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MARGINAL IDENTITIES, HISTORIES AND NEGOTIATING SPACES: LIFE EXPERIENCES OF STREET CHILDREN IN BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

So much has been said and written about Zimbabwe's political and economic problems with very little mention of Zimbabwe's street children who are a common feature of the urban landscape. Street children's life experiences can be viewed in the context of stigmatised identities and living on the margins of society. The research explored some of the conceptual terrain necessary to a study of the life experiences of street children in Bulawayo in the context of their day to day activities and claims for space and places. The study employed an ethnographic approach based on the understanding of street children as autonomous social actors. Their street image, their journeys and how they project themselves into the future emerge from their dynamic interactions amongst themselves and their immediate environment. Their life experiences define who they are and how they navigate living on the margins of society; crossing physical, social and moral boundaries. Finally, the study explores whether a child-centred model of practice could be used in relation to street children and the implications for policy and practice.

KEY TERMS: *Street children, stigmatised identities, space, place*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on findings from an ethnographic study of life experiences of street children in Bulawayo between 2011 and 2014. Avoiding an obsession with causes and what might be done to remove children from the streets (Hecht, 1998), this study focused on the day-to-day experiences, negotiating space and places as well as children's perspective of life on the streets. The concept 'street children' immediately suggests a number of escape routes from capture, and can be described as a slippery label often attributed by the powerful upon the powerless, 'antisocial', 'uncivil' and marginal identities who may not welcome the constraints of taxonomy or classification. Identities are considered as one 'mechanism of capture', and then space or place may be another. Identity is often a product of place and space and being identified by virtue of place is a factor in the identities of street children. In addition to these explorations the author reflects on 'ethical symmetry' in relation to children as autonomous social actors in the process of research with a view to incorporate these ideas into a helpful methodology.

For the purpose of this paper, the author adopts the UNICEF categorisation of street children as 'on' and 'of' the street which provides a helpful benchmark:

Boys and girls for whom the street, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc. has become their home and /or source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults (Volpi, 2002:11).

UNICEF (2001) conceptualises street children as boys and girls less than 18 years of age. This definition distinguishes between two main groups: 'children on the street' (those who are home based) and 'children of the streets' (street-based). It should be noted that while this is a narrow definition of street children, it is helpful as a framework to use on the group of children (street-based) that were part of the research.

MARGINAL IDENTITIES AND HISTORIES

Marginal identities

The phenomenon of street children cannot be divorced from the opposing concepts of the child and childhood, theories of childhood, identity and marginalization (de Benitez, 2007), which have dominated the study of children for many years. Foremost, children or young people are considered to be born (and remain) innocent and, therefore, they need protection from the potential negative impacts of society. Aligned to this view is that they need to be both controlled and nurtured lest they perish from a natural state believed to be innately destructive (Golding, 1954).

There are those such as Jenks (1996:7) who argue that '*childhood is to be understood as a social construct, it makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society but which are incorporated within the structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct. Childhood then always relates to a particular cultural setting*'. There is a widely shared view that childhood is not the same in different times and places (Maynard and Thomas, 2004) and relates to a particular cultural setting (Jenks, 1996). In respect of street children, there is a tendency to place emphasis (in some cases) on deficient characteristics of the children themselves by portraying them as different from those who live at home (Cosgrove, 1990); or seeing street children as having a culture of their own or the '*street society*' (Lusk, 1992:297) or what Campos et al (1994) described as a surrender to the temptations and rules of the street.

Goldson (2000) suggests that punitive policies and practices in many parts of the world can be attributed to the negative presentation of street children as young people who are prone to commit crime and, thus, having roots in the social construction of childhood. There is an escape route in that within the context of rapid urbanisation, unemployment and poverty, street children often make pragmatic and sensible decisions to use the street as a survival strategy. They adopt an opportunistic approach to their situation and view the street as a road to self-determination and advancement. In some cases, it is their way of addressing their daily struggles to survive (Bourdillon, 2001) and also form networks that provide a high degree of social support to be characterised as 'pseudo-families' (Swart, 1990).

