I move, therefore I am not
exploring different conceptualisations of street-connected children’s identities
This briefing paper provides an overview of how street-connected children identify themselves. The paper outlines different conceptualisations and constructions of street-connected children’s identities and highlights how their identities are fluid and varied. A detailed understanding of their identities will enable better responses to street-connected children’s individual and collective needs. This paper is for practitioners, donors and policy-makers.

Author: Natalie Turgut, Advocacy and Research Officer, Consortium for Street Children with the Research Expert Forum
1. WHY IS IDENTITY IMPORTANT FOR STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN?

In November 2015 CSC’s annual Research Conference explored the many and different conceptualisations of street-connected children’s identities. The Conference brought together researchers and practitioners to consider street-connected children’s identities through key-note speeches, expert-led panel sessions, workshops and research posters. This briefing paper builds on CSC’s “thinking paper” on street-connected children’s identities available at our annual Research Conference and the Conference proceedings.

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Identity is the way by which individuals define themselves, and are defined by others – it is who they are, what they associate with and how they relate to others. Identity is a social construction and has its theoretical underpinnings in different academic disciplines: sociology, psychology and philosophy. Initially identity was thought to be determined by character traits, creating a fixed identity. Now, however it is considered to be socially constructed and as such fluid and malleable, changing in different contexts.

Social identity theory, first introduced by psychologist Henri Tajfel, maintains that people are motivated to achieve a positive self-concept. Self-concept comes from personal identity (individual character traits) and social or group identity.1 Identification, distinct from identity, is constructed by an individual through his/her recognition of shared characteristics with another individual or group.2 Identification can also be constructed by others through their recognition of an individual’s characteristics and categorising them as part of a group, including by governments and social institutions. In Philosophy, Axel Honneth put forward three patterns of recognition necessary for the development of this positive self-concept. These are: love, rights and solidarity.3 Love refers to emotions being met by primary relationships with family and friends; rights refers to the development of moral responsibility through relations with others; and solidarity refers to recognition of an individual’s own traits. Thus identity and identification are affected by individual and group recognition.

According to J.P. Hewitt, identity can be thought of as being made up of components: (a) motivations, (b) roles and knowledge that allow individuals to interpret them, (c) norms and values, (d) cognitive competencies and (e) self-image.4 The street then cannot be presented solely as the identity-marker for street-connected children; nor the means used by children to resolve their problems or realise their aspirations. For instance, motivation to connect with the street does not reduce itself to a simple, rational choice in which children consciously combine an objective (solving a family problem) with a means (going to the street). Motivation is in fact only one element of the identification system of the child. It is a combination of the components of identity and other factors that influence identity development. Identity is then a combination of predispositions and potentialities related to possible behaviours5 or experiences.

These theories indicate that street-connected children both construct their own identities and are labelled through identification with the group “street children”. These theories also highlight that the street is not the sole identity-marker in their lives. It is now widely accepted that an individual’s identity is not homogenous, but rather is socially constructed through multiple and intersecting factors6 (see section 3 below). Historically, street-connected children have been represented under the homogenous label “street children” and in this way they have been commonly reduced to victims or delinquents.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN’S IDENTITIES?

The categories of victim or delinquent are constructions of “street children’s” identities that represent and project certain understandings of them. In particular:

• “Street children” are victims: creates an impression that street-connected children are needy, poor, destitute children in need of being “rescued” from the street; and

• “Street children” are delinquents: creates an impression that street-connected children only engage in criminal activities and as such are a scourge on society.

One of the most complex challenges that street-connected children face is dealing with these negative perceptions.7 This is reflected in how they are referred to. For instance in Costa Rica, “street children” are called “chapulines” meaning “grasshoppers” or “pests” and in the USA they are called “throwaway kids”.8

The victim/delinquent representations contained in the label “street children” are constructed by others; street-connected children do not define themselves in this way. These categories have enabled non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors and policy-makers to pursue certain types of programmes or policies that can conflict with street-connected children’s actual experiences and therefore limit fulfilment of their rights. For example, in 2015 the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security for the ECOWAS region held a workshop on the eradication of the syndrome of street children that positioned street children as a security risk to the region.9

An accurate understanding of street-connected children’s identities challenges the homogenous categorisations and enables programmes and policies to respond to individual children’s lived realities and experiences.

