

Thematic Review: Negotiating Identities of Street Children.

A Short Reflection Piece

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This paper presents a review of 171 scientific articles dedicated to the phenomenon of street children in the last two decades. According to Orr's notion of identity as a social representation, the aim is to examine how scholars, through their research and the resulting international scientific production, represent the street children and therefore contribute to shaping their identity. The complex zone in the case of street children is the street, the place that performs the functions of home (where they sleep, eat, work, play and die), yet it does not fulfil their basic needs, such as proper nutrition or safety. This article discusses how in such situations the findings and approach to research proposed by Orr could be applied as a common thread to analyse the phenomenon of street children, discussing its links with child slavery and human trafficking.

Keywords: Street children, Social representations, Identity, Child slavery, Human trafficking.

THE PHENOMENON OF STREET CHILDREN

Different types of complex zones exist throughout the world. One of such types is the street, a classical public space in the "age of the crowd" (Moscovici, 1985), which for the majority of

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inhabitants of the city constitutes “the outside”. The typical metropolitan passenger is in the condition of permanent movement, travelling far and fast (Jovchelovitch, 1995). However, to some people the street has to fulfil some of the basic functions of home – it is the place where they sleep, eat, make their living and entertain themselves. This is the situation of street children who can be found in different places of the world and who live in the complex zones precisely because their “home” is the opposite of what most people would define as “home”. One of the most common definitions of a “street child” used in the literature has been formulated by the Inter-NGO Programme for Street Children and Youth in Switzerland in 1983: “a street child is any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults.” Some authors argue that to speak about “street children” is stigmatising due to powerful emotional overtones (Panter-Brick, 2002) and responses such as hostility and pity (Aptekar, 1988). However, I have decided to use this label since it has been widely used and accepted in the scientific world for more than twenty years. The purpose of this reflection piece is not to analyse the definition and types of street children, but to consider the complex zone of the street in the light of the scientific contribution of Orr.

The phenomenon of street children is complex and differs from place to place, but there are some common stereotypes of who the street children are. On one side there is a picture of a male, aged around 13 or 14 years, engaged in substance abuse, early sexual activity and delinquency, while on the other, a street child is seen as a victim and thus is more likely to be treated as a passive object of welfare, rather than a person with his or her rights (UNICEF, 2005). Such an environment certainly constitutes the complex zone, which is the street for street children. Caught up between the stereotypes and stigma, they find themselves in, a situation that forces them to negotiate their identity. The fact that tens of millions (UNICEF, 2005) of children across the world live in such a complex scenario has been thoroughly analysed by the United Nations and other international organisations, especially from the quantitative and legal point of view (United Nations [UN], 2012), (UN, 2011), (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2005), (UNICEF, 2012). Street children often become victims of child slavery, in particular sexual exploitation more common in Europe, Central Asia and the Americas, as well as forced labour more frequently detected in Africa, Middle East, South and East Asia and Pacific (Llach, 2013).

While such studies allow us to talk about numbers, statistics and regions, the exact ways of how street children negotiate their identities in different places of the world differ, depending on the context. The definition of identity representations that I adopted (after Paryente & Orr, 2010) envisions these representations as generally shared by members of society and referring to the group as a collective, anchored within the representations of specific social groups and expressing the group's most central and unique social issues (Duveen, 2001). The theory of social representations has been chosen by many scholars all over the world as the framework to address different phenomena. Its strength lies in the fact that as a research perspective it has been successfully applied to other areas than social psychology (Flick & Foster, 2008). This paper is a short discussion, a thematic review of scientific production on street children, considering as a common thread a key to interpret the findings, the Orr's notion of identity as social representation based on the social reality of a group's identity, and its construction by specific groups and stakeholders (Paryente & Orr, 2010).

ORR'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION ON IDENTITY

Before proceeding with the review, I am going to identify the crucial findings of Orr concerning identity as social representation, in particular applied to the case of children and adolescents. Although Orr has not performed research concerning street children, some of her findings and theoretical insights concerning identity can be applied to this particular case.

