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STREET CHILDREN AT THE INTERFACE WITH SOCIAL REALITY

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Abstract

More and more children experience a new way of living as they are pushed to the streets due to the altering of the inter-human relations within family and to social reality. Social and economic changes worldwide have had a tremendous impact on the whole social system, including the structure and organization of family. After 1990, Romanian society witnessed the coming out of the phenomenon of street children. The issue of such children is still topical, due to the specificity of this social phenomenon, on the one hand, and to the different manners of diagnosing and initiating efficient measures capable of decreasing it. The article analyses several studies which focus on the characteristics of street children.

Keywords: street children, social, reality, issue, characteristics

1. Introduction

In the vision of Dabir (2014, p.5) most definitions of street children concentrate on just two characteristics: presence on the street and contact with the family. The definitions of street children are seen to be incorporating the two

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groups of children: home based, which refers to children who usually return home at night; and street based, which is used to signify children who remain on the street and have no family support (Dabir & Athale, 2011). The phrase 'street children' has not been the only term referring to such children; they have been identified by various terms, including 'teenage beggars', 'street kids', 'homeless kids', 'street boys', 'street bums', 'parking boys', 'city nuisance' and 'children in difficult circumstances' (2016, p. 2071).

UNICEF following the UN International Year of the Child, introduced and described the term "street child" which refers to unaccompanied children working or living in the streets who do not have an adult to take care of them, no place to live, and who sleep where they want (Veale et al. 2000). UNICEF (1986) and other international organizations claimed, without empirical evidence, that these "street children" were parentless and therefore in need of supervision and direction. Many organizations also assumed street children came from the rural poor who had recently migrated to the capital, and could not cope with city life. Street children stoled and begged and came from abused or neglectful homes and were therefore forced to survive on the streets (Aptekar, Stoecklin, 2014, p.8).

Other international organizations and UNICEF agreed that all of the children on the streets in the developing world did not have the same family circumstances and hence developed new terms. Street children were " of the streets" meaning they did not go home at night.

There are several social science theories that can be used to understand these reactions to children in street situations. Festinger (1957) suggests through cognitive dissonance theory that society's attitude about what children should be doing in public and what they see children in street situations doing in public are not in synch. "The dissonance between the beliefs that children belong at home under caring adults, and the behaviors of children in street situations in public is uncomfortable; it produces a psychological tension which the person wants to reduce. The two ways to reduce the tension are either to think of children in street situations as having been abandoned or abused and therefore still

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children, but children who have a reason for acting this way, or to think that children in street situations have no excuse; they are acting delinquently, and thus they are in need of action to get them back in line with what is appropriate children's behavior" (Aptekar, Stoecklin, 2014, p.108).

Social constructivism theory explains that reality is formed by the interaction of the children and their environments. "Children in street situations under social constructivism theory must be considered in the context of multiple realities, and the way to help them is to focus on the quality of the multiple relationships of the child and his or her diverse social world" (Aptekar, Stoecklin, 2014, p.109).

The sociological perspective looks at what society demands of the child. James Jenks and Prout (1998) propose a critical exploration of the various ways in which the sociological tradition has conceptualized childhood. First is the functionalist approach to explain that uniform and predictable standards of action from participating members of society are the only way to maintain stability and integration. The first participants in the social order are children and they must be socialized in ways that are functional for the social system (Ibidem).

2. Street children as a minority

With a view to adequately approach the issue of "street children", we consider it appropriate to begin by delineating their position in relation with society, the manner they are perceived by society together with the solutions adopted by society to fix the issue.

2.1. Social framing of street children

A series of researchers regard the issue of street children as a limited phenomenon due to the connection they make with "the more traditional issues of juvenile delinquency, such as: the use of drugs, abuse, prostitution or vagrancy" (European Community, 1992, p.22).

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Our opinion is that, in order to define the social issue of street children, we should consider them a minority group at a social level. We have chosen this approach as we are able to debate it at a global level, leaving aside the individual, for the moment. When we analyse the minority represented by street children, we have in view its position in comparison with the standards of the majority, namely of the society it belongs to. The definition proposed by J. Perez and F. Dasi suggests that "a minority regards everything that deviates from the standards desired and imbued with value by a majority", a fact also proved by empirical researches in this field (Apud, Neculau, 1996, p. 62).

