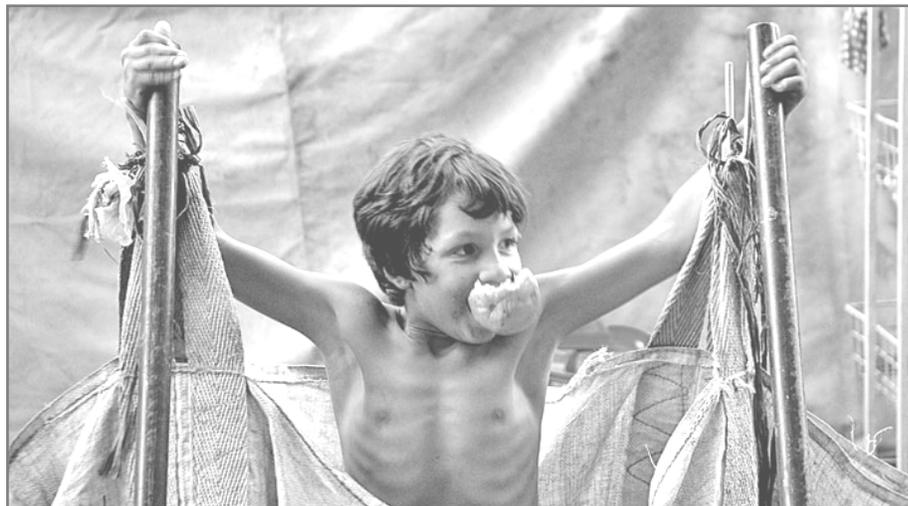


Coping on the Streets

Accounts on the Lives of fifteen Argentinean Street Children.

Bachelor Thesis

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¹ Image on cover: A cartonero in the streets of Buenos Aires

Preface

The thesis in front of you is the result of my cooperation with many other people. I would first like to thank the organization of *pelota de trapo* for giving me the chance to live with the children that I have come to adore. Secondly I would like to thank the children that have cooperated with me to a great extent. To be able to have a little peak in their worlds has been a privilege and I hope they all reach far in life! Thirdly I would like to thank the *educadores* of *la granja azul* for coping with me, providing me with plenty information and medicines when my stomach was upset (again!). Finally I would like to thank my tutor Martijn Oosterbaan with whom I have pleasantly worked together.

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Introduction

“A slim, red burn crosses the left side of Victor’s face from cheekbone to forehead. His eyelid is burnt. His lower eyelashes are gone, charred to the rim of his eye. Only 3 ½ months old, Víctor faces a tough life. “He got burnt with a pipe,” says his 16-year-old mother, Marta, referring to the pipe she uses to smoke paco, a cheap, highly toxic by-product of cocaine refining. With her baby in tow, Marta lives on the streets, begging and stealing, seeking shelter in dark porches or under trees. They rarely spend two nights in the same place. Many times they don’t even spend them together. They eat what she can get, when she can get it” (Labanca 2006).

Street children are a common sight in the cities of Argentina. They work in subways, on trains and sell various goods on the city’s streets and in restaurants. Estimates show that since the economic crises of 2001 the number of street children has risen to approximately 3000 children in the city of Buenos Aires alone. These children vary in ages from as young as six years old to adolescents of twenty years and older. Some of these children have families and relatives to return to at night, but estimates show us that about 700 of these street children do not have anywhere to spend the night. Many of the children suffer and are exposed to drug abuse, sickness, violence and hunger (Labanca 2006; Black 1993; Rydberg 2006: 1-4).

The definition of what is youth and when a child becomes an adult varies across cultures. Andrés Saraví (2002) defines youth as “a particular stage of the life course characterized by specific biological, psychological and sociological features”. He emphasizes that childhood and the transitional phase to adulthood are, like all phases in life, processes. Moreover, he emphasizes that childhood is to some extent, socially constructed by the context in which a child is brought up. Socially accepted behavior during childhood and the time span of the childhood period varies across cultures. Children have not been of great interest in the research conducted by anthropologists. Nancy Schepper-Hughes (1998) is one of few anthropologists who has studied children and youth extensively. She has played an important role in the development of childhood

anthropology. The fact that children have been understudied in the field of anthropology is at least curious as most definitions of the term *culture* are defined at least in part as a transmittable aspect that is learned and transmitted throughout childhood. According to Kottak “Culture, which is learned, passes from one generations to the next through the process of enculturation” (Kottak 2003: 272). From this perspective, the study of children, childhood and youth seems to be very important in the process of learning about culture. Children can teach us the essentials of their culture and are less influenced by their environment and upbringing. In my experience I have come to notice that children can be strikingly honest when it comes to subjects such as drug abuse and other sensitive subjects. Where adults tend to avoid or even dismiss social problems that are evident in their societies, children often speak honestly and are not afraid to show their anger. Therefore my main research subjects are children and youths who live or have lived on the streets of Buenos Aires. This research will contribute to the existing literature on street children as it was conducted from the child’s perspective. Street children in Argentina are often defined in terms of poverty, vulnerability and criminality. In my research I will link street children to their abilities to create coping strategies.

This research was conducted within the reality of urban poverty and the inequalities of the contemporary world that cause social exclusion. For the purpose of this thesis I will define social exclusion as: “a process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live.” This notion of relative social exclusion provides us with a useful perspective for this research. Firstly because it points out the multidimensional character of poverty. Second, because it focuses on processes, on the mechanisms and institutions that exclude people. It is through these mechanisms that children end up on the street. It furthermore makes clear that poverty or deprivation are not simply an attributes of particular people but that different societies have their own ways of in- and excluding people (Narayan 1999; Cullen& Pretes 2000). Worldwide, all countries face these inequalities, and the fact that people and children live on the streets may be the most visible evidence of this. That is, people on the street are visible to everyone’s eye (De Moura 2002). Children are, at least in Western societies, expected to be at school or to be playing with their friends and are not expected to be working and living unattended on the streets. Children living on the

streets have their own ways of survival. They cope by creating strategies for the means of taking care of themselves in the best possible way. Moreover, knowing how street children develop these strategies is important in order to understand the social organization of street life. Organizations and scientists have become increasingly concerned with street children and many organizations have conducted research on the phenomenon. The problem with many of these researches however lies in the perspective these scientist hold to. Organizations tend to emphasize the possible interventions and policies instead of looking from the child's perspective, considering its wishes and needs. By researching the creation of coping strategies more adequately, implementations and policies can be designed for eliminating the incidence of children on the street.

1. The Contemporary Poverty Debate & Children

1.1. Relative Poverty and Social Exclusion; definitions and discussion

The notion of poverty has been challenged greatly over the past decades. Poverty was for a long time measured by the means of the Gross National Product (GNP). This GNP measures the total income available for private and public spending in a country. The GNP per capita then is a measure of the average income of each member of the population. It provides us with an overview of the economic health of a particular country. This figure does however not take into account socio-political conditions in a country such as the distribution of wealth between rich and poor. In the past decades more qualitative analyses have been added to the plentiful quantitative studies in the poverty debate and these are incorporated in many contemporary discussions, policies and programs.

The ideas and conceptions of who is poor varies across societies. It depends on economic factors as well as social factors. Being poor is not exclusively the opposite of being rich. Other considerations such as falling from one's station in life, being deprived of instruments of labor, loss of status, lack of protection, exclusion from a community, abandonment or public humiliation are also mechanisms that define poverty in a particular society (Thomas, 2000: 11). Because of the variety of the definitions of poverty, and due to the rapid urbanization process that has spread throughout the world, the notion of relative poverty has arisen in the late 1970's. In his pioneering work in 1979, Townsend coined the concept of relative poverty. He described it in the following manner: "Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diets, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely accepted and approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual of family that they are, in effect, excluded from the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities" (Thomas 2000: 13-14). With this notion of poverty Townsend argued that poverty cannot be defined by referring to the

satisfaction of absolute needs. One needs to consider the individual opportunities of participating in the activities of one's society (Saravi 2002: 20).

Townsend's work was, however highly contested in the 1980's by those who argue that people in industrialized countries cannot be regarded as poor if they, for example cannot afford a television or a computer, as long they are able to maintain a minimum level of nutrition. It was argued that it downgraded the needs of those living in poorer countries. The notion of relative poverty has been accepted over the past decades as has the notion of social exclusion which holds strong connections to this notion of relative poverty. Wield and Chataway, (2000: 121) provide us with a more useful definition of *relative* social exclusion. They define it as "The process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live." The notion of social exclusion is useful firstly because it points out the multidimensional character of poverty as I have outlined above. Second, because it focuses on processes, on the mechanisms and institutions that exclude people. It makes clear that poverty or deprivation is not simply an attribute of particular people but that different societies have their own ways of in- and excluding people (Narayan 1999; Cullen & Pretes 2000; Wield & Chataway 2000: 121).

