STREET CHILDREN, AIDS ORPHANS, AND UNPROTECTED MINORS:
WHAT YOU READ IS NOT WHAT YOU SEE: RESEARCH AND
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE
Lewis Aptekar, Professor
Counselor Education
San Jose State University

Abstract: A bit more than twenty-five years ago I was on the streets with children in Cali, Colombia. I was there as a researcher, an assistant professor eager to write a book. I did: Street Children of Cali (1988a). Since then my work has taken me to four continents and about thirty countries. Along the way, I have conducted ethnographic research with several groups of urban youth who are, as UNICEF says, “children of particularly difficult circumstances.” These include children with psychosocial reactions to disasters (Aptekar 1994b; Aptekar and Boor 1990), children traumatized by war (Aptekar and Abebe 1994a; Aptekar and Giel 2002), and disabled children living in low-income countries (Aptekar 1983; 1986). In this paper, I offer to researchers what I have learned about street children and ethnography.

I approach this in three parts. First I present some issues related to understanding the phenomenon of street children. Second, I discuss my perspective on street children in their family and societal context. Finally, I suggest how researchers can collect valid and reliable data and understand how their own experiences may shape their interpretation and representation of those data.

Key words: street children; ethnography; social responsibility; humanitarian assistance

Defining Street Children

It is not clear who street children are. Some research inadvertently defines all poor children as street children. There are many definitions that include many children, and the results from studies are widely divergent. I define street children as preadolescent children who sleep on the streets. I omit working children who earn money for their families and return to them at night.

Another point that needs to be made about street children is that society’s perception of them changes once they reach the physical appearance of adolescence. At this time, they are viewed as dangerous adults rather than as pitiful and bothersome youth. They are tolerated only if they can be seen as pitiful or cute, but once they look menacing they are no longer tolerated by a society that fears their independence.

1 I am often asked if there are street children in the developed world. Based on my observations in Portland, Oregon, the young people living on the streets there are teenagers, primarily runaways, and because they are adolescents I do not define them as street children.
Counting Street Children

Many authors over generalize their findings, using a small non-random sample to suggest a much larger population, thereby leading the public to think that the problem is more severe than it is. Readers tend to believe the numbers printed in scholarly articles no matter how many disclaimers the author includes regarding these numbers. Once an article is published, it is common that others in the field will cite the numbers in future research. In this way, faulty numbers, once published, become research facts prominent in the field, even if the original author provides disclaimers that downplay their validity.

The media, from which many researchers take data, are motivated to sell their products, so they emphasize the youngest and the most pitiful or delinquent children, and inflate numbers to arouse the public. Reporting is also inconsistent (see Aptekar and Ciano 1999 for details). For example, in July 1994, the Daily Nation reported that there were half a million youth living on Kenyan streets, three hundred thousand of them in Nairobi.2 However, according to an article appearing in the same newspaper two weeks later, the number of street children in Nairobi was thirty thousand.3 In 1991, Undugu, the largest and most experienced group working with street children in Kenya, estimated five to ten thousand street children in Nairobi.

Professional publications present Kenyan street children as a unified, undifferentiated whole. The views of the general public reflect the lack of clarity and the inaccuracies found in research. When we (Aptekar and Ciano 1999) organized focus groups to ascertain the public’s opinion of street children, estimates of their number in Nairobi ranged from a thousand to one hundred thousand.

Thoughts on Cause and Effect

I separate the causes that lead children to go to the streets and the responses of the children once they are on the streets. My experience suggests that while much has changed since I started this work in 1983, there has been one constant: poverty, which I believe is a necessary but not sufficient condition for children to go to the streets. At the time of my original work, the causation hypotheses (rather than empirical evidence) were mainly related to anomic caused by rural-to-urban migration and abuse at home.

