Kids Working on Paulista Avenue
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It is 7 a.m. on a Saturday morning in 1999 in a Brazilian shanty town on the outskirts of Sao Paulo, one of the world’s largest cities. Eight-year-old Edson’s mother, Elizabeth, wakes him for work. Edson puts on his threadbare navy T-shirt, old gray sweat pants and worn rubber ‘flip-flop’ sandals with the tattered yellow plastic strip between his toes. As Edson goes without breakfast out the door of his scrap-and-cardboard house, Elizabeth hands her son a plastic two-liter Coke bottle with a few drops of soap in it and a ‘squeegee’ for washing car windshields. With a good-bye kiss from his mother, Edson scurries along the narrow corridor between the slum dwellings of cement, wood and cardboard, leaping back and forth across the stream of raw sewage.

Arriving at the precarious shack where 14-year-old Vilma lives, Edson meets his co-worker, who sells candies at ‘their’ traffic light. The two continue along the slum path for more than a mile to the bus stop. There, they expect to join their four co-workers – Francinaldo, age 13, Luiz Ricardo, 12, Luciano, 11, and Danilo, 8. But, today, only three of these other children show up at the busy bus stop: Luciano is too sick to leave his house. As the children begin their hour-and-a-half bus commute into the center of Sao Paulo City, they worry about how much they will earn today. Crawling under the bus turnstile, at least they can avoid the cost of the long commute.
– those under 12 are entitled to ride the bus free; the fare collector is nice
today, he lets the ones over 12 travel free as well. Given the children’s paltry
earnings, they could not come up with the 2 reais (US$1.00) that it costs to
travel to and from work each day.

On the bus, three of the older youth laugh, play and argue; the two
youngest try to catch some sleep before beginning their 9- to 14-hour work-
day in Latin America’s wealthiest city. It is 10 a.m. by the time the young
workers arrive at glamorous Avenida Paulista, known as Brazil’s ‘Fifth
Avenue’ for its commercial sophistication and air of vibrant luxury. To reach
their workplace – a bustling street corner near chic restaurants and busy
banks – the children walk past modern skyscrapers, wealthy shoppers and
itinerant street vendors. Stopping briefly at a parking lot water spigot to fill
their soap-added Coke bottles, the youth then cross Paulista’s six lanes of
fast traffic to ‘their’ corner. There, they will begin the ritual of waiting for
the traffic light to stop Avenida traffic so that they can approach stopped cars
with their candy or soapy squeegees. With any luck, some of the drivers will
pay them for their services. However, even on a good day, after up to 10
hours’ work, the youth will each return home with on average only about 6
reais (US$3). They will have earned less than 30 cents (US) an hour.

Theorizing street youth

Based on 6 weeks’ field study on one street corner of Sao Paulo City’s
Paulista Avenue, this ethnography examines 12 young children and their two
somewhat older ‘supervisors’. One subset of the younger youth – the
‘squeegee kids’ – washes car windshields, while the other – ‘sweets kids’ –
sells candy and gum. The work rhythms of these two groups are regulated
most immediately by the traffic lights: when the light turns red for the
Avenue, the youth quickly fan out into the traffic lanes, approaching each
driver as quickly as possible. As the light changes to green, they quickly
retreat to the sidewalk where their ‘supervisors’ wait to count what the chil-
dren have just earned.

While technology – automobiles, traffic lights, squeegee equipment
and ‘sweets’ – regulates important aspects of the children’s work, other
aspects of their activities are shaped by the children themselves: how they
‘sell’ themselves and their wares to drivers, how they relate to their ‘supervi-
sors’ and parents, how they use spare time, and how they explain them-
selves, their work and their social worlds to themselves and others. Yet a
compelling structural constraint affecting this technology/agency dynamic is
the conditions making it necessary for some Brazilian pre-teen and teenage
youth to go to work in the first place. Once on the street, where they some-
times must sleep and always spend long hours working, many of the chil-
dren’s activities are dedicated to earning a pittance toward securing their and
their family’s survival or protecting themselves against the outsiders who

threaten this. It is within this dynamic of wider social structure, work technologies and personal agency that the children’s dreams and aspirations take shape. These, as we show, provide yet another window into the interface between structure and agency.

Looking for a theoretical framework for studying Brazilian street youth, we found that most scholarship on the sociology of childhood – like its sociological ‘parent’ more generally – falls at one end or another of the micro/macro theoretical spectrum. At the macro-level, such studies of child labor as those by Bayles (2000), Boyden (1991), Salazar (1988) and van Oosterhout (1988) often stress how children are shaped by structures beyond their control. For example, as the International Labor Organization (1997: 2) has argued, pervasive child labor during the formative years of poor working youth, ‘deprives [these] children of their childhood and their dignity . . . [and] hampers their access to education and the acquisition of skills, and . . . is . . . harmful to their health and to their development’. From such a theoretical vantage point, youth are often seen as the product of adult institutions – the sum of adult socialization or neglect or of organizational and institutional processes that exploit their potential.

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, the interactionist human action perspective sees youth as agents within socially constructed worlds. Within such worlds, according to Qvortrup (1997: 90), youth create ‘a reality which is common for children irrespective of their parents’ backgrounds’ (Qvortrup, 1997: 90). Explaining the thinking behind such a focus, Prout and James (1997) argue that childhood is ‘an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted’ (see also Solberg, 1997). Solberg (1997: 142) calls for researchers to give voice to children by seeing them as more than ‘victims of adult misbehavior . . . or the lack of justice’.

