

## **Street Children: daily routine, trajectories of life and cultural expressions**

Author: Juliana Prates Santana

Institute of Child Studies, University of Minho

### INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to describe the routine of street children inserted in an institution of attendance in the city of Salvador, in Brazil. Such description focuses the activities developed by the children, the relationships established between themselves and with the educators and also the forms in which the institutional rules are constructed, reformulated and transgressed by these children, in a constant game of negotiation with the institutional staff.

This research is based on Sociology of Childhood and this implies the adoption of some basic principles, such as the conception of childhood as a social construction, that must be historically understood and analyzed, existing not only one childhood, but diverse forms of living and experiencing this stage. In this direction, childhood must be studied as a social variable, which is related to others social variables, such as class, gender and race. The children are understood as competent social actors whose voice and participation must be considered in all research about their trajectories of life. The idea of childhood as a social group endowed with rights and the one of children as competent social actors have been supported by many authors, as well as the necessity of creating new forms of inquiry that answers to the underlying needs of these two basic premises (Alderson, 2000; Christensen & James, 2000; James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1992). It is in this perspective that in this research we seek to understand the forms in which children conceive and produce the institution's routine, through ethnographic observations and the use of other participative techniques. In all moments, the child was considered a privileged informant of his/her own history, a conception that is reflected in the form in which this study was planned and executed.

Ethnography has been described as a privileged strategy in research with children, one that makes it possible for the researcher to have a broader approach to the children's reality. It allows the children to expose their set of representations, beliefs and values, instead of remaining occult as in traditional research with children (Graue & Walsh, 2003). However, ethnography with children presents some important challenges that must be presented and argued. It is necessary to understand that the study of the children's world is the study of another world that is not independent from the investigator's world. This implies in an investigator's trend to understand childhood's experiences from his/hers own memories and experiences as a child. The ethnography with children requires the researcher the challenge to turn something that it judges to know extremely well into something strange. In this direction, ethnography with street children presents an even a bigger challenge

because these children possess a double otherness; one in relation to the adults' world and another in relation to the world of other children. This demands the researcher to be in a constant negotiation between his/hers preconceived ideas concerning childhood and the daily experience of the children participant of the study.

Another important aspect to be considered in the accomplishment of ethnography with children relates to the position assumed by the adult researcher in the inquiry context. Once the relations between adults and children are already been socially established, it is necessary that the investigator breaks with this to become related with children in a differentiated way. It is in this direction that Corsaro and Molinari (2005) defend that the researcher must assume a position of an atypical adult, having therefore to abdicate the role of an adult expertise, of coordinator of the games and of the one that manages the conflicts between the children. To assume this position of an atypical adult allows that the child and the investigator establish another type of relation where the power, inherent to the process of investigation, can be renegotiated.

Considering the challenges placed by the accomplishment of an investigation with children, it is essential that the investigator adopts a reflexive position throughout the research process. As Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2005) affirm, the use of the reflexivity is central for the accomplishment of ethnography. This reflexive position allied with participative methods makes it possible to have access to the voices of the children, which are traditionally hidden in research.

Moreover, it is important to relate that the theoretical frame assumed here leads us to consider the children's productions not only as a reflection and reproduction of the adult culture, but as forms of expression of childhood's cultures, which possess its own characteristics and deserves, therefore, singular analysis and theorization. As Sarmiento (2003) affirms, "childhood's cultures express the societal culture in which they're inserted, but they make it in a distinct way from the adult's cultures, at the same time that they propagate specifically infantile forms of intelligibility, representation and symbolization of the world". It is in this direction that we understand the childhood cultures produced by the children that have participated in this study.

## INQUIRY CONTEXT

The present inquiry was accomplished in an institution of attendance for street children, in the city of Salvador, north-eastern of Brazil. The institution foresees the attendance of children of both the genders, with ages between seven and fourteen years old, that are directed by the Advice Tutor and/or Public Prosecution service. In this organization it is intended the accomplishment of activities and services that are necessary, such as contacts with the family, medical, dental and psychological attendance, and transferences for other institutions of permanent character.

