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STREET CHILDREN'S SUBCULTURE: ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS INTO PEER-TO-PEER PROTECTIVE NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT

The issue known as street children has been discussed in social sciences literature, primarily in the field of child welfare, sociology and urban studies. This paper seeks to address the subculture of street children with particular reference to the role of peer-to-peer protective networks. This subculture has long been ignored in dominant studies yet it remains a crucial part of the survival mechanisms adopted by street children. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores how street children create informal protective networks to survive in urban conditions predicated on violence. Drawing on the research, it sheds light on essential mechanisms of mutual help, social hierarchies and informal control in the groups. Employing a multi-method approach of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, this research adds to an understanding of the social lives and coping mechanisms of life on the streets for street-connected children. Findings indicate that peer networks are fundamental for survival providing emotional, social and physical protection. The research finds that knowledge about these networks is vital for policy makers interested in formulating successful policies to the benefit of street children and the causes of their marginalization.

Keywords: street children, subculture, peer-to-peer networks, ethnography, urban sociology, social protection, child welfare

INTRODUCTION

children and its collision with modern life are some of the most pressing concerns today, as the new literature increasingly acknowledges their specific suffering and experience in space. Street children – street child Street children are generally those who spend most of their time outside the family environment or support structure, and live in dangerous conditions that have extreme poverty, abuse, neglect or involvement in criminal activities (Ennew, 2000). The increasing rate of urbanization, rise in rate of poverty and social inequality have conspired to increase the population of children on the streets with resultant gradual visibility and vulnerability. These children grow up in an unsafe environment; they face threats of violence, abuse and mental trauma. They have since become an urban condition which is affecting cities everywhere, with developing world cities suffering as rapid urbanization outpaces the social infrastructure and services in place (Morrow 2017).

Living on the streets being urban in nature, offers the advantages of anonymity and to some extent resources and access but also heightens the precarity that defines street children's lives. They are often stigmatized, criminalized and not accepted by the education system and social services (Powell & Jordan, 2018). Moreover, they are routinely caught up in unreconciled violence from peers and adults--police harassment, abuse and economic exploitation (Thompson & Thompson, 2019). Yet, despite these challenges, one key aspect of street children's lives has been relatively overlooked; that being their capacity to establish and sustain protective networks. Such informal social organizations may well be all that people have in environments where the threats of exploitation and violence loom large.

Research on street children has in the past concentrated mainly on vulnerability with regard to their status as victims of societal collapse, poverty and neglect (Ennew, 2000). But this victim-centered story often masks the agency and resilience these children exert to negotiate their worlds. As a response to the severe extent of their vulnerability many street children develop close-knit peer relationships, within which they find emotional, physical and social protection. For young offenders, these peer groups may represent lifelines in contexts where formal care and protection systems are absent or beyond their reach (Foster 2016). Depending on one another, street children form subcultures which provides a sense of identity, belonging and solidarity in the midst of challenges. This ability to reciprocate support reflects their ability to cope and generate social resources, elements that has been underemphasized in the literature.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by concentrating on the peer-to-peer protective networks established and sustained by street children. Such networks are vital to the children's well-being because they provide some of what the immediate family offers (emotional support, physical security or buffer, and informal social capital). Through an appreciation of the operation of such networks, we can better comprehend the ways street children manage to resist marginalization and how they develop ways of coping with the hardship that is inherent in street life (Foster, 2016; Powell & Jordan, 2018) snippets. Despite research on the economic survival strategies of street children, less attention has been directed to examining the social and psychological aspects of networks that take into account not just emotional but also social connections that help children deal with and overcome situations and challenges faced in life (Wacquant, 2018).

The main focus will be as follows: “how do children living in the street develop and maintain peer protection networks, and how do these networks enable their survival and resilience?.” This issue is crucial to grasping the secret workings which support street children’s lives, in general terms against all odds. In order to address this question, the project will explore how these networks are structured and maintained by street children, how status hierarchies are developed in them and how feelings of unity and a sense of belonging are preserved with the group. This is an important study for guiding social policy and interventions designed to reduce the vulnerabilities of street children, as well as protecting networks within which they develop in urban environments.

