

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Throughout history, gangs of street children have roamed the cities of the world, begging, stealing, and prostituting themselves in order to survive. With the advent of the child welfare reform movement and the passage of legislation restricting child labor and mandating school attendance into adolescence, street children largely disappeared from the cities of the developed world.

In many parts of the developing world, however, children fleeing poverty and abuse or children who have simply been abandoned by their parents still band together to live on the street. As is evident in Lewis Aptekar's count, even under the most unfavorable circumstances, these children manage to create organized, functional social groups such as the galladas found in the cities of Latin America. In these small societies, which typically consist of fifteen to twenty-five economically interdependent children, behavior is regulated by norms and sanctions; children fill varied roles such as fence, thief, and beggar; and status is hierarchically organized with a jefe at the head, and subjefes and members in successively lower positions.

As is also evident from Aptekar's research, the way in which children relate to the broader group and the problems that they face in the adolescent transition are a function not only of the circumstances in which they find themselves but also of the nature of their own personalities and developmental histories. In this regard, Aptekar identifies two styles of street life, gaminismo and chupagruestic, which characterize preadolescent children's links to the galladas.

Gamines value their independence and ability to survive by their own wit and cunning and have little respect for authority in itself. They are more likely to have left home of their own accord, less likely to form permanent bonds to those in power within the gallada, and may find it difficult at adolescence to adjust to the adult society into which they are emerging.

Chupagruesos, on the other hand, survive on the streets through servility to the powerful, older and larger boys. They are more likely to have been abandoned by their parents, to enter into relatively enduring dominance submission patterns within the hierarchical structure of the gallada, and, paradoxically, to find it somewhat easier to adjust at adolescence since their submissive style prepares them to work in the menial jobs available to them in the broader adult society.

SELECCION FROM APTEKAR'S WORK

When I was a little boy, my parents explained about the hard times they were going through. Putting food on the table, I was told, was not a natural event like the change of seasons; it deserved respect. If one of us left carrots or broccoli on our plate, we heard the inevitable lines about the kids in India who were starving and how hard Dad was working to provide for us. We were lectured about our

responsibilities: we had to help around the house, do well in school, and just as importantly, dress and keep ourselves clean. By the time we had more or less internalized these demands, we had started school. And, at school, like most North American children, we had heard or read about the adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Huck was my first hero. By comparison to our timid dependencies, Huck, who did not have to wash, dress up, listen to lectures about being respectful, or do "nothin'" he didn't want to do, was indeed a heroic figure.

Working in Latin America over the past several years, I found it impossible to avoid these memories. According to reports from UNICEF (Tacon, 1981, 1983), there are 40 million street children in Latin America who appear to be on their own, growing up without parental supervision. Seeing them, I often wondered what childhood would be like without parental authority.

In 1984 I was fortunate enough to be a Fulbright scholar in Colombia and to have the opportunity to examine the lives of the street children more systematically. The first task was to get as close as possible to those who were living outside of family and state control in order to gain their confidence. I collected ethnographic data as they ate, played, worked, and even as they slept so that I could share the variety of experiences as they moved around the city....

Two Styles of Street Life: *Gamines* and *Chupagruesas*

From the ethnographic data, it was apparent that there were two different preadolescent psychological styles that ended at adolescence. The first was that of the true *gamine*, who chose to leave home, having rejected the trade-off between childhood protection with family obligations for the freedom from authority. He was the abandoner, who survived by cunning and wit. The second style was that of the *chupagrueso*, who was more likely to have been abandoned. These children lacked the haughty independence of the *gamines*, and learned to survive on the streets by becoming servile to the powerful.

Not only did the *gamines* appear much more independent and less self-doubting, but also enjoyed their independence. They were significantly brighter, functioned better emotionally, and had less neurological impairment than the *chupagruesos*....

From the onset of their street lives, the two groups developed very differently psychologically. At first they played together while playing, but soon a differentiation between them occurred. Since the preadolescent children were more effective at soliciting alms, they were eventually asked to provide their services to the older children. Some of the smaller children responded to this demand by compromising their liberty and becoming dependent on the larger boys. Others refused, even if it meant fighting against the odds, and established themselves as independent.

The demands upon the *chupagruesos* by their older peers made it extremely difficult for them to break this submissive pattern. In their relationship with other street children, the *chupagruesos* formed sadomasochistic relationships with the larger boys, which often resulted in depression or regression to immature behavior. This in turn increased their submissive lifestyle.

This difference in the relationship of each group to authority is related to a universal motif of children that Bettelheim (1976) discusses in his book about fairy tales. This motif features a giant in conflict with

an ordinary child who through wit overpowers him. "This theme is common to all cultures in some form, since children everywhere fear and chafe under the power that adults have over them.... Children know that short of doing adults' bidding, they have only one way to be safe from adult wrath; through outwitting them. " It was through wit and cunning that the *gamines* took out their anger and learned to cope with their situation, while the *chupagruesos* were too afraid to express their pain.

