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The Construction and Protection of Individual and Collective Identities by Street Children and Youth in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia has a proliferation of children living on the streets of its larger cities. In the eyes of the state and dominant society, these children are seen to be committing a social violation, as their very presence contradicts state ideological discourse on family values and ideas about public order. Such an offence justifies the ‘cleaning up’ of children from the streets, arrests, imprisonment and, in some extreme cases, torture and extermination. As a response to their marginalisation and subordination, street children in Yogyakarta, Central Java, have developed a ‘repertoire of strategies’ in order to survive. These include the appropriation of urban niches within the city, in which they are able to earn money, feel safe and find enjoyment. These spaces have become territories in which identities are constructed, and where alternative communities are formed, and where street kids have created collective solutions for the dilemmas they confront in their everyday lives.

This paper is a social analysis of the street boys’ social world which exists within these marginal spaces. Using Visano’s (1990) concept of a street child’s life as a ‘career’, I examine the socialisation into the street child subculture: the Tikyan. By employing Turner’s (1985,1994) ‘self-categorization’ theory, I discuss how a street boy’s individual identity construction and performance entails a continual interaction with the Tikyan collective identity. Further, by drawing on the work of subcultural theorists, I reflect on how the Tikyan have developed their own code of street ethics, values and hierarchies, as a reaction to, and a subversion of, their imposed exclusion. I show how the Tikyan actively reject their ‘victim’ or ‘deviant’ label, and ‘decorate’ street life so that it becomes agreeable in their eyes. Instead of complaining about their lives (which is considered bad form), they reinforce the things that they feel are good about living on the street. Always, they are attempting to look for proof that street life is better than
conventional life. Problems are often glossed over and treated with humour and a light-hearted disregard, and the children create a doctrine for themselves that it is ‘great in the street’; a cod-philosophy which is constructed to make life more tolerable. Over the months or years street children and youth learn to interact and comply with the expectations of their own group, and are more influenced by it. It is in this way that the Tikyan community enables a street child to establish a new identity, and is a means through which street children can voice their collective indignation at the way they are treated by mainstream society.

**Keywords:** street children; boys; Indonesia; youth culture

**Introduction**

*Often if you ask street children with whom they roam, they will reply, ‘alone with God,’ although they are normally in the company of their peers. Street life is marked by both wrenching solitude and intense solidarity.* (Hecht 1998, 46)

Indonesia has a proliferation of children living on the streets of its larger cities. The majority of children visible working on the streets of the city of Yogyakarta, Central Java, are boys between the ages of 7-18. There are also girls, although they are not so visible or as prolific in numbers as the boys. In the eyes of the state and dominant society, these children are seen to be committing a social violation, as their presence contradicts state ideological discourse on family values and ideas about public order. Such an offense justifies the “cleaning up” of children from the streets, arrests, imprisonment and, in some extreme cases, torture and extermination (Beazley 1999; 2000a).

Elsewhere, I have written about how street children in Yogyakarta have managed to respond to their social and spatial oppression geographically, and have developed a repertoire of strategies in order to survive their numerous negative experiences on the street (Beazley 2000a; 2002). These strategies include the appropriation of urban niches in the city in which they are able to earn money, feel safe and find enjoyment.

In this paper I discuss how in addition to the “winning of space,” it is within these marginal niches that street boys have constructed their own subculture, the Tikyan, as a strategy for both collective and individual survival. As Massey (1998,128) tells us: “the construction of spatiality can be an important element in building a social identity.” For street children in Yogyakarta, the spaces they have carved out for themselves have become territories in which collective identities are constructed, and where
alternative communities have formed. They are what Scott (1990, 119) terms "off-stage social sites in which resistance is developed and codified," and where the "hidden transcript grows." The "hidden transcript" for street boys in Yogyakarta is their Tikyan subculture, which has its own patterns of behavior and a discernable system of values and beliefs.

Tikyan means “street kid” in the children’s own creative language, and is a name used with pride to refer to their surrogate family (Beazley 1999; 2000a). The Tikyan subculture is exclusively for street boys; street girls are deliberately excluded from this group. In this paper I focus on the norms and values of the Tikyan subculture, and present it as a technique for the children to resist their social and spatial exclusion, and to counteract the negative perceptions held by the state and mainstream society who view them as social pariahs infesting the streets (Beazley 2000a). The paper considers a street child’s socialization to the subculture as a “career” that can be understood as a solution to a child’s personal troubles. As Visano states, the concept of a career and the various stages of assimilation to street life is a useful tool for exploring street children’s “activities and relationships attendant with street socialization” (1990, 142).

Such an enquiry requires a social analysis of the various forms of emotional, psychological, and physical tactics which street children have developed as a distinctive way of life, and which are embodied in their lived out daily practices and attitudes. This includes their ideas of individuality, freedom, and solidarity; how they shape their norms, rules and values; their social organization, conflicts and pressures; and their relationships with other people on the street (Hall and Jefferson 1976, 10). I describe these practices as the obligatory performances of the Tikyan.

My entry point into the street-child world was through the street boy non–government organization (NGO) Girli in Yogyakarta, where I spent 18 months working as a volunteer and conducting fieldwork. My research in the field took a qualitative approach by asking the children to participate directly in an investigation of their lives. The methods I applied included informal interviews, participatory observation on the street, and PAR (Participatory Action Research) activities, including role playing, drama improvisation, spontaneous drawings and “mental maps” drawn by the children (Baker 1996a; Baker et al. 1996b; Chawla and Kjorholt 1996; Chambers 1997; Gould and White 1974; Hart 1996; Johnson et al. 1995, 1996; Matthews 1992, 1986, 1980; Swart 1990). Empirical data was also collated through focus group discussions. All these methods and convergent research strategies were ideal catalysts for informal conversation interviews, and often led to further discussions about other aspects of the children’s lives (Beazley 1999).
The theoretical framework for this paper draws on Scott’s (1990) concept of the “hidden transcript” of resistance to the “public transcript,” together with the works of subculture theorists from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. I also utilize Turner’s “self categorization” theory, together with Visano’s (1990) methods employed in her study of street children in North America, by describing life on the streets as a “career.”

