Adapting visual methods: action research with Kampala street children

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The paper examines the use of four visual ‘action’ methods for eliciting information from street children about their interactions with the socio-spatial environment. These methods were adapted and used to encourage child-led activities and minimize researcher input. The advantages and constraints associated with the successful implementation of visual methods with children are examined, followed by a brief examination of the ‘real’ and ethical considerations surrounding their use. The paper concludes that visual methods allow a high level of child-led participation in research, as well as providing a stimulus for eliciting further oral material.

Key words: Uganda, child-centred research, street children, visual methods

Introduction

Following on from Ariès’ (1962) work, childhood has become recognized as socially, rather than biologically, constructed. Social science research now considers children as active, valuable contributors and members of society (Holloway and Valentine 2000; James et al. 1998; James and Prout 1990; Jenks 1996). Holloway and Valentine (2000) recognize that there are two important elements of the new social studies of childhood that are particularly relevant to geographers. First, if childhood is socially constructed, then children must be considered as ‘meaning-producing beings’ in their own right and second, childhood must be a culturally diverse experience for individual children growing up in different societies.

Based on this recognition that children are important social actors, researchers within the geographical discipline are now calling for more research on ‘children as a neglected social grouping undergoing various forms of socio-spatial marginalization’ (Matthews and Limb 1999, 62). At the same time there is the need to acknowledge the importance of ‘multiple childhoods’ and the difference in both their social and spatial constructions (Matthews and Limb 1999). A large amount of substantive and informative research has been undertaken in a Western context on the socio-spatial behaviour of children and their marginalization from adult society (Matthews 1992; Sibley 1995; Skelton and Valentine 1997; Valentine 1996a 1996b 1997). Much less work has been done on the ‘special position of exclusion’ (Matthews et al. 1999, 135) of children in developing countries. The street child population is a particularly interesting facet of multiple childhoods and marginalization because they are creating their own spaces within an inherently adult domain, that is the city. Furthermore, there is a culmination of factors that affect their spatial presence; they are excluded from public social and spatial environs due to their status as minors; and they are marginalized in society due to their deviant characteristics and homeless status. Their public existence on the streets is, therefore, producing a particular ‘street childhood’ with associated ‘street child spaces’, many of which are hidden and separate from the adult city.

Although street children are recognized throughout the developing world, they have recently become more prevalent in African cities. This is the
result of the combined effects of socio-economic restructuring, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and internal conflicts which directly impact on the micro situation of the home and family (Harper and Marcus 2000). The geographies developed by these children to enable them to survive in an adult dominated city-scape are little known or understood by policy-makers and researchers. The aim of the research project was, therefore, to develop an understanding of Kampala street children’s socio-spatial geographies in relation to their street environments and survival mechanisms. This paper examines some of the methodological issues associated with researching the socio-spatial relationships and spatial experiences of these children.

**Children and the research process**

Methodologically there are special concerns when researching children as

> [A]ppropriate research strategies, in both methodological and ethical senses, need to be thought through very carefully. (Sibley 1991, 270)

Recently, however, traditional social science research methods have been denounced as problematic because they rarely involve children in the research process. These methods are often based on positivist methodologies using questionnaire surveys for generating large quantities of statistical data. Baker et al. (1996) point out that such strategies are particularly inaccurate for developing an understanding of a child’s circumstances. Moreover, these methods have rarely enabled children to have any input into the research design and process, thus highlighting issues of reflexivity and participation, given the difficulties adults have in engaging with the world of children (James 1990 1991; Sibley 1991 1995).

In response, attempts have been made to make research techniques more child-friendly and participatory. Recently, a diverse range of child-centred methods has been developed across the social sciences covering oral, written and visual activities. These include amongst others:

- focus group discussions;
- observation;
- recall;
- drawings;
- spider diagrams;
- resource mapping; and
- seasonal calendars.