Histories

The phenomenon of street children is relatively new in Zimbabwe, compared with the history of street children in South and Central America and some parts of Asia (Sexton, 2005). However, it has increasingly become one of the biggest social welfare issues in most African countries (Baker, 1999; Boakye, 2006; Bourdillon, 2001; Le Roux, 1996; Sexton, 2005; Tacon, 1991). Modernisation, colonialism, and, to some extent, Christianity have changed the balance of the traditional safeguards and belief systems thus engendering, in many African countries, a 'hybridised local cultural system' featuring a combination of traditional and modern aspects of family life (Kesby et al 2006:189).

In the 1990s, an influx of children onto the streets of Bulawayo and other cities in Zimbabwe was partly attributed to the hardships that many families were facing. Some children helped their families to supplement family income and others ended up staying on the streets. (Department of Social Welfare, 1998). The easing (by

the new administrators) of enforcement of by-laws and restrictions of the pre-independence administrations also contributed to informal trading on the streets (UNICEF, 2001). Germann (2005) points out that family disintegration and the collapse of traditional safeguards around care of vulnerable children (with families being decimated by HIV/AIDS) resulted in the prevalence of child-headed households in Bulawayo. A study by Mashumba (1995) found that relatives were struggling to care for AIDS orphans and the emergence of child-headed households is an indication that the extended family is under severe stress (Foster et al, 1995).

The street children phenomenon in Bulawayo is inseparable from Zimbabwe's political and economic problems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2002; Moyo, 2007; Masunungure and Badza, 2010); as well as the country's history which has been characterised by the brutal and repressive colonial legacy (Chitiyo and Rupiya, 2005; Raftopoulos, 2006; Moyo, 2007; Nyathi, 2005). To many people outside the country, Zimbabwe represents a failed state with chronic economic and political problems.' It is therefore inconceivable to imagine how marginal groups like street children survive in a country with a failed economy.

The government's policy and approach to the phenomenon of street children has been punitive (Bourdillon, 2001; Marima et al, 1995; Wakatama, 2007). Typical examples are the massive round-ups of street children in 1994 (Marima et al, 1995), the 2005 massive urban clean-up coined '*Operation Murambatsvina*' (Tibaijuka, 2005) and the round-ups of street children and the homeless in Bulawayo in preparation for the Africa Youth Games in 2014 (ZimEye, November 23, 2014). Such actions suggest an entrenched view of street children as the 'other' and as people not to be seen in the public space probably because they belong on the margins of society.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an ethnographic approach (Bryman, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) using participatory methods such as observations of people's lives (watching what is happening and listening to what is said and asking questions) and semi-structured interviews (20). Such an approach was the most appropriate in that it made the participants (street children) central to the study by focusing on stories told by street children as they recalled and understood their life journeys. The study was informed by the understanding of children as autonomous social actors (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Punch, 2002). Central to this view is the importance of listening to street children's views and valuing their narratives as individuals with hopes and dreams for their future. The fundamental assumption was that human beings were creators of their social world and meanings in the contexts of their own choosing (Marx, 1852). This view is supported by Mack et al (2014:14) who state that '*there is no substitute for witnessing or participating in phenomenon of human interaction- interaction with other people, with space, with things.... Observing and participating are integral to understanding the breadth and complexities of human life*'. In essence, the aim is to capture the data of quality in the participants' own language and everyday concepts they use in telling their stories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

The study was carried out in two phases (December 2011 and August 2013) and involved engaging with street children at a drop-in-centre in Bulawayo as well as on the streets, visiting their places of abode and other places of interest for street children. This was done on a daily basis from the start to the end of business (between 8.00 am to 5.00 pm). Night time visits were also conducted including during weekends.

