

What is good childhood? Local realities under the pressure of international perspectives

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Abstract

Street children in Brazil are numerous, at least that is how they are presented by institutions. However, in reality one can have hard time to find them – if following the definitions of street children around the world, as it became obvious during my anthropological fieldwork in one Brazilian city. The definitions of locals partly correspond to those definitions, partly not. The perspective on street children is influenced by governmental perspective on what is normal childhood, responsible parenthood, good family, etc. At the same time one can observe the rise of the perspective of *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*, Brazilian law on children and adolescents, based on UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These two perspectives have increasing influence on the concepts of childhood that does not correspond the local reality, like where the children spend their time, what does it mean: child labour and service at home, how can a mother be a good mother. Street children seem only to be a mirror of the processes behind the curtain. What is the right perspective on childhood? And who has the right to say so and by that to influence the ways of living of people around the world? The influence of international perspectives and documents on quality of life of people on local level can be far away from responsible ones, although they might be perceived as such.

Keywords: childhood, anthropology, street children, Brazil, international perspectives, local way of life.



1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the diversity of the perspectives on street children in Brazil, namely in one city, Corumbá, Mato Grosso do Sul. While some locals claim high number of street children, on the other hand one can have hard time finding them if following definitions accepted by various researchers (Lusk in Aptekar, 1994, 2; Unicef in Moura, 2002, 357 and in Naterer, 2010, 33; Oblak, 2016).

This paper is based on the research carried out by the author in the form of anthropological field-work in the mentioned city Corumbá¹. Observing the situation of street children, some other topics seemed to be connected to that phenomena, i.e. race, poverty, social classes, family, perception of a person, and various communities, the services of help among others, governmental as well as non-governmental ones (Oblak, 2016). When becoming familiar with these services one faces also various perspectives on street children as well as on childhood: What does it mean to be a child? When does a person stop to be a child? Who are street children? What is the right way to spend childhood? What is the best environment for education? What is the best educational approach? One meets also tendencies to find one common answer for all children of the world (Jenks, 1996; Rapport and Overing, 2000; Lancy, 2011). However, that might be a big challenge already at the local level as various groups of people in the city live quite distinct way of life.

2 Who are street children in Corumbá?

2.1 Variety of perspectives

“Scientists, policy-makers and the media talk about street children as if they are referring to a clearly defined populations” (Moura, 2002, 356), yet street children are not homogeneous group. In Corumbá there are two terms used: *crianças na rua* (children on the street) – those who live with parents or relatives and look for additional means for their survival, like food, free time, work; and *crianças da rua* (children of the street) – those that are not connected with the family and live at the street (Contini and Kassar, 1995, 10). The first term is most used in everyday life (field-notes from the days 2. 1. 2007; 21. 1. 2007).

Unicef classified street children in three categories: “candidates for the street, children ‘on’ the street and children ‘of’ the street” (in Moura 2002, 357). Lusk developed four categories: First, poor working children, who sleep with their families, attend school and are not delinquent; second, independent street workers, starting to break down family ties, attend school less, and are more delinquent; third group are children of street families who live and work in the street; in fourth group there are children who stopped having contact with their families and live at the street (in Aptekar, 1994, 2). There are some correlations with these definitions and terms used in Corumbá. However, in real life these terms are not sufficient as some children sleep at home and on the street, and they spend some time in institutions, like shelters (*abrigo* in Corumbá) (Panter-Brick, 2002, 150; Naterer, 2010; Žigon, 2014; Oblak, 2016). Definitions try to group children that are not where it seems to be right place for them,

¹ Fieldwork was carried out in the period from October 2006 till March 2007, based on previous voluntary-work experience between October 2002 and August 2003, followed by one visit in July 2009. The research was first anthropological research about street children in Corumbá.



with the street as a source of survival, and the lack of adult care and protection (le Roux & Smith in Panter-Brick, 2002, 149). Also some terms in definitions might be confusing, like what is home, family, protection, etc., how often a child needs to sleep on the street to become of the street (ibid, 150–151).

When starting asking such questions one also meets various perspectives on childhood. One can see them as *indices* (Rapport and Overing, 2000, 29–31), only as receivers of the inputs from the environment, or *agents* (ibid, 31–32), being active participants, being learners and at the same time co-creators of their environment (Ingold, 1994, 746; Poole, 1994, 837).

Children can also be seen as bad in nature and we need to protect them not to fall in something bad, like bad company, for the bad in children not to wake up (Jenks, 1996, 71–72). The other perspective is showing them as angels, innocents, good in nature (ibid., 73; Lancy, 2011). We can handle them when they are cheerful, but we do not support their cry, stubbornness, we enable them developing their uniqueness (Jenks, 1996, 71–74). The last one is mainstream concept about childhood, children being perceived as innocent, dependent, which makes them powerless, unseen, ignored in their reality; romantic picture shows this period as time without responsibilities (Jenks, 1996, 124; Burr, 2002, 52). Researchers stress out that these perspective is a construct, far away from the real life of children (Panter-Brick, 2000, 5; Jenks, 1996, 7; Santillán, 2009, 69). Burr was researching street children in Vietnam; she found out that programs based on global standards, similar to ones described and represented in UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, can not impact street children as planned because they do not consider local context while implementing the programs (2002, 50–52). Convention does not allow much space for variety of childhoods, it presents hegemonic model of childhood where all other, different forms of childhood are not appropriate (Panter-Brick, 2000, 11).