1.2 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The changing understanding of child rights has been reflected in a stream of national and international legislations. In 1959, the UN issued its first '*Declaration of the Rights of the Child*', announcing young people's entitlements to adequate nutrition, free education and medical care, as well as rights against exploitation and discrimination. This declaration, however, was not more than a statement of good intent and was not registered in official legislation until November 1989. In November 1989 the UN General Assembly approved the UN convention on the rights of a Child and since then the convention has become a phenomenon in the field of international human rights law. Within a year, it had been signed and ratified by 130 countries, and by April 1996, 187 of the 193 countries in the world had become parties to the convention. The countries that have not signed, under which the United States and Switzerland, have signed but not yet ratified the convention,

meaning that it is not legally binding. Both claim that their constitutions set higher standards than the convention (Green, 1998: 180-202). The vision of the convention is reflected within four of its 54 articles. Article 2 establishes that “all rights described in the convention apply to all children, without any discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, language, religion or other bases”. Article 3 states that “In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”. This article places children at the centre of state policy making. A government can no longer make a decision without taking into account its impact on children. Article 6 requires that states “shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”. Thus, governments are obliged to guarantee not just the lives of children but also their broader development entailing economic, social and cultural rights. Finally, article 12 insists that parties shall “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”. This guarantees active consultation with, and participation by children, increasingly as they grow older, in the decisions affecting their lives (UNHCR 1990).

The real output of the UN convention may seem far away from the reality of the daily lives of children in Latin America today. However, the convention has had an impact in several important areas. This impact lies in the formal change of national laws throughout Latin America. A number of Latin American countries have been forced to change their laws concerning the protection and participation of children due to the convention. On the other hand it is clear that the reality does not align with the legislation in many countries. Latin American governments are known for their inability or unwillingness to enforce their own laws and constitutions (Green 1998). Criticisms also state that the convention is drawn up from a Western perspective. The right regarding children’s protection and participation in social life has, for example, been controversial. This controversy stems from the great social inequalities as well as cultural differences between the elite and the ‘rest of civil society’ that are evident in most Latin American countries. While the Latin American elite may accept Western views on issues such as child labor, this is far from the experience of many poor families. These families often believe that children should go out to work as part of their education. Above all it is too

often necessary in order to contribute to the family income (Green 1998: 180-202). Above all, the convention cannot yet be said to have made an enormous change in the lives of most of Latin America's children. There are still many children living in poverty and going out to work every day at the cost of their development, education and too often, their health. Local NGO's, civil society and the media are believed to be essential in monitoring the authorities' performance and in putting pressure for improvements (Green, 1998: 180-202).

1.3 The Informal Sector of Latin America

The informal sector is a much debated concept. It accounts for a large percentage of the Latin American work force. The definitions concerning the informal sector are various. The definitions all share a number of characteristics. First, the informal sector accounts for more jobs in Latin America than in the formal labor market, as this market is not large enough to take into account all workers. Second, to be able to work in the informal sector a person needs no prior qualifications or papers. Furthermore, it functions for a large part, outside government control, making any existing (child) labor laws irrelevant. The hours are flexible and can often be fitted around school or other commitments such as the household and family responsibilities (Black 1993; Kottak 2003; Green 1998).

In the past decades the informal sector has been booming, as many government programs have driven millions of people out of regular work. Moreover, it is important to mention that many (international) firms have cut costs by adopting the 'fashion of casualization', that is outsourcing labor to the informal sector. This casualization has led to a major increase in informalization as much of the production was outsourced to home based workers and sweat shops. This is especially evident in trades such as textile and shoe-making production. Green notices that outsourcing is often directed towards Latin American as the relative distance to the major market (the USA) is close. Nearly nine out of ten jobs in the 1990's in Argentina were created in the informal sector (Green, 1998).

2. Street Children

“All too often, children are not listened to, taken seriously, or encouraged to participate in designing policies and projects which are supposed to help them. As a result, many of these programs are ignorant of children’s real lives and aspirations. In the case of street children, the consequence has been a high failure rate among street children’s projects, and, in some cases, results which have been completely opposite to those intended” (Green, 1998: 61).

2.1 Street Children: Concepts and Discussions

As we have seen, the variety of street children is great. Then, what defines a street child? The United Nations defines street children as “boys and girls for whom ‘the street’ (including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become their home and/or source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults.” This definition suggests that the concept of street children surrounds more than just homeless children. A street child might be a school drop out or a working child and many street children are not homeless (Volpi 2000: 2-3). Some institutions argue that the notion of street children is not appropriate since it suggests the child to be living on the streets. It creates a categorization, and lacks attention to the interconnected dimensions of vulnerable children. UNICEF was the first organization to come out with an international report on the incidence of street children throughout the world. It was published in 1986 and provided the world with a clear definition on what street children are and a description of the vulnerabilities of children that enlarge the problem. De Moura (2002) stated that: “the social construction of street children is a powerful discourse strategy which sensitizes audiences to the existing of children living in poor circumstances” (De Moura 2002: 353-355). However, he also emphasizes that the construction represents more than just a description of a social phenomenon. With a constructed scheme on street children one also characterizes the street children and their families as lacking moral values and as isolated and alienated. This has important implications because it has a

stigmatizing effect on poor families and children on the streets. It reinforces their social exclusion. According to De Moura (2002), the term street children can best be seen as a socially constructed phenomenon. He notes that there are many definitions which include and exclude certain characteristics of street children. He furthermore emphasizes that we need to understand that the concept of street children has a certain fluidity to it and that it should be understood as such (De Moura 2002: 355). There are no possible clear definitions on street children and counting them is, in many countries and circumstances not possible as it is no clearly defined population (Del Felice 2008; Volpi 2000; de Moura 2002).

Street life has specific aspects that can be problematic for the child's development. Some of these are, drug addiction, abuse, exploitation in labor, involvement in criminal activities or gangs and violence by the police, adults or rival gangs. However, street life also has particular attractions such as freedom, adventure and peer solidarity (Volpi 2000: 12). Children who live or work on the streets do this for several reasons. First, a low family income can contribute to the need for children to help gain income. Many children work on the streets to contribute to the family income in order to survive as a family. Second, the lack of proper housing pushes entire families into the streets. Third, problems in the family such as neglect and abuse cause children to end up on the streets. This is a major problem in many Latin American countries among which Argentina. The problem is often associated with the parents' drug addiction or alcoholism and lack of attention for the child due to these addictions. Fourth, school failure can be caused by several factors such as poor educational systems, marginality and vulnerability of families. Finally and often neglected, children might see the adventurous side of life on the streets. As Green (1998) states, "the street is often more than just a refuge and might even know certain attractions. He quotes a child that provided him with the answer. "I like being in the street – you have fun, jump cars, climb onto the horses and carts. It's more fun than being at home". A street child's history and specifically the reason for ending up on the street often is caused by several interacting and blending factors and is never one-sided. Street work can be many things. Many children work in the informal sector, they sell goods on the streets as petty traders or provide small services. However, there is a great risk of exploitation involved in this sector. Many children are used in

order to deal drugs, as prostitutes, beg or steal (Volpi 2000: 2-6; Del Felice 2008; De Moura 2002).

2.2 Policies and Implementations on Street Children

Eroles (2001) defines four paradigms concerning policies on street children. These paradigms have been applied and executed in many policies in diverse Latin American countries and all are still relevant in some.

The *first paradigm* states that children on the streets are in danger as well as a danger to society. The street provides them with ambivalent contacts that can either victimize them or lead them to delinquency. Young children in the streets are considered to be in danger, while older children are said to be a danger to these younger children. This paradigm justifies repressive policies in order to remove the child from the street and institutionalize the child to prevent it from becoming a delinquent. The paradigm justifies separation from the parents and other relatives as they are blamed for the child's presence on the streets. According to Rydberg (2006) the danger in this paradigm lies in the possibility to criminalize poverty because it equates vulnerable children with delinquents. The *second paradigm* still sees a child on the streets on a path to delinquency and lacks to see a child as a person with rights and own thoughts. This paradigm sees street children as deviations from the norm, thus it does not frame them as children in personal or social danger. Intervention in this case is based on normalizing the child and can be applied in diverse ways. The definition of a normal child is often interpreted by the goals instead of the means. Moreover, the way through which a child is normalized is regarded as unimportant. It is the result (a normal, non-criminal child) that matters. The *third paradigm* emphasizes the need to understand all factors that affect a child's life. It describes the child in terms of context. It does no longer see street children as possible delinquents or wrongdoers. This paradigm implies addressing the problems that street children face and the needs they have in order to make a better living and provide a qualitative future. The *fourth paradigm* provides us with the contemporary paradigm as the province of Buenos Aires has stated it. Street children are no longer defined by their needs, but are now looked at in terms of their rights. "The family shares

responsibility for the child's wellbeing with the state, which means the state cannot penalize the family for being unable to meet the child's needs" (Rydberg 2006: 5-10).