Pointing to an interface between structure and childhood agency, Glauser’s (1997) research on street youth in Asunción, Paraguay, points to the powerful role of structure in developing countries in shaping childhood dynamics and outcomes because,

... Third World societies do not provide formal substitutes for the family’s functions, but ‘abandon’ the [street] child to a jungle-like, socially disorganized aggressive sphere. (Glauser, 1997: 157)

At the same time, Glauser (1997: 156) also recognizes that ‘the street has different meanings for different sections of the urban population’, with children who live on the street seeing it as ‘a place to build up social relations’. Qvortrup (1997), whose demographic research illustrates the invisibility of children in most national and international record-keeping – except as dependants or victims of adult agency – recommends that a sociology of childhood include structural influences on children without erasing children’s active contributions to their lives.
Taking a lead from Glauser (1997) and Qvortrup (1997), our research on working street youth in Sao Paulo, Brazil, illustrates the interface between the grinding structural realities faced by a group of Brazilian street youth and the micro-interactions that they use to push at, ignore or reshape the largely unbending challenges of their worlds. We have discovered that by focusing on social relationships among and between the children, and by considering the structures that bind and constrain their relationships, we can provide a window into some linkages between human agency and social structure. Our central theoretical proposition is that children’s agency varies by gender, class, age and ethnicity, without being able to specifically demonstrate the extent of such variation in a study of poor youth alone. Likewise, we further propose the importance of considering the relative balance of power among children, supervising adults and political, economic and other sociostructural and historical processes. These make some childhood constructions and outcomes more likely than others.

For example, such structural realities as lack of adequate and conveniently located affordable housing, a viable educational system for the poor, extremely low (or no) wages for their parents and widespread under- and unemployment – combined with sluggish and largely ineffective administrative and legal systems – render children in peril even before they are born. These realities for poor children in developing countries suggest one rationale for the sociostructural perspective’s focus on poor children’s relative powerlessness. However, at the same time, as this study shows, such children can still exercise agency in the worlds that they inhabit, carving out little pieces of their own life in the process of interacting with the technologies of their work, with one another and with superiors, customers, police and other adults.

For the purpose of this analysis, we adopt the interactionist recommendations that researchers of childhood see children as actors (for which ethno- graphic methods are well suited) and as more than the sum of their surroundings. We also adopt the premise of human rights scholars and of the structural sociologists of childhood that powerful sociostructural conditions can limit or enhance the ability of children to create their daily worlds. Rather than fully rejecting either perspective on childhood, we illustrate the interaction of these, without advancing an explicit formula for integrating micro- and macro-level findings.

**Poor children in Brazil**

According to recent estimates, almost half of all Brazilians live in poverty (Novartis Foundation, 2003); 45 million of the 170 million Brazilians are without sufficient economic resources to provide even the most basic caloric needs. One-half of these undernourished Brazilians are children under 15 (BBC, 2003; see also Dewees and Klees, 1995). The Brazilian government’s
Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) confirmed in 1999 that 40 percent of Brazilian children under 14 live in extreme poverty, 'where the monthly family salary does not surpass half of the monthly minimum wage of 136 reais – roughly $68 (US)' (Diario Popular, 1999; Klintowitz, 1999: 117). Compared with countries having a similar per capita gross domestic product, Brazil has one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world.

A very high proportion of poor children in Brazil live in favelas (slums) in Brazil’s major cities – Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Salvador. Favelas are ‘illegally settled, haphazard clusters of impoverished dwellings’ (Gay, 1988: 104; see also Gay, 1994), largely without public water, electricity, sewage or drainage systems. Most of the children who grow up in such impoverished conditions begin working at an early age. Indeed, according to Klintowitz (1999: 117), one in every six Brazilian children in 1999 entered the job market before the age of 16. Thus, although Brazil’s Statute of Children and Adolescents prohibits employment of children under 14, except where their work contributes to their education, many poor children under 14 must work anyway out of sheer necessity.

Perhaps among the most disadvantaged of Brazil’s poor are youth who work on streets – victims of Brazilian society’s social and economic failures. These children, who often come from unsanitary living environments in unsafe neighborhoods, carry out hard and often dangerous street work, encountering negative social stigma and frequent physical violence (Huggins and Mesquita, 1999). They are considered by many Brazilians as totally detached from family and other humanizing social relationships, an image that contributes to their victimization. In fact, most such youth live at home, alternating, rather than replacing, one unsafe space for another.

Scholarly research in Brazil since the late 1980s has demonstrated that the vast majority of such children maintain close familial connections (Alves-Mazotti et al., 1996: 77; see also Huggins and Mesquita, 1995; Mickelson, 1999). For example, a 1999 study found that of 423 children and adolescents 18 years of age and under working and/or living on Sao Paulo City streets, 69 percent reported almost never sleeping on the street. Ninety-nine percent of them lived with their families (SOS Criança, 1999). In 1996 and 1997 in Brasília, Brazil’s national capital, only 25 percent of the 1466 interviewed youth actually slept on the street (Soares, 1999: 6).

