

## Abstract

*This article is based on interviews with 12 shoeshine boys in Hanoi, Vietnam, aged 11 to 16. All but one had finished primary school, and all were working to help support their families. Their childhood narrative is characterized by family obligations which motivated them to work hard and conscientiously, taking responsibility for their own day-to-day survival. It is a childhood narrative different from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) vision of a childhood free of labor and protected from abuse and risk, but it is also different from the image of children working in the streets as homeless and deviant, abusing drugs and stealing. This narrative underlines the need to recognize different childhood experiences when addressing the rights and health of working children.*

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*Cet article est basé sur des entretiens menés avec 12 garçons de 11 à 16 ans, cireurs de chaussures à Hanoi au Vietnam. Tous, sauf un, avaient terminé l'école primaire et ils travaillaient pour aider financièrement leurs familles. Le récit de leur enfance se caractérise par les obligations envers leurs familles, ce qui les pousse à travailler dur et consciencieusement et à prendre en charge leur propre survie jour après jour. Il s'agit d'un récit d'enfance différent de la vision qui anime la Convention des droits de l'enfant (CDE) où les enfants ne travaillent pas et sont à l'abri des abus et des dangers, mais c'est aussi une vision différente de l'image des enfants qui travaillent dans les rues, sans abri, au comportement déviant, drogués et voleurs. Ce récit souligne le besoin de reconnaître des enfances vécues de manières diverses.*

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*Este artículo se basa en entrevistas de 12 limpiabotas en Hanoi, Vietnam, entre las edades de 11 y 16 años. Todos menos uno habían completado la escuela primaria y estaban trabajando para ayudar a mantener a sus familias. Su narrativa de la niñez se caracteriza por obligaciones a la familia que los motivan a trabajar duro y concienzudamente, asumiendo responsabilidad por su propia supervivencia día a día. Se trata de una narrativa de la niñez diferente a la visión de la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño (CRC, por sus siglas en inglés) de una niñez libre de trabajo y protegida contra el abuso y los riesgos, pero también es diferente a la imagen acerca de los niños que trabajan en la calle como pervertidos y sin hogar, abusando de las drogas y robando. Esta narrativa subraya la necesidad de reconocer diferentes experiencias de la niñez.*

# TO BE A SHOESHINE BOY IN HANOI: A Different Childhood Narrative

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**T**he Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) reflects a modern narrative of childhood that—similar to the concept of human rights—has its roots in the European philosophical tradition of humanism and individualism. Childhood is seen as a period of preparation for adulthood dedicated to learning and leisure. Its focus is on the survival and development of the individual child.<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of children in the world grow up in societies where other value systems have dominated over the centuries, which also means other conceptions of childhood and what it is to be a child. With modernization and globalization, the modern ideal of childhood is being universalized, but the reality for many children is determined by factors such as tradition, religion, culture, and economy, which result in other childhood experiences.

The CRC is universally accepted as a norm toward which governments should strive, even as the far-reaching reservations taken by some countries suggest that they perceive their own realities, value systems, and ideals as in-

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compatible with many of the provisions of the CRC. To protect these, governments have taken reservations for anything thought to be incompatible with their national law (for example, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Tunisia), with Islamic law or *Shari'a* (for example, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria), or with their position on parental rights and the position of the child in the family (for example, Poland and Singapore).<sup>2</sup> To ensure that the dignity and rights of all children are respected, a better understanding of the differences in childhood experiences is necessary. Children's own stories expressing their own understanding of their situations deserve serious consideration.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Development of the Modern Narrative of Childhood**

Drawing on the ideas of Locke, Rousseau, and Wordsworth in the 18th century, a modern, largely European-based understanding of childhood as a distinct stage in life with its own *raison d'être* and as a time of innocence gained acceptance, together with a greater trust in children's own ability to learn from nature and develop through their own curiosity. Charity organizations in the 19th century emphasized the plight of children in the streets or struggling in factories as a public concern.<sup>4</sup> These children needed to be "saved" and given the opportunity to enjoy childhood.<sup>5</sup> In the 20th century, the responsibility of the state as a provider and guarantor of an ideal childhood for all grew.<sup>6</sup> Important child rights advocates such as Ellen Key, Janusz Korczak, and Egletyne Jebb in the early 20th century pleaded for respect for each child's own personality and identity, as well as for their individual rights to welfare and social security. They claimed that children had the right to respect as individuals with their own wishes and thoughts and not to be seen primarily as dependent on adults and members of a collective—the family.<sup>7</sup> Their work contributed to the development of the first International Declaration of Children's Rights adopted by the League of Nations in 1924.<sup>8</sup>

