

## THE LUDIC AND SOLIDARY VISION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WHO COLLECT RECYCLABLE MATERIALS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims at presenting the reasons which lead children and adolescents to work as recyclable materials collectors. This study is characterized by being a qualitative study, delineated by a descriptive study. Two children and 20 adolescents who collect recyclable materials took part in this study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focal group in January and February 2009. The data was studied by content analysis, through the thematic analysis technique, which consists in identifying the meaningful content nuclei from the presence or the frequency of the theme which composes the text, since it is related to the objectives or research questions. Through the analysis, the following reasons which lead these children and adolescents to work as collectors of recyclable materials are the following: to help their parents at work, to provide financial sources to the family; to go out and to have fun. In the end of this study, we concluded that the work situation and the entertainment of these kids could not be separated. Work and entertainment, home and street, are polarizations which are not applicable to this group, since they are constituted mutually and conform to their lives.

**Keywords:** Child labor. Motivation. Solid waste segregators.

### INTRODUCTION

Child labor is a frightening reality for dimensions that presents and by the magnitude of its occurrence. In Brazil are 4.5 million children between 5 and 17 years old who work in economic activities, representing 10.2% of the population in this age range, according to the current portrait done by the National Research for Sample of Domiciles (PNAD) of 2008. Among the activities developed, 35.5% work in agriculture and 51.6% are employees or domestic workers. Their circumstances meet the economic-regional criteria, the northeastern region has the highest rate (12.3%), followed by the southern region (11.9%); while the Southeast region has the lowest percentage (7.9%). Among the 5 to 17 years old boys, 13.1% work; and the girls are 7.1%, a fact realized in all regions of the country<sup>(1)</sup>.

Poverty is an undeniable explanation for child labor, condition which requires both parents using their children as domestic labor as to offer them in the labor market to increase the family income. Considering the social aspect, it

is observed that children and adolescents are working to ensure a basic income for survival<sup>(2)</sup>. This situation ends up making a future cause of poverty, once the child who works will present an education level lower than the final reached by those who do not work.

It is a situation that tends to reproduce so long as they remain an alternative to certain segments of workers to remain in the sphere of work, although in poor condition, as an alternative for survival to a contingent of non-specialized workers and/or outside the labor market. As for the precarious work collecting of garbage, in addition to being an activity carried out under the worst working conditions, is the very precariousness conditional upon use of child labor<sup>(3)</sup>.

It is true that the nature of child labor is rooted in poverty, inequality and social exclusion, but its effects propagate through all dimensions of life, because the early work reflects negatively on children's health<sup>(4)</sup>.

On the relevance of the theme "child labor", we present a study whose objective was to know the reasons that lead children and adolescents to work in the collection of recyclable materials.

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When we chose to unveil the everyday expressions of child labor, we assume the prospect to perceive them in addition to its economic dimension.

## METHODOLOGY

Two children and 20 adolescents recyclable material collectors participated in this study, residents of three regions that have a higher concentration of collectors families in the city of Chapecó, located in the West of the State of Santa Catarina. With respect to the point of cutting the age of children and adolescents participants, we have established seven to ten years old for children, because seven years old is the age at which the child must start elementary school (which is mandatory according to Brazilian legislation), and ten years old because, according to the World Health Organization, they are still considered children. Adolescents had age between 11 and 15 years old, since the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLL) prohibits to work before the age of 16 years old, except in the form of young apprentice, which is not the case of recyclable material collectors.

As for the selection of the participants, this has occurred through snowball technique, proposed by Minayo (5). In this way, the first respondent, indicated by a social worker of a Non-governmental Organisation (NGO), indicated another, which in turn indicated another, and so on.

Given the multiplicity of social issues involved in the study and to describe and interpret the possible amplitude research problems that we set out to accomplish, we chose the following information gathering techniques: semi-structured interviews and focal group.

The interviews were conducted in the households of the participants of the study, in the months of January and February 2009. In view of the request of some parents, some interviews took place in the presence of these, which may have embarrassed some adolescents. We believe that such embarrassment was circumvented with the development of the focal group, with the participation only of researchers and young people. We emphasize that all participants of 22 interviews were invited to the focal group, but

only two children and seven teenagers attended the two meetings of the group. The focus group meetings were held in February 2009 at the local community center where teenagers reside.

The analytic procedure of the information collected in the interviews of the teenagers was conducted by thematic content analysis, according to the proposal presented for Bardin<sup>(6)</sup>, in which it was followed the following moments for the characterization of messages and statements: the pre-analysis; the exploration of the material; and, finally, the treatment of the results (inference and interpretation).

