



Youth on the move: ethnography of relational mobility with street-connected children and youth in urban Northeast Brazil

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Background: Ethnography with street-connected children and youth on the move

During my first fieldwork in Recife, 2018, two topics quickly caught my attention:

- Street-connected children and youth are highly mobile and
- most of them in urban Brazil have some connection with their family members, despite their presence on the street

Lehtonen, Annika. 2021. “‘They Wish I Would Come Back Home’: An Ethnographic Study of Street Children’s Family Relations in Recife, Brazil.” Master’s thesis, Tampere University.

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Lehtonen, Annika. 2023. “‘She Does Not Make Me Do It, but I Want to Help Her’: Relational Family Interdependence of Street-Connected Youth in Recife, Brazil.” *Childhood*, 30 (4): 380–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682231200792>.

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Street-connected children and youth and relational mobility

- **‘Depend on the streets for their survival’** – whether they live on the streets, work on the streets, have support networks on the street, or a combination of the three’ (The Consortium for Street Children n.d.).
- **‘Street situations’** – individual realities instead of stigmatisation (Paludo and Koller 2008) and fluid, dynamic nature of their life between different important settings (Schwinger 2007; Thomas de Benitez 2011; Van Blerk 2012), e.g. **family, the street and support systems** (Lima et al. 2021; Santana, Doninelli, and Koller 2010).
- **Circulating mobility** rather than moving from one place to another – the different socio-spatial settings and important relationships were overlapped and interconnected (Lehtonen, in review) – focusing solely on their direct environment on the street could ignore other potentially important sites in their lives (Lima et al. 2021; Van Blerk 2012).
- **Contradicts the societal idea** where young people are passive victims of exploration and poverty and abandoned by their family members (e.g. Bordonaro 2012; Morais, Paludo, and Koller 2010; Schwinger 2007)
- Mobilities should be explored as **relational practices**, rather than mobility decisions being made by solitary subjects (Adey 2017; Larsen, Urry & Axhausen 2006; Manderscheid 2014; Rau & Sattlegger 2018).



Data and methods

- Ethnographic data collected in Recife and Salvador, Brazil on three different fieldwork periods in 2018–2023
- Two civil society organisations (Juntos and Desejo) and one governmental child welfare institution (Casa)
- Participants: seventeen street-connected children and young people, two family members, six professionals
- Learning about children's and young people's social worlds in their own environments, where they could be both teachers and subjects of knowledge
- Multi-sited mobile ethnography: street education (day and evening), socio-pedagogical activities, domestic visits to young people's family homes, 'mother's groups', protests on the street with the children and youth, countryside visits...



Bruno (12) 'When she spends the night on the street, I do too'

'When I go to the street, I go there to play. On the street, there is always someone I can play with. We are in Resistência, Luz, the park, the statue. When I was younger, I was at the station with my mum. Begging and selling gum. I still sell and I beg. [...] At Resistência [in a street community] the adults give us food, we cook there together. Sometimes mum comes to take me and my brother home. Sometimes I'm at home for three days and then go back to the street. Sometimes I spend nights on the street, my mum also does. Sometimes my brother runs away from home to the street, then I go after him. Other kids bully him, so I defend him. I don't use glue. Or sometimes a bit, just to stay warm. Sometimes I go to school, but lately less. Everything is good at home, with my family, but I also like it on the street.'

–Bruno (12) Recife, 2019

- Children's and young people's mobility was formed in the context of survival, poverty and social vulnerability
- Still, they actively made mobility decisions and agentic choices regarding their street and family life and created important bonds with people in various settings – young people's movement toward survival was fundamentally embedded in relation to others.