The abuse and rural-to-urban migration continue, but there are new reasons for children to go to the streets. Some have been orphaned by AIDS, war, or natural disasters.4 Some children on the streets are stateless; others are part of the increasing number of refugees and displaced people. Some street children are the children of undocumented immigrants.5 Most of these situations are exacerbated by bad economic times, often from programs like structural adjustment that curtail social services to the poorest children.6

About the time of the publication of the book Street Children of Cali (Aptekar 1988a), the Colombian war between the various groups of guerilleros and the state was reaching a new level of violence. This was the beginning of street children as provocateurs of intra-state political violence. Violence was often part of the rite of initiation.

There are problems with focusing on the causes of the phenomenon of street children. Cause-and-effect thinking does not account for the fact that only a small number of children that have the same background become street children. Focusing on causation can lead to tautological thinking: street children are delinquent or abandoned and therefore all kids who are delinquent or abandoned are street children. Because street children are poor, some observers might conflate them with poor children who earn a living and are in public view. All of these are reasons why the numbers of street children easily get inflated (as discussed above).

Coping and Resilience

While I acknowledge that it is important to be clear about the experiences children bring to the streets, I put more emphasis on how children cope and how they are treated once they are on the streets. Take Roberto and Antonio, two 11-year-old street boys in Cali, Colombia whom I called gamines (Aptekar 1990b). A Catholic priest I worked with

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2 “We Will Care for Nairobi’s Children,” Nairobi Daily Nation, July 6, 1994, p. A.
4 The UNAIDS Report on the Global Aids Epidemic (2002) stated that by the year 2010, over 100 million children would lose one or both parents, with 25 million becoming “double” orphans.
5 In some cases they have been abandoned because international treaties on war and migration are not being followed (Veal and Donna 2003).
said that *gamines* are the street children who have chosen a life of partial misery with liberty rather than continue a life of total misery and no independence.

Every morning Roberto and Antonio went to the El Paradiso restaurant, where they washed the front sidewalk with a hose in exchange for leftover sobres (food). On one particular day, Antonio put the plastic bag of sobres over his shoulder and the two of them went to a quiet side street, sat down in the shade, and emptied the food, which was lumped together in a mass about the size of a small pillow. They ate some of it and traded the rest with a blind man for a few pesos and a couple of used cigarettes.

As they got on the bus that was going to the cemetery, they asked the driver to let them ride for free so they might ask for food, since, they said, they were starving. On the bus, Roberto put on a pitiful expression and began to sing soulfully about the difficulties of having a sick mother whom he was trying to support. The song concluded with, “Would you give my mother a few pesos so she could go to the doctor?” He got a few pesos, enough to pay for their ride to the cemetery. Meanwhile, Antonio lodged himself in the exit well, standing in the way of passengers getting off, offering them his hand so they might climb down more easily. Most of the passengers ignored him; some were indignant and made comments to the bus driver; a few found his performance amusing and gave him a coin.

Once at the cemetery the two boys met a few older friends and gave them some of the bus money for a ladder, which they carried over to an area where relatives were visiting a loved one’s grave. As it was nearly impossible to place wreaths on the higher grave-sites, Roberto and Antonio earned money by renting out the use of the ladder.

In the evening they went to *la sexta* (the sixth avenue, an avenue of shops and restaurants in the fashionable side of town), where because of their dishevelled appearance, the boys were perceived as a menace. After receiving some malignant looks and rude comments from people, they stopped on a side street where a young and rather affluent couple were dining. When the boys asked them for food, the couple tried to ignore them. The two boys, sensing that they were intruding on a special occasion, were insistent, thinking that they were likely to be paid to leave the diners alone. Finally, the man who was dining told them in a loud voice to leave, which only indicated to the boys they were winning the battle of nerves. The diner called the waiter for help, who told the boys to go, but they were back in a few moments. Roberto approached the table from one side asking once more for something to eat, while Antonio came from the other side and grabbed a piece of meat off the woman’s plate. Running and laughing, the two boys receded into the darkened street (Aptekar 1988a).

While I didn’t know the background of Roberto and Antonio, I can say that the wit and sass (and intellectual skills) of *gamines* like Roberto and Antonio were not typical of all the street children I found on Colombian streets. Another group of street children coped with street life by becoming servile to the more powerful. I called this group *chupagruesos* (*chupar* means to suck and refers to those who suck up to the bigger boys). *Chupagruesos* are more pushed than pulled into the street, while the *gamines* are more pulled than pushed (Aptekar 1993).

