

The badass and the asshole: Violence and the positioned subjectivities of street youth in Mexico City

Roy Gigengack

Understanding street youths in Mexico City as emergent practices, in this chapter I set out to understand a) how street youth embody and perform their identities, which subtly diverge from those of similar groups of urban poor, such as gang youth; and b) how violent practices shape who street youth are and what they do. Based upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in streets and institutions in Mexico City throughout the 1990s and regular follow-up visits thereafter (most recently in 2010-2011), the chapter presents impressionist “tales of the field” (Van Maanen 1988). These tales illustrate that, far from merely being destructive, violence constitutes and reinforces street youth’s positioned subjectivities.

Street youths and gang youths as emergent practices

Handy Boy, who owed his nickname to a congenital deformation of his right hand, grew up in the centre of Mexico City in the eighties and nineties, where he lived in a series of wastelands and shelters. I had not seen the lad for more than a year, when I bumped into him in a governmental *Program for the Street Child*. When I asked him what kind of being ‘the street child’ would be, he answered:

Mira, hay chavos de calle y chavos de casa. Look, there are street boys and home boys. The difference is that the first ones do not live with their family. They live in a *banda* and the others don’t. You can easily recognise a *callejero*, a street boy, as he *anda mugroso y va malvestido*. He looks dirty and is slovenly dressed.... Not all the lads of the street take drugs but there are very few *que no les ponen*, who do not do drugs. A street boy sniffs, but so do the home boys. I have mates who are *de casa* but sniff

un chingo, a fucking lot.... To me, *ser de la calle*, being of the street, does not sound ugly.

The flow of meaning exposed in the quote above is typically absent in writings about street children. Unlike most academic definitions, which usually focus on what ‘the street child’ allegedly lacks, such as a home or a family, Handy Boy underlined that street children are to be recognised by the concrete aspects of what they do have, such as their group life, appearance and sniffing. Handy Boy also associated street children with youth (*chavos*) rather than children.

Handy Boy contrasted the *chavos de calle* (street boys/youth) with *chavos de casa* (home boys/youth). From his assertions it is clear that the latter category referred to what in Mexico are known as *chavos banda*. This term is sometimes translated as ‘youth gangs’ (eg Feixa 2006, p 158), but strictly speaking ‘gang youths’ would be more correct. Mexico City’s gang youth are similar to street youth in terms of age, class and urban background. They also speak almost identical versions of Mexican street slang (*caló*) (cf Hernández 2002), and engage in similar practices, notably the use of inhalants and other drugs. Both gang youths and street youths see themselves as belonging to their respective peer groups, both of which are called *bandas*.

Handy Boy perceived overlaps between the street and the gang youths: the home boys could sniff “a fucking lot,” just like the street boys, and they could be mates with each other. Notwithstanding the criss-crossing overlaps and porous boundaries, however, the two categories evoked different prototypes. Handy Boy noted that these could relate to the materiality of street and gang youth’s diverging living conditions, but that was not necessarily always the case. In fact, as I will discuss shortly, with changing living conditions sometimes the only difference between street and gang youth was that the former were *callejeros* and the latter *chavos banda*.

This consciousness of difference and similarity is my point of departure in thinking about street youth as emergent practice. Although essentialism must be avoided, these youths have distinctly positioned subjectivities, divergent experiences and life stories. Street and gang youth also constitute subtly divergent social formations, as came subtly to the fore in their

totem systems: whereas the street children's *bandas* were always named after the particular streets or metro stations where the groups dwelled, the *bandas* of the gang youth typically bore the names of animal or human animal species. Style, such as street children's dirty and slovenly appearance, further performed the respective identities.

To adopt and adapt a famous distinction, one can think of the groups of gang youths and street youths as *bandas* 'on' and 'of' the street. These groups were positioned in different figurations. Typically, they sought access to different resources, identified with different places, and related primarily to groups similar to themselves. The gang youths I have known typically sought to align themselves with a street politician living a few blocks north of Plaza Garibaldi. The street youths living in the same area, however, rather sought help from charities and other institutes targeting street children. They had no contact with the politician, and when I told them about her, they were eager to meet her. They needed someone like me, who could act like a broker and bring them in contact with street-level politicians – whereas the gang youths had such contacts already.