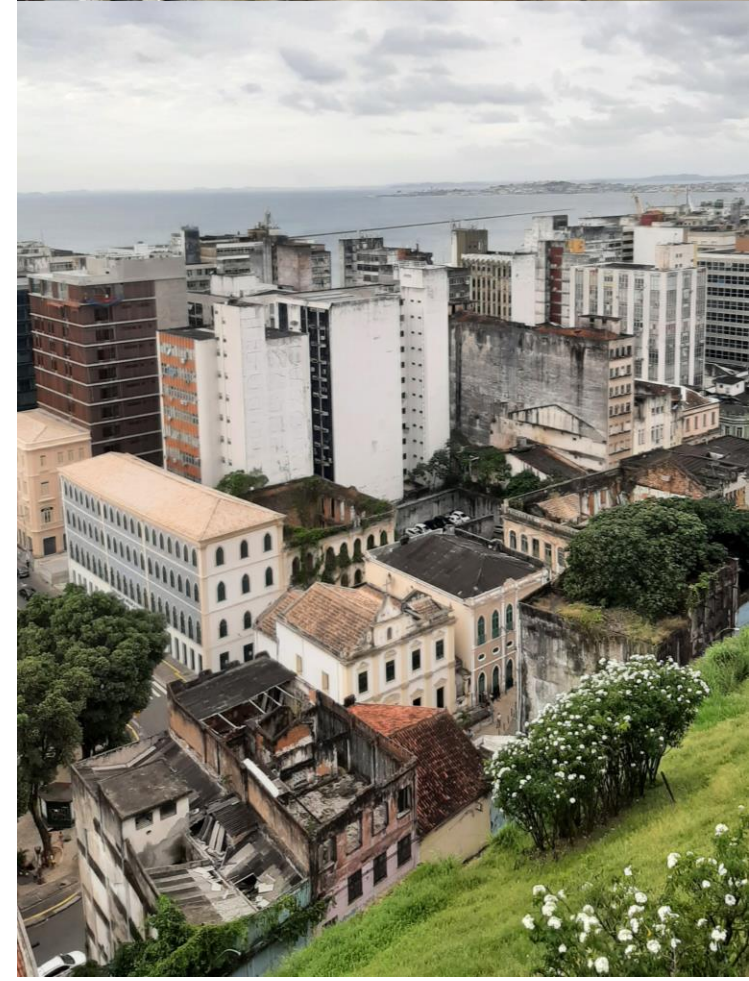


Jenifer (10) 'She's a walker'

On my first week in Desejo, I met ten-year-old Jenifer. She was bubbly, sociable and knew her way around Salvador. I told Jenifer I was going to another place to meet someone there. Jenifer wanted to walk with me and show me the way. She told me she was also going downtown to visit her grandmother's sister. Jenifer held my hand as we walked, she was curious and friendly. When we got to an elevator to get to downtown, Jenifer guided me: 'You pay here, I don't pay' and she hopped her way to the elevator line. –Extract from the field diary, Salvador, 2022

- Concern and care for me, Jenifer as the teacher and subject of knowledge in her mobile environment (also Lara and Castro 2021) – mobile ethnography and role-play (Lydahl et al. 2021)

One morning Dona Cristina, Jenifer's grandmother, came to Desejo. She was tired and worried, as she had spent the night looking for Jenifer, who had spent the night on the street. She had received a photo of Jenifer from 'some lady' who spent time in the mall, and Dona Cristina went to sleep there hoping Jenifer would show up. The social workers had received a photo from a woman who had found Jenifer and her friend sleeping on the street. As the social workers went to look for them, I talked with Dona Cristina. 'She's a walker', Cristina said. After some time, Jenifer came to Desejo with the social workers, visibly regretful. Finally, we found out that Jenifer and her friends had spent the day begging at the mall and then on the beach, later taking a taxi to go and sleep downtown. –Extract from the field diary, Salvador, 2023



Concluding remarks: mobile youth – mobile researcher

- Street-connected children and youth are not solely agents moving as they wish – they move within complex relational processes that include various people and motives (Lehtonen, in review)
- Isn't ethnography often multi-sited and mobile? Why make the word mobility explicit? – Doing mobile ethnography means moving while analysing movement; understanding the participants' meanings and representations of mobility in their worldviews (Novoa 2015).
- The importance of the organisations on the field as sponsors (e.g. Lee 1995) and integration of mobile ethnography to mobile outreach work methods that respect children's and young people's agency and relationality.
- The need to acknowledge young people's relational mobility in research and practice – as street-connected children and youth are on the move, the ethnographer doing research with them should also be. Through mobile ethnography, it is possible to co-create knowledge together with the children and youth in various locations that are significant for them (see Matias and Francischini 2010).





Thank you!

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