A streetcar named desire: lifestyle and identity of street kids in multi-ethnic Rotterdam

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3 A streetcar named desire: lifestyle and identity of street kids in multi-ethnic Rotterdam

Flip Lindo

Introduction

In 1996, youth workers in one of the boroughs in the southern part of the city of Rotterdam started using a converted local bus to visit places where local youth were loitering on the streets. Problems with young people in several districts of the borough, but especially a neighbourhood called Pendrecht, were the main impetus for this new strategy. Pendrecht is mostly made up of working-class housing projects (mainly blocks of flats some five stories high), constructed right after the War for dockworkers and other labourers. From the 1970s onwards, families have moved out when they could afford better housing in other parts of the city. The indigenous Dutch population that has remained is ageing quickly, and from the 1990s immigrant families have begun settling here in growing numbers. Since 1997, the bus has functioned as a mobile hangout. It pulls up to places where young people congregate and elderly residents complain of overlast (inconvenience, trouble). The inconvenience consists of noise in the late evening and at night, litter in the streets and on the pavement, and, more seriously, a heightened sense of insecurity, caused by a sharp rise in street crime and violence over the last few years, intensified by extensive media coverage of this development.

In 1999, in search of a location to conduct fieldwork, I met with Mark, a youth worker with the local welfare service, coordinator of the Bus Project, and the only driver (and mechanic) for the bus. During the course of a year, I was able to follow a group of street kids who frequented the bus on Wednesday nights. The team on the bus allowed me to do research and, in return, I offered my services as their assistant. As I got to know the boys better, I accompanied them on other evenings as well, beyond the surveillance of the workers. As I did not voice explicit criticism of their indulgence in cannabis and was not ‘giving them away’ to the youth workers on the bus (who did not allow cannabis use during bus evenings) they started to trust me after a while. The fact that they appreciated my acceptance of their hashish smoking is in itself interesting. Although cannabis use is tolerated and even legal in the Netherlands, minors are not allowed to use it, or to have it in
their possession. All the same, the boys used it incessantly and excessively. In this chapter, I will describe some of my experiences with these boys. I will say some things about how they spend their leisure time and how we can best understand their day-to-day relationships with their friends. The data were collected over ten years ago. The description is not representative of the behaviour of street kids of whatever ‘origin’ and, worse, it is a very incomplete picture of these particular boys. Nevertheless I think it provides ample material to buttress a few comments I will make here and in the concluding paragraph on matters pertaining to identity and identification processes. My comments focus on the function of peer relationships for the reconciliation of each adolescent’s individual self-image. They regard the question of to what degree collective identification among peers and its related symbolic behaviour should be seen as an act of volition that can also be changed or abandoned at will.

Identification of social groups (including ethnic groups) is essentially of two sorts; we can discern processes of internal and external definition (Jenkins 2003). Firstly, there are the processes in-group members go through, defining their own identity, indicating it in the process to others belonging both to the same group and to outsiders. These processes of internal definition are individual and psychological, but simultaneously social, as they elaborate upon already existing structures of meaning and refer, implicitly or explicitly, to members of the in-group and to out-groups, without whom identification processes would make no sense. Secondly, there are processes in which primarily others are defined. Processes of external definition can confirm these others’ internal definitions, but could also be different and negative, defying experiences and affecting possibilities for those categorised in this way (Jenkins 2003: 60). External definitions are always generalising, while internal definitions, however categorical, always pertain to an individual personality and biography.

Concerning external definitions, my account illustrates and underpins some of the fundamental critical points formulated in the 1980s and 1990s against ‘ethnographic realism’ (Marcus & Cushman 1982). In the multi-ethnic urban environment under study, the culprit could well be dubbed ‘policy realism’ or ‘practitioner realism’, as it pertains to the way ‘groups’ of youthful troublemakers with an alleged common ethnic background are perceived by others, be they researchers, print journalists, television reporters, politicians, policy officials, social workers, policemen or public opinion in general. These ‘street kids’ are widely seen as a social composite with shared ethnic and geographical origins, shared values, shared problems due to the pre-migration legacy and migration history of their parents (usually alluded to by using the word culture) and, by implication, a shared identity. This compound
entity is hence constructed with the help of fixed spatial and temporal categories. To provide for our tendency of grasping reality by classification, this externally constructed entity is ‘mapped’ as demarcated social units in a geographically bounded space, ‘onto the concept of locality’ (Marcus 1994: 46) and, I would add, onto the self-explanatory notion of a common historical or even genealogical background.

Identities, though socially constructed, should not be seen as formed by structures of community and shared history only. The ambiguous notion of ‘collective identity’ is a case in point here. As long as it signifies ‘the consciousness of belonging to a group that exists in time’ (Epstein 1978: 122), all is well. On the other hand, when it permits hypostatization of objectified features of that group on an individual’s supposedly internal drives and subjective identity, we have been misled (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 194, 233 n.40). This seems a superseded argument, redundant since we have moved on from situationalism to post-structuralism and further to post-positivist realism; nonetheless, where policymakers, social workers and researchers meet with their boots in the muddy depths of everyday practice, ‘policy realism’ and ‘practitioner realism’ are present and potent theories and, unfortunately, because of this, ‘ethnographic realism’ has all but died out. One of the reasons for its perseverance might well be that such a way of problem identification seems convenient for practical and political purposes. Brubaker (2002: 164) has called attention to an analogous inclination he calls ‘groupism’, which he defines as

the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.

In this process, categories of people are transformed into collectives by attributing to them agency, motives, and a social identity. Brubaker has pointed to the persistence of this predisposition in public and social-scientific discourse, despite the dominant trend in diverse traditions of social theory challenging the reification of social categories (Brubaker 2002: 164). He warns us not to confuse categories for groups and recommends that we, as social scientists who, like everyone else, engage in defining the other ‘externally’, consistently distinguish between them so as to be able to ask the question, and to find out, how much ‘groupiness’ an identified category actually possesses (Brubaker 2002: 169). Related to this inquiry is the question to what degree and in what measure a putative social identity is in fact a collective identity, and in what measure, and to which individuals associated with this category such an assumed identity can be justifiably attributed. In the meantime, there is
every reason to continue to assert that social identities are, first and foremost, subjective constructions of an extremely individual kind. In addition, they are indeed polyvalent and, even more importantly, prone to multiple interpretations.

