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Street Youth Labor as an Expression of Survival and Self-Worth: Voices from Youth in Guatemala City

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which employment/ labor are situated within the daily lives of Guatemalan street youth. The youth interviewed primarily engaged in informal money-making activities. These activities not only demonstrate the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and resilience of street-involved young people, but their need to undertake any number of often undesirable tasks to survive. Findings from this study suggest that such work can provide street youth with greater self-confidence and self-esteem – reshaping their identities as “productive citizens.” However, such work, primarily due to its very public nature, can also re-marginalize young people as “unworthy” and “non-citizens.”

Key Words: street youth, street culture, street work, informal economy, street survival

This paper explores the experiences of 18 street-entrenched young people in Guatemala City, Guatemala concerning their engagement among the intersections of both “formal” and “informal” employment regimes. The paper explores how homeless youth survive within, and surprisingly thrive through, the contested practices of everyday economies alongside the normative spaces of management and control. The objectives of this work are twofold: First, we lay claim to these participants’ accounts of creative and entrepreneurial street survival within harsh street environment contexts; and second, the study works to contest the normative discourse about this population simply being lazy, unproductive, delinquent and/or criminal. Tangentially, the paper also wades into the debates how to understand the nuances of ‘street entrepreneurialism’ as a tactic of self-empowerment and complicity within formalized (neo-liberal) economic regimes. The notion of an “informal economy”, as others point out, is a social construction. So while being careful not to contribute to a “neo-romanticism” turn in a portrayal of street life (Gowan, 2009) strategies and aspirations (i.e. their aspirations are ‘just like’ the mainstream), we explore the irony of how commodified market activities work to assist youth who are often framed as ‘victims’ of those very market-based structures typical of the “formal economy”. This paper contributes to the very limited literature exploring how street youth actually make money, as opposed to the wealth of literature focusing on the pathologies of homelessness or risk for youth.

The Guatemala Context

Guatemala, like many Latin American developing nations, is an extremely resource rich, people poor nation. According to the World Bank (2012), Guatemala has one of the most unequal income distributions in the hemisphere. The wealthiest 20% of the population consumes 51% of Guatemala’s GDP. As a result, about 51% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day and 15% on less than \$1 a day (United States Department of State, 2011). Guatemala’s social development indicators, such as infant mortality, chronic child malnutrition, and illiteracy, to name just a few, are among the worst in the hemisphere (United States Department of State, 2011). Further still, Guatemala has been plagued by a thirty six year civil war that still impacts current economic, social and political arenas; the result, as the World Bank observes, is poverty that is “high” and “deep” (World Bank, 2012).

Like all industrialized or industrializing countries, Guatemala has been affected by the forces of globalization; in today’s global economy, Guatemala is increasingly dependent on international demand which determines the market price of its principle export, coffee, despite their relatively low share of global output. Coffee accounts for more than 20% of merchandise exports in Guatemala (Baffes, Lewin, & Varangis, 2012). Global overproduction of coffee, along with international competition and the global recession have led to a “collapse of coffee prices [which] left what was once the country’s leading export sector in depression and had a severe impact on rural income” (United States Department of State, 2011, “Economy,” para. 36). An even more crucial economic factor in Guatemala’s development has been the internal armed conflict that characterized the nation from 1960 to 1996. This period, dominated by violence between paramilitary, vigilante, and government groups, largely mitigated the country’s economic growth. Moreover, the violence in the outlying provinces contributed to a large urban migration that has only increased with time: as Guatemala City flooded with new residents

seeking work, shantytowns, and informal jobs continued to increase unchecked (Villelabeitia, 2000).

For youth in Guatemala, due to the socio-economic and historical systemic factors related to extreme poverty, less than 10% of Guatemalan youth have the opportunity to enter high school (for example, see the United States Agency for International Development website for an overview of Guatemala). According to the World Bank, only three in ten Guatemalan children finish the sixth grade, while fewer than one in ten enter into high school. Moreover, the Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC) / USA (2008), the illiteracy rate in Guatemala is the highest in Central America, at 70%. Enrollment at the secondary school level is at just 38%, with a completion rate of just 10% (GHRC/USA, 2008). Education statistics in Guatemala are even worse for rural, indigenous, and female populations. Indigenous women, on average, complete only 1.8 years of schooling (Cooperative for Education, 2012).