All these methods have been successfully tested in a participatory framework for their appropriateness in eliciting information with children, with manuals for practitioners being produced on issues of implementation (Boyden and Ennew 1997; IDS 1996; Johnson et al. 1994).

These child-centred and child-led participatory methods are particularly relevant when researching street children, given the unique set of circumstances that impinge on the lifeworld of a child living and surviving in the city-scape. Furthermore, the intense, haphazard nature of street life often results in a way of living that is alien to the majority of researchers. It is for this reason that Bemak (1996) calls for researchers to become ‘street researchers’ getting to know the street environment and way of life by entering into a mutual trust relationship with the children prior to developing and initiating a research strategy. According to Rudestam and Newton (1992) researchers must become more creative and flexible in exploring street child environments. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt visual methods to the particular lifeworld of the street child.

Not only do the unique circumstances of the street child population need to be considered when devising a research methodology, but also the methods selected need to be adapted for eliciting particular types of information. In this instance, the aim was to develop an understanding of the street child’s socio-spatial geographies. Given that they tend to locate in ‘hidden’ spaces within the city, serious methodological issues concerning ethics and positionality are also raised and must be addressed. A multi-method approach was therefore employed for this research, allowing the strengths of individual methods to compensate for limitations in others.

Although observation, discussion, role-play and written techniques were used, visual methods proved to be particularly important for developing gainful insight into the street child’s urban environment from the child’s perspective. They introduced a relaxed, fun atmosphere and allowed the children to take control of the process without imposing adult influence. This paper illustrates how four visual methods were successfully adapted expressly for obtaining socio-spatial information with street children and within a highly sensitive ethical situation.

**Kampala street children**

Kampala, the capital of Uganda was selected as a case study for this research as poverty and social upheaval associated with civil war and the AIDS epidemic have resulted in a sharp rise in the street
child population in the last ten years. The identification of the socio-spatial relationships and experiences of street children in Kampala is important in informing policy-makers in Uganda, and other African cities where street children have become a major urban and development issue. There are approximately 300 full-time street children who both live and survive daily on the city streets of Kampala.1

As indicated in the introduction, defining childhood, and consequently street childhood, is both complex and somewhat arbitrary, particularly if children are recognized as social actors in their own right. Within the African continent, Ennew (1996) illustrates the range of diverse and multiple experiences that come under the ‘umbrella’ of childhood. Similarly, within Uganda, children experience a diversity of lifeworlds although these are impinged upon by the legal and constitutional definition of a child. Therefore, although there are numerous childhood experiences, each one is impacted upon by the framework set out in The Children Statute (1997) which draws on the notion of children needing care and protection as outlined in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, an essentially Western construction (Boyden 1991). Therefore, as Holloway and Valentine note:

recognition of children’s agency does not necessarily lead to a rejection of an appreciation of the ways in which their lives are shaped by forces beyond the control of individual children (Holloway and Valentine 2000, 6).

Given this, the children who participated in this study were aged between nine and 17 years old.2 Most had little or no contact with parents or guardians, having left home principally because of the micro effects of mistreatment, parental death or poverty. They therefore had to create their own survival opportunities and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the street children were an eclectic mix of individuals coming from different background situations and with various mother tongues. Their spoken language, Luyaaye, was a combination of words and phrases adopted from various Ugandan languages and dialects. When coupled with the fact that many of the children in the sample were illiterate, the use of visual methods was particularly important for encouraging free expression. Oral and written communication was limited for many of the children in the sample, as street life resulted in the adaptation of their mother tongue. Visual representation is universal and could be used as a catalyst for eliciting oral description and information.

In this paper an exploration is conducted into the use of four visual methods with street children in Kampala:

1 mental and depot3 maps;
2 thematic and non-thematic drawings;
3 daily time lines; and
4 photo diaries.

Each visual method is described before the advantages and constraints are discussed, and then the analytic and catalytic properties of each method are investigated. The final section of the paper focuses on the practicalities of conducting research with street children highlighting the benefits of participatory visual methods.

