‘Being in Public’: the multiple childhoods of Mexican ‘street’ children

Context

Media typify young people on the streets as antisocial, violent and associated with organized crime and drugs. Policy makers respond with regulatory, surveillance and exclusionary measures. In contrast to these moral panics about ‘youth’, ‘street children’ tend to be seen as powerless, disorganized and vulnerable, especially when located in the developing world, meriting of charity or welfarist policy. Working in Puebla, Mexico, we investigated how young people who work, and occasionally sleep, in public spaces construct their identities in threatening environments, and how they mobilize or are mobilized within social and civic activity.

Key Findings

- Public perceptions position street life as dangerous, self-destructive, sexualised and diseased. For ‘street’ youth, this life is ordinary and mundane.

- Street youths’ identities are formed in public and private: through often barely seen lives at home, institutions and wider social networks. Their identities are ‘blurred’, ‘unresolved’ and tentative.

- ‘Street’ youth see themselves as willing hard workers, though the reality may be different. Work provides mobility and distraction requiring organization and networks to negotiate spaces and times.

- Women adopt highly masculinised identities or ‘traditional’ roles as mothers and carers, alternately subduing and highlighting their sexuality in public, while male sexualized identity is displayed as machismo and as infidelity.

- Bodies affirm identities through dress and tattoos. Violence permeates daily life as punishment, protection and aspiration, with wrestlers, gangs, and related lyrics and films underscoring masculinised identities.

- Identities are imaginative and imaginary. Music, from ‘rock urbano’ to death metal, contributes to on-street identities linking street youth into marginalized youth cultures. Religious customs from Catholicism to beliefs in death cults and witchcraft help make sense of and regulate daily life.

- Service providers, despite (often limited) personal contacts with street groups, are deemed important sources of ‘knowledge’. They project street youth as atypical and dramatizing, marginalising them from an imagined mainstream. Such representations mask service providers’ own turbulent lives and religious-political motivations.
Highlights of the Research

Our main objectives were to produce in-depth material on how ‘street youth’ construct identities, exploring the tensions between how they see themselves and how others see them, uncovering the relationships between our participants and others in public spaces including market traders, drunks and passers-by. We sought to gain insights through ‘street ethnography’ and interviews with members of government and civil society organisations. In appreciating the texture of lives we attempted to avoid assumptions that young people would themselves prioritise discussions and actions related to violence, drug use and crime.

We took as our point of departure the view that childhood and youth are socially constructed and identities are fluid, unstable, and cross-cutting beyond age, income and gender. The research emerged from unease that street groups were often represented as excluded despite most researchers showing little interest in how subjects might be ‘included’, networked and organised. We were intrigued as to how participants negotiated their street presence and working conditions with others, how their ‘social action’ influenced their identity constructions. We sought to adopt a ‘loose frame’ to allow detailed themes to emerge from the field. Teasing out the textures of daily life is always a struggle to capture the wilful and subjective. Despite representations of youth and ‘street children’ as different, exotic or wild, we have tried to keep in mind our participants’ corporeally enacting a subjectivity that was expected of them – as friends of the deceased, as Catholics – or were their actions and explanations to counter notions held for them by others?

Tracing ordinary events and affects might lead us to adopt metaphorical labels for identities as ‘fragmented’, ‘splintered’ or multiple. These are useful but we have found alternative terms, such as ‘blurred’ or ‘unresolved’, more helpful. These seem to retain the beguiling flexibility, mundaneness and texture of identities without overloading the glimpses with too much interpretive meaning. Blurred identities open possibilities for interpretation without indicating that our participants’ identities are different from a norm, and therefore threaten to become exoticised. Identities as expressed through music, dress and religion might be ‘mainstream’ but blurred in sense that actions differ from accounts that participants identify the group as fulfilling (e.g. identifying with being a good Catholic supports abstinence from drugs whereas returning to drug use is not a signal of religious failing). The blur therefore is not from a norm but from awareness and a social construction of being.

The indeterminacy is, of course, anathema to media representations that need to hold to an imaginary of ‘real street life’ as dangerous, sexualised, dirty and diseased. These are common tropes in films such as Salaam Bombay and The Rose Seller. A moment in our research exemplifies the disjuncture, and how ordinary events and affects are crucial to grasp. After some weeks meeting with the three boys at the municipal welfare department we had decided to show De la Calle (On the Street) to gauge their reactions. Eliciting conversations had been difficult with limited attention spans and disruptive group dynamics. The boys watched the film in silence. At the end hardly a word was spoken before one boy mentions “that is not how it is”. Within a few minutes the room is full of rowdy banter once more. The film is a gritty drama depicting an adolescent boy who sleeps in the sewer and uses his guile to survive in a tough barrio of Mexico City. His every attempt to get

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“One day; we went to the rescue – that’s what we call it – of some [street] youngsters who had been shut away in an Alcoholics Anonymous Annex [residential programme] and we knew that they tortured the youngsters as part of the therapeutic process – it’s not a story, it’s perfectly documented. When we took them out, we allowed them to get them out, some 11 people, they went straight to hospital. In 2 cases, they were close to amputating their legs because, as drug addicts, the punishments had been terrible. There were infections; there was torture - literally torture. So then there was a reaction by the people in charge of the Annex, who went, armed, to the Welfare Department in search of us...”