**Tikyan: Subcultural Solution**

The Indonesian state and the majority of society often construct street children to be deviant criminals, or they are over-romanticized by the press and charity groups, and portrayed as the passive victims of a ruthless society (Beazley 1999; 2000a; 2002). An overall theme in my own research is the assertion that street children should not be perceived within such rigid stereotypes. Instead, it is important to focus on street children’s agency in order to challenge those commentators who present them as total victims, or as cunning criminals. As Lucchini (1993, 16) says when discussing street children in Latin America:

*The definition of the street child only in terms of ‘victimization’ or of delinquency leads to a reduced conception of a reality which is in fact far more complex. This dichotomy generates the stigmatization of the child.*

It is essential to view street children’s actions and motivations as complex and diverse, depending on the situation they find themselves in and the people with whom they interact. It is also necessary to recognize that street children possess multiple and fluid identities which shift depending on their circumstances, the spaces they occupy, and their daily interactions (Beazley 2000a). Thus, even though their lives are regularly portrayed in a negative way, and as a “problem” which needs a solution, their decision to leave an impoverished, boring or abusive home should, in fact, be understood as the child’s own solution to a personal predicament. As Hebdige (1979) asserts, every subculture “represents a ‘solution’ to particular problems and contradictions.”

Street children do not lack agency, but take responsibility for their own actions and have some control over their lives. The creation of street kid identities and the maintenance of their own subcultures can be seen not as a problem, but as response to their stigmatization and a solution to the variety of problems they face in a world which is hostile to their very existence. Brake (1980, 175), for example, states that subcultures are often an attempt to resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in the social structure, alienation in society, and harassment by the law. He says that they appeal to those who feel that they have been
rejected, and provide an alternative social reality and status system which offer “rallying points” and “symbols of solidarity” (ibid.).

Socialization to a subculture, then, helps a young person redefine negative self-concepts by offering a collective identity and a reference group from which to develop a new individual identity, and thus face the outside world. A community of children who have similar background problems and experiences can provide new children on the street with comfort, support, and vital knowledge necessary to survive. Ennew (1994, 409-10), for example, notes how street children, in the absence of parents, bring each other up and “develop supportive networks, coping strategies and meaningful relationships outside adult supervision and control.”

Similarly, in Yogyakarta, seasoned street children help to socialize newcomers to the street and the Tikyan social identity. The socialization provides new children with peer support and survival skills as well as a collective identity that assists them in their construction of a new positive self image.

The following section examines what happens when a child first goes onto the street, and the distinct social processes related to the construction of a new self-identity. I show how a child’s individual identity transformation entails a continual interaction with the street kid collective identity, and the frequent display of appropriate attitudes and behavior patterns (see Turner 1985, 1994). As Turner (1994, 1) suggests, “we need to distinguish between personal and social identity as two different levels of self-categorization, which are equally valid and authentic of the psychological process of self.”

**Street Socialization: Initiation and Identity Transformation**

*Socialization refers to an interactive process of transmitting and learning ‘acceptable’ ways of acting, interpreting and feeling. This process is viewed as occupying a central place in the lives of children. Sociologists analyze socialization as an important clue to determining how children construct their identities, interpretations and social relations (Visano 1990, 139).*

An analysis of a child’s socialization to the street is important, as it provides significant evidence for determining how children construct their collective identities as “street children." As Visano (1990, 140) informs us, socialization is often misunderstood with respect to street children, as most literature describes them as having an absence of any socializing influences. This is in keeping with the stereotyped notion that street children are dangerous criminals, who lead a disordered and non-socialized existence. On the contrary, however, once on the street, children engage in specific social
processes that socialize them to street life. However, that which is considered as “acceptable” on the street may often not be the case in the family home (Beazley 2000b). As Cresswell (1996, 85) says, “a lifestyle that is perceived as disorder is really a different kind of order, a different set of priorities and expectations.” Similarly, due to the different environment in which they live, street children experience a different lifestyle to the average Indonesian child: they sleep, eat, play and work on the street. They therefore require and undergo a very different kind of socialization.

**Leaving Home**

Poverty is frequently cited as a main cause for children first going to the streets, to find alternative channels of income. Financial hardship, however, is not the only reason, and although it is often a contributing factor, there is usually some other family problem.7 During interviews and focus groups discussions with street children, I found that violence, neglect or physical abuse often motivated a child to flee to the street permanently. This may relate to parental depression or alcoholism, the child being naughty in the home or the kampung (local residential community), not doing well at school or not bringing home enough money from working on the streets (and being severely punished).

In addition, homeless children frequently come from families with step-parents and step-brothers and sisters, and many children told me how inequitable treatment and victimization at home left them feeling unloved and unwanted. Fathers or mothers may remarry and neglect their children from their first marriage, or a stepchild may be beaten by his stepmother, father or stepbrother, and run away when he cannot tolerate it any more.8

Other children told me that they left home because they were sick of the restrictions placed on them. As Valentine, Skelton and Chambers (1998, 9) have noted, the home can often be a space of exclusion. Sibley (1995) has also presented a useful analysis on how adults set boundaries for their children in the family home, and the transgressions made by children against them. He suggests that intergenerational conflict is likely to be triggered by the fact that young people have few opportunities for privacy in the home, while adults may find their constant presence a nuisance. This is particularly true for children who come from impoverished families where the parents and a number of siblings all live in one or two rooms. As Sibley has noted (1995, 129), these problems may result in children opting to leave home altogether, preferring to live and work in the streets and other public spaces.9

**Arrival**
Before they leave home, most children have spent time working or playing on the street, and have gotten to know homeless children in those settings. By observing these children, the working child sees how it is possible to survive on the street, and is often envious of the freedom and independence that they have. For example, working children have to take home the money they earn during the day, and they see from the experiences of homeless children that, if they do not go home, the money they earn is their own, to spend on snacks, video games, or however they please.

The early part of the street child’s “career” in Indonesia is when a child tests the waters of the street. Typically, during these early stages a child drifts between his home and the street, and begins by spending one or two nights away from home before making the decision to leave for good. Many street children I met were encouraged to a life on the streets by those who had already left home. This often happened when they went to work on the streets for their families after school. As the months went by they started skipping school more and returning home less, as they became absorbed into the Tikyan subculture. The children were attracted to the way of life and saw it as a viable alternative to the existence they already had. This is especially true if they were experiencing problems at home.