Freedom from labor and the duty to learn are main features characterizing the modern concept of childhood, which is reflected in the CRC and other international in-

struments that guide policy on child development and protection. Childhood is treated as a special period in life, separated from adult life with adult possibilities and responsibilities, but also risks and dangers. Children are mainly viewed as non-adults—vulnerable and needing care and protection; as incompetent, immature and dependent; and with the obligation to prepare for adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Since World War II, this period of dependency has been extended to include both young children and adolescents.<sup>10</sup>

Governmental commitments for realizing the CRC have mainly focused on protection from hazards and the provision of services, with the child understood as an object for intervention by adults. The school-attending child is the norm.<sup>11</sup> Adolescents who work are treated more as deviants or as victims needing support and rehabilitation. Little interest has been given to the role of work as a positive contributor to their childhood experience.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Convention on the Rights of the Child**

With the adoption of the CRC, children have been made visible as citizens with their own rights and given a place on the international political agenda. They are recognized as rights-holders who should be consulted and listened to on matters affecting them.<sup>13</sup>

As international human rights law, the CRC is both a legally binding treaty and a normative political instrument. Its aim is to change attitudes and behavior towards children by granting them a childhood with opportunities for survival and development. The primary responsibility for the well-being of the child lies with the parents, with the government as guarantor of the obligation to fulfill the child's human rights. The balance between a child's right to autonomy, choice, and privacy and the responsibilities of the parent and the state in providing for and protecting the child should be struck consistent with "the evolving capacities of the child" and taking into account the "child's age and maturity."<sup>14</sup>

The CRC, in keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), includes the right to the highest attainable standard of health and to a standard of living adequate for well-being and development. The fulfillment of these rights implies the mobilization and prioritization of

resources, and the state is obliged to undertake “measures for ... implementation ... to the maximum extent of their available resources” (CRC, Article 4). Local- and individual-level resources also need to be mobilized for fulfillment of the right to health.<sup>15</sup> For the poor, access to necessary funds is often limited. The only alternative to survive and develop for many may be to work under adverse conditions and at a young age. The CRC prohibits economic exploitation, but it does not prohibit children from working to survive.

Research and policy discussions on children working in the streets have largely been shaped according to adults’ perceptions and views of the life of street children, focusing on “protecting” them and “saving” them for the childhood desired by society.<sup>16</sup> Working is not part of the modern narrative of childhood in a protected and education-focused environment. However, this environment is not available for the many children who work in the streets. How do these children describe and explain their lives?

### **The Vietnamese Setting**

The concept of childhood in Vietnam has its roots in Confucian thought, which has strongly influenced Vietnamese culture for many centuries.<sup>17</sup> Reverence for ancestors and faithfulness to family lineage were important features, as was the hierarchical structure of society. Children were taught to know their place in the hierarchy—to be obedient and respectful and to understand and fulfill their obligations towards the older generation. Sons were responsible for ancestral worship and lineal continuity, which lead to a differentiation of how boys and girls were perceived and brought up. Boys were therefore brought up with a preferred, but also demanding, position.<sup>18</sup> The interests of the family and the community prevailed over the interest of individual children. Most children were expected to participate in production for the livelihood of their family, in accordance with each child’s strengths and capabilities. Their work was part of their responsibility as members of the family and community.<sup>19</sup> Already at the age of 6 or 7 they were given their first chores; by the age of 15, most of them in effect worked as adults.<sup>20</sup>

With the Communist revolution in the 20th century, a

new value system was introduced. The old feudal, hierarchical thinking should be eradicated to create an equalized, collective society. An important means to achieve this was thought to be education, which was given high priority. Primary education was expanded to reach all children, both boys and girls, and was free.<sup>21</sup> The responsibility for the well-being and development of children was largely taken over by the government, stressing the role of children as citizens rather than as family members.