Introducing visual methods

Visual methods have, for many decades, been used in child development research focussing on spatial cognition and environmental psychology. In testing Piagetian stages of child development, the visual representation of space as a diagram or plan has been a popular method used to demonstrate children’s spatial awareness (for example Matthews 1984). Researchers have effectively used mental maps and aerial photographs to show the spatial development of children by age and gender (Blaut 1997; Golledge et al. 1992; Matthews 1984 1987). Similar techniques have also been used to demonstrate the cross-cultural similarities of the mapping abilities of young children (Blades et al. 1998).

However, the visual methods used are very much researcher directed and controlled. Thus, as Ennew (1996) points out, visual methods applied in this way inevitably support adultist interpretations of childhood. Within this cognitive tradition children become the objects of the research rather than part of it and often children’s interpretation of their images are missed by the researcher. This is particularly important in conducting cross-cultural work, as visuality is a culturally diverse experience (Boyden and Ennew 1997; Swart 1990). By contrast, the recent sociological interest in children as social actors, uses visual methods to gain insights into the context of a child’s lived experience (for example Beazley 1997). Within this discourse the control and implementation of research methods are passed
from adults to children, allowing them ‘to construct accounts of their lives in their own terms’ (Holloway and Valentine 2000, 8). In this way child-centred visual methods avoid the adultist assumptions of the cognitive school and facilitate research ‘with children’ rather than research ‘about children’. Child-centred visual methods can therefore illuminate children’s geographies, by embracing and celebrating different experiences of childhood.

For this research a series of visual ‘action’ activities were devised and adapted, which were fun, child-centred and gave the street children involved a large measure of ownership of the exercise. They were then used to elicit information on the street child’s use of the street on a daily basis. Although the four methods were experimental in nature, some had been used before with street children (for example Baker et al. 1996; Swart 1990). The experimentation, however, was not just related to the population under study but also to their use in eliciting socio-spatial data and as a catalyst for oral description—a form of basic analysis by the children themselves.

Mental maps and ‘depot’ maps

This method was used in a variety of settings at different times. Although 22 children took part, only small groups were gathered together at any one time to discuss the subject of maps. Once it was clear that everybody understood the concept they were asked to draw their own mental maps of Kampala showing the places that they usually visited during the day, and depot maps illustrating all the depots where they knew street children frequented. In order to do this each child was given a piece of plain paper and a pencil already equipped with an eraser should they wish to change their image. The maps were used to facilitate explanation and discussion with each child, concerning what they had drawn and why they had drawn it.

The advantages of this method for the understanding of children’s daily lives were three-fold. First, as most street children do not attend even informal education classes they are limited in their opportunities to use paper and pencils and, as the activity was action-based rather than discursive and drawing capabilities were not essential, the children found the activity fun and others often asked if they could join in. Second, as such an activity is not spontaneous like conversational interviews, the children were able to take their time and make amendments to the finished product, thus providing the truest representation possible. Finally, the maps themselves were useful tools in eliciting information about the daily life of street children as they were keen to talk about what they had drawn and provide details of where each place they had marked was and why it was an important place to them. The maps acted as prompts because often the minds of the street children wandered owing to the effects of sniffing fuel. Further, the spatial representations produced were also valuable for examining the ‘place’ of street children in Kampala with many children concentrating their efforts on the ‘down-town’ area to the south of the city. This is generally the busiest and least-regulated area containing the markets and taxi parks. For example, Figure 1 is a map drawn by a 12–year old boy which shows the Old Taxi Park where he sleeps, Owino Market where he sells vegetables, as well as sportsgrounds and video clubs where he spends his leisure time.

It was often quite difficult for the children to position places accurately on their maps. On some occasions the ‘discussion’ between children on their maps became lengthy as some children found it difficult to grasp the concept. This, however, was generally the result of the effects of fuel inhalation.