Sample size

A total of 42 children (36 boys and 6 girls) actively took part in the study during both phases of the study. Data from 20 recorded interviews was used for this article as well as observations made during field visits. The study adopted Atkinson and Hammersley's (2007) idea of focusing on a few cases in a single setting with a groups of street children with a unique characteristic of living on the streets.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used to put together the story of street children's experiences. The decision was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006:77) view of thematic analysis that it 'offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data and Atkinson and Hammersley's (1994) concept that data analysis engages in an explicit interpretation of the meanings and actions of participants based on descriptions and explanations embedded in the volumes of data collected. The process of data analysis involved a systematic search for patterns to provide an illuminating insight and description of the phenomenon of street children's lives in Bulawayo. This was mainly moving back and forward between the entire data sets (interview transcripts and a field diary that was kept during fieldwork). The recorded interviews produced 40 000 words and a field diary produced 37 000 words. Important texts linked to questions asked during the interviews were isolated and assigned codes in phrases like 'the first day on the streets, adapting to life on the streets, their places on the streets, their perceptions of life on the streets, their future aspirations. Patterns emerged from the data and these were used as themes were created and street children's words and descriptions were used for telling their life story.

FINDINGS

In this study the children loosely fit the 'of the street' category, as they spend their time without adult supervision. It was apparent that places occupied by street children are their homes, indeed, places they identify with, operate from as well as retire to at the end of the day. They negotiate space with fellow street children, the public and authorities from the point of entry and throughout their stay. For example, Sbu (not his real name) stated:

The first time I came onto the streets I met one of the boys called Mabhatshi (street name). We immediately shared our experiences and he brought me to Egodini where I joined the other boys.' Egodini is home to more than 20 street children and they negotiate the space with the public who include vendors and commuters. Sbu stated that *'Over there we are a 'family'. We number about 20 both Ndebele and Shona boys. We relate well with all the boys and you will often find us sitting around one fire place. There are some who may want to hold themselves as better or more superior but it is not a big problem.*

Mshona (not his real name) had a similar experience.

I first got to know one of the boys from Egodini and I started hanging around with him and finally joined the group to sleep at Egodini.' He further described life at Egodini as *'sometimes interesting. I have my own room there and the other boys have their own rooms. Sometimes I accommodate some who do not have a place to sleep at night.*

It was a similar story for Tsholotsho (not real name) who stated that *'The first person I met is that guy known as Mabhatshi. He found me sitting around a fire in the morning and asked me where I lived. I told him and he invited me to come and stay with him and others at the 'rooms' over Egodini.'*

For some of the children it was an adventure driven by self-made set of circumstances such as mischief at home as well as ill-treatment by carers and/or parents. The transition from home to the streets involved testing and appraisal of the territory. A street identity is acquired by a presence on the streets at the time when other residents of the city retreat to their homes. It is in the shared space that they forge links and friendships that go on to sustain their survival on the streets which depends on a collective effort and initiative. One of the notable observations made by one interviewee was that, *'If you wait, you will eat later'*, that is, any hesitation would mean starving. There is urgency and necessity to engage with individuals who share the same predicament of being homeless and hungry on the streets. On the journey to the streets children cross many social, moral and physical boundaries such as learning how to look for food in an unfamiliar environment such as digging for food in bins, hence they called themselves *Madigira* (Shona word for digging for food in bins).

The fluidity of street children's lives was evident in that the numbers of children living on the street fluctuated from about 30 at the beginning of December 2011 to about half that figure towards Christmas. Throughout the two fieldwork phases, just below 100 children lived on the streets of Bulawayo. These children were teenage boys and a very small number of girls in their teens. Gender differences were apparent in activities that boys engaged in compared to girls. Boys were more visible during the day as they tended to engage in activities like begging, cleaning and guarding cars in the city centre while girls were more visible at night and some of them engaged in low level prostitution. Mabree (not her real name) stated that *'I used to go to Waverley Bar and Hotel and would book a room upstairs if I found a customer.'* Another young person, Hona Mwana Wako stated that she once met two men at the bar and went on to have sexual intercourse in the bush and contracted a sexual transmitted infection. She was helped by other street children to go to hospital. In a period of three months she contracted another sexual transmitted infection. Sexual transmitted infections were reported to be prevalent among street boys because they follow the few girls on the streets. One of the boys joked that *'no street child will die from eating food from the bins and but HIV/AIDS because they tend to sleep with a few girls living on the streets.'*

Sexual abuse is not limited to girls but also young boys. Mafana (not his real name) stated that *'Mabhatshi is a big problem. He has tried to sodomise me and other young boys. He even tried to kiss me and I pushed him away. The older boys came to my rescue and threatened to beat him up. He sodomised Kabila (one of the younger boys from Egodini).'* Street children are reluctant to disclose sensitive information and if any, such information would come from third party disclosures.

