

Maria João Leote de Carvalho

Maria João has a Ph.D. in Sociology and she is a researcher at CESNOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Besides research, she is a special education teacher in public elementary and middle schools located in public housing neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area. For 16 years, she taught and coordinated school and training programs in a Portuguese juvenile institution where she worked with young offenders aged 12-21 years-old. Her research interests include children's and juvenile delinquency, the spatial dynamics of crime, disorder and violence, Juvenile Justice, Children's Rights, school violence, and the role of the media concerning news on children and Juvenile Justice. Currently, she is a member of the European Council for Juvenile Justice (Academic Section), of the European Juvenile Justice Observatory and has been a consultant to national research and social projects related to children and youth, including the "Children and Youth at Risk Program" of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

There are too many sad things here: children's exposure to neighbourhood violence

Abstract

Do children represent the neighbourhoods where they live? This was the starting point of a research focused on the analysis of children's lives in six public housing neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Portugal. Rooted in social ecology theoretical approaches and childhood studies, which recognize children as social actors, the main goal was to achieve a better understanding of children's socialization processes considering multi-problematic spaces, but focussed mainly on their involvement in violence and delinquency. Between 2005 and 2009, a case study based on ethnographic and child-centred research methods to explore children's personal accounts of their lives was conducted in the selected neighbourhoods. Findings highlighted that most children complained about living there, referencing how social and spatial segregation, associated to high exposure to violence, affect them. Violence and crime were labelled as the most prominent problems, and children's exposure to neighbourhood violence seldom occurs only once or just in one form. The data demonstrated how 'normalization' of violence perceived by children influenced their use of the neighbourhood's places, reducing their sense

of the seriousness and effects of violent acts. Violence, briefly discussed from the children's points of view, served to build their skills, structure their present relations with peers and adults, and simultaneously helped and (re) constructed a permanent social dissatisfaction reinforcing neighbourhood's stigmatization.

Introduction

Children and youth are amongst the most vulnerable social groups to violence and crime in urban environments (Sampson and Laub, 1994; Shuval et al. 2012). Given the level of violence in many urban neighbourhoods worldwide, especially those where social disadvantages are territorial and concentrated in metropolitan areas, which particularly affects children's socialization, it is fundamental to identify how children perceive the influence of ecological variables in their lives and what specific factors place them at greater risk. The complexity of children's lives in contemporary urban settings is expressed in the coexistence of multiple ways of life and experiences of violence, generally associated with different social status and contexts.

The more adults emphasize security issues in public spaces, the more cities become less child friendly, decreasing the possibility of children accessing different types of experiences. Children's play in streets is seldom seen freely in urban contexts since there is now equipment specially designed for this purpose, such as playgrounds, one of the hallmarks of present-day childhood (Karsten, 2003). Parental perceptions of risk and (in)security tend to result in the child's confinement to enclosed spaces, specialized 'islands', mainly in the family, school or leisure places, being registered a loss of freedom to use public spaces (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). However, this is not a linear process and does not affect all children in the same way (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003). It results in marked differences in access to resources according to social origin and the nature of the areas where children are located or live (Almeida, 2009).

When comparing risks in different urban settings, Benbenisthy and Astor (2005) have argued it is precisely those children living in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods who are more likely to be victims of violence. Several studies show that the use of public space by socially disadvantaged children tends to be done more without parental supervision, with a level of greater mobility and autonomy, than among those who belong to middle and upper social classes and who are more likely to participate in organized and formal activities (Valentine, 2004). This might expose the first ones to higher levels of violence and disorders (Sampson and Laub, 1994; Shuval et al, 2012), which confirms that poorer children are likely to be more affected by social risks in using public spaces than children of different social status (Christensen and O'Brien (2003).

The research

The current article is part of a larger study, a PhD in Sociology concerning childhood, violence and delinquency in Portugal (Carvalho, 2010). Aiming to achieve a better understanding of children's socialization processes considering multi-problematic spaces, mainly about their involvement in delinquency. Between 2005 and 2009, a case study was carried out in six public neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area, involving a combination of qualitative methodologies.