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP), through the protocol number 1015/07. The ethical aspects of research that ensure the integrity of children and adolescents were respected, considering the consent of the participant, in addition to the legal guardian. This agreement came about after the explanation of the purpose, objectives and research procedures, agreed in an Free and Clarified Consent Form. In this document, it was guaranteed to the participants the right to withdraw from the research if they so wish, as well as the protection of identity and respect for individuality and privacy of everyone involved. The protocols used in this research are strictly in accordance with Resolution 196/96, of the National Council of Health/Ministry of health, existing legislation at the time of the survey.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The testimony of children and adolescents has enabled us to meet their reasons to join in the work of collecting recyclable material. Among the reasons, two categories were identified, namely: help parents; and experiencing pleasure and displeasure in the daily work.

### TO HELP THE PARENTS

According to children and adolescents, to help parents in legwork, from collecting on the streets until the separation of the material at home, is one of the reasons to be working in social collection of recyclable material, as shown in the following lines:

*To help my father hold the horse, pick up the paper. (14 years old).*

*To help. Because the two {parents} alone don't realize even more that the two are kind of old. († 14 years).*

*Because the father has health problems and has to stay together. († on 13 years).*

The activity of social collection is even more difficult if carried out in a manner isolated and individually. It is the act of need for collaboration, because the work is performed in a manner more responsive when the collectors working in double: while one of them holds the cart or wagon, the other takes the material; While one is aware of the cars, the other looks at the materials exposed in the streets. In addition to physical aid to push the cart, driving the wagon, to collect and separate the recyclable material, these children and adolescents also collaborate with their families with monetary resources arising from the work of picking up trash. This aid was established in these expressions:

*To help the mother, because she can't afford to buy anything. († 8 years).*

*Because there's no one that pays better to work. († 13 years).*

*Because it does not suffer much. Because I help my mom. I support the house. († 15 years).*

*To buy stuff for me to study. († 12 years).*

Most of the families surveyed receives assistance from the Family Allowance Program and follow its requirements, especially to keep children and adolescents at school. We know, however, that is not enough to eradicate child labor and to transform the situation of exclusion to which they are subjected.

In a study conducted to check the impacts of Federal Family Allowance Program on child labor and school attendance, it was showed that the program is effective in raising the school attendance of children, but "it is unable to reduce the incidence of child labor, perverse phenomenon is intrinsically related with the lowest school attendance among children from poor families"<sup>(7)</sup>.

There are several reasons that lead to early insertion of children and adolescents to the labor market, but most economic studies points to the

low family income as the main reason. Therefore, the issue of child labor is intrinsically linked to poverty, being both cause and consequence of this. Child labor perpetuates poverty, since the time spent with the labor activity decreases the possibilities, or the use, of the child to study. In addition, early insertion in labor activities "to the detriment of the effectiveness of investments in education undermines the possibility of social rise and bring negative impacts on intergenerational income distribution"<sup>(8)</sup>.

### FEELING PLEASURE AND DISPLEASURE IN THE DAILY LIFE OF WORK

The poverty in which the families' collectors are explains the collaboration of children and adolescents in the household budget, but to go out and play was also a reason quite pointed:

*Because I don't like to stay home, because it sucks. († 13 years).*

*I have nothing to do at home. I've got more to go to work. († 13 years).*

*Because we know the neighborhoods. To go for a walk, to play. († 11 years).*

*Time passes, I'd rather go to work than stay at home. († 13 years).*

During the interviews in households, we see children and adolescents (in addition to the research participants) playing domestic activities considered in substandard housing and without room for games, as well as the absence of rooms for family get-together in the interior of the houses. We observed, too, that most of the external environment of the houses was occupied with materials collected. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that in this condition the street is the preferred place to stay and to play.

The healthy environment involves different conditions that make the nice area to live. In this case, as the environments of the residences offer few conditions for leisure and family life of children and teenagers at home, maybe are the reasons to prefer to be on the streets, because these offer conditions and places for fun, even if it is in the midst of the work they do with their parents. In homes with low economic conditions,

it is noted the lack of attractiveness, because of the violence, social exclusion or for any other problem. It's on the street, as well as in the family, the neighborhood and in other environments that they establish social contacts, which play different roles and perform different activities.

Also, it is important to remember that most children and adolescents of popular classes assists in housework, which allows us to Intuit that leaving home to collect is because they are moving away from activities that they consider less attractive. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the domestic child labor is often named as an aid, not being recognized as work, despite expending time and physical and mental demands, constituting a violation of the rights of children and adolescents<sup>(9)</sup>.