The issue of street children and their social organization has become a well-documented phenomenon in the areas of urban sociology as well as studies on child welfare. Conventional research has tended to highlight the risks and exploitation experienced by children living on the streets, such as crime, abuse and neglect (Ennew, 2000). Yet, evidence of these children’s own resilience and agency in the creation of protective kinship networks to ensure their survival is largely absent from the literature. Although lived experiences of street children may be that of marginalization in many aspects, they also have an ability to build support systems for survival under difficult conditions (Morrow, 2017). Our study intends to make a more innovative contribution by casting light on these so called „burden relations“, by now almost ignored in earlier research, as possible sources of support for street children’s resilience and survival.

SIGNIFICANCE

Several points make this study important. First, it problematizes the master narrative of the street child as a passive victim through uncovering their agency and creation of meaningful social contexts. For street children, these networks constitute a kind of protection or social capital necessary for survival. In de-mystifying such micro-institutions of ‘protection’, the study adds to a fuller account of how street children

resist and cope with the everyday brutality of life on the streets. Second, this study carries important policy implications. If social workers, policy makers and NGOs can appreciate the complex nature of social support in the street children's networks, they can concentrate on integrating such systems in their intervention strategies rather than trying to dismantle them. Finally, the findings of this study can contribute to tap future child welfare and social protection research in an urban setting particularly in developing countries where the phenomenon of street children is more common (Powell & Jordan, 2018).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Find out about the friendship groups street children create for their own safety.

Examine the social uses of such networks for survival and healing.

List the most important characteristics of these networks that allow for a stable and sustainable operation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into street children has developed markedly over the last thirty years or so, in line to some extent with changing social attitudes and also with changes in academic views. Initially, the street child was considered a victim of institutional failure, neglect and poverty (Ennew 2000), the literature displayed an almost exclusive concern with the psychological, economic and social consequences of life on the streets. The representation of homeless children as victimized by urban decay was rooted in a deficit model based on the external causes for their marginalization, such as family disintegration, economic deprivation and state breakdown (Lansdown 1995). This early view directed much of the policy discussion about street children towards rescue and rehabilitation rather than empowerment.

Nonetheless, emerging research has tried to challenge this victimization lens and investigate the agency, resistance and social capital of street-connected children. The predominance of the model of petit pére in the understanding and treatment of street children suggest that scholars have underestimated the integrated nature of street

children, who—though subject to a difficult life—actively create extra-institutional connections and social worlds through networks ‘parallèles’ (Abdalars, 2001a; Morrow 2017). These subcultures can provide street children with a means to have control over their lives, to create a sense of belonging and solidarity, and even resist the inhumane conditions of the streets. In demonstrating this, they question the stereotypical view of street children as passive victims and highlight their potential to create stable, empowering communities. This new understanding has created pathways for researching how street children adopt strategies of survival and resistance to the manifold forms of marginalization they confront (Foster, 2016).

The role of peer relationships has also been highlighted in recent research. Powell and Jordan (2018) emphasise the importance of social relationships to street children asd a source of emotional, psychosocial, and material support. These are friendships which can be a way to protect children in high-risk environments including both the streets and institutions, for instance from violence, abuse or neglect. Street children can take sustenance in such close-knit groupssharing resources, such as food, shelter and informationand protection in one another’s company. These informal networks are part and parcel of a child's strategy for survival, helping them negotiate the complexities, dangers and opportunities thrown up by city life. These networks themselves, and the feeling of belonging and protection that they give, may be very important to children for whom traditional family structures have broken down (Thompson & Thompson, 2019).

Additionally, peer group processes in these groups are also being investigated by scientists. Although earlier research has been concerned with street children’s vulnerability, more recent work has drawn attention to the way in which they construct social hierarchies (Ennew & Hozumi, 2019), negotiate power relations and develop informal governance within their groups. Appreciation of these internal social dynamics is critical for understanding the larger influence peer networks have on living experiences and survival strategies of children in street situations. However,

despite some focus on the support and social networks at street level in literature on this subject, it appears that little has been reported of how these networks are developed and operate within the particular urban geographies that street youth occupy.