Figure 1 Map drawn by a 12–year old boy depicting the places in Kampala which ‘are important to him’
Copyng was also present in these activities although not rife. However, what tended to be copied were not the actual places drawn but the style of drawing. As these children are out of school their knowledge of mapping is not well developed. They would therefore discuss how to draw the map before creating their own representations. This meant that map styles were limited and places were often represented as circles. However, as the detail was the important aspect, it was not felt that comparing styles was detracting from the information produced. In hindsight, and time allowing, individual drawing sessions would have eliminated such comparisons but reduced enthusiasm generated by initial discussions, and may have returned the situation to adult rather than child-led.

The mental and depot maps produced images that were striking and immediately highlighted the individuality amongst the participating children. In particular the variation in work and leisure space became apparent. The coding of places represented on the maps allowed analysis of the spaces used by different age and gender groups. For example, the mental maps demonstrated that, as would be expected, older boys utilize a greater spatial area within the city compared to younger boys and girls. The analysis of the depot maps, when compared to the results of later focus group discussions, emphasized that there was a core of main depots used by the children, with other subsidiary sites used less frequently. Furthermore, it was revealed that it is the least well-established depots that are subject to change. The visual representations also facilitated discussion with the children to explain the importance of the places included in their maps.

**Thematic and non-themed drawings**

Again this activity was undertaken in a variety of places and at different times with 23 children. The activity was split into two sessions comprising three drawings each and although some children participated in both, this was not a requirement. This was done because of the limited attention span of street children and it was felt in the pilot study that three drawings were ideal. Children were each given paper and a pencil and asked to draw a series of pictures. The format varied between formal thematic, informal thematic and non-themed representations based on aspects of the children’s daily lives. Each drawing was given a title arrived at through piloting procedures and discussions with children. Modifications were made so that correct interpretations of the titles would be arrived at.

As with map-making, drawing pictures allowed the children to freely express themselves and to think about what they wished to portray. Further, they were not inhibited about their drawing capabilities which often occurs in more literate children who may develop a sense of artistic inadequacy. The images produced were also useful tools in eliciting discussion with individual children as it provided a focus away from the researcher. The children themselves were in control of producing the pictures and therefore, when asked about what they had drawn, the majority talked freely increasing the quality of the information gathered.

Poorer images were constructed than those that would have arisen from a group of similar-aged school-going children, due to lack of practice. However, as the quality of the drawing was not the issue under examination, this was not felt to compromise the results. When drawing formal thematic images based on ‘safe’ and ‘dangerous’ places, children occasionally ‘mixed up’ the pictures because they could not remember which column was for each category. This highlighted the importance of the children’s subsequent explanations. Often ambiguity occurred and it was impossible to determine whether the picture represented a safe or a dangerous place. It was only through listening to the oral justifications provided that the correct understanding could be gained. Although separate papers could have been used and the activity split into two, this would not have allowed for children’s work to be compared nor would it have elucidated initial mental conjecture over the meaning of safety and danger in the context of space.

Several themes, based on the daily activities undertaken by street children, emerged from the analysis of the drawings. Figures 2, 3 and 4 are typical of the activities highlighted by street children. The results suggest that: leisure; work activities, especially collecting rubbish, scrap and carrying luggage; eating; stealing; and sleeping are important daily activities for street children. It was, however, often difficult to correctly identify the images on the drawings and to identify the most important features (see also Ennew 1994; Swart 1990). Thus, the pictures were used to prompt more detailed oral information. This helped elucidate the images accurately and the combination of visual and oral methods resulted in a much richer data set than could have been obtained from pictures or discussion alone. The pictures, therefore, helped overcome problems
associated with interview situations, giving control of the situation to the children. Lying was reduced as the children talked freely and the researcher was careful not to ask direct questions which are known to evoke fear (Ennew 1994).

