

# The Process of Permanence on the Streets. Street Children in Mexico City\*

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• **Abstract:** *In this article I use Foucault's theory of power to explain children's presence on the streets. I argue that resistance to be subject of family power and to be subject of the power exercised in shelters or governmental institutions is not the only struggle in which participates a child that decides to stay living on the streets. Subsistence is difficult; resources are scarce. Children need power to survive, to protect themselves, to stay. Therefore, permanence cannot take place without a minimum amount of power. I find that, when children are on the streets and are given an option, they establish a balance between the street and previous experiences outside the streets. But, not all children have an option or the possibility of exercising that option. My main aim is to understand the reasons why a child stays living on the streets even when she has to face situations as problematic as the situations confronted while living in their home or in a shelter.*

**Keywords:** Street children, adolescents, power relations, resistance, Foucault.

## El Proceso de Permanencia en las Calles. Niños de la Calle en Ciudad de México

• **Resumen:** *Las relaciones de poder se dan en diferentes direcciones y múltiples dimensiones. En este artículo utilizo la teoría de poder de Foucault para explicar la presencia de niños que viven en la calle. Argumento que la resistencia a ser objeto del poder ejercido por la familia o en los albergues, no es la única batalla que tiene que enfrentar un niño que decide quedarse a vivir en la calle. La subsistencia es difícil; los recursos son escasos. Los niños necesitan poder para sobrevivir, para protegerse, para quedarse. De ahí que la permanencia no se pueda dar sin un mínimo de poder. Encuentro que cuando un niño está en la calle y tiene la oportunidad de escoger, hace un balance entre su experiencia previa y la vida en calle. Pero no todos los niños tienen opciones o la posibilidad de ejercer su elección. Mi objetivo principal es tratar de comprender las razones por las cuales un niño se queda a vivir en la calle aún cuando tiene que enfrentar situaciones tan problemáticas como aquellas situaciones enfrentadas en su casa o en los albergues.*

**Palabras Clave:** Niños de la calle, adolescentes, relaciones de poder, resistencia, Foucault.

## O Processo de Permanência nas Ruas. As Crianças de Rua na Cidade de México

• **Resumo:** *As relações de poder acontecem em direções diferentes e em dimensões múltiplas. Neste artigo, uso a teoria de poder de Foucault para explicar a presença de crianças que moram na rua. Argumento que a resistência para ser objeto do poder exercido pela família ou nos abrigos, não é a única batalha que deve ser enfrentada por uma criança que decide morar na rua. A subsistência é difícil e os recursos são escassos. As crianças precisam de ter poder para sobreviver, para se proteger, para ficar na rua. Assim, a permanência não pode acontecer sem um mínimo de poder. Acho que quando uma criança está na rua e tem a chance de escolher, faz um balanço entre a experiência previa e a vida na rua. Mas não todas as crianças tem opções ou a*

\* This article is a synthesis of the book *Poder y Resistencia. El proceso de permanencia de los niños de la Calle en la Ciudad de México*, published in 2008 by Plaza y Valdés. It is based on field work done between 2000 and 2003 in Mexico City, and it has been updated with undergoing research on child labor in Guadalajara, Mexico. In addition to participant observation as "Street Instructor", I used in depth interviews with street children living in both the streets and shelters. The initial fieldwork was supported by the Conacyt and the University of Texas at Austin, through different research grants and fellowships.

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*possibilidade de exercer sua escolha. Meu objetivo principal consiste em tentar de compreender as razões pelas quais uma criança decide morar na rua não obstante precisa de enfrentar situações tão problemáticas quanto aquelas situações enfrentadas na casa ou nos abrigos.*

**Palavras-chave:** crianças de rua, adolescentes, relações de poder, resistência, Foucault.

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## 1. Introduction

*“The invisible can stay invisible because of an unknown complicity, because the invisible participates on its own invisibility acting as if it is visible”* (Roberts, 1999). But the invisible could also stay invisible because others act as if the invisible is visible, even though they are not able to see it. This has been the case of street children in Mexico City. Custom has made them invisible. The specific characteristics of the city. The invisible stays invisible, and every time it is shaped with more intensity. How is it possible for the invisible to stay alive? Invisibility is mimesis, is an act of subsistence at the same time it is an act of resistance. Children become street, multitude, drain or just old clothes or cardboard lying on the frame of an old door in order to survive, but also to stay. Mimicry with what is violent is to become violent and force the social order; but at the same time it means being subject of violence. Why all this resistance? Julio<sup>1</sup> left his home because he wanted to be independent. He left behind a good house and the possibility of having food every day. Even though he was doing better with his family, he doesn't want to go back. Norma and Irma constantly move between their house and the street. One month they live on the streets, the next week they live with their mom, or maybe just for two days, or maybe for a longer time; they never know.

Most of the guys I met on the streets live in terrible conditions. Many of them sleep on sidewalks and are exposed to bad weather, unsanitary situations and violence. Nevertheless, they want to stay on the streets. Some of them have the option to go back with their family; but they don't want to. Why do they stay living on the streets

even though sometimes they have to face situations as problematic as the situations confronted before? I argue that Children and young people decide to stay on the streets some times because they have no other choice; but in most of the cases, because that is their best choice.

