

New Directions on adolescent research:

**Developing a cross-cultural methodology for working with
street children**

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The problems of defining street children

This talk under the focus of "New directions in adolescent research" focuses on conducting research with street children. It begins with trying to be clear about the subjects, namely who are street children. To do so I have to put the children into the perspective of the children that UNICEF refers to as being "in particularly difficult circumstances". The term describes children whose suffering indicates the highest risk to mental health, and includes children traumatized by war, and natural and technological disasters. In the last 15 years since UNICEF began using the term children in particularly difficult circumstances, many children that were described as being victims of these particular circumstances have become street children. Now there are children who have been war and disaster victims for example who are living on the streets. There is also the serious problem, particularly in some cultures of children in the streets who have AIDS, or children on the streets who are orphaned because of AIDS. The problem is that there are not the children that UNICEF refers to as street children.

UNICEF defines street children differently, but even the way they define them is not clear. According to UNICEF "street children" live on the streets because of suffering from prolonged deprivation, labor exploitation, excessive family violence, and extreme poverty. This excludes many children on the streets with other particularly difficult circumstances, and it also presents other problems. In and of itself this definition holds such a wide range of children that it opens up plenty of research problems. And, if we were also to talk about the differences between street children in the developed world and those in the developing world, we would see that all street children do not come from impoverished families. It also does not address the gender issues, which are substantial.

The difficulty of understanding the psychosocial dynamics of the children who are on streets can be seen in an example of some of the children I have been recently been working with in Ethiopia. In 1991, the 30-year civil war between the forces of Ethiopia and Eritrea temporarily ended, (it has since resumed) and Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia. All Ethiopians living in the new territory were made to leave. This meant that the women who were considered Eritreans, even though they were married to Ethiopians were placed into a horrendous dilemma by being forced to make a nearly instantaneous decision. They could stay in Eritrea with their families of origins, which meant saying good-bye to their husbands and children who were considered enemies, or they could join their husbands and children on the long uncharted march back to Ethiopia through the Danakil Depression. In the Danakil Depression there is no vegetation or water, and temperatures reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. The journey was even worse than everyone feared. For those who walked, the important thing was to make progress. However slowly they moved, it was always necessary to move forward. After

the early morning hours, the heat beat down, and the wind began to blow. Before the middle of the day the marchers shuffled, and suffered in silence. They tried not to look at the old, the infirm, or the small children, whose parents could no longer carry them, because they knew they could not help them, nor watch their agony, nor participate in their death. Many of these survivors, who were young children at the time, are now living on the streets, are they victims of war, or street children, or both? How do their problems relate to those in UNICEF's definition of street children?

Even if we could resolve this problem we would have to face the fact that street children cannot be understood only by measuring the degree to which they have experienced awful events. Staying for a moment with the example of children who are in the streets because they have been involved in war we can see that in some cases, Ireland, Palestinian children and the children of Soweto, South Africa for example, active participation in war has actually improved the child's mental health.

Street children and the definition of childhood

For me the best way to come to a clear idea of who street children are, particularly when I come to a definition that is useful for my research is to define them in the context of how their society defines childhood. Many people in the West have a concept of childhood based on an ideal child who is seen as innocent and in need of constant attention. Although a childhood like this might be found in certain cultures, to incorporate this concept of children across cultures, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, has poses problems that impinge upon research.

I have found that when people of material comfort work with street children they hopefully discover that many of their preconceived ideas about childhood are ethnocentric and filled with morality. If they don't they have a hard time getting a clear picture of the problem. For example, it is far too easy for a person from the West to assume that the parents of street children are abusive. This makes the children victims in need of help, particularly so since abusive parents in Western cultures are seen as immoral, because they abuse in ways, which deliberately hurt the child. It is helpful to see child abuse cross-culturally. If the researcher can take this view than abuse in non-Western cultures abuse comes less from parents than from society. Take for example, the numerous instances of how political contexts, invoking the "superior interests of the state", have led to the most painful forms of child abuse. During the "Dirty War" in Argentina children were tortured in front of their parents in order to motivate the parents to offer information to the state. Children in Iran were given the status of martyrs after serving as human shields in war against Iraq. In these cases abuse comes under state authority. Thus it is not the parents who are victimizing street children is more likely to be state authorities.