The neighbourhoods were chosen because they experience relatively high levels of social deprivation, violence and crime, although being located in one of the richest counties in the country, and the first one to have eradicated slums in 2003, by promoting public housing policies. One of the main features of these territories is that they are all close to each other instead of being near other kinds of residential areas. Five of them create a homogeneous continuum in this county territory, and the sixth is less than a half a mile away from the other five. Although there are not two equal neighbourhoods, many of their traces of characterization are common, highlighting the importance of considering the analysis of their interdependence and socio-spatial dynamics. It is a whole socially disadvantaged universe, with no significant socio demographic differences (1,700 homes, 5,000 residents, of whom 33.2% were between 0 and 18 years-old).

This article focus on the results obtained at the first stage of the research based on the analysis of 312 children's neighbourhood's drawings and narratives and community photography. The intention was to identify the main contours of children's socialization in the field, through their own accounts of their lives. We then examine their perspectives on disorder and violence. In small groups in their classrooms, children were asked by the author if they could do an individual drawing about their neighbourhood. When they finished, there was an individual conversation with every single child, started with the author asking the child to describe and explain his/her drawing, in order to register his/her interpretation, which led to the identification of the content and meaning that each one gave to his/her own work. Community photography was carried out by two classes (4th and 2nd grade).

The material collected was subject to content analysis, where it was possible to cross the graphic representation (non verbal language) with the individual narratives told by children about the drawings and photos. In each work, both form and content were considered, the themes and sub-themes were identified, and cross tabulations and chi-square analyses were performed to test age and gender differences.

Participants were 312 schoolchildren aged 6-13 (M=8.38) attending two primary state schools (1st-4th grade), living in one of these neighbourhoods. Exactly half of the participants were girls (50.0 percent,

n=156) and the other half were boys. To assess age effects, the children were grouped according to age: 6 to 9 years old (75.0 percent, n=236), and 10 to 13 years-old (25.0 percent, n=76). Most were African origin from the former Portuguese colonies (62.8 percent, n=196), mainly The Cape Verde Islands, 9.2 percent (n=29) were Gypsies, and 28.0 percent (n=87) were Caucasian. Nearly all were from lower SES households, with 86.7 percent (n=271) getting financial support from social services at schools.

According to the Portuguese law, since the participants were under the age of 18, the study had been previously explained not only to children, but also to their parents or legal guardians, who had to give permission.

Findings

"There are too many sad things here"

Children were eloquent when stating their views of social relations in their neighbourhoods. Most complained about living there, describing how social and spatial segregation, and high exposure to violence and disorder affect them.

Children's awareness of the effects of the territorial concentration of social disadvantages was clearly expressed. As materialized in the context of broader public housing policies through which the national and local authorities tried to overcome the poverty and housing problems faced by large population groups in Portugal, it is important to note that children's representations of their neighbourhoods show how they can be identified by socio-economic disadvantage.

'Here what we have mostly is poor people, there're only poor, poor people, just poor...' BoyM08, 8 years-old (Carvalho, 2010, p. 269)

In addition, these demonstrate how they can apparently accept and approve their social condition of 'being poor,' recognizing their neighbourhoods as places of spatial concentration of socio-economic disadvantages that could potentially exclude them from participation within the city social life by just being poor.

Another emergent issue was the problem of social inclusion.



'I'm Portuguese, yes I am... I'm Portuguese like all other Portuguese people! That's it, that's it... I'm "brown" but Portuguese...' GirlF10, 9 years-old (Carvalho, 2010, p.277)

This 9 year-old girl was born in the country; however, difficulties of social inclusion grounded on the feeling of not being respected and socially accepted because of her skin colour are notorious. The internalization of a notion of social inferiority, based on her ethnic identity is clearly expressed, and which seems to reinforce her need to strengthen the adherence to a more inclusive category: the belonging to the 'Portuguese people'. Children strongly expressed how being subjected to the processes of spatial segregation inside their neighbourhoods on the basis of their ethnic origin affects them and it is at the origin of disorders and violence. Many families have been relocated by local authorities in specific streets of the neighbourhoods, according to this criterion. The social division of space produces power relations that become institutionalized amongst residents, whom are mainly of African origin, and in a smaller, but still significant number, of Gypsy origin, in a climate of permanent opposition and demand for territorial domination that children (re)appropriate and (re)construct in a perspective of a 'normalization' of violence.



