

Are Colombian Street Children Neglected? The Contributions of Ethnographic and Ethnohistorical Approaches to the Study of Children

LEWIS APTEKAR
San Jose State University

Data from ethnographic notes, ethnohistorical documents, and standardized tests given to Colombian street children illustrated that the children functioned with adequate mental health. Using cross-cultural comparisons, including North American "runaways," it was shown that street children lived as nomadic entertainers in a politically volatile sedentary society. They were abused by society because they challenged the concept of "family" depicted by the dominant social class. Adolescence was shown to be a developmental period defined by historical and societal phenomena.

On any cold rainy morning in the central financial section of Bogota, children can be seen playing between traffic. They are without shoes, their heads unprotected by hats, their only shield from the weather a tattered shawl draped over their shoulders. On many of their faces there are smiles as wide as the gulf that separates --them from the patrons entering the banks. As the children of the bank patrons are being held tightly by their parents, they watch the apparently libertine street children with a mixture of disdain and envy. Each day, scenes like this are multiplied by thousands of children and by thousands of incidents, forming the texture upon which lay Colombia's reaction to ,-street children.

Street children are not just in Latin America. UNICEF has recently estimated that worldwide there are 80 million children without families who are living on the streets. Twenty million of them are in Asia, 10 million in Africa and the Middle East, and 40 million in Latin America (Tacon 1981, 1983). The numbers and proportions for Latin America are staggering. Although Latin America has only 10% of the world's child population, it has nearly 50% of the world's street children. The number of Latin American street children is equal to the total population of Colombia and all of Central America.

Most commonly, the children have been described as being abandoned by their families, an inevitable consequence of cruelty or poverty (Munoz and Pachon 1980; Munoz and Palacios 1980). However, Samper (1984), a well-known Colombian journalist, referred to the children in the leading Bogota daily as a "plague" threatening the fabric of traditional family discipline. That the children were described in terms that elicited pity was not surprising, but that they were perceived as a disease and, indeed, as a threat to the family aroused in us a more specific interest, which led us to carefully consider the children's lives. We knew that by merely recording the numbers of street children, however staggering these numbers were, we would not be able to understand the variety of emotions the children evoked in the populace, nor would we be able to understand the children's daily existence. To do this it was necessary to partake in their daily activities: eat with them, accompany them to the places where they slept, and follow them around the city as they searched for sustenance and took pleasure when they were able.

To understand the children it was not only necessary to get close to them by ethnographic study, but it was also imperative to view the children in their cultural and historical context. By examining Colombia's ethnic history it was possible to see how the claims about the virtue of parental discipline and the accusations about appropriate child rearing and adequate parental responsibility, which permeated the press as well as everyday conversation, stemmed from the fact that street children in the context of Colombian ethnic history posed a threat to the fabric of traditional family relations.

Under the auspices of the Fulbright Commission, I worked in 1983 and 1984 with 12 Colombian University students to understand the characteristics of street children and society's reaction to them. After spending nearly a year collecting ethnographic, psychological, and archival data, it became apparent that the children were functioning better than they were portrayed in the press (Aptekar 1988a, 1988b). It also became evident that the children could not be understood without seeing them in the context of the larger society in which they lived. This article begins with a discussion of the children's characteristics and continues with an explanation of Colombian society's reaction to the street children.

Characteristics of the Street Children

In order to get more information about the children's mental health I administered to a nonrandom sample of 56 children, between 7 and 16 years of age, a battery of three psychological tests (Aptekar 1988a). The children's intelligence was measured by using the Kohs Block Design test (Kohs 1923). Although there were few cases of very high IQ, the mean score (88.38) of all the children was within the normal range (85-100), and, excluding the margin of error, there were no more examples of mental retardation than what would be expected in the normative population (3.6% instead of 3%). The Bender-Gestalt Test (Bender 1938) and the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test (Goodenough and Harris 1963) gave measures about their emotional and neurological functioning. About a quarter of the sample scored within the pathological range, but nearly half were clearly without pathology. Other authors have corroborated these findings (Felsman 1981a, 1981b; Lopez and Lopez 1964). What the research suggested was that most street children were functioning adequately intellectually, neurologically, and emotionally. It also was clear that about 25% were having problems in one or more of these areas.

Thus, the data did not portray the children as carefree or without emotional problems, but it did, illustrate that, given their circumstances, many of them had adapted remarkably well. This was in contrast to the manner in which they were portrayed in the press and in governmental documents, where it was reported that all of them were dysfunctional. This was one discrepancy that had to be understood if the characteristics of children were to be adequately addressed.

Certainly, there was ample reason why the children in our sample should have demonstrated more pathology than they did. They had all lived on the streets for at least three months. They had all been incarcerated at the state juvenile center. Some came from homes where there was abuse, and others had no homes. They all knew firsthand the effects of poverty. The question became, Why did this group do as well as it did? Although we had to be clear that about a quarter of them were not functioning well, it was remarkable that almost three quarters of them were faring adequately. One reason for their well-being was that a pre-selection factor existed. Having left a set of bad circumstances (home) for an unknown future (on the streets) meant that, contrary to public opinion, the emotionally stronger children were the ones surviving on the streets, whereas their weaker siblings remained at home or became the children who were not functioning well on the streets. Once on the streets the children who were functioning well joined a peer group that gave them a good deal of friendship and support. Many of them had benefactors, some of whom were ex-street children or friendly restaurant owners who gave them food in exchange for some minor service. Most important, they had received training for an early independence that made leaving home less traumatic than the assumption of rejection or abandonment implied.