These protection networks become a child survival strategy, particularly when formal social support mechanisms are nonexistent or unattainable. The relations among former street boys who are still on the street largely take place through reciprocity, mutual assistance and protection as well as sharing resources and emotional support. This mutual support is essential to the survival and welfare of street children, as it enables them to manage risks related that come with physical and sexual violence, exploitation, social exclusion (Foster Baptist (2016).

These networks, according to Thompson and Thompson (2019) are not only a matter of survival but about an atmosphere of independence and Strogen can be the wiring diagram on the below7722P none potential self-worth. In contexts in which children's agency or influence is particularly limited, their peer networks provide a mechanism through which they mediate control, establish social bonds and find sense of connection. In this respect then, to be part of such informal networks is one way by which street children are able to fend off full-scale marginalization and retain some measure of independence within the harsh and frequently hostile urban terrain they inhabit.

Although peer relationships are believed to be crucial in this process, little is known about the development of structured protective networks of peers. A great deal has been written about street children, who have often been reduced either to victims or criminals; the description of social strategies surrounding the survival of these young people is neglected. Additionally, little is known about the functioning of these networks, such as how they support people both emotionally and, in their conflicts, or resource distribution. Although previous research has illuminated the importance of friendship networks as sources of social support, less is known about the development

and nature of these ties when they become formalized protective vectors that function as systems of mutual aid and protection (Morrow, 2017).

In addition, although there have been some studies about how street children interact with one another and the creation of a peer networks among them; unfortunately, we could find no ethnographic research which has looked into the concrete process by which these networks are constructed and maintained. The role of trust, loyalty, and experiences shared within these networks in establishing them is not well studied. It aims to address this gap by offering a rich ethnographic account of how street children assemble protective networks, and how these networks operate to protect their welfare. By privileging the perspectives of children themselves, this project will elaborate on the social dynamics framing these networks and provide insights into their significance for survival and resilience.

Notwithstanding this increased acknowledgment of the agency and resourcefulness of street children, there are some critical gaps in the literature. Firstly, a lot of the current research surrounding street youth still tends to concentrate mainly on 'detrimental' factors of life on the street with an emphasis on their vulnerability and marginalization (Ennew, 2000). Although this focus is critical to understand street children's constraints, it largely overlooks the social dynamics that characterizes their world. This kind of exclusion encompasses elements such as the mechanisms through which street children generate protective relationships and pass-through social ambiences, or informal governances that foster a life for them that is not unlivable (Wacquant, 2018).

Second, whilst there is a growing literature on peer relationships of street children, little work has been done into the development of these relations as organised and protective networks. Little is known about the invention, maintenance and evolution of such networks. This gap is significant since it is crucial to understand how street children construct and maintain such networks in designing better policy and programs for these 'invisible' children. Most of the current literature provides an

account at a general, abstract level rather than at a close-grained, ethnographic level that captures what it means on the street for children to manage these complex networks (Foster, 2016).

Finally, by not having engaging in ethnographic research the extent to which street children perceive and cope with these networks is better understood. Such networks should ideally be researched through an ethnographic lens which focuses on close engagement with the lived experiences of those involved, ie: the children. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature, by providing an enhanced understanding of how street children make sense of their networks, which offers a fuller picture of street children's social (Powell & Jordan, 2018).

This analysis of the literature identifies several crucial gaps in knowledge, particularly regarding protective networks and agency of street children in negotiating their circumstances. Our objective through this research is to fill these voids and add to our understanding of how street children demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in constructing and maintaining these essential social safety-nets.