2.2. The behaviour of street children as a minority

Starting from standards, we might assert that two types of "standards" may be outlined: the standard of society or majority and the "counter standard", which is the standard of minority, transposed in a specific behaviour adopted by each member of such a group. This specific behaviour is a rebel one, a result of the individual's refuse to obey the standards and is the consequence of the individuals' reactions to standards and expectations combined with their decision to reject such expectations and to act contrary to them (McDavid & H. Harari, 1978, p. 327). Let's also notice a desire of these individuals to become independent of such standards. Mc David asserts that "the true independence represents the indifference in face of standards and expectations". Moreover, in the case we consider his opinion that the "standards of society represent one of the most important mechanisms of social control, of the individual's behaviour in society", we might assert that independence is exactly the desire to escape this social control, transposed in a delinquent behaviour that begins with vagrancy, which represents the "primary school of a delinquent" (Manoiu & Epureanu, 1996). Under such circumstances, the minority of the street children, as we use to call them, represents the "nursery" of juvenile delinquents and of the subsequent recidivists reflecting "behavioural consistency" (Dasi & Perez, Apud Neculau, 1996). This represents the mere repetition of an action, which, in the

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end, attaches an "existence and visibility to the group, which is perceived as an independent entity and which, although it gives no chances to recovery practices, maintains social conflict active" (Dasi & Perez, Apud Neculau, 1996).

There is no doubt that the coming out of such a behaviour was facilitated by the technique of the so called "strike with the foot in the door", in the case we consider the origin environment of these children, who, most often (in accordance with empirical researches) come from families who are well positioned on the social scale or from families of intellectuals; nonetheless, once the contact with the vitiated environment is made, they accept compromise, which subsequently determines the specific behaviour.

2.3. Child's identification with the minority of street children

Another characteristic of street children is their desire to identify themselves with a minority or to be perceived as belonging to it. The example of the Ku- Klux- Klan group, which used to wear white gowns that hardly allowed the perception of their face, suggests a comparison with the street children. These ones, under the cover of anonymity and having become members of the "street children" grouping, reach the psychological status known as de-individualization, characterized by "decreased self-care, diminished fear or reaction to the negative evaluations expressed by others; in accordance, the individual becomes more apt to engage in impulsive, antisocial and non-standard behaviours" (Feldman, 1976). Both institutionalization and the mentality of the majority (discrimination and critical opinions on these children, rather originated in a desire to supress them than to help the) have also contributed to this process of de-individualization of the children who are, at present, in the streets. One of the solutions to this issue resides both in the education of majority, with a view to accept street children, and in the education of the professionals, with a view to focus upon the social integration of these children. Church might also have an important role to play as it is the promoter of moral values.

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3. Factors that turn children into street children

If we have previously referred to the street children as to a minority, we are further going to regard them amidst the factors that act upon their psycho-somatic development as well as on the results given by the action of such factors.

3.1. Parents and family environment

As already known, family environment offers the primary condition for a balanced and normal development of a child. Starting from the hypothesis that about 50% of the street children have families, a question is set forth: what might have determined these children to become street children? The negative "contribution" of family and of parents, in general, to the strengthening of the negative attitude of the child in face of them and society is extremely large. Family environment leaves marks upon the child's development and behaviour. Peter Weldge suggests that: "friends significantly contribute to the foundation of self-respect as well as to repulsive appearance, bad manners and an inadequate social behaviour, which are going to attach a stigma on the child" (P. Weldge, 1992). We might specifically speak about a series of characteristics encountered especially in the case of the children who left their families as a result of the effect determined by the following two factors occurring within their families: neglect and aggression.

The analysis of these factors appears to be motivated by the jeopardizing and prejudices they determine upon the existence of the family micro-group, which is also influenced by other social factors, such as: poverty, unemployment and interpersonal relations, mainly in Romanian socio-culture.