The *chupagruesos*, as lackeys to the more powerful children, tend to have more mental health problems. When trading favors for security they are often taken advantage of. For example, soon after his new stepfather started demanding that he bring home a certain amount of money each day for his room and board, Luiz was befriended by Jorge, an older street boy who made his living shining shoes. Jorge taught his trade to Luiz, but after a few weeks he demanded that Luiz, despite his fear of doing so, beg for money. After a while, Jorge taught Luiz how to help him steal a watch from a street vendor. As Jorge walked behind the vendor and got his attention, Luiz was supposed to grab a watch and run, but the man grabbed Luiz instead, which led to Luiz being put in the reform school where his low status among his peers continued. In short, by being dependent on the more powerful (whether fellow street children like Jorge or the general public), *chupagruesos* lacked the independence of *gamines* in their daily coping strategies.

**Deviance and Normative**

Up until now, I have been referring to street children as a whole without specifying gender, but there are important gender differences. By looking more closely at street boys and street girls and putting each into the context of their child development, the erroneous notion of deviance becomes much easier to understand. My research has found that most (but not all) street boys are taught by their mothers to cope with the necessity of having to live in a very limited economic environment by becoming independent at a far earlier age than the dominant society deems appropriate (Aptekar 1990a; 1992b). Thus, when compared to other poor boys and to the other boys in the family, street boys are the more resilient, since the less resilient boys are unable to leave home.

The opposite situation exists for street girls. Mothers teach their daughters to cope with the vagaries of poverty by staying at home and out of the streets. Thus, street girls (for the most part) are often more psychologically challenged than their sisters who stay at home. These girls begin street life much later than boys, usually not before they are ten years of age. Even though they may appear to be alone, an older sibling often supervises them. As girls become
pubescent, they are perceived (and evaluated) in sexual terms. By the time they are young women, they follow in their mother’s footsteps by having children, usually many and by different men, who as a rule do not view them as legitimate wives worthy of continued financial support.

Because boys are expected to bring income into the house by living on the streets, while girls are expected to stay at home and help with the household chores, street boys and street girls relate to their families of origin differently. It is quite common for street boys to remain connected to their mothers; indeed they often contribute part of their incomes to them. On the other hand, because girls are taught that they are supposed to remain at home, street girls often have distant and more difficult relationships with their families of origin (Aptekar 1999c).

The results of our work in Ethiopia are noteworthy here (Aptekar and Abebe 1997; Aptekar and Heinonen 2003). Boys who had no connection with street life were encouraged by their parents to go out and play football and other games during weekends and school holidays. Girls aged eight and older were discouraged from playing in the street due to fear that they would be bullied or sexually harassed and because it was conduct unbecoming for nice girls. Mothers seldom approved of their daughters being outside playing and preferred them to be at home or in the neighborhood where they lived (Heinonen 2000). Further still, in Kenya, adolescent boys traditionally sleep apart from their families and often in groups. Street boys in the country continue this tradition (Kilbride et al. 2000).

The data suggest that street boys are commonly on the streets because they have been brought up to be independent, whereas street girls are on the streets because they are fleeing a very difficult situation. We tested this notion in Kenya and, as expected, the street girls’ mental health was considerably worse than that of the street boys (Aptekar and Ciano 1999). Throughout the developing world, as many as 90 percent of street children are male; contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of street children are not psychopathological, or otherwise delinquent and drug-abusing, and many have developed adequate coping strategies, which allow them to function at least as well as their poor counterparts who spend less time in public view. These coping strategies include finding a niche in the economic market, which gives them sufficient income to eat and clothe themselves; finding and taking advantage of programs that serve them; and being sufficiently informed about their physical health to stay reasonably healthy. They form close friendships with their peers and, in many cases, belong to strong communities. At the same time, they consistently maintain some form of connection to their family of origin.