In post-industrial countries the mainstream wants children to be away from the spheres of adults, like work – and when street children work they are intruders in the world of adults (Mikulak, 2007). Street children in general do not correlate with what is accepted as a norm for childhood (Panter-Brick, 2002, 154). They are “disturbing a predominantly modern and Western construct of childhood as a protected state in which children should lead safe and carefree lives” (Panter-Brick, 2004, 85; also Burr 2002, 52). They are seen with pity by public, often with contempt or even hatred – probably because they are dirty, without control of authority and they cause damage (Aptekar, 1994, 1).

2.2 Meeting street children

As mentioned, in Corumbá one can have hard time finding street children by some definitions. And not by other ones. They are guardians of the cars close to supermarkets and some restaurants in exchange for some money, they play on the streets, they just have fun in the centre of the city or swim in the river, they are at places where no adult is present which is risky for drugs, prostitution, trafficking (statements by locals, field-notes from the days 3. 11. 2006; 1. 12. 2006; 2. 1. 2007; 5. 1. 2007; 9. 1. 2007; 22. 1. 2007).

In Corumbá the research showed three groups of street children by locals' perceptions. *Crianças na rua* can be those that live at home and do some activities on the streets – watching cars for money, earning some money during carnival or other festivals on the streets. They spend money by themselves or give it to the family. But they are on the streets



only occasionally, which was found out also in another research in the city (Contini and Kassir, 1995). Mostly they are located in the city centre. Numbers mentioned were different, between 25 and 45 (field-notes from the days 2. 1. 2007; 22. 1. 2007). This group was mentioned by employees in the institutions (governmental and non-governmental ones) that work with the people from the lower class.

Picture 1: One of the street children in the school



Another group, *crianças da rua*, was mentioned only by one person, working in *Conselho Tutelar*². That person said that these children have nowhere to go, there are 10 to 12 in the city, and they do similar activities as previous group (field-notes from 9. 1. 2007). The other research found out seven of those children (Contini and Kassir, 1995, 11). In the period of field-work only one person would be suitable for this group, however, he was in the shelter for adolescents (*abrigo*) at that time.

Although, some locals stated that they can be found every day in front of the supermarkets, similarly to what was found in some other cities in Brazil, namely Recife (Hecht, 2000), one could not find children from the first two mentioned groups every day.

By the opinion of adults the third group of *crianças na rua* are those children that are outside, not at home and at the same time without the supervision of their parents or responsible

² Conselho Tutelar is the governmental institution on the level of municipalities that protects rights of children and adolescents, stated in *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*, Brazilian law on children and adolescents, based on UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Conselho Tutelar).



adults. Many of them play on the streets, some skip the school and instead go to some other places, i.e. to the river, to friends, to play flippers, etc., or go to those places before or after the school. One can find children playing on the streets every day if it is not rainy, and they are many. Nobody mentions the numbers, locals just say there are many (field-notes from the days 27. 2. 2003; 3. 11. 2006; 22. 11. 2006; 28. 12. 2006; 9. 1. 2007; 2. 2. 2007). Generally, people spend much more time on the streets as in Slovenia, not only children, especially in the parts where people from the lower class live and less where people from middle class live. Seeing those children one can have difficulties to distinguish who is on the street in front of the house and who not, who would need to be at school at that time, who has adults close to supervise them.

3 The findings and conclusions

Local perception that children from the the third group are perceived as *crianças na rua* is showing diverse perspectives on what is acceptable for childhood, what is home, street, responsible education, work, etc. “The street here means playing in front of the house, being at neighbours” (field-notes from 11. 1. 2007). Predominant opinion in Corumbá is for children to be at home all the time, except when in school or at organized activity. If not at home than somewhere under supervision; children belong to the household, not on the street (DaMatta, 1986; Hecht, 2000). The opinion that the children from the third group are street children correlates to the opinion on childhood that comes from middle and upper class or from Western perspective, being part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Jenks, 1996; Burr, 2002; Panter-Brick, 2002; Mikulak, 2007; Santillán, 2009; Lancy, 2011).

Families of these children do not necessarily perceive their children as street children. Playing on the streets is acceptable for their style of education, boys having more freedom to move farther away from home earlier than girls. Many parents are absent also due to necessity to work to have enough money to sustain family. Some parents worry more and some less if they do not know where their children are.

For the institutions, responsible to work with children primarily from lower class, street children come from poor families, parents are often unemployed, parents do not care enough for children, also neglect them, they are without authority, there is presence of alcohol, sometimes drugs, violence – not necessarily all of mentioned in one family. That correlates with the perception of the middle and upper class on childhood, family, education, etc. With such perspective they also influence the perception of childhood in those families and the certainty parents have in their education.

These institutions need to raise reflection about the background of their work, the influence and impact they have. They could work with higher quality and more inclusion if they would consider diverse concepts and habits of their target groups.

The need to do more anthropological researches exists, to discover more about reality of (street) children, their families, life-span development, success of the impact of the services of institutions offering help to this target group, governmental and non-governmental ones. Also, children need to be involved in researches as active participants, being researchers themselves.



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