Among the younger ones – the children – we realized that they feel pleasure in escort his parents and siblings. For them, being on the street is fun and in their imagination there are larger possibilities of finding food, clothes and toys, there's expectation of the unexpected, a pleasant find. When they stay at home, everything is more predictable and boring, compared with the diversity of things and situations that the street can offer, as we see in the lines:

*It is bad just staying home, there's not much to do.*  
( † 12 years).

*Because we know the neighborhoods. To go for a walk, to play.* ( † 11 years).

*To pass the time. I'd rather go to work than staying at home.* ( † 12 years).

*Sometimes we go to different places, I know everything is market, house.* ( † 12 years).

We cannot consider to be on the street is easier than at home, but we know the context of violence in which these children live. The lack of attractiveness of their homes and schools, on the one hand, and the attractiveness offered by the street as a space of freedom, on the other hand, the domicile is not his favorite place<sup>(10)</sup>.

In work processes, there are activities that the employee feels more or less pleasure in performing them, because the labor is not always presents itself just as misfortune, it is often a generator of health and pleasure. Given this assumption, we also seek to know the activities

that children and adolescents collectors like and dislike in their daily lives.

When we asked if they would like to work as garbage collectors, only two teenagers, a boy of 15 and a girl of 14 years old, said no. For these, we asked them to tell us why the dislike, and the teenager initially responded "why not". Insisting, she said:

*Because I have to separate the material from the garbage. Because the garbage is mixed with the recyclable.* ( † 14 years).

As for the boy, he nothing replied when asked again about what/why did not like to work. However, his mother, who was at his side during the interview, replied:

*I think he's ashamed, because it's a boy.* (Mother of one of the teenagers).

The shame of being a collector is also common among adult workers, according to the results of other studies<sup>(4-11)</sup>. For many collectors, having to live from the work of social collection represents humiliation and shame<sup>(12)</sup>. The authors also state that the low level of education associated with the self-image that the collectors make of their profession and their social position triggers the bias and discredit that they themselves have in relation to the work they perform.

Thereby, the collectors "feel guilt and shame for their alleged lack of productivity on production society, having a self-image circumscribed to the field not only of non-have, but also of not-being"<sup>(13)</sup>. If for adults the condition to work with garbage is experienced with some shyness, this perspective leads us to reflect on the teenagers who are building a psycho-social identity, when representations of themselves and of the world exert as much influence.

We also evidenced, they do not like to separate what is recyclable at the garbage collected nor of the organization required for marketing, for being tiresome activities that expose them to constant contact with the smell and the ugly appearance of organic waste. In addition to its nasty aspect, we cannot ignore that the trash raises a complaint of poor welfare, social or individual. Therefore, we can think that, in our aseptic society and for refusal of odors, to work with the garbage and live among

unpleasant objects is synonymous with social degradation.

This way, repeated studies that when one of its so many images, the population of garbage collectors is present in the dynamics of urban cities, demonstrating that the "simple" act of consuming products causes, interferes, disseminates social phenomena based on exclusion and affecting environmental health and the planet conference, requiring changes in public policies in force and re-adapting the current ways of life in society<sup>(14)</sup>.

However, we find that they like to go out to collect, since it allows them to transit through several places, seeing things and different situations to each route. Furthermore, we note that, in addition to being instruments for facilitating the transport of the material collected, the wagon and the horse generates pleasure in boys guiding and driving, as shown in these testimonials:

*Everything is cool when I'm driving the wagon.*  
(† 14 years).

*Horseback riding. Guiding the horse.* († 12 years).

*I'm going into town. Riding the wagon, to deal with the horse.* († 14 years).

For some teenagers, the fact having the management of a wagon and what they will be collecting can put them to the *status* of adults, someone who has the command of part of their life. In addition, it can put them in a higher level before his peers, since they already have income, knowledge and different experiences of teenagers from their midst. For the low-income population, working can mean there is ability to face its difficulties and that there is greater likelihood of securing a safer future.

However, we cannot fail to point out, at the end of this study, that the situation of children's work seems to be naturalized in Brazil and, in some situations, it is desirable even when this presents itself as a solution in the face of poverty and violence. However, when they step into the world of early work, these young workers are exposed to diseases, accidents and damage to health in the medium and long term and possibly may become irreparable<sup>(15)</sup>.

The work, on the one hand, it is used as a disciplinarian of children and adolescents,

avoiding the entrance into marginality of poor segments. On the other hand, as a provided of early worker, the subject is built in the activity and at the same time empty, for being "exploited, consumed, autonomy and feeling adult"<sup>(16: 2 17)</sup>.