From this fourth paradigm the Buenos Aires federal government implemented a major project called '*Centro de Atención Integral a la Niñez y Adolescencia*' (CAINA). The CAINA project exists out of several spaces in the municipal city of Buenos Aires where children can come to find protection, where they can play, where a child can talk to a social worker. The organization opens its doors in the mornings and afternoons providing food, a shower, and fresh clothes in exchange for the dirty clothes the children wear. CAINA does however require children to stay and participate in several workshops where they can learn to articulate themselves through various forms of expression. The principal objective of CAINA is "that the maximum number of children and adolescents that work, live or frequent the streets of the city of Buenos Aires find an institutional space and integral attention, in which they can elaborate individual strategies that contribute to their gradual separation from the streets." Among their secondary goals, many of which are influenced by the convention on the rights of the child are promotion of child's rights and help street children to understand these. While CAINA's goal is for the children to leave the streets, this is not obligatory (Rydberg 2006: 4-8). Finally, we must note that many street children use several organizations in order to be able to make a living and live their lives in accordance to their own views. A child in Green's book states that: "What I like about the institutions is that they dress you, the worst is that they are small. The best of life on the streets is that you can stay with the gang and do things you cannot do when you are at institutions. That's brilliant, but the worst is that there are people who beat you up" (Green 1998: 59).

3. Youth and Poverty.

“I like reading and studying. I do my homework with a candle on the floor. If God wishes, I’ll make something of my life; become a solderer or a shopkeeper. If I had a magic wand, I’d make this place pretty, so that my mother could take time off and relax. I’d make the house big and have more beds and a television, if God wishes” (Green, 1998: 54).

3.1 Aspects of Vulnerability: Resources, Opportunities, Constraints

According to Saravi (2002) there are four major institutions that are important for youth in their transition to adulthood in order to be able to fully participate in society. These institutions can provide children and youth with opportunities when correctly and honestly implemented. They can however be agencies of constraint in situations of corruption or bad governance. First, a *dynamic labor market* and high demands of labor are critical conditions for youth in order to be able to find a job. In Argentina, major fluctuations within the labor market are seen. Since the crises of 2001 when the labor market had collapsed we have seen a rise in labor demand. This however does not imply a dynamic labor demand concerning youth. *The state* also accounts for an important factor in young peoples lives. Social policies on education, health and labor as well as welfare provision from the state account for some of the most important influences on the opportunities and constraints concerning young people’s lives. Furthermore, *the community and the neighborhood* have an important function of protection and accessibility to other institutions. This is especially so in many countries in Latin America, including Argentina where spatial marginalization often leads to social exclusion. Physical characteristics such as infrastructure, spatial isolation or accessibility and demographic attributes of the population are important influences on the lives of children and youth. Social characteristics such as levels of crime and violence, social class composition and local economic development create either a positive or negative context for the ability to mobilize other resources. High levels of crime, for example,

create mistrust from the outside communities as well as internal mistrust and therefore reduce the opportunities for collective action and employment. The fourth and most essential factor in a child's life is *the family*. According to Saravi (2002): "the family represents the main platform from which young people are launched into adult life" (Saravi 2002: 145). The nuclear family accounts for the main support for children and youth. In Latin America the family is one of the most important factors contributing to children ending up working or even living on the streets. Drug and alcohol abuse amongst poor families is a major problem in many countries under which Argentina. Drug and alcohol addicts are more likely to physically and mentally abuse their children and may lead to abandonment (Saravi 2002; Narayan 1999).

3.2 Youth and the Informal Labor Market

All street and working children have in common that in official terms their work is invisible in statistics and their employment is untraceable in company annuals or GNP statistics. Children can be found in various jobs within the informal sector. UNICEF makes a clear distinction between the visible and the invisible working child. The visible working child can be found in every major Latin American city. They are seen in subways, near restaurants or in the streets as petty traders selling goods like vegetables, newspapers, flowers or small souvenirs (Unicef IN: Black 1999: 17-22). These working children are described by UNICEF as children in the visible informal sector. They are usually from poor families, although they are often not from hardcore poor families, that is 'one dollar a day' families. These children often have a strong desire to work. There is strong evidence that many of the working children in Latin America work as their parents are unwilling to compromise on job offers. They often prefer being unemployed over a degrading job or a long travel distance. This implies that a child's entry into the informal sector is not always an indicator of extreme family distress. It often has complex motivations that do not exclusively stem from the parent's or child's initiative. On top of this there are important cultural issues that make children want to go to work. Many parents throughout Argentina believe that work is at least useful in giving their children a good start in life (Green, 1998: 32-57; Black, 1999: 17-22; Volpi, 2000).

For any child, going out to work brings both benefits and costs. Many working children do not feel coerced to go to work, but are proud of their contribution to the family income or their own income. They gain self-esteem, skills and respect from their elders and peers. On the other hand, working long hours can rob them of the chance of a decent education. Furthermore, all children in the informal sector do face certain hazards and vulnerabilities. They are almost always underpaid; they often have high exposure to a physically unhealthy environment and a hazardous social environment such as a lack of parental guidance and protection.

Besides the visible informal sector, UNICEF notes an important invisible sector in which the risks and dangers are greater and where the children are more susceptible to these risks. The sectors that include these dangers can be manufacturing work, as the children who work in factories are employed beyond the protection of labor inspectors and parental protection. Another problem concerning these types of jobs is that education is less practicable when a child is working for a boss instead of working in their own free time on the streets. Moreover, many of these children are exposed to toxic fumes (from glue), work under poor conditions in extreme heat or work without paying attention to the safety precautions. Another major sector in which many 'invisible' children work is the domestic service industry (Unicef IN: Black 1999; Portes 1987). According to UNICEF (IN Black, 1999: 17-22; Portes, 1987) "child domestics are potentially a highly vulnerable group although many employers and parents think of the child as living in a good environment, learning a skill, and being socially useful". Child domestics, however, live in social isolation and unlike many other working children they have no control over their lives. They are to adapt to the employer's wishes and needs and cannot be children. Furthermore, they face a risk of being sexually and physically abused and are isolated from anyone they can share feelings with.

The most hazardous and tough sector in which many children work is drug dealing and prostitution. These so called *marginal occupations* contain many hazards due to the illegality of the work and the high profits made by the adults that exploit them. In Latin America the drug trade is substantial and many children are used as traffickers. A major problem concerning this industry is that these children often have no one to turn to. Many police officers and officials are corrupted, family members may be major buyers or

traffickers themselves and therefore they have no reason to protect the child. The particular subculture in which a child working as a drug trafficker lives contains high levels of violence, abuse and aggression. These characteristics are especially dangerous to children as they are easily influenced at an early age and often become drug addicts at an early age as well. All these factors make it especially tough to reintegrate a child in the 'normal society'. In addition to the hazards, UNICEF also notices that these children face the most health and educational deprivations compared to other working children as these hazards are reinforced by their environment (police, pimps, gangs etc). Marginal children face deprivation from lack of affection and from the absence of an adult reference group that engages in socially positive behavior. Moreover, they face a risk of trauma from accidents and fights; STD's including HIV infection, pregnancy, abuse and social disorders (Green 1998; Black 1999: 17-22; Portes 1987).

4. Argentina: Economic Downfall and the Rise of the Informal Sector.

4.1. Cartoneros

Every night after dark the crowded streets of Buenos Aires fill with people who search the streets for garbage. In Argentina, these people are known as *cartoneros*. They are forced into the informal sector by increasing unemployment. Moreover, the increased prices given for recyclables such as plastic, paper, cardboard and wood provides new informal job opportunities. The *cartoneros* are the new poor that arose from the various crises that have hit Argentina between 1990 and 2001. The presence of the *cartoneros* is one of the most visible effects of the decade of crises in Argentina (Chronopoulos 2005: 170). Although the informal sector has existed for many years and people have always collected and sold recycable materials, during the crises period that begun in the 1990's the gathering population exploded and expanded throughout the city's wealthier neighborhoods (Chronopoulos 2005: 172). The explosive increase of the *cartoneros* population was caused by a number of factors. An important factor is the formal labor market which was not able to take in a sufficient amount of people. The residents of entire communities were unemployed and informal work was for many people the main source of income as these people were left with no other option than to join the informal labor market. Another contributing factor was the existence of a middle class that had a large consumption capacity and which did not consider the sale of recycables worthwhile. Furthermore, the population as well as the government were willing to accommodate and tolerate the *cartoneros* even though the gathering was formally illegal until 2003. Finally, there were companies present that were willing to buy the recycables and sell them to large corporations that turn them into raw material and sell them to factories abroad (Chronopoulos 2005: 170-174).

4.2. The economic collapse of 2001.

The *cartoneros* are primarily people who were displaced from the formal economy due to neo-liberal reforms in the 1990's. Before this period many lived in the suburbs of Buenos Aires and held regular jobs in the public sector, such as at railroad companies, water companies, construction or in factories. During the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1999) the country underwent a complete neo-liberal transformation in which almost all state companies were privatized and sold to corporations in foreign countries such as the United States and Spain. The reforms resulted in a massive breakout of unemployment, lower wages and capital outflow. Despite an economic improvement between 1996 and 1998, the structural problems persisted. Most state companies were now privatized and many people had lost their jobs due to the private companies' reforms. Many former state companies were sold to foreign companies which outsourced the expensive labor to cheaper countries such as Mexico and Guatemala. Moreover, due to the convertibility between the Argentine peso and the US dollar (which was set 1:1 by the Argentine government) the Argentine industry was destroyed since it made imports from most parts of the world much cheaper than domestically manufactured goods. Many of the people who rejoined the labor market found only irregular employment in the service sector that paid much less than their previous jobs (Chronopoulos 2005: 173-175).