Not surprisingly then, there is a strong narrative in Guatemala, and among formal international organizations, of a serious “youth problem” in Guatemala. The problem is underpinned by both the economic challenges faced by Guatemala, evidenced in the formal macro-economic indicators briefly noted here, coupled with the simple harsh reality of lives lived within poverty. For instance, youth violence in Guatemala City is rampant, and is normalized to the extent that fear is part of the ‘everyday’ fabric of community in most neighborhoods, which is a reality poignantly felt by youth in particular. As Winton (2005, p. 180) concludes, in Guatemala City “the very visible and negative image of ‘youth’...can mean that trusting young people becomes considered dangerous.” The characterization of ‘street youth as dangerous’ is of course a phenomena not restricted by location; for example, mainstream North American criminology research on street youth is typically situated in the context of crime, or how youth become ‘criminally involved’ (Baron, 2004; Gaetz, 2002). This paper takes a different approach to explore how youth, despite the odds, mindfully work to accord themselves both a sense of positive self-identity and a livelihood, however meager, through the mechanisms of entrepreneurialism and market-based activities.

Informal Economies

In a global “fact finding” study of the informal economy, carried out on behalf of the World Bank, Becker (2004) notes the terms informal economy has been typically characterized as a temporary or marginal phenomena, and not linked to the formal sectors of modern capitalist development. Typically, in this vein, we understand a country’s economy as composed strictly of both formal and informal sectors.

Formal economies are defined as encompassing all legal and lawful work which is documented and taxed – in short, work that is considered formally regulated. Informal work tends to be differentiated by how the work takes place and the nature of goods and services being exchanged (Losby, Else, Kingslow, Edgcomb, & Malm, 2002; Schneider, 2002). For example, informal jobs might include providing childcare services and receiving cash payments, or working additional hours at work, getting paid in cash, and not filing taxes. Such work is considered *unlawful* as formal regulations are not being adhered to (i.e., reporting income for taxation purposes), yet, it is still legal as a form of activity. Typically, we also understand

informal work differentiated by a shift from the ‘unlawful’ to the ‘illegal’ when criminal activity is involved, such as selling drugs, sale of stolen goods, and theft (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Losby et al., 2002; Schneider, 2002). Often the informal economy is associated with developing nations. Furthermore, the informal economy has been observed to have more of a fixed character in countries where incomes and assets are not equitably distributed. According to Schneider (2002), the informal economy accounted for 51.5% of Guatemala’s GNP in 1999-2000, the fourth highest percentage reported for Latin American countries, behind Bolivia (67.1%), Panama (64.1%) and Peru (59.9%) (Schneider, 2002). The National Economic Research Center (CIEN) (2012), according to their research released in 2006, contends that up to 75% of the economically active population in Guatemala is employed in the informal sector; these statistics are echoed by other reports and more recent assessments (see, for example, Global Fairness, 2009).

While many scholars, including Loazya (1999), have long affirmed that “the presence of large informal sectors is one of the most important characteristics of *developing* [emphasis added] countries” (p. 5), an increasing amount of literature on the topic is beginning to recognize the importance of informal economies in the context of industrialized nations (Chen, 2007; Reimer, 2000; Schneider, 2002; Vogel, 2006).

Within all nation states, therefore, informal economies emerge in desperate times; individuals, communities, or populations who need money create avenues through which to satisfy their material needs. Informal economies are often referred to as underground, shadow, invisible, and black market economies; they develop as an alternative to the formal economy (Losby et al., 2002; Vogel, 2006). In so-called ‘developed’ nations, participants in informal economies typically include illegal immigrants, workers who cannot work legally for a variety of reasons (e.g. criminal record), and workers who are unemployed due to structural/systemic unemployment. In Guatemala, where informal employment accounts for over half of the GNP, this group must be expanded to include the average worker who cannot – or chooses not to – work in the formal sector for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps not surprisingly then, if economic growth is not accompanied by improvements in employment levels and income distribution, the informal economy does not shrink (Becker, 2004). Ironically, due to the growing stability of the informal sector, many observers now contend that it is more helpful to think of the economy as a dynamic continuum, with various forms of work settling somewhere within the categories of formal and informal. In countries such as Guatemala, and for street youth in particular, work often intertwines across formal and informal domains in complex ways, confounding the distinctions between formal and informal economies that economists tend to neatly subscribe to. As Juan Carlos Martinez, of the Association for the Advancement of Social Studies, bluntly explains, “eradicating the informal sector means eradicating the only possibility of survival for the majority of the people” (as cited in Villelabeitia, 2000, A12). In this sense, in Guatemala, the ‘informal sector’ can be appreciated as a systemic and formalized presence in the “mainstream” economy of the country.