Research on street children is not something new; both, academic and journalistic research has taken place since the early 80's<sup>2</sup>. There is an enormous sociological, anthropological and psychological literature describing children's socio-demographic characteristics (Unicef, 2005; Brewis & Lee, 2010; Aptekar, 1988; le Roux & Smith, 1998; Glauser, 1997), form of life (Fernández, 1993; Márquez, 1999; Lusk, 1992), coping strategies and organization (Edmonds, 2008; Avilés & Escarpit, 2001; Camacho, 1993; Agnelli, 1986). Most of this research has been focused on the reasons behind children's presence on the streets (Lucchini, 1996, Aptekar, 1988) and has been strongly related with research on child labor and schooling (Edmonds, 2008; Udry, 2006; Binder & Scrogin, 1999). In most of the cases children's lives have been examined in light of (1) general analyses of poverty and social exclusion, in one hand, and (2) coping strategies, vulnerability and resilience in adversity, in the other (Panter-Brick, 2002). There has been an attempt to understand how children arrive to the streets and how they live; but there hasn't been any explanation of the reasons why they decide to stay on the streets. In this paper I answer the question by analyzing the process of permanence of children and young people living on the streets. I argue that children generate a preference structure that ties them to the street; a structure developed on the basis of personal needs, but strongly shaped by power relations.

<sup>1</sup> The names of children in this paper are not real. They were changed in order to keep confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the literature see Panter-Brick, 2002, Udry, 2006 and Edmonds, 2008.

Two main theories support my analysis: Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (Maslow, 1943; 1968; 1970 and Maslow, 1972) and Foucault's theories of power (Foucault, 1969; 1966; 1975; 1976; 1982). Based on Maslow, I elaborate on possible likes and dislikes of being on the street and on a possible structure of preferences, in which the satisfaction of basic needs of subsistence, security and affection is fundamental. I use a Foucaultian approach to analyze how preferences are satisfied, and how family and institutional domination are resisted. My objective is to demonstrate that the process of permanence of children and young people on the streets can be understood as a result of the influence of power relations among children's structure of preferences. My hypothesis is that children and young people living on the streets generate a preference structure that ties them to the street. They evaluate what they like and dislike about the street, and what they like or dislike of being out of the streets; and based on that evaluation they choose to stay or to leave the street. I argue that the structure of preferences is strongly related with the possibility of satisfying basic needs of subsistence, security and affection. Power relations and social networks determine the possibility of satisfaction of those needs. I consider the process of permanence as a form of resistance against power, and therefore, an expression of power.

In terms of methodology, the use of Foucault's theory of power to understand the process of permanence on the streets lets the incorporation of a more complete scope of experiences, and demands both: the recognition of (1) children's social agency and competency, and (2) children's dependence on others. A focus in the process of permanence instead of a focus on categories determined by the use of a public space (i.e. working children vs. children who live on the streets), and the possible relations with significant adults (ties with "responsible" adults or family members), avoids simplistic analysis of children's reality.

In order to support my hypothesis, I assume that individuals are capable of making choices based on their own preferences. But this process is subject to a certain amount of personal control which will lead to the effective satisfaction of needs. Theories of Social Behavior recognize children's capacity to establish preferences and make decisions (Kohlberg, 1981). As soon as a child arrives to the

streets and is forced to generate his own form of subsistence, he is forced to exercise his capacities of self-definition and self-direction, giving place to the expression and 'realization' of an autonomous self (McConville, 1996). Child's autonomy begins to develop since his first months of life. Good support in early years gives place to increased autonomy in later years (Palomares & Ball, 1980; McConville, 1996). Personal differences in terms of personality and habitus give place to differences in their ability to make decisions. Self-definition and self-direction can be undermined or enhanced on the streets. This way autonomy can be reduced by a lack of self-esteem and a lack of a sense of oneself as competent to respond to other's demands (Oaklander, 2006). Children without a sense of self-worth don't recognize their authority with respect to the community demands. This way self-esteem and power are strongly related. A lack of self-esteem gives place to a loss of autonomy; less autonomy, more dependence on others. Addictive relations (to drugs or someone else), oppression, and the absence of satisfaction of certain needs—such as affection and protection—increase dependence. Dependence is inversely related to power: More dependence, less power and vice versa.

### *The arrival of a humanistic perspective*

In the last two decades the number of children and young people living on the streets of the main cities in Latin America and other underdeveloped countries has increased significantly (Unesco, 1995; Panter-Brick, 2002). The number of newborns on the streets has multiplied, and the presence of "grandmas" on the streets is growing, -mothers that arrive from the countryside following their children and who stay living on the streets. A problem that was strongly associated with males and adolescents has become significantly heterogeneous in terms of age and sex. Non-profit organizations and local governments are getting more involved in the process of pulling children and adolescents out of the streets. They are implementing different mechanisms to decrease their number, and have supported research projects that could lead to a better implementation of social policies.