Changes in economic policy in Vietnam since the mid-1980s have made a great impact on the lives of children and their families.<sup>22</sup> The state has backed away from direct responsibility for the daily life of its citizens, who are expected to take greater responsibility for their own survival and welfare. Opportunities for many to earn an income have increased. Greater availability of goods and services in the market has underlined the need to earn money.<sup>23</sup> Fees have been introduced for education and health, which has also led to a greater need for cash within families. The service fees introduced as part of Health Sector Reform have been an especially heavy burden for many households.<sup>24</sup> By 1998, private spending for health care increased to 80.5% of the total amount, with government, donor, and insurance accounting for the remaining 19.5%.<sup>25</sup> Health care for children below the age of six, as well as for a number of other groups, is supposed to be exempt, and the government is introducing school-based health insurance.<sup>26</sup> However, a shortage of funds has meant that these ambitions cannot always be met, especially in rural areas, where many public health centers lack necessary supplies.<sup>27</sup> Instead, people often have to mobilize private funds for the health care they need, which in turn is often provided through private pharmacies where drugs are often dispensed freely on wrong indications and in wrong doses to children.<sup>28</sup> The lack of family resources combined with the need to pay for health care has contributed to adolescents leaving school to look for work.<sup>29</sup> Although first communism and later open market politics have meant great changes in the society, traditional values around childhood and child-rearing have prevailed, such as the obligations of children towards family, elders, and society, and the special duties of sons.<sup>30</sup> In

Vietnam, any discussion on child rights also includes discussion on the obligations of the child. The Law on the Protection, Care, and Education of Children, passed by the National Assembly of Vietnam in 1991, refers to these obligations in its preamble, and devotes Article 13 to enumerating the obligations of a child. They include the following: show love, respect, and piety towards grandparents and parents; study diligently and abide by school regulations; respect the law; and love the homeland.<sup>31</sup>

Vietnam ratified the CRC in 1990 without any reservations and has introduced legislation and policies to implement it. The Vietnamese Constitution states that the family is the basic unit of society and that the parents and grandparents have responsibility for the upbringing of children. A child's duty is to respect and take care of parents and grandparents.<sup>32</sup> The Law on the Protection, Care, and Education of Children includes all the main provisions of the CRC. It stipulates that children below the age of six should have free health care and that the government is responsible for monitoring, guiding, and organizing the implementation of disease prevention and health examinations at regular intervals. Both the state and society shall assist children with disabilities and provide medical treatment and rehabilitation.<sup>33</sup> Primary school is compulsory, and junior secondary school is available and attended by a majority of school children, but with increasing drop-out rates.<sup>34</sup> The Labor Code prohibits the employment of children below the age of 16. And even as there are special requirements tied to the employment of adolescents between 16 and 18 years old, the law makes no provisions for teenagers working the family farm or self-employed as migrant workers in the streets of the towns, perhaps indicating that these activities are not considered to be work.<sup>35</sup> Work on the farm is seen as a normal duty; working in the streets as incidental and a sign of parental failure.<sup>36</sup> Often, working in the streets is referred to as a "social evil," which should be eradicated, and children on the streets are considered possible delinquents in need of care.<sup>37</sup>

In 2003, we conducted a study among shoeshiners in Hanoi to investigate their work and living conditions. The aim of the study was to contribute to the understanding of

the life of the shoeshiners by letting them tell their own stories about their life, working conditions, experiences of ill-health, and their knowledge about health protection and care.

## **Methods**

The study was conducted by three of the authors: a Vietnamese social pediatrician (DPH), a Vietnamese social anthropologist (NVC), and a Swedish public health scientist with a child rights' background (BR). This meant that within the team we had different research disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and language knowledge. The Vietnamese researchers had extensive experience interacting with children and were also familiar with the situation of working children, a prerequisite for establishing trusting relationships.<sup>38</sup>

For the study, we chose a qualitative design with unstructured interviews to explore how the shoeshiners presented their health, social situation, and working conditions, as well as how they managed their lives.<sup>39</sup> For the analysis, we used "narrative structuring," which, as described by Kvale, "entails the temporal and social organization of a text to bring out its meaning."<sup>40</sup> Kvale describes this process of both narrative finding and narrative creating, whereby "the analysis [is] a condensation or a reconstruction of the many tales told by the different subjects into a richer, more condensed and coherent story." Frank suggests that developing thematic narratives can contribute to a better understanding of the stories told and the lives they depict. Individual experiences and the diversity among participants in the study may be lost, but instead the different threads in the stories can be elucidated and the common characteristics highlighted.<sup>41</sup>

## **Participants and Data Collection**

For the study, we contacted shoeshiners as we met them in the streets in Hanoi. We invited boys aged between 11 and 16 to participate. In total, we interviewed 12 boys who did not have contact with each other as far as we could discern.