The public can assume that children in street situations are not making a long-term rational choice and thus need immediate help. The same can be said of their parents who are not making a rational choice to be abusive or neglectful, in which case they also need help. Even if the public can accept that the children are acting rationally, it still does not provide an option to grant them adult respect.

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There are always strings attached to this way of thinking (Aptekar, Stoecklin, 2014, p.109).

3.2. Neglect

In accordance with the definition given by J. Gibbons, and Weldge (1992) neglect regards "the lack of protection of a child in face of all types of dangers, including cold weather and starvation or the obvious failure to provide a series of important responsibilities specific to care-giving; consequently, a significant deficiency of the child's health and development comes out"; let's notice that these observations characterize a lot of children who, at present, are looking for a self-valorisation in the street due to the fact that their families fail to provide it to them. "When children are not monitored, vagrancy, delinquency, and troubles of character and behaviour come out" (Manoiu & Epureanu, 1996). Meanwhile, intellectual development is affected due to a "lack of an adequate cognitive stimulation that may result in deficiencies of the general intellectual abilities" (Gibbons, Weldge, 1992).

Under rational choice theory children in street situations are on the streets because they have made a rational decision that it is better than staying at home, either because it was abusive or neglectful, or because as boys they were expected to leave and earn money to help the family. This decision might not be the optimum decision in the long run, but the best one available at the time, given the lack of complete information (Aptekar, Stoecklin, 2014, p.109).

3.3. Abuse

The social constructivism theory explains that children in street situations as being abandoning and abandoned, having abusive or neglectful families and families that are rearing them to do their best with what life has to offer, and of a supporting or ostracizing society (Ibidem). "Violence and child abuse are among the most serious problem facing children today, but they are not the only ones" (Sorescu, 2016, p. 105).

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In the vision of other authors (Ayub, Kumar, Shora), abuse was reported quite often. Children shared their experiences about abuse on their own in the natural course of interview and therefore offered valuable insight into the prevailing abuse at the hands of biological parents, step parents, and others (2016, p.1807).

Among the forms of abuse encountered in the life of street children who have family environment origins, three of them come to front and have as an effect the fracture of the relation parent-child and the child's appropriation of a wrong behaviour in face of other adults.

The three forms are the following ones:

3.3.1. Physical abuse and maltreating

3.3.2. Sexual abuse

3.3.3. Emotional abuse

3.3.1. Physical abuse and maltreating

A research made upon a sample of 70 children abused by their parents, before the age of 5, showed a connection between physical maltreating and their subsequent anti-social behaviour, the research having confirmed previous results (Gibbons, Weldge, 1992).

In the case we closely analyse the results of the research mentioned above, we observe the manner parental aggressiveness is transmitted to the child as "aggressiveness is the social behaviour learnt by children in their family environment. Among the causes that determine or influence parents to adopt an aggressive behaviour against their children, which manifests as a body abuse we may mention: stress, poverty, alcohol, frustration, pornography, insecurity and a dangerous environment" (Neculau, 1996), which they might have also faced.

3.3.2. Sexual abuse

Another form of abuse encountered within the families of the children who become street children is sexual abuse. In accordance with a case study of a 12-year old child, they noticed that the child was sexually abused by his aunt at whom he lived (his parents being divorced, they abandoned him). He only had

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the courage to leave his home after two years and he entered the category of street children. They estimate that the average age when street children begin sexual relations, including through sexual abuse. Paedophilia and prostitution are also encountered in such cases.

3.3.3. Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse represents the "current or probable negative effect upon the affective and behavioural development of a child, determined by the persistent or reversed emotional maltreating or rejection (Gibbons, Weldge, 1992). Why this form of abuse is mostly encountered in the case of street children? Such a situation occurs owing to the fact that they come from mono-parental families, with affective drawbacks, or from disorganized families, which have children from previous marriages. "Rejection is one of the most usual causes that have as a result the phenomenon of street children. It includes rejection by family, friends, school or rejection by a series of persons who use to take care of them" (European Community, 1992). Children are emotionally abused by the parents because they are deprived of parental care and attention that are irreplaceable for any child growing up (Andrioni, 2011, p.8).