The second point here is that childhood is defined in the West as ending much later than in less wealthy countries. More precisely and importantly this is the case among the many who are poor, while among the wealthy childhood is defined much as it is the West. As a

result street children are not allowed to enter into what their wealthy compatriots might call an early adulthood. This compounds rather than minimized their problems.

Street children are outside of the boundaries of childhood because they assume the right to live as they choose without parental authority. They attend or do not attend school, they become intoxicated when and where they desire, and they work to support themselves. These children have taken on many of the qualities associated with adulthood in their society and they have done so in full public view. As a result they have received sanctions, in many cases of immense proportion.

Given these qualities street children have to distinguished from poor working children, who are still within the domain of their own culture's childhood in spite of working on the street, often instead of going to school. While it is common to use the words "in" and "of" the streets, the former being the working children, the latter the street children it is better to see these two groups along a continuum. When conducting research with street children it is important to be clear where on the continuum your subjects lay. In fact those children who while living at home are exploited in the work place either because they are too young to be working or because their working conditions are unsafe or exploitative are far more of a public health problem than street children. India and several other Asian countries have often been the brunt of public exposure to this, I am thinking of the children forced to make carpets for example, and who as a result lose their health and childhood. In many places the line between poor children who are forced to earn something so their families can eat, even if they must do some things that might be abhorrent in the West and child exploitation in the developing world is not easy to manage.

Perhaps, because of this we found that street children frequently move between the streets and their homes. This depends upon such practical factors as seasonal differences in the weather, the changing family dynamics in the home, the availability of friends on the streets, the degree to which the police are harassing street children, and the comparative economic conditions of the home and the streets.

Also as these microenvironments change so do societal conditions. Since the time I did my original research in Colombia, much has changed for “narcotraficantes”, the government, and the private para-military organisations. How they cope with these competing demands is not well understood, but it is clear they are not the street children of a decade or more ago.

Differences between genders, and between the developing and developed world

As I mentioned it is far too common to refer to street children, instead of street boys and street girls, and thus the differences between the genders are minimised. It is also a mistake to take as equals street children from developed and developing world. Let me focus on this latter point for a moment, although there is some connection here.

In the developed world there are also far fewer street children in absolute numbers, but maybe more in comparative figures. In the developed world the state is wealthy enough to police the streets, as well as having enough facilities to put children in confinement who will not conform to the rules and regulation of childhood.

The problem in making comparisons is that street children are often locked up in the West. The question I often receive is, are the delinquent gangs found in the West street children? No, as long as they are living at home, however misguided that home may be I do not consider them street children, although clearly they represent a large public health problem. I can use the words thief and thug to describe the differences of behaviour of street children in the developing world with delinquent children in the developed world. For the most part street children in the developing world are more likely to take advantage by cunning than power. The opposite is the case with delinquency in the developed world, particularly if you consider how well armed they are. It is almost as if lack of war in the developed world is compensated for by the violence found there among its youth.

There are children in the developed world on the streets, if even only at the times they are between arrest and state supported incarceration, from mental hospitals to prisons. These children emanate a certain sense of the pitiful. In fact the mental health of their families is often much more troubled than those of the families of the developing world who are producing street children.

In the developed world, there are more female than male street children while in the developing world the ratio is as high as 80% or more percent male to female. Also when one looks into the background of children on the streets in the west, one discovers that they many of them do not come from poor one parent family as they do in the developing world. Instead their origins are often middle class and their family structure is what might be considered the ideal nuclear family, with two parents and a couple of siblings. In these cases there are two factors, which push the children out of their families. At home these children live under abuse that comes from one or more of their psychopathological parents or guardians. This is one big reason why I think are more female street children in the developed world. Females are more likely to be abused than males. The factor that seems to account for a good deal of the male street children in the developed world is homosexuality. In several studies adolescent males were simply either afraid to come out to their parents and fled, or if they did come out they were forced out.

In the developing world most but not all street boys are taught by their mothers to cope with the necessity of having to make do in a very limited economic environment by becoming independent at a far earlier age than the dominant society deems appropriate. If this is the case then when compared to other poor boys in their society, and to the other boys in their family the street boys should be the more resilient, the less resilient boys of being unable to leave home. This was what we found in our Kenya study. We also predicted that the opposite situation would exist for street girls in the developing countries. These mothers taught their girls how to cope with the vagaries of poverty by

staying at home, and out of the streets. Thus, street girls (for the most part) were as we found more psychopathological than their sisters who stayed at home.