However, and this is the central argument in this chapter, we should reject the idea that their construction is entirely ‘dialogical’, and multiple in the sense that one can discard at will a specific idea of one’s self previously adopted because of its lack of usefulness or appeal in some other situation. This in fact comes down to equating social identities with social roles. When social roles are performed, segments of the self are utilised or emphasised, but we should not forget that the roles are played by complete persons (Cohen 1974: 54-64). The complete self is involved. Individuals are constantly engaged in safeguarding the ‘wholeness’ of their selves; this is even more necessary when they have to play roles that, in their view, are extremely segmented and reflect a partial self-image in a painfully unequal relationship. In general, adolescents often find themselves in such an – admittedly subjective – quandary, be it at home or in school. In circumstances where the situation can also be objectively described as difficult, as is the case with young people living in run-down urban areas, often from immigrant backgrounds, and relegated to the bleakest forms of lower vocational education, the task of maintaining or achieving an integrated image of the self is indeed a formidable one. My point is that, for young people, informal relations among peers are all the more indispensable in these circumstances. In what follows, I will give an account of activities of, and relations among one peer group as I have experienced them. In the conclusion I will come back to my point and develop the argument further.

The boys, the bus and the workers

The group of boys who get together at the terminal for tram line 2 has been dubbed ‘the Moroccans’ by local policymakers and social workers. However, the group does not consist solely of boys from Moroccan immigrant families. The quotation marks not only refer to their origin, but could be applied to ‘group’ as well. ‘Group’ implies a bounded and defined entity, and therefore does not apply well to the ever-changing company that assembles Wednesday evening at the tram stop. There is, however, a nucleus of eleven boys who are there regularly: six boys of Moroccan-Dutch background, four Surinamese-Dutch boys and one white Dutch boy. But even these boys are not present every time. Besides this more or less steady group, there are about fifteen other boys, of mostly Moroccan-Dutch origin, and three girls (white Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch) who join the group
intermittently. The large majority is between 12-18 years of age. Everyone knows each other and between many boys longstanding friendship ties exist, in some cases dating from kindergarten. Also, strong friendship ties exist between boys of different ages. Within the group there is no individual occupying a clear leadership role.

We used to meet up with more people. Last summer we were 30. We’re not only Moroccans, but ‘negers’ [Negroes] and Dutch and one Russian guy. Many of us are at the [...] school. We are friends, but each of us also has other friends, not only in Oud-Charlois and Pendrecht, but everywhere in Rotterdam. And nobody acts the boss, just everybody, you know. For instance, we just all listen to each other. That one says we’re going to do this, and the other, let’s do this. It doesn’t matter, you know. We’re not like: who’s strongest, let’s listen to him. Because, the only one that sometimes quarrels, is Hassan, you have seen that yourself. For the rest, [we’re] just quiet. (Hamid, 15)

The bus started coming to this place because the workers were supposed to pacify the situation in the adjacent small pre-War housing project of tiny one-storey houses on the outskirts of Pendrecht, immediately adjacent to the harbour. This small neighbourhood is inhabited by six to seven hundred indigenous Rotterdammers who have lived there for over two generations now, and have started to intermarry. In contrast to the rest of the district, the indigenous inhabitants have not moved out. De Wielewaal, as it is called, boasts a community centre and a small youth club. In the summer of 1998, a group of predominantly Moroccan-Dutch youth, mainly boys, came to the community centre when there were activities and parties, and trouble started between the local youth population and this group. That summer a kind of weekly ritual of fights developed between the ‘Moroccan’ group and ‘De Wielewaal’ boys.

The mills of government, however, grind slowly. It took some time before workers and policymakers made up their minds to put the bus into action, because they identified some dilemmas as well. The stationing of the bus on regular nights for an extended period in this particular part of the neighbourhood might, it was expected, encourage the Moroccans in their belief that they had the right to demand a place of their own in or near De Wielewaal. When, finally, the decision was made to bring the bus to De Wielewaal, the weekly mêlée had already died down. The Moroccans who continued to see each other at the tram stop – a public space signifying the boundary between Pendrecht and De Wielewaal – and subsequently came in contact with the bus remember the fuss during the summer of 1998, but took part in it only
marginally. Two of them (one of the Surinamese-Dutch boys and the white Dutch boy) live in De Wielewaal. Although the networks of most De Wielewaal youth are separate from that of ‘the Moroccans’, they know each other and, on several occasions, I did not observe any antagonism between them.

The Bus Project, run under the auspices of the welfare services foundation for the borough, is not meant as a facility to be used permanently by the same group of boys. Generally, the workers approach groups of young people where they hang about, as the bus is parked near them at fixed hours on a fixed evening in the week. The workers then start inviting them to frequent the bus on this evening. Through a short-term programme offering alternating activities, the aim is to motivate the boys to display more socially acceptable behaviour among themselves as well as in their relations with others in the neighbourhood. The method the workers use to achieve this goal – and which all the activities are part of – consists of two mainstays: so-called ‘challenges’ and ‘bonus points’ (‘premie op actie’ in Dutch). The group, as a collective, can be offered several challenges: for instance, cleaning a playground together or organising a meeting with older residents from the neighbourhood. A successfully completed challenge earns a collective reward that varies, according to the size of the challenge, from a treat at McDonald’s or a round of indoor go-carting to an outing to Six Flags or a ‘survival weekend’ in the countryside. With the ‘action points’ method, youth social work tries to put an old adage into practice – teaching young people to assume collective responsibilities. When they, in the eyes of the social workers, have given enough evidence of this, the ultimate remuneration follows, which simultaneously signifies the moment they have to take leave of the bus. The group is then passed on to a youth worker from a different unit of the service, who will assist the boys in running a weekly club evening in a venue allocated by the local welfare foundation. The ideal situation is when they are eventually able to run their evening relatively independently. Such an evening otherwise only lasts from half past seven to nine, as it is not possible to engage service staff for longer hours in the evening. Anyhow, the bus can then be deployed to visit other places to help solve new ‘inconvenience problems’ (as they are called) elsewhere in the neighbourhood. In this way, the Bus Project serves as well to funnel street kids into the regular supply of activities run by the borough’s social work departments.