Although the major reason given for the existence of street children was poverty, another discrepancy between popular opinion and our data was that poverty, though it may have been a necessary condition, was not sufficient to explain their existence. According to the 1976 census (Jaramillo 1976) there were 28 million Colombians, 41% were below 15 years of age, and 70% of the country's population were considered to be poor. Jaramillo defined poor as not having the basic elements for a dignified life. This meant that in the country there were nearly 8 million poor children, and in Bogota, assuming a population of three and half million, there were about one and one third million poor children.

By taking the highest figure of 1-341000 street children in Bogota used by the Instituto Colombiano Bienestar Familiar, the national social welfare agency (Pineda et al. 1975), only one in ten poor children could be considered street children. If the less startling but more commonly occurring statistics from various non-governmental sources were taken, the percentage of poor children who were street children was reduced dramatically. Gutierrez, the author of a definitive study on street children (1972) and a national expert on the topic, claimed that there were about 5000 street children in Bogota. In 1973, an article in *Education Hoy* (Diaz 1973), a national periodical, gave a figure of 3000 street children in Bogota. The mayor of Bogota, who from 1968 to 1980 was responsible for supplying the official statistics, said that in 1980 there were no more than about 2000 street children in Bogota. The commander of the police claimed that many of the statistics had been exaggerated and that "there appears to be a *gamine* [urchin] population in Bogota which is not less than 6000 and not more than 12,000" (de Mantilla 1980). Taking the 12,000 figure, which was the highest for all of these statistics, only 1% of the poor children in Bogota were considered street children.

The value of examining these statistics is not to deny the poverty of the children and their families, but to show that only a small percentage of those impoverished became street children. Poverty caused children to leave their homes, but the children who left because of poverty could best be illustrated by a bi-modal distribution. At one end were the best functioning children who, as a result of being poor, were raised to adapt to street life at an early age. At

the other end of the distribution were the poorest functioning children who, indirectly or directly, because of poverty, were either abandoned or forced out of their homes.

A third discovery concerned the terms abandonment and neglect. In spite of the fact that the terms street children and abandoned children were used interchangeably, the street children in our study were not without families. Only 16% of the children in our sample were unable to locate at least one parent. Similar findings were reported by Felsman (1981a, 1981b). Instead of being abandoned or neglected, the majority of the children were reared in a way that was deliberate and that was helpful in training them for early independence and self-assurance. These were the very skills that would help them make a living in an urban economy where there were few wage opportunities open to them.

One Colombian author (Cobos 1979) offered a detailed phenomenology of the singular emotive word "abandonment." He described "Passive abandonment" as a method of child-rearing that allowed children to roam the neighborhood, finding company outside of the immediate view of their mothers. This is similar to child-rearing among the poor in the Caribbean (Mintz 1984), in Mexico (Fromm and Maccoby 1970; Lewis 1965), and in Brazil (de Jesus 1962), which are the areas of Latin America where the largest numbers of street children are found.

Our data, and that of Felsman (1981a, 1981b), suggested that street life began slowly. The children left home, returned to it, left again for a longer period of time, came back home to touch base, and so on, until the children were ready to assume a total life on the streets. Even when the children lived on the streets, most of them returned home to visit, to contribute money when they could, and to get support when they needed it.

There were several reasons why the children's early independence was not the same as abandonment. First, the children's siblings often assumed a good deal of the child-rearing responsibilities, which, as Ainsworth (1967) has shown, made separation from home less stressful than it was for children raised only by adults. Second, as the Whitings (1975) demonstrated in a cross-cultural child development study, children taking care of younger children promotes the development of pro-social, responsible nurturing behavior. This independence can come more easily and earlier to these children than to children without these early experiences. When children grow up with sibling caretaking, and are socialized to assume early independence from their families, their developmental stages are accelerated. For most street children the process of assuming street life was not complete before age 13, and there were only a few street children younger than 11 or 12 who were fully matriculated on the street. This meant that most street children, given their developmental experiences, were closer to early adolescence or adolescence than childhood, and that the great majority were not abandoned.

Our study, which suggested that street life was not an automatic road for all of the children, was corroborated by other research. Pardo and Vergara (1964) compared the siblings and neighbors of street children who remained at home. They noted that the street children's physical and emotional health were superior. The summary of a review of the literature on street children (Cortes 1969) stated that "the authors who have studied this phenomena note a significant difference in the average weight which favors the street children when comparing them to their siblings at home, which the authors [the researchers] contribute to better nutrition" (p. 43). Felsman (1981a) made similar observations about street children's physical and psychological health. He noted that, in one family, when the children who left home were compared with their siblings who stayed at home, the street children were in better physical condition.

The physical evidence of the children's weight is harder to dispute than the oral claims of the children, when we know that it was precisely these "pitiful" words and behaviors that were used to manipulate others into helping them. Thus, we learned to take with some doubt the obvious answers to the question, Why are you on the streets? when the response came too quickly, when it was a rote response, when the possibility of gain was associated with the answer, or when the answer dramatically went against our observations. In fact, one of the advantages of ethnographic study was that it allowed a more in-depth view than random occurrences or paper and pencil responses.

