

# Researching Street-living and Working Children

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## *Abstract*

*Research among street-living and working children has contributed to informed practice, which in turn has aided children living out very difficult lifestyles either living or working on the street. The following document highlights the important task of careful and reliable research among this population by focusing on several participatory methodologies. Among the methods that are presented are: Street Ethnography, followed closely by Participant Observation, Interviews, Focus Groups and Questionnaires. Because research among children can be coercive and abusive, several cautions and ethical considerations are discussed in order to emphasize the protective care of the child or adolescent.*

## **Street Research**

The anthropologist and folklorist, Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) is best known for his book *The Golden Bough* published first in 1890. He told of the ‘savages’ and of their myths and deep held beliefs in magic and superstition. When asked whether or not he had ever met any of the people he had studied his apparent reply was, ‘God forbid.’ Much of his information was collected from missionaries and others traveling and working among the so-called ‘savages’ (Swart 1990, 1). Perhaps some researchers would say the same in regards to street-living and working children.<sup>1</sup> Most boys and girls living on the street are certainly not the cute children that appear on the front of a child sponsorship brochures.

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<sup>1</sup> While I use the term child, in all reality I am referring to young people under the age of 18 years of age. The United Nations uses this age limit to refer to children. That being said, we must certainly recognize and address the developmental differences between those children in early childhood stages, middle age stages and that of adolescence. To not recognize the intellectual, emotional and physiological changes occurring is in many ways to commit the same sin of not contextualizing or understanding the differences in culture and go about presenting the Gospel as if all societies were monocultural. In my own experience, the majority of “children” actually living on the street are adolescents.

As the leader of a Christian ministry to street-living children<sup>2</sup> in Caracas, Venezuela I received numerous requests, from both national and international students interested in studying the phenomenon of street youth to do research on the children in our program. While it is certainly not my place to judge the motives of those who seek to do research and gain knowledge, at times from afar, on street-living and working children, there are certainly several issues that must be considered in regards to ethics and validity with any research endeavor.

The very children who live on the street and whom we are trying to help deserve the very best as we go about reaching out to them holistically. Some practitioners feel they have no time for research. I have heard, “we must help the children now,” but just as there is a flaw in ‘knowing’ without a responsive action-oriented approach, so there are flaws in ‘doing’ without an informed thoughtful action. If we are to respond in a way that is appropriate and take action in working with the children to create safer environments, then we must understand what their lives are like and how they arrived where they are at. Research and action go hand in hand when it comes to understanding and working with children at risk.

As those who are concerned about best practices, advocacy and child protection in our desire to help children living on the street we must become acquainted with the context, lifestyle and habits of these young people. This is primarily done through qualitative research.

The research I am focusing on concerns with the gathering of facts and other information that seeks to answer a question, thus solving a problem (Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003, 10).

### **Ethics and Child-based Research**

Ethicists teach that most rules for research are based upon three common understandings of ethics in research:

1. Respect and justice, because these focus on doing ‘good’ and not harm. This includes respecting children as dignified human beings.
2. Rights based research, which focuses on the 3 aspects of rights: Provision, Protection, and Participation. Participation rights include allowing children to be part of the research process, in sharing their views and relying upon them for knowledge.
3. Working on the production of benefits, and reducing the costs and harms (Alderson 2004, 98)

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<sup>2</sup> Some practitioners and academics are concerned about the term “street children.” Some describe it as inaccurate, others as harmful. It is of my opinion that the term as is used in literature as part of a never ending pursuit of defining homeless and abandoned children, is not helpful. While I have gone to great lengths to express why I feel this way in other places (see *Community Children*, Burch 2005), I will on occasion use the term here due to the recognized definitions that accompany such a term in academic writing. Other terms that I prefer are “street-living children,” “homeless and abandoned children,” and “street-working children.” These terms are descriptive and limit the stereotyping and ‘object’ like analysis.

It is critical that those involved in research with young children know local and federal policies on researching children. These policies and laws change from country to country. Adults who work in schools and care facilities are normally subjected to criminal background checks and psychological evaluations. The institution or group sending out the researcher must take care to ensure the children will be safe. The researcher should also take care in screening assistants and helpers who will be participating in the research process as well. Both the child and researcher need to feel and be safe during the research process.