**Daily time lines**

The construction of daily time lines was elicited as a group activity. Initially it was explained to the whole group that this particular research task was aimed at discovering what they did at different times of the day or night. It was explained that this would be constructed using a graph made up of pictures representing different activities. Nineteen children then opted to take part with three joining in later. A discussion ensued on what kinds of activities street children did and what should be included for representation. A list of 11 activities was devised and the children devised symbols to represent each one. Often heated discussions arose when someone got too artistic and after negotiation the symbol was modified and simplified until each category had a matching symbol that everyone was happy with. Each child then took turns at creating a line on the graph representing their typical day and discussing where they carried out each of their activities.

This activity in particular, highlighted how the more participatory an activity becomes the more enthusiastic are the participants. The fun nature of designing the symbols and categories persuaded others to join in. Furthermore, the initial discussion could also be highlighted as important for pre-activity analysis in that the children coded their activities through the process of designing symbolic representation. There was also an in-built cross-checking mechanism in that children questioned each other on what symbols they had drawn or shouted out the activities of their friends. This was particularly useful for de-sensitizing taboo subjects such as stealing. If the children were discussing another’s involvement in stealing it became obligatory that the child in question included that symbol. The information provided could be analysed to construct daily movements around the city at particular times and was useful for triangulating information gathered from discussion groups.
The main disadvantage with the method was the group nature of the activity. This was necessary in order to hand over the design of the activity to the children but may have limited some children in admitting that they took part in illegal or undesirable activities such as stealing. Second, the omission of drug taking occurred in some instances because for some street children this is omnipresent and has no particular time or place. This, however, was an important discovery in itself. Prior coding of the images also meant that less detail was present in the time lines. However, had the children drawn their own representations, group cohesiveness and participation would have been reduced and continuity in symbols may have made later analysis difficult.

With respect to the analysis of daily time lines, the frequency of events were compared with time of day and place of operation in order to highlight street child niches. In this respect the visual data proved very fruitful. Daily time lines, however, were not so useful in eliciting oral information from children and involved much more probing by the researcher as the symbols were not detailed enough to elicit information based on individual experiences. Therefore the children were only asked to comment on the places where they carried out each activity. This allowed for the construction of route maps and the exposition of important places.

Photo diaries

The researcher’s position as a white, female adult researcher meant it was impossible for her to enter into the lives of Kampala street children as a full participant observer. Therefore photo diaries were used to re-create street children’s’ daily life processes and spatial patterns. It was envisaged that images would be produced in spaces and at times that the researcher would otherwise have no access to. Fifteen disposable cameras, with flash for evening pictures, were given to street children who wished to participate in the exercise. A variety of ages and both gender groups were represented. Instructions on how to use the camera were given to each child, or child group. The children were asked to take pictures of the activities they did and the places they visited over a 24–hour period. However, they were not told what or when to photograph, thereby leaving both the content and process entirely up to the child to decide.

From the point of view of the researcher there were four main advantages to using this method. First, the images produced gave excellent coverage of children’s daily lives and good representation was produced. Second, the pictures themselves worked exceptionally well as a tool for discussion and on many occasions the dullest and most technically poor pictures elicited the richest information from the photographer. For instance, although Plate 1 represents a general street scene, insightful into how street children live and survive, it was through discussion with the photographer that the main subject was identified. This resulted in a detailed description of a street child pick-pocketing which is not immediately obvious to the observer because the photograph is ‘busy’ and distant. Often such discussions were more revealing than the pictures themselves although this is not to undermine the photographs taken as some were excellent visual representations of street life. Plate 2, for example, shows the street space and environment in which two street girls sleep. Third, some of the cameras went into places where the researcher in her ‘outsider’ position would
have changed the situation. Finally, often subsidiary images in the pictures highlighted more than the main subjects themselves. This is demonstrated in a picture of a child standing in a skip (Plate 3). In the background others were sniffing fuel and collecting scrap along the roadside.

