

## A culturally sensitive plan for working with street children

I want to talk about four points where culture and work with street children interact, often in a problematic way. Then I will give some practical suggestions on how these problems might be overcome. The four areas are 1) How cultural issues alter our perceptions of the families of street children, (2) how cultural values influence our assessments of the mental health of street children, (3) how cultural beliefs change the way we provided services to the children, and 4) how cultural differences contribute to the hostility the street children receive.

### 1. How cultural issues alter our perceptions of the families of street children.

Throughout Latin America and Africa, at least 75% of street children are raised by their mothers but live in patrifocal societies. Yet, the most common hypotheses in these countries for the origins of street children are that they come from abusive, neglectful, immoral, and irresponsible parents.

I propose that the major cause of street children is poverty. For the most part poor urban women cope with poverty by raising their male children as quickly as possible so that they can contribute to their family's financial well being.

The view that parents are to blame for street children was expressed recently in a regional meeting in Latin America when a special Task Force comprised of governmental organizations and NGO's working with street children announced their findings of a study which claimed that the causes of the increase in the numbers of street children were "broken families, single parenthood, and irresponsibility among parents.

I recently visited a mother of four boys and two girls who lived with four of her six children in one room no bigger than a small bedroom in a middle class home. The room was divided by two blankets hung up by clothes pins. Behind one blanket was the mother's loft, behind the other, three levels of shelves, each of which was used for a bed. In one corner was a small one burner propane stove that was surrounded by two pots and a stool. The only source of light in the house was from the front door. Open sewage ran from the front door, through the walkaway. down to the front of the house, where it met the drainage from other homes.

The woman was nearly able to support herself and her children by selling illegal beer. She never attended school, had no job skills, and was illiterate. Her two oldest boys, half-brothers well into their teens, both lived and made a living on the streets. They came home periodically, usually with some gift, and were very welcome. Their mother had taught them that the time they could stay at home without making a contribution ended shortly before puberty. The male children accepted this. They preferred the streets to their homes, particularly when they could come home when they needed to.

One cultural interpretation of this mother's situation would describe her as irresponsible and immoral. However, she can also be seen as coping adequately. She taught her two oldest boys to make their own way, she found a means to feed the other four children at home, and fulfilled her

hopes of educating as many of her children as possible by using the sale of illegal brew to pay the children's school fees.

To pejoratively label these families, in large part because the mothers have developed their own cultural criteria for supervision and protection of their children which is different than those espoused by the middle and upper social classes, is to compound rather than solve the problem. Not only does the pejorative attitude condemn the hard effort of mothers, it dismisses the fact that unmarried mothers can raise children without a husband, as well as discounting the judgment of street children who have left unhealthy homes, such as girls who have been physically or sexually abused.

I contend that the cultural notion which claims that single poor mothers are, by virtue of being single and poor, irresponsible and incapable of raising moral and productive children, represents a culturally ethnocentric point of view. Among the families that produce street children there are a wide variety of competencies, but for the most part the families are adequately coping with extreme poverty.

## 2. How cultural factors alter our assessment of the mental health of street children

According to the predominant cultural point of view street children are psychopathological, delinquent, carriers of AIDS, and drug abusing. I propose that this is an ethnocentric bias, and that most, but not all, street children function adequately, given their circumstances.

No where is the negative point of view expressed more than in the alleged connection of street children to drug abuse. Because I have witnessed so many children inhaling glue yet still maintaining their ability to cope with demands of the streets I began to think there was more to their use of inhalants than the explanations most commonly given, such as to self medicate fear and depression, to kill hunger, to provide strength to live in difficult circumstances, or as indications of a pathological need for immediate gratification.

One evening a few months ago I was visiting street children in the "Little Mogadishu" section of Nairobi. There were about a dozen boys on a small island of refuse in the middle of a busy roundabout inhaling glue. Around them sped a steady onslaught of traffic. I observed them through the traffic as did other pedestrians. All I could see were many pairs of eyes peering over noses covered with paper bags or shirt sleeves. It occurred to me that as I and the others watched the boy's eyes, the boys were also watching us.