In her earlier works, before introducing the notion of identity as social representation, Orr has proposed the definition of social representations as "the human symbolic world of meanings" and the "kind of cognitive-affective schemata, which we construct, reconstruct and share to a large extent with others inside our group during interpersonal and public encounters" (Orr, Sagi & Barr-On, 2000, p. 2.4). She paid special attention to the social representations' functions of making sense of the unknown and maintaining group identity, as well as serving the interests of groups. This theoretical framework was applied to the research on social representations of Israeli and Palestinian high school students as an illustration of collective coping strategies in the conflict zone (Orr, Sagi & Barr-On, 2000). Another significant research that Orr performed in the beginning of the century concerned the identity of immigrant Israeli adolescents from Ethiopia and the former USSR (Orr, Mana & Mana, 2003). In approaching the topic from the

theoretical point of view, she defined the relationship between social representations and identity as a “reciprocal causal system” (Orr, Mana & Mana, 2003, p. 72), emphasising the distinctiveness of her vision of this issue from the one proposed by Breakwell (2001). According to Orr (Orr, Mana & Mana, 2003), thanks to the existence of a social identity, a new or transformed social representation can emerge, while at the same time the assumption of shared identity is based on the content provided by social representations. As a result of this research on immigration, she identified four identity representations: on the one hand, extended and rivalry identities that point to the empowerment of the minority group; on the other hand, secluded identity and identity loss that reflect the immigrants’ acceptance of their lower social status. An interesting phenomenon occurred in relation to ratings of these representations by host students, which Mana called “ostrich effect” (Mana, 2007): the host group underrated extended and rivalry identities, while it overrated secluded identity and identity loss. Mana, Orr and Mana took their research a step further, and as a result they proposed a four-factor integrated acculturation model of immigrants’ social identity (Mana, Orr & Mana, 2009).

One of the seminal contributions of Orr stemmed from the focus that she placed on the role of social context and identity representations of children in the process of intergenerational value transmission (Paryente & Orr, 2010). She considered identity representations as constructed by observers and not only as those by which societies and individuals represent themselves verbally, and therefore including representations of which the society members themselves are not necessarily aware (Paryente & Orr, 2010). In the conception of identity as social representation, Orr acknowledged a constructionist perspective on social reality of a society as constructed by other relevant spectators (Orr, 2007). Moreover, the conception of identity as social representation has the value of “investigating social-collective processes in addition to those already researched within personal and interpersonal paradigms” (Ben-Asher, Wagner & Orr, 2006; Wagner & Hayes, 2005), as it includes both shared social issues and the individual and group’s sense of who they are, where they stand and what they stand for in relation to members of other societies (Paryente & Orr, 2010).

REVIEW OF PAPERS ON STREET CHILDREN IN THE LAST TWO DECADES

The literature on contemporary street children is abundant and diverse. Numerous organisations, foundations, magazines, as well as blogging individuals dedicate pages after pages to the topic. In order to bring some light into this complex labyrinth of information, I have decided to concentrate on scientific contributions in the form of published articles in international mainstream academic journals. This approach shall allow us to understand how scholars all over the world frame the phenomenon of street children, which countries are the most frequent locations of the research and if there is any clear trend concerning the global timeline of research.

In order to identify scientific publications dedicated to street children during the last twenty years, I have performed advanced searches using the search engines of three major independent international academic publishers: SAGE Publications, ScienceDirect and Wiley-Blackwell. Two independent reviewers have analysed the total of 528 publications' titles and abstracts dated 1993-2012, and after rejecting those that were not dedicated to street children as defined in the introduction, have ended up with a total of 171 publications, all in English. Based on this analysis, the scientific production concerning street children has been fairly stable throughout the last twenty years, as demonstrated by the following chart:

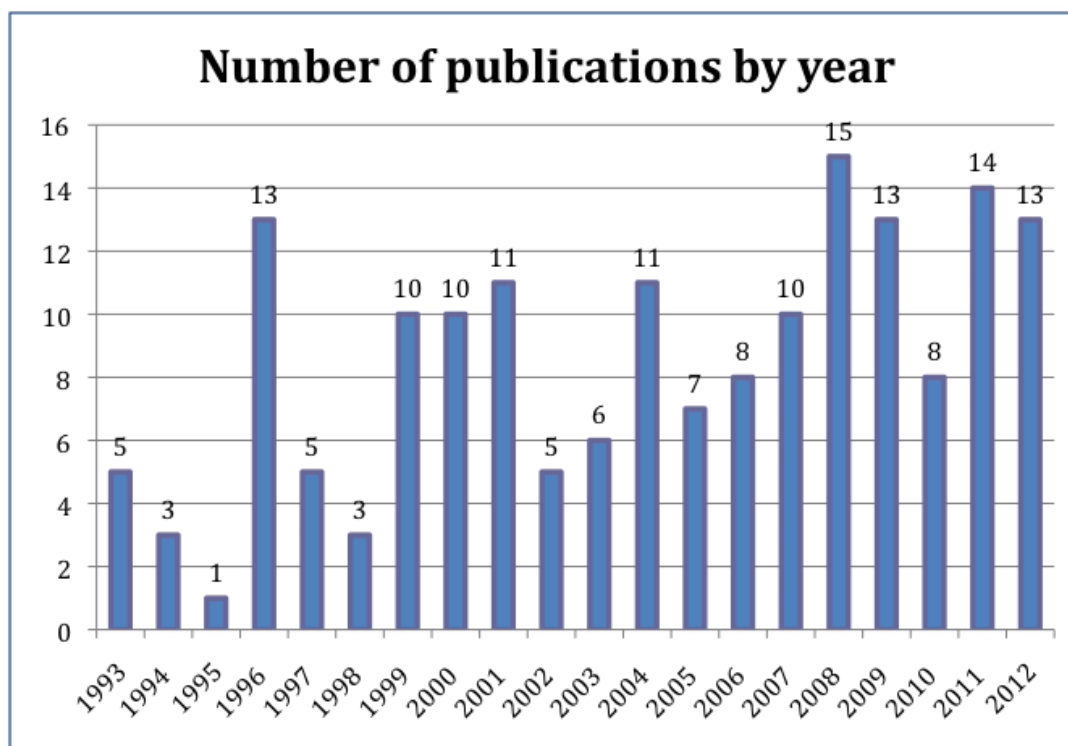


Figure 1: Number of publications per year on 'Street Children', 1993 to 2012

The lower number of publications before 1996 is probably due to the fact that with time, it has become easier to digitalise articles thanks to the advancement of technology. There have been no extremely outstanding peaks in the scientific production on street children, which demonstrates that street children continue to be seen as a worthwhile topic and a phenomenon that requires ongoing academic analysis.

Concerning the places that have been studied as locations of street children, the first and foremost country is Brazil with 25 scientific publications that describe research carried on street children in this country followed by Kenya (with 8 publications) and Mexico and Turkey (with 7 publications each). Brazil with its *favelas* appears as the most widely studied complex zone where street children can be found. The fact that English is not the official language in Brazil and notwithstanding it is still the most predominant location studied, demonstrates that the restriction of scientific production under scrutiny to publications in English did not affect the choice of the country. Certain phenomena discussed as present in Brazil in fact apply to the situation in many other developing nations, for example, the fact that the country's richest 20% of the population uses over 65% of the wealth, which results in rampant poverty. In turn, the existence of street children in Brazil, as well as in many other countries is directly linked to poverty as "children on the street become children of the street" (Fernandes & Vaughn, 2008). Kenya, the second most studied country when considering street children, appears from research as a complex zone where these children are a paradox: "so visible but so invisible" as they experience a contradictory condition of dwelling in the urban public space in plain sight, yet completely overlooked from a legal point of view in terms of their rights (Meda, 2011). The fact that street children live predominantly in big cities also stands out from the analysis of research locations, as vast majority of publications concentrates on capital cities worldwide as main places where they can be found. However, many scientists tend to consider street children in general, without referring to one particular country or, more frequently, referring to a number of countries, as in case of reviews that discuss the reasons for the existence of street children, their characteristics and methodological problems related to the study (Aptekar, 1994). In fact, apart from research publications that discuss the phenomenon in a certain country or countries (there are some cross-national comparisons), the majority of authors focuses on the general aspects of the phenomenon, without specifying one geographic location, as shown in the chart below:

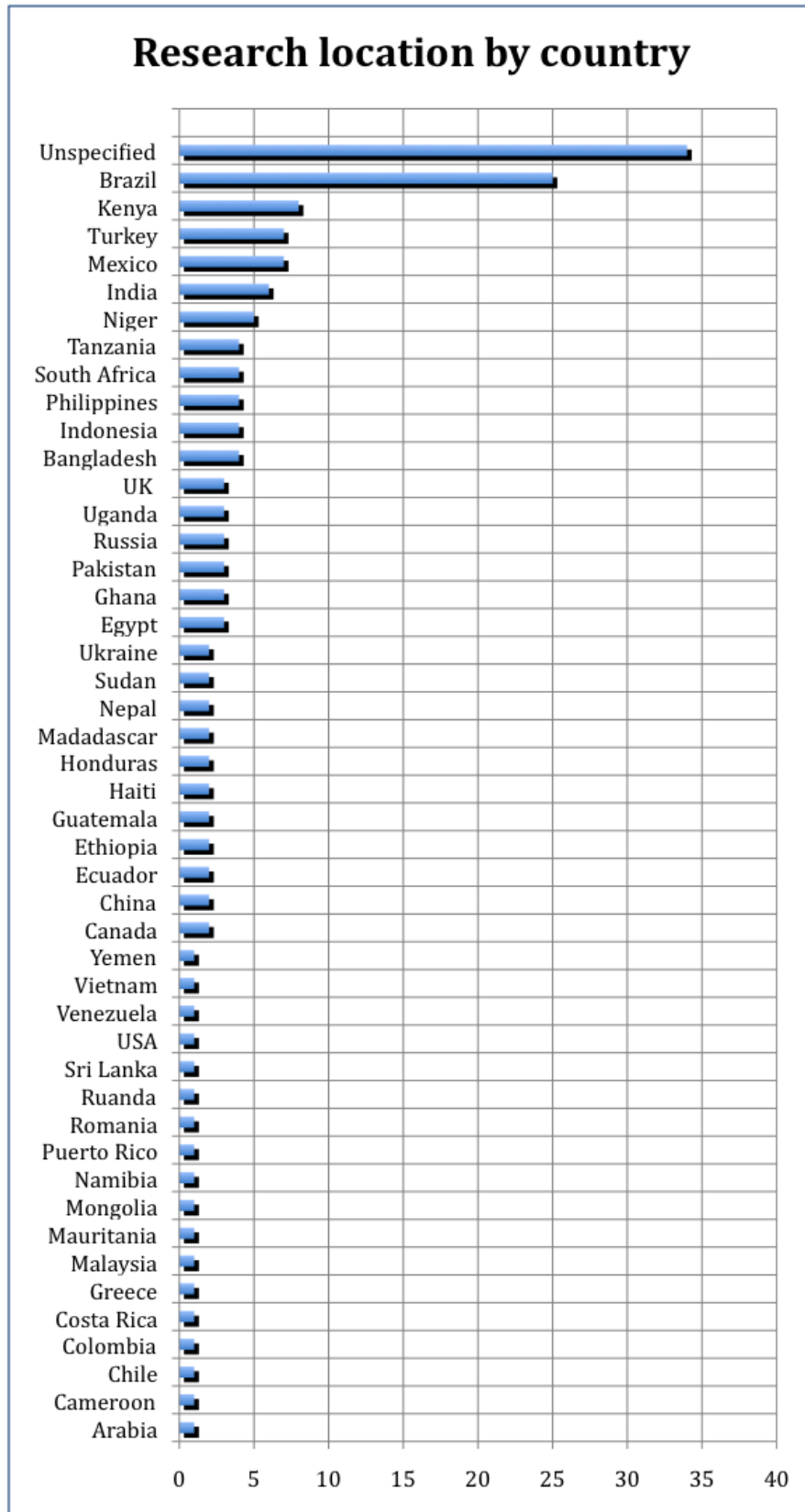


Figure 2: Research location by country

The categorisation of research places by country gives a different type of information than their categorisation by continent, as seen in Figure 3 below:

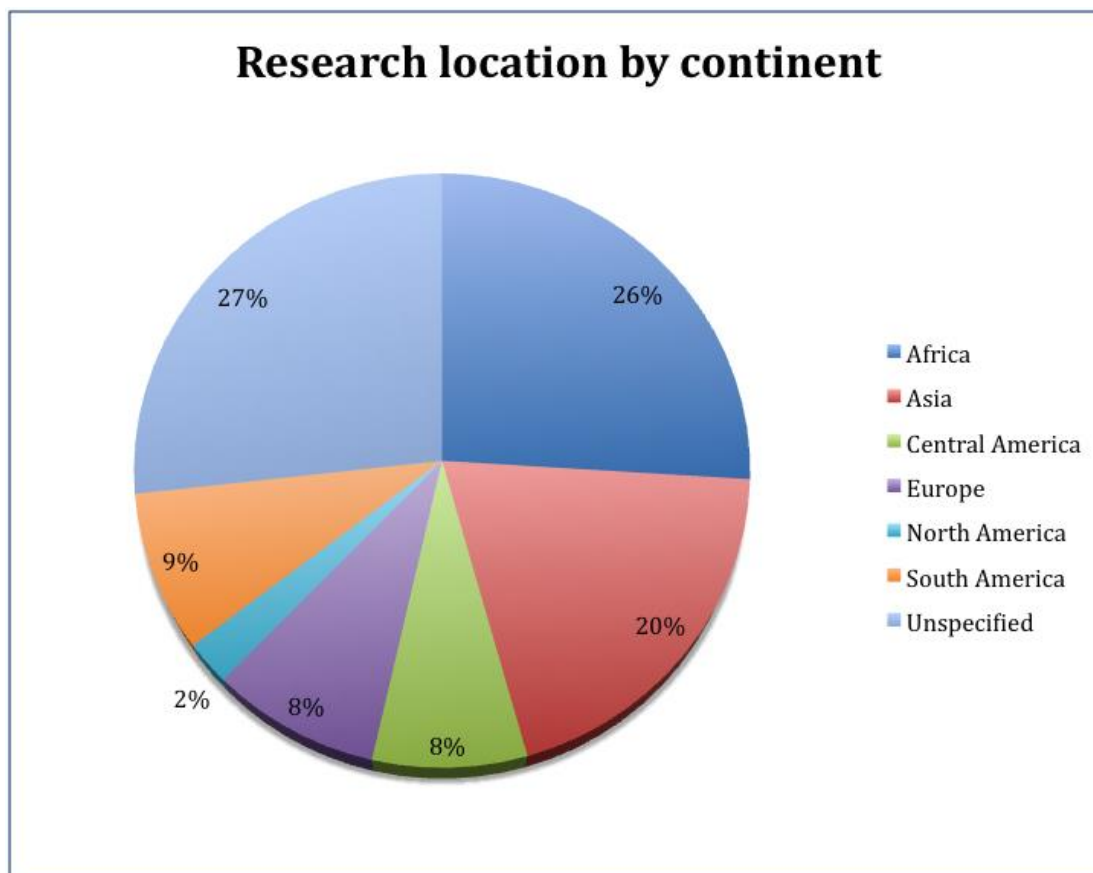


Figure 3: Research location by continent

In fact, the continent that appears as the most frequent location of research on street children is not South America but Africa, followed by Asia. On these two continents, the scholars have dedicated themselves to the study of phenomenon of street children in a wide variety of countries. In Africa, situation and thus research focus differs significantly from North Africa through the heart of the continent to South Africa. For example, in line with the formal legal treatment, the researchers discuss how in Egypt, children living and working on the streets of Cairo, treated as criminals even if they do not perform illegal activities “are regularly rounded up by the police and held in crowded detention centres” (Bibars, 1998). On the other hand, in Nigeria scholars tend to study street children as “a ready pool of ethno-religious soldiers”, in

relation to the national security (Nte, Eke & Igbani, 2009). While in South Africa particular attention is paid to the children's right to social security, as street "children are very vulnerable to sexual offences, including prostitution" and their situation is compared to the situation of other particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, working children in rural settings and illegal immigrants' children (Du Plessis & Conley, 2007). As we see in Figure 3, in terms of numbers of publications, Africa, with its wide variety of problems is followed by Asia. It is worth mentioning that from a scientific point of view the issue of street children in Asia appears often in relation to identity and in particular to place identity. For example, street children in Indonesia appropriate "urban niches" in the city where they can earn money, feel relatively safe and survive by winning space (Beazley, 2000).