In 1998, Argentina was hit once more by a deep recession that lasted until 2003. In 2001, the Argentine economy collapsed due to the privatizations that were implemented the decade before. Alongside the loss in public sector jobs the service sector now underwent a transformation as well. As the entire Argentine population was hit by the economic collapse even jobs such as gardening or housekeeping disappeared (Chronopoulos 2005: 176-177).

4.3. The influence of the crisis.

After the economic collapse of 2001 the streets were flooded with people searching the streets for recyclables. The numbers of *cartoneros* were now so high that the activity could no longer be done in a clandestine manner. The residents and government of

Buenos Aires were now caught in a situation where they could no longer ignore the situation. The subject of *cartoneros* became a major campaign issue during the 2003 elections. The candidates stated in their campaigns that *cartoneros* have a criminal attitude and that they steal from the trash. One of the contestants promised that if elected he would enforce the law, removing the *cartoneros* from the streets and imprisoning them for tampering with garbage (Chronopoulos 2005: 175)

5. Coping Strategies of Street Children.

Being alone on the streets, children face many problems and need to work in order to survive. Aderinto (2000) notes that although living on the streets is often perceived as difficult, many street children prefer coping with those problems rather than living at home. The children face daily challenges of finding work, food, and a safe place to sleep and for this they use several strategies to cope with the difficulties of living on the street. Street life makes a child vulnerable to sickness; hunger and exploitation at work. Kombarakaran (2003) describes five categories of coping, coping at work; coping with maltreatment; maladaptive coping, coping with networks and coping with organizations (Aderinto, 2000:1209; Kombarakaran, 2003: 865-870).

5.1. Coping at work.

Finding income is of vital importance for children whose survival depends on daily work. Street children often have several alternative ways to earn an income. For many children it is especially hard to find non-exploitative work and they are vulnerable to many hazards such as abuse and exploitation. Kombarakaran (2003) notes that many employers overwork street children, pay them less, keep part of their earnings and abuse them. Often, self-employment, such as selling goods or washing car windows, is the preferred strategy for income generation as the work time and strategy is decided by the child. A problem concerning self-employment is that, although not exploited by employers, the children are often harassed by the police, (adult) competitors and authorities. In his study to street children, Kombarakaran (2003) notes that 'Children expressed resentment and anger against the police and municipal authorities who prevented them from engaging in work such as vending goods, shining shoes and carrying loads at railway stations, cleaning trains, and entertaining travelers (Kombarakaran, 2003; 866).

5.2. Coping with maltreatment of the police and other authorities.

As described above, children face many problems concerning the police and other authorities. Harassment and abuse by law enforcement authorities is a common feature in the lives of street children. Street children are often victims to police violence and often experience humiliation and physical and mental abuse. Having no formal resource to turn to once in the hands of the police, children often arrange release in exchange for favors. They, for example, run errands, work at the police station or pay a bribe. Kombarakaran notes that in most cases children believed that they would be released provided they did not question or challenge the authorities, did some manual work, and promised not to engage in illegal activities again. Another important strategy used in these situations is pleading helplessness or making up a story of being orphaned or abandoned by family. This strategy is often learned by listening to other children's' experiences with the police.

5.3. Coping by using Networks

Street children develop networks of friendship with people who have similar lifestyles. The insecurity of their lives and the daily struggle to find food, work and shelter, avoid confrontation with law enforcement and the public make them dependant on other children. In a study on street children Kidd & Sean (2003: 245) describe that friends on the street are often described as a 'street family'. These friends teach them the rules of the streets and support them until they learn how to cope with street life themselves. The support is emotional and supplies money and safety. Another important factor is that having friendships counteract feelings of hopelessness, loneliness and worthlessness. Peer support is particularly important for children in case they have broken with their family and has been found to be an important factor in their survival on the street (Kombarakaran 2003; Kidd & Sean 2003: 245-253).

5.4. Maladaptive Coping

Coping on the streets often also includes drugs, alcohol and sexual abuse. Although friendships among children are sources of physical and emotional support, they also bring about unsafe and socially unacceptable behaviors such as smoking, drinking, using drugs, teasing girls and visiting prostitutes. Kidd and Sean (2003) note that the influence of peers is the most important trigger for experimenting with tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Although most street children know about the risks and hazards of drug and alcohol abuse they justify the use as a price they need to pay for living on the street. Moreover, the need and will to belong to a group and the stresses that come with life on the street are other reasons for taking drugs and alcohol among street children. Kidd and Sean (2003) note that the coping strategies most mentioned were hanging out with friends and taking drugs or alcohol. These strategies are described as relaxing and as a social activity by which one can bond with friends on the street (Kombarakaran 2003; Kidd & Sean 2003: 250).

5.5. Coping with Organizations.

Many children that live on the street also have contact with organizations. Organizations provide medical services, food, safety and other basic needs and often do not oblige them to stay or leave the streets. Karabanow (2001: 377) notes that street children attempt to avoid organizations that maintain obtrusive rules and regulations. Moreover, many children complain about organizations being corrupt as well as being abused whilst in an organization. In their study on street children Kidd and Sean (2003: 251) mention that the children often complain about being moved from group to group and to diverse foster homes leaving them trapped in environments in which people do not care about them.

6. Case-study: The Life History of Fernando².

When I enter the grounds of *la granja azul* for the first time, a slightly grubby eleven year old boy comes up to me, grabs my hand and shows me around the grounds. During the initial few days it is from this little boy I learn my first new words in Spanish and it is he who makes me feel comfortable. He seems happy to have some new faces around and is delighted with my visit. I am immediately drawn to this boy and curious about his life, but when I carefully ask him about it he ignores me and starts on another subject. After these first days I come to see more and more about the real Fernando as he often slips into one of his tantrums. After one week I too encounter my first problem with him. I am baking pancakes for the entire group and two of the children are helping me. When I don't pick Fernando first he gets angry, yells and hits the wall with his fists. After we finish the meal he sticks his finger in his throat and throws up in front of me. He looks up and laughs. As the weeks go on and I become closer to the children Fernando too starts talking to me about life in Buenos Aires. He carefully chooses his words and does not let anything slip about his personal experiences. He speaks of the problems concerning poverty in Argentina and during his monologues I can see a lot of anger in his eyes. I decide that I want to know more about him and finally I make an appointment with him to tell me his life history.

Life at '*la granja*' is tough on Fernando. He comes from a typical family of violence as is so often heard of in Latin America. He grew up in a suburb in Buenos Aires where the large part of the population lived in poverty. Most of the houses were single spaced with a double bed, a television and a small kitchen in which as many as eight family members lived. Although he does not relate to his family as poor he does refer to them as miserable: "When you are poor, you have no food for example, or no medicines so that when you get ill you just die. Where I lived everyone had food, not good food like here (at *la Granja*), but we ate and had a television as well some medicines".

² Interview with Fernando on 06-03-2009 and 10-03-2009

Fernando's mother worked as a housekeeper and tried to meet the ends by working several informal jobs. Fernando does not remember his mother not working. His dad was a carpenter but often did not go to work as he was an alcoholic and Fernando refers to him as a man that had many problems. Fernando describes his life during the time when he lived with his parents as a life of violence. His parents had many fights, yelled a lot at each other and at him and his sister. His older brothers and sisters had left the family to live with other relatives or on their own. Fernando is the second youngest child and he took care of his sister when his mother was at work. The fights between his parents got worse during the years and got more and more physical. He describes the moment the family collapsed in detail and without any emotion:

“When my mom came home they (my parents) would argue a lot. They yelled and screamed at each other all the time and my dad hit my mom many times. Then one day my mom was so angry because my dad was drinking again and he threw a chair at my mom. Then chairs and stuff were flying around the house. She (mom) grabbed a knife and she stabbed him, I saw it. There was blood everywhere. Then the ambulance and police came, and took him to the hospital. He had drunk a lot, and smoked. When I came to the hospital they said he went really far away. He died... because he drank and smoked a lot and the wound too. My mom went away because she couldn't handle it anymore”.

Fernando and his sister went to live with an aunt after his dad died and mom went away. His aunt however, could not take care of both of them and left him with no other option than the streets. During his time on the streets he had several jobs such as selling small goods to tourists and working as a shoe polisher. He does not remember everything about the period during which he lived on the street because it was during his early childhood. When Fernando was eight years old he ended up on the streets. In order to make a living or survive on the streets as he calls it he had to work several informal jobs. He worked on his own at first, but after a while (he does not recollect how long exactly) he met other children with whom he worked and lived together. The group provided protection, food, money and friendship for Fernando and they worked strategically together. As Fernando explained to me:

“We worked separate because tourists are more willing to give money when you are alone. I went to the tourist places and tried to sell little cards with messages on it, you’ll know them. We got the cards from the older kids and put them on the tables at restaurants and sold them in the subtes (subway). Tourists give a lot of money for a card, sometimes I got five pesos just from one tourist [laughs]. The work was easy, but long hours so I got really tired at the end of the day”.

By strategically choosing a location to sell goods and working individually it was easy for the group to make money during the busy tourist season. Working and living with peers provided Fernando with his ‘education’ in street life. It is from the peers that he learned how to survive.