Street Children, Their Families, and Their Social Contexts

Street children and their families are seen and described by people whose subculture is different from their own (Aptekar 1989c). We (Aptekar and Ciano 1999) noted such a case in our ethnographic description of a Nairobi mother living in Mathare Valley with four of her six children (four boys and two girls) in one room no bigger than a small bedroom in an American middle-class home. Two blankets, hung up by clothespins, divided the room. Behind one blanket was the mother’s loft, behind the other, three levels of shelves, each of which was used for a bed. In one corner was a small one-burner propane stove that was surrounded by two pots and a stool. The only source of light in the house was from the front door. Open sewage ran from the front door, through the walkway, and down to the front of the house, where it met the drainage from other homes. The mother never attended school, had no job skills, and was illiterate. She was barely able to support herself and her children by selling illegal beer. Her two oldest boys, half brothers well into their teens, both lived and made a living on the streets. They came home periodically, usually with a gift, and were very welcome. Their mother had taught them that the time they could stay at home without making a contribution ended shortly before puberty. The male children accepted this. They preferred the streets to their home, particularly since they could come home when they needed to.

One cultural interpretation of this mother’s situation would describe her as irresponsible and immoral, but we laid claim to seeing her as coping adequately. She taught her two oldest boys to make their own way, she found a means to feed the other four children at home, and she fulfilled her hopes of educating as many of her children as possible by using the sale of illegal brew to pay the children’s school fees. The children’s period of dependence ended early and their adolescent independence was accelerated. The cultural notion that poor single mothers are, by virtue of being single and poor, irresponsible and incapable of raising moral and productive children represents a culturally ethnocentric point of view that, without sufficient and valid data, pejoratively labels these families, in large part because the mothers have developed their own cultural criteria for the supervision and protection of their children (different from those

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7 The reader should note that this is both an extrapolation and based on the chapter author’s experience. For a review of street children in the developing world that includes the argument for street children being less benign, see Aptekar 1988; Aptekar 1994.
The problems of collecting data with street children are significant. It is often difficult to identify who the children are and in what context they are living. There are three areas that I believe are particularly problematic: sample selection, data collection, and representation. I discuss these to provide suggestions for improving ethnographic research and analyses of street children.

In addition to the previously-mentioned problems of being clear who the children are and in what context they are living, there are three areas that I believe are particularly problematic when doing ethnography with street children: sampling, data collection, and representation. I discuss these to provide suggestions for how to improve ethnographic research and analyses of street children.

More than ten years ago my research team and I established a valid procedure for choosing a random sample of street children while working in Kenya. Nevertheless, almost all research with street children does not utilize a random sample. As you will see below, it is time consuming, needs particular skills that many ethnographers do not have, and can be costly.

Yet without random sampling, the numbers of street children and their characteristics remain guesswork. The same can be said about many significant demographics such as gender ratios, income and ethnicity of families, etc. To collect our random sample in Nairobi, we started with a map of the city. By using former street children and others who were called to define households, households are the central concept in census data and what was lacking in former estimates of street children in a particular space. We then placed the choums on the map of the city. This gave us areas of the city with high and low concentrations of street children. This map was divided into equal grids, which were then labelled with high or low concentrations of households. We then selected a stratified random sample of the high and low areas of households for collecting census data.

The census takers collected data on the numbers of street children in each choum in the randomly selected areas for three successive nights, and then at weekly intervals for three weeks. Each data collection team had the same structured interview format to collect demographic data.

Because we knew that street children are not good reporters of demographic information, such as ages and family circumstances, we worked in pairs. While one member of the team asked the child’s age, the other made an independent estimate of the child’s age. Similar procedures were used for comparing the child’s stated tribal affiliation with physical characteristics and language skills. The degree of discrepancy noted gave us some idea about the validity of information the child was supplying, and by using this procedure three times we had some notion of reliability.

The census data was then used to estimate the population, which would determine how large samples had to be to make statistical comparisons. Because we were working with a relatively small sample and were checking on them daily and nightly we were able to understand the degree to which they moved from choum to home, the gender ratio, and

Espoused by the middle and upper social classes). Not only does the pejorative attitude condemn the hard effort of mothers, but it also dismisses the fact that unmarried mothers can raise children without a husband.