Nevertheless, as ‘street youth’ poor Brazilian street workers are transformed into deviant adults, erasing others’ positive sense of their child status. Scheper-Hughes (1997: 43) points out that ‘Brazil’s street children . . . violate conventional ideas about childhood innocence, vulnerability, and dependency; they are not seen as children at all, but as dangerous young people’. Considered ineligible for designation as innocent children, Brazilian street youth face serious problems in achieving a childhood that is free of life-threatening danger and physical and psychological abuse.
Getting into the field

With a focus exclusively on children and adolescents working on the streets – crianças na rua – we sought such youth from an eight-block area near Avenida Consolação’s intersection with Sao Paulo City’s Avenida Paulista. After selecting a particularly busy corner, Rodrigues began striking up a conversation with the first child she found working there, which introduced a significant challenge: How could we ethically conduct research on children? Did we not need permission from their immediate adult guardians, the tia or tio who supervised them on the street, and the youths’ own consent, and ideally their parents’ as well?

Locating the parents would be difficult because, according to the youth, most of their parents were not at home at the times when we could get to their communities. In addition, there were issues of safety: as a total outsider to the community where the child lived, the field researcher might herself be vulnerable. The next best thing was to obtain permission from the children’s older street supervisors and from the youth themselves. We received permission from all 14 of the kids who called that Paulista Avenue corner their workplace – although nine of them had to convince their tia or tio first. This ‘aunt’ or ‘uncle’, who may or may not be a biological relative, oversees the children’s safety and makes sure that they work. For performing such services, the supervisor usually extracts a portion of the child’s profits.

To obtain permission to observe and interview the youth, the field researcher introduced herself to the group’s tia and tio, who were in their early to mid-twenties, and gave a brief summary of the research. The older caretaker was assured that the children’s names would be changed to protect their anonymity and that the children would receive a meal or money in exchange for an interview. Asked what the children wanted as compensation for an interview – money or food – most of the youthful workers selected food, specifically from the nearby McDonald’s. Four of the 12 children had their meal at McDonald’s itself, six requested a McDonald’s ‘take-out’ meal; two wanted payment in cash. The latter youth were each given 10 reais – roughly equivalent to US$5 – which more than compensated for the work time lost during an interview.

The field research involved six weeks of tri-weekly visits to the children’s corner. The youth were observed for 10–15 minutes each from approximately three yards away. The interviews, conducted at least once with each child, lasted approximately 45 minutes, with each child asked the same questions – about family and home life, workday experiences, personal aspirations, interactions with police and other experiences with danger. An interview began by exploring how the children labeled their workplace. Having assumed from our academic Portuguese that they would call their street corner a ponto, we were initially surprised that they referred to it as a posto, an incorrect Portuguese referent for a street corner workplace. Since
the children worked on a street corner, it would have made sense for them to call their workplace a *ponto*. Yet in Brazil’s urban areas, the word *ponto* is very commonly associated with locations where ‘deviants’ sell their wares – a *ponto de travestis* (a cross-dressers’ hang-out), *ponto de drogas* (where drugs are sold), or *ponto de prostitutas* (a prostitutes’ hang-out). Apparently for the youth interviewed, the word *ponto* would have obscured the corner’s central role as a location for conducting *respectable* work. Their choice of vocabulary was an indication of the seriousness they placed on their work, a fact that was verified over and over again in the interviews.

**Profile of the ‘squeegee’ and ‘sweets’ kids**

The 12 younger working street children, who were predominantly male, young and brown-skinned, ranged from 8 to 14 years; only two were female. No observed child was white: two boys were black, the others were brown-skinned. Their two older ‘supervisors’, a 20-year-old female and a 25-year-old male, are discussed later.

Only one of the 12 had only one sibling, two had two each, and one had three; all the rest had between six and 12 siblings. Ten lived with their biological mother; only four of their households had a biological father. Five fathers had left the youth’s mother; three had died. Three of the 10 youngest children were without biological fathers and had a stepfather (*padastro*) in their household. All the youth said they lived in the *periferia*, indicating a slum toward the edge of the huge city.

Ten of the 12 children claimed to attend school: one boy said that he was in the second grade; three boys declared themselves fourth graders, five said they were in the fifth grade, and one self-identified as a sixth-grader. On the other hand, 13-year-old Luana said she had left school after third grade and 10-year-old Anderson claimed to have stopped after one week into the first grade: ‘I didn’t like school and never went back.’ All of the youth except Anderson could write their names, all they were asked to write, so the extent of their writing ability cannot be determined. Their reading comprehension was likewise untested.

**Working lives**

Street work was seen by the youth as a positive alternative to a range of other less pleasant or viable options: ‘Work is better than staying at home and being hungry’ (Anderson, the 10-year-old ‘squeegee’ kid); ‘If I were to stay home, I’d have nothing to do’ (Emerson, a 14-year-old ‘sweets’ kid); ‘Being on the street here is better than being at home’ (Diego, a 10-year-old ‘sweets’ kid). Sitian (a 12-year-old ‘squeegee’ kid) enjoys working because his mother is happy when he brings home money. Three of the children said
that their financial contribution to their family was a primary reason for enjoying work: ‘I have to do what I can for my family’ (Luciano, the 11-year-old ‘squeegee’ kid); work is ‘necessary for me and my family’ (Fabio, a 12-year-old ‘squeegee’ kid).