The majority of the street children in the study were orphans who were looked after by elderly grandparents or older siblings. It was evident that the traditional support networks were under severe strain. In most of their accounts, the children perceived themselves as victims and having no choice other than seeking relief on the streets. The children preferred Bulawayo to other cities for being calm compared to, for example, Harare, where there is a fierce competition for space and food due to large numbers of street children and homeless adults.

One surprise finding was how street children crossed the border into South Africa by using their adventurism and manipulative skills mastered in their quest to survive on the streets and their ability to negotiate their way into or out of difficult situations. More than half of the children (boys) had at one time crossed the border into South Africa without travel documents. They gained the trust of border security guards on the Zimbabwean side by loitering around the border post and would ask for permission to go across to the South African side to collect

empty plastic bottles for resale back in Zimbabwe. After a few trips they would not return and push further into South Africa by either bribing guards or using illegal entry points cut through the fence. Some of them enlisted the help of people smugglers who took them through illegal entry points across the crocodile infested Limpopo River and the electric fence on the South African side of the border. They joined the multitudes of Zimbabweans flocking into South Africa in search of better life prospects. Living on the streets in South African cities continued until they decided to return to Zimbabwe. The return journey was much easier in that they were given free passage by the South Africans who saw them as 'good riddance'. Some of the children reported being rounded up in South Africa and placed in Children's Homes which they described as very good. For example, Bushu and Mandava said '*Ma Children's Homes ekuSouth Africa arikuspaka*', meaning they are posh. After a while, they would leave the homes and go back to the streets to enjoy the 'freedom' that they do not have in Children's Homes.

Finally, street children have aspirations and ambitions like other young people of their age. Street children would like to be successful and have a different life to the one they experience on the streets. Bushu (not his real name) summed it by saying '*No one wants to die poor*'. His wish was to go back to school and then become a boiler maker. However, in a year's time he had gone back to South Africa. Hona Mwana Wako (one of the girls interviewed on the streets in August 2013) wants to be a nurse and thought going back to school would enable her to achieve her ambition. Another example is that of Mandava who stated (in December 2011) that '*I know that I cannot go on living like this on the streets. If I manage to raise enough money for bus fare I would go back to live in the family house*'. In August 2013 Mandava had just come back from another stint in South Africa. Others wanted to join the army, to be police officers or set up their own businesses. In most cases, street children saw themselves as being on the streets for a short period (at the peak of their troubled young lives) with the hope to turn their lives around at some point. Unfortunately, for some of them, the cycle goes on.

While street children's aspirations may appear far removed from reality, there were success stories of former street children in Bulawayo who made it into skills training programmes run by the Bulawayo City Council's Youth Services and some had even gone into higher education (including one who was doing journalism at university). It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that with the right support and encouragement some of the street children can reach their potential. They need opportunities to turn their lives around.

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH STREET CHILDREN

While it is acknowledged that there are no simple answers to how the phenomenon of street children can be resolved, it is equally helpful to point out there are messages to draw from the experiences of street children in Bulawayo. Street children demonstrated resilience and that they were '*street survivors*' with future aspirations that could be achieved with the appropriate support. For example, adaptations could be made to Stein et al's (1994) model of intervention at primary level (such as education in schools), secondary (mediation between parents and street children) and tertiary interventions (focusing on skills training). The Reach Model (Railway Children, 2012) places emphasis on interventions at various levels such as on the streets, community and government (during and after they run away to live on the streets). It is important for interventions for street children to reach deeper and branch out as suggested by Browne (2014).