In Colombia, another related contextual factor concerned two forms of child-rearing that created a serious tension between family structures and social classes. The socially acceptable and class-dominant Spanish patrifocal family had child-rearing demands that children stay close and loyal to their families (Aptekar 1988b). Thus the middle-class adolescents congregating in front of the Kentucky Fried Chicken as they waited to study English were appropriately pursuing the desires of their parents to secure a future spot in a bilingual, cross-cultural world. Similarly, working-class children were learning to follow their fathers by being vendors or vendors’ helpers in El Centro. Street children, coming from matrifocal family structures, were also following their family tradition by being allowed to drift away from home and parental authority much earlier than the patrifocal family deemed appropriate.

Thus, if the street children like the ones working with the deranged in the Plaza de Caicedo or with the blind in front of La Ermita were seen, at their age, as functional, they might well have challenged the importance of “family authority” as it was perceived from the patriarchal point of view. The street children found themselves inheriting a class struggle based on deep-seated cultural and family traditions. Their lives were not carefully examined because the children had more value as objects in this larger struggle than they did as individuals. The children also participated in this scenario. They could feel the disdain, and part of their learning to outwit authority was a payback to irk higher society’s concept of the appropriate role of children. In so doing, they were living out the fantasies of many well-off children who dream about outwitting their parents, as well as the fantasies of many adults who dream about outwitting those to whom they are beholden. In fact, the street children were uncompromising heroes in a society where there was little room for heroism, particularly within the confines of the existing political and social power structure. As such, they were repellent to some and attractive to others.

Problems in Collecting Data with Street Children

In addition to the previously-mentioned problems of being clear who the children are and in what context they are living, there are three areas that I believe are particularly problematic when doing ethnography with street children: sampling, data collection, and representation. I discuss these to provide suggestions for how to improve ethnographic research and analyses of street children.

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The census data was then used to estimate the population, which would determine how large samples had to be to make statistical comparisons. Because we were working with a relatively small sample and were checking on them daily and nightly we were able to understand the degree to which they moved from choum to home, the gender ratio, and
so forth. By having a random sample we could address important hypotheses about their mental health. From our sample, we chose a stratified random sample of street children with differing degrees of street experience, from those who had just arrived on the streets to those who had been around for a while. When we coupled this with various measures of mental health, we were able to get an idea of whether or not the length of time on the streets diminished a child’s mental health (not necessarily).

Once a random sample is in place, there are other challenges that must be met. In order to avoid bias, ethnographers should routinely compare the children’s answers given to different data collectors. Data collectors themselves should come from different academic disciplines, ethnic groups, genders, social statuses, ages, and so forth. They should further chart how street children respond differently to different people given the same question.

While almost all researchers are aware of adjusting Western methods to cross-cultural purposes, I warn them not to make the mistake of overlooking the obvious. For example, in my work in Kaliti, the Ethiopian refugee camp, after taking a random sample, we began developing and collecting data on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through tests developed in the U.S. and Europe. We subsequently worked on translations and back translations, establishing local norms, training local data gatherers, and otherwise working on the issues of taking tests in one culture and using them in another. It should also be pointed out that many of these children did not have adequate age documentation, and of course all standardized tests are normed on age.

In an attempt to get the best data collectors, we chose the brightest and most competent university students. However, these students came from privileged backgrounds and were not familiar with the living conditions of the adolescents in the refugee camp. Because of this and other social class differences, the researchers sat together in one tent to collect the data, ate lunch together, and left together at the end of the day.

In addition, being very poor and being paid for participating meant that children vied for the option to participate. Some children on the list took the psychological testing that was the basis of the study more than once under the wishes the adolescents in the photos might have for their future. Many of these research problems could have been avoided by having the data collectors and the people in charge of the study work together more closely. The tendency was to finish fast and inflate psychological difficulties, because they thought that their fictitious circumstances would bring them more aid. Since the data collectors were new to the field and did not venture out into the refugee camp, they did not know the children and were not aware that some of them bought the names of others.