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1 Peter Robinson (ed) (1996), Social Groups and Identity: Developing the Legacy of Henri Tajfel (Butterworth-Heinemann)
5 Hall, p.17
7 Neelia Dabir and Naina Aftale (2011), From Street to Hope: Faith Based and Secular Programs in Los Angeles, Mumbai and Nairobi for Street Living Children, (India: Sage Publications) p.4
DEFINITIONS OF STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN

Street-connected children’s identities and how they are perceived individually is closely interlinked with definitions of “street children” as a group. Definitions of “street children” have changed over the past thirty years as understandings have developed with increasing research. Today, “street children” are understood as “children for whom the street is the central reference point – one which plays a significant role in his/her everyday life and identity”, i.e., street-connected children. 10

An overview of the development of definitions of “street children” is significant as it highlights how “street children’s” identities have been understood and how they have positioned “street children” within policy and programme developments. It also highlights how these conceptualisations have developed.

Defining children as on/of the street was first put forward by UNICEF11 and quickly became the most frequently used by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), NGOs, donors and policy-makers to identify “street children”. “Children on the street” are identified as home-based children who spend much of the day on the street but have family support and return home at night. “Children of the street” are identified as those who spend most of their time on the street including at night and predominantly have no support from family or other adult guardians or care-givers. 12

This definition has been subject to criticism as it imposes cultural assumptions on “street children”, that have been filtered through INGOs which are more often than not based in Western countries. 13 Furthermore, the on/of distinction ignores the mobility of street-connected children’s lives and their movement between home, the street and welfare shelters. 14

The on/of the street definition also ignored the activities that children engaged in whilst on the street and hence impacted on their identities. The children working and/or living on the street definition attempted to address this and reflects some of the complexity of street-connected children’s lives, recognising that some children may just work on the street whereas others may both live and work on the street. This evolved into children in street situations15 capturing the complexity of their lives on the street. This terminology has become widespread and is today used by the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child for the drafting of the General Comment on Children in Street Situations. This perspective stems from empirical studies and action-research with Terre des Hommes, using the model “Child-Street System” 16 that emerged from research in Rio de Janeiro, 17 Montevideo and Mexico, 18 as a way to reconstruct the multi-dimensional relationships children have with their street environment. The expression “children in street situations” is not a definition as such but rather an approach that highlights a variety of ways in which a child can be involved with the street, how they identify with it and the different experiences that children have there. This includes living and working on the street but also, for instance, making friends and learning skills on the street. The tension between approach and definition of “street children” can however be felt, with some compromise towards a definition of children in street situations as “children for whom the street is the main living place, all the while pointing out the diversity of situations these children can experience”. 19 This definitional move is looked at critically; 20 the relevance of this approach, versus a static definition, is that it disentangles children street from situations, emphasising that the problem is not inherent to children but rather to their situations; and that their identities are therefore more complex than perhaps perceived.

The definition of street-connected children, draws upon much of the thinking that informed the children in street situations definition, and emphasises that some children may not be physically present in the street but their identities still be influenced by their street life or career. For instance, a child may be in a welfare shelter but their personal and identity development affected by a number of years’ experiences on the street. The street-connections definition recognises the role of the street and public space in children’s lives without constructing what their role is for them. Ultimately, all children’s identities are constructed through an amalgamation of their life experiences, which for some children includes experiences on the street.

The definition street-connected children draws upon much of the thinking that informed the “children in street situations” definition and emphasises that some children may not be physically present in the street but that their identities can still be influenced by their street life or career. As such, “street children” can be understood as those children considered by society to be out of place. 21 In reality then “street children” do not form a homogenous population, but in fact are a subject group constructed by others. There is now, however, an increasing focus on “street children” as social agents or actors in their own right. This brings street-connected children out from the margins and emphasises the importance of their own perspectives of their experiences, 22 especially in constructing their own identities.