## PARTICIPANTS

Throughout the accomplishment of the field work, it was possible to make contact with 53 children, with ages between 8 and 16 years old, being 38 boys and 15 girls. The level of participation of the children in the study was very diverse, since some children had been in the institution for only one day and others had practically been in entire period of data collection. Moreover, the children possess varied profiles concerning street experience, because the institution also serves youth who have experienced domestic violence, abandon and neglect. Even so, all the children that participated in this study had already been in the streets, having this street experience occurred previously or during the institutional insertion.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research with children involves a series of ethical questions that need to be considered and respected, the first one concerning the request of the free and informed assent. In general, it is requested to the parents, responsible and/or the institution where the child is, without consulting the child itself. This practice has been changing, since it is considered a right of the child to decide about its participation in a free and clarified way. In the present work, it was first asked the authorization to the institution's directors so that they could assent the entrance in the inquiry context and later the project was presented to the children, time when it was asked for their permission to participate in this study. However, it is important to report that the great turnover of the children made it impossible to uniformly request for their participation. Another aspect taken in account in this study is the guarantee of the secrecy and the anonymity of the children, who have had their names changed in the presentation of the results. Finally, it was intended throughout the execution of the research not to perform any type of discrimination and/or exclusion of the children.

## RESULTS

The analyzed institution possess characteristics that make the task of describing its daily routine into a difficult matter, being some of these characteristics typical of the street population, such as the high turnover of the children and the unpredictable aspect of the daily events. Moreover, the system of shifts, which implies in the alternation of educators, and the difficulty in carrying through a global planning of activities, make the daily unpredictability even more visible. As the educators affirmed, it is impossible to know what will happen in a shift in the beginning of one, since new children can arrive, others can run away or be sent to their houses or other institutions. It can be a calm shift, without great incidents, or the children can be agitated due to the entrance of psychoactive substance in institution or a withdrawal experienced by one of the children, or even due to problems occurred in the previous shift.

These characteristics provoke in those who arrive the sensation of experiencing a complete chaos, in which the children are developing the most diverse actions without a connection between it. Some children might be playing ball, others seating or lying by the ground, while some others might be with an educator carrying through some task. The noise is constant, either from the high tone of the voices of educators and children, either from the radio and television on at the same time, as well as from the constant noise coming from the external environment. Moreover, the careless and dirty aspect of the majority of the children gives the sensation that we're in the street, even being inside the institution. Only the constants and numerous observations allow us to find some order in this chaos that marks the institutional routine. Even though the absence or the little frequency of the structuralized and planned activities in the institution, it's noticeable a certain standard in their daily living, even if the standard is the frequent repetition of certain moments of chaos. That is, the chaos or the clutter appears, at many moments, as a standard form of acting and functioning of the children and the institution itself.

As related in the description of the inquiry context, the institution in analysis intends to be an institution of closed character, once the entrance and exit of the child from the institution are intermediated by the Child Protection service and/or Public prosecution service. The institution, in the figure of its director, possesses the temporary guardian of the child. This means that the exit of the child to the street constitutes an evasion of the institutional space and has to be officially reported to the competent agencies, being necessary in order to return to the institution that the child receives a new order from the related agencies. This series of bureaucratic procedures does not hinder, in any way, that the child leaves the institution whenever it's desired or considered necessary, even because the own institution recognizes the lack of legal or practical ways to hinder these evasions. In legal terms, the child is not submitted to loss of freedom and therefore she has the right to go and to come (even though this is never said explicitly) and in practical terms the institution does not possess a physical structure that hinders (completely) the child's exit. It's important to note that it does not hinder completely, because the institution does possess characteristics that demonstrate the care in preventing possible escapes, such as the existence of bars in all windows, the presence of a wire screen that surrounds and covers the soccer field, as well as the constant concern in keeping the doors and gates closed with locks. On the other hand, the children possess a way of escape known by all the staff, which is to go up in the gratings on the only area not covered by the screen, arriving at the roof of a shed that exists in the institution, and after crossing the roof they go down on a tree that exists in the external area, allowing them to get down to the street with a certain security. Moreover, the exit of the institution is many times verbally announced by the child to a staff member, who tries to convince the child to stay or clearly ignores this behavior for believing that it is only a way for the child to get the adults attention. In

fact, this is what is observed in several occasions. There're, still, some cases in which the escape of a specific child is foreseen and even desired by the educators. In these cases it is a familiar child that the educators already know that doesn't support the institutionalization and would completely disorganize the activities that are being carried through, beyond the fact that this child might be able, in many cases, to convince other children to leave too.