Yet in fact only three of the youth were introduced to street work by an adult in their own family. Most came at the invitation of a youth already working on the street. Most commonly, once children found that they could make money on the streets, they invited other kids – usually from their own home neighborhood – to join them. Simple presence on a given corner appears to establish and confirm it as the child’s or group’s ‘turf’ – their posto. Thereafter, like a person in business whose work is always conducted out of the same office, the ‘squeegee’ and ‘sweets’ kids work only on that street corner.

The kids explained that they stayed at their corner because it was more profitable than the others they had used, although their reasons for having moved suggest other motives as well: fights with other youth over turf, harassment by shop owners, police repression. Pointing to a combination of reasons for changing turf, Francinaldo, a 13-year-old ‘squeegee’ kid, explained. ‘If one place doesn’t make us enough money or if the cops tell us to leave, we find another traffic light’.

The 12 Paulista Avenue street youth worked between 3 and 6 days a week – six worked only on weekends, including Fridays, and the amount that the other six worked depended on the weather and the money they had earned the prior week. That the youth worked so many and such long hours calls into question their claim that they were attending school. While many Brazilian school districts hold classes in three shifts – morning, afternoon and evening, Monday through Friday – the working youth that we observed left home during a school’s first shift and did not return home until after the end of the third shift, making it unlikely that they attended school regularly. Even those who worked only on Fridays and weekends would have had trouble attending school full-time. In any case, the fact that the children measured their need to work by a prior day’s earnings, suggests that earnings – low and irregular at best – very likely dictated whether a child could go to school. Furthermore, it is very likely that the interviewed youth’s demanding work schedules did not leave much energy for classroom learning, even if the schools they attended provided such an environment in the first place. Yet it seemed important to the youth that the field researcher think they were in school, an example of their presentation of self ignoring the obvious discrepancy between their working and attending school.

**Securing technology and earning money**

The ‘squeegee kids’ brought their work ‘technology’ with them to their posto, stopping along the way at a local parking lot to put water in their
soap-enhanced two-litre Coke bottle. The four-liter container of concentrated liquid soap, which was purchased and left at home, cost about 2 reais (US$1). Since the squeegee kids use only a little soap each day, their supply lasts up to four months depending on how often the child works. Purchased from a local merchant, the ‘squeegee’ has a long handle reaching to a right-angle strip with a sponge on one side and a rubber strip on the other. When asked how much a new squeegee costs, the children indicated from 30 to 60 reais (US$15–30), depending on its quality. The strip on the end of the squeegee is removable; a replacement costs about 5 reais (US$2.50). A squeegee strip is said to last up to four months, with the complete squeegee good for up to three years, depending on its quality and assuming that it does not get broken, taken, or lost.

By contrast, the ‘sweets kids’ need to make a significantly lower initial investment in their work. They need between 10 and 15 reais (US$5–7.50) for a mixed box of wrapped hard candies – gum, mints, cough drops, or fruit-flavored drops. Each candy sold earns a ‘sweets kid’ 1 real, or 50 US cents. The ‘sweets kids’ sell, on average, a box and a half of sweets a week. Each bulk box of candy, purchased at a local supermarket, contains approximately 30 pieces, with each sold for 1 real (50 US cents), netting 30 reais (US$15.00) per box. ‘Sweets kids’ sell between US$7.50 and US$11.25 worth of candy a week, or an average of less than US$2.00 each day for a 5-day, 60-hour work week.

However it is very difficult to calculate how much either set of working children actually makes in a given month because their earnings are so sporadic. Asking the youth themselves about their earnings did not always provide accurate information: either the youth did not want to disclose earnings or they fabricated higher profits to impress the researcher. However, their fabrications were often met with disbelief and scorn by the other street youth, suggesting that the children themselves had a pretty good idea of the range of earnings among them. For example, 8-year-old Edson, a ‘squeegee kid’, reported in the presence of a group of co-workers that he had once made 50 reais (US$25) in one day. This was met with shock, disbelief and laughter by the other children: 14-year-old Vilma called Edson a mentiroso (liar); 10-year-old Anderson gave the researcher a cynical smirk and shook his head. The children found it implausible that one of them could earn as much as 4 reais (US$2) an hour during a 12-hour work day. Indeed, on average during the observation period, only one out of every 25 to 30 cars paid ‘squeegee kids’ either money or penny candy for their window-washing services. Payments ranged from a few cents to 1 real (50 US cents). This paltry outcome would probably not net over 15 reais (US$7.50) for a 12-hour day.

During the observation period, both sets of youth workers – the ‘squeegee’ and ‘sweets’ children – estimated their average daily earnings at 5 reais (US$2.50), or approximately US$12.50 for an entire 5-day work week. They guessed that on a ‘good day’ they might earn up to 20 reais
(US$10), although more than 15 reais (US$7.50) a day was not very common. But even before the child’s family got its share, the on-site young adult caregiver had to get a portion. We could not find out about the caregiver’s cut since the children were unwilling to tell us. The caregivers were unwilling to tell us as well.

