

DRUG AND SUBSTANCE USE AMONG FILIPINO STREET CHILDREN IN AN URBAN SETTING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

Drug and substance use has a long history in the Philippines. Intoxicating beverages fermented from rice, sugar cane, and from nipa and coconut palms were popular drinks, and betel leaf chewing was a common practice (Zarco, 1995). The first mention of narcotic drug (opium) use was among the "moros" of Mindanao (Zarco, 1995). Prior to the 19th century, use of these substances was not socially disapproved (Sinha, 2001). When the United States acquired the Philippines in 1898, the colonial government was confronted by the opium problem in the new colony. The initial reaction of the Americans was ambivalent. Governor Howard Taft proposed to take control of the opium monopoly as a source of revenue for the government to defray its massive public education expenditure but the policy was opposed by other sectors who would rather see a campaign for narcotics traffic control (Musto, 1991).

Today, the problem of substance use/abuse remains as one of the major social problems in the Philippines. It was estimated in 2004 that drug users nationwide numbered 3.4 million (Esguerra, 2004). This is despite the very stiff penalties, including death, imposed by the law on the sale and consumption of prohibited drugs.

One disturbing aspect of the problem is the fact that drug abusers are getting younger. The statistical figures over the last decade revealed a trend towards a decreasing age. In the 50s, the age of drug offenders ranged between 40-55 years. In the 80s the average age of drug users was 25. More recent data indicate that initiation to drug use starts at the young age of 8 to 9.

One sector of this young population that is particularly vulnerable to drugs is the so-called street children. In one country survey the percentage of drug and substance users among street children was estimated to be between 60 to 100 percent (Postupniy et al., 2002). In the Philippines, out of an estimated 1.5 million street children in the

country half of them are believed to have at one time or another snorted "rugby" and other aromatic solvents (Bordadora, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

There had been a number of studies about street children in the Philippines. These studies have invariably shown that living in the streets places children at risk of falling into drug use. But what factors and processes in street living render it a fertile environment for drug use for street children is a question yet to be more fully explored. The present study focused on those factors and processes. It probed into the lifeways of street children with a view to understanding the interplay of these lifeways with their drug-taking practices. The study had the following specific objectives:

1. To understand the background and situational factors of the street children (their family and home conditions, economic situation, educational achievement, etc.) and the features and characteristics of their life and ways in the street;
2. To describe the practices surrounding the drug/substance-taking of street children: how they are socialized into drug/substance use, what kinds of drugs/substances are used, what modalities are employed in their administration, what are the psycho-physiological effects of drugs/substance-taking, what social functions does drug/substance taking have?
3. To explore interconnections between their home life and street living and their use of drugs.

Research Participants, Locale, Methodology

The study was participated in by 20 street children, with ages ranging from seven to 17, three of whom were female and 17, male. The qualitative method of research was employed in the study. The techniques used were participant observation, in-depth individual interviews, and focus group discussion. The data gathering lasted for 9 months (from October 2005 up to July 2006). About 14 to 20 interview days/nights were spent for each participant. This had produced 23 interview tapes or around 1,500 double-space pages of transcripts. The researchers' observations were kept in field notes which they accomplished at the end of the day or night. The activities of the children were also documented in pictures, still and moving. A total of 849 pictures (541.2 MB of visual materials) had been taken. In addition to interviews, the street children were also engaged in some creative activity. They were asked to draw some of their ideas and concepts about themselves and their world. This has produced 14 drawings. As the interaction with the participants progressed, the researchers encountered other actors in the field – informal "gatekeepers" – who eventually served as key informants providing additional data about the street children and their activities.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with the 20 street children in order to validate initial impressions of the researchers.

The initial locale targeted by the study was the area of the University Belt located in the Sixth District of the City of Manila, so called because of the number of schools existing in the area. However, as the study progressed, it became necessary to extend to the outlying areas of the Welcome Rotonda and Malate because of the itinerant nature of the research respondents.

The fieldwork produced a considerable volume of "thick" data – transcripts, visual materials, drawings, researchers' reflections, field notes – and the tedious task of organizing the data was begun in August.

Step 1. Coding – The transcripts were reviewed and coded using the following as the main organizing categories: contextual factors, life in the street, and substance use. These categories were derived from the problem statements. Under contextual factors were included such items as family background (parents, siblings), economic conditions, education, living conditions. Data related to the patterns of behavior in the street were categorized under street life. Items having to do with drug taking fell under the category of substance use.

Step 2. Preliminary narratives – The grouped data served as basis for writing preliminary narratives for each individual street child.

Step 3. Identifying data gaps and emergent themes. These preliminary narratives revealed data gaps as well as emergent data.

Step 4. To fill up these data gaps, the transcripts were reviewed again. In some instances, the researchers went back to the field. Emergent data (items that did not fall under the general categories) were identified for inclusion in the write-up of the final narrative.