When a child first makes the decision to leave home, however, he still has a lot to learn about living on the street. As Visano (1990, 149) has noted, “initially, newcomers experience considerable hardship in trying to fit into the street environment. They exist on the border of conventional and deviant worlds.” In Yogyakarta a child who has recently left home is referred to as “the new kid” (anak baru) by the seasoned homeless children. It is a source of self-esteem to homeless children that they are “street wise,” and know how to survive on the streets. They see themselves as distinct from, and superior to, children who still live at home but work on the streets. Their superior attitude is related to the immense pride they hold in their independence and freedom, and can be clearly seen in one term of address homeless children have for working children: “little one” (cilik).

In Yogyakarta, when a child first arrives on the street he is asked where he is from. He may simply be chased away, but it is more likely he will be beaten up, or mugged of his possessions, clothes and money. As Suvil (15) said to me, “if it’s a new street kid, they’re beaten up.” After that he is usually bought a drink and some food and invited to join the group. Often at this time he is given advice on how to earn money and on the laws of working on the street. This special treatment of providing food, drink and advice is only until the child has settled and earned some money for himself. Then he is on his own. If at any time, however, a child is thought not to fit in, he will be beaten up and “evicted” from the group. Street children have a
selection and monitoring system which polices the group from within and excludes those who deviate (see also Scott 1990, 129-30).

Some children are not accepted into the group as they are considered to be too “rough,” which usually means argumentative or unnecessarily violent. This kind of behavior is not acceptable in Yogyakarta where traditionally the culture, even within the street kid community, is more refined than in other cities. Batak children (from North Sumatra) and children from Surabaya, for example, are often not accepted for this reason. Other reasons that children are not accepted are if they are considered to be “stuck up,” or “spoiled,” and therefore not independent, which is a necessary requirement in the Tikyan world.

Initiation

Once a child has been accepted by the other children, he must then prove himself to the group. Some children told me of how they were forced to give away or sell their clothes and possessions from home in order to be admitted. Another young boy told me of how he had to take a large group of children to the cinema, and buy everyone a meal, until he had spent all the money he had stolen from home.

A further initiation practice which takes place among street boys is anal sex (sodomi). When a boy first comes to the street he may be sodomized by an older boy, and given food in return. The practice is initially a way in which the older boys can assert power and control over the younger boys (Bongkok 1995). Younger children accept their fate as they are threatened with violence if they do not and also because they wish to be accepted and to belong to the group. As Rajani and Kudrati (1996, 309) explain with respect to a community of street boys in the city of Mwanza, Tanzania, which has a similar ritual, “belonging is established through the very assertion of authority. Exhibition of another’s power over one’s body appears to be the inevitable price of becoming a member of the group.”

For street boys sodomi is not conceptualized as being violent, and neither is it considered to be a homosexual act. It is a normal and acceptable part of life, and an initiation process which most have experienced and also perform. Street boys have sex with each other for comfort, to alleviate sexual frustration, to express emotion, and for protection from older boys. With respect to initiation, the practice is not only to assert power but also to introduce new kids to a fundamental behavioral aspect of the Tikyan community. As Hengst (1996, 43) informs us, in reference to children’s constructions of collective identities, “collective identity…is based on the construction of difference and equality. Membership in a particular (social)
collective is experienced particularly through the perception of such differences.”

**Mapping Street Kid’s Identities**

As a child begins to identify himself as a Tikyan he usually changes his name, or he is given a new one by his friends. As one boy said to me, “you never give your real name on the street, because if there is trouble you don’t want to be implicated.” Giving oneself a new name is also a form of resistance to being abused, and a way of creating a positive self-identity.

Edo told me that he changed his name because he wanted to break totally from the past, and did not want to think of himself as the same boy who had been thrown out by his mother. Similarly, Mohammed is now called Ronny. When he first got to the street I knew him by his real name, but within a few months I found that he had changed his name to Ronny. When I asked him why, he said that Mohammed was not a good name for a street kid and he felt uncomfortable with it. Why? “It’s a holy name- it’s for the people who go to the mosque and pray five times a day, not for a street kid.” He said that his life was too sacrilegious (haram) to befit such a revered name. It may have also had to do with the fact that his father was looking for him, and he did not want to go home.

Almost all street boys are given nicknames by other children, which they accept as part of their inclusion into the social group, even if they do not especially like their nickname. One unusually fat boy, for example, was known by the other boys as Gendut (Fatty); another who was not particularly dexterous was known as Peok (Spastic). Other boys are named after their town of origin: Budi Bandung, for example, or Supri Semarang. Sometimes the boys have several different names. Jono (12) had his original name, his nickname, a name for Yogyakarta, and two different names for different groups he hung out with in Jakarta (I found this out when I met him in Jakarta). As Ertanto (1996, 12) has noted of street children in Yogyakarta, “it is not unusual if every time they move to change their name.”

Changing one’s name may be recognized as part of the psychological process of a child’s re-personalization, as his self identity undergoes changes and he begins to categorize himself in terms of a new social identity (see Turner 1985; 1994, 455). In this way a child’s “self-categorization” assists him to break with the past and his original self-identity, and to redefine himself as a street child- “anak jalanan” or Tikyan- and a member of a distinctive social group (ibid).
Social Relations

The Tikyan subculture offers a child who has fled home a new identity as a street child. As they construct their new collective identities, the children are also expected to adopt appropriate attitudes, values and perspectives in order to conform to established street etiquette, and to continue to be accepted as a member of the group. As Schurink (1993, 181) notes of newcomers to the street in South Africa,

*Children had to acquire more than just surviving skills and techniques to perform the job. If newcomers (who had the lowest rank) wanted to raise their status to street child they had to acquire expertise and become street wise. Furthermore, the newcomer had to learn to earn the respect of the group and be accepted as a professional member capable of understanding their language, sharing their norms and values.*

It is the same in Indonesia. In trying to make sense of the values and hierarchies of the street child subculture, it is helpful to heed Thornton (1995, 10) who draws on Bourdieu (1991), and his work on “cultural capital.” Thornton (1995, 11) suggests that a similar system exists within a subculture, where “subcultural capital” confers status on the owner “in the eyes of the relevant beholder.” She further asserts that there are particular spaces in which these subcultural distinctions hold their sway. In this way, subcultural capital can be objectified (in fashion or belongings) or embodied, in “being in the know,” or being “cool” (Thornton 1995, 10-11). Within a street child subculture, doing the right work, speaking the recognized slang, being street-wise, and displaying the expected attitudes are all forms of subcultural capital.