To the bus workers, ‘the Moroccans’ seem far from ready for this. The challenges successfully completed by other (white Dutch) groups of youngsters, are for them ‘still a step too far’, as phrased in euphemistic social work-speak. The Moroccan group is considered ‘unapproachable’ (onaanspreekbaar in Dutch) for two reasons. Firstly, the social workers
cannot get anything done when there are more than six or seven boys on the bus. When a larger party gets on, they can no longer predict the interactions between the boys mutually and between the boys and themselves. The boys grow reckless, leading to things regularly getting broken on the bus, and sometimes arguments develop into a scuffle. The workers’ feeling is that, because of this, it is impossible to make agreements with the boys to engage in activities over a longer period. Secondly, every week the workers see different faces on the bus. They interpret this as a lack of group cohesion and mutual solidarity. To be able to forge a close-knit group within which the boys can take responsibility for each other – as said, a classical objective of youth work – the individuals who are going to form this collective should come into view first. The professionals want to work with the same group as much as possible, while adhering to the formal prerequisite that their ‘clients’ should be residents of the burrough’s specific district in which the Bus Project is active.

Because of this, the workers decided to restrict the group to the boys they see most and therefore know best. These boys would be provided with an ID card with photo, name, address, telephone number and age. The youth workers found this ID system indispensable to keep the group limited to a fixed number of boys from the neighbourhood. Also, they hoped to get some more background information about the boys and to be able to contact their parents. Not having concrete knowledge about the home situation of each individual boy is a thorn in their side. Although the workers deemed it essential for the success of the project, they did not manage to introduce the ID system, partly because of a lack of bus staff – during the period of my research, three colleagues with whom Mark decided on the ID system went on sick leave – but first and foremost because only one or two of the boys divulged their address and home telephone number.

The network

These boys see to it that their life on the street and their life at home are kept separate as much as possible. One of the attractions of the bus is exactly that the authorities at home and on the bus do not have any contact with each other. The boys are afraid that their doings will become known to others outside their peer group, especially significant others within their direct social environment, such as teachers, social workers, local cops, neighbours, but especially parents, other kin or acquaintances within the Moroccan-Dutch community. The distrust that Moroccan immigrant families feel towards each other is documented (Van Gemert 1998). Children especially fear the all-seeing eyes of the
Moroccan-Dutch community in the neighbourhood and anticipate their parents’ fear of exposure to malicious gossip. This is an important cause for the considerable mobility ‘the Moroccans’ display in their free time. As a Moroccan-Dutch youth worker commented:

Here in the district where you live, you are known. When you do something wrong, your parents will hear it, from family, a neighbour or a friend. You try to avoid this in all kinds of ways. Somewhere else in town, where you are unknown, but again have friends, there you go to do some things. That’s typical for Moroccans.

The ‘things’ that this worker is referring to are activities that the boys themselves judge to be illegal or subject to criticism; criticism they especially fear from other Moroccan-Dutch. These vary from having fun together and smoking cannabis, driving scooters and cars without permits or driver’s licenses to shoplifting, street theft and selling or trafficking drugs.

During the fieldwork I found it difficult to build up a relationship of trust with ‘the Moroccans’ of tram line 2, irrespective of their ‘real’ origin. All the boys have an extensive repertoire at their disposal to put the researcher and the youth worker or teacher or any professional ‘from the outside’ to the test and lead them up the garden path. For the rest, reserve and taciturnity prevail.

Within their peer network, the boys rely on, and confide, in each other to a considerable degree. They are acquainted with the pros and cons of consorting with each other in different combinations.

When for the first time one of the youth workers shows me around in the bus, she points to the broken folding table in the back. It was wrecked last week on a hectic ‘Moroccan’ evening. ‘They didn’t do it on purpose, but things get out of hand because within the group nobody is taking responsibility. Then things like this happen,’ she states. A week later is my first evening with ‘the Moroccans’ on the bus. Four boys show up, it looks like it is going to be a quiet evening. Shortly after entering the bus, Fouad (13) points to the still unrepaird folding table, and angrily exclaims to me: ‘He [Mark] surely told you that the Moroccans have done this. They don’t fix it; it stays like that to shame us. But that’s what you get when you want to work with such a large group at all costs.’ Then, turning to the front of the bus: ‘Come on Mark, what are you waiting for man, let’s go!’

The boys are acquainted with the group dynamics. They know that there will be more commotion as more boys gather; they know that almost inevitably things get out of hand. The commotion is attractive; however, when you opt for an evening without fuss, why not see to it
that your company is smaller in numbers? The boys of tram line 2 look around for, or steer clear of, contacts to create a situation that suits them best at that particular moment. This is their solution for controlling collective processes. To accept collective responsibility in a situation that is imposed on them is, in their eyes, a stupid idea. The boys’ solution (and this applies to the Moroccan-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch and all other boys in the network alike) is: keep your options open and make the best possible decision according to the situation in which you find yourself. The boys can fall back on a relatively extensive network to put this motto into practice. The network is open-ended, which means that the composition of the group as it gathers on Wednesday evenings near the bus is different every time. In fact, the youth workers do not meet with a group, but with an ever-changing and shifting segment of a larger youth network, which does in fact lack strict boundaries. Many of the participants of this network are friends, even soulmates, but that does not imply that they feel they should consort with the same group of ten to twelve every Wednesday night. Besides boredom, the weekly pattern of these street kids also contains commotion and disorder. When the bus comes, many boys prefer to do something pleasant with a small group of four or five. This is why those who arrive first invariably insist on leaving at once. ‘Why should we wait?’ they ask. ‘Nobody else will be coming!’