The Public Lives of Street Youth in Guatemala

Within the past few decades, much academic and popular interest has been paid to street children across the globe. While research up to the 1980’s primarily highlighted personal and

family pathology within this population, other scholarly accounts have taken into consideration structural elements. For example, extreme poverty conditions, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse within the family and/or child welfare structures, poor educational systems, inadequate housing and health services, and a dearth of employment opportunities which have acted as “push” factors towards street life (Green, 1998; Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Raffaelli, 1997).

Street youth populations are by no means homogeneous - there are numerous sub-categories within street culture. For example, investigations have noted distinctions between “in and outers,” “runners,” “hard-core,” and “homeless” populations - highlighting the length of time one spends on the street (Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Morrisette & McIntyre, 1989; van der Ploeg, 1989). Other classifications depict from where youth on the street have come - “child welfare kids,” “group home kids,” and “refugees or immigrants” while other descriptions note their experiences on the street - “squeegee kids,” “prostitutes,” “druggies” and “gang-bangers” (McCarthy, 1990; Shane, 1989). A classification stemming from research with Brazilian (and to a lesser extent, Latin American) street children has uncovered a significant insight concerning this street population. The term “children” was used in the research because the majority of Latin and South American street youth are between the ages of eight and fifteen. The term “youth” will be used for our analysis since participants were significantly older, ranging from 19 to 25 years of age. The distinction is made vis-à-vis children “on the street” (*ninos en la calle*) versus children “of the street” (*ninos de la calle*) (Boyle, Herrera & Golde, 1999; Green, 1998; Lusk, 1992; Ortiz de Carrizosa & Poertner, 1992; Panter-Brick & Smith, 2000; Raffaelli, 1997). While the latter classification describes children who make the street their home, the former suggests that some children work and play on the street yet return to families to sleep.

Street youth in Guatemala frequently engage in informal economies due to the myriad challenges which prevent them from acquiring formal employment. These difficulties include their age, their lack of proper housing and education, as well as a lack of legal documentation. Street youth tend to be defined in the formal academic literature as young people (typically between 12 and 25 years of age) who do not have a permanent place to call home, and who, instead, spend a significant amount of time on the street (in places such as alleyways, parks, storefronts, and dumpsters), in squats (usually located in abandoned buildings), at youth shelters and centers, and/or with friends (i.e., “couch surfers”) (see, for example, Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; Karabanow, 2003, 2004; Lusk 1992). The identification of “street involved youth” is reported as particularly problematic in Guatemala in relation to violent crime and the role of youth populations, which are growing, and formally high unemployment rates (Seelke, 2011). In Guatemala a serious gang problem is also typically framed as a “youth problem”, where a combination of poverty, social exclusion, and a serious lack of education and employment opportunities are pinned as push factors for youth and association and participation in gangs.

In addition, we know that homeless youth often report family violence, poverty, instability and trauma, and mental illness during childhood and adolescence (Coates, 2000; Hughes et al., 2005; Karabanow, 2004, 2010; Novac, Serge, Eberle, & Brown, 2002). Of course, not surprisingly in both global North and South, street survival for these youth often appears somewhat similar and entails involvement in risky and illegal behavior in order to survive (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). These markers of ‘street youth’ of course further marginalize these youth; addictions, mental, and physical illness as well as criminal justice records all create barriers to “success” as it is typically framed as measurable educational and economic

achievement outcomes (Durham, 2003; Hughes et al., 2005; Karabanow, Clement, Carson, & Crane, 2005; Karabanow et al., 2007; Novac et al., 2002). However, it would be misleading to suggest all street youth experiences are similar, regardless of geography. In Guatemala, street youth are increasingly viewed as “garbage” by mainstream society. Street “cleansing” methods in Guatemala are disturbingly associated with methods that involve eradicating the youth themselves. Approaches include imprisoning young people, placing them into closed-unit correctional compounds, forcing them into child welfare institutions, or worse, torture and death. Few of the perpetrators of these attacks – by the government police, or off-duty death squads – are brought to justice (Amnesty International, 2009, 2010; Karabanow, 2010). Amnesty International (2009, p. 9) writes of these “clandestine groups”: “Termed as such by civil society, these groups are best described as criminal networks involving serving and former members of the army and the police, the business sector, private security companies, common criminals and gang members.”