Because the street boys in the developed world are not raised for early independence as they are in many developing countries they do not have the skills or experiences to help them cope without parents. Thus their mental health is considerably more precarious than their male counterparts in the developing world. Without making these gender and social class distinctions while doing research with street children, these important distinctions get blurred. There is here a whole research agenda, which has to be carried out.

The importance of taking the child's world view

Another dimension to defining and doing research with street children, one that makes it possible to understand street children's survival strategies, which is another important and neglected research domain, is to look carefully at the child's worldview. When we do this street children emerge as social actors who develop a specific "microculture" that comes from balancing what they need to survive with wide-spread cultural reactions that often impinge upon them. I have already mentioned one of these; their society's definition of what is permissible behavior for children.

To move forward on this found that it was very valuable to use current and ex street children as research assistants. They not only helped us by telling us about the children's problems, but also by assisting us to follow the children's movement so that we could observe street children in many situations and places. By choosing the right street children and by this I mean both men and women, and in the case of Africa of different tribal groups, we had good access to many street children.

To explain why a child's perspective is necessary I want to present a fairly typical workday of two Colombian children who I knew when I was doing my work there. Every morning in Cali, Colombia, Roberto and Antonio, who were both eleven years old went to the El Paraiso restaurant where they washed the front sidewalk with a hose, in exchange for left over food, *sobres*. On one particular day Antonio put the plastic bag of *sobres* over his shoulder, and the two of them went to a quiet side street, sat down in the shade and emptied the food, which was lumped together in a mass about the size of a small pillow. They ate some of it and took the rest to a blind man who they traded with for a few *pesos*, and a couple of cigarettes.

Getting on the bus that was going to the cemetery they asked the driver to let them ride for free so they might ask for food, since they said, they were starving. On the bus Roberto put on a pitiful expression and began to sing soulfully about the difficulties of having a sick mother whom he was trying to support. The song concluded with, "could you give me mother a few *pesos* so she could go to the doctor?" He got a few *pesos*, enough to pay for their ride to the cemetery. Meanwhile, Antonio lodged himself in the exit well, standing in the way of exiting passengers, offering them his hand so they might climb down more easily. Most of the passengers ignored him, some were indignant and

made comments to the bus driver, a few found his performance amusing and gave him a coin.

Once at the cemetery the two boys met a few older friends and exchanged some of the bus money with them for a ladder which they carried over to an area where relatives were visiting a loved one's grave. As it was nearly impossible to place wreaths on the higher graves sites Roberto and Antonio rented out the use of the ladder.

In the evening they went to the *sexta* (Sixth Avenue), an avenue of fashionable shops and restaurants in the fashionable side of town) where because of their disordered and dishevelled appearance, the boys were perceived as a menace. After receiving some malignant looks and rude comments from people, they stopped on a side street where a young and rather affluent couple were dining. When the boys asked them for food, the couple tried to ignore them. The two boys, sensing that they were intruding on a special occasion were insistent, thinking that they were likely to be paid to leave the diners alone. Finally, the man who was dining told them in a loud voice to leave, which only indicated to the boys that they were winning the battle of nerves. The diner called the waiter for help, who half-heartedly told the boys to go. They were back in a few moments. Roberto approached the table from one side asking once more for something to eat, while Antonio came from the other side and grabbed a piece of meat off the woman's plate. Running and laughing they receded into the darkened street.

From learning their perspective of what was for them a fairly typical day I realised that many things about their characters flew in the face of what was being said about them. For example, it was obvious that they were intelligent, motivated, and capable. I also was able to see that they had a peripatetic way of life. They rotated between routines and places known for their lucrative possibilities, and stalked these places to find something of value. They lived and worked in groups where their major emotional were among themselves. They developed this way of life to cope with their poverty. Finally and what turned out to be extremely important I could see how they influenced those around them, who like the "marks" of other nomadic entertainers were of a different life style than their own.

This anecdote, not only shows us the need to get into the life's of street children to understand their behaviour as being far more rationale than pathological, but it also points to another fruitful area for future research the importance of seeing them in their context. In fact the point could be made that it is far more important to understand society's reaction to street children than it is to understand the children themselves. In nearly all cultures street children are saying that that the hostility they receive from the police and the public is far more difficult for them than the vagaries of their personal lives.