Intervening agents reify the differences between the categories. Most NGOs target street youths only, while others only gang youths; state correctional centres differentiate between children with and without families. The young may find pride in the labels attributed to them. These practices of differential treatment and their subsequent appropriation further reinforce the differentiation: in the institutes street children meet, and seek to meet, other street children (and gang youths other gang youths). Compared to the gang youths, then, the street youths may have lacked the contacts with street level politicians, but they did have many more contacts with institutionalised inmates. "It is important that you have *banda* when you're new [in a prison]," as it was explained to me. Also, it is typically in the shelters and prisons that young street people learn about other places where they can dwell. The circulation of street children through the institutions shapes their flow through the streets.

Seeing street and gang youths as emergent practices complicates structuralist variables such as class, generation and gender. These variables are certainly relevant, if not self-evident (as evidenced by Handy Boy's references to impoverishment, youth and the whereabouts of specifically

boys). But to see the fine-tuned dynamics of street life, one must bring in street children's "authenticity" (Ortner 2006), with which I mean that their politics and culture are not merely reactive to dominant structures, but are woven together through their own locally and historically evolved logic (Gigengack 2014).

Differentiation through talking about violence

The seven corners of the street where I lived in Mexico City were claimed by different groups of *chavos banda*, successively called *los Warriors*, *los Lobos* (the Wolves), *los Thunder Cats*, *los Topos* (the Moles), *los Piojos* (the Lice), *los Nazis*, and *los Hijos de Puta* (the Sons of Bitches). While I always had to avoid the Piojos and the Nazis, I was on friendly terms with the Lobos. The building in which the Lobos had lived with their families was damaged in the 1985 earthquake, and ten years later it was pulled down. The families were lodged in huts of tinsplate and cardboard across the street, and this situation continued for years. The Lobos gathered in what they called *los escombros*, the messy remains of the former dwelling. In the debris they placed iron beds, put blankets over the rocks and a dart board on the remains of a wall. Sometimes I saw a youngster defecating among the dust. At night the place was illuminated with candle lights, but notwithstanding all these attempts to furnish it, the *escombros* remained damp and moldy, especially in the rainy season. The degradation in which the Lobos lived had become very similar to that of the street kids. In fact, whenever I walked by, the smells of the Lobos' filthy poverty reminded me of the young street people living in the nearby Marroquí Street – also because they consumed a similar toluene-containing inhalant.

Once I visited five young Lobos in a bus wreck left behind in their street, where they liked to sit. As always, they wanted to know where I lived, where I came from, whether I had children, whether I was married, and what I did for a living. When I remarked that I wrote about street children, the following conversation evolved:

Yolanda (17): *Ay, ¡nosotros somos de la calle!* Gee, we are of the street!
Aroncito: Are you going to write about us?

Yolanda: In that case, write that we are angry at the government!

They took our homes away!

Roy: And why do you say you are *callejeros*?

Yolanda: Because we are *bien desmadrosos*. We are pretty good destroyers!

Tomás: *¡Nos gustan los putazos!* We like beatings!

Yolanda: We love to struggle for our lives!

Roy: I know the ones [the street children] from Metro Hidalgo and Guerrero. They are often visited by street educators who want to bring them to a shelter.

Yolanda: Nope, we don't like that! We have a *cantón*, a home.

Upon my subsequent question of which *bandas* the Lobos knew, a vivid discussion followed about the Piojos, the Topos and the Hijos de Puta. The kids disagreed about who was who and who lived where. "I don't care!" exclaimed Yolanda finally, "*¡Yo soy una Loba!* I am a Wolf girl!"

Boasting about their capacity to destroy, Yolanda described herself and her mates as "of the street." Nevertheless, in her mind, too, street and gang youth remained different categories. The girl stressed that the Lobos did not like the educators who visited the street children in the two nearby subway stations, and she thus distinguished her group from those who were not in the position to do the same. Yolanda further underscored the categorical differentiation when she explained that the Lobos were domiciled. Yet, however relevant, being homeless and living without the family hardly constituted essential characteristics distinguishing street children from others – factually, the Lobos were homeless as well, as they spent more time in the *escombros* than with their families.