Moreover, the informal street economy is a visible economy that exposes its participants to the ire of the public. In Guatemala, this ire is expressed not only in taunts, but in physical violence, carried out by government officers as well as clandestine groups. So while, as mentioned, street youth in the formal academic literature are usually defined as being 12 to 25 years old, Guatemala’s street population is significantly younger. Documentation on this matter is rather scanty; however, Human Rights Watch (1997) cites numerous cases of street children as young as 7 years old that live on the streets, sniff glue, and are brutally harassed by the police and members of the public. Although the participants in this study are all between the ages of 19 and 25, several recount experiences of growing up on the street, or leaving home to live on the street at a very young age. In addition to being a young population, street youth in Guatemala tend to be less educated. Among the youth who participated in this study, many had not finished primary school and some admitted that they could barely read.

Methodology

In the present study, we examined the narratives of Guatemalan street youth regarding their involvement in informal and formal economies. This exploratory, qualitative analysis of street youth experiences provided a rare opportunity to explore the unique culture of Guatemalan street work, the possibilities for work-related identities, and the difficulties Guatemalan street youth face in finding and maintaining formal and informal employment. A qualitative approach was undertaken with two considerations in mind. First, only a small number of studies have been conducted in the area of employment among homeless youth (e.g., Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd, & Patterson 2010), and even fewer to date have primarily focused on examining the lived experiences around informal and formal economies. Second, the issues examined in this study are highly complex with interactions between community contexts, structures, and norms within formal and informal economies, individual youth experiences, and meanings tied to youth subcultures. In such a context, an exploratory qualitative approach was felt to be best suited to uncover such complexities and nuances. This study was developed and implemented in collaboration with a community-based youth center called Mojoca in Guatemala City.

Following approval from Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 18 youth in Guatemala City, Guatemala. One-on-one interviews were used to collect narratives from youth 19-25 years old who identified as having current or past street experiences. Participants were recruited at local street hangouts and at a youth center's drop-in and outreach program. The average age of participants was 21 years old; 55% of the sample were females; 25% were currently sleeping on the street; while 70% were living in a group home setting at the time of the interview. As such, the majority of participants involved in this study represent a particular street youth population that had social service engagement. Moreover, all participants had informal work experiences and approximately 30% had previously worked in the formal economy. At the time of the interviews, all participants worked within the informal economy and two participants had supplementary part time formal employment as well. Interview guides were drafted by the research team to shape the narratives collected around key aspects of employment and labor – including daily routine, benefits, and challenges, meaning of work and considerations of 'dream jobs'. Interviews were conducted primarily at one youth center in the downtown core, lasted on average one hour, and were tape-recorded, transcribed, translated, and anonymized.¹ Each participant was interviewed once and provided a small honorarium. Using grounded theory to guide the process, the research design was community-based and naturalistic, endeavoring to build understandings based on emerging data trends which form the foundation of our arguments. Grounded theory analysis involves the process of identifying common and dissimilar themes while building conceptual narratives from the data through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process facilitates the fracturing of the data into conceptually-specific themes and categories; rebuilding the data in new ways by linking primary categories and auxiliary themes into a path analysis; and, constructing a theoretical narrative shaped by data integration and category construction.

Findings

While the street youth involved in this study explained a number of reasons for engaging in both formal and informal work, all agreed on the fundamentally fiscal motivation for seeking employment. In short, money is necessary for survival on the street. As one participant noted, even the most menial task is "a way to earn a living and to try to buy what one wants." Many of the youth spoke of their work in terms of "earning" and as such, explained it as an alternative to stealing: "Instead of stealing, you're going on to sell, to earn money as you should, not stealing"; "I don't like stealing...I prefer to work and feel how hard it is to earn money...if I've earned it with my sweat, I feel pleased." While the majority of studies regarding street youth and informal economies focus on criminal acts, such as the drug and sex trade (Baron, 2001, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997) few emphasize the non-criminal activities that in fact characterize a great deal of street employment. In Guatemala City, these informal jobs include gardening, waitressing, watching or washing cars, and hawking on streets and buses. While these activities are not legal – in that they are not regulated or taxed – they represent a non-criminal subdivision of informal labor that is critical to street culture and street survival.