Each boy’s circle of friends is wider than the group that meets in an ever-changing composition to get on the bus. Most of the boys on the bus have regular and often intensive contacts with current and former classmates, friends and also cousins who live elsewhere in southern Rotterdam. They meet those friends on other evenings, in other parts of the town, and undertake other activities. Of the boys on the bus, some have larger networks than others, networks that may also contain older adolescents and even adults.

The boys are on the street each night. Some complain that there is so little to do: ‘Rotterdam is dead.’ Others stress that they are never bored. To spend leisure time at home is not an option. The home situation is of course not the same for all. Some elements, however, fall under a common denominator. At home, they do not see any opportunities to dispel boredom. Neither does anyone of their household ever insist or convince them to spend the evening at home. Fathers – be they Moroccan-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch, Antillean-Dutch or white Dutch – are completely out of the picture or are home only sporadically. While growing up, none of the boys seems to be encouraged to engage in any activity that might be attractive because of some expected future benefit. Generally, they avoid spending their time in a way that somehow could be managed, supervised or controlled by others. An exception is sport, and especially football. Three of the boys I met played for a club, but
two of them have stopped in the mean time because of arguments and scuffles with coaches and officials. For everyone there is only one way to fight boredom: the company of peers outside the range of family, and the distraction that can be found there, preferably of the exciting kind, in the here and now.

Most of the boys leave the house early, around six in the afternoon, if they have been home at all.

I go to see everybody. At the meeting places where they are. [...] We are nomads [laughs]. We wander about, no fixed place. We walk and walk, settle ourselves sometimes here, then there. (Mounir, 17)

The image of the nomad should of course not be taken literally. It is not the homelessness – and lamenting about it that appeals – but the identification with freedom and being unbounded.

I come home, but most of the time I am outside immediately. I say hi-bye! (Fouad, 13)

All of us are outside, always. That’s normal. We only go home when our eyes stay [closes his eyes] like this, when they sleep. Then we go home! And when you do not have money in your pocket, you go home. You only go home when you have a crisis, then my mother sees me. Then she can see me all day [laughs]. (Winston, 16)

Trash-talking

In the bus Kenneth (15) joins us at our table. ‘You have jonko [‘joint’]? Please roll one for us. I am boel nuchter [‘too sober’], man.’ [Talking to me:] ‘That little man is choking [toking] the whole time till he is suf [‘drowsy’].’ He asks the others for a cigarette. Karim (15): ‘Hey, siki, do you know how much I gave your brother [Winston just took three of his cigarettes for others in the front of the bus]. Hey, hey, you have to sign, Moroccan association. Moroccans have priority over Negroes. Oh yes! Just sign here [points to imaginary form on the folding table]. Now you are with the Moroccan Union, MU! Now say [yelling]: I am a Moroccan!’ Kenneth remains imperturbable and takes his cigarette. The youngest (and smallest) Moroccan boys’ trash-talk the worst: ‘Hey, dirty black man, the bus is forbidden for Negroes!’ The rejoinder of the Surinamese and the Antilleans on the bus comes nearly always in the same dutiful sounding formula: ‘I don’t mix with those goat fuckers.’
Verbal violence is a specialty of the Moroccan-Dutch boys, and is tolerated by the boys of Caribbean descent. When horsing around and in friendly scuffles, the Moroccan-Dutch are no match for the much stronger and faster Surinamese-Dutch and Antillean-Dutch boys, who also often have relationships with girls, which they brag about, and whose stories about sexual adventures are not disputed by the others, but listened to respectfully. The boys of Moroccan-Dutch background associate party culture – dress, dance, music (hiphop) – to a large degree with black culture and, by association, with Surinamese and Antillean (Caribbean) culture. All Moroccan boys frequenting the bus know several texts by heart of black rappers, including the late but still the much-admired Tupac Shakur.

Just before we drive off, someone outside knocks on the bus. It is Mike (17). Hassan (13): ‘Hey, that nigger belongs here, too!’ Hassan opens the back door and shouts: ‘You’re black!’ Fouad adds: ‘Three black heads on the bus is enough!’ Karim: ‘Get lost, you teringaap [‘sick monkey’]’ Mike enters the bus unfazed. He is the biggest and strongest of the group, and has an impressive police record related to his irascible temper. Mike is not a talker, but the others recount his encounters with the authorities respectfully, as acts of heroism.

Bickering, preferably in ethnic-pejorative terms, is an indelible part of the colloquial language of the group and, because of its coarseness and abusiveness, it took time for me to understand that it expresses a sense of intimacy, a tool to bridge, especially phenotypical, differences. Dutch friends are often called kankerkaaskop (‘cancer-ridden cheese-heads’). Simultaneously, Moroccan boys have a great sense of relativity concerning their own ethnic and phenotypical heritage. All the boys sing (often self-made) rap songs in which Moroccans figure as sukkels (‘oafs’).

We are Rotterdammers. We talk dirty. We talk dirty but we don’t mean it. It’s just normal. You say: ‘Hey, kankerlijer [‘cancer patient’], how are you, long time no see... You know how it goes, while, well, you’re having a normal conversation. (Mounir)

**Earnings**

Hassan: ‘I have never done anything without getting something in return!’

Within the group one may encounter boys with different degrees of respectability, together with social outcasts of all sorts. Most of the boys are not of the completely marginalised kind, in the sense that they still
have relationships with our most central social institutions of family and school and have not become complete outsiders in their respective origin communities in Rotterdam. However, some of the boys have lost some of these contacts, or are in danger of losing them. The majority of the boys regularly overstep the mark. In five cases, you could even speak of an organised (petty) criminal vocation, nonetheless combined with a – be it unassuming – school career (see also Faasen 1997). Although boys are not banned from the group if they abstain from criminal activities – quite a few do not partake in these activities at all – it does not add to your prestige if you’re boasting about your paper route.