10 UN OHCHR (2012). Protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street, p.10
12 Sarah Thomas de Benitez, (2011) Research Paper on the promotion and protection of the rights of children living and/or working on the street OHCHR 2011 Global Study
16 Lucchini, (2007), 49 – 75
17 Lucchini, (1993), Enfant de la rue. Identité, sociabilité, drogue, (Geneve/Pariis: Droz)
18 Lucchini, (1996), Sociologie de la rue. L’enfant dans la rue, (Paris: PUF)
20 Daniel Stoecklin, forthcoming
Identity may appear finalised but it is something that is constantly forming, in process and subject to change over time or with circumstance. A useful concept by which to understand street-connected children’s identities, put forward by Udi Butler, is as storied struggles of becoming: the storied element emphasises that street-connected children construct their identities themselves through narratives about their lives; the struggle element recognises the huge levels of discrimination and stigma that children experience on the streets; and the becoming reflects identity construction as an ongoing process, it is not fixed or determinate. Identity is also something that can provide a focus for social action and organisation, i.e., identity can be used to bring about change, either in an individual’s life or a group’s environment.

During the 2015 CSC annual Research Conference, Ari Widodo, a former street-connected child, gave some vivid insights into the Tikyan community, a street boy group in Yogyakarta, Indonesia where he grew up. The idea of intersectionality – as a lens through which to think about street-connected children’s identities – captures these differences. Intersectionality is “the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference…and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power”. Intersectionality can be used as a tool to understand the complex and multiple factors that combine to constitute street-connected children’s identities and enhance understandings of how these different aspects of their identities are further affected by inequality.

Street-connected children’s identities are also often constructed through a process of exclusion, the result being that street-connected children develop identities that contrast with and resist mainstream societal structures. They are also, however, constructed through a desire to progress like others in mainstream society. These differing elements can be seen through the four stories of becoming relevant to street-connected children:

1. Be ‘revoltado’ (enraged) – as a response to the structural discrimination and oppression that street-connected children face, they construct their identities through being enraged or resistant to negative perceptions
2. Be street-wise – street-connected children lack access to conventional resources, but in spending a lot of time on the street generate knowledge and skills there
3. Be free – there is an idealised sense of freedom on the streets that children experience, where they can control their experiences
in Tanzania, street children appeared to internalise negative connotations of street life dominant in the wider community.32

The transition to the street may be triggered by a significant event, such as the break-up of family, or through a gradual process of spending more time on the street, perhaps to raise money for family. The transition from the street may equally be triggered by an event or again a gradual awareness of different options, encouraging a child to move to a welfare shelter or back home. It may equally be the draw of friends and peer networks on the street that cause a child to leave a welfare shelter and reconnect with the street. These experiences are different for every child.

**COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITIES**

Street-connected children construct their individual identities based on their own experiences; and these experiences are often with other street-connected children. They will create groups for friendship, to socialise with and for protection. The group, and its collective identity, has a significant impact on the individual child’s identity, both its construction and development.33

During the 2015 CSC annual Research Conference, the observations of Ari Widodo, a former street-connected child from the Tikyan community, gave some vivid insights into the Tikyan community, a street boy group in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. At the time he lived in the street, the Tikyan community developed their individual identities and identity of the group, through subverting, or challenging, their marginalisation from mainstream society, including creating their own identity cards. This was apparent through their style of dress, hairstyles and type of work.34 The Tikyan community had its own values, street ethics and hierarchy.35 This identity was a reaction to and a way to resist the negative discrimination and stigmatisation that they faced daily. The collective identity was therefore a way for individual children to define themselves and face the outside world. The group supported and protected individuals within it and helped newer street-connected children to socialise into the Tikyan community. This socialisation involved initiation practices and adopting new names and was reinforced through peer pressure to adhere to the norms of the group.36 Subversion of mainstream society by groups of street-connected children has also been documented in Ukraine.37

A group, in challenging their marginalisation focuses on solidarity and preserves unity through acts of enforcement and control. In Indonesia, the Tikyan group involved ‘rigid surveillance from within and [was] replete with internal rivalry, violence and oppression’.38 It also, however, provided a family for members of the group, being their

12 Ruth Evans (2006) ‘Negotiating Social Identities: The Influence of Gender, Age and Ethnicity on Young People’s Street Careers in Tanzania’ in *Children’s Geographies*, Vol. 4 No. 1, p.113
16 Ibid
There are many other examples. For instance, the Buca boys in Mexico City collectively identified a formal leader of their group (and excluded females) to ensure cohesion. Over time, as street girls became associated with the Buca boys, the girls were allowed to socialise with the boys but clearly not as part of the group, and the girls’ sexuality became a means of negotiating with the boys.

**NEGOTIATING SPACE**

Street-connected children are constantly negotiating spaces, often public spaces – and this affects their identity construction. In considering this concept of negotiation through a gender lens, (gender as an element of an individual’s identity that can be related to across cultures and contexts), the choices that different street-connected children make and how this affects their identities is highlighted.