Another issue that must be included in our discussion on ethics is that of power. Typically, it is the researcher that often holds the power when it comes to interpreting the data and the writing of reports and thus children are not always given the opportunity to contribute to this process (Alderson 2004, 101). Researchers should keep these possible issues in mind when working with children.

Power and the position of researchers is a very crucial topic to reflect upon. If researchers are to have a truly participative arrangement then they must take into account the issue of positionality. We know “field research with street children presents two interrelated ethical problems: first, how to gain access to and build up the trust of the children, and second, issues affecting the research process which are associated with the identity and positionality of the researcher” (Young and Barret 2001, 384). In engaging the homeless child in research, many researchers have reflected upon the issue of power and the position of being adults.

In Christian based research, we are obligated to remember the *Imago Dei* that is present in each person we seek to understand. As humans created in God’s image, humans deserve to be recognized as part of God’s creation and dignified human beings created in the very likeness of God, our Maker and Savior.

### **The Issue of Consent**

One must pay special attention to informed consent and other ethical concerns. Children and youth should be given freedom to choose their involvement or not in the research process. Recently while conducting research on the central role of children in planning and development of an apartment complex and the resulting organized community I had the following experience. I asked one of the teenagers in the complex if she would be interested in participating in an interview. Her response was not one of excitement, but I thought I would get her mother’s consent just in case she changed her mind. Her mother told me, “She must participate,” to which I responded, “She is not obligated.”<sup>3</sup> Ethical issues are often thought to be the central difference between research with children and research with adults. For example, “it is widely recognized that in order to gain children’s consent and involvement in research, one has to go via adult gatekeepers who are able to limit researchers’ access to the children” (Punch 2002, 323). Not only are we obligated to go to adult gatekeepers, but we must have the consent of the children we are researching. In the case of children who live alone on the street, at the very least we should have the consent of the child and consult national laws and policies in regards to children’s right.

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<sup>3</sup> The reader should note that I chose not to interview or include the girl in the interview, due to her lack of interest in the process.

## **Confidentiality**

In regards to confidentiality, the children involved in research should be guaranteed confidentiality<sup>4</sup>. Confidentiality is of extreme importance in researching children and this confidentiality must not be broken unless a child reveals that his or her rights have been violated or they have been harmed or abused; in which case this must be reported. In some countries, to not report such an incident is illegal and it is certainly unethical. Researchers should also be aware that their investigation can be used in later court testimonies if a child reports abuse during an interview or conversation. Typically it is not appropriate for the researcher to offer help or counseling for the child that has been harmed, but rather should help get the child connected to a place where help can be offered (Masson 2004, 52-53). The emphasis throughout the research should be focused on confidentiality. If a young person is confident their confidentiality is guarded they are more apt to be honest during the interview process and the outcomes of the research will be less biased.

## **Children as Social Actors**

Another issue that we should keep in mind in research is the role of the child as a social actor. Children are often disregarded when it comes to the value of their opinion or perspective. In fact, until recently, children have been overlooked in most academic disciplines. I believe children are important participants in society and church life. As participants, children have a voice and must be given space to speak into issues affecting their care and protection.

Children are not to be regarded as passive beings, or objects in the research, but rather as individuals with agency and co-participants with their adult counterparts. In the past, many researchers have passed up opportunities to gain new perspective from children because they thought that they were incapable or too immature to be involved in the process (Alderson 2004, 97). Children who live and work on the street, in most cases, know much more about their environment and condition than they are given credit for. The voice of the children must be respected in street-based research among children.

## **Child Participation in Research**

Recently there has been a switch in social science methodology, from doing research *on* children and youth to doing research *with* them. However there are complications from this new research perspective as well. "One implication concerns the nature of the power relations between researchers, who are normally adults, and those who are researched, in this case children and young people" (Fraser 2004, 5). It would be wise for researchers to take this issue into account and to intentionally work towards a pedagogical relationship. A pedagogical relationship focuses on creating an atmosphere of mutual learning and appreciation. This takes us to our next subject, research *with* children.

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<sup>4</sup> In order to protect the confidentiality of the child or adult, pseudonyms and a change of circumstances or geography is recommended.