The importance of putting the children in a larger perspective

In the middle of August, 1994 Simon, a Kenyan child of 15 years of age, was murdered by a police reservist. So many poor unkempt children had already been mistreated that his demise would not have aroused much concern except that he was shot five times at point blank range, kicked into the gutter, and then spat upon. Evidently, Simon had stolen

a signal lens from a parked car. There were no other complaints about Simon. No one said that he was belligerent or assaultive. How was it that Simon's relatively minor crime aroused such anger in the police officer?

My best answer comes from what I observed of these two boys. They were nomadic operating among the sedentary. They were like the Qalander, (Berland, 1982), a peripatetic group of entertainers in Pakistan who travelled from village to village having animals perform and illustrating magic tricks for their audiences. The Qalander children were trained from an early age to study the reactions of their potential audiences. As they travelled through different areas they practised the appropriate regional accents and adjusted their clothes and methods of presentation to take advantage of each subculture's expectations. By the time the children were the age of Roberto and Antonio, they had learned to dance in front of potential patrons, to control their performing bears and monkeys in order to arouse the public's interest, to juggle and do magical tricks, and to do sexually suggestive impersonations.

Each time the nomadic Qalander came to a local village, community members discussed among them, often with great alarm and anger, what could be done to keep them from performing. These citizens tried to keep them out of public view where their theatrical way of life, they feared, would create too much curiosity and interest among their children.

As Roberto and Antonio roamed through the streets of Cali, performing various acts of bold orchestrated performances, they, like the Qalander children peripatetic entertainers (indeed there are many other peripatetic entertainers including the "gypsies"), found a way to live off the sedentary groups they "entertained" by their varied antics. I think that this is what happened to Simon only in excess. To date there is very little research on why the children so badly and so out of proportion to what seems rationale let alone proportional. To date there have been more street children killed in Brazil alone than all the deaths in the civil war in Lebanon.

Dealing with some general research worries

If the problems so far presented do not make you wish for another topic and you are still willing to undertake a research project on street children I am delighted. What follows are some specific examples of how you can improve your work.

First, don't worry about being accepted in a very street-wise group of street children. This is because it is almost impossible to be accepted by them, and certainly just as hard getting past being used by them. It is more important to know how the children perceive you. This at least allows you to can get some baring on how they are altering their behavior because of your presence than it is to try to be accepted by them in the first place. The only people who surmount these obstacles of intimacy are some, and by no means most of the people who live and work with them for years.

A man I know who has adopted about 50 street children in Maputo. We had gone on some field trip to see an "outstanding program" for street children in Lusaka. We arrived at about the same time that the children were being fed. They were all sitting on their haunches in the back of a large room, while they waited to receive their ladle filled with gruel. We were all supposed to be impressed with how well they were being taken care of and no one, myself included, saw what he did. He leaned over to me and said they were being fed like animals, which of course was true, even though none of us save him saw it. He went on to tell that in fact he fed street children like humans at the same or less price by a combination of smart shopping and home butchering. His comments opened my eyes to see what was really there, instead of seeing the children only in the context of street children, and thus worthy of living and being treated like animals. This is the kind of guy who gets past the impasses of working with street children.

How to overcome the sampling problem

There are two sampling questions that I want to help with, one is how to estimate the population of street children, and the other is how to get a sample. Getting a sample depends upon knowing the dimensions of the population, which of course relates to a clear definition of who is being studied. The absence of a clear definition is however only one reason for not knowing the population. Another problem is the bias toward inflating the numbers of street children. There are several reasons for this. The higher the number the larger the problem, and the larger the problem the more likely it is for donors to contribute funds. If funds are flowing there are more programs for street children, each program employs several people who have an obvious bias toward inflating the numbers. Finally, the press is biased toward increasing the numbers, which they often do by reporting worst case scenarios - the youngest child on the street, the most drug dependent, the severest delinquent acts, etc. This is what sells newspapers. There is a field of research here, one that falls under the rubric of the sociology of information or the sociology of knowledge

In my work in Kenya we began a process, which I believe will establish a valid procedure for choosing a sample of street children. We started with a map of Nairobi. By using ex-street children and others who were working with street children we were able to identify the areas in the city that had high concentrations of street children. We laid this over the map of the city. We made and numbered grids on this new map.