Girls can be excluded from groups of street-connected children; street-connected girls were excluded from the Indonesian Tikyan subculture. Indonesian society is very patriarchal and girls’ presence on the streets is contrary to family values and society’s conception of public order. Similar observations have been made across Africa and in Argentina where the presence of girls in the street ‘upsets the values and representations of adults’. The girls’ presence is then read through a pathologisation of her and her family life and as a ‘delinquent’ girl she is soon associated with sexuality.

In this environment street-connected girls experience huge discrimination from those in mainstream society and street-connected boys who also see them as out of place. This is not to deny that street-connected boys and girls do create positive relationships. Yet street-connected girls create their own identities as a means of resistance to this negative placing; for instance, the Indonesian girls emulate masculinity in defiance to the femininity expected in society through wearing masculine clothes. This is both a survival mechanism and resistance to society’s expectations. It is through this negotiation of space that children’s experiences contribute to their identity construction, and in the instance of the Tikyan community, that a subculture was established.

Street-connected children, like other people, shift their identities according to the space they are occupying and their audience. In Yogyakarta, street-connected girls shifted their identities according to where they were in the city and who they were with; for instance whether with women market stall holders for safety or taxi drivers for money or food. The girls negotiated different spaces in the city and their identities (and survival behaviours) were constructed around this.

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39 Observations of Ari Widodo, a former street-connected child from the Tikyan community at CSC’s Research Conference
41 Ibid, p.115
43 Lorraine van Blerk (2006), ‘Diversity and Difference in the Everyday Lives of Ugandan Street Children: The Significance of Age and Gender for Understanding the Use of Space’ in Social Dynamics, 32.1, p.56
44 Ibid
48 Ibid
49 Ibid, p.1675
MOBILITY

The concept of negotiating space highlights the fluid nature of street-connected children’s identities. Street-connected children live mobile lives – they move between public and private spaces (for instance, the street, home and welfare shelters) and need to adhere to different values and display different behaviour in each of these places. Furthermore, the different actors and organisations that street-connected children engage with in these spaces also have an impact on street-connected children’s identity construction.\(^5\) Mobility then affects the spaces that street-connected children move in, the relationships that they form and their identity construction. Street-connected children will often move as a means of dealing with, or avoiding difficult situations.\(^5\) In much the same way that other people or groups do, for instance, refugees and migrants.

There are three main types of mobility during a child’s street career: between spaces in the city; between street and non-street locations; and between cities. This mobility can be voluntary – to visit friends and family – and forced – by State authorities or adults in the community moving street children on.\(^5\) Children may also move across country-borders unaccompanied during their street career.

A child’s street career may be transitory and whilst often necessary for their immediate survival, can end voluntarily. This may begin with a renouncement of street identity\(^53\), which involves the individual actively changing their identity, or what they identify with. It may also be part of a longer identity trajectory where the child’s negotiation of public and other spaces ultimately help him/her to achieve his/her ambitions.\(^54\)

Street-connected children’s identities therefore are not fixed or set as the dominant categorisations of the victim/delinquent narrative imply, but are multiple and fluid – sometimes transitory – across space, time and social axes, and also therefore specific to the individual child’s experiences.

4. PRACTICAL WAYS OF ADDRESSING STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN’S IDENTITIES

Practical responses to street-connected children’s identities ensure that: there is better design of programmes for street-connected children; policies are more responsive to street-connected children’s needs; governments fulfil their legal obligations to street-connected children; and there is a better allocation of resources to street-connected children. Ultimately, practical responses lead to sustainable and more effective results for street-connected children.

Taking a rights-based approach, street-connected children are social actors with agency, able to articulate their individuality. This agency should inform programmes and policies that are sensitive to street-connected children’s age and gender and are also nuanced to accommodate street-connected children’s differences, individual needs, interests and abilities.\(^55\)

PARTICIPATION

Through participatory research street-connected children are co-informers alongside researchers. Participatory research is when the people whose lives are being studied are involved in collecting and analysing the data.\(^56\) Participatory research methods are a relatively new concept, promoted in research on and with children as a tool to explain the culture of childhood and children’s social relationships.\(^57\) Street-connected children can express themselves through engaging in ethnographic, participatory research that generates an accurate understanding of their lives to better inform programme and policy development. Street-connected children, like all informers and researchers have a unique viewpoint, and provide valuable information on their lives, but while their perspectives are particularly important, other evidence should be reviewed.