METHODOLOGY

This approach is rich and inclusive of both ethical and non-ethical approaches of studying the peer-to-peer kinship networks, thus providing us with a better knowledge based on which to conduct an ethical informed study. Such a mixed-methods approach is especially appropriate for the present study, since it enables one both to uncover the subjective experiences of street children (captured by qualitative methods) and to investigate social processes within their networks more broadly (measurable by survey data). Qualitatively, the study takes an ethnographic approach where researchers can enter the field and record the nuanced and contextual dimensions of children’s dynamic social interplay. The quantitative side, meanwhile, will produce empirical evidence about the prevalence and form of such peer networks as well as their effects – and by that a more widely valid generalization could be made.

Such an approach is consistent with calls by previous street children's research to comprehend the experiences of marginalised children not only as they inhere within individuals, but also through collective ways in which these assemblages develop and act (Morrow, 2017). Through this bifold approach, the research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how these peer networks are structured and sustained, as well as contributions such networks make to the survival and resilience of street children.

Surveys were conducted in an urban center with high number of street children. The case was considered significant to answer the research questions, as large cities are more likely to have a concentration of street children issues (i.e., vulnerability and social exclusion; Powell & Jordan, 2018). Data used in this analysis were collected over six months using participant observation, comprehensive interviews and questionnaires.

Forty semi-structured in-depth interviews with children aged 10–18 years living on the streets were carried out. These interviews were about the children’s lives on the street, their difficulties and the different forms of protection with friends in their networks. A semi-structured interview method was used, allowing the children to tell their stories and simultaneously promoting comparability between participants. Furthermore, a quantitative questionnaire was provided for 2,000 street children. It provided information about how often peer networks occur, who leads the peer groups, and their affect on children’s lives.

Purposive sampling procedure was adopted for the selection of a qualitative sample of 40 street children. The focus group was utilised as a means to aim attention on children who formed lasting peer relationships (such children being most likely capable of offering useful information about how protective networks operate and what is their significance). Purposive sampling is particularly appropriate for ethnographic studies, where the researcher selects participants who have particular experiences of relevance to a research question (Creswell, 2014). The larger sample size of 2,000 street children was included for the purpose of gaining a broader

perspective on the prevalence and characteristics of peer networks among all kinds of children in the urban area.

The analysis of the data was both qualitative and quantitative. The interview data were qualitatively analyzed thematically. This method was helpful to map the emergent patterns and themes through narratives of children, shedding light on how their peer networks are constructed, sustained and operated. The themes were grouped in patterns across the participants and checked with published reports on street children for validation.

With regard to the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were implemented for the survey responses. This was an exploratory analysis to help identify patterns in peer network formation (e.g., how often people interacted in the networks, what kind of support was exchanged), and which demographic variables influenced membership in the networks. Descriptive statistics provided evidence for how these networks were configured, and in what way they influenced the well-being and survival among street-connected children (Thompson & Thompson, 2019).

The ethical consideration was a critical one, from the start of the research to its conclusion. All of the participants (or their guardians when was necessary) provided the informed consent. The consenting process was adapted to the age and cognition of participants to be sure all understood what would happen in a study, and what they would need do if involved. Because of the subject's adolescent status, confidentiality and potential psychological or travel risks for any children that might have been contacted were all addressed throughout. For the purpose of reliability, triangulation, a method used to compare what has been observed through interviews, observation and survey to ascertain whether they support each other. Member-checking which involved a subset of participants' reviewing the interpretations for ensuring their correctness or providing correction, was also employed to confirm participant agreement with researchers interpretation(s) of events (Creswell, 2014).

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The survey results also yielded valuable information on the significance of peer networks in street children's lives. 72% of the participants identified close peer networks as indispensable to their survival, especially for emotional and physical protection. These networks served as a cushion, offering the resources that children did not have from formal institutions or family backing. The types of support commonly reported in these networks were the provision of food, protection from violence or threats, and assistance during sickness. Such networks often helped protect street children from the myriad of risks they encountered in the streets – including violence, abuse and police harassment (Morrow, 2017; Powell & Jordan, 2018).

In addition, the findings also indicated that children felt safer and were less isolated when they have an older network. The communities were at times a comfort — helping to combat loneliness and abandonment. Although street children are commonly perceived as marginalized, these networks enabled them to develop their own social resources that were important for mental and emotional health. In structural terms, 56% of the children said that their peer groups were organised on a hierarchical basis, with older or more experienced members offering protection and guidance to younger children. These results mirror a survival mechanism, that whilst providing immediate protection, also encourages capacity for greater resilience of street living conditions (Foster, 2016).