Neither poverty nor abandonment explained the street children, which was not to deny that there were children on the streets who were poor and abused. All of them were poor, and far too many were abused. Rather than being abandoned, most of these children were cared for in families with as many as three generations of women, a distinction that was missed by many people who studied and wrote about the children. These women raised boys to be independent at a far earlier age than the more European-type families.

Society's Reaction to the Street Children

The Changing Civic Identity

By the mid-19th century, two political parties, the Conservative and the Liberal, dominated Colombian political life. Both parties were composed of warring factions of the postcolonial elite. The Conservatives, large landowners allied with the clergy, were opposed to secularism and liberalism. They supported a culture of dogmatic authority, a rigid hierarchy, and a strong role for the Roman Catholic church. The Liberals were motivated by secular and commercial interests. They favored free trade, secular education, individualism, and reduced authority of the Catholic church. Both parties shared a pride in their European ancestries and their ownership of land.

Both political parties were reflections of ruling-class interests. The "domination was taken for granted by the white or near-white elite, based upon the assumption that it was inherently superior to the largely ignorant, poverty-ridden and dark-skinned majority whom it had a natural right to control" (Sharpless 1978:21). It was thus nearly impossible to separate class and caste. Politics was "based on a mixed class-caste system, with ethnic considerations forming the later criterion" (Cquist 1980:29).

Violence between social classes and thus between ethnic groups had been a constant theme throughout Colombian history, including the Spanish conquest, the maintenance of the Spanish colonial social system, and the subjugation of the indigenous peoples and the African slaves. However, it wasn't until April 9, 1948, when the populist presidential candidate Gaitan was assassinated, that violence posed a challenge to the hegemony of the ruling elite of both political parties. "The assassination of Gaitan set off a spontaneous uprising in Bogota [referred to as La Violencia that rapidly spread throughout the country. The Gaitanista multitudes, reacting in frustrated rage to the death of their caudillo [a leader of great personal charisma], for a few brief hours came close to overthrowing the existing social order in an orgy of violence and destruction" (Sharpless 1978:177). Before La Violencia was contained, and it went on for nearly 20 years, 200,000 people were killed.

In Bogota, the violence after Gaitan's death was described as "the scene of one of the most massive urban insurrections in the history of the twentieth century" (Oquist 1980:118). It has been very difficult to understand, or offer an explanation for, why it was so intense and why it lasted so long. There had always been tension between the widely divergent social classes, but it wasn't until the mid-20th century and Gaitan's candidacy that "loyalties to the traditional parties began to be transcended and modernized politics based upon lower and middle class interests began to appear. These changes represented revolutionary challenges to the established order" (Sharpless 1978:185). Scholars have suggested that the reason for the intense and enduring violence was due to the profound social changes that threatened the power of the ruling elite (Alape 1984).

Before Gaitan's ascendance, access to political life, as well as to prominent society, depended on family name. Not only did different families belong to different political parties, but the very identity of those parties was also inexorably tied to the single moniker that made claim to social status: the father's apellido (the father's surname). Thus, political parties were not civic responses to national or regional life, but rather manifestations of feudal patrifocal family empires that were built on slavery. Because each political party was composed of different factions of the elite, the poor or disenfranchised never gained much as a result of Liberal or Conservative rule. Thus, up until the time of Gaitan, political struggles were intra-elite. The notion of democracy, which was always part of the seed that was planted in the new world, was yet to come into reality.

Gaitan courted the Colombian masses, and through his programs he established them as a source of political power. Most of his programs focused on lower-class Colombian families. As mayor of Bogota, he worked to end the plight of poor children by opening "school restaurants" that would give children a free breakfast. He began a factory that provided poor children with shoes at cost, and he upgraded agencies that were concerned with the children's welfare. As minister of education, he established a national literacy campaign. Through his programs he allowed the poor to dream that democracy was possible. He called for the abolition of legal differences between legitimate and illegitimate children. He sought to establish divorce, and to make legal the recognition of women's equality with men. He advocated a sufficient minimum wage to provide for a family. He spoke about wage supplements for each child worker.

In Bogota, speaking directly to the masses, putting these positions in family terms, he asked, "What is the future of our children if they continue to live in the present state of affairs? Can you be sure that they will advance because of their merit, their ability, their studies, or their efforts? No. . . . They will succeed not by hard work, or by being

technicians, farmers, engineers, knowledgeable in their profession, but by being base and servile to the political bosses" (Sharpless 1978:105-106).

Once the child of slaves, Gaitan addressed his audiences with hope. He promised them that their children would be able to pursue independence in a democratic society where merit would determine their opportunity. The oligarchy did notably sit by waiting for their demise as crowds of a hundred thousand assembled to hear Gaitan. The press, which was ruled by the elite, called Gaitan a "negro" and the "literate negro." Because of his racial features he was denied admittance to a wealthy social club where mayors of Bogota had routinely belonged. His followers were called chusma (rabble or mob) because they were from the lower social classes and of darker complexions. Many of these reactions demonstrated the ethnic-caste nature of Colombian politics.

