

# Homeless children: Experiences and meanings of the environments they construct

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## Homeless children: Experiences and meanings of the environments they construct

**Objective.** This work sought to learn of the experiences of homeless children and understand the meanings they give to environments they construct within these spaces. The study took place in Medellín, Colombia in 2015. **Methods.** Ours was a qualitative research with ethnographic approach. Non-structured interviews and observations were conducted; a field diary was kept. **Results.** The street, although a space of public use, is converted by children into their private space; they carry in it almost all their activities and construct two big environments: that of the street that attracts and educates and that of the work that is transitory because it is performed to survive. These children dream with an ideal environment that allows them to live quietly. **Conclusion.** Children convert the street into a private place where they carry out their daily practices: socializing, working, sleeping, having fun, and relaxing, that is, a place of social construction.

**Key words:** homeless youth; working environment; anthropology, cultural; interpersonal relations; social condition.

## Los niños en situación de calle: experiencias y significados de los ambientes que construyen

**Objetivo.** Conocer las experiencias de los niños en situación de calle, y comprender los significados que dan a los ambientes que construyen en estos espacios. Medellín, Colombia 2015. **Métodos.** Investigación cualitativa con enfoque etnográfico. Se realizaron entrevistas no estructuradas, observaciones; se llevó un diario de campo. **Resultados.** La calle, aunque espacio de uso público, los niños la convierten en su espacio privado; desarrollan en ella casi la totalidad de sus actividades y construyen dos grandes ambientes: el de calle que engancha y educa y el de trabajo que es transitorio porque se hace para sobrevivir. Sueñan con un ambiente ideal que les

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permita vivir de manera tranquila. **Conclusión.** Los niños convierten la calle en un lugar privado donde realizan sus prácticas cotidianas: socializarse, trabajar, dormir, divertirse y relajarse, es decir, un lugar de construcción social.

**Palabras clave:** jóvenes sin hogar; ambiente de trabajo; antropología cultural; relaciones interpersonales; condiciones sociales.

### As crianças em situação de rua: experiências e significados dos ambientes que constroem

**Objetivo.** Conhecer as experiências das crianças em situação de rua, e compreender os significados que dão

## Introduction

In Colombia, as in other countries in Latin America, there is the phenomenon of homeless children. Medellín, according to the 2009 census denominated: Census for Homeless Population, reports a total of 1080 children<sup>1</sup> (following UNICEF indications, the term children will comprise the population under 18 years of age).<sup>2</sup> The street is a space where diverse situations, phenomena, and social events take place: informal commercial activities, fights, robberies, illegal drug distribution, drug and weapons trafficking, that is, the legal converges with the illegal. It is the elemental component of the city and becomes a place to meet, work, play, and survive.<sup>3</sup> It is understood as a system of relations<sup>4</sup> and a practiced setting,<sup>5</sup> to the extent that those who inhabit it or transit through it interact with other people and the environment, converting “the public space into a place of action and communication”<sup>6</sup>. Children consider the street their place of housing, not only due to the time they remain in it, but because therein they find their family<sup>7</sup> and turn the street, which is traditionally a public space, into a private space, where they carry out their daily practices, like eating, playing, working, sleeping, and relating amongst them, with vendors, with other street inhabitants, and with those who transit through it.

aos ambientes que constroem nestes espaços. Medellín, Colômbia 2015. **Métodos.** Investigação qualitativa com enfoque etnográfico. Se realizaram entrevistas não estruturadas, observações; se fez um diário de campo. **Resultados.** A rua, embora espaço de uso público, as crianças a convertem em seu espaço privado; desenvolvem nela quase a totalidade de suas atividades e constroem dois grandes ambientes: o de rua que engancha e educa e o de trabalho que é transitório porque se faz para sobreviver. Sonham com um ambiente ideal que lhes permita viver de maneira tranquila. **Conclusão.** As crianças convertem a rua num lugar privado onde realizam suas práticas cotidianas: socializar-se, trabalhar, dormir, divertir-se e relaxar-se, ou seja, um lugar de construção social.

**Palavras chave:** menores de rua; ambiente de trabalho; antropologia cultural; relações interpessoais; condições sociais.