Even though the presence of children living and working on the streets in Mexico City has taken place since the colonial period (Sosenski,

2010), academic research didn't begin until the 80's. Concerned with the accelerated increment of children living on the streets and the violence associated with it, academic and welfare literature emphasized the sheer scale of what was considered a worldwide problem (Agnelli, 1986). The objective was to explain the root causes of the phenomenon—family disruption and poverty—, and to describe the identifying characteristics of street children—the subculture of street children (le Roux & Smith, 1998; Flores, et al., 1998). Beginning in the 90s, research focused on the recognition of the negative consequences of a street lifestyle for children's health and development (Wright, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Wright & Kaminsky, 1993).

After a first period of victimization and isolation of street children with respect to a more general and complex problem, research developed under a new perspective in which street children were not demarcated so radically from other poor children facing adversity in urban centers, and in which their actual experiences and their own strategies for coping with adversity became fundamental to the understanding of the problem (Panter-Brick, 2002).

The idea of children as “agents of change in their own lives” (Myers, 1988, p. 137) followed the perspectives which considered children as a “product of adversity”. A significant amount of literature about street children developed after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This literature recognized the capacity of children to change their own lives and was more interested in identifying the “factors that help children cope with adversity” (Gutiérrez & Pérez, 1994a, 1994b). With the incorporation of children's voices as part of the research method, children's social agency and competency was recognized (Ennew, 1994; Johnson et al., 1995, 1998; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998). This recognition has had a positive impact in the elaboration of public policy. This initial recognition of children's capacity to make informed decisions about their lives and expressing views and aspirations that may differ from the views held by adults (Panter-Brick, 2002) demands the integration of children's needs with those of the community, in order to elaborate effective policies.

### *A change in perspectives*

In general, understanding children's presence on the streets has always been confronted by the problematic need of explaining what is meant by “street children”. Most of the first literature related with street children was concerned with the definition and differentiation between different groups of children who use the streets. These first works tried to identify street children based in two peculiarities: Their use of public spaces (if they use the street for sleeping or for working) and the absence of proper contacts or *links* with adults in the family home and/or public institutions. This differentiation gave rise to two categories that turned to be “problematic”: children *of* the streets and children *on* the streets<sup>3</sup>, —two definitions that do not explain the whole scope of experiences involved in living on the streets and which do not include children's reality and own world's view—.

In 1983, the Inter-NGO Programme for Street Children and Street Youth, elaborated a consensual definition of street children: “Street children are those for whom the street (in widest sense of the word: i.e., unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc...) more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults” (Ennew, 1994, p. 15). The most widely spread typology was established by the Unesco who defined street children as: “any boy or girl... for whom the street in the widest sense of the word... has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults.” (Unesco, 1995, p. 286). Street children can be street-based or home-based. Children *of the street* are in contact with their families but the street is their home; children *on the street* work *on* the street but return at night to their families. There is no classification for children that live in both, the street and with their family. Felsman (1984), Lusk (1992), Cosgrove (1990) and Glauser (1997) tried to elaborate a better characterization of children living on the streets. They made distinctions between abandoned and abandoning, runaway and throwaway. In all these cases, permanence on the streets has been considered just as an element of

<sup>3</sup> Panter-Brick (2002) explains with detail the problems this definition brings. Given the specific interest on this paper, I won't go further in this discussion.

distinction between working children and children of the streets. In summary, the main elements of differentiation between children have been: the time they spend on the streets, the streets as a source of livelihood, and the lack of protection and care from adults. (Panter-Brick, 2002; Gustafsson-Wright & Pyne, 2002)

During the 90's, the category street children tried to be substituted by categories such as: children in need (Woodhead, 1990) or children at risk (Unesco, 1995). But these definitions also turned to be problematic. The same as the research who finds the root causes of the problem in poverty and family dysfunction, which by no means can be held as sole explanations of children's decision to leave their home—when siblings and the majority of poor children do not run away so easily—(confront with Panter-Brick, 2002), literature that approaches street children as children *at risk* or *in need* blots out the capacity of children to face adversity, or to make decisions in terms of their well-being; most of these research portrait street children as product of circumstances.

Literature has proved the inconvenience of using categories such as *children at risk*, *children on the street* or *children of the street*, at the same time that has recognized the need to use a word to differentiate, at least in some aspects, the experience of children who live on the streets. It is very difficult to find a category good enough to describe a process as complex as children's life on the streets. This is why many scholars have decided to continue using those categories just as a tool to help analyze the problem, with the previous recognition of the difficulties associated with their use. A focus in the process of permanence<sup>4</sup> reduces the need to differentiate between children on the streets and children of the streets. General categories such as *street children* or *children and young people living on the streets*, can be used. The mobility of children in different fields (the family, public and private institutions, and the street) and the different forms in which children and young people relate and position themselves within those fields, become fundamental not as a form of differentiation between children on the

street or children of the street, but as the main expression of power relations. It is in the dynamic between different fields and different social groups that power relations will be observed\_(Foucault, 1966; 1969; 1976; 1982).