¹Fabienne Doiron was our field research assistant and carried out the interviews in Spanish, transcribed the audio tapes and translated to English the transcripts.

Formal employment – that is, structured, taxed and regulated work – is often inaccessible to street youth. A small minority of the Guatemalan sample group had experiences with formal employment, primarily through families and friends. As one participant noted:

I was working in a formal job two years ago, in a bakery, making bread...I made French bread, lard bread, cupcakes and cakes...I was there for a year and one half...I really like baking, I like making breads, cakes and all of that...my uncle owns the bakery, so I worked for him...I left my house because of problems at home and he stopped paying me, that's why I had to quit the job.

Another young person shared: "I had steady, steady job, yeah I worked at a blacksmith's. I worked as a blacksmith, over there in Zone 5 [area in the city]. It was a steady job, but I left because of drugs."

As these accounts suggest, formal work tended to be part of pre-street life: issues arose in these young people's lives which forced them out of formal employment and, for the majority, out of their family homes. The move away from stable housing typically parallels a shift away from formal sector employment; as this study demonstrates, homelessness and formal labor are usually incompatible. Several of the participants noted that without a home at which to rest and wash, and without the necessary legal documentation, formal employment is not an option.

While formal work presents many barriers to street youth, their engagement in informal work is quite prevalent. Every participant spoke to their experiences with gardening, restaurant work, cleaning, construction, garbage picking/hauling, and most frequently, hawking food, pencils, flowers, candies, bookmarks, and other small items on the street and on local public buses. Informal work makes up a part of street youth's daily activities and provides the youth some financial gains and emotional support. The following discussion explores the complex and nuanced world of informal work for our participants in Guatemala City, focusing on the culture of informal employment, the relationship between informal work and self-worth, and the marginalization and difficulties faced by street youth engaging in the informal economy.

A Culture of Informal Employment: Structure and Rules

While few of the participants recognized a marked difference between formal and informal employment, several noted that while formal work is "structured" or "steady," informal work is not. One participant explained, "When you're selling, there isn't really a schedule, hardly. You decide yourself, whenever." Another recounted: "[we'd sell] until whatever time we wanted. Now, in our case, since we're going around selling, it's not the same as a job, right, where you get off work at a scheduled time. Because at a job they tell you at what time you start and at what time you end." This flexibility is necessary and reflects the vicissitudes of street life. However, one participant pointed to the danger of such non-scheduled employment: "to go around selling in buses is hardly a steady job, because when you're selling in buses, if you feel like it you can stop selling and go get high. Now, if you have a steady job, it's not the same because it's steady and you have a schedule."

Despite this reported lack of structure, many of the participants in fact described work routines very similar to those of a formally employed person. Most would set some kind of alarm, wake early in the morning to wash and dress, and work six to eleven hour days. Similarly, while many began their explanation of informal work by stating that “there aren’t any rules,” the majority of participants went on to detail a fairly complex culture of informal employment, complete with its own structures and social codes. The rules of selling, for example, include rules designed to limit competition:

First of all, if you were selling a product, the others shouldn’t start selling that same thing. And alright, each had their turn: if you just did a round now it’s my turn and we had to take each our own bus, and that’s how it went at each stop.

Participants explained how, as a seller, one must respect the territory of others: “you can’t go sell just wherever, and it depends how you’ve acted [towards others].” Unlike the traditional capitalist model that thrives on competition, these informal economies are community-based, with each participant recognizing that their survival depends on mutual respect. Along the same lines, another rule “is not to go around inhaling solvent, to not get high when you’re selling because if you do the other vendors...take away your money and take away your merchandise.” The participant continued to explain that the other vendors do so because they do not want the public to perceive hawkers as drug addicts – this would hurt sales for the entire group. Another youth stated: “The rules are not to talk back to people, also not to respond to them in a bad mood, also not to steal money, also not to get scared, well the first time you do, but they teach you. And to help each other between groups, help each other.” Sellers must mind their behavior, not only for the benefit of their own sales, but for the survival of the group.