Regarding the return of the children to the institutional space it was possible to evidence that, in general, the children do not need to elaborate great strategies to guarantee it, due to the fact that this institution is the only one of temporary character that the city has, leaving not many alternatives. Consequently the children go to the places of more interest in town and whenever they intend to come back they go to the closest counselor and get the new order and transport necessary to come back to the institution. When the evasions become to happen more frequently, the council members make it harder for the child. The first strategy the child uses is to search for another counselor (the city of Salvador possesses seven) that hasn't yet the knowledge of his/hers history.

When the institution does not tolerate anymore (this is not a fixed and uniform criteria) the constant coming and going, it's emitted a communicated to all the counselors asking them not to send one specific child to the space. From this point on the children appeal to more elaborated strategies, as one of the children tells:

*"There was a time when I could not come here, because to come here I need the order of my counselor. My counselor did not want to give me the order in any way. Then I said: 'Oh, you don't want to give it to me, do you? You're going to see what I'm going to do'. Every day I came to the 'institution' and put I don't know how many girls to run away. All night I put one, two to run away. One, two. One, two. Until...I was able to enter here again. After this I didn't put anymore girls to run away. I succeeded".*  
(Eliana, 14 years old).

To observe the interaction of the children who are not inserted in the institution anymore and those that remain there allow us to analyze another important aspect of the institution's routine and rules, that concerns the relation of this context with the street environment. One of the rules of the institution is that the children cannot, in anyway, stay in the windows talking to people that are outside, nor can change objects/merchandises with them. The educators are constantly arguing with the children to leave the windows, but this does not seem to prevent their constant contact with other children, nor the entrance of cigarettes, for example.

Many times the children go to the window in reply to the call of children who had run away and/or that are forbidden to enter in the institution. In fact, the neighborhoods of the institution seem to be one of the preferred places by the children when they're without something interesting to do in the street or during the night, when the door of the institution is a secure and safe place. This proximity indicates that running away from the institution it is not related with not liking its space, but with the attractions that the street offers. The street's appeals and attractions make the relation

of the institution with this space tense and confused, and at many times the institution ends up losing this battle. It's interesting to observe that also the educators interact with the children who are outside, once they are familiar and attract the attention of the educator.

To finish the analysis of some of the institutional rules, it's important to refer the fragility of some of these rules when facing all the chaos that we have referred. It is as if to not being able to follow more essential rules - as the entrance and exit of the institution, the accomplishment of programmed activities, the violent behaviors of the children, among other things - the staff ends up becoming attached to less important rules, that can even be considered trivial in face of the broader context. The role of these less important rules is to guarantee that the adult has certain power over the children, and for that making use of primordial issues for the children, such as food, music, television, ball, etc. One of these rules is the obligation that the children use shirts in order to enter the refectory when the meals are served. It could be imagined that such rule is important in the learning of proper and polite conducts, if it was not for the fact that many of the children possess only torn shirts or that some of the them do not have shirts at all. This obligates the children who, in all the time spent in the institution, have old, dirty and torn clothes, to be decently dressed at the meals. The educators stay at the refectory door to make sure the children follow such rule, without any exceptions. Those children who do not have any shirt (due to losing the one they had or leaving it at the other institutional space) wait for a colleague to finish the meal so that they can borrow a shirt. Since to be deprived of a meal can be one of the worst sanctions that these children can receive, once it moves with the privations that they already have passed during life, this is one of the rules that is always followed, even if in an artificial way as the one that we've illustrated.

Concerning the stressful events that occur in some shifts it is important to analyze how children provoke or manage these situations. In some occasions it was possible to observe that the activities were happening in a relatively calm way when it's heard a voice of command among the children that says: "Let's stress the shift!" Immediately we see this child starts to beat another one who had no connection with what was happening, and after that knocks down the material of some other colleague. And when this occurs, in a domino effect, a series of parallel conflicts that demands the presence of the educators and all the staff that is in the institution. Once the origin of the confusion many times can't be identified, the adults try to calm down the spirits and many times end up punishing or arguing with children who were only victims of the situation. This is an extremely efficient behavior for messing completely with the activities that are being developed and is used when the children are not minimally interested in the task or when they are stressed with something and want to express it in some way.