Some authors have been concerned<sup>8-13</sup> with describing situations, like drug use, abuse, morbidity attended, and risk behaviors in homeless children. Other authors, like Melo,<sup>3</sup> Delgado,<sup>4</sup> and De Certeau<sup>5</sup> have described the street in a global manner as a place of social construction. This work sought to accomplish comprehension of the street dynamics from the point of view of children from their experiences. The research questions were: how do children construct the environment in which they develop their activities? And: what does that environment mean to them? The objectives of this study centered particularly on knowing the experiences of homeless children and understanding the meanings they give to the environment they construct.

## Methods

This was a qualitative study with ethnographic approach. Qualitative research is characterized for being inductive and focuses on understanding meanings to construct sense around the problem or phenomenon studied.<sup>14</sup> The ethnographic approach has culture as center of interest, which according to Geertz,<sup>15</sup> is the “structure of socially established meanings”. Another central element of ethnography is the context, which implies more than the physical environment, as

well as analysis and abstraction processes.<sup>16</sup> The population studied were homeless children who voluntarily accepted to participate in the research. They frequent the downtown area of the city of Medellín (Colombia), between the sector near the of the metro stations Prado and Parque de Berrío, including Bulevar de los Puentes, Parque de Bolívar, Plazoleta Botero, and sectors surrounding these central locations of the city.

The research was carried out by starting with the following concepts: *a) Homeless children* (hereinafter denominated children). Forselledo<sup>10</sup> understands homeless children as “those under 18 years of age who have weak or non-existing family ties, who make of the street their main habitat and develop therein survival strategies”. Experience in the street is the accumulated life story of the children from the time they leave home to the moment they enter an institution or return to their families;<sup>11</sup> *b) Public space*. According to Melo,<sup>3</sup> it is “a daily construction, a process of interaction between man and environment”; for Delgado,<sup>4</sup> the public space must be represented and, for such, it should have been practiced and lived. According to De Certeau,<sup>5</sup> the public space implies norms that must be complied, given that on the contrary offenders will be excluded. The street is a public space to which inhabitants assign their own meaning; it is a space of survival, socialization, and learning; and *c) Environment*. The environment is the link between environment and context, where children conduct adaptation and transformation processes. The circumstance of a given phenomenon are considered context; in this case, the interactions of the children. The environment is a place where one inhabits; it is the physical, the material.

To gather information, 64 non-structured interviews were conducted, which permitted delving into specific themes without the need for a list of questions. This type of interview implies active listening and permits the interviewee the freedom to speak and attribute meanings. Some themes addressed during the interviews were: experiences in the street, distinct types of environment they construct, and the ideal

environment for their survival. Initially, open questions were formulated and, then, the questions were more specific to delve into aspects of their lives in the street. To achieve fidelity of the information, the interviews were recorded in video and audio and were performed when trust and approach were accomplished with the participants, a situation that in some cases took several days. The observations were carried out in places frequented by the children to describe the spaces where they establish interactions and conduct their activities, so that they would – in turn – describe the setting, colors, smells, places, and sounds. A total of 170 hours were employed during the observations. A field diary was kept, which registered the meetings with the participants and important aspects for the investigation, such as: observations, comments, personal and methodological reflections, clarifications, and other topics that helped understand the phenomenon studied.

Information analysis was performed simultaneously with its collection. Upon transcribing the interviews and observations, codes were identified; these were grouped into categories and subcategories and maps were diagrammed to facilitate the analysis and discussion, which was carried out by the researchers and participants together. During this stage, the participation of the children was fundamental, given that it guaranteed that the results were from their point of view (Emic vision) and that categories overlooked by the researchers would be identified. The rigor<sup>17</sup> for this investigation was accomplished by the credibility and auditability through the use of recordings, confirmation of results, and their revision with the participants. The ethical considerations kept in mind were the following: *a)* respect for the autonomy of the participants. For this, prior to each interview, they were explained the intention of the study and their decision to respond totally or partially was respected; *b)* participant identity was protected and confidentiality of the information was guaranteed; the results were presented to the children for their approval. Resolution 8430 of 1993<sup>18</sup> was kept in mind, which dictates the dispositions for the research. The study was

endorse by the Ethics Committee of the National Faculty of Public Health during session 93 of 28 January 2014.

## Results

The children consider the street their place of dwelling, hence, they turn it into a private space through their interrelations with other people and with the environment. To the extent in which they carry out activities within a given space, they construct an environment to which they assign meanings according to the different experiences.