This new approach, based in the permanence of life on the street instead of the use of a public space, incorporates a broader scope of children's experiences. The idea of permanence as a result of a process of decision-making that takes place within a world constantly defined by power relations, assumes children and young people are capable of making decisions. From this perspective, children and young people are considered agents of their own lives. This necessarily demands the inclusion of the children's own point of view and a more detailed analysis of their whole life experience, an experience that is strongly influenced by specific age-needs; demands the elaboration of *an economy of daily life*.

## 2. Likes and dislikes of street life

In 1994 María was 16 years old and had two daughters: a baby and a two year old. She used to live with her boyfriend in an abandoned building. Since she was 4 years old, she began working on the streets selling newspapers and candies. When she was going to baptism her children she asked a street instructor to write what she wanted to say, so she wouldn't forget:

*"I'm María Gómez Fernández and my husband is José Alvarado Moreno. I work at my home and my husband works in a parking lot. We live with a group of friends: men, women, boys, girls and babies. We are not street children, we are neither of the streets nor delinquents; we are a poor family and we want to go on working and studying."*<sup>5</sup>

María as many children who live on the streets, has food and a place to stay. She has found a new family and is proud of her life. Even though she doesn't like when her kids get sick, she knows that she is able to provide them with enough food and clothes to satisfy their basic needs. Based on Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow, 1972),

<sup>4</sup> It is also hard to give a definition and measurement of *permanence*. I consider that a child has been on the street when he/she has generated his own mechanisms of subsistence, regardless of the strong or weak link with their families. This implies children that have slept, eaten and subsisted on the streets without the direct support of their family of origin or previous tutor, at least for a short period of time—namely one or two weeks.

<sup>5</sup> "Yo soy María Gómez Fernández y mi esposo es José Alvarado Moreno. Yo soy ama de casa y mi esposo trabaja en un estacionamiento. Vivimos con un grupo de amigos: hombres, mujeres, niños, niñas y bebés. No somos callejeros, no somos de la calle ni delincuentes, somos una familia humilde y queremos salir adelante trabajando y estudiando". (Gutiérrez-Leticia, 1994)

once Maria has food and shelter, and forms part of a group, she might look for security, love and respect (Maslow, 1968). Maybe after satisfying all her basic needs, she will feel the urge to satisfy her need of recognition. But not all the children that live on the streets have always food and shelter and they are not always waiting to satisfy that need before trying to satisfy others. Sometimes, love and affection can be satisfied even when they do not have a place to stay.

Most children on the streets are always faced with the necessity to find food, shelter and affection. Nevertheless, some children leave their home in search of independence and self-realization. Marco left home when he was 13, after his father forgot to buy his school uniform. During the last two years his relation with his father was improving, but he didn't feel loved enough. Pushed by his anger and his need of freedom, he decided to leave his house. As most adolescents, Marco had the need to be independent and to have his own group of friends. He has been living on the streets for more than five years, moving from the shelters to the street and then back again to a new shelter or to a center or rehabilitation from drug abuse. He has seen his family a couple of times. They think he is renting a room. He doesn't want his parents to know he is living on the streets. Every time he moves from one place to another, he makes a balance between those things he likes and dislikes from the street, and what he likes and dislikes from her parents house or the shelters.

What do they like from the street? On the street children find indispensable living conditions; have friends from which they receive protection; they are subject of affection and form part of a group; a child can even be recognized and appreciated by others. Children and young people become independent and free to move wherever they want. They feel powerful. On the streets they find an easier access to drugs and sex. But the conditions are not good enough. The protection provided by peers is not always sufficient; they feel insecure. Violence and abuse are a constant; and loneliness is a feeling that hardly disappears. Many of them know that drugs are going to destroy them, and the lack of sanitary living conditions and health care are not going to make things easier. Food is not enough and cold can "break their bones". Many times, they don't have the structure—the rules,

the norms to be followed—that can help them to resist adversity and solve problems.

Children know that out of the streets they can find better living conditions, and even a good sense of security. They won't confront so much violence. New forms of affection, recognition and appreciation can be found out of the streets. Children know that they will be limited by institutional rules and norms, but they have experienced the need to have limits. And, if they have positive expectations about the future, they will be attracted to leave the streets behind. But the decision is not easy. If they accept or decide to leave the street they will be separated from their friends. They won't have easy access to drugs and sex, and could even lose the possibility to move freely or be independent. Children know they can be rejected or devaluated again, and that family or Institutional restrictions can constrain them too much. Even though violence tends to lower, there is the possibility that previous experiences of violence and abuse will be repeated.

The choice is not easy; it will depend on the needs the child is able to satisfy *on* the streets and the needs he will just be able to satisfy *out* of the streets. Marco hasn't found a place in which he can satisfy his need for love and health. He knows that staying on the streets worsens his drug consumption, but at the same time he knows it is hard for him to stop consuming drugs even though he could lose her daughter. Without a job any attempt to leave the streets will put him on a public institution or a shelter, but his previous experience in these places is so negative that he doesn't want to go back. By now, it seems that his best option is to stay living on the streets.