During the tourist season business is thriving for most street children. However, once the tourists have gone it becomes a lot harder to make enough money to survive. This also had severe implications on the coping strategies of the group. When the tourists left, the weather also got worse and the cold and hunger took its toll on the group. It was during those times that maladaptive coping such as drug abuse became ways to survive. When Fernando saw his peers using drugs and drinking alcohol he got curious, especially because he was hungry and cold all the time. The older boys in the group would not let him use drugs at first, but when things became hostile they allowed him to drink and later use drugs too. Fernando was really explicit about his feelings concerning drug and alcohol abuse:

“I guess my friends let me use drugs because they felt sorry for me or they just didn’t care anymore. After that time I wanted more and they let me. I drank a lot and used drugs sometimes when I felt really bad, cold or hungry. It made me feel happy and I wasn’t hungry anymore. I know drugs are bad, but sometimes you have to use them if you don’t want to die. I am sure that I would be dead if I hadn’t used anything”.

Taking drugs and drinking initially becomes a coping strategy for periods when there are no other possibilities. Obviously, once the children are addicted there is no way back.

The initial family-like-group became internally hostile. The boys fought almost every day and as they lacked job opportunities and often got bored they used more and more:

“When we had used (drugs or alcohol) the guys got really nasty, then we used more and it got even nastier... this is how it went all day, everyday. We fought and hit each other, yelled and screamed and many times we had to run from the police because they heard us fighting”.

Violence is a common thing on the streets and Fernando believed that it was normal to fight with people as his childhood had provided him with no other image. For him, this was a strategy needed in order to survive: “If you wouldn’t fight, you would get nothing at all; no food, no alcohol and no drugs”. The group encompassed about five to seven boys and one or two girls. Sometimes children would join for a while and some would leave. They all scattered during the day in order to make some money by working or begging. At night they joined again with their money. One of the older boys arranged and distributed the drugs, alcohol and sometimes food. Due to the fights and arrests by the police the composition of the group and leader role changed over time.

After having lived on the street for several months Fernando was picked up by an organization called CPO. He told me that he doesn’t have recollections of how he was taken of the street. The CPO is an organization that provides street children with a temporary shelter and distributes children to the *hogares* connected to the CPO program. Fernando had by then built up an aggression problem and has been in several *hogares* during the past four years before being placed with Pelota de Trapo. His experiences at the CPO and at the diverse *hogares* are mainly negative and he provides an excellent image of the problematic situation of the shelter for street children. After living with the CPO for a while he was sent to another organization. There he lived for a while and even though he doesn’t remember everything he gave me an account on the problems at that *hogar*:

“There were lots of kids and they were not nice at all. The people that worked there were not nice either, they beat you up without telling what you had done wrong. All the boys

fought, they were much stronger than me, but I fought anyway. I stayed there for a while, I don't know how long but I stayed there until the CPO came and asked me if I liked it and I said no.. Then I was sent to another hogar where I would live. That place was really bad. It wasn't like here where they take care of you, you just had to get through the day and survive. There were more children, like 30 or 40... and the people beat us up all the time. They didn't care about us at all. We went to school, but after school we did nothing and we had to stay inside. All the boys fought and some of the girls as well. It was like living on the street, but then in a building”.

After having stayed at several *hogares* where he was treated badly the CPO sent him to *pelota de trapo* labeled as a child with a serious aggression problem. The *educadores* at *la granja* told me that his initial behavior was very aggressive. They did not know whether he could stay, even at the time I was there, there were still serious issues concerning the problems of Fernando's behavior. He, however, wanted to stay at *pelota de trapo* and voluntarily went to a psychologist every week in order to work on himself. When Fernando told me about his wish to stay at the organization I asked him why he wanted to stay:

“Here things are different from other organizations. Carla and Jorge live here and are with us all the time, they are like a mother and father that take care of you. I also like it because we do everything together, like working and eating and we are not allowed to beat each other up. We are like a family here although I would rather be with my real family I know that that is not possible so this is nice for me. I like to work here and work the lands... we make food for all the children”.

Pelota de trapo provides street children with a home-like basis. The children are raised by adults that are parent-like. Carla and Jorge are at the *granja* all day, every day. They treat the children as if they were their own. By working the fields the children at *la granja* provide the other *hogares* of the organization with food. By meaning something for others Fernando felt worthy of himself.

Conclusion

Fernando comes from a family of violence, “a typical problem of Argentinean society” according to the *educadores*. Due to the crisis of 2001 his father lost his job and became addicted to alcohol. The process of entering the street is usually a fluid one. This too accounts for Fernando’s experience. Because he could not adapt to staying with relative he hardly knew and he knew could not take care of both him and his sister he gradually entered the streets. Once he met a group of street children he stayed on the street. He refers to his street group as a family on the street. The group provided Fernando with a ‘street family’ that provided protection, food and learned him the rules of the street. Coping was easy when there were tourists in town and the group had specific strategies in order to make money. However, when this strategy no longer worked, the group found other manners to survive. Maladaptive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse are common coping strategies for street children. His childhood is marked by violence, and it is not surprising that he too fought on the streets as it is a known coping strategy and determines the rank and status in a street group (Kombarakaran, 2003; 866). After being institutionalized at an *hogar* Fernando experienced some adaptive problems. The *hogares* he was initially sent to are typical examples of housing for street children in Latin America. Violence in institutions and criminalization by authorities are known problems of the Argentine society. Children feel that they can do nothing about it as their self worth is generally low because of their experiences in the past.

Fernando’s life history is one that provides us with a number of categories concerning the coping strategies on the street. For the purpose of this thesis I will divide these in five categories from which I will outline the other children’s experiences with street life. Firstly, I will describe the coping strategies concerning work. I will then turn to the problem of maltreatment by the police and other authorities. Following this I will outline how children use of networks while on the street. Then I will outline the maladaptive behaviors known to street children. Finally I will outline the coping strategies used within organizations.

7. Coping strategies of the children of *la Granja Azul*.

7.1. Coping at Work.

“We drove through the city today and it struck me how many children are working on the streets. I saw them in every street, on every corner, in the subways, sleeping and working or just hanging. When we stood still in front of a traffic light and a boy of about fifteen years came up to the car and just watched at us, and made funny faces. I thought that he wanted to ask us something but Regine said he was on drugs and probably didn’t even see us. It came to me how striking this problem is, and I wonder whether it was my ignorance or the worlds that I have never heard about the scope of the problem of street and working children in Argentina before³”.

As one can see from the piece written in my diary, I encountered street children from the very first day spend in Argentina. As anyone can imagine, hearing such stories from the mouths of children is moving enough to leave any person in their right mind shocked.

Living on the streets brings both benefits and costs. Even though the children at *la granja* emphasized that the costs outweigh the benefits by far they did acknowledge that the freedom perceived on the streets is a liberating one when coming from a history of poverty and specifically one of violence. Nina, a sixteen year old girl from a poverty stricken family told me that during the times when she was on the street she would forget about the problems at home. Although she never actually lived on the street for a long period of time she did run away from home multiple times so that she could enjoy her freedom for a while. Once on the streets she would hang out with peers, consume alcohol and have fun. During the time she spent at home she perceived what was for her the opposite of freedom. Even though she was only 12 years old at the time, she did have a sister to take care of as her mother could not support the entire family from her wages as

³ From diary, 25-02-2009

a housekeeper. In order to contribute to the family income Nina made money by selling her body to older men. When I asked her how she felt about that she told me that:

“You have to do what needs to be done. You cannot feel bad about yourself when there is nothing else you can do. I didn’t work, because I didn’t want to and I saw that many times you couldn’t keep the money yourself because an older guy took it. This way was easy enough to make some money so that I could buy milk for my sister. I would just go with a man and fifteen minutes later I was back with my friends so that we could hang out again. That is what I liked. Now, I think that maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but at that time it didn’t matter because I drank a lot and felt bad about myself anyway⁴”. - Nina

During her time working on the streets Nina faced many risks and hazards, such as becoming pregnant or catching HIV. However, she did not perceive it as such. She felt that she needed to work because she had to support her family. For girls it is harder to find an informal job outside of the marginal occupations such as prostitution because women are ascribed to the house by the Argentine culture. For a man or boy like Fernando it is easier to find work in the visible informal sector. However, boys too are susceptible to marginal occupations such as drug dealing or gang life. Pablo described his engagement in such a gang and the work he did. Pablo is a fifteen-year-old boy and was ten when he lived on the streets. He participated in car theft and several robberies. He describes his work for the gang as dangerous but exiting work. In the gang the rolls were clear. The older boys went inside to steal and the younger ones had to watch out for the police. By working, even though it was illegal work, Pablo’s self esteem raised as he felt he was contributing to something important. The excitement as well as having a place of belonging within a group made him feel more secure. Moreover, he was proud to contribute to the work that had to be done in order to get food.

⁴ Interview with Nina on 03-04-2009

Box 1: Working as a *cartonero*: Paula.