Once a boy joins the Tikyan he is constantly watched and appraised by the other children who discuss his behavior and his ability to survive on the street. A child is assessed for his attitude, independence, masculinity, strength of character and apparent adaptability to the street. The assessment is particularly intense when a boy first joins a street kid community, but it is a constant process that ensures conformity within the group. As Scott (1990, 130) has noted among “subordinate groups,” these “pressures for conformity” are expressing the “shared ideal of solidarity” to protect the “collective interest of the group.”

For newcomers, the early period is marked by trial and error as they are gradually caught up in the expectations of the street child community. These are the fundamental values which the Tikyan adhere to and live out in their daily lives, and include their attitudes, rules, beliefs, forms of communication within the group, and relationships with others on the street.
Work and Survival

Street children take enormous pride in earning their own money and in the fact that they are not dependent on anyone. A street child’s work is strongly connected to his social identity and his feelings of self-worth and confidence. In Yogyakarta there are distinct hierarchical levels and codes of ethics attached to all working activities, and older children will teach newcomers the rules of working on the street. As Visano (1990, 160) notes in Canada, “experienced kids orient neophytes to various techniques of survival.” Once accepted into the Tikyan subculture, newcomers are taught how to earn money and survive by shoe shining, busking, selling, parking or petty theft in the local market. They are also informed of the strict spatial territories in which they may operate.

The lowest level of work in the Tikyan hierarchy is begging. This is generally viewed as lowly and shaming, as it does not conform to the value of being independent. Also seen as a low-status job in the eyes of Tikyan is scavenging (plastic spoons, water bottles, cardboard boxes, tin-cans, newspapers and clothes, which they re-sell and wear), although it has a higher status than begging.

Shoe-shining is the most common profession among prepubescent street boys and can be highly lucrative, especially for those boys who play on the fact that they look cute, thus gaining sympathy from the general public. Despite its high returns, however, shoe-shining is considered to be only for young boys and they will stop when they feel they are too old, or when they are mocked by their peers. Other professions which street boys in Yogyakarta are engaged in are selling newspapers, bottled water, sweets and stationary, making and selling jewelry and busking with guitars, drums, tambourines, and celek-celek (a home-made rattle). Busking with guitars is at the top of the instrument and work hierarchy, and street boys take a lot of pride in playing their guitars as it confers a significant amount of subcultural capital. They busk along the main street of Yogyakarta, Malioboro, serenading people who eat at the numerous night food-stalls. In the daytime they busk at bus stops, or on the buses as they travel across the city. Most young boys who want to stop shoe-shining desperately aspire to own a guitar and will try and save up so that they can buy one, and thus move up the hierarchy.

Linguistic Devices and “Rituals of Obscenity”

The learning of the Tikyan linguistic devices is also essential for belonging, and for acquiring subcultural capital. A distinctive part of the subculture is their use of slang, which they call “the happy language” (bahasa senang).
This language is often vulgar, involving a lot of swearing and the use of words that tend to horrify mainstream society who consider them offensive. The children call their slang bahasa senang because they enjoy talking in a way which shocks and disgusts outsiders. Their conversations are peppered with words such as “bastard” (bajingan), and “dog” (Asu- an incredible insult in the Javanese language), which they utter with glee, enjoying the fact that they can swear out loud in public.

Street boys also engage in verbal contests or “rituals of obscenity” between themselves, with the exchange of rude words and insults of a more-or-less jocular type: “joning” as Hannerz (1969, 129-133) calls it. As Hannerz found among young males in Harlem, these verbal fights usually occur in a social context, and are definitely considered to be jokes. The contests can be recognized within the context of socialization and identity formation, as the children learn the accepted forms of interaction with other street kids. They are often about the opponent’s family, mother, or sister. They also joke about one another’s sexuality, e.g., being a homo, banci (transvestite), wadam (transsexual) or wadon (female).

The children also have their own vocabulary that relates to events, activities and objects that they regularly use (such as left over food: hoyen, and police operations: garukan). The Tikyan language creates a realm of autonomy and solidarity, reinforcing a sense of belonging, and excluding outsiders who cannot understand. Just as cockney slang is known as the secret language of thieves in London, the children have their own street code that prevents infiltration by outsiders. The word used by the older street boys for house-breaking, for example, is jerka– an anagram of the verb kerja, to work.

Further, street children have linguistic techniques to resist people in positions of authority, such as the police and security guards, who are shown respect in public encounters but are “showered with abuse and given nicknames behind their backs” (see Scott 1990, 130). They also parody institutional structures by creating new meanings for established acronyms. The children say that they have an SH (the acronym for a law degree, Sarjana Hukum) but then say it stands for Susah Hidup (a difficult life). Other children who work every day at one of the main traffic intersections in town say that they go to SP (which in Indonesian is the acronym for senior high school), but which they say stands for Sekolah Perempatan (The Traffic Intersection School). In addition, the street children who work on the main street Malioboro say they attend the UGM. Instead of the highly prestigious Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta, however, UGM stands for Universitas Gelandangan Malioboro (University of Malioboro’s Vagrants).
Tikyan also use words to resist their marginal status. For example, cuek ("don’t care"), personifies their whole externalized attitude to life on the streets, and they will say that they cuek anything that have no control over, such as the view mainstream society has of them. The cuek attitude indicates a rebellious approach to life, and the children take it on so as to be able to cope with, and resist, their marginalization and alienation. In this way the Tikyan slang creates a realm of autonomy in which people outside cannot interfere. Through their use of slang and other linguistic devices, the children are publicly expressing a collective identity and affiliation with their friends, and a sense of group solidarity and conformity is subsequently enforced (see Scott 1990, 129-30).