Step 5. Themes and sub-themes were finalized. These themes and sub-themes were used to organize the final version of the twenty narratives.

Street Life and Rugby: A Way of Coping with Life

Children on the street develop their own ways of thinking and living and organizing their society (Bourdillon, 2005). This street culture provides the context of their drug taking practices because drug taking is but one dimension of this street culture. But the street ways are, in turn, related to the home situation of these street children and understanding these conditions shed light on the reasons why the children take to the streets.

Push and Pull Factors

Two sets of factors seem to have led the children to turn to the streets. One set are push factors, the other, pull factors. Constituting the push factors are the conditions of deprivation that characterize most homes in slum areas: the inadequate housing conditions, the filthy physical surroundings and inhospitable neighborhoods, the lack of access to basic amenities and to social services, insecure employment, hunger, troubled family relationships and domestic violence, lack of parental caring and nurturing. These adverse home conditions have pressed these children to leave their homes and head off to an alternative environment which they perceive to be more accommodating to them.

The pull factors, on the other hand, are the supposed satisfactions that the streets are perceived to promise. The streets give them the opportunity to earn their own money, buy themselves the simple necessities of life and, occasionally, help out in the financial difficulties of their own families. The streets enable them to socialize with fellow children, engage in play, and indulge in simple leisure denied to them at home. The streets afford the children a way of escaping from the oppressive boredom and lack of creative prospects at home. More importantly, they enable them to get away from the hostilities and violence that frequently blight relations at home. These satisfactions entice the children toward the world of the streets.

Rugby and Street Life

Once in the street, the children are just a step away from drugs. All of the twenty street children participating in the study, with the exception of only one, were inhalant users which leads one up to conclude that inhalant use is an integral part of street living. The same streets that provide the children these satisfactions also initiate them to certain socially questionable practices. One of this is the use of drugs, particularly rugby. What function does rugby perform for the street child?

Street life, for all the supposed satisfactions it promises, is tough and difficult. Street children have to contend not only with the hardships of making a living but with the apathy and disdain of the public. The opportunities for earning are extremely limited for the street children. They are unskilled and uneducated on top of their being minors. In the street, survival is often the name of the game. Food is short and hunger is a constant companion. Although friendship abounds among them, there is no absence of foes and adversaries. Violence is, thus, an ever present threat. Conflict with the police and the authorities is a constant likelihood and they have to be continually on their toes for possible confrontation.

How does the street child deal with these difficulties and strains of street living?

Rugby provides a way out. Rugby has been called a survival drug. It helps the child to survive on two levels – physiologically and psychologically. On the physiological level,

rugby is a convenient solution to the most pressing problem of the street child – hunger- since one of the physical effects of inhalant is to suppress the sensation of hunger.

Rugby serves the street child psychologically in two senses. First, rugby provides the bond that connects him/her to a group to which he/she can turn to for support in the lonesome world of the streets and from whom he/she can derive some sense of self-identity. In another sense, rugby enables the child to create his own imaginary world. In this world the child is king and master, powerful and controlling, in stark contrast to his/her situation in the real world. In this rugby world, the child is able to overcome even his/her physical limitations, able to “fly” and “jump” from tall buildings. For once, the child ceases to be a child and is transformed into an adult.

Street Life and Social Exclusion

In a larger context, child “streetism” is no more than a symptom of a society that has failed to provide an inclusive environment to its members. Socially excluded groups tend to engage in socially unacceptable behavior. Such behavior had been viewed as means of coping. They are mechanisms by which people who do not have access to the means for attaining socially defines goals “make sense” of their exclusion. In this sense, the deviant behavior is a function of the conditions of deprivation and a response to the situation of being socially excluded.

The notion of social exclusion has a particular applicability to the situation of street children. They are excluded from the economic resources of the community by the very reason of their being children. Politically, they have no voice. They have little access to the cultural resources of the community. Street children experience exclusion economically, politically, and socio-culturally.

They are often held in disregard, if not disdain, by the larger society. This attitude of contempt is typified in the statement of one of the key informants. But there is yet another sense in which street children experience exclusion. They are psychologically alienated from themselves because their status is marked by ambivalence. Biologically and psychologically they are supposed to be children. Yet, oftentimes, they are forced by circumstances to take on the role of adults such as earning a living. The street child is neither a child nor an adult. Or, to say it differently, he/she is both a child and an adult.

The lifeways of the street are the street children’s way of coping with these various forms of exclusion and rugby is but a part of these ways. For as long the extreme divides between peoples endure and substantial segments are deprived of participation in the economic, political, and social opportunities and benefits, slum living will persist. The homes in these slums will continue to be inhospitable places for children, who will continue to be drawn to the city streets. The lure of rugby will endure.