Paula is a fifteen year old girl that has worked as a *cartonero* during the crisis of 2001. She had to go out to work every night after dark so that she could buy food for her malnourished sisters. Her father had worked as a carpenter before but lost his job because the company that he worked for went bankrupt. Her father could not do this kind of work because he would lose all respect and a



chance to find a decent job again. Moreover, he had begun to drink a lot since he had lost his job so at night he often couldn't even get up. Her mother was bound to the house with her four children and the daily cleaning work. Thus, Paula would go out on the street after school, often at night so that she could keep up with her schoolwork. At the beginning there was so much that she couldn't even carry it all. She gathered paper and cardboard, bound it together and carried it on her back. She took the gathered items home to her father who would go out and sell it the next day. After a while the goods that she was collecting were becoming scarce as her way of coping became a popular because many more had lost their jobs and working as a *cartonero* had proved to ensure a minimal income. It was after half a year that paper and cardboard was worth only half the price and after a year it was worth nothing. Many people that gathered cardboard now had big horse carts (see image) that they filled with plastic too in order to meet the ends. Paula says she could not afford such a cart as there was no money left of her earnings due to her father's drinking. The solution that left her was searching garbage cans in order to find leftover food to support the family income.

Working on the streets brings both costs and benefits for children. First, they gain self esteem by providing for themselves and others. Another aspect concerns the freedom perceived on the street. While most of the children come from situations of violence the street provides them with a new context in which fighting gets a new meaning. Fighting and getting beaten up in the family makes children feel vulnerable and victimized. Fighting on the street however provides street children with confidence and it is a necessary strategy in order to survive. By fighting with other children they gain status on the street and thus gain self-esteem.

The informal sector of Argentina can be divided in three main categories. Firstly Fernando is a good example of a child working in the visible informal sector. He worked several informal jobs such as selling goods. The invisible informal sector also accounts for the lives of many children. These are however not exclusively street children and in my research I have not encountered an example of this phenomenon. The main part of the informal sector where the children I met made their money was in marginal occupations such as theft, gang life and drug trafficking.

7.2. Coping with maltreatment by the police and other authorities.

“One day, (a friend) and I, we just were off the property because we needed to go somewhere. Then we encountered the police and they stopped us. They asked what we were doing and why we were there. When we said we were from the ‘granja’ of Pelota de Trapo they knew who we were and treated us like shit. They yelled that we should not walk around and when (my friend) talked back because he tried to explain they grabbed us and beat us up. They beat us up really bad just because we are from Pelota de Trapo”.

(Why do you think they did that?)

“Because we are still street scum in their eyes. They will never treat us normal unless we wear a suit and have a lot of money. That is how they treat us, it doesn’t matter if we complain because we are nobodies to all of them”. - Pablo⁵

The situation described above was told to me by Pablo while I was talking to him and one of the *educadores* about the police. Carla told me that the boys came home from school that day covered in bruises and cuts. “For us this will never be a normal situation, but for the boys this was not a new experience and they know that the police will beat them up when they get a chance to do so”. On numerous accounts the children told me about their experiences with the police. All have had several encounters while they were living on the streets and all told me that this was normal for them. Jorge made it clear that this maltreatment does not only apply for the police institution but also for numerous other government institutions like education or healthcare. This has been the situation for decades and that people are used to it. Authorities concerning education and healthcare also lack proper policy for the poor, as Jorge told me:

“When I go to a hospital with one of the children I know in advance that I won’t be helped for hours. When we need a child to go to the hospital we go the night before, wait the whole night with all the other people and are lucky if treatment is given the next day. One time I had to go to the hospital myself and just waited while I saw the doctors drinking coffee and chatting. They just don’t care about the people, only work for the money⁶”

The Argentinean healthcare system, like many other institutions such as education, which is divided in public and private schooling, in Buenos Aires is divided. On the one hand there is public healthcare which is accessible for everyone and often this healthcare is free. The public hospitals however do not have access to expensive equipment of medicines. Moreover, the public hospitals are understaffed, that is underpaid, undereducated and inexperienced which makes them slow and inefficient. Jorge told me

⁵ From interview with Pablo and Paula on 10-03-2009

⁶ From informal conversation with Jorge on 08-03-2009

that “When I had to have an X-ray taken, the photo paper was out of stock so I had to wait for five days before they could reset my arm”. On the other hand there is private healthcare for the non-poor. This is partially free when you have an expensive insurance, but mostly it has to be paid for. Since a large part of the well to do population of Argentina works for government institutions or international firms they are able to pay for private healthcare as well as private schooling.

The children are all aware of the fact that they are excluded from society by their backgrounds. On numerous accounts have they provided me with examples of problematic issues concerning the government of Buenos Aires and Argentina. Elections in Argentina are held four yearly and are populist oriented as the votes from the poor are often decisive in their chances for presidency. During the election time candidates make many promises concerning the poor of Argentina. They provide *barrios miserias* with improvements such as new schools, paved roads or new electricity lines in order to buy votes from the poverty stricken families. Once the elections are in the pocket, the newfound improvement are often removed. Schools close due to staff shortages, electricity is cut off as the power lines ‘disappear’ and the federal police once more enter to run the neighborhood. Angelo provided me with an example of such neighborhood controlling of the police:

“One time, in my barrio... the police came to a friend’s house. He was an honest guy... I knew that because he was my friend and I knew what he did (for a living). He was a salesman on the street. The police came to his house to search for drugs. He did not have any... they (the police) send him out of his house to do the search. One of the policemen was watching him.. no, no, holding him he was. Then the police came out with lots of cocaine or something like that. I know that they put it there because I know that (my friend) did not have drugs. They said they found it under the bed and in the toilet. It’s bullshit... but they needed a victim. They shot him in front of his house and took his body through the barrio to show that they had caught a drugs dealer”. - Angelo⁷

⁷ From interview with Angelo, Nina, Pablo and Paula on 04-02-2009

It became clear that the children have witnessed these kinds of occurrences often, as most of the children could provide me with such a story. Corruption of the Argentine government and the police is a common phenomenon in Buenos Aires and the children that live on the streets have several strategies in order to cope with this corruption. In most cases they try to avoid the police by choosing a strategic location to sell their goods, or work at hours during which there are not so many policemen around, like late at night or early in the morning. Working at tourist places also seems to help although the chance of running into police is great then. However, when such a child is doing business in a crowded place, filled with tourists “the police is less likely to beat you up or take you away” as they do not want to offend the tourists or make a huge issue in front of them. This also reflects my own experiences with street children in Buenos Aires. At the crowded tourist places many street children tried to sell goods to me and even though the police was present they never so much as gave a look at the street children. The children that actually lived on the street mostly slept in narrow alleyways or under bridges and always in a group.

Maltreatment by and corruption of the police is a common situation in most Latin American societies. Even though the government of Argentina stated that street children are looked at in terms of rights and that the state will provide street children with a new context it is not perceived as such by the children of *la granja azul*. The CAINA program which is instituted by the government of Buenos Aires is generally mistrusted by the children: “o yes.. they will let you eat, and play and all that stuff... but there are stories that they have a list with your name and the police uses it”. Jose⁸ Was very clear when it came to the programs implemented by the government. The children feel that they are there for two causes. Firstly because the government can registrate the number of street children and their whereabouts. This functions as a criminal list and the police can round the children up by using it. Secondly it is believed that the Argentinean government implements these programs as a façade for their real policies. As Carla explained to me: “They hide behind their so called helping programs to show the world that they are working on it. But they are not... the programs have been there for years and obviously do not work. They just help them to get the street children out of the way”.

⁸ Jose: interviewed on several occasions with other children: Informal conversations.

7.3. Coping by creating networks

“When I left my home and my family I started to live with some friends on the street. We were together for a large part of day, they were my brothers and sisters, like family. We would just hang out and drink a lot. The older boys also took drugs, went shoplifting and stole cars. I wasn’t allowed to join them in any of this because they said I was too young. I could drink but not anything else because they did not want me to end up like them”. - Nina

Many street children leave their homes for good, and by that they also abandon their families. When they decide to do so, this is often done out of sole desperation. They come from situations of maltreatment, abuse or are simply abandoned. Leaving the family home never seems to be a free choice. All the children I spoke to talked about having to leave home for one reason or another. Most children said that there was no other way because the situation in the family home was simply unbearable. Nina told me that she was afraid of her mother because she drank so much that she lost all control and just started beating around. Nina had to leave her house because her father was sent to prison and left his mother with no possibilities to be able to take care of her and her five brothers and sisters.

The process of leaving the family home and start living on the streets is often one of fluidity. Most children leave their homes for a day first to make some extra money. Earning a living by working is an important aspect of the culture of work that is common in Argentina and provides children (especially boys) with a sense of self worth that they have often not experienced before. Inherent cultural values such as being a real man and being able to provide for the family are important in Argentina. Moreover, even though many women work nowadays, they are still seen as ascribed to the house according to many people I have spoken to. Men on the other hand, are still seen as the main breadwinners and by leaving the family home and providing for your own food it is believed to make you a real man. When the time spent on the streets becomes longer and more intensive children often meet peers with whom they can work, share food and eventually they become a group. While many people speak of such groups as gangs (that

is, they show criminal behavior such as stealing cars, begging and using drugs or alcohol) the groups themselves identify their groups as family. Pablo provided me with an example of such a group:

“We were with about ten of us. We lived together, worked together, drank together and ate together. We would look after each other. The older girls we like the moms of the group and the guys like the dad. The guys provided food for the girls and younger kids and collected the money made every night. They were the leaders”.