While it was not difficult to categorise the analysed scientific production by publication year and research location, it appeared much more questionable to perform a quantitative analysis of main topics covered in relation to street children. The complex zone of the street as the environment of street children is often discussed in the light of children's rights. Some authors analyse the phenomenon based on the street children's perception of their rights (Snodgrass Godoy, 1999), while others attempt to describe how the situation on the streets reflects the lack of respect of children's rights (Burr, 2002; Salazar, 2008; Drybread, 2009). Another topic often discussed in relation to street children relates to the state of their health and prevention practices, as well as particular diseases, from AIDS to dental problems (Baybuga & Celik, 2004; Swart-Kruger & Richter, 1997; Clatts & Davis, 1999; Contreras-Bulnes & Reyes-Silveyra, 2008). In relation to health, some authors represent a purely medical approach, whilst others are interested in the perception of the disease in order to identify the best prevention practices.

Finally, another topic closely related to street children is how they are perceived, both by the actors directly involved with them and by passers-by (Aldebot-Green, 2011), by children themselves in terms of their identity (Young & Barrett, 2009; Butler, 2009) and even by mass media, such as films (Epstein, 1999). The picture that appears as a result of analysing the mainstream international scientific production on street children has a lot in common with the traditional topics studied using the social representations approach, such as human rights, health and identity.

Coming back to Orr's conclusions on identity as social representation, it can be certainly applied to the case of street children who, by definition, live in complex zones. In particular, when considering scientific production on street children, the contributions of Meda concerning the situation in Nairobi stand out as those using Moscovici's social representations theory and Archer's identity theory of internal conversation (Meda, 2010, 2011). She recognizes the crucial role of social representations in the process of negotiating identity. In a similar way to Orr's approach, Meda (2010) pays attention not only to how street children represent themselves, but also how local populations represent them worldwide by using stigmatising names of: *chinchas* (bugs) in Colombia, *marginais* (criminals) in Rio de Janeiro, *polillas* (moths) in Bolivia, *bui doi* (children of dust) in Vietnam, *saligoman* (bad boys) in Rwanda, and *mosquitos* (mosquitoes) in Cameroun (Kopoka, 2002). Meda (2010, p. 12) concludes that others form street children's identity through relations of affiliation and differentiation in the light of their social representations, but children themselves can and do negotiate their identity "in a way that allows a positive restructuring around the positive mainstay of the relational self".

A FEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

How can we analyse street children's identity according to Orr's approach? She has developed the integrated acculturation model of immigrants' social identity with the hope that others would test the degree to which it can be generalised to other populations (Mana, Orr & Mana, 2009). I realise that moving from immigrants to street children may be considered as a stretch, yet such reflection offers interesting possibilities. In fact, the street children are a disadvantaged group whose social identity depends on how local communities represent them. It could therefore be interesting to carry out a study based on the integrated acculturation model, in order to verify how street children represent their own identity compared with how the surrounding population does so. Moreover, it would be worth a try to explore the group life of street children; in particular how they position themselves "within the relational fabric among other members", based on Orr's assumption that a collective identity "is a core social representation, existing in every group" (Ben-Asher, Wagner & Orr, 2006, p. 113). A minority group, such as street children or kibbutz, faces the challenge of negotiating their identity (Orr, Assor & Cairns, 1996). In the particular case of street children it would be interesting to research the upward mobility

and its representations in the three groups: street children, former street children who took the opportunity to leave the street, as well as the local population. Of course, it is a rare case when street children actually have a choice, but even in such rare cases a further research could explore their “desire to adopt the ideas of a high-status group” which could motivate some of them to “reject their group identity” (Orr, Assor & Cairns, 1996, p. 706). In spite of the sensitivity of such research from the ethical point of view, I consider it crucial to address all the needs, including social psychological sphere, while taking actions to improve or change the street children’s situation.