On the job

Working at an Avenue stop light, and getting drivers to pay for services or purchase candy, requires imagination, agility and stealth. Among their strategies for ‘making a sale’, a few ‘squeegee kids’ first asked drivers if they would like their windshields washed; most just approached a vehicle, poured soapy water onto its window, and began cleaning. This often evoked a hostile response from drivers – they honked, motioned the youth to stop, yelled, or pulled their car forward and turned on their windshield wipers. One ‘squeegee kid’ explained: ‘Some drivers are nice, others do everything except hit us to get us away from their cars.’ Drivers were usually less hostile to the ‘sweets kids’, even though most drivers did not want to purchase their candy – shaking their fingers, hands or heads to get the seller to leave them alone.

Given the hostility of most drivers, the street vendors’ imagination was critical for a successful sale. The youth had devised a number of ‘performances’ (see Goffman, 1959) to promote themselves positively and sympathetically to drivers, including developing a carefully thought out persona and sales pitch. Edson’s co-worker explained that 8-year-old Edson makes the most money because he is the ‘cutest’ and uses his appearance of innocence and youth to evoke sympathy from drivers. Other street workers had to be more imaginative. On the sidewalk waiting for the light to turn red, Danilo was a playful, smiling and energetic 11-year-old. When Danilo approached stopped cars, he had a sad and pained expression, placing his hands on his belly, saying: ‘I’m hungry. Please give me some change for washing your car’s window.’ While it is very likely true that Danilo was indeed hungry – all the children interviewed were undernourished – this fact was not advanced when Danilo was in his energetic sidewalk persona. Indeed, sidewalk activity, during the short minutes between red lights, often involved the youth joking with one another, kicking garbage, wandering around, or arguing and fighting. During these moments of play, the working youth discovered little joias (treasures) – random throwaways tossed onto the street by pedestrians or drivers – and turned them into toys. For example, during a 2-hour interview with a group of ‘squeegee’ kids, 8-year-old Edson spotted a colorful empty box from a McDonald’s ‘Happy Meal’. He placed the box on his head and converted it into a crown, proclaiming: ‘I am King of the Traffic Light! You all must bow to me!’ Two children proceeded to bow to Edson with their hands raised high. On another
day, 13-year-old Luana found a discarded, ripped-up necktie. The tie still had a loop, which Luana converted to a lasso for catching other children by tossing the looped necktie lasso around their necks, as if being captured by a cowgirl. This quickly turned into a game of tag involving all of the children. Such moments of play were carried in and out among the shopping and business public, as the crowded street was transformed into the children’s private play space.

Violence

Violence was constant in the lives of the ‘squeegee’ and ‘sweets’ children we interviewed, whether taking the form of fights among members of the street group itself, or with competing youth, or carried out by family members, the police or adult strangers. In-group squabbles were common. One day a fight broke out when 8-year-old Danilo darted out to a car to wash the windshield of a man who had been his squeegee customer on several previous occasions. Because the man was known to pay well, all of the ‘squeegee’ kids wanted to serve him. The other squeegee workers alleged that Danilo had served this prized customer in the past and kept a larger than acceptable share of the driver’s payment from them. Despite the pushing and shoving of three other street youth in his group, Danilo prevailed. But when the generous driver pulled away, 13-year-old Francinaldo demanded that Danilo give him some of the money from the squeegee customer. The two boys began shoving each other in the traffic lanes as cars sped by until Danilo backed down and gave Francinaldo some of his coins.

Such aggression among group members was considered less problematic by the youth interviewed than with competitor street youth. Indeed, half of the 12 young interviewees maintained that meninos de rua – those they said lived permanently on the street – caused them the most trouble. They described such permanent street-based children unfavorably as malandros (delinquents), cheira-colas (glue-sniffers), trombadinhos (thieves), or moleques de rua (street urchins), alleging that these youth beat them up and stole their money. The children angrily denounced such youth as ‘robbing from those who have nothing’. The negative interactions that especially the six ‘squeegee kids’ had experienced with such meninos de rua, had led them to stigmatize all of these children as ‘mean, lazy, thief-glue-sniffers’. As Danilo put it, ‘Those criminal vagabonds are thieves. They take our money because they are too lazy to earn it themselves. They get high while we’re trying to bring a little change home to our families.’ This distinction, between good and worthy street workers and deviant ones, was common among the youth interviewed. It was certainly one reason for seeing their workplace as a posto, rather than a ponto, the latter associated in their minds with delinquents could delegitimize their constructions of self and work.

Violence did not end when the street youth returned home. The majori-
ty indicated that they suffered harsh physical discipline, particularly when earnings fell short of family expectations. As one interviewee put it, ‘If I spent any of [the money], my mum would hit me.’ Fourteen-year-old Vilma explained, ‘I hate my father. I work so hard to bring money home to my mother and he blows it all on alcohol. He is very mean to us and he doesn’t bring anything to the house but misery.’ Five of the interviewed youth pointed to their fathers or stepfathers as harsh disciplinarians, asserting that they were alcoholics who beat them and their mothers. Just as the structural realities of violence at home pushed some youth into the streets, some realities of the streets exposed them to new adult predators.