From the point of view of the child there were three main advantages. First, most street children do not have a good self-image and initially it was difficult for the children to understand why they were being trusted with cameras. For example one nine-year old boy really wanted to participate in the research but did not believe that he was actually being trusted with a camera. This exercise was a major self-esteem and self-confidence builder among the children. Second, the activity gave the children access to modern technology that would otherwise not have been available to them and allowed them to keep their own photographs. Finally, the ‘fun’ nature of the activity interested many children and they became very excited about designing their photo diary.

As a relatively new method several issues arose. Although the majority of the cameras were returned, three were not. In two of these cases other children who were ‘accidentally’ photographed destroyed the films. Only one camera was sold. Therefore, although there were instances where the data was not returned, this was not perceived to have invalidated the exercise. The fun aspect of this session was enhanced by the novelty of the method, which allowed the children to be involved in using modern technology, an otherwise impossibility for them. Despite this some ethical considerations arose and on a couple of occasions the cameras caused problems between children. Where one child in a group had been given a camera the others acted in a hostile manner towards him due to jealousy, and on another occasion when the camera was given to a group to share, one child ran off and kept the camera to himself, causing problems with the rest of the group. This only happened on two occasions and generally between younger children.

With regard to the actual process of taking the pictures, many of the children were not able to spread this over a whole 24–hour period. The younger children in particular were too excited and tended to use up all the photos in the space of a morning or an afternoon. Although this changed the nature of the data, it was not any less rich and in fact provided even more depth to particular activities. In order to avoid repetition of scenes, cameras were handed out to different children at different times of the day and on different days of the week. The in-depth nature of the photos and the subsequent discussion of their contents suggest that they provide a valuable exclusively child-centred and child-led source of information.

Camera ownership also highlighted issues of concern, particularly among the younger children. Much worry was expressed over policemen and other security personnel who might think the child had stolen the camera, and take it from them. Therefore, if required that a card containing the researcher’s name and contact details as well as a brief description of the research activity the child was taking part in, accompanied the camera. A further consideration that arose was the use of the camera at night. Most of the children were worried about the security of the camera while they were sleeping. It was difficult to get around this problem as it was not possible for the researcher to meet with the children very late at night when they were about to sleep, as this is when most of the children were high on drugs or fuel. The solution came from the children themselves. Cameras were given to friendly adults or security guards, who were nearby, to keep over night. One child even slept at the house of a friend to avoid losing his camera.

Visually, photo diaries produced pictures containing a wide range of situations and images. Many of the photographs taken were self-explanatory both in terms of the subject and setting, although some children were less technically adept with a camera as Plate 3 shows. In addition these diaries proved to be a particularly useful method for stimulating discussion with children. On meeting with the children after the pictures had been developed, they
were eager to talk about them and to provide very detailed information on why they had taken each picture. Every picture tells a story and in some instances this information revealed more about the survival mechanisms developed by street children. For example, a child who had ‘snapped’ a person working in Owino Market, not only took the picture to represent their place of work, but also because the child in question was able to sell the photograph afterwards. This demonstrates that street survival is constantly in the forefront of the child’s mind. Such an insight would not have emerged from an interview, which is not action-based and therefore does not detail the minor aspects of survival and existence. Initially the photos were analysed in chronological sequence, to present a pictorial representation of the daily lives of individual street children. These sequences were then used to construct a more general representation of street children’s’ socio-spatial daily life in Kampala.

The catalytic properties of visual methods

Overall, visual methods were an important means of truly representing the socio-spatial aspects of street life for children in Kampala. In terms of children’s oral analysis, photo diaries were particularly useful in eliciting information. Much more detail was extracted from ‘real’ as opposed to ‘constructed’ images such as drawings and maps. It is envisaged that this is related to the truer representation that a colour photograph provides. Furthermore these were reconstructions of real situations that had occurred in the last 24–hour period and therefore triggered short-term memory recall. The drawings and maps however, were mental constructions taken from long-term memory which has lower detail capacity. In this instance then, photo diaries were a much superior method for eliciting oral information than other pictorial representations, although they too elicited a wealth of descriptive data.