### 3. Street children as subject of power

Children living on the streets, even temporarily, are always subject to power relations which are rooted deep in the social nexus: "to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible—and in fact ongoing" (Foucault, 1982, p. 222). A relation of power takes place when a person can induce or influence the actions of other<sup>6</sup>. Individual differences in terms of resources

<sup>6</sup> A power relation is a "mode of action which does not act directly or immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future." (Foucault, 1982,

and knowledge determine inequalities in terms of power. Knowing where to get free food, drugs or a safe shelter, gives power. Even having the aspect of a child helps a lot when they want to ask for money. These characteristics become resources when they need to ask someone else for protection or to satisfy the unsatisfied need.

The exercise of power is:

*“a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a mean of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action”* (Foucault, 1982, p. 220);

Power is determined by differences in economic resources and abilities. Abilities allow the appropriation of resources, and these abilities are more or less significant depending on the specific situation in which the relation takes place (Foucault, 1982; 1969). If the child is a girl, it is more likely that she will be allowed to stay in a bus station than a boy. When boys need someone to help them convince the policemen, it is more likely that they will look for a girl; older boys tend to use small children to get money on the street lights, in exchange of security and protection. Power is relative to the specific characteristics of that who exercises power in relation to that who is the subject of power. But power doesn't exist by itself. It just exists when it is put into action, when it is in relation to other —*the other* over whom power is exercised, the one who can be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts (Foucault, 1982, p. 220).

Children and young people living on the streets are subject to power relations that are neither uniform nor constant. Who in a given circumstances has the power, in other circumstances can be subject of power; “there are diverse forms, diverse places, diverse circumstances or occasions in which these interrelationships establish themselves according to a specific model” (Foucault, 1982, p. 218). The relation of power changes depending on the specific circumstances in which an experience takes place. Therefore, the only way to understand the links between rationalization and power is to

analyze rationalization in several fields, each with reference to a fundamental experience (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). In terms of oppositions, power relations take different forms: Power of parents over children; of authorities over children; of children over authorities; of young adults or adults over small children and vice versa; of men over women; of boys over girls; of institutions over children and young people; etc. The presence of children on the streets can be seen as a form of resistance to some of those forms of power relations.

Children living on the streets oppose to the universally accepted belief of the family as ideal. In opposition to this ideal the presence of children living on the streets becomes synonymous of what is illegal, anomic, unhealthy, dirty and violent. In contrast the family represents what is legal, order, wellbeing, hygienic, no violent. Power relations among street children must be understood in light of these oppositions and in light of the struggles against those who exercise power over them.

### *The struggle in the family field*

*“The first time I got out of my house I took nothing with me, well, just some money that was mine. I left my house on December, at the beginning of December... Why? Because my stepfather began to abuse of me, because of bad treats, fights with my sisters”*

(Sandra)<sup>7</sup>

When a child or young adult decides to leave home he or she is running away from the abuses and/or living conditions in which he lives or seeking independence (Lucchini, 1996). He is resisting to the control and dependence of the others over him. Resistance against power gives place to different types of struggles Foucault (1982). In the case of street children the struggles that take place usually question their own status, —they claim the right to be different, and in some sense, they try to underline everything that makes them truly individual. Adolescents have the need to differentiate themselves from the

p. 220)

<sup>7</sup> “La primera vez que me salí no me llevé nada, bueno, más que dinero que era mío. Me salí en Diciembre, a principios de diciembre... ¿por qué? Porque mi padrastro empezó a abusar de mí, por maltratos de mi mamá, peleas con mis hermanas...” (Personal interview, July of 2002).

others, at the same time they need to form part of different groups. Resistance against power is always present in the adolescent's need to be different and autonomous. The adolescent or older child seeking independence is underlying her differences with respect to other brothers and sisters, or with respect to her parents.

Sandra left her house for the same reason that other adolescents and children have left their houses: because she was subject of her stepfather's abuses and violence. In many cases in which the family has been identified as dysfunctional and violent, the struggle against the exercise of power arrived to a point in which running away was seen as the only option left against domination and violence; it became the only way to escape from an oppressive relationship. Why didn't her sisters follow the same path? Because there are as many possible reactions to the exercise of power as there are different individuals. Differences in terms of biological and cognitive development, the same as differences in terms of needs, knowledge, personal abilities (which could include the ability to get their own money and food) and personality, give place to many different reactions in which consent and violence can be an instrument or a result of the exercise of power.<sup>8</sup>

There are many factors that determine the transition to the street. In some cases, exit can be influenced by a resistance to live life in the way they do or by the desire to live independently or with "liberty", or just because they want to follow a friend or a sibling who promises a better life. In other cases, a family member throws them out of their homes. In any case, there is always a struggle going on. It could be a personal struggle in which the self becomes the subject of power, or a struggle against the others who exercise power over the

subject<sup>9</sup>. In the last case, running away breaks the power relation with that who is violent, with the other that tries to control, the dominant. In this process, the relation of power gets inverted. Now the adolescent or the child who runs away takes control, at least in that specific moment and circumstance. The subject of power is no longer present.