As the two groups approached adolescence, they faced different problems. The ethnographic notes revealed that *gaminismo* ended at puberty. *Gamines* were unable to continue with their petty robberies or even commit more serious forms of robbery and still be *gamines*. These alternatives no longer provided the satisfaction of outwitting adults. With the increased experience and skill acquired with age, the same acts of mischievousness that once were thrilling became degrading. They no longer tested the *gamines'* intelligence and ability. As they grew older, they were compelled by their perceptions of themselves as haughty provocateurs to give up the small-scale mischief and become either full-scale delinquents or find a way to live outside the mainstream of society. However, escalating petty mischievousness into delinquent acts was unsatisfactory because it led to associations with gangs and the friendships and customs of that delinquent world. The ethos of the delinquent subculture was not to outwit authority, but to commit crime in order to gain wealth or power. The motives of the *gamines* were different.

Thus, gaminismo is a developmental stage which faces a nearly inevitable end as the child reaches puberty. This made adolescence for *gamines* a particularly difficult time because they had to give up so many of the acts that had brought them mastery and pleasure. The only way to maintain their hard-won sense of independence was to hide their haughtiness and accept poverty, a task which was not palatable to them. Having made one important life decision-to leave home at a time when most children were fully dependent on the decisions of their families-the *gamines* were forced by puberty to make another vital decision. One such decision was to become a small-scale entrepreneur. This allowed them to live outside of the mainstream and avoid being beholden to "bosses." If they could not do this, some became criminals. Others went against their grain to accept the servile life of a worker; that is, they became *chupagruesic*.

Chupagruesos also had difficult choices to make at puberty. Since they had not chosen to leave home, they lived with great emotional turmoil. As they approached adolescence, their problems were more related to gaining independence than losing it, to increasing self-respect rather than having to trim down excessive self-perceptions, and learning to live with their fears and lift their depression rather than curtail their grandiosity, as the *gamines* must. Paradoxically, the very servility which worked against them as small children on the streets helped them when they faced integration into adult culture. This style allowed them to be dependable and successful in menial jobs-the only kind of work available to them. Although the *chupagruesos* were thus more employable and able to avoid delinquency, they were rarely able to achieve the internal satisfaction that came to the *gamines* who became small-scale entrepreneurs.

Galladas and Camadas: The Street Children at Work and Play

Studying the children among their peer groups was helpful, in gaining a fuller understanding of their psychological functioning. Two groups were revealed—the galladas and the camadas.

The galladas consisted of groups of fifteen to twenty-five children who associated with each other primarily for economic reasons. They were led by post-puberty children, with the prepuberty children as their underlings. Although the children stayed together in order to divide the labor that could make them all more successful than if they acted alone, as is the case with other business partners, they rarely associated outside of work.

The gallada was integrally related to the poor urban subculture. The leadership of the galladas, as well as the majority of its members, had been on the streets for a long time and had adopted a somewhat delinquent lifestyle along with the associations such a style brought. Although the galladas were composed mainly of adolescents, there were some preadolescents who helped bring in the goods. In addition, there were a few adults who helped integrate the children's economy into the larger culture.

The ultimate authority of the gallada resided with the adolescent jefe, who maintained his power and prestige by physical prowess, intelligence, and the ability to "fence" the products of his labor. The jefe not only had to learn how to control his *subjefes and* members, but also had to acquire the appropriate skills for dealing with the established criminal element. This gave him and his gallada access to more lucrative goods and a place to cash in what they already had. The jefe knew how to cultivate and maintain friendships with adults such as street vendors, restaurant owners, and taxicab drivers, all of whom occasionally fenced his materials, even if they were not fully committed to a criminal existence. These skills cemented the jefe's power over the group, since they relied on him and his connections to bring them what they needed and wanted. The jefe was the bridge between the street children and the subculture of urban poverty.

There was quite a difference between the way the Preadolescent *chupagruesos* and the *gamines* responded to the *galladas*. This type of organization was suited for the *chupagrueso*' who learned quickly what was expected of him. He was reliable to those who he saw as having Power, and did what was necessary to stay in their good graces. The *chupagruesic* style helped maintain the integrity of the hierarchy and method of doing business. However, the *gamine* used the *gallada* only so long as it helped him. He had little respect for authority per se, and maintained his allegiance to the powerful only so long as it served him better than he could do on his own, or in another *gallada*.

In comparison, the *camadas* were composed of small groups of two or three preadolescents who shared intimacies and camaraderie. These groups were different from the *galladas* in that they were more like family and friends than business partners. The children in the *camadas* were in the middle childhood developmental stage, a time when friendships consist primarily of two-person, same-sex dyads. The *camadas* existed not for economic or pathological reasons, but because, as Sullivan suggested, this is the time of psychological development when such friendships are most needed. By forming chumships, they were able to deal with the demands of street life in a rather healthy manner. In fact, chumships were nearly synonymous with *camadas*.