3.4. Internal factors

Other factor, which exerts its action upon children's life and augments the issue - irrespective of the fact that the children live with their family or are institutionalized - is represented by the internal or individual causes. The research made by Europe's Council upon children showed the global cause "directly connected to the child, namely: violence, vices and the strong desire of youngsters for independence, especially during teenage." (European Community, 1992). In the case we extract from this definition the first two individual influences, namely violence and vices, and we relate them with Freud's vision on human instincts (Zamfir, 1992) we would reach the conclusion that street children did not manage to correctly direct their aggressive tendencies; yet, by asserting this, we would limit to a simple demonstration that blames the

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individual and shows no opportunity of social reinsertion for these children. Although we cannot neglect certain biological influences in the lives of these children, nonetheless we should not stress only heredity. We assume that all these influences play a well-defined part (family, social environment, individual, heredity) in determining the behaviour of a child.

"The wrong behaviour of a child is the sign of a series of uncertainties, connected with the child's search for his/ her own positioning within society. Children believe that, in accordance with their behaviour, they are going to find out and ensure their desired place within society as well as the admiration they look for" (Dragomirescu, 1976). Neglected children (as previously shown) will try to escalate a position and to dominate the other children around with a view to draw attention, while adopting a wrong behaviour in the face of adults; they begin with contradictory issues, which determine conflicts, first at the level of their family (in the case they live with their families), and later at the level of their relations with the other children and adults. Their self-image, wrongly forged, represents the factor that determines most affective and behaviour issues that manifest in the case of the children separated from their families. In accordance, help may be given in developing a feeling of personal identity through creating authentic relations within the environment children live, be it the family, an institution or the street. Such relations are the only ones able to provide hope for this disadvantaged group and also represent a reward for the professionals' effort with a view to reintegrating these children

3.5. Institutional factors

The institutional environment represents the second origin milieu of street children. As already known, care-giving institutions were designed to foster orphan children and socially disadvantaged children (poor and those who were victims of abuses).

Due to the fact that they were institutionalized, children suffer as a result of the breaking of the relations they were familiar with before institutionalization

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and have minimal chances to initiate new and correct relations, positive for their development, in the institutional milieu. In accordance with their definition, care-giving institutions include a series of rules and standard social constraints meant for the social modelling of the children. Once children enter the car-giving institution, they are not going to face a diverse environment; instead, all the children are going to develop the same characteristics of social disabilities, which are either determined by social factors, parents or poverty, or by the internal influences that direct them to social deviance.

Nowadays, such institutions are perceived, to a certain extent, and especially by the teenagers looking for independence, as a form of forced separation from daily life, as limitation and isolation instead as a form of social integration. There is no doubt that such a perspective would determine a child to leave the institution and go to the streets, becoming an anonym among the other "street children", far from the imposed standards. "Due to the fact that in the past the children living in such institutions were isolated from normal life, they are not prepared to relate correctly with the adults, the other children, and, generally, with people, at the moment they leave the care-giving system" (Gibbons, Weldge, 1992).

3.6. Education – an integrating factor of the process of socialization

Education plays an important role in the social integration of individuals. This is more obvious in the case of street children due to the factors mentioned previously. The absolute majority of street-connected children do not have access to either education or medical services beyond emergency care (UNICEF, 2018, p.6). For instance, researches subsequent to the physical abuse of a child analysed the relation between physical abuse and cognitive development, the capacity of educational progress, behavioural and physical development. Generally speaking, results show that physical abuse is accompanied by a series of negative effects, on a long term. "Cognitive abilities and educational assimilation are generally slightly decreased than in the case of the children who were not abused"

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(Gibbons, Weldge, 1992). After a sexual abuse a series of "school difficulties" are expected. Poverty also has a negative effect upon the development of children, in accordance with Elena Zamfir, determining the cultural confinement of the children to their homes (…) and their exclusion from collective activities (Zamfir, 1992).

Within the educational process, school plays an important part, and, in the case it is fractured, children's abilities decrease. We consider that the stress on education might be a solution for improving the condition of children in difficulty.