On the bus, Youssef (14) lets slip that he has 75 guilders in his pockets. ‘He showed it to me,’ says Hamid, who has joined us in the back of the bus. It turns out that he earned it at the Hobbema market in The Hague, in the booth manned by his uncle. Hassan and Fouad show sardonic disapproval. Hassan: ‘I don’t have to work, I have brothers!’ Fouad agrees. Another time, Omar, an irregular guest on the bus, asks me if he is allowed to go work in a supermarket when he is fourteen. He receives howls of derision. Hassan: ‘Don’t you have brothers? Are you going to work for juvenile wages?’ As do several other kids, Hassan wears golden jewellery (a chain and a big ostentatious ring). ‘Real gold!’ the others comment. Besides, thirteen-year-old Hassan has more money on him than the others do most of the time, and always has quality Moroccan hashish. The money he gets from his older brothers, whom he calls ‘rich’, and who drive expensive BMWS and Mercedeses. Fouad also has a prosperous older brother and, at the start of summer, the two boys extensively review the air-conditioned cars with which the family will go on holiday to Morocco. Hassan has, besides an allowance from his brother, other sources of income. ‘He deals,’ the boys say about him. Hassan stays unaffected and does not deny it. Neither does he want to talk about it.

One of the marks of an open-ended network is that participants are well informed about opportunities outside their own neighbourhood, including chances to supplement their spending money by working in the twilight zone of the economy, for instance selling or trafficking drugs, bringing customers to the pusher’s apartment (drug-running), fencing or shoplifting. New ideas are conceived and adopted, new chances created and new tricks learned by the members of the network, with its relatively wide geographical dispersal and opportunity for new members.

Visiting some youth workers in the field (without the bus) I am watching a football game organised by the workers in a small square in the neighbouring borough Feyenoord, where only Moroccan-Dutch meet, mostly children and adolescents, but young adults and mothers
as well. Two boys of about eighteen appear on the scene and start shaking hands with everybody including persons like me whom they have never seen before. They sit down on a bench and soon a crowd has assembled around them. One of them has a mobile phone for sale, new, still in the box. We walk towards the group and listen. The boy extols the virtues of his merchandise; it is an expensive cell phone worth 1,200 guilders. Bargaining has started. Ahmet, one of the workers, intervenes informally in the discussion that takes place in a mix of Dutch and Tarifit (the Berber language of the Moroccan Rif). While taking our leave, Ahmet confirms that it is a stolen phone they are selling; they want 250 guilders. I share my observation with him that the bargainers do not seem to act at all distrustful towards us; they are obviously not afraid the workers will inform the police, with whom they are in close contact, as everybody knows. ‘Yes,’ says Ahmet, ‘if we would do that [inform the police], we would never think of coming back here.’ The transaction is completely out in the open. Within the community living around this little square, criminal activities like these seem to have become the most natural thing in the world.

Stealing cell phones is the most important activity and source of income for five boys in the ‘core group’ on the bus. A few others join them sometimes. Within the group, everybody knows this. After having spent a night with the group in the Dutch countryside (a drop-in session in summer 1999), they informed me of this. Kenneth: ‘Fouad once said, “Join us tonight.” We came along, and we liked it, earning money and a lot of it, too.’

The telephones are stolen from shops. At late openings, and in the weekends, the boys set out to do it in the smaller towns around Rotterdam, where their activities have proven most successful. They take the train, and travel without a ticket. The double-decker trains are especially suitable because it is relatively easy to evade the conductor. This way of travelling is called piepen, which simultaneously connotes peeking, popping up and off and fixing a job.

Hassan: Look here, it goes like this. You take the train; in the train you go piepen, to Leiden or some other place. You just go into a telephone shop there, you pinch a few telephones, V series or something similar, and then you sell them.

Where do you sell them?

Well, simply to someone who wants them and has money.

OK, but you’re not waving with them in the street, yelling that you have phones for sale; how do you sell them?
Well, of course to people who have bought them previously, and who sell them again.

How many of you go out stealing them?

Winston: With… hey, ai, this is not going to the police, hey?

No, of course not, don’t you trust me?

Yes, of course I do. Eh, four or five. We go everywhere, but outside Rotterdam. We collect twelve, fifteen. We have keys. Keys to those locks.

Of the display cases?

Yes, those, too. But also the large cabinets. Then you just stand around each other. Someone ducks and opens the case.

Then it must be crowded in the shop...

No, of course not, that is really not necessary.

Don’t they see it?

Yes, they see it… but what can they do, when they see a group of five boys like us? It happens, that an assistant… yes, hello… he was beaten black and blue.

So they are afraid?

Yes, but sometimes we just wait, two or three employees are working, and we wait till they have customers all three of them. And then, when they’re not paying attention. Or someone is diverting that shop assistant. We take the most expensive ones. Lately I had the last model, the most expensive one. That is a very small one.

V series?

Yes, the one you can fold out. Hamid has got it as well, didn’t you see it?

How many times a week are you doing this?
Two or three times.

A week?

Do you know how rich I am? [laughs]

The boys who set off on these expeditions form occasional coalitions with others they know from their network, a network that extends over the whole of southern Rotterdam. Among the boys who meet on the bus, not everybody is involved in phone theft, but most of the time the subject is openly discussed among them. Only two boys who intermittently come to the bus are not trusted. When one of them approaches, the subject is changed. Within the group, telephone theft – and shoplifting, in general – does not diminish your status. It is seen as an exciting activity, which demands guts. The fact that television networks have described this new form of criminal behaviour makes it all the more interesting. It adds to your prestige when not only the police and shop workers are your opponents, but also a celebrity such as Peter R. de Vries, the Netherlands’ most conspicuous crime journalist. The following conversation took place in the back of the bus, one evening when we made a trip to the coast. Except for Winston and I, there were three other boys, of whom two who are not involved in this kind of criminal activity. They listened attentively, without mingling in the conversation.

Winston: That thing is now big with Peter R. de Vries, did you know that?

What?

That thing, those telephones. It’s going on already for two and a half years, you know, and millions, billions of phones have gone, in guilders, eh. [Kenneth makes assenting sounds.] Two of my buddies were in touch with him, and they were caught. Two friends of mine – Peter R. de Vries went asking them: ‘Who steals? Who deals? Who buys?’

Kenneth: When they catch somebody, all of the blame comes on that person.

Winston: ... all of the blame on his head.