Research *with* children, instead of just *on* children provides us with a unique view that up until recently has not been approached. Researchers are just now beginning to look to children as the source for understanding children and their context. One research methodology that can aid us in our desire to include the child or youth as research participants is Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is one very suitable research approach that would serve children well, as participants, in the research process. But before we get into the details of research with children, we must first take a second look at participation, within the framework of child oriented research. One of the better places to begin is with Roger Hart's participation ladder (see figure 3).

Hart makes use of a ladder to illustrate participation. Participation increases as one moves up the ladder. The bottom of the ladder includes non-participative techniques such as *manipulation, decoration and tokenism*.

These three approaches to working with children and youth tend to lend to being hierarchical in nature and are non-participative, and focus on using children for a particular cause, either through direct manipulation or a participation that seems authentic, but in reality is only so in appearance.

As one moves up the ladder of participation one moves into the areas of effective participative ideas and thus the results are more child-centered. These areas consist of *assigned but informed, consulted and informed* and *adult-initiated-shared discussions with children*. These are areas where the child is given some control over the process and participation increases. As one enters into "child oriented research" the more participative the child becomes with the research. The two last categories are: *child initiated and directed* and *child initiated shared decision with adults*. This is considered to be very participative and child centered development or research.

The goal of PAR is for maximum participation. However, it might not be possible to begin at the top of the ladder, but one should not begin at the bottom either. PAR will most likely begin with *adult initiated/shared discussions with children*. This is not in conflict with PAR, as it often times begins with the researcher teaching on issues of research design and process. Also, this is considered participation, as long as one is working his/her way up to more participative engagement with the children. The eventual goal is to allow the children and youth to be full participants, leading the research and data collecting. One example of this is found in the work of Maria Cristina Salazar.

Salazar worked with young laborers in Bogotá, Colombia. The external agents consisted of a research group made up of three officials from the Ministry of Labor, six social workers and the author. The first thing they sought to do was to introduce to the child laborers (and themselves) knowledge about child labor practices and current legislation in Colombia. They then went on to develop, as a group of insiders and outsiders, illustrated booklets and photographs dealing with child labor and outlining current laws and rights of children. The outsiders (external agents) then conducted interviews, and through socio-dramas, autobiographies, and informal conversations gained knowledge about the social circumstances of the children (1991, 54).