## Environment

The physical elements identified by the children in the places they frequent are: the Metro (urban rail system), buildings, hotels and tenements, parks and squares, fountains, churches, means of transportation, commercial establishments, places of entertainment and of storage, like warehouses and parking lots for motorcycles, coffee vending carts, street vending facilities and pushcarts; parking lots and coves or places where they safeguard their belongings, like sewers, water and electric meters, or in trees: *we would hide our blankets in the sewer and retrieved them at night (E41)*. For them, the street has sensory characteristics, like smells, colors, and sounds. Bodily odors like urine or fecal matter. Smells of psychoactive substances like *basuco* (cocaine paste), marijuana, and cigarettes and foods like fish, bread, fried foods, meat and chicken: *dirty, filthy; I stunk because in the street you smell bad, you smell nasty (E28)*. Colors to which they give meaning, thus: green (nature, football team); red (blood); yellow (light); white (peace and love); blue (hope); grey (when it rains); black (sadness). The street is a mixture of sounds, some made by cars, sound amplifiers from stores or bars, and from the people who inhabit or transit through it. The children identify sounds like insults, weeping, screaming from team fans and protesters, and from those promoting sales, newspaper hawkers; and music from radios. The different transportation means produce very intense sounds like those from buses, motorbikes, the Metro, sirens from

ambulances, fire trucks, and police patrol cars. The most notorious sound from nature is strong rain. They consider noise like car screeches and continuous honking as maddening.

## Relationships

Relationships are fundamental for their survival. These are established with people who dwell in the streets, like other children, with adult street inhabitants, with shopkeepers or street vendors, with street cleaners, with the police, with organizations outside the law such as those denominated “CONVIVIR” (private surveillance and security cooperatives, that were initially created for the defense of the countryside and then extended illegally to urban zones) or, in general, with people who transit along the streets. Relationships can be conflictive, neutral, or positive.

**Conflictive relationships.** As already stated, the street is traditionally considered a public space and, as such, has norms that people who remain in it or transit through it must comply. By turning the street into their private space, children create their own norms that permit their survival and, in that sense, disagree with the norms of the public space, hence, they do not abide by them: *in those places there are various regulations, that is, in some parts you can't do drugs, you can't be the way you want to be (E51); Norms are not for us because we left home to avoid being scolded so much (E6)*. Not abiding by the norms and conditions through which the children live make them at times interact in conflictive manner with some people and with the State's security organizations, like the police and sometimes with the “CONVIVIR”: *the CONVIVIR members because they beat you up, the cops (police), also (E43)*. Additionally, they have conflictive relationships with their own peers or companions (*parceros*) with whom they make up a group in the street, which they denominate *parche*: *a girl kept giving me trouble, so at one point she tried to stab me so I had to stab her (E54)*.

**Neutral relationships.** These occur mainly amongst them or with other street inhabitants; they are

generally expressed through greetings and some conversations. In these types of relationships, the norm or principle that “*whoever is quiet is left alone*” is quite important, thus, avoiding conflict.

**Positive relationships.** These are generally ludic, like playing football, horseplay (laughing for no reason, having fun, kidding around), dancing, bathing in fountains; engaging in competitions like spinning top, little soldier, spin the bottle; fighting for entertainment, blows, with tins (sharp weapons); affective meetings with their partners or getting high with the group: *it is cool there. We talk, we hang out playing with the ball (E61); the kids (‘peladitos’ a term used by children and other people to point out other children) walked around together to go into the fountain (E5).* Among the positive relationships there are those of support in which they help each other when conflicts arise with other groups, with the “CONVIVIR” or to offer some services, especially to shop owners or street vendors, like washing or taking care of the stand while the owner is out or purchasing something needed: *there you took care of those who stop by to buy something (E21); people from the shops who let me shower and gave me clothing (E25).*

## Environments

The setting is given by the environment and the context, having relationships as an important element. The children move in two very different environments: on the one side there is that of the street; and on the other there is the space they consider that of work, nonetheless, they wish to have a different one from the one they live in, an ideal environment.

**Street environment.** It is the daily environment that teaches them and educates them for life. To the extent in which they interact amongst them and with the environment, it facilitates elements for survival and little by little harnesses them, obligating them to always remain there, making their exit impossible and leading them to recognize it as their space: *the street itself is a vice, so you can’t leave it, you can’t get out of it, even if you are in shelters and you change for*

*a few days, but you have to return to the street (E51).* In the Street, the children recognize other environments like that of amusement, party, the tough environment, the heavy environment, and the calm or quiet environment.