Rather, the Lobos differentiated themselves from street children through their enactments as gang youths: whereas they were indifferent to the street children nearby, they emphatically contrasted themselves to the other *chavos banda* in my street. These other gang youths triggered their self-pride, even if the Lobos did not know them very well either. Their logic followed what Gregory Bateson (1973, p 41) called "the principle of symmetrical differentiation": through boasting about their collective violent selves, the Lobos were able to distinguish themselves

from those who were most like them. Bragging about their own violent abilities fostered the unity of the group vis-à-vis these others; it was also a performance in front of each other

In the emergent practices of street life, then, violence encompasses more than merely perpetrators and victims: it involves performers, targets and audience.

The *gandalla* and the *culero*: narratives of violent and enduring selves

Identity talk intertwining fact and fiction was common among the street youth as well. Their narratives of collective violent selves followed the same principle of symmetrical differentiation as that of the gang youth – but with the crucial difference that in their case the target and audience consisted principally of street rather than gang youths. The Plaza Garibaldi kids could for example say that they hated the *chemos* or glue sniffers, with which they basically meant that they hated the street youth from the peripheries (who sniffed glue rather than *activo*, the solvent the Gari kids consumed). In addition, the street youths' performances and their narratives of self brought themes to the fore, which I found rather peculiar to the practices of street youth.

The following story took place in Metro Tacuba, a violent neighbourhood in Mexico City. Together with Héctor, alias *El Loco* or The Madman (19 years), I was looking for disinfectants to treat the gash in his hand. Four of his friends sauntered behind us. Héctor recounted how he was stabbed in a *lucha callejera*, a street fight. When I asked what he meant with that, he looked at me. “Do you want to know, Roy, what *ser de la calle* means? I'll show you.” He accosted a passer-by, and the five boys stood around him. Words were exchanged, the passer-by ran through his pockets and showed a handful of pesos. Héctor snatched them away, and wanted more. I said I understood now and pulled him away.

In the mindscape of these street youth, Héctor performed as a *gandalla*, that is, a badass. Being violent remained morally reprehensible, as was also suggested by Héctor's nickname *El Loco* or Madman. At the same time, the violence begot a positive connotation. In the evil street, things were serious, and that made it attractive for a badass. *Ser de la calle*, being of the street, enabled Héctor to show the world that his life was not a

joke. The mugging was a performance, to himself, his peers, the victim, and not in the last place, of course, to me. Héctor conveyed he had the power to overpower, and that he was prepared to use it. Speaking with Katz (1988, pp 98-102), he meant to be mean.

But because of the structural position of relative powerlessness, a street youth can never succeed in performing as a badass all the time; at some point the *gandalla* will inevitably fail. The flawed badass is known as *culero* or asshole. Both the badass and the asshole deserve punishment, but whereas the badass cannot be punished, for he's a badass, the asshole can – and he deserves it all the more so because he's an asshole. The failed victimiser thus becomes the victim who asked for it. Commonly, the asshole sees himself as such: he blames himself for his situation.

Oscar, another 17-year-old Tacuba boy, stared straight ahead and mumbled. We sat together in a little park, and the whispering was audible to me. "I'm a damned dog. I'm a son of a damned and whorish bitch of a mother. Rubbish, that's what I am. Worthless. I only roam the streets. A nasty, whorish vagrant of that bitch of that mother of mine." Oscar said it so many times and so fast that he seemed to know the formula by heart. When I asked Oscar why he said what he said, he explained that it was *así nomás*, just like that, and *por culero*, for being an asshole. He was *puro terapiando*, "merely talking therapy."

Oscar trivialised his self-mortification by convincing me, and perhaps himself as well, that he just mimicked therapy. Symbolic suicide attempts are indeed accepted treatment in many self-help groups of the Anonymous Alcoholics and the Anonymous Drug Addicts, and it is possible that Oscar had learned the text he recited in one of these centres. The self-blame of the asshole springs from experience of humiliation – but at the same time Oscar's seeming self-hate and self-derogation were a rehearsal of resentment, frustration and, above all, stubbornness. For what characterises the true asshole, apart from the self-blame and the humiliation, is his persistence to remain what he is. That is why the asshole is definitely part of the policeman's world too (Van Maanen 1978).