Finally, it is worth noting that children, adolescents and families who work with collection of recyclable material, in most cases, do not have support from local governments, being at the mercy of fate and, in some cases, are hostages of middlemen, being in a productive circuit by the perverse side, characterized by exploration of his work<sup>(17)</sup>.

Thus, it is necessary to blame and extinguish demeaning situations and exploitative working conditions in which children and adolescents are subjected, especially when the activities developed by the children do not have the purpose to prepare them for the confrontation of adulthood, not the perspective of a local trainer subject to society<sup>(18)</sup>.

According to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Federal Constitution and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, child labor limits the opportunities for education, for the acquisition of cultural capital, for a social inclusion and for the full human development of them<sup>(19)</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

For children and adolescents, working on social collection is something important because they believe that their work, in addition to helping his parents in employment practice it contributes financially to the family. Also, they imply that, by developing activities in collection of materials, they are experiencing playful experiences, often more enjoyable than their family space- environment.

Definitely poverty permeates all the reasons that lead these children and adolescents to work. In addition to fulfill the needs with resources from the collection, the work is considered by many as a leisure and entertainment activity that are not in their homes. Go to collect is the condition that allows them to see new things and different from their world, like freedom and autonomy to guide an instrument of locomotion, like the wagon.

In this sense, we cannot separate the work situation with the entertainment among these children. It has not been possible to devise such a dichotomy and this inability is perhaps one of the contributions of our study. Work and entertainment, the house and the street, are biases inapplicable to this group, it constitutes each other and conform their lives. To help the parents, to get resources for survival and entertainment are allegations repeated in lines of these children and they help to re-elaborate some

explanations of current meanings that allowed understanding the persistence of child labor.

From this scenario, we realize the need of public policies towards health promotion, in particular, of working conditions for adults, workers from collecting recyclable materials, whose children, children and adolescents, are labor co-participants and leisure spaces for these adolescents to enable them to have favorable conditions and enjoyable living in their community and family.

## A VISÃO LÚDICA E SOLIDÁRIA DE ADOLESCENTES CATADORES DE MATERIAL RECICLÁVEL

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é apresentar os motivos que levam crianças e adolescentes a trabalharem na coleta de materiais recicláveis. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, com o delineamento de um estudo descritivo. Participaram da pesquisa duas crianças e vinte adolescentes catadores de materiais recicláveis. A coleta de dados ocorreu a partir de entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupo focal, nos meses de janeiro e fevereiro de 2009. O tratamento dos dados foi feito por meio de análise de conteúdo, através da técnica de análise temática, que consiste na identificação dos núcleos de sentido a partir da presença ou da frequência do tema que compõe o texto, desde que tenha uma relação com os objetivos ou questões da pesquisa. Na análise dos resultados identificamos os seguintes motivos pelos quais crianças e adolescentes trabalham na coleta de material reciclável, a saber: para ajudar os pais no trabalho; para gerar recursos financeiros à família; e para sair de casa e se entreter. Ao final concluímos que não conseguimos descolar a situação de trabalho com a de entretenimento entre essas crianças. Trabalho e entretenimento, a casa e a rua, são polarizações inaplicáveis a esse grupo, constituem-se mutuamente e conformam suas vidas.

**Palavras-chave:** Trabalho de menores. Motivação. Catadores.

## LA VISIÓN LÚDICA Y SOLIDARIA DE NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES RECOLECTORES DE MATERIALES RECICLABLES

### RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo presentar las razones que llevan con que los niños y adolescentes trabajen como recolectores de materiales reciclables. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo, con la delineación de un estudio descriptivo. Participaron de la investigación dos niños y veinte adolescentes que recolectan materiales reciclables. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas semiestruturadas y grupo focal, en los meses de enero y febrero de 2009. El tratamiento de los datos fue hecho a través del análisis de contenido, por la técnica de análisis temático, que consiste en la identificación de los núcleos de sentido a partir de la presencia o de la frecuencia del tema que compone el texto, desde que tenga una relación con los objetivos o preguntas de la investigación. En el análisis de los resultados identificamos las siguientes razones por las cuales los niños y adolescentes trabajan en la recolección de material reciclable: para ayudar a sus padres en el trabajo; para proporcionar recursos financieros a la familia y; para salir de casa y entretenerse. Al final concluimos que no se podía separar la situación de trabajo con la de entretenimiento de estos niños. Trabajo y entretenimiento, el hogar y la calle, son polarizaciones que no son aplicables a este grupo, pues se constituyen mutuamente y conforman sus vidas.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo de menores. Motivación. Recolectores.

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