### *The struggle goes on*

Referring to a street instructor and me, Julio began to complain, "*You see, I ran away from my house because I didn't want to depend so much on my family, and now I'm depending on you, what is worth of it?*" Violence and family dysfunction are not the only reasons why children and adolescents runaway. Sometimes the need to be independent and self-responsible, in a context of familiarity with the streets, drives the children to leave their home. But being independent and self responsible are not the only needs a street child has when he decides to stay living on the streets. The need of shelter and food are the basic needs to be satisfied, even though their satisfaction could take place in detriment of autonomy (Maslow, 1970).

On the streets, children confront many difficulties. In the need to survive, knowledge of strategic points in the cities and personal characteristics become essential for the satisfaction of basic needs. The lack of resources on the streets and the constant battle to get those resources gives place to a more complex system of dependence and power relations, than the one in which they were previously involved. In this new system age, sex and personal abilities become significant in terms of acquisition of resources. Once they are on the streets, children and young people try different forms of subsistence. Some steal, make tricks with fire, become clowns, do mimic, or guess other's future. Most of them prefer to *palabrear* o *charolear* in public transportation –as they refer to the act of asking for some coins. Others use weaker children or girls to get their food or to get money for drugs, since small children and women are more likely to

<sup>8</sup> In this dynamic, the relations of power within the family field are modified. Faced with a new relationship of power "a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault, 1982, p. 220). This new dynamic can facilitate the resistance against authority or can increase acceptance. Maybe other members of the same household decide to runaway too, or become more acceptant of the situation; or maybe that who exercises power can become more violent. I have the hypothesis that a modification of a relation of power, as a result of the decision of a child to leave her home, gives place to a new arrangement in the exercise of power in which the one that used to hold power could even lost her capacity of exercising it. There are many possible reactions that will depend on the specific characteristics of the household and family member that runs away. The weak can become strong, the strong can become weak, or everything can remain the same way. But for this paper I won't center my analysis in the family field, I'm focused in the child or adolescent's perspective. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that McConville's concept of the family field supports this hypothesis (confront with McConville, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> The process of permanence on the streets can be seen as both: the manifestation of an authority struggle which questions the status of the individual, asserting the right to be different and underlining everything which makes individuals truly individuals; and the attack of "everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back to himself and ties him to his own identity in constraining way" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 211-212)



get money from other people. Norma was lying down in the door of an old building when the owner of an elegant car was ready to leave. The lady saw Norma sleeping on the border of the door. When she closed the door of her car Norma was standing behind her. She asked for some coins, and the lady gave them without questioning. When Norma returned to her previous position she just said: *You see? That's the advantage of being a woman!* Norma was conscious that she did not take care of the car, and that the lady saw her laying down, but at the same time she knew that many people feel pity of small boys and girls who live on the street. In similar situation, Tomas, a thirty years old guy that lives on the street wouldn't be able to get money.

### ***Resistance against institutional power***

A second type of struggle takes place when a child perceives that his group is being attacked. This attack is generally seen as coming from other authorities (policemen, social workers, politicians, etc.) or by other gangs. Children feel that their community life is being threatened and try to resist the dissolution of the group. Street children and young adults living on the streets form a new family when they are accepted into a group. Links become strong. They have a new family. But this time, they know how hard it is to lose a family and they don't want to lose it again. Many of them have found affection on the streets that they were lacking in their family.

As soon as we arrived into the subway station, Raul started giving me advice on how to approach the group in Insurgentes<sup>10</sup>. *"We need to convince Sergio, because Julio always follows him. Norma and Irma do not want us to take Julio. Let's invite all of them to go swimming, and that way Sergio and Julio will prefer to go with us. They always want to go swimming."* Social workers and street instructors are harder to resist. They have a lot of resources and power to control and induce children's decisions. Street Instructors establish links with some members of the group; they are just interested in some children. Raul was just interested in working with Julio and Sergio. In this case, the "chosen

ones" needed to be from the same sex<sup>11</sup> and the same age rank. Raul's main objective is to break the children's ties to the street, and to generate the need of a new form of life. Selective links between street instructors and children give place to the fragmentation of the group. Children try to resist, but most of the time food and shelter are easier to get if they follow the street instructors.

Social workers and street instructors exercise what Foucault (1982) calls Pastoral Power, a power directed to the spiritual salvation of street children. A salvation that in this modern era means: health, well-being, security, protection against accidents, violence, etc., but that is based on the aims or needs of the agents of pastoral power; needs that do not always correspond to the needs of children and other people living on the streets.

Youth resist the fragmentation of the group and the possibility of being subject of public institutions. Public and private shelters have an elaborate technology of power and control that restrains children's possibility of freedom and movement. *"Children in the Center are separated by sex and sleep in rooms of 20. Under constant surveillance by officers (...) they follow a strict daily schedule of classes and meals. (...) Although it is not a prison, the windows are barred and the children are under constant supervision. (...) At the end of the class (...) the boys gather at the door and file out, two by two, into the cold, dimly lit hallway"* (Foster, 2000, cit in World Bank Special Report, 2000).