As the previous quotation demonstrates, there is a process by which new sellers are “taught” the business – an apprenticeship. Selling in the informal economy resembles the running of a small business in the formal sector. Vendors start their day by purchasing their wares; they will usually focus on choosing products that can be purchased at a low price and that they think the public will be interested in buying. One experienced seller described her job:

To work and sell and to invest in merchandise, I take a chance on merchandise that I see that I’m going to be able to make money with... Like right now, at this time of year...I would be selling pencils...pens, pencil cases or games, crayons or something like that...But I would almost only work with school-stuff because right now is that school-time. You also notice that if you go to the bookstore this would cost you one quetzal or one-fifty but if I sell it to you on the bus they’ll cost you about 35 cents each because I don’t sell you just one...I only sold by dozen and the dozen cost you about 5 quetzals and you sell it cheap and earn a bit for us as well, but you have to sell it fast. And when it’s not school-time anymore, we sell, let’s say candy, cookies, different things. Sometimes you have to rethink things, let’s say if crayons aren’t pulling, then you have to see what it is that people want, if it’s candy or cookies, or another type of material.

This informal seller’s thinking is similar to the rationale of a small store: she analyses the market, purchases appropriate wares, and attempts to buy low and sell high. After purchasing their products, the sellers then board buses (or walk the streets) and give people their sales pitch or *casaca*. One of the participants provided an example of an effective *casaca* approach:

I get on the bus and say: ‘Very good afternoon to each and every one of you. Sorry about the noise that I’m making, with all of the respect that you deserve, I will walk by your seat placing in the palm of your hand, let’s say a cookie. This is a rich and delicious cookie through the sale of which I earn a bit of money. But look, I hope you understand in your heart. I’m not looking at how nice you’re dressed nor am I taking away the food off your table. I’m only trying to earn a bit of money, day after day. I hope you feel it in your heart. Through the small change you give, I wouldn’t either want to leave you with empty hands. Rather, through your money, I give you a rich and delicious cookie. The price of which is...’ and I say the price ‘And that’s the way I can afford a roof, a plate of food for my home without having to do you any harm.’

Sellers rely on many tactics to convince people to buy, and are very conscious of their self-presentation and marketing strategies. As in the formal economy, these skills do not always come naturally: hawkers, like all salespeople, must learn their trade. Many of the street youth interviewed recall a person, or group of people, who “taught me how to talk” – “a guy came and taught me how to throw the *casaca* [sales pitch].” This exemplifies the community-based subculture of the informal economy. As has been noted in other studies (for example, Karabanow, 2010), street youth tend to form communities or “crews” that support each other on the street and are essential to street survival. The informal economy in Guatemala clearly supports this theory.

Despite this emphasis on helping one another, the majority of participants explained that they prefer to work alone. Once they have learned the necessary skills to sell, most recognize that they can make more money if they are not obliged to split their earnings with a partner. While characterized by communal aid and mutual respect, the informal economy is ultimately – like the formal economy – based on making money.

Work-based Identity: Creativity and Self-Worth

Work, be it formal or informal, is beneficial for street youth not only for its financial benefits; but it helps youth to develop and rebuild their sense of self, to break away from destructive patterns, and ultimately contributes to any goals of exiting street life. Although many of the participants were aware that society viewed them as “lazy” or “useless,” they tended to see themselves as contributing members of society earning a valid and honest living. One participant said, “Well, a lot of people say, right? ‘The kid doesn’t want to do anything. Lazy kid’ right? And I wouldn’t like for people to say that about me, I’d rather do something so that they don’t say that I’m lazy. I want to be someone important in life.” This youth makes an interesting and important connection in this statement: he intrinsically associates “being someone” with “doing something” – he accepts the work-based identity that characterizes much of contemporary capitalist society. Many of the interviews subtly enforced this idea that in the informal economy, as in the formal economy, “who one is” is largely dependent on “what one does.” This demonstrates two important ideas: that street youth working in the informal sector are surprisingly ‘mainstream’ in their underlying beliefs and ambitions, and that work – be it formal or informal – plays a crucial role in allowing street youth, who have often dealt with trauma, isolation and low self-esteem, to rebuild a sense of self-worth.