There were two results of Gaitan's politics and the epoch of La Violencia. First, life became more egalitarian and meritocratic by increasing many people's opportunity to participate in civic and political life. It became possible to be someone without having to rely on family name or family history. Thus, La Violencia resulted in the demise of privileged status based on ethnic history as the sole determiner of citizenry. It made democracy viable (Alape 1984). :

Second, many scholars traced the origins of street children to the epoch of La Violencia (de Mantilla 1980; Munoz and Palacios 1980; Neron 1953; Pineda et al. 1978). Before that time there were children on the streets. Indeed, the word gamine, which means urchin and was used as a general descriptor for Colombian street children, had its origins as far back as 1874 when children led a protest against inhumane working conditions in the mine of Zipaquirá. However, it was not until after La Violencia. that the children were first labeled "abandoned." This labeling by the elite allowed them to judge lower social class families, and in turn gave credence for action. "Abandoned" is not a value-free term. It judges parents pejoratively. It calls for action against those who abandon and action for those who are abandoned. It gives the right to those who use the term to act against those to whom the term is applied.

The street children were in the midst of a social class and caste struggle that placed them and their families into the political turmoil. As the children flaunted their independence in public, they enraged the status quo against them. The overreaction of the populace revealed its symbolic nature. The response to the children was in great part due to the loss of power the oligarchy had endured. To understand further why the street children and their families were devalued, we turn to an examination of another ethnohistorical phenomenon: the different Colombian family structures.

Family Differences Between Social Classes

By reading 20 years of newspaper reports about the street children and examining how they were perceived in governmental reports, we discovered that the attitudes toward street children were mainly directed toward their families. In the major governmental document, Pineda (1978) characterized the families of street children as being headed by mothers who were considered victims of their abusive male partners: the stepfathers (*padrastrós*) of the children. The mothers endured the abuse because of their need for economic survival. Placed between the demands of the *padrastró* and the love for her children, the mother was under severe pressure. Because of this, the children were neglected, abandoned, or otherwise forced to leave the home. This commonly accepted scenario arose from important differences in traditions between the class dominant families and the lower social class families. The street children came from the lower social class families, and they were being judged by the higher social class family standards.

Research has described two Colombian family structures with important differences between the quality of the conjugal ties and the raising of children (de Galan 1981; Gutierrez 1972; Jaquette 1976; Villar 1978). Each type of family had different internal family dynamics. The two family types also corresponded to the different social classes, which in turn mirrored the ethnic differences in the society. Because the family dynamics paralleled social class, the two types of families had different amounts of power in the society, a connection that we found helpful in understanding society's reaction to the children. First, we explain the different dynamics of the two family types, and then we show why these differences added to the already existing social tension caused by the rapidly changing civic politic.

Eduardo and Virginia were typical of many Colombian families of the middle or upper class. From our ethnographic notes we learned that they traced their individual ancestries to the Spanish conquistadors. When they were married in the Catholic church, they agreed that Eduardo would become the *jefe* (boss); the house, the property, and even, in many ways, Virginia were considered his assets. When their children, three boys (Eduardo Jose [161, Juan [141, and Felipe [61) and two girls (Ximena [131 and Lupe [71), were born, Eduardo assumed authority over child-rearing

and was considered the principal source of wisdom for his children. Monogamy for Virginia was sacrosanct, but it was less than that for Eduardo. In the family's position in society it was Eduardo who marked the status of Virginia and the children.

This was quite different from what we found in the poor neighborhoods. Manuel and Maria began their conjugal relationship outside of marriage. Manuel was not the first man that knew Maria in this way. Maria already had three children from as many different men: Tomas (16) had already left the home, Cecilia (17) had just had her first baby, and Juanita (12) was living at home. It wasn't until Maria was 34 that she settled into a relationship with Manuel. She and Manuel have two children of their own. Before meeting Manuel she never allowed, nor did the fathers of her children assume, that they were part of a family. It was up to Maria to decide to give the status of family member to the fathers of "her" children. In fact she gave and took away this status depending on their behavior, and on how she perceived her needs and those of her children were being affected by them.

Before Maria met Manuel she lived with her mother and her two daughters, making three generations of women in the same home. Maria was in charge of the family assets, and it was she who marked the family's social status. She was in charge of the child-rearing, and when Manuel moved in, she made sure that there was no favoritism between her and their children. All of them were considered equal members of the family. Wagley (1976), in his study of peasant Colombian communities, reported a similar situation in which fathers treated their stepchildren as well as they treated their own children.

There were, however, differences between child-rearing in the two social class family structures. Boys in the higher social classes were encouraged to stay at home until they married, and they did not leave without the blessings of their parents. In his private social group or club, Eduardo taught Eduardo Jose and Juan how to be "men." At home, Virginia cared for her youngest son Felipe, demanding, almost excessively, his attention and obedience. This created a dependence on her that mirrored her dependence on her husband. Trying to reverse this "weakness," Eduardo demanded that all his sons become ultra "masculine" so that they were not made into "sissies" by their indulgent, emotional mother. This dynamic prepared the boys for the adult relationships between men and women that they were likely to inherit. They learned to treat women as if they would be overly emotional and potentially controlling.

Contrary to this, boys in the lower social class Colombian homes learned that men were not part of their family. Tomas was socialized to leave home by puberty, and he was prepared for this by learning to be independent of his mother at an early age. By the time he was 12 he had had many experiences on his own, away from home and often with other children on the streets. Before he reached puberty, Tomas considered his mother the source of wisdom, but afterward he did not consider his mother as someone he would ask to clarify experience.