(How was your position?)

“I was still very young, only seven or eight... so I was just a little boy for them. This was also nice because they would not beat me up so much and I always got food. Many of the boys fought, because they also wanted to be the leader”. - Pablo⁹

Pablo told me about his family life before this. He told me that his brothers were always beaten up by his dad and that he too ‘got it’ a couple of times. For him, the fighting in the street was a normal situation and he never told me more about it except that it was normal to fight for your position when you wanted to move up in the picking order. It grants respect. Also, violence in the family is perceived in a rather different ways as fighting on the streets as fighting on the streets is deemed necessary. On the one hand the street groups are formed to protect each individual from the police, violence of adult wanderers and the weather when it is cold. A group also provides more food and robbing a supermarket is much easier with six people than doing it by yourself. On the other hand, there are also constant conflicts within these groups over leadership and distribution. It was mentioned earlier that the older guys from the group did not want Pablo to take drugs. This could be a way of protecting her, or it could be an easy way to keep more drugs for yourself.

For children family is the most important aspect of their lives. It provides protection and a frame of reference. When the biological family can no longer be seen as

⁹ From interview with Pablo on 10-03-2009

such children search for a new reference point. A street group is often perceived as a family and referred to in terms of relatedness. Pablo provided me with such an example as he referred to the group leader as '*el padre*'. This leadership role would change overtime, but the leader was always called this. The other children in the group were referred to as brothers and sisters. The family group on the street provides protection and teaches the children the rules of the streets. It can also be an important strategy against loneliness and feelings of worthlessness.

7.4. Maladaptive Coping

Coping on the streets often also includes drugs, alcohol and sexual abuse. Although friendships among children are sources of physical and emotional support, they also bring about unsafe and socially unacceptable behaviors such as smoking, drinking, using drugs and visiting prostitutes. The children of *pelota de trapo* were initially very careful not to speak of their past concerning the use of drugs, alcohol and prostitution. However, at the very end of my fieldwork they did provide me with some examples of maladaptive coping. Anna had been very open about the strategies for surviving on the street and named using drugs as one of the most important aspects of being able to survive in harsh conditions:

(did you ever use drugs?)

"Yes I did... I had to, not because I liked it, but because I had nothing else. When you had used drugs, you weren't cold, hungry and you didn't feel left out. My friends had used it for a long time but I didn't use it too often because I know that it is bad for you. It is just, that when you feel that bad... you have no family, no money, no school... I had nothing then and by using drugs I was able to escape... you know? I felt good about myself when I had used it and we (me and my friends) had a lot of fun with it". -Anna¹⁰

¹⁰ From interview with Anna on 12-04-2009

After this conversation Anna specifically asked me not to tell anyone about this quote. It is a taboo to speak of using drugs. Using drugs was not the only example of maladaptive behavior I was told about. As I have mentioned earlier, Nina spoke of having sex with older men for money. She found that this was not prostitution because she really needed the money. “When you need money for milk for your sister, what are you going to when someone asks you to have sex with them for money. And all of my friends did it too”. For Nina, having sex with older men was a strategy to make money, another informal job opportunity. By referring to her friends who did the same thing she justified the situation. The influence of peers is very important in the maladaptive behaviors. Feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness also provide a context for drug and alcohol abuse. Fernando explained to me that: “When you feel like nobody cares about you and you have nothing to lose why not use something. Drugs are the only thing that make you feel good when everyone just walks over you”.

7.5. Coping within Organizations.

“When I lived on the street I was with friends, and nobody else. I know that some of my friends went to a place where they got food and cloths, but I never went there as I wasn’t that desperate. I still had my family where I could go to if I needed something. I didn’t do that regularly, but if I needed something, I knew I could have. As I said, I got food from my friends, and sometimes clothes too. I guess they were stolen, but I couldn’t care less”.
- Nina¹¹

Nina is the only child that has mentioned her friends using the organizations available in the city of Buenos Aires. She never went there because she could do better and felt that if she went there she would be in danger of being caught by the police. Moreover, she implied that these organizations are places where only the real ‘lowlifes’ go and that by going there it was like admitting that you did not like it on the streets and needed a better life. Furthermore, as I have mentioned earlier, the children believe that these organizations are corrupted. This was mentioned to me by most of the children. “They

¹¹ From interview with Nina on 03-04-2009

put you on a list and know your name, where you are when you are on the street and they will catch you and put you in a foster home”.

Eventually all of these children ended at *pelota de trapo*. The means by which they left the streets can best be seen in terms of feelings of failure and exclusion, and shouldn't be seen as voluntary moves. Nina provides us with a good example of this as she has explained to me, in detail how she ended at *pelota de trapo* and the problems she has faced before, during and since that time.

“I never wanted to leave the street. I liked it so much, all this freedom and living with my friends. It was hard sometimes, but mostly it was nicer that living with my family and I never imagined that things could get better for me at that time. I knew that if I was picked up by the police they would send me to an institution and from one of my friends I heard that it was horrible there. He had been there before and got beaten up a lot, and lost all of his freedom”. - Nina¹²

After having been on and off the street for well over a year Nina was ‘picked up’ by the police. The federal police of Buenos Aires often pick up groups of street children on demand of citizens. Citizens complain about the youth being in their neighborhood and hint the police about where the children hide at night. They are often scared that these ‘criminals’ will break into their houses or that they will ‘infect’ their children. When Nina and some of her friends were picked up they were in prison for two days. “They didn't know what to do with us, because all the houses were full they said. Personally I think they were just bullying us though.” After two days without food, being spit on by several policemen and one of her friends beaten up they were brought to an institution. Nina doesn't recall much of this place. “It was horrific, I know that. (My friend) was beaten up by the police and when they (The people at the institution) didn't even ask the police how this happened I knew I couldn't trust them”. The children were separated and each was placed in another *hogar*. The story of life at the *hogar* was typical, and shows much overlap with that of Fernando. Being bored and dirty, getting beaten up, feelings of abandonment, exclusion and losing hope all added up in this period. “I didn't want to

¹² From interview with Nina on 03-04-2009

live, nobody cared about me and I just remember sitting there and thinking of ending it all". After a period of time (she doesn't remember how long she had been there) she found a way to escape and she did. Even though she was picked up by the police again after only two or three days she was not treated badly this time. "I think it was because I was alone time that they were nice to me". The police took Nina to the CPO, just as they had done with Fernando. In the year that followed Nina was placed at different *hogares* and foster homes, but she never liked any of them. "I missed the street and my freedom. None of these people were nice to me and they all treated us like criminals". Whenever the CPO came to check on how Nina did she would tell them she hated it and they would take her away to a new place. After many different institutions (she doesn't recall how many) she was finally placed at *pelota de trapo*. She emphasizes that she never went there with the idea that things would get better as none of these places had provided her with improvement. Nina has now been at *pelota de trapo* for over four years. She has run away seven times and even though she likes this *hogar* a lot better than the ones she lived in before she still feels the urge towards freedom. Most of the children told me that they like it at *la granja azul* although none of them came voluntarily. All of the children were sent to the organization by judges or through the CPO. The organization states that the children do join voluntarily and when I asked Carla about this she said the following:

"The children are picked off the street and sent to us but they do have options and that is why they are here voluntarily. They can always go to another organization or to family, so they have a choice". - Carla¹³

Organizations are used in multiple ways by street children. During the period on the streets many children visit organizations to get food or clean cloths. At *la granja* these organizations are perceived as lowlife organizations and through the daily speeches at the diner table by Jorge I found out that they have learned to perceive them as such. Jorge has his own history on the streets and points out that living on the streets means survival and that organizations are corrupted and full of scum: "The children going to these places are like dogs. They eat like dogs and speak like dogs and are worth nothing". I believe that

¹³ From interview with Carla on 19-03-2009

the children are greatly influenced by the organization's views and therefore will not provide me with their own experiences concerning multiple subjects, among which the use of organizations while on the street.

8. Conclusion

The contemporary Argentinean society faces many problems concerning poverty, social exclusion and the existence of street children. As entire families are excluded from society, many children still end up on the streets. There seem to be three overlapping elements that exclude the poverty stricken population. These elements are the main cause for children to end up on the streets.