**Social Solidarity: Enforcing a Collective Identity**

Brake (1980, 175) tells us that subcultures provide an alternative social reality which offer “symbols of solidarity.” Similarly, within the Tikyan subculture the shared ideal of solidaritas (solidarity) is highly valued. During focus group discussions about values within the group, the children consistently emphasized their feelings of solidaritas, as well as the values of helping one another, borrowing from one another and watching out for one another. As Scott (1990, 119) tells us, “a resistant subculture is necessarily a product of mutuality.”

Within this notion of solidarity the Tikyan are expected to look out for each other, particularly against hostile groups. Once, for example, a boy was stabbed in the arm and chest while he was defending a younger boy against a gang on Malioboro. The boy was a busker, and his guitar-playing arm was wounded so he was then unable to work. He was looked after by his friends who provided him with money, food and cigarettes, until he was well enough to work again. The boys also organized a “revenge” fight against the gang who had stabbed their friend. The Tikyan will always stand by one another in the face of danger. They will also severely punish anyone who does not conform to the expected norms of behavior.

Once I asked Coki (12) if he had ever been arrested. He told me about the time he was pick-pocketing with some friends at the zoo in Surabaya, his home town. Coki explained that he and his friends had a “pact” between them, which was, “if one is arrested then all are arrested.” This meant that they would have to give themselves up to the police if one of them was caught. Sure enough, one of the boys was caught by the police. Coki was further off and saw that he had the opportunity to run away, but he remembered the promise and stayed. He told me that at the time he thought to himself, “better to be beaten up inside than outside.” By this he meant better to be beaten up by the police than by his friends when they
were released. He said this would certainly have happened if he had not kept his promise and shown solidarity by giving himself up, and it would have been a much worse beating than the one he actually got from the police. Coki was taken to the police station and held for two days with his friends. During this time he was beaten by the police, but “not too badly” he said. There was no doubt in his mind that he had made the right decision. Similarly, another boy told me that if someone is arrested they will not say who their friends are, “because if he tells then he is going to get beaten twice. Once in the police station, and the second time by his friends when he’s released.”

**Individual Survival: Looking after Number One**

Solidarity between street children is not, however, exclusive to the Tikyan, and is actually a characteristic among the urban poor the world over, particularly the homeless (see van Doorn 2000; Swart 1990). Jellinek (1991, 53), for example, has written about reciprocity networks within kampung communities in Jakarta. She notes, however, that these networks are extremely fragile and are a defense against the harshness of urban life, but that “ultimately each family had to support itself.”

It is the same for street children who in spite of their strong group value of solidarity are ultimately on their own. This is because, as Scott (1976) explains, reciprocal practices are far from altruistic but are instead a type of hidden insurance, and a symptom of need and survival. Ropke (1990, 78), in his analysis of the psychology of reciprocity in Indonesia, explains that all acts of reciprocity are in reality aiming to serve personal needs with the expectation of fair return. Thus, reciprocal exchange and mutual assistance only ever really exist where there are chronic conditions of insecurity. Security networks emerge because individuals lack resources, and need to help one another in the struggle for everyday survival.

Reciprocity and solidarity networks between the children can therefore be understood as a defense against their marginalization, and as methods of individual survival. They are what van Doorn (2000, 34-36) terms “mutual credit loan systems,” a symbolic economy between the children that is constantly appraised and balanced in subtle ways through a system of social contracts and returns. It is vital for his personal survival that a street child harnesses himself to this economy, and learns to fully partake in expected actions and performances of solidarity.

**Unique Attitudes: Anak Bebas**
As explained, earning one’s own money is linked to the pervasive ideology of individualism that permeates all street boy relations, and within this ideology they take tremendous pride in independence. Tikyan are fiercely independent and do not want to be pitied, and they will often react quite strongly or aggressively if anybody tries. One of the first things I was taught by the children was not to ever say I wanted to “help” them. That was patronizing and insulting, and denied them their own ability to cope. Within the Tikyan ethos, it is considered unacceptable behavior to “ask for something from someone” or to “enjoy being spoiled.” The children do, however, value attention and appreciate the fact that one cares about their welfare.

Due to the importance placed on displaying one’s autonomy, street children glorify their lifestyles so that it becomes agreeable in their eyes. Instead of complaining (which is considered bad form), they reinforce the things which they feel are good about living on the street. They do this by saying things like: “Street kids are richer than kampung kids and can buy what they want;” “street kids can eat in with a spoon;” “street kids can eat meat all the time;” and “street kids don’t need to know a beautiful woman because they can have free sex whenever they want.” Always, they are attempting to look for proof that street life is better than conventional life. Problems are glossed over and treated with humor and a light-hearted disregard, and the children create a doctrine for themselves that it is “great in the street;” a pseudo-philosophy that is constructed to make life more tolerable. As one young street child said to me:

*It’s great in the street! You can eat, sleep, eat, sleep continuously! If it’s night time you can look for money… and eat again! Yeh! It’s great in the street, right?!* (Momo, 13, personal communication, Yogyakarta, January 1997).

The values of freedom and independence were repeatedly cited when I asked children what it was they liked about living in the street. The most frequent replies were: “we can be free;” “we can be independent;” “there aren’t any rules;” “we can go wherever we like;” and “we have much more freedom and independence than kampung children.” This discourse of individualism is constantly reinforced between the children, and is one way in which they can remind (or convince?) themselves that their life is better than that they have left behind.

Mas Didid, the director (or “father”) of the Yogyakarta based street boy NGO *Girli*, said that he feels the children actively “glorify their lifestyle” in order to make it more acceptable to themselves (personal communication November, 1996). As Hebdige (1979, 139) puts it, subcultures have ways of
embellishing, decorating, and parodying their position in order to “rise above a subordinate position which was never of their choosing.” Below, for example, is a conversation I had with Made (15) when I asked about living on the street:

Made: "In the street there isn’t anyone to call you or order you...there are no rules"
Hatty: “Why did you leave home, Made?”
Made: "It’s nicer in the street”
Hatty: "How’s it nicer?"
Made: "yeh...well..., you can be free, there aren’t any rules as there are at home. If it’s nighttime you can be free in the street...go to wherever. Independent...you can sleep where ever you like and feel as though you are looking after yourself“ (Field notes January, 1997).