Girls in high social class families were closely supervised by their mothers and fathers, often being chaperoned whenever they left home with boys. Ximena at 11 was a year or two away from *puberty*, and Lupe at 7 was many years away, yet they had already learned which boys were acceptable, knowing that their social status would be defined by the status of their future husbands. They were told by their mothers, their aunts, and the female friends of their mother that their adult status would be dependent on the men they marry. This was not the case for girls in lower social class families. Cecilia, at 17, and Juanita at 12, were socialized to become independent of men. Years before they had learned to look for their identity without being dependent on intimate relationships with men. Cecilia was encouraged to remain at home even when she had her first child.

These family differences were not unique to Colombia. They existed in most of Latin American and the Caribbean (R. Smith 1973). The predominant role of the mother (and the fairly distant role of the father) in lower social class families is found in many societies in which there is a large amount of socioeconomic stratification, low rates of social mobility, and restricted public roles for adult men (M. Smith 1973). These are characteristics of most Latin American countries. These families have been given a variety of labels. In Colombia they have been called *matrifocal* (Gutierrez 1972). In the Caribbean, lower class families have been called *maternal* or *grandmother families* (Comitas and Lowenthal 1973), or *keeper families* (Henriques 1973).

Whatever the label, families with the same characteristics as lower social class Colombian families have had long histories in Latin America and the Caribbean. They existed in 18th-century Colombia, as well as 19th-century Mexico and Brazil (Lavrin 1987). They continued to exist well into the 20th century in spite of receiving a good deal of pressure to change. For comparable examples in Venezuela see Peattie (1968), and for the Caribbean see Mintz (1984).

Not only have these families existed for a long time, but their histories also parallel ethnic or racial lines. When the Spaniards arrived they introduced the Napoleonic code, which defined the family, set standards of family conduct, and connected it to law. Children born to fathers outside of marriage were not recognized and therefore could not receive inheritance. These children, who remained illegitimate, were placed in the public domain. Since a woman by Spanish law was treated as a minor, her inheritance went to her husband, who administered her dowry and whatever other goods she brought into the marriage.

These laws created conflict because they were much different from local customs. Contrary to the Spanish culture, for example, Inca women maintained rights over property, rights they still hold in many indigenous communities (Burkett 1978). Women in African cultures also had many more rights than were allowed under Spanish rule (Mathews 1973). These Spanish mandates have been slow to change. Only recently did the majority of Latin American wives gain equal rights to their children. In Argentina, for example, women did not receive parity until 1985 (Lavrin 1987:112).

Tensions Between Social Class, Family Traditions, and Ethnicity

Because the family differences historically went along ethnic and social class lines, family styles became part of the country's class conflict. Colombian women in lower social class families, like Maria and her daughter Cecilia, viewed marriage and child-rearing differently from women who lived in higher social class families. In these lower social class families the woman's role as mother, rather than that of wife, gave the conjugal unit less value. Thus, they reared girls and boys to expect that the relationship between husband and wife had less importance and was less necessary.

Without the necessity of men, women were more independent, and the power of men, which was based on their presumed economic and social value, became precarious, weakening their authority to instill and demand obedience from their families (see de Jesus 1962 for an account of this in Brazil). This not only jeopardized the man's position within the higher social class family, but also reduced his public status since the conjugal relationship was part of what defined his power socially.

The attitude of the elite in many Latin American countries was such that they viewed the women of the poor social classes as promiscuous, in spite of the fact that research showed little promiscuity in these families (Slater 1977). The women and their children were the recipients of erroneous accusations and abusive treatment. They were labeled unwed mothers, their marriages were called "concubinage" or menage, and, given the pejorative nature of these terms, their value as people was diminished. The men with whom they had relationships received similar treatment. These views rested on the fact that kinship and marriage were considerably different in the two types of families.

To analyze lower social class families by their internal dynamics only would miss the important social forces that impinge upon them and that, through governmental and press coverage, spread their image to the populace. The errors produced by Pineda (cited above, 1978) illustrated how difficult it was to have people of the dominant class write about the lower class. Their research team, working for the national social welfare agency, and using middle-class Colombians, gave lower-class women a questionnaire that asked them about their attitudes toward family. The results indicated that the women wanted legal church marriages and saw extra-residential unions as immoral. The authors maintained that young Colombian girls became pregnant through ignorance and exploitation by males. In fact, when young girls in lower-class families gave birth out of wedlock, both the mother and her child were accepted without pejorative status (Villar 1978).

The children from these unions were taken care of by their mothers, by their mother's mother, by female relatives, or even by women friends of the mother or grand marriage. The researcher's mistake was to assume that the women equated marriage with sexual liaisons, which they did not. In fact, these women saw premarital sexual unions as normal (Fals-Borda 1955; Mintz 1984; Schmidt 1976). Only after living this type conjugal life for some time did these women with one man (marriage).

One problem with accepting this elite view of lower social family was that the family in Latin America has been used to defend privilege. "The key difference between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' was that the former were able to establish successful mechanisms to serve the attributes of their class through family connections" (Lavrin 1987:111). As the changing civic politics in Colombia increase the opportunity of the non elite to participate in social and political life, the power of the elite families waned, which further

motivated their demeaning meaning attacks on lower social class families (Alape 1984; Lavrin 1987). In fact, these attacks had similar themes to those that were used to discredit Gaitan after his assassination.