All but four of the 12 youth had experienced at least verbal abuse from police, ranging from, ‘Get out of here or we’ll have to take you to FEBEM’ – the State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors, a notoriously violent and abusive juvenile reformatory – to, ‘We’re going to take you to jail.’ Some children reported that police had beaten them so violently that they had bled. Without doubt, the 12 working children feared the police. When a police car had approached a group of ‘squeegee’ kids and their adult supervisor, Alessandra, the four younger children ran off. Alessandra and her sister, 15-year-old Isabella (visiting for the day), failed to get away: two policemen grabbed them, cuffed their hands, forced them into the patrol car and drove the girls to the police station. The police held the two girls in custody for 17 hours. At 8:00 the next morning, the young girls were released. Alessandra – a recent widow – was back to work the next day washing windshields: ‘I have two little girls to feed at home. If I don’t work to bring them food, nobody else will.’

Seemingly friendly strangers represented a threat to the children. Moses, one of the older tios, remembers at the age of 12 being approached by a man ‘in a suit’ who spoke ‘in a friendly tone’. Explaining that since it was Christmas, the man wanted ‘to do something special’ for Moses, he invited the young boy to his house, where Moses was to have a good meal and then go for a ‘shopping spree’ at a mall. Filled with excitement, Moses got into the man’s car, but became concerned as the man pulled his car into a deserted alley: leaning over and grabbing Moses by the belt, the man began unzipping the young boy’s pants. Filled with terror, Moses grabbed a pencil from the car seat, stabbed the man in the face, jumped out of the car, and ran as far as he could without stopping. According to Moses, street children ‘are always in danger of being raped by a stranger’.

In the face of such dangers from strangers, some street youth in the study had devised ways of protecting themselves and one another. When two younger female street workers ‘were talked into following a “nice” man who promised to give them each a large doll’, Moses, suspecting that something was not right, decided to tag along. Moses became concerned when the man ‘had us follow him into the vacant parking lot of an old meat market’. When the stranger grabbed one of the girls ‘and tried to take off with her, the other
girl started screaming and pelting [the man] with rocks’. The assailant ‘ran away cursing and saying that he was going to call the police’. Moses maintains that ‘if the man had called the police, they would have taken his story over ours’. Cast in the role of ‘dangerous deviants’, street youth are in peril of victimization by pedophiles and then considered guilty of a crime whether they commit one or not.

Dreams and realities

What are the chances of street youth becoming something other than street sellers? Will Luiz Ricardo be able to fulfill his dream of buying his mother ‘a house and other good things”? Can Vilma start a babysitting business for poor women? Will the ‘squeegee’ boys be able to fulfill their goal of someday working in a bank, or becoming a lawyer, or a veterinarian, or a rapper? The prospects are not good for most of these youth. Looking at the lives of the two ‘street veterans’, at 25 and 20, respectively, Anderson Moses and Alessandra have been working on the Sao Paulo streets since early childhood. Anderson Moses, who goes by Moses, had been a street worker for 23 years at the time of his interview, having begun at 2 when his parents – unable to support their children – found a woman who, in exchange for Moses’s labor, took Moses into her home. Moses grew up in a slum shack with the surrogate mother he calls ‘grandma’ and her four older children. Remembering the violence at home, Moses explains:

I thought I would die on many occasions from the beatings I got at the hands of my stepbrothers. It got to the point that ‘grandma’ put up a little wall in a corner where I could sleep by myself to get away from them . . . I did not have a childhood. There were nights when ‘grandma’ would punish me for misbehaving by forbidding me to come home. I’d sleep in a chicken coop or with the stray cats in the neighborhood.

At the age of 2, Moses was taken to work on the streets. Being too young to join his surrogate family collecting cardboard to sell, Moses was placed in a box on the sidewalk with a plastic cup in front of him. While Moses was attracting spare change from sympathetic passersby, one of the older kids or ‘grandma’ took turns sitting with him. After 3 years of using Moses to beg, ‘grandma’ decided that the boy, then 5 years old, was old enough to begin collecting cardboard. As Moses got older, he began spending more time on the streets – working days and sleeping at night in Sao Paulo’s Praça da Sé, a central city square where street youth often congregate to work, beg, play, wash up and rest. In the winter Moses would curl up on a hot air subway vent, always in fear of the police: ‘The police beat me a lot because I was a kid on my own. Street kids aren’t to blame for their conditions, but they are punished for them by society [just the same].’ The street represented a difficult set of choices for Moses. It was an escape from the violence at home, and an adventure, but it also posed dangers of its own.
Moses began smoking at 8, got into frequent fights, abused drugs – mostly glue and marijuana – and was generally ‘treated like a dog’.

At 25, Moses lives in a slum with his biological brother, sister and his two siblings’ three children. Moses’s 4-year-old son, Roberto, lives with his mother, a woman Moses had dated for 7 months before she became pregnant. Now estranged from the mother of his son, Moses ‘does what he can to support him’, but finds earning money increasingly difficult: Society ‘likes cute young street children, [people are] much less sympathetic’ about older street workers. In Moses’s experience, ‘people treat us like animals. It’s humiliating.’

Moses believes that street work has become harder in other ways: ‘Many more children live and work on the streets and there is increased competition for “turf”. They do not support one another as they used to.’ Sociologist Irene Rizzini’s research on Rio de Janeiro street youth would call into question Moses’s first observation, that there are many more children on urban streets in Brazil today. In Rizzini’s 3-month study of Rio youth, she discovered that the absolute number of children on Rio streets had increased by only a third over the last 10 years – from 900 in 1990/1 to 1200 in 2001/2 (SEJUP, 2002). Rizzini’s study supports Moses’s claims that conditions have worsened for street youth: children now enter the streets younger and face much more violence than in previous periods. For example, among Rizzini’s Rio de Janeiro sample, all of the youth had been victims of violence, with over half claiming that police or security guards had been the source of that violence. Another fifth said that other street children had been the perpetrators. Moses recalls that most of the kids he had known growing up had died or been killed: one was hit by a car, several died from bullet wounds, others from drug overdoses or preventable illnesses.