'It's my street and the buildings on the side of the Gypsies and on the other it's me and my friends. What I like least in my neighborhood are the Gypsies and if I could, I would move them to another neighborhood because they are noisy and rude and thrown litter on the streets.' GirlF13, 9 years-old (Carvalho, 2010, p.282)

The way children mentioned the built environment and the use of space – on one hand, “we,” and on the other hand, the “other” – in a representation that reflects a battlefield, cannot be devalued.

Overall, when expressing their thoughts about their neighbourhoods the negative aspects overshadowed the positive ones. This overlap was particularly pronounced when they talked about ‘people’ ($X^2=125$, $p < .05$) and ‘public equipment’ ($X^2=85$, $p < .05$), and to a degree, somewhat lower but still significant, as they referred to the ‘public spaces’ ($X^2=31$, $p < .05$) and ‘shops and services’ ($X^2=31$, $p < .05$). On the other hand, their ‘house/homes’ ($X^2=12$, $p < .05$), ‘schools’ ($X^2=18$, $p < .05$) and ‘family’ ($X^2=8$, $p < .05$) were more positive. No significant gender differences were registered in all variables

The 'normalization' of violence in children's lives

The most significant negative evaluation (47.1 percent) is related to social interaction, specifically concerning 'people', in this case the adults with whom children interact or observe in daily life. Children have a clear idea about their expectations of adults' social roles and disparagingly referred to the existence of a large number of individuals who are distant from what they consider the reference model, suitable for the maintenance of trust and social cohesion. Violence, disorders and crime emerged as the focal point of the majority of children's approaches, regardless gender, age, ethnic origin or the neighbourhood where they lived.

A negative evaluation was also made about 'public spaces' (34.5 percent; n=76), because it is within these kinds of spaces children located a wide range of disorders and violence. Children took many photos emphasizing a multitude of places, people, and items associated with the neighbourhood's social problems. Most of the photographs highlighted the degradation of public spaces and equipment. A particular attention was given to physical disorders (graffiti, abandoned cars - or "stolen" to use children's own words-, garbage on the streets, deteriorated sidewalks, broken windows and doors, inoperable street lighting). When describing the drawings, a wide range of social disorders was singled out.

'There're also many 'cafes' full of men drinking and smoking and sometimes there are fights and they hit and run. Sometimes the police come but have to leave and go back because they go after them and beat them among big fights.' GirlF19, 8 years-old (Carvalho, 2010, p. 295)

As children pointed out, most 'cafes' are located on dead end streets, which make any formal social control intervention more difficult. At the same time, children perceived those spaces as dangerous and tried to avoid them.

More play space, better public space and public equipment maintenance and more security were the children's priorities. By not having playgrounds in their neighbourhoods, children are mainly sent to the street. On one hand, it gives them the possibility of fully exploring their physical and social environment, but it simultaneously exposes them to a range of other situations that are clearly more unfavourable and potentially generate different risks (Carvalho, 2013).

When children were asked to talk about their own drawing the most mentioned problem was crime (31.4%), followed by different types of disorders in a social framework characterized by insecurity.



"This here is a man running over a little boy... On the other side is the youngster who killed the other near my house, he went home to pick up the gun and then came back and killed him... In the building there is a man shooting at his wife, and she was pushed away by him. She fell out of the window and the neighbours called the firemen and there's nothing else... I don't like to live here, there are too many sad things, and it's very sad to live here, it's like this..." GirlF02, 9 years-old (Carvalho, 2010, p.163)

Children's forms of victimization in the neighbourhoods were subject to a particular interest and concern by the research participants, with a special attention to death cases in violent circumstances, such as during illegal car races. Other serious problems, strongly represented, is domestic violence, which according to children's words seem to affect a significant proportion of the neighbourhood households, regardless its composition or ethnic origin. Children's perceptions reveal hostility and confrontation between police and residents happen on a regular basis, and police action in the neighbourhoods is far from successful. The easy access to drugs and weapons reported in our study was notorious and widespread.