## Ladder of Participation

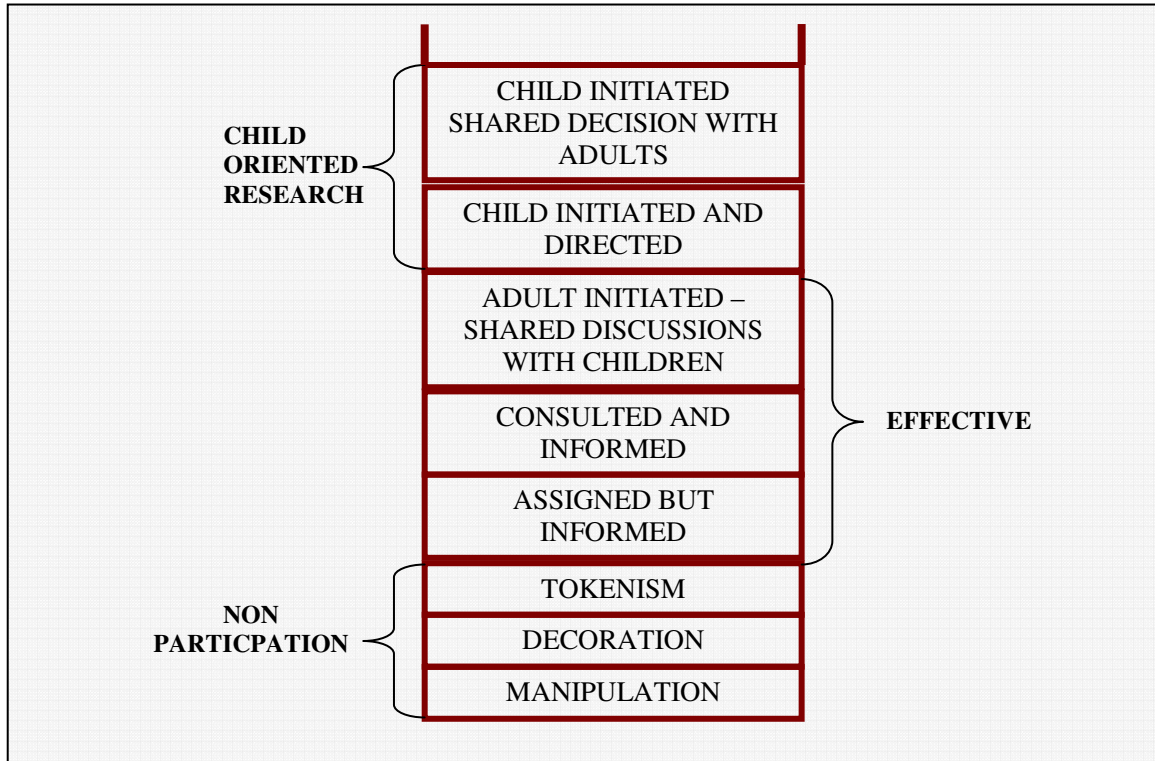


Figure 3, Adapted by Karen Flanagan of Child Wise (Hart 1992)

In reflecting on the project Salazar comments: "This effort to obtain knowledge about the children's own experience, opinions and beliefs was a slow process that required the establishment of more equalitarian or symmetrical relationships with and among the children and a development of trust with members of the research team" (1991, 55). The researcher states that overtime the children began to share their stories---their history---and why they were working. The team also focused on opportunities to impart knowledge about "human rights, local ethnic and cultural origins---in short, knowledge which could help to alleviate inferiority feelings and assert self-respect and self-esteem" (1991, 56). As the process moved forward, the children participated more and more in the research. Salazar freely admits, "it was not easy to start and sustain participative processes with the children in the activities . . ." (1991, 58), yet we know, that participation grew over time. It was only when the children began to trust the outside research team did the participation really gain momentum.

While the outcomes of the research process did not prove to be 'revolutionary' as a whole over the country, the young laborers did feel empowered as a result of their participation and were able to find concrete answers to problems they were facing as young people on the streets of Bogotá (1991, 62)..

One of the results and benefits of PAR with young people and children is that they are encouraged to explore, reflect and act upon “their social and natural environment with the aim of strengthening their capacity for self-determination” (Nieuwenhuys 2004, 207). Children are social agents or actors and it is through their participative process that they are given a voice to begin to address issues that are important to them and to trust their decisions is crucial.

Involving children in research, while a rather new concept, we know that without the child's perspective, we will never fully understand how they perceive such things like education, child-care, protective services etc, so children are essential to increasing our knowledge in caring for them.

## **Research Techniques**

Some research methods that could be approached as we carry out investigations on street-living and working children are as follows:

- Street ethnography
- Participant observation
- Dramas
- Narrative
- Drawings
- Role-play
- Interviews
- Questionnaires

Numerous research methods are available for research among street-living and working children, but the following are highlighted due to their sensitivity and ethical appropriateness in working with children. For further reading on specific research techniques and appropriateness, see the Bibliography below.

## **Street Ethnography**

One example of a street ethnography (SE) is found in the research by Kamal Fahmi in Cairo, Egypt. Fahmi chose to work with a group of homeless youth in Cairo and because of this the research group decided upon SE as the most appropriate method in which to develop a better understanding of the context and issues affecting the children on the street.

The main task of SE work is to "develop a strategy of social infiltration into the living milieus of targeted youth. In so doing, the street worker, like every other ethnographer, must turn to observation and participant observation" (Fahmi 2004, 78).

A partial list of qualities that the researcher must have in order to properly use SE are:

sensitivity; knowing how to observe and listen, the ability to make connections and to take time to understand; belief in the capacities of the youth and in his or her potential, accepting differences in language, values, and culture, and respect

youth and those surrounding them; to be able to establish their own limits and recognize their own strengths, weaknesses, and fears; to be available; and to have a spirit of initiative (Fahmi 2004, 78).