Alessandra, a girl-turned-mother on the street, is Moses’s ‘stepsister’. Having begun street work at 6, Alessandra, like Moses, was introduced to the streets by the woman Moses calls ‘grandma’, Alessandra’s biological mother. Alessandra’s first memories were of working 10 hours a day, 4 days a week, selling chocolates to drivers with her cousin Rosa. For 7 years, every Friday, Alessandra, her mother and Rosa would sleep in a parking lot near their workplace. Knowing that Saturday mornings brought the most customers, Alessandra’s mother found sleeping on the street much ‘better than traveling’ 2 hours every Saturday morning: The family would be able to minimize travel costs and maximize time at work.

At 13, Alessandra switched from selling sweets to washing windshield. Later, as a supervising tia to three younger children, Alessandra’s had to ‘keep the kids out of trouble and make sure that they worked’. After 4 months at this, Alessandra’s mother told her that she had to stop supervising because the street was ‘no place for a teenage girl to be alone’. Alessandra began cleaning a middle-income family’s apartment 3 days a week – spending the other days hanging out with street friends – a group of older street
workers whose *posto* was in the heart of Sao Paulo near the Praça da Sé. Alessandra’s mother had always warned her to ‘stay away from street children’ like these, but Alessandra quickly realized that, ‘The more time I spent on the street, the more street kids I met and some of them are cool, even though others are bad and scary.’ Recognizing that ‘the street is a violent place’, and not liking to fight, Alessandra ‘hung out with kids who knew how to fight: They were always there to back me up if anything ever happened.’

At 14, Alessandra began dating boys from the street crowd and at 15 she met Luis – ‘the love of my life’. After dating Luis for a year, she became pregnant; at 16 she married Luis and had a baby girl. A year-and-a-half later, Alessandra and Luis had another child. Luis worked in a small luncheonette, allowing Alessandra to stay home with their babies. Alessandra remembers Luis as ‘a wonderful husband: He understood that I had been working since I was 6 and didn’t want me to have to work again.’ For Alessandra, the 4 years with Luis were the ‘happiest’ of her life.

At 18, Alessandra’s life changed drastically: Luis was mortally wounded by police during a slum drug bust. According to bystanders’ accounts: ‘The officer looked Luis straight in the eye as Luis begged the policeman not to shoot – pleading that he had a wife and two little girls.’ Alessandra was told that the policeman shot Luis ‘at point blank range and then put Luis’s wounded body in a squad car’. Luis died in police custody without any further investigation of the event. Alessandra believes that if she had not been poor she might have got justice for Luis, but in her ‘situation, it’s just a waste of time’ to even try to talk with the police. According to Alessandra, Luis was not involved in drugs, he was ‘just on his way to drop something off at a neighbor’s house’ when he was shot.

Alessandra, now raising her daughters alone, sometimes works ‘7 days a week to support [the] family’. Alessandra recognizes that ‘as much as I try to avoid it, my daughters’ fate will be just like mine’, an assessment that is well grounded. The reality of her class and gender position – a poor single mother raising two children alone in a slum – will very likely lead to Alessandra’s having to put one or both of her young daughters to work. Indeed, Wahba’s (2001) research on intergenerational transmission of poverty in Egypt found that the children whose parents had been child laborers were twice as likely than those whose parents were not to become child laborers themselves. While circumstantial observation over years of studying Brazil suggest that similar research in Brazil would surely support Wahba’s findings, no such research was discovered for Brazil.

**Broken dreams**

If the lives of Alessandra and Moses are typical, then the younger working kids in this study cannot expect much positive change in their lives, a
prediction also suggested by the limited longitudinal information about Brazilian street youth. Hecht’s (1998: 205) academic research on a group of street youth in Recife City in Brazil’s northeast found that between 1992/3 and 1995 there were ‘no reports of children returning home [full-time from the streets] and no reports of street children finding jobs and leaving the street except to live (for a time) in a shelter’. A journalistic study (Folha de São Paulo, 1999) of 17 young street workers in Sao Paulo City discovered that 6 years after the youth had been initially studied, four were still on the street, two were in a state-run orphanage, eight were in prison and two were dead. Only one of the 17 had experienced ‘positive change’ in her life: as a domestic, she was earning the real equivalent of US$80 a month.

A journalistic (Jornal do Brasil, 2000) follow-up of the 64 initial survivors of the 1993 drive-by shooting that left eight street children dead among the 72 who were sleeping that night in front of Rio’s Candelária Cathedral, suggests equally pessimistic outcomes. Even among youth who had received more national and international attention and assistance than almost any other poor Brazilian street youth, only 19 of the 64 initial survivors were still alive 5 years after the well-publicized massacre! By 2000, 10 of the 19 survivors were in prison, primarily for drug-related offenses. Maria, one of these imprisoned youth, had been awarded a scholarship by a German modeling agency right after the shooting. Just four days before her planned departure for Germany, Maria was arrested for robbery, dashing any hopes for a modeling career. Not long after her release from prison, Maria was again arrested and imprisoned.