Firstly, it is a *cycle of poverty* that families cannot seem to escape. It causes many children to be stuck working on the street instead of going to school. The poverty stricken population is further excluded by spatial marginalization. Their houses are often located in slums where the police rule the neighborhoods by controlling their every move. Lack of interest and corruption within the government and police system is a major factor for the children as well as the adults to explain the presence of the cycle of poverty. Secondly, crises in this country are a major factor in creating new poor. During the presidency of Menem in the early 1990's many people lost their jobs due to privatizations of the many companies in the public sector. Many of the children currently living at the *granja* have families that fell apart during this period of crisis. The larger part of the children's families were lower middleclass families. They have lived in *miseria* since the crisis due to loss of jobs and a deteriorating economic situation caused by major inflations. Influence of the family is very important in a child's life. According to Saravi (2002) 'the family represents the main platform from which young people are launched into adult life'. The nuclear family accounts for the main support for children and youth. The family is one of the most important factors contributing to children ending up working or even living on the streets as drugs and alcohol abuse amongst poor families is a major problem in Argentina. Alcoholism and drug addiction are major problems in the Argentinean society, and are often related to feelings of hopelessness after years (or generations) of a life of poverty, losing job after job, enduring crisis after crisis. Drug and alcohol addiction was mentioned as a major cause of abuse and abandonment. Violence in the family due to drug and alcohol abuse can best be seen as outcomes of the context of the cycle of poverty and crises in Argentina. The definition of street children is

a factor that stigmatize and exclude entire families. I argue that the notion of street children is inherently inappropriate since it suggests the child to be living on the streets. It creates a categorization, and lacks attention on the interconnected dimensions of vulnerable children. During many interviews and informal conversations the children told me that the people and more importantly, the government of Buenos Aires see them as criminals. This criminalization becomes apparent in the ways street children are institutionalized. In Argentina *hogares* can function without control of the government and often lack important facilities like an outside place for children to be able to play. Projects that help street children, like CAINA, set up by the government of Buenos Aires, can best be seen as a façade in order to show worldwide institutions such as UNICEF that they are working on the problem. According to my participants these government implemented projects further work as a platform to registrate the presence of street children.

The process of entering the streets, is often one of great fluidity. The children have problems at home, either due to poverty or violence in the family, or a combination of both. In a quest to find a better life, they enter the streets. First for an evening, just with friends. Then for a day; another day. After a while they stay away for a night, and sleep on the streets with friends. After a period of time they return less and less to their homes until they do not return at all.

Coping as a street child provides a complex reality and the lives and survival tactics of these children cannot easily be categorized. However, for the purpose of this thesis I have tried to divide their main strategies into five elements. These categories are fluid and often overlapping as you have been able to see from the life history of Fernando (Chapter 6). Firstly, street children need to cope on the streets by using the informal sector. Street children use the informal sector in several ways. The children, as well as my own observations in the *capital federal* have provided me with many examples of what the children do in order to survive on the streets. They work small informal jobs such as juggling and washing car windows at traffic lights to selling small goods such as cards, pens or candy in buses, the *subte* or at restaurants and begging at locations that are strategically picked (tourist places). According to de Moura (2002) the informal sector can be divided in three categories, the visible, invisible and marginal sector. However, de

Moura (2002) holds to a static division and children often use different aspects of the informal sector in order to make a living. That is, they will not work in the visible, invisible or marginal sector, but will use whichever job available. For street children it is often a situation of 'getting what you can take'. Pablo for example, worked several informal jobs in the visible informal sector. On the other hand he was also part of drug trafficking and robbery, which are seen by de Moura (2002) as marginal occupations. A phenomenon that elapsed around the crisis of 2001 is the rise of *cartoneros* that you can see in the streets up to this day. They collect everything from cardboard, to plastic cups, tin cans and paper towels. They find it on the roads or in the garbage as they walk along the plentiful tourist *plazas* where many tourists are willing to give them their empty cups. This phenomenon can best be seen as a modern coping strategy as it is following the modern consumption style of the upper classes in Argentina. Secondly, almost all street children have to deal with maltreatment by the police. As I have argued above, the government of Argentina does not provide with a sufficient solution to deal with the problems of the marginalized population. The government, as well as many residents of Buenos Aires, see street children as culprits and criminalize them. They see a street child as a person on the path to delinquency and attempt to normalize these children by institutionalizing them in *hogares* which are spread through the country and in which abuse and neglect is often the norm. Another way of coping on the streets is by using *networks*. Peer solidarity is important for any child and specifically for street children as they need protection, food sources and they need to learn the rules of the street when they first enter them. However, these networks also work in terms of creating maladaptive behavior. As peer solidarity is important, it is also an important source for starting maladaptive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. Finally, although my participants did not refer to any organization used whilst on the street it is known that organizations are used in multiple ways by street children. Although the organization of *pelota de trapo* states that all children are embedded in their organization voluntarily, the children have provided me with an other perspective. They are not voluntarily removed of the streets, but do acknowledge that being institutionalized provides them with a better perspective. Therefore, they are staying at the organization voluntarily. *Pelota de Trapo* provides street children with a new future by teaching them to create new coping strategies.

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Supplement: Reflection: Looking back.

1.1. The first days

'I am so afraid that my Spanish isn't good enough. I do understand Carla and Jorge, but some of the children speak so unclearly that I wonder if I will ever understand them. I also feel hot and sweaty all day long, it seems unbearable sometimes because there is nowhere to escape from the heat, even at night the rooms are hot. Moreover, as I have counted, I now have 45 mosquito bites and I haven't been able to count them all' (From personal diary 02-02-2009).

The first days in Argentina were days of confusion and insecurity. As I felt that my Spanish was not at the level at which I could fully understand everything I became very insecure with the possibilities to conduct a proper research. However, I have come to learn that all skills take time to develop and settle. My Spanish improved rapidly and the conversations with the educadores were not too hard for me to understand. In order to understand the children it took me a little longer, but after two weeks I could understand most of what they said too.

The heat and mosquitoes took a while longer to adapt to. As it was mid summer when I arrived in Argentina the first month was the hottest month in Argentina. With temperatures rising to the 45's and higher it was unbearable at times and my body would ache and itch all day long. I did, however, have to work with the children during those hot hours because I felt that they would not have accepted me and this would have destroyed my research. For my next research I plan to take things a little slower by giving myself a week to adapt.

1.2. The social situation at *la granja azul* : Crises

'I don't know what is wrong with this man. He keeps yelling and screaming at the children for no apparent reason. Saying that he comes from the streets too and knows

about that life, for me, that is no excuse to treat children like this. If you want the children to succeed in society... wouldn't you want to teach them about norms and values of life? I can't help but being angry with his even though I might not be aloud to' (From personal diary 20-02-2009).

My relation with Jorge has been tough. The first two weeks he was a pleasant man to be around, but after those weeks he started behaving odd. Whenever he was around, the children were uncomfortable and the atmosphere was really tense. For no apparent reason at all he would start yelling at them and calling them names like 'filthy betrayer'. As time passed I started to notice that the children as well as Carla find this a normal situation and have their ways of coping with Jorge. Luckily I am very good at hiding my anger and I have always managed to contain myself.

As an anthropologist you have to be able to adapt to every situation. I can now say that I have done that, even though it often felt as betrayal of those wonderful children that I (gun) so much more in life. However, to me, it doesn't matter how much you have been through or what the reference point might be. In my opinion it is wrong to treat children in this way and by doing so you do not provide a decent future for them.

1.3. Key informants: Children.

As I had anticipated on, working with children in their teens is hard work. The children of *la granja azul* have been through a life that I could never imagine. Even though we had a rough beginning during which they tested me, the children were not only my key informants but also my allies and friends as time passed and they had come to accept me. The methods I used (topic list, planning of conversations) were already adapted to meet the children's viewpoint. I had taken into account that some of the children might needed more time to adapt to me being there and therefore this has never been problematic. I have developed certain strategies concerning interview techniques that have helped me a great deal while interviewing children. These techniques came to me by practicing and making mistakes. After my interviews I reviewed them and wrote down what I should have done differently. One of those mistakes concerned the privacy while conducting an

interview. During my first interview all children wanted to be there and listen. Obviously this distracted my informant even though he was fine with everyone hearing his story. By choosing a strategic location for the next interviews (often during a walk or locked in a room) I have come to learn that children do tell you a lot more when you are private with them. One of the children even told me his deepest secrets and specifically asked me not to tell anyone about this.

It gave me a great deal of confidence when the children shared personal information with me as I got closer to them. At the start of my fieldwork I had conducted interviews in small groups which I thought worked well. However, after conducting an interview privately I came to understand that even though the children are honest when interviewing them in groups, one can only learn about the little details when taking them apart.

1.4. Anthropological research: What have I learned?

Most of the time I am just doing whatever. I do not have the feeling that what I am doing is anthropological at all. It is like I am just living here for no apparent reason at all. The children know I am here as a researcher, but they don't have a clue about what that is. I am just doing what they are doing and I can see that they think I'm weird. Even Carla and Jorge have no idea what an anthropologist does as Carla asked me today if I have plans to go to some sort of archeological site. In a way, it's hilarious! (From personal diary 25-03-2009)

My first research often felt as though I wasn't doing anything at all. Except for conducting a couple of lengthy conversations with the children as well as with Carla and Jorge I was no different from the others at the *granja*. This was strange for me as well as for the children. Because I was not located in a village but in the remote farmlands of Buenos Aires it was not easy to 'escape' for a day. I have read on numerous occasions that, as an anthropologist you are often seen as the weirdo of the community, because... Why would I be interested in the lives of fifteen former street children. Even at the very end of my fieldwork the children still had no idea why I was there, no matter how many times I had explained it to them. At a certain point they came to accept me as 'almost one of them'. I knew by the confidential information that they started giving me, that they

trusted me and had accepted me as one of them. In a way this too, felt like betraying them, especially when a couple of the children hinted me with their expectations of change that I would bring for them. I have told them that I am only a student and do not have the ability to change their world. However, in a way they always expressed their hopes for a better future to me which often made me feel guilty.