Former Director Municipal Street Children Programme

 IDENTITIES and SOCIAL ACTION
out and for emotional connection with friends/girlfriends/relatives is dashed, violence ensues and the film’s imagery gets darker with every scene.

To our participants the film lacked an important dimension of their identities, the imagined possibility to overcome the violence and difficult conditions of street life through varying permutations of relationships, decisions and actions. The film itself was accurate enough – a life of repeated domestic violence, solvent use, sleeping in parks, occasional run-ins with the authorities – but it relied upon an imaginary of street life that missed the complexity of individual life stories, and substituted the exotic for the mundane, marking their ‘making do’ as signs of resilience. Following this experience we became more interested in identifications as Mexicans, workers, lovers, carers and consumers.

Being a street child or youth therefore can, and needs to be understood as performed in public but with reference to private or barely seen spaces such as home or life in institutions. While group bonds were strong our participants discussed and engaged in relations beyond the group, from kin networks (both birth and fictitious kin), through work and social relations, and with the police or gangs. Our notes indicate the extent and feelings towards social encounters, with traders, drunks, or rival windscreen washers/acrobats, from fights and disputes, to the considerations of decision-making, and establishment of status. These social engagements enrich daily lives, providing nicknames, lies, and flights of imagination.

Gender relations underpin social identities. One female participant known as ‘The Queen’ takes on highly masculinised performances, whereas other women express or are afforded sexuality in ways that affirm the roles of men on the street. Conflicting notions of motherhood/ fatherhood are prominent, with complementary discussions on morality. The emotional and physical relations of partners within groups illustrate social tensions, e.g. around a matriarchal figure who regulates daily life with contradictory claims to welfare, as she negotiates her own roles as protector, manager, dependent and lover. Sexualized identities are displayed through male bravado, machismo and infidelity, but quieter evidence of insecurities reveal young men bewildered by the abrupt departure of female partners.

Work is a vital part of participant accounts of who they are. There is an obvious ‘logic of survival’ but also a normative appeal. Participants see themselves as willing hard workers (in contrast to others who have it easy) with crime conflated with work, and euphoric accounts requiring reconciliation with claims to poverty. Work depends upon (and legitimates) a series of social relationships. One participant has a female boss away from the street, working for whom involves travel and possibly sexual encounters. Work also demonstrates organisation and social action. In the market, permission to wash windscreens requires the consent of a (Mao-ist) social movement with whom participants have occasional run-ins, obliging them to desist from work and to perform various duties in order to ‘belong’. For clowns and jugglers, work involves hierarchy and skill, careful attention to styles of presentation (dress, speech, cleanliness), and possibilities of joining unions. Work also legitimates the desire to ‘get out’ but some good job offers are rejected, while the offer serves as a focal point for conversations and dreams.

Participants’ daily lives are a constant process of understanding and using their bodies, affected by social relations as well as informing these through ‘doing looks’. Acquisition, use and effects of drugs form part of everyday conversations and actions, and are used to mitigate and to explain boredom, frustration, as well as make moral claims (of addictions under control). Consumption is also gendered with the female participants not using drugs and controlling their use by partners, sons and friends, and arranging for entry to rehabilitation facilities. Rehab and religion shape young men’s approaches to their drug use, through fear and thoughts of salvation. The body is used as a site of (consumption), of identity affirmation through dress, marking with tattoos and scars, in ways that indicate both empowerment and harm. Some of the daily routines of (ill) health – especially around the babies, of infections, diets – are recalled, as well as accounts of death including suicide. Violence enters into daily routines with our observational work locating frequent examples of harm and abuse – countered with signs of

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Background to the Study

Our principal methodology was ‘street ethnography’ spending over 500 hours in the company of groups on the streets of Puebla, Mexico. Observations were recorded in field diaries. We also conducted 32 formal interviews, including with two ‘former’ street children and three children in detention. Partly intended as conversation prompts, participants were asked to take photos of places important to them using disposable cameras. Thirteen group sessions were held with young people in government detention centres. Thirty-one interviews were held with representatives of government and CSOs in Puebla and Mexico City. Some of these informants also participated in a full-day workshop. Throughout, we reflected critically and reflexively on the social relationships developing between the participants and the ethnographic team, considering how the emotion of the research influenced performances, processes and outcomes.

Publications Include