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\(^{5}\) See Jamie Patrice Joanou, (2014) ‘Tu Sabes que somos de calle’ The Role of the Thirdspace in the Construction of a Street Child Identity in Journal of Contemporary Ethnography Vol. 43(3)


\(^{53}\) Ibid, p.17

\(^{7}\) See Gareth Jones and Sarah Thomas de Benitez (2009), ‘Tale of Two or Many Worlds?: when ‘street’ kids go global’ in Margaret Wetherell, (ed.) Theorising identities and social action: Identity studies in the social sciences, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.75–94

\(^{54}\) Lorraine van Blikik (2006), ‘Diversity and Difference in the Everyday Lives of Ugandan Street Children: The Significance of Age and Gender for Understanding the Use of Space’ in Social Dynamics, Vol. 31, 1, pp.69–95


Participatory techniques include:

• Interviews and/or focus group discussions between researchers and street-connected children;

• Participant observation on the street – where the researcher can participate in the child’s life or daily activities and record observations;

• Participatory action research activities – where the researcher participates with the children to generate the findings of the research. This includes activities such as role-playing, drama, photography, drawings, spatial stories/maps where children draw maps of where they live, work or hang out, explaining the significance of different areas for them;

• Biographical approach – children tell the personal story of their life, explaining in their own terminology how they see themselves. This goes beyond a recapitulation of how they came to connect with the streets and reveals more about the children’s actual experiences and mobility on the street. Such an approach has recently been followed in the USA called ‘travelogueing’ where homeless youth track where they move through GPS on their mobile phones. At the same time they use photography and diaries to capture their own perspectives on their mobility;

• Informal conversations and interviews spontaneously generated during the process of the research; and

• Full participatory research where street-connected children are trained to be researchers themselves, thereby removing the ‘outsider’ researcher status.

LEGAL IDENTITY DOCUMENTATION
Legal recognition, in some contexts, would go a long way to challenge the systemic discrimination and stigmatisation that street-connected children experience. Street-connected children face many barriers to realising their rights and this is significantly compounded by the requirement of national identity documents to access basic social services such as healthcare and education. Many street-connected children have not been registered at birth and sometimes late registration is not possible (due to prohibitive laws, bureaucratic and practical barriers), leaving street-connected children without legal identity documents. With formal recognition from the State, however, street-connected children would have greater access to the services that they are routinely denied.

Legal documentation, however, should be treated with caution. In some political contexts, particularly where street-connected children have limited protection from the law, legal identification documents could be used to further repressive policy aims. For instance, identifying children as a particular religion or ethnic group, or having no father can heighten the discrimination that street-connected children face. Identification documents could also be used to trace the children and serve to further criminalise them.

Organisations can support street-connected children to access identity documents through:

• Direct case support to individual street-connected children to process their registration;

• Increasing public awareness about how to register street-connected children;

• Advocating for local and national governmental bodies to make complex administrative procedures easier to navigate; and

• Advocating for national legislative change, where necessary, to allow for late registration.

58 See generally Lewis Aptekar and Daniel Stoecklin (2014), Street Children and Homeless Youth, pp.144-158
59 Discussed by Amy Donovan during the Research Conference 2015
5. WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN’S IDENTITIES AND RESOURCES FROM CSC’S 2015 ANNUAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE:
CSC’s Global Resource Centre
www.streetchildrenresources.org

RESOURCES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY PRACTITIONERS ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION:
In designing and evaluating programmes, A Passport to Participatory Planning:
www.streetchildrenresources.org/resources/a-passport-to-participatory-planning-2

To become researchers themselves, Growing Up On The Streets training pack:

FOR AN OVERVIEW OF CSC NETWORK MEMBERS WHO WORK ON PROCESSING LEGAL IDENTITY DOCUMENTATION FOR STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN:
www.streetchildrenresources.org/organisations
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  – (2012), Berg-en-See street boys: merging street and family relations in Cape Town South Africa’ in Children’s Geographies, Vol 10(3)
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The Consortium for Street Children (CSC) is a global network that raises street children’s voices, promotes their rights and improves their lives. We do this through our focus on advocacy, research and network development.

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