Kenneth: Yes, kill. Maybe it’s your first time, eh, but you just get screwed!
Winston: ...you get screwed for everything.

Kenneth: You get all the blame.

Winston: All 40 cases. You just get fucked.

Kenneth [referring to De Vries and getting really excited and angry]: That guy, I’ll do him in, I swear!

Winston: My friend, the one I sell my phones to, he’s bugged by the police.

Kenneth: Uhh? Is he...?

Winston: That’s why! You know I had that small phone? I got rid of it immediately, you know what I mean.

Kenneth: You shouldn’t have a telephone.

Winston: When I talk on the phone, we only say funny things, silly things, you know, like ah where are you, how are you, who are you with, this and that... and then you know where you are, you go there and you can continue talking. Not over the telephone, never. That’s how we are. Peter R. de Vries, that’s bad, dude, you really have to watch. Peter R. de Vries always gets you.

Kenneth: I haven’t watched in a long time.

Although being associated with ‘the phone thing’ (as these delinquent activities are known) does not secure one’s role as a leader in the group, it does contribute to one’s image as a sharp hand. Among the boys, cunning is a highly valued quality. I have not been able to obtain a clear picture of the financial gains. My impression is that the boys, also towards each other, exaggerate the ‘profit’ they make on each stolen telephone. They have, however, a few ways to display the fruits of their criminal activities: owning the most expensive telephones and posh clothing. Besides, within your family you can make people happy.

**Spending and the market of love and happiness**

Although the networks bring opportunities within reach to earn some money, they affect the lifestyle as well, by bringing attractive role models into view. Networks in which Moroccan-Dutch boys between 12-18
years of age participate are often multi-ethnic. Surinamese-Dutch peers are, as regards language, clothing and lifestyle, in general, an example for them. Moroccan young adults – their clothes, scooters and sometimes cars and (Dutch) girlfriends – are also models for emulation. Sometimes these alternatives for the good life are represented by Northern African young men with an urban background, who came to the Netherlands on the off chance. They know how to behave in public places and maintain relations with women of Moroccan-Dutch and white Dutch descent (see Viskil 1999). Open-ended networks such as these provide ‘an open door’ as a Moroccan youth worker phrased it. Behind the door, opportunities and role models present themselves ‘in real life’, but this does not of course bring these within reach immediately. However, opportunities present themselves to earn a little extra in the twilight zone, to at least be able to make a start in copying the lifestyle of their successful, often slightly older, ‘examples’ in the network. Most of the time, this does not give them a ticket to operate in the market of love and happiness. Because they are young, and Moroccan-Dutch to boot, they usually find their access to regular nightlife venues blocked. In daily leisure time activities, a lopsided and, for most boys, exclusive orientation towards male peers dominates. Their toughness and bravura is calibrated to this everyday interaction. What amongst them counts as the proper outfit and cool behaviour does not impress the ‘white chicks’ in the trendy discotheques very much, provided the boys are admitted to these places of entertainment.7

A number of boys regularly carry impressive amounts of pocket money, sometimes hundreds of guilders. Their ‘earnings’ are, however, not stable; besides, the money is quickly spent. Ask them where they spend their money and they make clear that ways to influence their status by conspicuous consumption are restricted, regardless of the amounts of money they sometimes have at their disposal. In this respect they have but a modest repertoire: clothing, shoes, some trinkets like rings and chains, cell phones; the modern urban nomad (as the boys like to see themselves) carries his distinguishing marks close to his body.

Exactly because of this, most of these status symbols have a short shelf life. Most gadgets soon lose their lustre – an expensive coat looks grubby after two weeks living on the street, and portable devices lose their novelty relatively quickly. Money to replace them is often not available. Because of this, none of the boys consider their way of life a feasible prospect. Regularly I lent them some money for cigarettes or a snack, and treating them to a hamburger meal at the expense of the Bus Project or my research budget was gladly accepted.

How do you spend your money?
Hamid: On clothes. I’m not stupid, you know. I know exactly what I want. Sometimes you buy a small bag or whatever, you know, that’s only normal.

_A small bag?_

Yes, for the _jonko_. And that’s normal. And food, McDonald’s everyday if possible. I need to have money every day. Except now, because I lent all my money.’

_And you?_

Abdel (18): On everything. Cinema, McDonald’s, hookers, and saving for a scooter, or whatever.

_You own a scooter?_

No.

_Do any of you own a scooter?_

No, but I want a car, too.

_Do you have a license?_

No, but I don’t need one.

Abdel, and the other boys a bit older than the rest, often talk about cars they covet. They agree that some small, fast cars about ten years old (like the Volkswagen Golf GTI) are attractive and within their means. Twice, a boy announces that he has bought one and will go and collect it that week. During the period of my fieldwork, I never saw a car. Sporadically, one of them rode a scooter, invariably a dilapidated specimen with parts falling off, which had disappeared from sight the next week.

The lifestyle of these kids is in large part determined by their age. Those boys who regularly get slipped something by their older brothers, the phone boys, all realise that the money they get does not permanently affect their situation for the better.

_Q: Where do you like to go to eat?_

Steven (14): ‘Depends on the money I have. If I have a lot of money, I go to McDonald’s. If I don’t have much, I go elsewhere,
some chips at Moos (neighbourhood snack bar) or something like that. That’s only 2.25. Because chips, you can’t buy them separately at McDonald’s, you get them only with the menu. And a menu is easily a tenner.

*But if you sell a few cell phones, you can easily go to more expensive places...*

Yes, but you don’t do that. A boy of fourteen doesn’t eat in a restaurant. You’ll get kicked out immediately, as far as I know! And regardless of the money you have, at fourteen you’re not admitted to the disco.

**School and the future**

Most participants in the group are at the same school, a large comprehensive school (*scholengemeenschap*) for lower general and vocational secondary education in southern Rotterdam. Most of them are hardly motivated to learn, but this is not exceptional for students in lower vocational education. They skip school whenever they feel like it, and discipline in getting up (and arriving on time) is often not part of daily routine and not supervised by parents or other household members. In front of teachers and school management, thin excuses are concocted for their regular absence. Sanctions and prodding to better their behaviour from the teaching staff make no impression, as the boys’ stories demonstrate. Four boys spoke to me about ‘an argument’ they were having with a teacher; this turned out to be a euphemism for the use of violence – or threats in that direction – of, in their view, legitimate behaviour for confronting discrimination and acts of disrespect.