Many of the youth involved in this study dream of futures that echo traditional ideals: “to have my family all together...to have a home, or rather to have a nice house...to have a good job.” Several explained that this future is unattainable without hard work; many viewed those who “do nothing” as people who “waste their time” and think that “your life isn’t important to you.” On the other hand, those who value their lives and wish to attain a future of “peace and tranquility” must “look for work, that’s what needs to be done to have that future because if God allows it, in the future maybe you can find a partner, form a family and live peacefully.” For these youth, working – be it in the formal or informal sector – is essential to a feeling of “moving forward (*seguir adelante*).” This movement forward begins with self-esteem. Although the focus of this study was not the troubled pasts of the participants, many alluded to the difficulties they have faced and the various traumas that forced them onto the streets. Several of the youth noted that working was a catalyst in rebuilding positive feelings about oneself: one explained, “[When I’m working,] I feel happy, powerful...Sometimes when I go out to sell, I feel happy.” Another said:

For me, when I’m working I feel free because I know that I’m earning my money in an honest way, not stealing right. Because when you’re stealing, you don’t feel free, right? Now when you’re working, you’re free, they can’t arrest you or anything because you’re selling. Now if you’re stealing and everything, you don’t feel free. But when you’re selling you feel free, out of danger.

This feeling of being “free” or “powerful” rests on the idea that money is “earned” and not stolen; being able to earn money is associated with being “someone,” with being a valid and contributing member of society.

In addition, work helps street youth to break away from destructive patterns. One participant spoke of her experience working full time at a café:

For me, working means to be busy, to not just be there....It helps us meet other people, like new people and not to be always in the same scene. Because if you’re not busy, you feel really bored and you might want to, I don’t know, go back to the same thing you were in before...you even forget your problems because you’re keeping busy, you’re talking to other people, people who don’t know you.

For this participant, a formal job was beneficial in that it supplied her with a daily routine and allowed her to interact with non-street people – these factors helped to separate her from the destructive lifestyle of the street, and helped her to “move forward.” Although these benefits are indeed most obvious with formal employment, many participants spoke of the positive effects of informal work as well, although to varying degrees. In Guatemala, since the informal economy accounts for over half of the country’s GNP, there is a wide range of under-the-table informal work available. These jobs frequently bring youth out of the street context and, therefore, provide similar benefits to a formal job, as described by the above participant. As to informal work that takes place on the street, such as hawking or car watching, the benefits of work are present, although to a different degree. Even hawking, for example, gives young workers a routine and a chance to interact with non-street people. As one young man continuously emphasized throughout his interview, “work helps you to keep your mind busy, to be in another mind-set, right? To not be thinking the same thing all the time: ‘Oh, drugs, drugs, drugs...’” As

explained earlier, the code of the hawking world dictates that vendors cannot sell while high – just like a formal job, hawking helps to distance youth workers from some of their destructive street habits. However, as one participant thoughtfully noted, it is difficult to break these habits when one is still highly embroiled in street culture; “it depended on who was around me because if they were in the same problems as I was, I stopped working and I started doing the same as they did. And if I was surrounded by serious people, then I got my act together.” While certain types of informal work, like cleaning or waitressing, can help youth to distance themselves from destructive patterns, others, such as car watching and selling, may not do enough to separate youth from their peers. While the routine and activity do have positive effects, they often are not sufficient.

Among some of the participants, there was the sentiment that informal work could function as a transition stage towards exiting the street; it could “change your life.” One participant said “there are lots of vendors who’ve gotten off the streets, if you make an effort, you go out to sell, you can get off the street. Like myself, when I was selling, I mean working, I got off the street, I went home and I managed to stay there quite a long time.” One might credit this success to several factors: first, the money the seller may have been able to save and accumulate; second, the routine of selling may have helped the seller to break from destructive patterns, such as drug use, and also prepared the seller for the demands of formal sector employment; and, thirdly, selling may have enabled the seller to develop the necessary confidence and sense of self to attempt exiting the street.

Marginalization: The Challenges of Work

Although informal work can be perceived as a positive aspect in the lives of street youth, one must not lose sight of the marginalization of this group and the profound challenges and difficulties they face. Informal work, such as selling on buses, exposes street youth to the ire and abuse of the public. Nearly every participant spoke of “fear and embarrassment” in the face of selling on buses. This job is profoundly public and many, at first, shy away from the exposure. As one participant explained: “To be selling on buses, you risk a lot because imagine that there are drivers who treat you badly...there are drivers who, when you’re getting on, they nearly run you over...they humiliate you in that way and that’s something that affects you.” The bus drivers are not the only threatening aspect of selling on buses; members of the public are often abusive as well:

Some people say that ‘Here they come again’ or ‘Why don’t you look for better work’ and others say ‘That work is just for lazy people.’ Others don’t buy anything from you, they throw your stuff at you. Sometimes, when people are drunk they disrespect you...it lowers your morale.

