aggression and violence. In other words, the tendency for aggression and violent killing is influenced by distal processes, while the trigger to commit and exhibit such behaviour is fostered by proximal processes.

DISCUSSION

This paper reviewed existing theories which aimed to explain possible causes of violence laying more emphasis on failed parenting and past traumatic experiences. The social learning theory by Bandura (1977) explained that violence is learned through observation and modeling. Parents who show bad examples to their children jeopardize their children's moral and behavioural development, thereby becoming a problem for society when they become adults. Additionally, Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1969) theories of attachment were reviewed. It elaborated on the role of secure and insecure attachment relationships with primary caregivers in shaping an individual's sense of judgment, positing that individuals with insecure attachment relationships are at risk of developing aggressive and violent tendencies. The social learning theory and the attachment theory both recognize the importance of significant others and social context in moral, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development.

Furthermore, Cohen's Subculture of Violence theory opined that youths engage in violence as a means of expression against societal oppression and to protest against situations they feel helpless to change. On the contrary, the general aggression model which provided a framework for this paper showed that aggression including the devastating killings in the Southeast region is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including environmental factors, social, psychological, and physiological factors. It emphasized the distal and proximal processes and how they influence each other. This framework to an extent is in agreement with the subculture

of violence theory as it also posits that violence is triggered by something that also is referred to as situational.

The review highlighted the important role of societal factors in perpetuating violent killings in South Eastern Nigeria. These factors, which emanate from the societal structure, are multifaceted and intertwined. For example, the modern childcare and nuclear family structure which emphasizes individualism over communalism, may contribute to inadequate moral and behavioural development in children. In contrast, the traditional Igbo communal childcare system, which fosters a sense of community, shared responsibility, and discipline, may offer a more effective approach to promoting pro-social behaviour and putting an end to the loss of human lives in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that communities within Southeast region of Nigeria should develop and implement parenting programs that promote positive parenting practices.
2. Also, there is a need to acknowledge and address the historical trauma and hate imprinted and experienced by the Southeast region of Nigerians.
3. It is also recommended that intending parents or potential parents undergo a psychological evaluation to identify and address any unresolved trauma or abuse that may impact their parenting and child's overall well-being.

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