Among the nine longer-term survivors, four were working and living 7 years later on the street – among them, Vanessa, dealing drugs, Tiago, living with AIDS, and Rogerio, in a wheelchair, paralyzed in a gang shootout. Sandro do Nascimento, another longer-term Candelária survivor, was murdered by police on 12 June 2001 after carrying out an armed robbery. The other five longer-term Candelária survivors were leading a ‘relatively normal life’ by the turn of the millennium (Jornal do Brasil, 2000): among them, one had been granted asylum by Switzerland after being shot several times by angry Brazilian police for testifying about the Candelária drive-by police shooting. The young man was working in Switzerland, but struggling with severe physical pain from the bullets permanently lodged in his body. One young woman still had no ‘regular’ work, another was married and had children. Elizabeth Cristina de Oliveira Maia, one of the female survivors, was murdered on 26 September 2000, on her way to testify in an appeals hearing of a policeman involved in the 1993 Candelária massacre (CBDD-CA, 2000).

These longitudinal data – Hecht’s and the two journalistic accounts – along with the life stories of the two older Paulista Avenue street workers, Moses and Alessandra – reveal the personal and social challenges that shape young street workers’ lives in Brazil. Such constraints limit to a few negative
alternatives the kinds of childhoods that they can construct between themselves and the adults inside and out of their worlds. The additional structural and organizational parameters on their childhoods include pressure to enter street work at an early age, a life eventually complicated for girls by pregnancy and exacerbated for both genders by very large families of origin – perhaps even above Brazil’s national average – and by little formal education among working youth. Such challenges are complicated by the absence of well-paying entry-level jobs for their adult caretakers, grinding familial poverty, a violent and growing culture of drugs, negative stereotypes about poverty and race and the brutalizing violence associated with, and justified by, these stereotypes. Yet within these structural and organizational constraints, poor youth carve out work spaces, develop work rules and norms, help each other in emergencies and have dreams and aspirations about their futures.

Theorizing about street employment

Presented with the reality of large numbers of poor Brazilian families who cannot survive without their children working, some scholars argue that eliminating street work is not a viable option. Hecht (1998), for example, maintains that ‘discouraging poor urban children in Brazil from working in the street, far from protecting them, will likely weaken their ties to the home’. If poor children can no longer contribute to their family’s support, they could become even more vulnerable to domestic violence. Other studies (see James et al., 1998: 106–7) also support Hecht’s general contention that eliminating child labor could be negative for working children. However, in the case of Brazil, if the government were to make a real commitment to creating entry-level jobs at a living wage for poor adults, and if the country had an urban housing and infrastructure development policy, and an equitable system of land irrigation and distribution – so that families would not desert the countryside for the bloated cities – and a viable system of free public education, then poor families would be able to provide healthy living conditions for themselves and their children. Under such circumstances, keeping a child in school would be an economic benefit rather than a burden. Of course, what such recommendations suggest is that powerful structural realities outside the immediate control of poor families and their children can shape the kinds of childhoods that poor youth and associated adults can create.

A sociology of childhood must seek to describe how different sets of structural realities – for example, the ‘life chances’ associated with being born into one social class rather than another, or the ‘life fate’ of being from one national or ethnic category rather than another – might influence the ability of differentially situated youth to create a childhood. The construction of childhood could be examined as a continuum – with some children,
in some countries, and in some social classes and ethnic/racial categories having relatively fewer structural barriers in constructing a childhood. Within this continuum, the researcher and theorist must keep in mind that the very high probability of early death from violence or from preventable diseases critically limits the possibility of poor youth in developing countries creating any childhood at all. For those children who survive the first years of life, their childhood options continue to be shaped by poverty, hunger, disease and violence – factors that this study has illustrated limit to a few undesirable options the childhoods that poor youth can work out. Yet, at the same time, within such limitations, poor Brazilian children still create modes of interaction and survival, a fact demonstrated for a Philadelphia urban area in Elijah Anderson’s (1999) *Code of the Street*. Our own study has shown that poor street youth create a working persona within, and in terms of, the structural constraints of their lives. We have demonstrated that working youth take time to play, to dream, to plan – sometimes supporting and sometimes competing with one another at work and play. We concur with Elijah Anderson’s (1999) research that the worlds created by youth cannot be separated from the conditions that make their survival modes available and necessary.

**Notes**

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1. It is common for poor families to give their children names they have heard in US films on television (i.e. ‘Anderson’) or of internationally recognized musicians (i.e. ‘Michael’), hence our use of some such pseudonyms in this article.
2. Rape and other forms of excess force are common in police custody, but the two young women did not disclose any such police violence to the interviewer. Questioning the girls further about what else the police might have done in custody could have victimized the young girls even more. For those interested in how field researchers navigate secrecy, danger and ethics see Huggins and Glebbeek (forthcoming).
3. Hearing of a robbery in progress, police surrounded the bus while Nascimento held passengers at gunpoint for several hours. After overpowering Nascimento, police left for the hospital with their captive still alive; Nascimento arrived dead. Autopsy reports later revealed that the boy had been strangled to death on the way to the hospital (Human Rights Watch, 2001).
References