Across the island on the main corner of the intersection, another group of about 10 street boys was also consuming inhalants. Unlike the relaxed demeanor of the island boys, these boys were in constant motion playing various forms of tag. Although they chased each other at a full run and fought each other in mock battles of kicks and fists, they were moving fluidly between and among the pedestrians and cars. At times the boys stopped to ask for alms, to make up a story for a

pedestrian designed to give them money, or to tell a shopkeeper they would watch their store in exchange for food.

To me the most impressive phenomenon about these scenes was not that one or two boys had obviously overdosed (even those these would be the boys most likely to be presented in the press and most likely to leave a lasting impression on most observers). The most impressive aspect for me was that as every street boy in the group was inhaling, every passer-by was consumed with interest. Each group eyed the other as if they were shopping in a market filled with exotic goods. The two were interwoven, making me think that the psychological value of using the drug was less important to the vast majority of these boys than its social value.

Knowing that the boys were very adept at manipulating public opinion, it was no accident that every passer-by saw the boys using the inhalants. In fact, if they had wanted to advertise their consumption they could not have developed a better strategy. Kenyan street boys come from traditional cultures where initiation into adult roles is a powerful experience, and one that is held in full public view of all the elders in the community. Staring down the pain of circumcision in front of one's parents and elders is needed to become a successful initiate. Similarly, part of the wide use of inhalants in public can be seen as a way of declaring adult status to the community.

The boys were also using inhalants to initiate and enhance friendships. In their traditional cultures, boys are raised with other boys in age cohorts. Ties between them are lifelong and intimate. The boys need and want this intimacy, and sharing in inhaling glue while in full public view of adults who do not approve builds group solidarity.

The combination of social, psychological, and cultural factors related to the use of inhalants by street boys is not fully considered before drawing conclusions about what effects the use of inhalants have on the boys' mental health. If all the reasons for the use of inhalants were considered, and the emphasis was placed on observing the boy's coping skills, and not on sensational account of drug abuse, we would find that most of the boys who use drugs do not fall to them. Indeed the alleged inevitable connection between street children and drug abuse is more of an ethnocentric accusation that serves to diminish the children's capacities than it is a culturally free statement of their mental health..

### 3. How cultural beliefs alter the way we provide services to street children.

For several years I worked with an elderly priest who had been working with street children for nearly four decades. Each Monday night he conducted street work on the streets of a large Latin American city with several young men and women interested in learning how to work with street children. It was my pleasure to accompany him. One rainy evening we stopped to talk to a group of about a dozen boys who were living at the back of a dead-end alley. After talking with them about getting help we bought each of them a bag of chips and we were off to the next group of children who received the same treatment. As was the custom at the end of each evening we sat down to

discuss the evening's work over chicken and chips. Afterward, on our way home, we encountered a group of seven girls about thirteen to fifteen years old. They came into the street stopped our car and pointed to one girl who stayed behind in the shadows. This girl clearly had a high fever and was delusional. She was either suffering from malaria, or from an overdose of drugs, or even syphilis. Whatever the reason for the girl's illness they implored the priest to take their sick companion to the hospital. He refused and told them he would check on her in the morning. As we drove back to where I was staying I asked him why he left the girl in such a crisis. He said that it was past ten o'clock at night, and if he took her to the hospital he wouldn't get home until past one in the morning. He had mass to give at six and a full day of street work already planned to do afterward. "I have to draw the line somewhere".

One fact of street work that needs to be learned is that there are always more troubled children than there are resources to help them. At some point everyone had to turn his (or her) back, if for no other reason than to move forward the next day. The priest's refusal to administer to the sick child, a decision learned from decades of experience, was based on the greater good. Yet, when I saw him leave this sick young girl alone in the rainy night I felt betrayed. He wasn't living up to the moral standards of his calling. I found myself evaluating 40 years of good work by a single late night's decision.