Two days after this conversation the same boy was beaten up and evicted (diusir) from the group for calling a food-stall woman whom all the boys respected a “Dog” (Asu) when she refused to grant him further credit. When I met him later, with a black eye, and asked him what had happened, he said it was no problem and “it’s usual between the children, they were just playing.” He left town the next day. The other boys told me what had really happened. Despite his claims of “no rules on the street,” Made fell foul of the Tikyan street code which is monitored from within the group. The way he was treated is a clear example of how street boys patrol the invisible boundaries of the group, and punish someone who does not conform to their own rules. The woman who ran the stall was generally very kind to the boys, and often allowed them to have credit. By insulting her in such a way, Made was seen to be jeopardizing a valued contact, and potentially “damaging the collective interests of the group” (see Scott 1990, 130).

**Quest for Adventure**

A further characteristic that street children say they enjoy about their freedom is their ability to seek excitement and adventure. High mobility is a distinct characteristic of the Tikyan lifestyle and they are constantly roaming the country, from city to city, often stowing away on goods trains, or by sitting on the roofs or in between the carriages of passenger trains. This nomadic behavior is related to the children’s value of survival: by keeping mobile, they are able to “jump scales” and avoid police operations, escape enemies or harsh treatment on the street, or go to places where money is easier to earn due to better weather or a holiday season. Consequently, the children travel a lot, and when they return to Yogyakarta they tell each other about their adventures. These travel stories circulate on their return and gain them prestige (and subcultural capital) within the Tikyan group. As
in the West there is a certain amount of glamour attached to travel in Indonesian society. Smith (1994, 41) asserts that this is because “the rich express their freedom by their ability to overcome space while the poor are more likely to be trapped in space.” Just as the children relish the fact that they can eat better in the street than they would at home, buy snacks, and spend their money on extravagant things, their ability to travel, which poor people in the kampung are less able to do, also gives them feelings of pride.

It is part of street children’s lives to get up and leave on a whim, without any prior notice. This is necessary for their survival and their desire for independence, but also comes from their unique attitudes related to instant gratification, spontaneity and their cuek attitude. The children really only think about their lives today, and react to every situation spontaneously as it presents itself. Street children have very little concept of the future and say that tomorrow they will think about tomorrow. Sometimes they say “for street kids there is no future.” It is due to this attitude that they are not worried about getting sick, or contracting sexual diseases, and if they die tomorrow, “that’s life!” One reason for this perspective is that the children are just trying to survive the day and do not know where they are going to sleep that night or where their next meal is coming from. Their lives are very unpredictable, and as the street can be dangerous, they have no idea what the next day will bring them.

Associated with this “live for today” attitude, the children are also extravagant (boros) with the money they earn. By their own admission they earn more money than a kampung child, but will spend it on food, entertainment and each other straight away. This extravagant behavior is partly due to the fact that they have nowhere to keep money safe, and if they try and keep it is often stolen from them or forced from them by older children or men on the street.

Being boros also stems from the ideal of collective ownership and the Tikyan requirement for solidarity. If a child is known to have money and has already eaten, he is expected to share with other children. The obligation to share is also an example of group-imposed social leveling and how “internal differentiation in status or income that might diminish the community’s solidarity vis-à-vis the outside world” is avoided (see Scott 1990, 132). For these reasons a child will prefer to spend the money he has earned on himself immediately, and enjoy it while it lasts, than have it taken from him or have to give it away in a gesture of “solidarity.”

The Tikyan use their money to buy cigarettes, snacks, alcohol and drugs, and spend it on gambling, playing video games, playing pool, and going to prostitutes and the movies. Even though their bodies are small, most street
children adopt a form of “pseudo maturity” as a sign of rebellion against the expectations of society. It is also to conform to the masculine expectations of the Tikyan, as having a “hard” image is vital for gaining status within the group, and for ensuring individual survival (to escape intimidation and avoid being picked on). They do this by acquiring and displaying “adult male working class habits” and affluent behavior such as smoking, getting drunk, taking illegal pills, fighting, gambling, and indulging in “free-sex” (see Willis 1977, 19; 1990). Anything, in fact, that increases their subcultural capital.

**Collective vs. Individual Identities**

Compliance with peer norms and expectations is therefore an essential aspect of Tikyan collective identity, and security and personal survival are subject to acceptance by the group. A street child must learn to balance his collective identity with other fluid identities, often resulting in the fragmenting of the presentation of the self. This is due to the multiple identities street children present for various activities and needs across different spatial areas, and the contradictions between these presented identities (see Beazley 2000a). Ennew and Milne (1989), for instance, reiterate the image of a street child in Peru with a knife in one hand and sucking his thumb on the other, and use the term “proto-adults.”

Carl, for example, looks much younger than his age (12), and performs a number of different identities. He acts tough and masculine when he is with older boys, and they like him because although he is small he is also street smart. When he is shoe-shining, however, he assumes a more polite and deferent identity. At other times he “acts cute” to get credit from stall owners, or money from adults on the street. It seemed to me, however, that sometimes he just enjoyed being a child, and acting out his child identity, which he so often had to keep in check. He was always interested in the children who lived in my kampung and would come and visit me alone so that he could play with them.

There are, therefore, disparities between street children’s collective and multiple self-identities, and commitment to the subculture is often in the form of the performance of an expected guise which may contradict the individual needs of a child. Within the Tikyan shared social identity, childlike behavior is not part of the projected image required by the group, and one more in keeping with the collective identity of the subculture needs to be assumed.

This tough, masculine, adult-type behavior or “assumed adulthood” has been used as evidence of street children having a “lost childhood” (Williams 1993, 835; Swift, 1991). Such constructions are based on adult (Western,
middle class) concepts of childhood and beliefs in the necessity for the “innocence” of childhood. Although street children may in some ways have lost their “innocence,” I would argue that they have not lost their childhoods, but that they are merely experiencing them differently (see also Hecht 1998, 70-92).