4. Street children characteristics based on comparative results of international research

There are several studies which analyse street children characteristics. One of the study argue that that street children are not victims, but are the more resilient of the poor. For example, Wright et al. (1993) studied about 1,000 children, divided into two parts, one was made up of street children not living at home and the other group was made up working children living at home. They were surprised to find that the street children had somewhat better nutrition and physical health than the street vendors.

In Northeast Brazil, "street children do experience hunger at times. But most street children are probably better nourished than their siblings at home" (Hecht 1998, p. 54). In Nepal, street children suffer from less severe malnutrition than children from the countryside (Panter-Brick, Todd, Baker, 1996). Panter-Brick has a long history of excellent public health studies in Nepal where she has made several physical health comparisons between homeless street children and both urban and rural poor children (Panter-Brick et al., 1996). In 2001 she used a finger prick sample of blood to determine the body's ability to ward off pathogens. While she mentions several possible sources of error in the data, she showed that homeless street children experienced signifi cantly less ill-health than children of rural areas (Panter-Brick 2002). Both in Nepal and another study

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she conducted in Ethiopia, she showed that while middle class children did better than poor children, among the poor children the homeless did no worse than the ones who stayed in their families.

In an article by Scanlon et al. (1998) the authors compared the physical health of street children and their matched counterparts living at home. They found that while street children suffered more physical trauma such as cuts sprains, bruises, etc. they had better nutrition than their counterparts. Some the advantage might come from begging and thievery, which is directed at food or means of obtaining food. Scanlon and others concluded that the street children they are talking about aspired to many careers, have had experience in working toward their goals, and were adept at achieving them.

Other research made in Jakarta, Indonesia, based on a comparative study, between street children compared to other poor children living at home showed that the street children had, at times, more financial resources than their poor counterparts and were not less healthy or underweight than their counterparts at home (Gross et al., 1996). In conclusion that might mean that the street children had more resources due to having more social services, or might mean that the street children worked better in their groups of peers than poor families (Ibidem).

While Mathur et al. (2009) carried out the study to examine the prevalence, types and intensity of abuse in street children, in Jaipur, India what the study shows, the major cause of abuse is not from their families, as would be assumed by the concept in the developed world, but from the societal and economic factors that we have mentioned which are associated with homeless children in the developing world.

Davies (2008) did some comparison between street children in Western Kenya and poor domiciled children. He found that street children had a higher standard of living than domiciled children. The explanation is because street children keep themselves in the public view, thus drawing more than their fair share of aid.

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In La Paz, Bolivia, Landfried, Herman, (1996), in a paper describing their project for street children, compared at risk youth with street children. They found that physical abuse, problems with the police, and school attendance, separated the two groups.

There are exist large data sets from many countries that tell us that homeless youth in developed countries are having many mental health problems while street children in the developing world are resilient (those that break down the genders favor resilient boys). There are studies that show street children with poor mental health (Ahmadkhaniha, Shariat, 2007; Mathur et al. 2009; Sherman and Plitt 2005 ; Njord and Merrill 2008 ; Thabet and Matar 2011).

In Shanghai, China, street children suffered from, cold, illness, hunger and psychological uncertainty, and in the author opinion the rather harsh conditions, constraining the child to immediate survival strategies, with almost no compensation in terms of peer-group sociability, were, according to the Cheng (2006), an illustration of how psychological satisfaction can be reached only when physiological needs are met.

5. Conclusion

Over time, the understanding and conceptualization of the street-child phenomenon has changed considerably because of the increased availability of evidence-based literature published by researchers and child-rights professionals across the globe (Dabir, 2014, p.4).

This paper attempted at analysing the issue of “street children” through employing the concept of “minority”, which helped delineating their position within nowadays society.

The synthetic conclusion of the problems under debate shows that each factor that determines this phenomenon may be eliminated in the case there is an understanding of the human being as a whole and of the roles each of us should play.

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The resolution made by UNCHR (2012) and related publications recommend actions to be taken by state and nonstate players and provide concrete guidelines for policy and practice, the goal ultimately is to make progress in reaching out to all street-connected children, wherever they may be, to ensure protection of every child's rights (Dabir, 2014, p.20).

Last, but not least, we have to stress the idea that each child represents a universe, which, once discovered, cared for and correctly guided, is capable of proving its whole value within society.

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