Throughout the inquiry it was possible to evidence the relation that the children establish mainly with their pairs, the establishment of leaderships, and the relations of friendship as well as

the romantic and sexual involvement that occurs between them. In general terms, we can affirm that the leadership is exerted by one or two children who have been in the institution for a long time and therefore already possesses a great knowledge of the institutional functioning and dynamics. Moreover, these children also play the same leadership role in the street environment, even that with different groups from the ones there're in the institution. These are very charismatic children, who are able to captivate adults and other children, even that, in many cases, the leadership is exerted through aggressive and violent behaviors. There is a clear gender distinction, each one of the groups possessing its leader, tendency that is increased by the fact that in the night shelters the children are separate by the sex. However, this leadership might vary according to specific activities or situations, as for example, the domain of certain techniques or ownership of determined good. The ability to dance is, for example, a factor that can allow the performance of a leadership role, even that only during the accomplishment of a specific activity, as well as having money or cigarettes can favor the child in some other situation. The good ownership evidently is not a decisive factor and must come with some other child's characteristic, as for example, its bargaining and negotiation power, once if it is a child who is usually exploited by the group, having something does not mean status, since certainly it will be taken away by force and not negotiated.

Concerning the relations of friendship established between the children, we can affirm that these are based in common interests and affinities, being important to mark the protective role of some of these friendships. Such is because to be friend of the leader, for example, brings advantages and security for the child, who ends up being benefited by the others due to the influence that this child can have on the leader. It is also possible to verify the existence of more ephemeral relations of friendship than are guided by specific events, as for example, the child's desire to leave the institution in one day. So the child joins another one who is also interested in running away, remaining together for that specific event. Moreover, the friends always seem to be responsible for the child's introduction in the street world through the presentation of its rules, the strategies of survival and also the presentation of drugs. In fact, there are few children who remain alone in the streets, since the presence of a partner is considered fundamental for the child's survival in this context.

Dates and sexual contacts are lived intensely and precociously by the majority of the children inserted in the institution. Throughout the data collection, we observed the exchange of romantic letters, passionate declarations made in the walls of the institution, as well as explicit exchange of affections and sexual contacts. The age band of the girls is superior to the boys and maybe because of this difference they are more experienced in sexual terms, being many times responsible for the sexual initiation of the boys, according to the educators and what was possible to observe. The children's sexual relations are forbidden inside the institutional context, therefore the

educators and other staff members seem very vigilant with this matter. With certainty such monitoring is not enough to hinder the exchange of caresses and the sexual relation between the children, being the kisses in the mouth, for example, frequent either between boys and girls, either between the girls.

Beyond the precociousness of the sexual relations, it was possible to verify the frequent exchange of partners, as well as the instability of the relations. Dates start and finish very fast and are marked by intense demonstrations of love, jealousy or even violent fights between the couples.

Another important aspect to be approached concerning the daily life of the children in the institution is the forms of cultural expression chosen by them. Beyond the common tricks of infancy, such as games of hop-schotch, simulations of fight, drawing and painting, it was possible to verify that music and dance play a crucial role for these children. The Bahia's music is used as a form of corporal expression in which the children have the possibility to express aspects of sexuality and sensuality, due to the music's lyrics and the form it is usually danced. Raps seem to be used as a form the children use to express their trajectories of life, many times marked by losses and violence.

The use of music and dance goes beyond a simple reproduction, the children having an active production in the creation of different versions of existing songs or in the production of original ones. The activities that include dance and music are generally requested by the children, fact that makes a lot of difference from the standard, which is to have to try to convince the children to adhere to any activity. The same happens with the other activities that also involve corporal expression, such as *capoeira* or soccer. During the accomplishment of these activities there is a clear reduction of the aggressiveness between the children, as well as an increase in the expressions of joy and pleasure, making a lot easier to work with these children.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the importance that the institution has, together with its educators and other staff members, to the children. In general, the children describe the institution positively and emphasize its protective aspect and suffer when they are removed from the institution. The behavior of the children denotes this confidence deposited in the institution, since this is the first place they look for in cases of difficulties and/or illnesses. The institution's social assistant confirms that many of the children reach to the institution whenever they need medical care and/or when the street's life conditions are extremely precarious. Therefore, the institution is a context that must be considered as privileged for initiating the intervention process that these children need.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the first place, it is important to reflect about the importance of ethnography and its role in