In addition, when the children were answering the questions, there was no way to confirm the accuracy of their responses. Many subjects rushed through their tests so as to complete them and get paid. They were more interested in getting the money than in telling some person they did not know the accurate details of their awful experiences in full hearing of their peers. The tendency was to finish fast and inflate psychological difficulties, because they thought that their fictitious circumstances would bring them more aid. Since the data collectors were being paid piecemeal, they, too, had their reasons to get through with the protocols rather than have accurate answers. Many of these research problems could have been avoided by having the data collectors and the people in charge of the study work together more closely. But the above is a paradigm often used to triangulate ethnographic data, and because the discipline gives more credence to quantitative than qualitative data, numbers usually trump observations.

I think there are some ways of dealing with this issue. When collecting non-ethnographic data, researchers should use performance-related or projective measures. Even if the street children are not literate, they can build their own life story by cutting out photos from magazines. While this does not give standardized data, it does help researchers get a sense of how reliable the standardized data is. For instance, I have used photographs from local magazines as projective techniques by asking the children to explain what they see in relationships between people, or to tell me about their preferences or their fears in ordinal amounts.

By having a random sample we could address important hypotheses about their mental health. From our sample, we chose a stratified random sample of street children with differing degrees of street experience, from those who had just arrived on the streets to those who had been around for a while. When we coupled this with various measures of mental health, we were able to get an idea of whether or not the length of time on the streets diminished a child’s mental health (not necessarily).

I also like having them answer incomplete sentences, and take the three wishes test. Another example is to force the children to make Q sorts showing their preferences or their fears in ordinal amounts.

For another example, see Hecht’s work (1998) in Brazil. Also, in Uganda, Young and Barrett (2001) used microphones as stage prompts for children to tell their stories as a radio announcer might do. Street Children International (Suave 2003) had their workers tell the kids fictional stories about street children based on their experience
Furthermore, a much overlooked and extremely important method of getting standardized psychological data is the mental status exam (MSE), which essentially is the psychological equivalent of a physician’s physical exam, thus providing a look into the child’s mental health at the moment. Psychological data can yield information on how well (or poorly) the child is functioning, if there are mental health issues that need treatment, and a variety of important intellectual and cognitive measures.

For example, mental status includes an assessment of the child’s appearance (tics, tremors, degree of taking care of oneself with cuts or wounds, motor behavior, etc.); memory (including short-term memory, which is particularly sensitive to concentration and alertness); thought processes (not if they are logical, but if there are any delusions); and other types of psychological functioning. The assessment enables researchers to answer questions including what the child’s speech is like, whether the tone is appropriate, if the flow of speech is slow or pressured, whether the tone quality is unusual, and if the volume is appropriate. Furthermore, it enables us to figure out what the child’s level of vocabulary is and whether the child has a problem finding words, in misusing words, or in finding the names of well-known objects.

Finally, researchers must remember the well-known fact that they cannot accept what the kids say as truthful. In my experience, almost no one who collects data can completely eliminate the distortion of information that the children are likely to produce. In fact, the ethnographer might find that their relationship of trust or friendship leads to increased distortion because the children have more invested in the relationship, and because the more familiar researchers are with them, the more adept street children are at manipulating information to get what they want. In my opinion, how the ethnographer comes to terms with this and how they help to align what they learn with objective and subjective reality should be part of the ethnography. This is the best way for ethnographers to assure the reader that they have not overly romanticized the children, which tends to create a bias toward resilience, or overly dramatized the children, depicting them as worse off than they are (Aptekar 1992a).

What is less commonly accepted is that what street children say is both meaningful and important to understanding them. For example, in Haiti, Kovats-Bernat (2006) found that street children routinely told the author made up stories, such as when they spoke about their adoring mothers who had in fact rejected them. Hecht (1998) found that in Northeast Brazil, when street children spoke about their mothers, they also gave particularly unreliable information. He took this to mean that the topic held something of importance, namely the children’s troubled relations to their mothers. So a good ethnographer must try to assess the factual bases of responses and also analyze the ways street children present themselves.