We then local people who were known by the street children to walk each of these areas each night for two weeks. We used these sleeping places (which in Kenya are called choums) to define the households. Households are the central concept in a census for sedentary and what is lacking in what was done for former estimates of street children. We then placed the choums on the map of the city. This gave us areas of the city with high and low concentrations of street children. This new map was divided into equal grids, which were then labelled with high or low concentrations of households. We then selected the high and low areas of households randomly for collecting census data.

Working in groups of two for increased validity and reliability we had three census teams collected data on the numbers of street children in each choum in the randomly selected areas for three successive nights, and then at weekly intervals for three weeks. Each data collection team had the same structured interview format that helped us ascertain a rough estimate of the numbers of street children, the degree to which they moved from household to household, and the gender ratio.

We were also interested in their ages, family circumstances, and tribal affiliation, but because we knew that street children are not good reporters of this information we devised a system to get this data that had the data collectors working in pairs. While one asked the child's age, the other made an independent estimate of the child's age. Similar procedures were used for comparing the children's stated tribal affiliation with physical characteristics and language skills. The degree of discrepancy noted gave us some idea about the validity of information the child was supplying, and by using this procedure three times we had some notion of the reliability.

The census can be used to define the population from which a random or stratified random sample can be chosen as well as an estimate of the population we could determine how large samples had to be to make statistical comparisons. Having an estimate of the numbers of street children in the population area also allowed us to ascertain several pieces of information. For example we could estimate how many of them were using the programs that were being offered.

We used the records the programs kept of the children who used their services to check to see which children living in which choums were visiting which programs, and how consistently they went to them. In this case a surprising fact emerged, there were more than enough programs for the children, which had to do with the fact that the numbers of programs grew from the inflated numbers of children. The problem was that there was not organization of growth. There were too many feeding programs, so that word went out among the children which one to go to a particular day.

We used the client lists to answer some of our hypotheses. We chose a stratified random sample of sample street children with differing degrees of street experience, from those who had just arrived to the streets to those who had been around a while. When we coupled this with various measures of mental health we were able to get an idea if the length of time on the streets diminished their mental health.

We were also able to draw a sample of siblings who stayed at home, because we were trying to figure out why some poor children became street children but most did not. And to learn why within a single family only some of the children became street children. The siblings at home were to provide a kind of control group. While we found it was quite easy to choose street boys randomly from this list, it was difficult to find a sample of their siblings who still lived at home. It was nearly impossible to get a large enough random sample of street girls, so we had to choose them non-randomly. Solving these problems would make for a good study.

Problems in collecting data

In general we thought that it was best to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, and use what has been referred to as a triangulation of methods, namely selecting three or more methods, each of which is chosen to offset some of the inherent problems of the other methods. The big difference between quantitative and qualitative methods was that in qualitative methods we were able to listen and allow the kids to say what was important to them and then to record the information systematically. Using our quantitative methods we were forced to ask questions that came with the standardized package.

In one way they were similar. The data collector is just not sure that what he or she is getting is valid or reliable. As I mentioned the children are not reliable reporters of their circumstances. Do not give questionnaires to street children, and don't trust any answers children give to your questions, either in ethnographic conversation or from paper and pencil tests that ask them about themselves. Like the Qalander they make their living by manipulating their audiences, of which you the data collector or you the NGO worker are one.

The most common quantitative measure beyond the questionnaire is the use of standardized tests. I have used the Bender-Gestalt, the Draw a Person, and the Ravens Progressive Matrices. These tests, if one is to use any, are about as good as you can get, which I think is not that good. On the one hand they are fairly simple to administer, and they are because they are somewhat interesting to the children. The real problems, which are beyond the general problems of doing cross-cultural research, are that they did not have local norms nor was it possible to get an accurate estimation of the children's ages. It is rare that these children have birth certificates and many don't even know their own ages. We were forced to make educated guesses, and this was a problem particularly with the younger children when a year or two makes a substantial difference on the scores. Also the lack of literacy made it very difficult to adhere to the standardized procedure for giving the tests.

Don't leave the store unattended

Perhaps the worst problem is caused by not being close to the data collection. For example I observed a recent investigation that included getting test data. This included working on translations, establishing local norms, training local data gatherers, and otherwise working on the issues of taking tests in one culture and using them in another.