**Amusement environment.** It offers them joy and the possibility of meeting with their friends and sharing with them. What characterizes this environment is that the children can decrease tension, “*have a good time*” and “*laugh a while*”. In this environment they consume drugs or liquor, watch football games, play, talk, have sex, and share with their “*parceros*”. The amusement environment is mainly constructed at night and on weekends and in places like parks, public fountains, football fields, and shops where there are large screens to watch the matches of the local teams: *I like it because of my friends, without friends you don’t like it (E52); that is a fun park to go and relax, to smoke crippe (transgenic marijuana) (E2): we also played football and talked. That is what we did (E9).*

**Party environment.** What differentiates them from the amusement environment, is that it is generally sought outside the places they frequent daily. The party environment offers them animation. The party places are noisy, with lots of people and there the children, besides dancing and listening to music, can consume psychoactive substances and liquor. Weekends are preferred for the party environment: *weekends are best to go out and party, everybody goes out to dance, to do drugs, it is a more animated environment for you (E47).*

**Tough environment.** It is an environment of shortcomings and difficulties where certain actions must be carried out manage to survive. This environment is experienced by the children, even since before leaving their homes because they lack food, clothing, and other basic elements, and the mothers must go out and look for them. Thus, the children must remain all day on the sidewalks by their places of work: *while his mother and my mother worked, they left us in cardboard boxes (E7).* The children must face the tough environment to overcome it and, thus, get

the elements they lack; for this they use strategies they learn from other companions and from the daily experiences: *it is very hard because living in the street is like not having anything, no hopes or anything, and that you have to go on in whatever way (E9).*

**Calm or quiet environment.** It is that to which the children aspire and struggle to reach; it is only achieved momentarily and when it occurs they enjoy it. According to their vision, what characterizes this environment is that it offers them tranquility, and lets them relax and rest without situations that alter their security. Therein, they can consume, be lazy, and meet to talk. For the environment to be calm they must have the presence of friends or people who back them up against any danger or aggression; conversely, there should be no presence of the police or “CONVIVIR groups”, or contamination, especially that related to bad smells, trash, and lack of hygiene. The most adequate day and place to achieve it is the hotel: *while working in the room, you know the police won't enter. You are relaxed, smoking marijuana, and eating whatever food you have, but you are tranquil because nobody is bothering you (E50).*

**Tough environment.** It is genera through fights among them, the presence of the police, illegally armed groups that chase them and violate their rights, and people who hurt them. This environment takes place most frequently at night. The calm environment may become a tough environment when there are situations that generate conflicts or when there is too much consumption of psychoactive substances they cannot control. Children represent it with black and red colors, the latter as a manifestation of blood. The tough environment produces fear; it is not frequented and when it takes place they avoid it, by getting away, but in some cases they remain in it and are part of the conflict: *in the street, where I live, there is a heavy environment, you see your friends smoking marijuana, sniffing glue, doing pills (psychoactive substances), arguing (E47); the heavy environment occurs mostly at night. It is very dangerous; I don't like*

*it. You have to keep to yourself (E 47); at night it was a very heavy environment because the police could not see anybody out there late, they would beat you (E50). Girls who sell their bodies consider as heavy environment the fact of having to face the situation with clients who do not pay them, beat them, or threaten them: I have had a lot of complicated situations happen; they leave me far away; I have been beaten; don't pay me and when you don't want anything they take out a gun (E43).*

**Work environment.** Although it is part of life in the street, children consider it an environment apart and different; it is a socialization environment: *my work environment is very different from my personal life (E47).* Some children learn the trade of their mothers when they go out to work to meet their needs and take them along: *my mother had a small street vending stand, so when saw that I was capable, she made me a vending stand and I started taking to the streets (E19).* Children get initiated in sales with the products their parents sold and then look to make more money by selling psychoactive substances: *I started selling cigarettes, roses, and chewing gum; then I started selling marijuana, then coke, and crack; after that, I started stealing (E1).* The act of working is denominated as ‘camellar’ or conspiring and comprises actions like: stealing, selling, begging, running errands, and selling their bodies; they use strategies to move, convince, and intimidate people to achieve what they need: *at a print shop we always asked for old calendars and drunks would buy them from us, that's how we got money (E16); I sold my body and paid for the hotel (E42).*