When the street children were described as “a miniture guerilla band at large in the urban area of Colombia” (Gutierrez 1972:45), it was because this image represented a more compelling reality than that of being in need. The sniping remarks made upon them (they were not abandoning) were not intended to help them. Given the precarious control of elite, the street children in their conspicuously dirty appearance; in their flirtation with danger, in their cunning thievery – all of which took place in public – were seen symbolically. They represented a defiance against parental authority as defined by Spanish tradition. They also represented a decreased possibility of maintaining privilege, that is of keeping so many people in need while there were so few that had so much, without having to resort to violence. Sensing that this role gave them power, the children participated in the scenario. It was not hunger or family disintegration that impelled them to be so public in their displays, but rebellion against the inevitability of inheriting the lowest social status due to their being deprived of opportunity lack of familiar favor.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

By describing the Qalander (Berland 1982), a peripatetic group of entertainers in Pakistan who traveled from village to village performing animal acts and magic tricks for their audiences, we will be able to illustrate remarkable similarities between how their children and the Colombian street children were treated by society. In many respects, The Colombian street children lived as nomadic entertainers, moving from place to place in the city looking for opportunities to earn their sustenance. In making their way, they mingled among a sedentary culture who raised children to be close to home and dependent on their parents. This comparison will help us understand why the street children were said to be abandoned, and why they were brutally treated instead of being seen as living and coping adequately with their impoverished urban circumstances.

Because the Qalander used entertainment as the mainstay of their economy, children were given a prominent role in earning money because they were seen as having more potential as performers. The image of competence was enhanced when small children were able to perform tasks that audiences normally associated with adult competence.

By age six, the children had learned to dance in public, to control bears and monkeys, to perform magic tricks, to juggle, and to do impersonations with sexual references. In learning these skills, the children were learning to be competent in their society. Living as they did, always moving through foreign territory on a large 3000 mile circle of travel, the Qalander were constantly a foreign body mingling with many different groups of people who lived in a sedentary culture. In these sedentary cultures, families were composed of blood members. Keeping the family together, performing functionally and efficiently, involved a relationship between parents and children where the lines of authority were clear, and where obedience toward parents was sacrosanct. Friendships between children were closely supervised so that peer relationships did not become too powerful.

Whereas the continuity between generations was maintained in the sedentary cultures by parents' authority to demand obedience from their children, continuity was fostered in the nomadic culture by relationships between siblings. The concept of siblings in the nomadic culture included cousins and non-blood relationships between peers, so that, in fact, there was not much difference between sibling and friend. Siblings routinely had different fathers. The value of associating with friends took on the tone given to family kinship ties in the sedentary family.

Predictably, when the nomadic and sedentary groups met, problems arose. As the nomadic entertainers came upon the next village in their route, their animals and magic tricks were viewed with great interest

and curiosity by the sedentary children. They were concurrently seen as alarming by the sedentary parents who discussed their adverse reactions to them with great fanfare, referring to them as "pariahs." The presence of nomadic children in apparently adult roles, as actors at center stage capable of extracting money and attention for their performances, presented 'a different picture of childhood. Young, independent children were not consistent with the role of children in the sedentary culture.

The parallel between the Qalander and the street children of Colombia became obvious when we followed the children. By mingling among the sedentary in the streets, the children were able to earn a livelihood much as their Qalander counterparts.

Throughout the study I walked in and around the downtown area where many street children gathered. One morning, on my way to the storefront program, I saw several street children wearing clown costumes. They had assembled in front of a traffic light where they began a performance for the passengers in the stopped cars - The three largest boys dropped to the ground on their hands and knees. Two others knelt on their backs, while the smallest child stood on their backs and juggled four bowling pins. With perfect timing, they disbanded a moment before the traffic light turned and moved throughout the crowd asking for payment.

The busy streets often held ample opportunities for the children. As I observed them walking through the streets, I was readily aware of the wide social class differences among the populace. Owning, or even driving, a car would be impossible for the street children, as it was for the large majority of Colombian society. One day, on a busy thoroughfare, a young man about 14 years old held a large torch in his hand. He ran up to the intersection where several lanes of traffic were merging. After lighting the torch, he carefully put it in his mouth. As the attention of the drivers and passengers was diverted, the friends of this boy were able to find unprotected places, places where they could find something of value to take.

Throughout the study, I was able to follow the children on their day's journeys and to observe how they, like the children of the Qalander, were keenly aware of the sentiments of the adult culture around them, and were capable of using their awareness for pleasure and profit. Every morning, Antonio and Roberto, two 13-year-old street children, went to El Paradiso restaurant where they washed the front sidewalk with a hose in exchange for leftover food, or sobros. On this particular day, Antonio put the plastic bag of sobros over his shoulder, and the two of them went to a quiet side street, sat down in the shade, and emptied the food that was lumped together in a mass about the size of a small pillow. They ate some of it and traded the rest with a blind man 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 free so that 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 to support. The song concluded, "Could you give my 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 that 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 scheme amusing and gave him a peso.

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 grave sites, Roberto and Antonio rented out of the use of the ladder.

Like the Qalander children, most of the street children's encounters made them appear, from the sedentary society's vantage point, delinquent or mentally ill. Although the Qalander were called "pariahs"

and the street children a "plague" by their respective sedentary cultures, the truth was more complex. Three examples will suffice to show how easy it is to misjudge the children. First, although the more affluent saw the children late at night and perceived them as playing at outdoor cafes, the children were in fact waiting for the cafes to close so that they could get the leftover food, or sleep in the private doorways. Because they were up late at night, they often could be seen sleeping during the day. Although they were perceived as derelicts or as sleeping off a drug binge, they slept during the day because it was safer than sleeping at night when they could more easily be accosted.