I had mistaken my own cultural view about the righteous life and made a judgment about what was appropriate and inappropriate to helping street children. I did this in spite of the fact that each time I visited a program for street children, no matter what continent or hemisphere, people spoke disparagingly about another program across town. They also spoke badly about people helping in a different style than their own. I have seen the religious assail the secular, touch disciplinarians complain about the easy going, those in favor of sheltering fight against those who favored fostering, etc., etc.

My own quick ethnocentric judgments were inappropriate for several reasons. There is little correlation between a program's official policy and the way the child experiences the program. Street children are also very different from each other, and their needs change over time. There is in short, plenty of room for nearly all philosophies and nearly every style of help. What keeps diversity, experimentation, and variety from flourishing in the work with street children can often be traced to ethnocentric values.

#### 4. How cultural differences contribute to the hostility toward street children

Most studies from all over the world indicate that street children are treated badly by their community. They are sold into what amounts to indebted servitude and are assassinated for no more than petty crimes and haughty behavior. In fact, more street children have been killed in Brazil than all the people who died in the civil war in Lebanon.

This past summer, a Kenyan street child was murdered by a police reservist. The boy, later identified as Simon, was first said to be 13 years of age, then 15, and finally 18. Whatever his true

age, Simon was shot five times at point blank range, then kicked into the gutter and spat upon. Evidently, Simon had stolen a signal-lens from a parked car. There were no other complaints about Simon's behavior. It was not said that he was belligerent or that he assaulted anyone.

What was it about this boy that aroused such anger? Was he seen in the context of a grand menace? Was he used as a warning to the larger group of street children? Ironically, the connection between Simon and the larger group of street children was not as clear as it might have seemed to the reservist. Simon was a street child, but he also had loving parents who were full of grief and who were present at his funeral. In their mourning they talked about his good character, his sensitivity to others, and his contributions to his family and younger siblings.

Like the majority of people in many parts of the world, it appears that the reservist construed a scenario about street children which did not include loving parents, or good character. The connection between adequate "parenting" and lack of character is at the heart of the dominant culture's concept of the origins of street children.

Street children, in nearly all cultures in the world, have become symbols of moral judgment because they violate the norms that most cultures give to children by not being under the same roof as their parents, by working instead of going to school, and by assuming the right to enjoy the fruits of their work as they chose (such as consuming drugs).

What makes the climate so volatile is that the phenomena of children taking on the roles of adults is peaking at a time when many societies are moving from traditional codes of conduct related to birth rights and long accepted roles of authority to cultures where conduct is based on rational values, democratic choices, and a worldwide culture based on the western entertainment media.

Like the alleged murderer of Simon, who seemingly quickly (and falsely) made a connection between large scale societal problems and the petty problems of minor delinquency caused by some street children, other murderers of street children justify their actions in self righteous moral terms, seeing themselves as heroes in cultures rapidly approaching moral decay.

Street children have become cultural scapegoats portrayed as carriers of all the large scale social problems, including inequality of income, changing family values with concomitant alterations in the roles of men and women, and the reduction in personal security in the context of an overly romanticized past. Only when the vastness and complexities of this situation are confronted will the hostilities be reduced. There is an old African saying, "if you want to get to the root of a murder, you have to look for the blacksmith who made the panga".

5. What can you do? Ten cross-cultural commandments.

1. Examine your culturally bound beliefs about the families of street children and about the psychological functioning of the children.
2. Embrace alternative family structures as legitimate,
3. Don't confuse poverty with psychopathology.
4. Accept young people in adult roles.
5. Focus on the child not the drug.
6. Work with street children without forcing them to accept your moral point of view.
7. Refrain from quick judgement against others who work with street children from different cultural points of view.
8. Give psychotherapy only to those who need it, Give the rest of the children practical help.

9. Do your best to increase income generation and self efficacy.
10. Educate the public, the most difficult, and potentially the most rewarding of tasks you can do.