When the data collectors finally went to gather data they went in groups of four, carrying with them the papers they needed to administer the protocol. The children knew they were coming and that they would be paid to take the tests. The data collectors had not been familiar with their living conditions. Because of this they tended to stay by themselves, to the extent that they all sat together in one tent to collect the data, ate lunch

together, and left together at the end of the data. In fact the very training they took to prepare themselves for this work made them into a social group, which increased their lack of intermingling with the children. One of many problems that this caused was to suppress many types of information, after all who wants to talk about personal things when one's peers are in ear distance.

Because the subjects were paid for their time to finish the protocol, which took several hours and because they were so poor they vied for the option to participate. Because the test takers did not know the children, they were not aware that some of them bought the names of others. There were many reasons why some children sold their names; mostly they didn't trust they were really going to get what was promised so they preferred the lesser amount of money in hand.

Also the sample was drawn from a list made of by NGO's. This was inflated for reasons I have mentioned. There were many names of children who were never found. There were also some children who took the tests more than once, which meant getting paid more than once. Unfortunately it also meant that the data taken from one person was being compared to other people with significantly different demographics.

Once the children sat for the testing, there was no check on how accurately they were responding. Many subjects rushed through their tests so as to complete them and get paid. They were after all much more interested in getting the money than telling some person they never knew the accurate details of their awful experiences. In some cases they just lied, making up complete stories about themselves, including past traumas, because they thought that their fictitious circumstances would bring them more aid.

Much of these research problems could have been avoided by having the data collectors and the people in charge of the study working more closely, but it is a paradigm that is common in this field. Someone plans most research with street children in a far off location and people who have their own agendas collect the data, and the information is never validated.

Overcoming the biases of the data collectors

There are several sources of bias. As the above example suggests it is important not to forget the biases that can come from the data collectors. In my experience I don't believe any one who collects data has such a unique relationship to the children that it will reduce the distortion of facts that the child is likely to produce. In some cases the relationship is just as likely to lead to increase distortion, because the more the children are familiar with you the more adept they are at manipulating information to get what they want. Some data collectors over romanticized the children, which tends to create a bias toward resilience, while others over dramatized the children, making the children worse off than they were.

To help with this distortion we have used more than one person to collect data. To see how successful this has been I suggest you routinely match the children's answers between the data collectors. In some cases we have used a group of data collectors from different disciplines, ethnic groups, genders, social status, ages, etc. and charted how the street children respond differently to different people given the same question. In fact in the Kenya study some correlations were stronger between data collectors than was the information gleaned from the children.

Another source of error comes from where the data is collected. If the data is collected on the streets, in the child's home, with or without parents present, etc. all influence the data. I also suggest asking the same questions more than once in more than one place to check for variation in answers. Needless to say it is also important to be clear about whether or not the child is being paid to give answers, or being forced to give answers in return for placement in a program, or to obtain services.

Reducing the children's distortions

By increasing the amount of data that is performance related or projective many of the problems of the children's distortion of information can be dealt with. Try using drawings, or asking the child to reproduce figures as in the Bender. Use more projective techniques, such as incomplete sentences, and the three wishes test. Other performance data like sociograms of their social networks, drawings of their family trees or of the important people in their lives, or of their daily life routines can be used. They can show their daily life through mural type drawings. The researcher can arrange cards that force the children to make Q sorts showing their preferences or their fears in ordinal amounts. They can do sentence completion quizzes orally.

Photos can be taken from magazines and used as projective techniques like having them use the photos to explain relationships between the people they are seeing, or the wishes the people have for their future. You can ask them to build their own life story by cutting out photos from magazines.

Scorers can be trained until they have some reliability among them. The methods can also be used more than once with the same child or comparable children. In these ways it is possible to yield some numbers.

It is also possible to turn the qualitative data into quantitative data by having the ethnographers get numbers on how many children come to a certain program, or how many pass a certain point in a given period of time. Using random time samplings in collecting ethnographic data helps to collect data during the day and night, during the week and week-ends, and in all kinds of weather, helps to reduce the bias of getting time skewed data. Random medical examinations of the children can be used to determine their nutritional level as well as their abuse of drugs.

The value of assessing mental status

A much overlooked and extremely important method of getting accurate psychological data is using the mental status exam (MSE). Essentially the mental status exam is the psychological equivalent of a physician's physical exam. The mental status includes an assessment of the child's current functioning including memory, thought processes, language abilities, motor behavior, feelings, and judgement. It also provides information about the child's attitudes toward other people and their appearance.