The problem was that chumship ended at puberty when, as Sullivan noted, "lust" for the opposite sex pulled the relationship apart. One preadolescent, for example, began puberty and an interest in friendship with the opposite sex earlier than his companion, which made his chum extremely lonely at

times. As a result, he sought out another chum-one who was younger. When that did not work, he joined a *gallada* and became an isolated and marginal figure which only added to his loneliness. This phenomenon occurred often, because it was rare that the breaking of a chumship was simultaneous. With the passing of chumship came the demise of the *camada*. Like flowers in bloom, the *camadas* were intense, but ephemeral; in their beauty, unfortunately, were the seeds of their own destruction.

Because of these developmental differences, the internal dynamics of the *camadas* were different from those within the *galladas*. There was less formal organization in the *camada*, less delinquency, and the jefe was less important. Since the preadolescent children usually were fairly successful in getting food, by relying on their youthful image and thereby posing less of a threat to the public, they were able to secure their basic needs. Thus, they had less reason to obtain goods that had to be fenced. This reduced their level of delinquency and dependence on a jefe. Because the preadolescent children in the *camadas* came together more for personal than for business reasons, their relationship with each other was more intimate, resulting in less hierarchy and formal organization.

Since the children in the *camadas* played and ate together, the spirit was more like that of the *gamine*. The *gamines* moved between *galladas*, frequently residing in any one *gallada* only as long as it served their economic needs. *Chupagruesos*, on the other hand, needed the *galladas* for both personal and economic reasons, and they often found themselves deeply attached to a *gallada*, or a particular jefe. When the *chupagruesos* reached Puberty, they were particularly hard hit by the change; they had not been able to enjoy their chumships in their *camadas* as a result of needing to attach themselves to the jefes in the *galladas*.

The *camadas* were composed only of preadolescent children; the *galladas* were run by adolescents, but there also were preadolescents. The preadolescents joined the *galladas* in groups that corresponded to their chumships. Typically, at the end of each day's work a group of chums who were in the same *camada* left the larger business arrangement of the *gallada* and went to their prearranged private spots to sleep. In the morning they rejoined a *gallada*, either to work, as in the case of the *gamines*, or for personal and economic reasons, as in the case of the *chupagrueso*. When the preadolescent children wanted the older children to help them integrate into the adult society, they also turned to the *galladas*.

Conclusion

When I started this study, I was thinking what childhood might be like without parental authority. By the time I finished, I realized that in its absence, society would fill the vacuum. Because there were so many street children, they could not go unnoticed by society. The apparent freedom of their lifestyle necessitated their moral evaluation. This was dramatically illustrated when the Colombian street children reached puberty. Before that time, the children were considered cute, which contributed to their success at begging for alms. But as they grew, the image changed; they were then perceived as thugs and treated accordingly. When the street *children* reached puberty, they became street *people*, a change which signaled the end of one developmental period and the premature beginning of another.

The reason for this is that the prepuberty children, because they looked so small and young, stood out against the large "real world" in which they apparently roamed without supervision, producing a form of cognitive dissonance in the observer. A person in a dissonant state experiences two conflicting

beliefs and thus feels compelled to change his or her opinion about one because of the tension of holding two incompatible attitudes (Festinger, 1965). The adult's concept of a child as innocent and in need of a family for protection, and a child who is capable of producing a self-sustaining livelihood are incongruent, particularly when the child is so small. It was psychologically easier to grant to the prepuberty children the status of children (i.e., dependent, in need of protection, and helpless), no matter how independent they may have been, than to change one's concept of childhood.

This was why small children were paid for cleaning the very windows they had just dirtied, and why they were capable of securing alms through a variety of "theatrical" gestures in which they portrayed themselves as urchins. When the older children tried the same things, there was no dissonance, and the reactions were less charitable. As a result of not being able to beg or rely on being "cute," they were forced to develop delinquent work habits to survive.

One of the most significant problems in adapting to being on the streets was the turmoil it created in the developmental sequence. Among their peers, the smaller children were often given the status of elders as a result of being more economically viable. In contrast to being seen as adults within their peer groups, they were treated as "cute and adorable" children by society. Yet, because of the experiences they had after leaving home at such an early age, they were living as adolescents. Unfortunately, as soon as they looked like adults, they were treated as adults. The leeway that adolescents normally received was absent. This made it difficult for the adolescents to do what they had learned as small children, so they either had to rely on their younger friends to support them or adopt a delinquent lifestyle.

The study of Colombian street children has value not only in helping them and the forty million children in similar situations in Latin America, but also points out the relativity of child development. Childhood is not a consistent phenomenon, untouched by societal and cultural expectations. When "appropriate" child behaviors go astray, society reacts. The study of Colombian street children offers the benefit of understanding, at least in one cultural context, how this affects children.

References

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