SE research is best conducted in the street or in an institution on a randomly selected group of children or youth. This research will last from several months to years if done correctly and employs the use of participant observation, interviews, note taking and other anthropological methods that focus on understanding the group culture.

### **Participant Observation (PO)**

PO is probably the most recognized social science research and was developed within Social Anthropology and Urban Sociology. Classic research projects like *Street Corner Society* by William Foote Whyte highlighted the need for such research among those who are considered street people (such as street-living and working children).

One of the best and most practical books written on how to do PO research was written by James P. Spradley. In his book, Spradley describes the process as a cyclical process that involves eight steps. These steps are: 1) define a research problem; 2) formulate the hypothesis; 3) Make operational definitions; 4) design a research instrument; 5) gather the data; 6) analyze the data; 7) draw conclusions and 8) report the results. All eight steps are essential in the development of ethnographic research (1980, 27-28). Spradley suggest that if these steps are followed, the research will ultimately be less chaotic and 'doable' (1980, 35).

PO research can involve a number of different kinds of techniques. Some of the methods included within this type of research are, direct observation, informal interviews and participation in the life of the group.

### **Interviews**

Typically informal interviews will occur while engaged in PO research. It is quite normal while participating in PO to have opportunities to ask questions of the children and youth you are observing. Most of the informal interviews will provide the researcher with essential data that will in turn help in establishing the questions that will later be used during formal interviews and focus groups. Most informal interviews do not need a recorder (notes and memory should be sufficient), however more formal interviews, with prepared questions should consist in a voice recording.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups have been acknowledged to be one of the better approaches to engaging children and youth in research. They are very effective in this type of research because children are encouraged to speak and reflect on issues because other children are involved in the discussion (Stewart 1990, 98-99). I have found this to be particularly true in my own research. A good size for focus groups is 8 to 12 individuals and focus groups can last from 1 hour to 1 1/2 hours, depending on the age of the children and maturity levels (Bernard 2006, 232). If the group consists of young children, the time should be

considerably limited. I also found in previous focus groups to provide snacks and drinks for the participants, as it helps to provide an informal environment for children who might be concerned about such a meeting. A list of 10 to 15 open-ended questions will provide a typical group with enough information to discuss. Notes and recording of the meeting are a must for accurate data collection.

### **A Word about Questionnaires**

While questionnaires (and surveys) can be helpful in carrying out research on street-living and working children, we must use caution. This method can be defined as: The use of developed and structured questions to gain particular information about the children that are being focused upon in the research. The questions that are used are intentionally limited in order to gain data that is very specific. Questionnaires may be most useful in collecting information from adults about the street children phenomenon. One caution about questionnaires has been presented by Ennew, in that “the framing of questions used in survey questionnaires is a very skilled job and needs a good deal of testing to get it right (1994, 91). One of the reasons that great care must be taken with questionnaires is that both the questions and the tact must be contextual for the children that are being surveyed. You may find children either unresponsive to questionnaires given the formality or they may be untruthful; after all, they have many reasons not to trust adults with lots of questions!

### **Data Analysis**

In the end, which ever type of research method is used, the data will need to be analyzed and the results written up. This is probably the most complicated aspect to the research. Due to the essential nature of data analysis several books on analyzing research will be suggested in the Bibliography and should be consulted before the results are written up.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, if the research is not able to be applied or engaged with action-oriented principles to improve the lives of the children and youth with whom we are working, then the research is not worthy of its calling. The very purpose of research among street-living children should have direct benefits for them. Ethically, we are guided by a concern to do justice and if our research does not seek the liberation and prevention of the causes that lead to children having to live or work (in unreasonable conditions) on the street, then the researcher must question the very reason for pursuing such a topic.

Some questions to consider as we do research are: What is God leading us to do? How is God working in the community where we wish to participate? What has God been doing in the lives of the children we wish to help prior to our arrival? As we think through these questions and pursue a common place for our research, we gain trust, one with another, and it is through our solidarity that we look into the issue at hand.

As Christian researchers we should be concerned with contextual issues that are at work in keeping the children in a state of powerlessness. Ultimately, our action-oriented task is to participate with the disempowered and marginalized community in bringing about a change in structural forces and creating a more just society that takes serious human rights and ultimately the dignity of each individual child created in the Image of God.

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