an inquiry that used a series of techniques of retraction of data, such as photography, filming, focus groups, interviews, among others. It seems clear that the ethnographic method allowed a broader integration and contextualization of the collected data. The accomplishment of the observations of ethnographic orientation was of great importance for establishing a reliable relation and proximity with the participants of the research. From the present inquiry it was possible to verify the decurrently advantages and benefits of treating children as competent partners in the discovery process, especially when the focus of analysis is their daily life and interactions. Street children are constant targets of inquiries and the life in the streets itself endowed them with knowledge and strategies that consist in giving socially accepted answers when questioned by the adults about their trajectories of life and other questions. In general, the children use this so called street wisdom when they are interested in getting benefits and/or the approval of the researcher, usually used in one-time meetings that have no great meaning for the child. When convoked to participate in an inquiry in which they will be partners of the process and it is established a narrower and more reliable relation with the researcher, the children allow the adult to have access to their knowledge, beliefs and values. It was through this type of relation that it became possible to understand the ways children think and organize their daily life in an institutional context, possessing an active role in the construction of their routine. It is in this direction that we affirm that the child's participation is a crucial factor for the effectiveness of an intervention and we must, therefore, consider them as partners of the process of planning and executing any policy for them destined. This seems to be a simple and easily feasible affirmation, but what we observe is a difficulty in accepting the child's opinion and knowledge as valid and effectively useful information. In general, the adults believe to know what is best for the child and it is this principle that guides mostly all of our interactions with them. Therefore the necessity of a constant monitoring on the part of the investigator to identify these preconceived ideas, since only this way it will be obtained results effectively significant for the children.

The knowledge that the children possess of the municipal structure of attendance for them destined and the way as they know how to manipulate it in order to immediately satisfy their necessities demonstrates the importance of rethinking the intervention's strategies so that the institution is not limited as a place for the suppliment of basic necessities, and is in fact able to fulfill its primordial role of socially (re)inserting the children by them attended. The institution already functions as privileged space of protection for the children, once in this context they feel themselves accepted and find the minimum conditions for their survival, being necessary, however, the children's adhesion in the elaboration of a life project that allows the alteration of their reality. Perhaps an important step for this adhesion is to include the children in the elaboration of these projects, not only as passive addressees of an intervention, but as co-authors of this process. And

the inclusion of the children should not be restricted to the elaboration of their life projects, since their participation is something to be collectively learned and constructed. The children could, for example, be invited to rethink and to construct some of the institution's rules and norms. If such rules were product of a collective construction there would have, probably, a better acceptance and, therefore, a better effectiveness. It is evident that there are limits and constraints in the elaboration of these rules, and that they are experienced not only by the children, but by the staff and the institution itself. However, a constant evaluation of the institution's practice in relation to its main objectives is very important, once it is through this process that the institution will be able to improve its services.

Since the children's participation seems to be a great contribution in the interventions improvement, it is necessary to refer the cultures of childhood as a way to have access to the children. It seems to us that the evaluation of these forms of expression provides a better communication between adults and children, since such forms are not restricted to the verbal language domain, being possible for the child to transmit complex questions about their lives without using the direct resource of orality. The children's tricks, drawings, music and dances seem to directly state some of their richer feelings, beliefs and values. It is because of this that all the activities that include playing and other forms of childlike expressions seem to be more easily implemented and accepted by the children. This matter becomes evident when an inquiry is carried through with these children, since it is noticeable the resistance they demonstrate in participating of a standardized activity that is similar to school tasks and, consequently, that raises the question of the children's incompetence, the (arbitrary) power of the adult, among other things. On the other hand, these children are "transformed" when they are given the necessary materials so that they can produce and, this way, can reflect about their experiences. It was due to this conception that the children in this study were able to produce photographs, films, music, choreographies and even a documentary about their life stories. This way of thinking doesn't have to do only with a concession given to the children, but with respecting their rights of participation as praised in conventions and statutes.

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