Stealing and selling their bodies were considered easier options to get money, given that they are not subjected to a schedule and do not depend on others: *Stealing is difficult, but it is easy because you get easy money, although everything has risks in life, but easy life is that because a person who works has to get up early every day, keep a schedule, while the thief steals at whatever hour and gets the money at any hour he or she wants, the prostitute goes to the corner at the time she*

wants and knows the client will arrive (E4). In some cases, work selling things is used as an observation strategy and, thus, find other options, for example stealing at night: *in the street there are many forms of work, a façade in the street could be selling chewing gum or candy to see what could be done at night (E35)*. The work environment is conducted at given schedules and places where possible clients inhabit; said places can be parks, at traffic lights, and some streets of the city: *the work environment for them to do well starts after 3:30 pm and goes until 9 or 10 pm (E47); I used to pick up scrap metal in a push cart and whenever I saw a soft drink delivery truck I would steal from it and sold the soft drinks (E18)*.

**Ideal environment.** Unlike the calm environment that is transitory, they desire the ideal environment as something permanent. In it, there should be no consumption of psychoactive substances or fights; children expect to be supported, valued, for their freedom not to be restricted and, thereby, have a quiet life and achieve the goals they set. This idea is linked to that of having a family: *I would like for drugs to never exist because that is a horrible temptation, God willing these environments would be this calm and we all lived relaxed (E51); they know how to value and support you; they tell you many things that fill the heart with joy, of emotion, of happiness and with those words you get to reach goals and value yourself, to have self-esteem and many things you have to practice in life (E28)*.

## Discussion

The most important categories found in this study were those related to the street and work environments. Although some findings coincide with those by other authors, differences exist in some aspects, which can be explained by the type of study, given that it starts from the point of view of the children. This study agrees with Neiva-Silva and Koller<sup>19</sup> on the importance given to the work and street categories. Although for diverse authors, like Lindón,<sup>20</sup> Berroeta and Vidal,<sup>21</sup> the

street is understood as a public space, this study found that children turn it into their private space of socialization and survival. Duarte,<sup>22</sup> in the research with homeless youth, found that children who inhabit the street are always in the exterior (public); they do everything there and have no reference of the interior (private). In this same sense, Marrero<sup>6</sup> conceives the private as that which is hidden, what is not shown to the public and, hence, is not subjected to judgment. The public, rather, is subjected to the view of the rest, to their judgment, and to the opinions of those who view it. The children who participated in this study, turn the street into their private space, but their actions are not hidden from the view of others.

The occupation and use of the public space (the street), requires compliance of norms that seek to accomplish better cohabitation. In Río de Janeiro, Vargas<sup>23</sup> found that homeless children live against the norms. In our study, children not only do not abide by established norms, but have their own norms that allow them to survive in these spaces. The conflictive interactions between passersby and those who inhabit the street may make it problematic, according to that proposed by Motta, Rosa and García.<sup>24</sup> This situation is what the children participating in this study denominate tough environment. Lindón, Aguilar and Hiernaux<sup>21</sup> propose that the street is an insecure space. Nevertheless, this work found that for the children not all of the street represents insecurity, but certain spaces in it, which they consider heavy environments.

Regarding the amusement environment, football occupies an important space in their lives, not only to practice it, but to watch it being played. This same situation is mentioned by Martinelli,<sup>25</sup> who considers street football a privileged space of homo-sociality. In relation to the quiet, ideal, and party environments, we found no works on these topics. Related to the work environment, especially on the type of work the children perform to survive, our findings coincide with the works by different authors, like Cárdenas and Rodríguez,<sup>8</sup> Duarte,<sup>22</sup> and Domínguez, Romero and Paul.<sup>26</sup> This coincidence may be because the social and

economic conditions for the homeless children are similar in Latin America and almost all of them engage in the same type of work to get money.

This study's conclusion is that children transform the street environment to accommodate it to carry out their activities and achieve a quiet environment. Thus, the Street is for them a private place that teaches and educates for life. In it, relationships are established that are fundamental for survival. In this sense, children construct the amusement, party, quiet, and work environments. They do not construct the heavy environment and the tough environment and dream of the ideal environment. The work environment, although they experience it in the street, is not considered part of it.

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