Although informal work can be dangerous and humiliating, street youth have few other options. They face a great deal of discrimination. One participant with a steady and formal job explained “they discriminate a lot against you when you’re from the street, then they don’t give you a job. But I didn’t say anything about me being from the street but I was staying on the street. I paid to get my clothes washed and I stayed on the street.” She went to great lengths to conceal her street life in order to secure formal employment. Street youth are discriminated

against for their lack of stable housing, and their appearance (many spoke of the trouble of being tattooed). Most are not even given the chance to lie about their living conditions: they simply cannot provide the required documents necessary to apply for a formal position:

Sometimes it drives you to despair. It drives you to despair because it's hard to find work, there aren't many doors open to you...Because when you're looking for a job, you have to bring a reference letter, what are those called, those papers? Your background or police check. You have to bring all of that.

It's hard! It's hard because you have to have all of your documents in order: health card, criminal records, police records, income tax...You need a lot of documents to get that kind of job, and on top of that you need to have other job experiences because when you show up [for a job interview] they ask you if you have any work experience and if you don't have any, well it'd be really hard to get the job.

In addition to lacking documents, most of the participants in the study were disadvantaged due to their lack of education. Many of the participants had not completed sixth grade, and some could not read. Lack of education, and legal documentation, combined with the material difficulties and discrimination street youth face leave youth with few options for employment in the formal sector.

Conclusions

Several observations become clear as we consider the experiences of these young people vis-à-vis work and labor scenarios. Youth stories from our study highlight the struggle to survive life on the street in Guatemala City. Street youths' engagement with work, whether formal or informal, is a direct result of the difficulties of living on the street. However, these youth face tremendous obstacles in acquiring formal employment. These collective pressures, including a lack of stable housing, lack of education, and lack of documentation, leave youth with little choice but to engage in the informal economy. Characteristics of street informal economies include: (a) they are based on the struggle for survival; (b) they are flexible and can adapt to fit the needs of the worker and the clientele; (c) they afford a greater deal of freedom to the worker, in terms of scheduling and task choices; and (d) most obviously, they are unregulated.

Within the Guatemalan context, youth react to hardships and trauma at home by entering the streets at relatively young ages. Once on the street, they battle addiction, mental and physical illness, poverty, as well as harsh treatment from mainstream society. Faced with the necessities of survival, however, most of street youth interviewed emphasized that they would much rather earn money than steal. As such, they exhibit strong entrepreneurial and creative abilities in finding and developing informal work opportunities. Although the informal economy is most often associated with criminal activities, and contrary to public policies which argue for a "cleansing" of parasitic street people, some street youth in Guatemala City strive for meaningful and honest employment that will provide them with the means necessary to survive. Recourse to informal work allows these young people a way to provide for themselves and to build or rebuild a sense of self-worth.

While the stories of young people living on the street depict a complex and nuanced image of the intersections between homelessness and labor, the grand narrative is somewhat simpler. Popular public myth often portrays street youth as unintelligent, lazy, and delinquent; however, most of the street youth interviewed disdain this concept of “doing nothing” and instead focus on being proactive and creative in their struggle to earn enough money to survive on the streets. These young people appear thoughtful and reflective with a strong work ethic that is steeped within civil society, not outside of it. The work-based identity exhibited by Guatemalan street hawkers in this study, as well as the apprenticeship system and culture of informal employment clearly demonstrate this assertion. While most studies focus on the criminal activities in the informal economy, the youth participants in our study emphasized that they would rather work than steal and described informal work that, while unlawful, is not illegal. With few options for engaging in informal work, and faced with the belittlement, mockery, harassment, and real violence of the public informal workplace, these youth exhibit strength and entrepreneurial creativity as they rebuild their self-worth and struggle to survive by engaging in informal work. What is troubling is that this labor – which seems to be a necessary, rational choice – perpetuates street youths’ statuses of marginality and social exclusion at the same time as it allows them a means to survive.

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