I do not imply, of course, that street children are just badasses or assholes. Rather, my point is that the Mexican street youth I have known were utterly familiar with these poses, and understood what was being 'said' through

them. Indeed, the recognition that in the street there are badasses and assholes was often such that street youth felt obliged to say that, contrary to the *gandallas* and the *culeros*, they were *tranquilos* or quiet ones. At the same time, the quiet street children applauded the badass and the asshole. The other Tacuba boys sauntering behind Héctor or listening to Oscar were neither *gandallas* nor *culeros*, at least not at these moments, but they knew what was going on: they were the audience enabling the performance.

Both the badass and the asshole are instances of Goffmanian “shameless scoundrels,” who bear their stigma but do not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so. Goffman (1986, p 6) suggests that these stigmatised youth may have a separate system of honour, which seems to be the case here too. The ways of the badass gain respect; applying violence is a vector to gain self-esteem. This finding is in line with Katz’ (1988) reading of violent practices documented in urban ethnographies in the USA. Mexico City’s street youth, however, also find self-esteem in their failure to be a badass: the asshole obtains respect among the peers as well.

The twin stereotypes of *gandalla* and *culero* open a window on values of street culture. With this I mean an analytical perspective rather than a primordial entity (Hastrup 1995): these values are not endorsed by all street youth – hence the *tranquilos* – and they resonate with values prevalent in other sectors of Mexican society. To begin with, and although the terms may refer to women as well, the *gandalla* and the *culero* share a notion of masculine toughness. Both distinguish themselves from the ‘true’ losers of street culture, the vulnerable street children, pejoratively termed *chillones* or cry-babies. But the two differ in logic. The *gandalla* is, in a sense, still a moral being. His goal is to take advantage; at the cost of others, he takes care of himself. The *culero*, in contrast, is beyond morality; he is indifferent to good and bad. As the saying goes *todo le vale madre*, “he doesn’t care a damn about anything.”

The celebration of indifference thus emerges as a collective narrative of self. Central to this narrative was the notion of *aguantarse*, that is, being able to endure violence. One of my tutees in the correctional centre where I did fieldwork once confided, “When the others hear that I have lived in the street for seven years, they say ‘Wow, so you must know a lot of *trompones*, beatings.’” In such a narrative of a glorified victimised

self, taking a beating is converted into a source of pride (cf Jackson-Jacobs 2004). Indifference towards one's own pain then pays off.

¡Pinche vicioso!: the roundabout route of indifference

Kids who could not endure, who constantly cried or neglected themselves severely, were excluded. Showing weakness was suppressed through beatings; one could not 'open oneself' (*no abrirse*). Learning to endure, or acquiring feelings of indifference, found an ideological support in the hidden transcripts of the group (Scott 1990). Amongst themselves these youths could give sometimes cynical and provoking comments on themselves and the society that treated them as street children. The term street child and all its synonyms could get the status of a Beggar's title. The smaller kids from Plaza Garibaldi called themselves "the gang of the forgotten children" (*la banda de los olvidados*), a term that subsequent cohorts copied. They also sang a song of the Mexican hard-rock band TRI, titled "Child without Love" (*Niño sin Amor*). The group of Metro Tacuba made graffiti saying that they were *la banda de los chemos*, the gang of the glue sniffers. Sometimes they also appropriated institutional language. Once I took the metro with two 11 or 12-year-olds. They waited until the doors of the train closed and then spat and beat against the windows, shouting to the startled and angry passengers that they were "the naughty glue sniffers" (*los chemos cábulas*) and "nobody's children" (*los hijos de nadie*). The latter was a slogan often used in the fundraising campaigns of a Christian charity.

Some street youths expressed the pose of cultivated indifference through an ostensible identification with inhalants. Boys and also girls could boast about their being *pinches viciosos*, "damned vicious ones," and provokingly show the sniffing paraphernalia in hand. It could have a dimension of defying, for example when the intended audience was a passing police patrol, but these performances of self were also, and especially so, made within the seclusion of the group. Some kids quite frequently asked me to take pictures of them in their wasteland, so that they could pose as sniffing street children, and in fact thus play who they already were (Gigengack 1999). It is true, of course, that I formed part of the audience as well, and so did the world that would eventually see the photographs. But

the performance of indifferent, viciously sniffing selves was fun mainly because it was a collective activity of the group.