It is commonly assumed that the children slept whenever and wherever they wanted, as if the world was their bed, and their sleep as easy to come by and as deep as that of a small child in the comfort of his parents' bedroom. One night near midnight, while a soccer game was in progress, I saw two eight-year-old boys sitting on a curb across from the stadium. Having contracted with a guard to spend the night in the doorway of the stadium, they had to wait until everyone left the stadium, including the adult beggars who would scavenge the area for something of value. In plain view, the children appeared to stay up as late as they wanted, but in fact they were thoroughly tired and depressed about having to wait for a safe, prearranged place to sleep. A more accurate description about how the children perceived the night was revealed when I asked one of these boys when they wanted to go to bed. I used the verb *querer*, to want or to like. In his answer, he changed the use of *querer* to *poder* (to be able), saying that it was better to ask when "am I able."

In fact, the night is more troublesome than most people realize. Not only do the children feel the most vulnerable in the dark, but also the elements are difficult. Rather than being randomly selected, their nighttime sleeping places are chosen because they are near the heaters of dry-cleaning stores or hotels, and they are picked well in advance. Even so, the children often sleep like kittens, head to foot, to keep each other warm. Their clothes, which present such a picturesque image of vagabondage, being worn in layers, are in reality used for protection against the cold.

The second example, which explains part of the confusion about the children, is their daytime appearance. Traveling during the day with out any possessions makes them appear derelict, but they avoid material possessions because they make them vulnerable to being robbed. What possessions they have, they often store in secret places, which they visit only at night. The children can often be seen with their one steady piece of clothing, a *cobija*, which is a type of shawl that they use to cover themselves with during bad weather, to sleep upon at night, as a table to eat upon, and often, knowing that the *cobija* can look like the security blanket of a younger and wealthier child, as part of an act to elicit alms. Unfortunately, the *cobija* is also associated with rural, "backward" indigenous men whose appearance presented an image in contrast with modern urban life.

A third example concerns the view of the children in groups. Although they were perceived as running in "hordes," the reason for traveling in large groups during the day, which made them appear ominous, was quite rational. There were two types of groups. First, large groups (*galladas*) were organized for economic reasons. They stayed together only during the day. At night the children broke up into small groups of two or three (*camadas*), which were formed for the intimacies and camaraderie of a small group. At the end of each day, children left the larger *gallada* to join their smaller *camadas* in their prearranged sleeping or private places. In the mornings they rejoined the *gallada* where their relationships became more business-like. Although they go from work to friendship, from public to private places, each day similar to the sedentary way of life, the children were still perceived as running in "hordes," when in fact these groups were not random, but well organized, according to age and street experience, for the economic success of all of them. However, the public nature of their enterprise made them, in the context of their society, and like the *Qalander* among the sedentary, appear threatening.

Conclusion

All of the street children came from impoverished homes. About a quarter of the children observed left their homes because of abuse or abandonment. They were not coping well on the streets: they were delinquent, drug dependent, involved with premature sexual relations, or plagued by mental disorders.

However, the majority of the street children in the study received training for an early, subculturally appropriate independence from their families. These children left home in stages, learning their independence with the help of their mothers, their older siblings, and their peer groups. Once fully matriculated on the streets, their culture was similar to that of nomadic entertainers like the Qalander. To earn a living, they acted upon the sympathies, empathies, disdain, and envy of their audiences. Like Roberto and Antonio and their performance on the bus, they either directly performed for money or were clever small-scale entrepreneurs obtaining something cheap in one place and selling it dear in another; or they engaged in creative manipulations of events and people, like the boys' renting of the ladder at the cemetery, which bordered on (and often went over the border of) thievery.

There was a good deal of difficulty even in the lives of those street children who were coping well. Their lives were often considerably better than those of their siblings and neighbors they left behind. Nevertheless, the children with pathology should not be overlooked. Elsewhere we have explained the different problems of the children and the kinds of programs that would be appropriate (Aptekar 1988a).

In this article we have tried to ignore neither the problems they faced nor the successes they had. To be sure we were not being overly romantic about their well-being or excessively depressive about their hardships, we were forced to constantly ask some very difficult questions. Were we romanticizing the children's lives? Were we unable to see their pathology? Were we avoiding the extreme difficulties of the children in their homes and in the streets? These and other questions became less abstract when we were forced by the ethnographic work to deal with actual situations. Was it worse for a child of eight to work alongside his or her parents, in the fields or in the mines or in a small factory for less than a dollar a day, than it was to be among his or her peers in the streets eating better and working less? Neither view measured up to our image of how children should grow up, but if we had avoided looking at their choices, we would have missed the fact that born of their painful realities was a life that testified to human resilience.

The strength of the children who were capable of independence at a far earlier age than we had thought possible forced us to reconsider the relationship of children and adults, to look more carefully at the ages at which children need to be under the direction of parental authority, and to look at the precarious balance between being beholden to parental power and the will to be independent of it. Either we could dwell on the children's misery, which was always available to us either from the many children who were miserable (or from the many children who played at being miserable to earn a living), or we could take the opportunity the children gave us to consider a different form of childhood, and how it fit into the social order.