Pictures and maps also provided good descriptive results owing to a higher level of detail in pictorial, as opposed to symbolic, images. This was shown through the map-making activities. When children drew pictures to represent the places they had frequented, in general, their explanations were much more detailed than when circles or other symbols were used to delineate places visited. The detail was important in prompting recall based on why and what they had drawn. The daily time line activity was the poorest elicitor of oral description. In this exercise the children selected to use symbols rather than images thereby reducing the level of mental stimulation. The group construction of the symbols used, also reduced the level of personal detail and thereby their usefulness as a prompt for discussion.

It is important to note, however, that the visual methods described above were used in different ways and for different purposes. Eliciting oral information from children was not always a major objective of the method used. However, when a number of visual methods are employed, they can facilitate the triangulation of data and have proved to be highly effective child-centred methods when researching the socio-spatial lives of street children in Kampala.

Researching street children: ‘real’ and ethical issues

Having discussed the use of visual methods with street children in Kampala, this section highlights two of the main considerations that must be confronted when conducting such research. These involve the problems associated with ‘real’ research, in particular the challenge of involving street children in research projects and ethical research based on the moral judgements, which often must be made.

‘Real’ research

Four factors arose during this research that need to be considered in the successful collection of reliable visual data. First, many children use drugs particularly the inhalation of fuel. This impairs their concentration and can result in a deterioration of the information given. However, it is not always possible to work with children who are sober, especially as the majority of full-time street children in Kampala engage in some form of drug usage. Walking and chatting on the way to the research site, which meant the majority sobered up significantly to engage in the research, generally counteracted this.

Second, as street children are sporadically engaged in a number of daily survival strategies the research had to be timed and sited conveniently for them. In Kampala, the majority of full-time street children have particular working patterns. They know when they can get work in the markets, when they can sweep shop fronts and generally only work long
enough to earn enough to survive for the day. This, it transpired, was not a large proportion of their time. Discussions with the children prior to each activity resulted in negotiations whereby it was possible to meet them when they were not thinking about employment opportunities and at a time and place that did not detract from their daily survival and social strategies. Flexibility was thus essential, as events and unforeseen opportunities would arise and result in rescheduling of meetings. Therefore, it was made apparent very early on in the research that the children needed to be involved in the process from the initial stages. This was important to ensure the participatory and child-centred features of the methodology.

Third, lying is part of a street child’s culture and is necessary for their survival. In an interview with James Wangobo (personal communication 1999) Drop-in Centre Manager for Friends of Children Association (FOCA) it was made clear that within a few days of arrival on the streets, a newcomer learns the responses to give when asked personal questions. This is why it is essential to spend time with the children to develop a trusting relationship and use methods which they design and lead themselves. The visual methods, which are the focus of this paper, fulfil these requirements well.

Finally, the research setting requires consideration. In most other research, identifying a place where activities can take place is not an obstacle. The street child, however, does not ‘own’ any space within the urban environment making the identification of research space difficult. Initially the FOCA Head Office was used, as there was a large tent with worktables, which was suitable. Although providing a good environment for the research some children did not want to go there for a variety of reasons, including distance and personal preference. This emphasized the importance of negotiating other research locations with the children where disturbances would be minimal. Much time was spent deliberating, discussing and testing out locations until a suitable compromise was reached. This process highlighted the importance of working within a familiar space that was agreeable to all the children involved and illustrated that participation must begin at this most basic level for successful and meaningful results to be obtained.

Ethical research
Ethics are an important consideration in any research setting but when the researcher is an outsider and the participants an excluded population, specific issues need to be considered. Four issues central to researching street children can be identified. First, gaining consent is vital, particularly when dealing with children. It is important that the details of the research are explained at a level understandable to the child so that they can make an informed decision to take part (Boyden and Ennew 1997; Ennew 1994). This was carefully considered when introducing visual activities and each time an activity was organized, participation was sought from the children and the nature of the research explained. Issues surrounding adult consent were also pertinent to this research. For example, consent was needed when involving female street children given the strong protective links they have with homeless adults.