**Adolescence as a “Career Crisis”**

As street children reach puberty, however, they find street life even tougher due to the changing perceptions society has of them. It is at this stage in their “career” that they start to resent the structural and economic restrictions placed upon them by the state and dominant society. The transformation of street children’s perceptions of their lives as they reach adolescence has been noted by a number of people working with them in the West, as well as in developing countries (see Aptekar 1988; Felsman 1989; Boyden and Holden 1991; Visano 1990). James (1986, 155), in her examination of youth in Britain, discusses how being an adolescent is in itself an incredibly difficult social experience for a child, as s/he enters a “nothing” stage when s/he is neither an adult or a child and “is lost in between, belonging nowhere, being no one.” This experience is particularly intense for a street child who has developed and cultivated his identity on the street, only to find that as he gets older things start to change.

In Yogyakarta the boys’ perceptions of themselves also changed when they reached puberty and began to physically look older. As Supri (15), who had been on the street since he was seven, told me, when he was small people thought he was cute, and felt sorry for him, and often gave him money and food. As he got older, however, people became more “suspicious” and alarmed by his presence, and saw him as a street thug and a threat:

*I want to be a shoe shiner but I am too big. People don’t like me any more and prefer smaller boys to shine their shoes. Now I am quite big and everything feels bitter, it’s so difficult. I want to go back home, but I’m afraid of my mother and that she will beat me again* (Supri, 15, Jejal, February 1996).

Visano (1990, 155) describes adolescence as a time in their lives when street children in North America undergo a “career crisis.” This is when they have to confront “reality shocks” about their way of life, and “begin to experience a sense of estrangement and frustration with their nomadic existence [as] the child’s idealized image of the street clashes with their struggle for survival” (Visano 1990, 156). This is when street children often consider returning to mainstream society and/or going home. Typically, Visano says, this will happen after a child has been on the street for a year,
although this is not the case in Indonesia where children can live for many years on the street before they become old enough to start feeling differently about their situation. The dilemma that they do face, however, which is different from street kids in the West, is their problem of not being accepted or established in the community due to their inability to obtain an identity card. Further, having experienced the freedom of living and working on the streets they are often unable to endure the strict discipline and time-keeping of home life or formal sector employment. Abandonment of the street is difficult or even impossible for children who have been on the street a long time, as it has become a central part of their lives, and is the way of life with which they are most familiar.

Once street children have decided to stay, or have no option but to stay on the street, they have to find alternative ways of earning money, which often involves crime. Further, they rationalize their decision to stay- to themselves and each other- via their “socially approved vocabularies” and linguistic devices, saying they cuek (“don’t care”) what society thinks of them or the way they live (Visano 1990, 145). As discussed throughout this paper, peer group communication is particularly important in street boys’ lives, and due to their own requirements for personal survival the children do not want to break out of that connection. Thus, to cope with their negative social environment, the Tikyan increasingly ignore and distance themselves from the criticisms they receive from society by reinforcing communication and interaction with one another. They do this by increasingly drawing on their numerous values and ideologies, and by creating and dispersing a whole array of “symbolic borders” to erect against mainstream society.

These symbolic borders are the ways in which the Tikyan are able to structure “their own liminality,” by reinforcing their difference, strengthening their boundaries, and reproducing their collective identity and sense of belonging (see James 1986, 158). Thus, as they get older, the Tikyan actively respond to their alienation by overtly deviating from dominant styles of dress and conventional behavior and by further conforming to the masculine expectations of the Tikyan and the street (by smoking, getting drunk, taking illegal pills, fighting, gambling, indulging in “free-sex” and getting tattoos). These symbolic challenges to the dominant culture are communicated and dispersed within the social group via the Tikyan subculture’s “specialized semiotic” (see Blackman 1995; Beazley 2003a). These are further examples of the subcultural capital with which the children reproduce feelings of solidarity and thus ensure continued participation in the social group.

Paradoxically, however, by overtly displaying the Tikyans’ symbolic boundaries of belonging, street children are simultaneously enforcing their
marginality by increasingly repelling society. This is because the Tikyans’ attempts to adhere to their subcultural norms only serve to confirm dominant society’s stereotypes of them (see Beazley 2003a). Their rebellious postures and performances cause mainstream society to look on with disapproval and label them as “deviant” or problem youth, and to alienate them even more.

Conclusion

This paper has considered a child’s life on the street as a “career” which can be understood as a form of mental and physical escape from numerous negative experiences and as a solution to the child’s personal troubles. The analysis reveals how through the various stages of assimilation to street life, street boys in Yogyakarta have been able to construct alternative identities and collective strategies between themselves as a form of resistance to the outside world. These strategies provide a matrix within which street children can regain feelings of belonging and self worth, contest their marginalization, and “counteract the overload of identities attributed to them” by the state and mainstream society (Cussianovich 1997, 6).

In order to follow a successful career, street children must be socialized to a series of norms, ideals, and group processes, and a distinct code of ethics that exist within the Tikyan community, and which control activities on the streets. These values include principles of solidarity, individual survival, freedom and independence, work hierarchies, the understanding of slang and street codes, and some unique attitudes to life on the street. Following Scott (1990, 119), I see that the street children’s values and ethics can be recognized as their “hidden transcript” and their “articulated feelings of anger” at the way they have been consistently ignored and alienated from society and the “public transcript.” This hidden transcript is a subculture with particular patterns of behavior, and a discernible system of values and beliefs: the Tikyan of Yogyakarta. These attitudes make up a distinctive ideology which is the “social property” of the Tikyan group, and which is disciplined by the children’s “shared experiences and power relations” within that group (Scott 1990, 119). The Tikyan ideology is essential in order to ensure continued participation in the subculture, and to give strength to the feelings of solidarity that characterize and underpin their daily lives.