The in-depth interviews provided additional insight on the social dynamics of these peer groups. Frequently, participants referred to their peers as “family,” acknowledging the emotional relationships they had built over time with others who shared similar life experiences. Trust, commitment, and support were the three elements that these networks found held them together. “We take care of each other,” one child said. One of us is under attack, then all of us get upa.” This sense of ‘family’, although not the traditional nuclear structure, was an important factor in how street children coped with their situation.

Others recalled how their friends helped them navigate perilous encounters, especially with older adults who attempted to use or abuse them. Most indicated mediators/protectors among peers in violent/risk situations, providing physical/emotional support when experiencing violence or abuse. For children, they reported that networks were critical in hotspots of crime and violence in the city. “For example, if the police want to hurt us, we crowd together. We do make sure no one gets left behind.” This sense of kinship and group effort helped offer protection in a context where individual survival often hinged on whether one could depend on others (Thompson & Thompson, 2019).

It appears that peer-to-peer networks among street children serve as more than just a survival strategy. These networks provide emotional social support, an identity and a social capital in the absence of formal caring institutions. The networks also allow children to resist becoming completely marginalised by creating a sense of belonging and sharing goals. This social capital, based on trust, loyalty and standard reciprocity yields children resources they need to face external threats as well as the emotional insecurities that those threats have triggered in them. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data gives a picture of street children as having vulnerability, but also considerable agency, resilience and social connectedness (Powell & Jordan, 2018).

These insights also suggest the need to regard street children not as passive victims of their own situation, but active agents in their survival. Despite manifest adversity, their capacity to develop protective webs empowers them by enabling control over the environment and mitigation of risk. They are not only for a childs physical safety but, at the same time, are vitals for their emotional well being as it gives them some sense of belonging and security that is usually absent in their lives. These findings highlight the necessity to develop policies and interventions that acknowledge and support those protective networks which street children already develop, rather than just being focused on rescuing them from the streets (Foster, 2016).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer important lessons on the importance of peer networks in the life and activities of street children. Such networks are typically forged by necessity, providing both practical and emotional care necessary for the children's course of survival and resistance. The data underscores that it is not simply a matter of getting by for day-to-day survival on the mean streets: they are the rock supplying emotional resilience and social means of identification. Street children who would otherwise be alienated and vulnerable, can draw on these friendships for security, shelter and a sense of belonging. These networks provide for psychological relations and moderate loneliness, but also trauma that inhabits the streets (Thompson & Thompson, 2019).

The report by 72% of the children that they have close-knit networks of friends in this study also implies such relationships are not remarkable, but a common survival strategy. The networks are 'central to children's coping and resilience strategies, enabling them to possess a sense of agency against the backdrop of former family and societal systems' no longer being in place (Powell & Jordan, 2018). These gangs provide security against physical harm and exploitation, support for emotional survival amidst a violent, abusive, adult-aiding atmosphere. Support networks The study indicates the resiliency of street children in forming support networks and counters dominant child victim discourse to show their adaptive, organizing, and thriving strategies for self-presenting justice.

Moreover, the investigation shows that these networks are founded in solidarity, trust and loyalty, three pivotal elements of social capital (Morrow 2017). In settings in which street children encounter significant hardships, these friendships ensure they have a kind of social capital that enables them to move through the city, access resources and shield themselves. In so may respects these networks act as simultaneous social systems to replace the lack of state or family protection to allow street children some ability for autonomy and agency (Foster, 2016).