Conclusion

As a part of the context where children live, violence appears 'normalized' to many children, due to its intense frequency mainly in public spaces, which has an effect on children's socialization, especially those to whom the street is 'the' central place in daily life (Jamouille, 2005). Violent acts may occur frequently and become perceived as less serious over time, in which they tend to gain visibility in all neighbourhoods. This 'normalization' strengthens the risk of children's devaluation of the seriousness and effects of violent acts and, not surprisingly, some participate in it since very young ages. This is a clear example that childhood cultures generated in these neighbourhoods are underpinned by a culture of violence, integrating both intra and intergenerational contributions. Children do not reject conventional values, but in the practice of violence there is excitement and fun. There is also the adhesion to notions that are widespread and highly valued in these territories, such as "be smart", "get tough and courageous" and "have power and money", which are recurrently associated with a 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999).

Continued on next page...

Ultimately, children's social development through violence is already structuring how they interact with peers and adults in the present, and it will be reflected in children's future roles in society. In this process, special attention should be paid to the use of public spaces by children and adults. The street plays a central role in children's socialization in these neighbourhoods, and parental supervision does not always provide adequate protection; often, both boys and girls referred to how they were involved in social disorders and violence together with their own parents or relatives. Residents' low level of agency and the dilution of informal social control in the study neighbourhoods reinforce the lack of social regulation, facilitating children's social learning of violence (Carvalho, 2010). This forces us to question the nature of the existing social networks and how residents' lack of intervention on social control reflects insufficient collective action to improve children's socialization, which may endanger social cohesion (Morenoff et al., 2001).

References

- Almeida, A.N. (2009) *Para uma Sociologia da Infância. Jogos de Olhares, Pistas para a Investigação*. Lisboa: Instituto de Ciências Sociais.
- Anderson, E. (1999) *The Code of the Street. Decency, Violence, and the moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd.
- Benbenisty, R and Astor, R. (2005) *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighbourhood, Family, School and Gender*. New York: University Press.
- Carvalho, M.J.L. (2010) *Do Outro Lado da Cidade. Crianças, Socialização e Delinquência em Bairros de Realojamento*. Phd Thesis in Sociology, FCSH, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Retrieved from <http://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/6132>
- Carvalho, M.J.L. (2013) 'Children's perspectives on disorder and violence in urban neighbourhoods', *Childhood*, Volume 20 (1) 98-114,
- Christensen, P. and O'Brien, M. (eds.) (2003) *Children in the City. Home, Neighbourhood and Community*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Holloway, S.L. and Valentine, G. (2000) *Children's Geographies. Playing, Living, Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Jamoulle, P. (2005) 'L'école de la rue'. *La Matière et l'Esprit*, n°2 21-38
- Karsten, L (2003) 'Children's Use of Public Space. The Gendered World of the Playground', *Childhood*, 10(4) 457-473
- Morenoff, J.; Sampson, R. and Raudenbush, S. (2001) 'Neighborhood inequality, collective efficacy, and the spatial dynamics of urban violence'. *Criminology*, Volume 39 (3) 517-558
- Sampson, R.J. and Laub, J.H. (1994) 'Urban poverty and the family context of delinquency: a new look at structure and process in a classic study' *Child Development* 65 (special refereed issue on "Children and Poverty") 523-540
- Shuval, K.; Massey, Z.; Caughy, M. and Cavanaugh, B. (2012) "'I Live by Shooting Hill" - A Qualitative Exploration of Conflict and Violence among Urban Youth in New Haven, Connecticut'. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 23 (1) 132-43
- Valentine, G. (2004) *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