The school they attend is notorious in the district. In and around school, violent incidents abound. Some months before I started the research, a pupil stabbed a teacher, who was in hospital for a considerable length of time. As students cause trouble when on break and hanging around the school grounds, the gates remain closed during all intervals between classes, and they have to stay on the premises. When on school outings, pupils have misbehaved so badly that the school now finds the gates of most amusement parks closed.

From third year of secondary school (approximately at age fifteen) onwards, many pupils use cannabis regularly and excessively, smoking dope before the start of classes and during breaks, even though it is strictly prohibited, under penalty of expulsion from school.
Most boys in the group lack the motivation to succeed in school. Some of them have repeated years several times, and two of them are in danger of being expelled from school because of severe and often violent misbehaviour, connected to rows with teachers. Nevertheless, not all of them are poor students. As several of them are promoted to the next grade each year, boys aged fifteen and eighteen are in the same grade. It is possible that a majority of them will finally be able to round off their lower vocational training successfully. All of them state that they want to finish school. Life on the street, with all its excitement and returns, is seen by everybody as temporary, a part of being young. It is not seen as an alternative for the future.

So a lot of pupils have quite a bit of money because of all kinds of odd jobs...

Why would you still fancy finishing school?

Steven: Of course you do. For instance, you’re twenty, you’ve got a wife and kids – you’re not going to steal telephones, are you? What good does that do you when you’re twenty? You might have 1,200 guilders, for you, your wife and your kid. That doesn’t bring you very far, does it?

Conclusion

The boys of tram line 2 feel that their behaviour belongs to the phase they are going through in their lives. One might be tempted to regard this feeling as an underpinning for the thesis that their ‘subculture’ described in this chapter should be classified as a lifestyle. After all, besides its admitted transience, it merely concerns the self-conscious and emblematic use of selected cultural elements, with the aim of creating a common bond, an imagined community of equals that distinguished itself from others. Elements considered exemplary for this dimension of culture (street language, behavioural codes, preferences for clothing and music, rituals of the jonko) occupy a prominent place in their behaviour. The boys, moreover, self-consciously relate a number of aspects of their life on the street to their identity, which they picture as unattached and cosmopolitan. These elements of behaviour are generally considered to belong to a ‘youth culture’ which participants shed when they enter adulthood.

This might be true, but it does not help us much further in understanding their behaviour. The ‘culture as lifestyle’ concept, stressing consciousness and voluntariness, becomes even more problematic
when it is posited against ‘culture as way of life’ (Vermeulen 2001). Culture as a way of life is the internalised sediment of the whole of experiences that we carry with us. It is, according to Vermeulen, the lens through which we see the world and our guideline for action, without us being aware of it. Conversely, culture as lifestyle is ‘more or less a coat one is able to put on or take off’ (2001: 14; my translation). Likewise, Bauman finds that traditional discourses and customs (‘harshes’) used to keep communities together are wearing off, being replaced by convertible and negotiable culture. Our age is what Bauman (2000: 169) calls ‘the liquid stage of modernity’ in which ‘only zipped harnesses are supplied, and their selling point is the facility with which they can be put on in the morning and taken off in the evening (or vice versa).’ By positing this antithesis, and by presenting culture as lifestyle as a booming social phenomenon, while pointing to an alleged decline in the diversity of ways of life, it seems as if these two dimensions of culture are extremes on a continuum of cultural forms, which almost independently, and exclusively, help to circumscribe and explain behaviour of different social groups, in different eras. For example, the first generation of labour immigrants mainly ‘possesses’ culture as way of life, while, conversely, their children raised in the destination country increasingly have culture as a lifestyle – and less and less culture as way of life.8

This antithesis does not aid in understanding the boys I have described in this chapter (and I suspect that it is too unequivocal a representation in many cases). The paraphernalia of their lifestyle cannot be comprehended outside the context of their way of life, of which these are, one could say, the inevitable or necessary adornment. The reference in the title of this chapter to Tennessee Williams’ classic play is a little more than just a droll allusion to the tram shelter where they swap tales and plan short-term excitement, or the bus that brings them diversion on Wednesday evenings. It also means to hint at the paradoxical process of purposive symbolism with which they try to make sense of their predicament (the monotony and restrictedness of their adolescent lives) while simultaneously concealing it by embossing it beyond reality. For most of the boys on line 2, life in the streets is tied to their situation at home. For them, it is completely self-evident that, except for food and sleep, there is nothing to keep them at home. The mothers of most of the boys would be surprised if they would stay home in the evening, and ask if something were wrong. It is more or less a law of nature: just as one tries to satisfy one’s hunger by looking for food, one chases away boredom by going in the streets to look for one’s friends. Subsequently, their possibilities are framed by the conventions of the community and the district where they grow up, the school they attend and their record there. In all these overlapping fields, the negative stereotypical image
that others have of Moroccan-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch and Antillean-Dutch kids plays an important role.

Choices for most of the boys are limited. It is not a coincidence that most of them hang out in the street and that you will not find them in trendy discotheques. Hanging around, chasing away boredom, the recurrent and excessive use of cannabis; the possibility of forming shifting new coalitions and shunning strained mutual relations within open-ended peer networks; the gross mutual rebuff that actually aims to keep inter-ethnic relations inside the group informal and natural; the criminal behaviour, the mistrust of and reticence towards outsiders; all these interrelated behavioural patterns should be seen as an adaptation to the circumstances in which these boys grow up, and as having the function to make their life as pleasant and meaningful as possible. By and large, these are daily behaviours, prompted by a habitual pattern drawing upon and reworking cumulated experiences and knowledge, to be able to manage, for better or for worse, limitations and problems one encounters. Part of this behaviour is so patently obvious that it hardly requires conscious deliberation. The fact that this patterned behaviour is ‘fleshed out’ and embellished, made suitable for internal and external consumption, by manifestations that are commonly classified under the header ‘lifestyle’, does not underscore the voluntarism and consciousness of the behaviours. At this stage of life, the boys described in this chapter do not have an alternative for the networks in which they participate. Consequently, they cannot renounce the behavioural accessories that forge these networks in an imagined (and moral) community, all the more so because their more consciously wielded lifestyle is bounded with aspects of their internalised behaviour, in a way that does not give them insight into these processes.