There is scope for home grown strategies which can be developed to strengthen the traditional support network of the extended family in Zimbabwe that has been weakened by the prevailing socio-economic conditions including HIV/AIDS which has left many children facing hardships. Lessons can be drawn from home-grown strategies like the Community-Based Care (volunteers) for people living with HIV/AIDS (Rodlach and Dlodlo, 2011) which served as a link between the public health care system and people living with HIV/AIDS. For example, a pool of street volunteers could be developed to provide a link between the mainstream Social Services provider, street children, their families and other stakeholders. According to Rodlach and Dlodlo (2014), Community -Based Care Givers regarded their care for people living with HIV/AIDS as 'social capital' which could lead to local influence. The street volunteers (and outreach workers) would need training in basic child welfare and child protection work including identification of risk (in the same manner that Home-Based Caregivers were trained around basic health care and hygiene). This could result in numbers of street children going down as the volunteers could sign-post them towards various exit points. Financial support from the government is essential rather than relying solely on Non-Governmental Organisations and community resources. Street children and their families would need help and support to resolve some of the issues that led to them leaving home for the streets and facilitate reunions where possible. This approach was evidenced at Thuthuka Street Children Project who managed about a dozen reunions under a UNICEF sponsored programme with only one relapse in the first six months of 2013.

Another approach worthy considering is Browne's (2014) Strengthening Families Approach with a view to prevent vulnerable children ending up as street children by focusing on meeting the essential needs of orphans and those living in poverty within their families and communities. Rightly so, because '*The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and state*' as recognised in Article 16.3 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The needs could be nutrition, education and

medical support and the development of strategies to guarantee the self-reliance of the family. With the majority of the population being rural based and the abundance of land, it would not be difficult to develop the family's capacity to provide its own food by allocating farming implements to those living in rural areas. Self-help projects in urban areas would help the vulnerable children to remain with families. Zimbabwe has a strong grassroots-based approach to social problems and functioning structures at local government level down to village level. This approach boards well with the old African proverb that '*It takes a village to raise a child.*'

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In terms of practice, it would be advantageous to promote advocacy in respect of street children. Kaseke (1991:43) states that '*an advocacy role often focuses the attention of policy makers on the plight of marginalised groups in society, and inadequacies and inconsistencies in the delivery of social services*'. This could lead to a work up call for social work practice which is largely curative in orientation and viewed primarily as an instrument of social control. Kaseke, (1991:1) argues that the profession has '*never addressed itself to the root causes of social problems.*' This a fundamental indictment of the profession in Zimbabwe which prides itself with enabling individuals and groups to achieve and sustain adequate social functioning and realisation of their potential (Kaseke, 1991). From the research experience with street children in Bulawayo, it would seem a valid argument that the Department of Social Welfare (responsible for children's services) needs to assume a protective outlook based on the principle of children's rights rather than the welfare model. So far the approach and strategies employed suggest a lack of understanding of the phenomenon of street children. Until this is addressed, street children will always be with us for generations to come. This calls for a change of social and political attitude towards street children in order to build protective and promotive factors to safeguard street children. The voice of the street child should be heard and acted upon in a world where children's rights are at the forefront of building future generations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The street children's experiences in Bulawayo reveal children and young people who have experienced trauma in their childhoods. These are children living on the margins of society in their formative years of their childhood and having to negotiate both space and place in their everyday lives. Street children are widely seen as antisocial, amoral and impossible to rehabilitate (Dallape, 1988; Ennew, 2003). This view is derived from the Latin American model which has influenced many attempts to resolve the phenomenon of street children in many parts of the world. It is time to come up with a more humane and comprehensive approach to deal with the ever present phenomenon of the urban landscape. Helpful insights can be drawn from journalistic reports from Bogota on the work of UNICEF and Childhope (Ruzzini, 1996) where a street child is presented as a 'strong and astute being' despite being vulnerable to exploitation, being poor and oppressed to surviving heroes from whom there is something to learn. As demonstrated in this paper, street children represent a 'new community' that we have to live with rather than shun them or view as a nuisance. Research on street girls' lived experiences is very thin on the ground. There are also gaps on outcomes for former street children as they mature and join the homeless street populations. Such explorations could shed more light on the impact and long term effects of living on the streets in the same manner as research has shown on neglect and child abuse on parenting and adult life.

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