In addition to the violence that takes place in some of these institutions, children and young people see themselves tied to a number of rules and norms which they don't like and to which they will resist as long as possible.

*"The doors of the shelter are always closed. If I want to go out I need to ask the Lic. Sometimes it is hard to convince him. The other day he told me that I could go out if I was back on time for the class. You already know! If we are here during any class or workshop, we have to participate. But sometimes the supervisors have the sensibility enough to let us stay lying down in our beds."* (Sandra)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Insurgentes is the name of a metro station in Mexico City.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of the Organizations that work with street children just target part of the population. In general they work with girls or boys, but rarely with both of them. At the same time, there are more institutions that work with small children than with older people. For adolescents over 15 years old is harder to find a place to stay.

<sup>12</sup> "Las puertas del albergue están siempre cerradas. Si quiero salir tengo que pedirle

As Foucault describes, Pastoral power in the modern state was “developed as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.” (Foucault, 1982, p. 214) It is interested in the individual, and not in the community as a whole. Many of the shelters in Mexico City just accept children under 15 years old. Pastoral power is just interested in those souls that are capable of being saved. If children are on drugs, they cannot be admitted into many of these institutions. If they want to be saved, they have to leave the *mona*,<sup>13</sup> their friends, the possibility of having sex so freely, their freedom and self-determination.

Pastoral power, as any other form of power, subjects the individual. Even though, this kind of power is more powerful than other forms, children and young people resist and use it just for their own benefit. Irma was asked to be “clean of drugs” so she could receive the clothes and food the missionaries were going to give her that day. That was one of the few days in which she was not drugged. The cost wasn’t so high, so she got rid of her drugs—at least for a while. After the missionaries left, Irma began distributing the clothes to other children in the same street. In exchange, she received protection and drugs from other children. For some hours the control of the group was in her hands; a control that she lost when the urge of drugs increased.

### *The endless story*

Sitting on the frame of an old door, Sergio takes out an old bottle of water now filled with solvent. As the sword of a warrior, Sergio keeps the bottle between his pants and his skin. When no one is looking, he takes out his bottle and inhales the fumes of the liquid that was meant to clean the pipes. Keeping it away from others eyes gives him power. Has to hide it from policemen, has to hide it from the adults that do not have their own solvent, and has to hide it from his sister that today wants

to hold it with her. The bottle is his best shield and his worst enemy. The bottle protects him from abuses of those who cannot get their own solvent; but the bottle also exposes him to violence. The bottle helps to forget. Hunger, loneliness and blows are forgotten; but he also forgets how to protect himself. The bottle makes him strong at the same time that makes him vulnerable.

Power relations take place in multiple directions and in multiple dimensions. Resistance to be subject by the family and by public institutions is not the only struggle in which street children are involved. Subsistence on the streets takes place within a complex system of power relations. Struggle against adversity and struggle for the appropriation of scarce resources. Permanence on the street requires a complex system of social networks that facilitate the satisfaction of basic needs; a system in which power relations are rooted. The specific characteristics of the social network will determine the more or less capacity to exercise power over the rest of the group. The power of a child or adolescent will be determined by the extension and quality of the social network. Individuals capable of obtaining food, drugs and security become more important members to retain as part of the group. A heterogeneous group is more likely to stay together, because dependence is higher. The old and experienced needs the charisma of younger members; the younger members need the protection of the older; the girls need the affection of the boys and vice versa; the boys need the care of the girls; girls need the security of men; and so on.

“While the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex” (Foucault, 1982, p. 209). As a social microcosm, the street is a complex system of relations of production and signification from which a children and adolescents living on the streets are unable to escape. Whenever a difference on abilities, knowledge or personality is present, a new form of power is exercised. Power relations are establish with peers, with members of the opposite sex, with older people living or working on the streets, with working children, with the owner of the corner store, with the religious groups, with the street instructors, with politicians... with every person they meet in the street and with whom they establish a new relation.

permiso al Lic. En ocasiones es difícil convencerlo. El otro día me dijo que podía ir si regresaba a tiempo para la clase. ¡Ya lo sabes! Si hay una clase o un taller mientras estamos aquí, tenemos que participar. Pero a veces las supervisoras son buena onda y nos dejan quedarnos en la cama.” (Informal conversation, July 2001) Lic is how they refer to the Shelter Director.

<sup>13</sup> The *mona* is a piece of paper towel or bath tissue wet in thinner, toluene or any other solvent used to clean the drains, and that they use as a cheap drug that they can hide easily and consume in almost any place without being caught so easily.

Whenever two persons are different a relation of power is established.

#### **4. Power and dependence. Who stays, who leaves?**

Affection and dependence can grow easily on the streets. Children depend on the young adults as much as the young adults depend on them. Small children get money to buy food in exchange of protection. The strong doesn't want the astute to leave; the small wants the protection of the adult at any cost. Battle takes place every day. In this fight survives the one that has more power—not the strongest, not the most intelligent— Survives the one who is able to exercise his power; to establish his own preferences and who satisfy them. This is, the one that has self-control and certain amount of autonomy.