Seen like this, their participation and activities in peer networks resemble coping behaviour, in the sense that there is little room for deliberation and choice. Indeed, I think this is the case. However, having highlighted their restricted possibilities and the unwittingness of their actions, we should not forget, and try to explain, their mostly positive accounts of their subjective experiences generated by their mutual relationships and activities. The relationships and practices in which these street kids are engaged fill an important need. Park has highlighted the importance of ‘sentimental groups’. These groups counterbalance the more instrumental and single-stranded relations in which people in modern, industrial society are involved. Sentimental groups resemble primary groups such as the family, in that they provide for intimate, face-to-face association, but differ from these in that they lack an ecological basis and an existence over a long period of time. Sentimental groups offer a newly created culture, and its members ‘share a mystical or mythical connection’ (Lal 2003: 46). When you are young, such
sentimental groups are of vital importance, especially because many, perhaps even most adolescents, perform the most important social roles imposed on them, like those of a student or a child, only reluctantly. Peer networks perform the function of involving the complete person, offering its participants the opportunity to reinterpret existing experiences threatening disintegration of their self-image, experiences that more likely happen to children like the ones I write about in this chapter than to others. In the eyes of the boys on line 2, their friends and acquaintances in the street are the best available relationships to reconcile their self-esteem and authenticity.

Making sense of the outside world and grasping the meaning of one’s selfhood are subjective processes that are intertwined in one’s consciousness and sub-consciousness to such a degree that discerning the two, and thus becoming conscious of one’s selfhood, takes place only when one experiences inconsistencies between the different roles one plays. As this, however, is a common lot in life (but some individuals and groups experience this more often and more severely than others), people are faced with the necessity to reconcile the incompatible roles with each other, and with the unity of their person. Cohen, in *Two-Dimensional Man*, highlights man’s ability to symbolise as his chief resource to resolve this predicament. Nearly all social behaviour contains symbolic and contractual elements. The ideal types of contractual and symbolic action can be seen to occupy the extreme ends of the spectrum.

At the one end are the segmental roles, played out in simple and instrumental relationships; at the other end pure symbolic action is situated, in which the complete person is involved. Symbolic action always involves the totality of the person, and is aimed at reconciling his or her selfhood (Cohen 1974: 54-60). Symbolic action, in contrast to contractual action, can be expected to take place in informal social relationships. In social settings where behavioural norms and social positions are least prescribed, there is room to manoeuvre for individuals, expressing symbolically, for themselves and for others, a self-image in accordance with the roles one plays in all domains of society, legitimating possible repressed parts in their role repository, or shedding these as irrelevant by signifying other dimensions of the self. This can only be achieved while in interaction with others who are able to acknowledge the self-presentation and the symbolic act in which it is fashioned, and to reciprocate with similar symbolic behaviour (this is probably what Park means by ‘sharing a mystical or mythical connection’). As these sentimental groups are informal (and sometimes illegal) social constellations not organised according to explicit rules, while a clear division of roles is lacking, the total involvement of the self is not only allowed, but also prescribed, expecting unconditional commitment, and
provoking condemnation of the complete person, if he or she has violated group norms.

This is why youth groups abound in regalia of lifestyle, worn mostly close upon the physical person. The notion that one can adopt or discard such a lifestyle as a coat one can put on or take off is reminiscent of the perception of identities as multiple forms of presentation of the self, alternatively, and more or less volitionally, deployed in different social settings. I hope to have made clear that my argument against such a purposive and conscious definition of the notion of identity follows a similar course to what I have contended above regarding lifestyle.

Notes

1 Charlois is, for the large part, a working-class borough that experienced major decline in the late twentieth century.
2 In the media, the contribution of Moroccan and Antillean youngsters in criminal offences is systematically highlighted. For 1999, official statistics report percentages for Moroccan and Antillean boys (age 12-18) who are suspected of crimes to be six times higher than those for indigenous youth the same age (http://statline.cbs.nl/).
3 The fieldwork constituted part of a research project among Moroccan and Antillean street youth in Amsterdam and Rotterdam carried out by the University of Amsterdam and funded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (Lindo 2001).
4 I functioned as a volunteer from March 1999 to March 2000. My offer to help was gladly accepted as, in spite of the enthusiastic response the project soon generated among local policymakers from Charlois and surrounding boroughs, the budget remained small, and Mark was chronically in need of assistants.
5 As my research was funded by the Ministry of Health, a major goal was to find out about drug use and the way this is connected to deviant behavioral patterns. From surveys among young people, the picture that steadily emerges is that Moroccan and Turkish youth generally use fewer ‘hard drugs’ (such as cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, amphetamines), and that their use of ‘soft drugs’ is significantly below average. Among policymakers – and within institutions to combat drug use – it is widely held that this picture is distorted. The reasoning is that, firstly, respondents are inclined to avoid answers viewed to be socially unacceptable, a tendency which is supposed to be stronger among immigrants in view of the taboo that rests on drug use within their communities, and secondly, because of the fact that, for a large part, ongoing surveys among Dutch youth are conducted in educational institutions. One surmises that the category of youth most prone to excessive drug use has prematurely dropped out of school. As the drop-out rate among immigrant children is much higher than among non-immigrant children, the unproven supposition is that a drug problem among teenagers of immigrant background exists that is hidden from view. The funding for my research was partly based on this reasoning.
6 The fieldwork dates back to the pre-euro era; 1 guilder equals about 0.45 euro.
7 Discrimination against people of Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch descent at discos in the Netherlands has been documented, and is commented upon regularly in the media.
8 Vermeulen sees otherwise, with both aspects being constantly subject to change (2001: 15-14).
References