All interviews were conducted by either of the two Vietnamese researchers, and all the boys contacted were



eager to participate. The boys were informed about the aims of the study, that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the process, and that their identities would not be revealed. They all gave oral consent to participate. Since they were all migrant workers in Hanoi, no consent could be sought from their parents. After the interview, the participants were given a sum of money, equivalent to the normal fee for polishing two pairs of shoes, to compensate for the time they spent in the study.

The interviewers encouraged the boys to talk about their experiences as shoeshiners, their relationship to the families, and their social situation. They asked about the boys' health and experiences of ill health, as well as about their fears and expectations for the future. Ten interviews were taped, transcribed directly after the interviews, and later translated to English. Two boys did not want to have their interviews taped; instead, the interviewer took notes.

During the interview period of two weeks, the researchers met regularly to discuss the completed interviews, their experiences, how to solve problems, and how to determine areas for further focus and probing. We looked for common themes and began the process of analyzing the data while continuing the interview process.

## **Analysis**

Acting as "narrative finders," we read and reread the interviews in both English and Vietnamese, looking for common stories and themes.<sup>42</sup> The boys told their stories in Vietnamese with many colloquial expressions that were difficult to translate. Using both languages during the process of analysis gave us a deeper understanding of the stories within their cultural context. We identified two themes that characterized the experiences of the boys: the "under-age adult" and the "vulnerable child." Within the category of "under-age adult," we included information concerning responsibilities assumed by these boys for their daily lives and well-being, including financial responsibilities for their families, while the "vulnerable child" category referred to their vulnerabilities to risks because of their youth and size. In preparing a common narrative, we reread the interviews focusing on and sorting

out the two themes to be certain that we did not miss important information and to improve our understanding of the conditions and risks for shoeshiners in Hanoi.

As “narrative creators,” we then molded the stories of the shoeshiners into one narrative to describe the lives and experiences of shoeshiners working in the streets of Hanoi.<sup>43</sup> The aim was to “find” meaning rather than to “construct” meaning through analyzing the interviews.<sup>44</sup> We chose to present the material as one narrative instead of several shorter narratives because we found that the similarities in the different stories were more pronounced than the differences. By letting the different stories be told as one narrative, the flavor of the life of a shoeshiner could be better presented and the main themes elucidated. Presenting several shorter narratives showing possible diversities would have highlighted small variations instead of the common narrative of how shoeshiners explain and give meaning to their lives.

The story of one shoeshiner was selected as a frame for the narrative. His story was supplemented with stories of the other boys to enrich it and to retain important information. When molding the different stories into one narrative, we revised and clarified the language to achieve a coherent and readable narrative.

## **Ethical Clearance**

The Hanoi Medical University approved the study and reported it to the Ministry of Health in Vietnam. The ethical committee of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, also approved the study.

## **Findings**

In Table 1, we present relevant characteristics of the boys participating in the study. The table shows variation among the boys, but more importantly it shows great similarities. For all boys interviewed, poverty was identified as a main reason for dropping out of school and starting to work, together with poor school performance for some of the boys. Two boys mentioned alcohol addiction and the resultant violence of their fathers as an immediate cause for leaving home.

Name/Age	Time Working in Hanoi	Living Conditions	Education	Health in the Family	Social, Economic Condition at Home	Social Network in Hanoi	Fears and Worries
Long 12 years	2 months	Renting house with mother and brother	Left after grade 6, poor results	Father dead, was drug addict	Big debts due to father's addiction	Brother and mother plus other relatives	Drug addicts stealing money
Thuong 12 years	1 year	Renting house with 30 others	Left after grade 5, lack of funds	Father disabled after accident	Parents poor, one sibling in school	Landlord, brother, one close friend	Being looked down upon
Toan 12 years	8 months	Living in village with parents, commuting	Left after grade 5, poor results	No serious problems	Parents poor	Friends from home village	Drug addicts stealing money
Chinh 13 years	3 years	In renting house with 19 others	Drop-out in grade 4, lack of funds	Father ill, back problem	Family poor, two siblings in school	Friends from home province, landlord	Being bullied, fear of drug addicts
Thanh 13 years	2 years	In shelter for street-working children	Left after grade 5, father refused to pay	Father alcohol addict, violent	Ran away from violent father	Shelter management, shoeshining friend	Drug addicts stealing money
Du 14 years	1 year	In restaurant, exchange for helping out	Left after grade 6, lack of funds	Mother ill with cancer	Debts for mother's treatment	Restaurant owner, friends, shelter staff	No serious problems
Quan 14 years	10 months	Renting house with mother and brother	Drop-out in grade 8, lack of funds	No serious problems	Family poor, paying for sibling in school	Mother, shoe-shining friends	The drug addicts who are robbers