As soon as the researcher makes contact with a street child the MSE should begin. The researcher can observe the child's appearance, is the child clean or dirty? Are there any wounds are they cared for or untreated, are there ticks or tremors? Are there any unusual facial distortions or movements, or any stereotypical or repetitive movements or mannerisms? Does the child pace or show other signs of agitation, or are the child's movements too slow and labored? Is the amount of eye contact appropriate? What is the child's attitude toward strangers and that of people they know?

What is the child's speech like, is the tone appropriate, is the flow of speech slow or pressured, is the tone quality unusual, and is the volume appropriate? What is the level of vocabulary, does the child have a problem finding words, or in misusing words, or finding the names of well-known objects?

There are other things to observe such as the child's mood, and over time their range of moods. You can ask about their goals and see the level of realism they have about themselves as well as the degree to which they are insightful about their problems, and what kind of judgments they are making about their lives. Certain games can be made that will help you ascertain their level of simple arithmetic, or their memory.

While it is true that it takes some training to use, understand and interpret MSE's the training is not beyond a researcher's grasp. The MSE exam when used properly gives the researcher important information about the child's abuse of drugs, their degree and to some extent the type of psychopathology. It also provides important information about their intellectual and cognitive capabilities.

In other ways it is valuable to heed to the fact that is better to ask these types of questions than asking for factual information about their histories like have they been to school. It might be better to ask questions designed to find out their intellectual capacities. These could include asking them to interpret local proverbs, or who is the President? During conversations with the child you can note their use of logic, their clarity of thought, their ability to articulate their opinions.

Get data from other sources besides the children

So far I have talked only about ways to improve data from the children, but there are also other sources of data, which should be explored. It is particularly important to understand society's attitude toward the children and to understand the historical context of the

children you are studying. For example, on a recent trip to St. Petersburg, I noted that the beginning of street children began with the fall of the former government and the beginning of democratic reforms. I already mentioned the change in Colombia's street children in the last decade.

Information can be gleaned from archival data such as press reports and other written documents like from governments and NGOs, and from civil and criminal laws. It is likewise valuable to see the children in the context of how they are presented by the media. It is important to follow the various functions for street children as well as to be gathering data during functions the children orchestrated. For example after the murder of Simon the children attempted an en-mass public march to protest the killing.

One way to get information from many people is to use focus groups. Focus groups can be formed contain groups of people from parents and those who worked with the children to those whose only contact with them is from what they read in the press. The themes for the focus groups can be chosen by the participants concerns while they are meeting, or by the issues brought up by street children, or by your research questions. If the street children are the participants other than verbal data can be obtained from drawings or by certain theatrical presentations.

We used this method to help us define street children from several perspectives, and found that different people's knowledge and attitudes about street children contributed to their estimates of their numbers, which ranged from 1,000 to 100,000 in Nairobi, to 5,000 to 1.5 million in Kenya.

Be careful when reporting the results

I want here to only mention two problems which I think are particularly important and unfortunately too widespread. One is that authors routinely over-generalize their findings by moving from a small often non-random sample to a title that suggests a much larger population. For example, a non-random sample of 40 street boys leads a title like "Nearly all street children in Uganda are HIV positive or addicted to drugs.

Secondly, there are problems with reifying numbers taken in studies of street children. The reader, no matter how much the author discounts the validity of these numbers, tends to believe in them, if no more than using them in the literature review of their own studies. Numbers also make the reader feel the research is scientific. In fact if the numbers were not accurate and I pointed out many reasons why they re not, mostly because they come from merely asking the child information than the numerical results that serve the opposite of scientific inquiry, namely to promote prejudice over truth.

I want would like to end by pointing out my ten commandments for prospective researchers in this field.

Ten commandments for conducting research with street children:

1. Think how your ethnocentrism defines the nature of childhood.
2. Judge how children poor families cope in the context of their culture.
3. Avoid pitying the children or stretching their resilience.
4. Be clear about how the sample was drawn and who the children are.
5. Don't forget gender differences.
6. Use both narrative and numbers, but understand the shortcomings of each.
7. Don't accept any of what the children say to you as factual.
8. Use projective methods, performance based tests, and observe their mental status.
9. Collect data about how the children are seen in their society.
10. Don't over generalise your results.