A further issue was researcher positionality given that the researcher is not able to become fully integrated with the street children under investigation. In part the methods examined in this paper were used as a way to overcome such problems in the researcher/street child relationship. Photo diaries were used to capture scenes from an inside perspective. Drawings and maps were also useful in changing the nature of the research and minimizing ‘outsider’ involvement. Visual activities are particularly useful as often the children engaged with the materials and tasks rather than with the researcher.

Third, researcher access to this group of children was important. This was facilitated by collaboration with FOCA and further enhanced by the employment of an inside informer, a young man who had previously lived on the streets of Kampala and was well-known and respected by current street children. These both provided an entry to the street child population, gave the researcher credibility and were invaluable sources of information and triangulation.

The last issue is that of data ownership. Participatory methodologies assume that data will be owned by the populations involved in the research. In this instance the children did not want to keep their work and it was not until conducting the photo diaries that the reasons for this became obvious. The majority of street children have nowhere to keep personal possessions. As the photographs were a novelty many children did want to keep them, but they could only successfully do this by asking older friends to look after them for them. For these reasons the visual data were often refused.
Concluding comments

This review of the use of four adapted visual methods has highlighted their successful use for research with Kampala street children. The participatory implementation of these action-orientated methods in non-threatening situations resulted in a high level of participation by children. This demonstrated the importance of placing children within the research process. First, children are increasingly being recognized as ‘meaning-producing’ members of society. The use of visual methods enables the researcher to investigate the diversity of child experience and to determine different child geographies, often producing results that adults find unexpected. Second, the fact that researchers now recognize that there are ‘multiple childhoods’, means that research methods need to be used which can draw out such multiplicity. Visual methods have been demonstrated to be a very good way of including children of all ages and both genders into the research process without discriminating between those with different abilities, confidence levels and educational attainments. Finally, once methods have been selected as appropriate their usefulness in eliciting the desired information must be considered. As this paper has demonstrated, visual methods vary in the type and quality of data they produce. Photographic diaries, followed by drawings, were generally more useful visually and as oral catalysts, although maps and daily time lines produce a wealth of spatial data particularly important for examining socio-spatial experiences. This equated well with the level of detail and personal involvement of the children in image production and allowed the images to become oral catalysts. For example, the photographs taken by the children were a good method for eliciting oral detail without subjecting the children to the authoritarian approach that previous interview techniques have been associated with. This provided the researcher with valuable data, that would not have been possible by visual or oral methods used independently.

These visual methods successfully allowed children to take control of the actual research process without the inhibitory factor of researcher presence. This is particularly important when the researcher is an outsider to the population under study. Children view the world differently to adults and street children have their own unique perspectives. Therefore, being able to decide, on their own initiative, about what is important for inclusion as a representation of street life often produces information that would have been overlooked by an adult. For these reasons visual methods are a vital part of the research process, they are fun, ‘action’, child-led activities that when used in conjunction with other methods can increase understanding of the socio-spatial structure of street living in Kampala.

Notes

1 The information was gathered in the 1998/1999 Friends of Children Association’s (FOCA) street child census, with which the researcher was involved.
2 Under Ugandan law a child is any person under the age of 18 years (The Children Statute of Uganda 1997). Although this is an arbitrary classification as many children are unsure of their birth date and therefore guess their age, it is important legally. Being considered ‘a child’ under the law, impacts on children’s interaction with the police and law enforcement agencies and the legal sanctions imposed.
3 ‘Depot’ is the colloquial term used by street children in Kampala to refer to the place where they sleep. Each child ‘lives’ at a specific depot. Which effectively replaces the conventional ‘home’.
4 The eyes of the children in the photographs have been obscured to protect their identity.
5 FOCA is a well-established non-governmental organization that has been working with street children in Uganda since the early 1980s.

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