**Table 1.** Details on 12 shoeshine boys working in Hanoi (names fictive).

Name/Age	Time in Hanoi	Living Conditions	Education	Health in the Family	Social, Economic Condition at Home	Social Network in Hanoi	Fears and Worries
Manh 14 years	3 months	In renting house with 3 friends	Drop-out in grade 7, father refused to pay	Father alcohol addict, violent	Debt for house, cost for grandma's health	Landlady, room-mates	Homesick
Phuoc 14 years	1 year	In renting house with two uncles	Left after grade 7, lack of funds	No serious problems	Family poor, younger sister in school	People from home village, uncles	Drug addicts who beat and steal
Thin 15 years	2 years	In renting house with shoeshiners	Left after grade 5, lack of funds	No serious problems	Pays for house debt and siblings' education	Scrap collectors, regular customer	No serious problems
Huy 15 years	5 years	In renting house with scrap collectors	Drop-out in grade 3, now in evening classes	No serious problems	Pays for house debt, saves to train as a teacher	Shelter staff,	Drug addicts robbing and beating him
Nho 15 years	3 years	Sleeps in the streets	Drop-out in grade 2,	Father dead, was drug addict	Mistreated by step-father, ran away from home	Fruit shop owner, rice seller, friends	Drug addicts, being beaten

**Table 1.** *Continued.*

These two boys did not have the same close and supportive relationship with their families as the others, but nonetheless kept up contact and hoped to return home at some point. None of the boys claimed to have experienced any serious health problems, but their stories included examples of behavioral and environmental factors detrimental to their health and well-being. The stories of life in Hanoi were similar for all the boys, and they all considered the actions of drug addicts to be the greatest threat to their daily lives.

### **A Shoeshiner's Narrative**

*My name is Chinh, and I am 13 years old. I have been working in Hanoi as a shoeshiner for three years. My father got a severe backache and had to stay in the hospital. Since then, he cannot do any hard work, so we did not have enough money for school fees. I had a lot of fun with my friends in school; but since I did not do well, I thought it was a waste of money to continue. Instead, I wanted to help my parents pay the debts for my father's medical treatment and for building our house. My parents agreed that, if I did not want to go to school, I should work. When a boy I know asked me to join him as a shoeshiner in Hanoi, I agreed immediately. My friend is also working to help pay for the medical fees—operations and treatment—for his mother, who has been very ill. Their family used to be rather well-off, but they had to sell many things and borrow money just like my family.*

*Here in Hanoi, I live together with 19 shoeshiners in a "renting house." The landlord provides us with blankets and mosquito nets, and we pay 2000 dong a night (\$1 is approximately equal to 15000 dong). Only four of us come from Ha Tay province; the rest are from Thanh Hoa province. Both of these are provinces in the vicinity of Hanoi. My friends are those from my own province of Ha Tay.*

*In the morning, I wake up around six o'clock. I wash and brush my teeth, and then I go to work with my friend. We work in the area for shoeshiners from Ha Tay. Sometimes I go into the area of the shoeshiners from Thanh Hoa; but if they find me, they will beat me, take my money, and tell me to "get lost." Only shoeshiners in restaurants make much money, but the older ones work there and they will not let me in. So I have to walk around, looking for customers. The best time for polishing shoes is between seven and nine in the morning and during lunchtime. In the evenings, I sell lottery tickets. The landlord closes the door at nine in the evening, saying that the police demand it to prohibit*

shoeshiners from going around doing bad things at night. If we get carried away while working and come home late, we have to sleep on the pavement. The landlord opens the door again at six in the morning so we can get in.