The results of this study have significant implications for social policies that focus on street children. Street child programs tend to focus on the rescue, or getting off the streets of, street children but with relatively little attention paid to the peer networks they forge. The research indicates that policy agendas must be revisited with an eye toward developing norms and rules that could fortify such informal networks. References Amnesty International,, & Save, The ratio of hannessing girls: someone to speak to, A child rights point of view on child poverty Cardenas (1989) Girl labour and prejudice In their Empty Hands Lucita Flanks began working as a servant in 7 Interview with a former zs-year-old girl street children comes in the dead of night Housemaid God is coming— prepare yourselves » We want adults to give us what we need instead of throwing money at the problem, I think girls do not do it so that they need suffer less;ando lot; 2 support each other like gtrown-ups 3 are e kin look after own affairs * be wicked body; nevER kill or take others' lives ¥ NEVER DRI K nor use any drug ' g' al st o care zon > never let yourself ü re illiter goune any untier you reach the age u city" neither sj owe ag t(

Policies, for example, might promote safepeer spaces where individuals can gather and access food, healthcare, and education resources. They could also provide an environment for community-led responses to the issues that street children experience – giving these vulnerable children more control over their futures. In addition, investment in peer groups through interventions that foster trust-building, leadership skills and conflict resolution would enable children to better navigate the social dynamics within these communities and increase their likelihood of surviving and thriving (Powell & Jordan, 2018).

Furthermore, policies might consider integrating street children's networks into larger child welfare systems by acknowledging the importance of peer relationships to children's emotional and physical safety. For instance, such programmes that concentrate on establishing networks with peer leaders in these networks could also create more effective interventions that resonate with the coping strategies and

survival tactics of children themselves (Morrow 2017). That knowledge, together with respect for these networks, can result in a more sustainable and supportive environment, where street children receive not only short-term aid, but also long-term possibilities of growth and empowerment.

The present findings do hold significant implications for the protective networks of street children; however, this study is limited. One significant limitation is that it was a single urban study and may not capture the variety of experiences and social relationships that street children experience in other settings. The peers of street children are likely to be different in urban, suburban and rural areas because neighborhood qualities, economic inequality and social/health services available differ by context. For example children living in rural communities may form smaller and more closely-knit groups, with those in major cities developing comparatively transient or disjunct networks (Wacquant 2018). Conclusions Therefore, the results might not be entirely transferable to other places or countries with varying social contexts and street cultures.

This limitation can be overcome by future research where the study could be extended to more cities and rural side. This would enable an inclusive examination of street children's networks in different geographical and cultural settings. The possibility of comparing between urban and rural street children would also provide an insight then into the key differences in initiating and sustaining peer networks in different contexts (Foster, 2016). Moreover, longitudinal studies that monitor the development of these networks may provide further insight into how protective structures change as street children grow older or leave street life. Having these contextual and temporal variables in mind, future research could expand upon the conclusions from here and provide even more refined guidance for policies that can support street children across different environmental settings.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides useful information about protective networks developed by street children and the importance that these play in their resilience and survival. By focusing on the agency of street children, this study challenges earlier depictions that cast them as passive objects of their environment and as a result provides further insights into social relations in life on the streets. It shows that despite facing difficult circumstances, street children are not helpless and defenseless beings; they forge protective relationships through peer groups which generate emotional, physical, and social protection (Foster 2016; Morrow 2017).

The results indicate that these networks are not transient or ephemeral but essential to the children's survival and safety on the streets. The children's networks provide a basis for solidarity, trust and resource sharing Without the militant activities of their own little social network they could not survive in the hostile environment. In effect, these peer-to-peer protective systems operate as social capital for street children, offering them ways to counteract aspects of the risky environment they live in from violence and exploitation through to marginalisation (Thompson & Thompson, 2019).

The policy implications are substantial. Present social policies tend to ignore or undermine the value of these informal networks and concentrate instead on taking children off the streets or implementing formalized government responses with little regard for existing support structures. The results of this study underscore the critical role that such peer networks play as well as the importance of policy initiatives aimed at enhancing rather than undermining these networks. Support structures should be developed to strengthen these networks, protecting children in a manner that enables them to maintain and enhance their protective systems. Policy makers can use the extent to which peer relationships are appreciated and used in interventions, as a determinant of how effective and sustainable programmes will be in meeting the short- or long-term needs of street children (Powell & Jordan, 2018).

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