The Tikyans’ actions, motivations and identities are complex and diverse, and the children have to negotiate their identities and adapt their activities and strategies in response to their changing environments. In their everyday lives, street boys operate within a kind of family system which embodies other groups on the street, including ex-street children, stall owners and elder street boys. They therefore encounter an abundance of social spaces
and experiences (other street children, food-stall owners, people in their cars at traffic lights, people eating at restaurants or riding on buses, NGO workers, police, security guards, researchers, me) which influence their identities in different ways. As a result of these “fractured identities” (on individual and group scales) blended with diverse geographies, there are sometimes contradictions between and within their various identities (see Parr and Philo 1995, 210). Such “interweaving of identities, space and place” means that at different times the children will act on the fundamental value of individual survival, but at other times they must rely on the interdependence and solidarity within the Tikyan social group (ibid., 213). This is because peer support is directly tied to personal survival. As Hecht (1998, 46) stated in the quote at the start of this paper, “street life is marked by both wrenching solitude and intense solidarity.” Such conflicts and contradictions between shifting identities, personal survival and the social requirement for group solidarity is part of the Tikyan reality.

There is no easy resolution to the contradictions street children experience within their lives. Some children do try to go home but they usually do not stay for long and eventually return to the streets (Beazley 2000b). This is because they find they cannot tolerate life at home (due to abuse, too many rules, spatial boundaries, or lack of freedom to do as they please). They also miss their friends on the street. This is particularly true for children who have been living on the street for a long time. As one child, Danang (12), who had been living on the street since he was 7, explained to me,

If a child has been on the street for only a few months then there is a good chance that he will be able to live at home again. If, however, it has been as long as a year since he left home then it will be very hard for him to stay there. He will miss his friends and become bored, and will long to be back on the street and be free.

The implications of this observation are numerous, particularly for those trying to assist children living on the street. Some street children NGOs in Indonesia have made a conscious decision not to try and access or “rehabilitate” children that have been on the street for a year or more. This is because the children have become so submerged in their subculture and way of life that they are considered to be too difficult to reach and “beyond help,” and it is believed that they will never leave the street. It is reasoned by these organizations (and their donors) that it is better to spend precious funding on newcomers to the street (before they too become too socialized to street life) and on community-based programs to try and prevent any more children going to the street.
Endnotes
1. The material in this paper was produced as part of a Ph.D. thesis in Human Geography at the Australian National University (ANU). Fieldwork was conducted over 18 months during extended periods through 1995, 1996, and 1997. Funding was provided by the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (Australia), and the Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), ANU. I would like to extend a special thanks to the children and workers of the NGO Girli in Yogyakarta for assisting me in my research.

2. One reason street girls are less visible is because they do not engage in the same income earning activities as the boys (shoe shining, busking, selling goods, parking cars, scavenging and begging). Usually, street girls survive by being looked after by their “boyfriends:” their principle form of income and protection (Beazley 2002).

3. See Beazley (2002) for a discussion on the lives of street girls, how they are treated by the Tikyan and how they manage to negotiate spaces, and their own street girl identities, on the streets of Yogyakarta.

4. Girli is an acronym of pinggir kali, which means “rivers edge.” It is where most of the poor inhabitants of the city live and where Girli had its first open house. It is also where many street children sleep and hang out, particularly under the bridges where it is cool away from the harsh rays of the sun.


6. Visano uses data from fieldwork in Toronto, Tampa, Los Angeles and Miami. As these are in Western and “developed” countries, some of Visano’s observational data of how a child survives and is consequently socialized on the street is different from my own. There are, however, some striking similarities between the formation of street kid communities in Indonesia, Canada and the USA.

7. See Bessell (1998, 67) who, in her study of child labor in Indonesia, drew a similar conclusion, and states that “poverty is not the only, or necessarily the most significant, factor in determining whether children enter the workforce.”

8. Step-children are at a far greater risk of suffering violence, abuse and even death. According to a recent Canadian study, stepparents represent the single most important risk-factor for severe violence against children (Kohn 1996, 55).

9. See also Beazley (2000b) for an extended discussion of street children’s perceptions of home, the boundaries which they encounter there, the reasons why they leave, and why they do not go back.

10. In order to protect their identities, all street children’s names, including nicknames, have been changed.
11. Here I have drawn on Turner’s concept of “depersonalization.” According to Self-Categorization Theory (Turner 1985), when a person’s perception of themselves changes to think of themselves as a member of a group they have become depersonalized, and depersonalization occurs through the interaction between the aspects of the person and the situation (see Turner 1985). I feel, however, that rather than totally changing their personalities, the children are building on their existing identities and can be understood to be repersonalizing rather than “depersonalizing” themselves to suit a situation and social group.

12. Bourdieu (1977) subverts Marx, and says it is not only economic capital but different forms of capital, cultural capital (knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions) and “symbolic capital” which is accumulated through upbringing and education. This cultural capital confers social status and is the linchpin in a system of distinction.

13. Smith’s (1994) account of the homeless in New York examines the use of a “Homeless Vehicle” which allows homeless people to have greater spatial mobility, and thus enables them to “jump scales.” Street children are also able to jump scales by riding the trains in between cities.

14. See also Hecht (1998, 199) who has similarly noted that street children in northeast Brazil “ironically...bring in- and quickly spend- a good deal a month more every month than the street educators who try to help them.”

15. Aptekar (1988, 47) says that this incongruent image of the small child roaming the streets without supervision causes “cognitive dissonance” in many adults. This discord, Aptekar says, results in adults often over-emphasizing one aspect of the street child’s character (e.g., being cute or a deviant), to make it psychologically easier to cope with the conflicting messages.

16. See Boyden (1990), Niewenhuyys (1994) and Stephens (1995) for a discussion of the “globalization of childhood” and how this image is “culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States” (Boyden 1990, 186). Following Hecht (1998, 72), however, I believe that this image is also widespread among the middle classes of Indonesian society (as Hecht finds among the upper strata of Brazilian society).

17. One way of returning to mainstream society for street children in Indonesia is to find work in the formal sector, in a factory or a shop, but that requires a state-issued identity card. To obtain an identity card a child needs a birth certificate, a family registration card, and an address, which most homeless street children do not have.

18. Some children do try to “go straight” and go home, but they often feel compelled to leave for the streets again, disenchanted with what conventional life has to offer. They also miss their friends. I discuss this issue in Holloway and Valentine (Beazley 2000b).

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