I polish about 10 pairs of shoes per day, but on special occasions like the Lunar New Year, I polish up to 30 pairs. Usually on a sunny day, I can earn at least 10000 dong. Selling lottery tickets in the evenings I earn another 5000 dong. When I have much money, I can spend up to 5000 dong for food, but usually only 3000. The money I save I give to the landlord to keep. He has a notebook where he writes down the sum and we both sign. I go home about once a month to bring money to my father. Now we have nearly paid off all our debt. But my family is poor, so I will need to continue to help my parents pay for the education of my siblings. They are girls and should not work hard like me. They need education to find good jobs. I also want to buy a television and some furniture to make our house a real home.

Sometimes I have a headache or a cold but it goes away after a few days. Once I was sick for two to three days. I had to stay at home. When I got well I had no money. But I have never been seriously ill and never had to see a doctor. Sometimes I take aspirin, but most of the time all I need is to take a rest. When I am sick, my friends in the house chip in money to buy me some fruit and drinks. We do that for each other.

I think I will continue this work for a few more years. After that, I want to go home and work in the fields or I will look for a real job. I cannot continue as a shoeshiner forever. People do not like adults polishing their shoes; they prefer children. Shoeshining is also not a very nice job. People look down at us; they even seem to distrust us. They are afraid that we might “take off,” meaning we would take the shoes outside to polish them and then take them away. I am afraid to “jump and fly,” because if I am caught, they will beat me badly. It is the older shoeshiners who have the guts to do that. Sometimes they come up and ask me to let them take the shoes away, but I refuse and say that I will call the customer. They usually disappear, but I know they will remember me and beat me when they get the chance. The older shoeshiners only try to find ways to steal rather than polish shoes. Adults are those who are drug addicts and take advantage of shining shoes to steal them. Shoeshiners like me are those with poor families, who work to help their parents. Some of my regular customers ask me why I do not live in a shelter for homeless children; but if I live there, I will have to attend classes. Then I would not have time to work to earn enough money.

*I have been robbed of all my money about six or seven times. The biggest amount was 42000 dong. I passed through an area where addicts stay. Suddenly a guy pointed a needle at my throat and threatened to prick me if I did not give him my money. I had to give him what I had in my pocket. Another time I had hidden money in the shirt collar but they still found it.*

*It is easy to recognize drug addicts. They are skinny with dark-colored lips; the skin on their face is very rough with lots of pimples; and they look absent-minded. Their posture and gestures are not like those of normal people. We are very afraid of drug addicts and try to avoid them. Every time when I work in front of the Da River Construction Company, someone will ask me to sell drugs. They say that if I sell heroin they would pay me 50000 dong. I know that drug dealers make a lot of money, but I am afraid of being caught by the police, so I run away immediately. Those who ask me are middle-aged men, wearing expensive clothes and sitting in coffee shops doing nothing.*

*On television, I have heard that you can get HIV/AIDS through taking drugs and by not using a condom. They also talked about this new disease, SARS. At first people cough a lot, then it becomes severe and people die. I go to my neighbors to watch movies and the news in the evenings. Lately, I have been watching the Iraq program.*

*I have been here for a few years now and I do not really like this life. All the time I have to walk around, and suffer from being beaten up and robbed by drug addicts. I want to go home to have a normal, calmer life with friends. Here I have seen nothing but fighting, stealing, and people being addicted.*

## **Interpretation and Discussion**

The shoeshiners presented themselves as hard-working and conscientious children, taking responsibility for their own day-to-day survival. They took a clear stand against drugs and theft, which was at the same time part of their daily lives. They were conscious about what was right or wrong.

The boys were encouraged to tell their stories, and the researchers helped them to remember and structure their experiences. Mischler emphasizes that when people talk about their lives, explaining their choices and actions, they try to make their life experience understandable thereby also forming and re-forming their identities.<sup>45</sup> We do not know what the boys preferred not to tell, or what they added

or changed to construct a story with which they could identify. Plausibility, or to what extent the analysis in the narrative is believable and coherent, is the main criterion for assessing validity in narrative analysis.<sup>46</sup> It is our impression that even if the boys did not tell us everything and possibly changed some things, their stories gave a good and trustworthy picture of what it feels like to work as a shoeshiner in Hanoi.