How willing is a child to sacrifice his bottle of *activo* in order to get food, clothes, sex or shelter? It will depend on the situation and personal characteristics. Children with a higher level of self-control and autonomy are more likely to decide freely among preferences. Preferences are established based on experience, personal needs and social demands; and their satisfaction depends on available resources. Friends and significant others alter the order of preferences. More dependence, more influence. Addictive relations and behavior constrain the process of decision-making, and the satisfaction of personal needs. Satisfaction of needs requires certain amount of autonomy (self-control and self-direction), of power.

Marco's dependence on drugs and his lack of alternatives keep him on the streets. Dependence and lack of resources decreases power. Little power reduces the possibility of a free choice. He has autonomy enough to make a critical analysis of his options; to reflect on his wishes or preferences, and the capacity to accept or to change them. With continue support he could reduce his dependence on drugs and engage in what he considers a better way of life: to be living out of the streets with his girlfriend and daughter.

Other children are less likely to leave the street, even in a long term: Children without power; and children with a lot of power. Addictions limit; they rest power. Children with more dependence on drugs and alcohol, or with strong attachments on

the streets, tend to stay. A complete lack of power constrains any possibility of resistance; they have no choice at all.

When boys and girls have a lot of power they remain on the streets. The more power, the harder it is to sacrifice what they have. In countries with high levels of unemployment and poverty it becomes harder to leave the street. Children don't get much by going off. They have no need to leave; they resist more.

Children that are in the middle—nor the more powerful, neither the most dependent—are more likely to get off the streets. When satisfaction of needs gets harder and affective links are weaker, leaving the streets is not necessarily a lost. If children are allowed certain amount of control and self-determination, they will be able to decide which form of power they want to resist—street violence, institutional control or family dominance.

#### **5. Conclusions and final remarks**

The child becomes adolescent; the adolescent becomes an adult. The strong becomes accomplice and enemy of the weak. The strong depends on the weak as much as the weak depends on the strong. The child gets the money for food in exchange of the protection of elders. The violent depends on the astute; the astute depends of the strong. Qualities and differences intertwine giving place to an equilibrium that is protected at any cost. But the equilibrium is constantly broken: this time the strong is dead, yesterday the astute of the group, probably tomorrow *el chiquilin*. Aids, cars, policeman, other groups are the giants against whom they have to fight. The worst of them: their own pain, their sadness. Life on the streets is not easy, but is the form of life many of them have chosen; a form of life that is far from the family ideal, but that better satisfies their needs. If this kind of life is better for many children and adolescents, why there is so much resistance to leave them living on the streets?

For some groups the presence of children living on the streets is the expression of a society in crisis. The strong association between family dysfunction, poverty and street children gives a negative signification to their presence. The existence of children and adolescents living on the streets has become strongly related with "underdevelopment"

and therefore something that needs to be eradicated. Instead of helping to prevent children's presence on the streets, in most cases, these associations have made street children subject of political and pastoral power. The need to save a country in crisis; the need to save a lost soul has become a significant political tool.

Given the importance of family in many societies, street children have become an important source of political discourses; discourses that take place in different levels. Journalistic, descriptive, and theoretical discourses have tried to target mass audiences and policy makers in order to influence effective policy development. Human Rights perspectives have raised the right of children for a better life (Unicef, 1999, 2000; World Bank, 2000); but just few of these discourses have really recognized the children's own views and all that they have already accomplished for themselves. Using Foucault in the analysis of permanence on the streets requires the incorporation of children's own views and the recognition of their abilities, necessities and capacities; and to understand the reasons why children or young people decide to sleep or live on the streets. This recognition implies an important change in what could be understood as an effective policy in favor of children. From this perspective, the probability to leave strongly depends on the opportunities they have outside the street.

Even though this paper is not intended to discuss public policy, it is important in terms of the implications that hearing children's voices have. It is not meant to argue in favor of children staying living on the streets. This argument tries to stress the lack of alternatives children face, as individuals who continuously resist being subject of power. Children's alternatives, including public policies, are not good enough. Living on the streets has significant negative effects on children's development; but, many of the "options" they have are as bad as the streets. Some children experience more stress and worst living conditions with their families or within institutions in which they could stay, than living on the streets. We need to hear children's voices and respect their choices, but we also need to create alternatives and better living conditions for them.

Understanding the process of permanence on the streets using Foucault's conceptions of power

and power relations means a significant shift from previous perspectives. A shift that leaves aside the urge to take out the children of the streets in lieu of a new relation in which children's life is respected and an equilibrium between the needs of the state and the needs of those living on the streets, is achieved. But this is a hard task, and maybe a problem impossible to solve; as Panter-Brick points out: "to respect or condone a child's choice to live on the streets, to grow up with peers rather than with a family, to work for an income, and to have sex is for many a morally unsatisfactory position" (2002, p. 9); and therefore, has significant political implications.

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