From the operational point of view, Orr’s contribution of conceiving the notion of identity as social representation can be applied to different types of research carried out all over the world and described in the previous section. In particular, the values of street children can be analysed according to the social model developed by Orr, which combines two independent paths: parental and social (Paryente & Orr, 2010). Since the majority of the intergenerational value transmission models are based on perceived parental values, in such an approach there is no room for consideration of values of street children. However, Orr’s model considers children’s identity and thus lays theoretical grounds for analysing street children’s values. Based on the analysis performed, not very many studies were dedicated to the street children’s values, which is certainly an interesting way of approaching the topic.

The multiple threads of research on street children that have been analysed above altogether form a part of the children’s identity as subjects of research and study. In terms of Orr’s conception of identity as representation, I hope that this review of scientific contributions concerning street children has, in a systematic way, contributed to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon so to speak. It has given an outline of street children’s identity through their representations by the international scientific mainstream community. It so happens that at least among the three major academic publishers taken into account, the references to the social representations theory have been quite rare, which leads to the conclusion that in general, from the mainstream scholarly point of view, the perceived situation of street children is taken for granted as their “objective” situation, without taking into account the social constructionist approach. Of course, there is a significant number of scientific publications concerning street children in the framework of social representations theory; however, it does not appear as dominant. In fact, the majority of studies carried out on the topic of street children attempts to

describe an “objective picture” of the reality that children live, which actually is the social representation of the authors concerning the phenomenon. Few offer the epistemological perspective of social representations that allows to acknowledge one’s representational view and to identify alternative representations. The above review of scientific publications demonstrates that within their discipline, the scholars who perform research within such diverse disciplines as social work, medicine (ranging from toxicology, through infective diseases and prevention medicine), sociology, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, political science, etc., all attempt to describe “their” piece of reality of street children.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To sum up the above reflections, Orr’s conception of the notion of identity as social representation leads to the conclusion that epistemologically, her vision of the world fits in the social constructivist approach. However, considering the major mainstream scientific production on street children, a vast majority of scholars do not share this approach, even though it could be and has been successfully applied to the precise phenomena that they study.

Additionally, Orr in her numerous scientific contributions concerning children and adolescents in complex zones, has often categorised the participants in her research both *a priori* (for example based on their nationality or residence) and *a posteriori* (after considering the results of the research). In the majority of publications analysed the categorisation of street children skips the social level and is not as profound. Many researchers use the existing categorisations, for instance Lusk’s four categories (Lusk, 1992) of poor children working on the streets and returning to their families for the night, independent street workers, children of street families and children who have broken off contact with their families; or Cosgrove’s two dimensions of family involvement and deviant behaviour (Cosgrove, 1990). However, following Orr’s research lines it would certainly be beneficial to go beyond existing categorisations and to consider reclassifying the participants as a result of the research. From a practical point of view, it would be beneficial to consider the identity aspects and self-portrait in order to differentiate between the street children when identifying ways of improving their situation. Each research presents some ethical aspects, but approaching street children’s identity appears as especially

challenging and delicate, as the scientists have to deal with the difficulty of research on children in a dangerous and very unstable situation.

Considering the limitations of this research, the scientific production, apart from being mainstream, includes only publications in English as the international language of science. Certainly, scientific contributions in other languages have their part in what we could call the scientific representation of street children, which in turn contributes to forming their identity. However, due to the fact that all over the world universities encourage scholars to publish in English, I believe that the limitation to this language is actually not a major problematic aspect of this research, but rather a more global problem (or opportunity) that science is facing worldwide. Moreover, I realise that the scientific point of view is not the predominant one when it comes to constructing the identity of street children. Probably mass media, personal encounters and interpersonal communication, as well as other sources have contributed in a much more significant way into how street children are viewed and how they view themselves. It was not my ambition to analyse comprehensive social representations of street children, which certainly vary depending on cultural context. While I attempted to shed some light into how and where scientists represent street children, certainly much more work could be done by gathering and analysing information from different sources than mainstream scientific journals.

I shall emphasise one final limitation of scientific journals here: due to the complex and often lengthy revision process (on average one year), by their nature scientific contributions are seldom timely and thus usually reflect the past. However, in the case of identity of street children it is probably a matter of generations by the time it undergoes major changes and therefore I considered it appropriate to study the scholars' representation of street children, in order to better understand their identity.

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APPENDIX

List of 171 papers analysed

Science Direct

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