The following conversation took place among the turpentine-sniffing *banda* of the Taqueña Bus Station. It illustrates how these boys not only suffered from violence and self-destruction, but also identified with it. They had come to regard violence as an intimate part of their selves:

Lucho (17): Do you like it if they call you a street child?

Pérez (17): The plain truth (*la neta*): yes.

Lucho: But don't you think all people are equal? We all breathe, eat and shit, and we all have our problems. I would say we are no street children. And if we were, we should all be of the street because we all pass through the street... I think it is wrong they call us children of the street.

Pérez: But someone who is already of the street, who stayed on the street for years, says 'so what.' *Le vale madre*. He doesn't care a fuck about what they say to him.

Lucho: So now you don't care if the people say you're a street child? Or don't you mind to be a street child?

Pérez: I do mind, and therefore I tell them to fuck off (*se las miento*). But then there are some who attack me...

Lucho: Why?

Pérez: *¡Por pinche vicioso!* For being a damned addict, what else? And *un majadero*, a pervert, because on the street I pinch the girls in their butts.

Lucho: And you Savage, are you a street child?

Savage (12): Yes. Because I have no home and live in the street... I mean not all people live on the street. Street children are we who have no home and do it on everything. That's being a street child!

Before this fragment, Pérez spoke about the abuse he suffered from his father, the running away, his intentions to go to a shelter once more, or otherwise to go into therapy again, the maltreatment he had endured in the youth prison, and the aggression he released during glue sniffing sessions. This boy seemed to match the traumas and frustrations of his childhood

with indifference towards others. Savage Boy, in contrast, had previously categorically denied to have ever used drugs. He then admitted to have used inhalants, and said that quitting depended upon God. He exclaimed that “the city of the glue sniffers needs help!” and also that street children would be helped by seizing and destroying glue, turpentine and *activo*. Savage Boy, too, transformed his frustrations into indifference: towards himself and his slowly disintegrating body. For both boys, however, the indifference made a difference. It represented a source of self-esteem.

Conclusion

Violence, it has been noted, is a notoriously slippery concept (Riches 1986). In the Northern world, violence is often understood as the antithesis of social order, and closely associated with ‘bad’ or unlawful conduct. Such a conception of violence is intrinsically connected to the state formation processes prevalent in Northern Europe, where the state has traditionally obtained a successful monopoly on the means of violence (Elias 2000). The irenic understanding of violence is in other words bound to a specific cultural and historically determined understanding (Blok 2001).

The assumption that violence is unacceptable and illegitimate invites to explain it through structural terms, such as notably class, gender and generation. These notions are certainly relevant, as shown throughout in this chapter. But the ethnographic vignettes complicate the picture as well. The street youths and the gang youths are similar, if not identical, in structural terms. Yet they embody and perform diverging practices, which suggests we need to bring in acting subjects with their consciousness of inner states and cultural formations, that is, their “positioned subjectivities” (Ortner 2006).

Violence imagined features in identity talk, differentiating groups and fostering collectivities. As any other predatory group, mugging street youth obtain their livelihood through violence or the threat of it. Their violence is expressive as well. The *gandalla* or the badass gets what he wants and gets away with it, and through violence he obtains a sense of self. The *culero* subsists, and has little option, but through endurance even he maintains a sense of self. The *vicioso* is also part of this family.

Not only does he endure the violence he commits against himself, he also enjoys and celebrates it.

As a politics of representation (Bourgois 1996), it may be attractive to present violence as not intended or even ‘senseless.’ But violence is meaningful to perpetrators, victims and witnesses. Even a violent act as street children’s self-destructive inhalant use is covered with meaning. Violence, then, cannot be reduced to purely utilitarian functions; the acting subject forces us to look at the communicative and expressive dimensions too. It may be attractive as well to think that violence is an aberration or an excess compromising livelihood and identity. But then we risk overlooking that violent practices are constitutive of positioned subjectivities. Violence creates as well.

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Author affiliation

Department of Rural Development Sociology, Wageningen University and Research (WUR), the Netherlands