Representing Street Children through an Ethnographic Lens

I am not surprised when I survey the field and see a good deal of contradictory information about what life is like for street children. Hecht’s (1998) research suggests that street children, at least in Northeast Brazil, lead a ruthless and violent life with a short and bleak future, even in comparison to other poor children. Unlike the poor kids who stay at home, he postulates that street children have had a painful break with their mothers. They are to be pitied, in spite of the violence they display, and they are not happy or resilient.

Other researchers argue that street life can be better than other options available to poor children in developing countries, children whose parents have insufficient resources to support the family. This viewpoint is exemplified by my own work and the work of others (Aptekar 1988a, 1999; 2004; Ennew 1994; Panter-Brick 2004; Swart 1990). The point I want to make is that this is not just an academic argument about the possibility of distorting ethnographic data because of one’s own view. Perhaps the answer lies in the extent to which the researcher is aware of his or her point of view.

As an ethnographer, I am asked to participate, but with distance. I am told to belong, but to remain objective. If I write about how I have been changed by the field experience, then I fear the text will be described as sentimental, as a self-indulgent embellishment. If I explain how I have interpreted the data because of my past experiences, then my conclusions will be dismissed as subjective. On the other hand, if I give only the cool presentation of the detached narrator then I open myself up to criticisms of a narrative without the convincing depth that comes from personal experience but also one that forces the reader to accept what he writes on faith alone.

The fact, however, is that all ethnographies involve abstractions of actual experience. The process of abstracting involves deciding which phenomena are worthy of putting into words, how much each event will be of working with street youth. The children then used these stories to talk about themselves. This is the reverse of the usual storytelling method, which begins with the street youth telling their stories to the adults.
emphasized in the document, and how the experiences are combined to form ideas, concepts, and hypotheses. In short the whole document, its form and content, is a matter of choice. What makes ethnography valuable as well as valid is that this process is clearly defined. The goal should not be the elimination of the effects of personality, but a clear and concise description of it.\(^{11}\)

While I was engaged in my ethnographic study of Colombian street children, surprising as it might seem (and it seems surprising to me), I did not think about my childhood and how it might have influenced my study of these children. In part I attribute this omission to my professionalism, which I equated with being objective. I had learned as part of my professional way of doing things to exclude what might well be the heart of the ethnographer’s lifeblood, the personal valve that connects them to their subjects. In this case, I assumed I was to sever the connection between my own childhood and the children I was studying.

My ethnography about street children in Colombia takes a very decided tack (as does most of my more current work). According to the Colombian populace and to the international or organizations that served the children, the street children were considered “abandoned.” However, I described many of the children as growing up in an orderly fashion from matrifocal homes that stressed an earlier independence from their parents than was common in the socially dominant patrifocal society in which they lived. While I demonstrated that the majority of street children had adequate mental health, the prevailing point of view was that they were emotionally ill. I described the children as being free of drugs and crime, while they were commonly portrayed as addicted and delinquent.

How much of my description, which was the opposite of what almost everyone else saw, was filtered through my sadness and anger at feeling abandoned as a child, or my sense of pride at having survived (and enjoyed) the experience of being a fatherless child? It is unfortunate that I did not try to answer this question as it would have made for a more valid study. What I did in writing a traditional ethnography was to present my notes in the form of a lawyerly argument so that the conclusions seemed obvious. I left out the internal dialogue; in fact I did not even allow myself to have one. This deprived the reader of being able to make a judgment about how much of the relationship between myself and my informants existed before either of us got to the point of actually talking to each other.

To the extent that Hecht (1998) and Kovats-Bernat (2006, and in this volume) are right, and I and the others whose findings are like mine are wrong, we hold a terrible burden, or at least let me speak for myself: I do. My thinking goes something like this. How could I say that these street children lead anything but an awful existence? What is in my interior landscape that allows me to see children like Roberto and Antonio as resilient rather than as sad and pitiful? Is it that I offer hope because it gives me hope? If they can live in abhorrent conditions and survive, so can I. If things really got bad, and I lost all I held dear, I could make it too. Ethnographers must always ask themselves what they bring to and take from this work.

References


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