The childhood narrative of these shoeshiners is characterized by obligations to the family in a relationship where parents have expectations of their sons and the sons feel a strong responsibility for the family welfare, which gives them a sense of belonging, self-worth, and satisfaction. They work hard to earn the money needed for the family and for their own survival. Shoeshining is described as a full-time job and a long-term commitment, but not as a job for adults. The boys are social actors, shaping their present while learning and developing skills in handling money, meeting customers, and negotiating housing, support, and self-protection. They describe a well-organized life with daily routines, and clear limitations on where to work and whom to approach. They are aware of the risks and dangers threatening them and have developed strategies to avoid them. Their youth and small size make them vulnerable, and they know that it is best to keep out of the way of drug dealers and thieves and to avoid causing quarrels. Similar findings have been described in studies with street working children from other parts of the world.<sup>47</sup>

Contact with people from their home province gives them a sense of belonging. Even though they are working individually, they belong to bigger groups, defining where to work. Often, there are leaders who control boundaries and ensure that people do not trespass the borders. Their social network also includes adults, such as the landlord that keeps their money, a village contact to visit if they become ill, and restaurant owners that allow them into their restaurants to work. Building relationships with regular customers provides both a steady income and a form of protection because customers notice if their regular shoeshiner is absent. None of the boys had been seriously ill, but they had



all experienced headaches and common colds for which they took some aspirin from a pharmacy and rested for a day or two. Within their groups, they helped and supported each other when needed. Through TV and newspapers, they had learned about HIV/AIDS and were aware of its connection to drug abuse and sexual behavior. As the interviews were done during the outbreak of SARS, they had also heard about the epidemic and its risks.

The childhood, or rather adolescence, that these shoeshiners recount is not the childhood envisaged in the CRC—a childhood with access to education and basic social welfare, a childhood devoted to learning and play. For these boys, the right to education was limited to the first five years, after which family funds were not available to cover the costs for education. This situation was also aggravated by the need to cover costs for medical care for family members or education for younger siblings. These boys not only had to leave school after primary education; they also had to take some responsibility for the family welfare and, in some instances, become a primary provider. The protective home environment was exchanged for a risky life in the street, where their right to protection and safety was often violated.

This narrative is also different from the one presenting street-working children as homeless, vagrant, and deviant. Drug use, theft, and prostitution are usually linked to this image, which has become established in much of the media's reporting, as well as in many project plans and reports of organizations focusing on children working and/or living in the streets. Children in the streets are considered "out of place," as the place for the child should be with parents or at home, while the street is for the adult professionals, merchants, and shoppers. Life in the street entails many risks and children who spend their days in the streets are associated with and often blamed for theft, violence, and criminality. Also, in many reports sent by governments to the CRC Committee, street children appear as a group in need characterized by their lack of social stability and belonging and their association with illegal activity. This image of childhood calls for adult interventions to save or punish, but it is also stigmatizing and excluding.<sup>48</sup>

In his work on child labor, Woodhead focused on how childhood and adolescence are constructed and how work affects development and maturing.<sup>49</sup> He argues that “neither school nor work are ‘natural routes’ through childhood, both are culturally created contexts that are adaptive to particular circumstances and human priorities.”<sup>50</sup> Both school and work environments can be conducive to the child’s maturing and developing, but both can also be abusive and coercive.

For the shoeshiners and their families, as well as for many in the Vietnamese community, being a shoeshiner is an acceptable transition from childhood to adulthood. These narratives suggest that a childhood and adolescence spent working in the streets can be structured and developmental. For the boys, it was a rational choice. They might not like it, but have accepted it as a necessity. Their rights to dignity, respect, and safety were often abused; but as social actors, they contributed to their own and their families’ livelihood and improved their standard of living.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states in its programming for adolescent health and development that self-worth, safety, and structure are important outcomes as are membership in community, responsibility, and autonomy.<sup>51</sup> These values are all present in the narratives of the shoeshiners who developed strategies to create structure and avoid dangers and risks in their daily lives. Their route through adolescence offered conditions for development and maturing, but it also contained risks due to violence and exposure to drugs.

## **Conclusion**

As social actors, these shoeshiners were shaping their present to cope with the many demands in the rapidly changing socio-economic context of Vietnam. Their narratives underline the need to differentiate between childhoods. They are not the same—neither over time nor over cultural and social settings—nor is it the same to be five years old and 15 years old. All of these differences must be recognized when considering the rights of the child. The many different routes through childhood and adolescence need to be acknowledged when working to guarantee the

dignity of all children, respecting their choices for how to manage and cope, and ensuring that they have opportunities for survival and development.

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