We have demonstrated that poverty, although necessary, was not sufficient to understand street children. In Colombia, less than 10% of the poor children were street children. An adequate explanation would have to go beyond poverty. We have placed the children in an historical and cultural context, hoping that these factors would provide us with answers to our questions.

In coming to an understanding of street children, we could not ignore that they were treated very badly by the dominant society. They were verbally debased in the press, placed in constant jeopardy by the authorities, and physically abused by the police. At the time this article is being written, street children in Colombia and Brazil are being assassinated. These reactions stem from very deep and convoluted societal motivations.

Due to the changes brought about by La Violencia, the children found themselves involved in a battle over the place of the poor in the post-slavery, but yet to be truly democratic, society. In fact, the children were engaged in a struggle that even went beyond the history of their nation or that of Latin America. The problem the children posed to their society was first defined by Plato who claimed that the family (similar to what we have outlined as the patrifocal sedentary family) was inimical to the state because family, in its privacy, always cared for its own at the expense of the public welfare.

The children were responded to out of proportion to their actions because they threatened the struggle first defined by Plato and heightened by the particular circumstances in Colombia. The dominant class, tied closely to a certain family style and tradition, injured by its waning power due to the aftermath of La Violencia, reacted with such outrage in large part because they were being forced to give up their privilege and power and care for the common good. Thus, societal responses to the children were placed in an historical and cultural context.

The study of Colombian street children has significance beyond the immediate goal of helping them or the many millions of similar children in crisis in Latin America. First, studying the Colombian street children also helps us to examine North American runaways and to understand the millions of immigrant children in the United States. These comparisons will be helpful in seeing that childhood can be viewed not only from a developmental perspective, but also in an ethnohistorical context.

Similar to Colombia, we also have problems of adequately defining the characteristics of street children. In the United States we must distinguish between the street children who are fleeing from abusive or neglectful parents and the street youth who commit violent acts of delinquency. In the United States, the relationships between children on the streets are like the relationships between fugitives—they change as frequently as circumstances demand. As a result, children on the streets in the United States have less opportunity for intimacy, which reinforces the loneliness that drove them to the streets in the first place. Instead of being faced with public displays of cunning thievery, our society is more likely to encounter violent groups of thugs or wounded groups of runaways, yet the populace rarely makes these distinctions. How do these perceptions fit into our ethnohistory?

As our country's demography changes to include a more divergent group of children, many of whom do not speak English, are we likely to categorize them as did the established and wealthy Colombian families with the street children? It has been estimated that in the first half of the 20th century more than 100 million people migrated, either out of choice or because they had to, from one country to another (Zwingmann and Pfister-Ammende 1973). Over a third of the students in San Francisco schools are immigrant children (Aronowitz 1984). Some research on migrant children suggested that they were unusually prone to mental illness (see Bagley 1972 for a review), whereas other studies revealed that they had a lower incidence (Kantor 1969; Sanua 1969) and that the phenomena was related to social class (Goldlust and Richmand 1974; Kurnz 1981; Morrison 1973). Without knowing these children from the intimate perspective of ethnographic fieldwork, and without being aware of them in their ethnohistorical context, a variety of misperceptions about them are likely to occur, some of which might diminish their problems, whereas some might avoid their resiliency.

The second value in studying the street children is that it gives us information about the street children in our culture who represent a similar problem—what to do with children who leave home at an earlier age than their societies deem legitimate? Street children in different cultures, with the different reactions they receive from their respective societies, allow us an opportunity to see children's capabilities in a developmental context, which helps us to untangle which social customs are dictated by children's needs and which by society's needs. In this process, we can better understand that childhood is not a given and

consistent phenomenon, but that it exists in an historical and societal context, one that is in great part defined by the needs of adults enmeshed in that conflict.

The third value that the study of street children afforded was the illustration of the importance of using ethnographic methodology in an ethnohistorical context. The test data showed that the children were faring better than the press or the international organizations portrayed them. If we did not pursue the children by getting close to their lives and seeing them in their daily activities, it would have been impossible to understand the discrepancies in how they were portrayed publicly and in the test results. By taking part in the children's lives it was possible to see their coping skills and how their lives were organized to meet realistic ends. By understanding the children's families it was possible to see that their child-rearing was part of an orderly development that functioned to make them capable of being independent at an early age.

Through the ethnohistorical documentation, it was possible to deal with several questions that needed to be answered. The governmental report of street children (Pineda et al. 1978) indicated that the children were the products of rural to urban migration, which produced cultural dislocation and a high degree of unemployment. Not being able to meet the demands of urban life, the report went on to describe how the fathers abused their children and abandoned their wives. This left the mother incapable of protecting her children so she took in a series of stepfathers who abused their stepchildren, causing them to adopt a street life. When the ethnographers of Colombia did not support this type of family dynamics, and the demographics did not support the rural origins, it was necessary to ask why. Through historical documents it was apparent that street children became a social issue only after La Violencia. At that time, profound social changes (Alape 1984) accompanied the new perspective of street children and their families. Slowly, the questions came into perspective through historical evidence, psychological test data, and ethnographic exploration, including the introspection of clinical method.

It would have been impossible to understand these subtle dynamics by methods associated with logical empiricism. Ethnographic methods coupled with ethnohistorical documents made it possible to sift through the complex interchange between the children and the dominant society, affording, in the final analysis, a strikingly different, more accurate account of this large social problem.

Note

Acknowledgment. I would like to thank the Fulbright Commission for the opportunity to study Colombian street children.

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