

Life Trajectories of Children and Adolescents Living on the Streets of Rio de Janeiro

Irene Rizzini

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, (CIESPI) The International Center for Research on Childhood

Udi Mandel Butler

The International Center for Research on Childhood (CIESPI)

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the research findings from a study of street children in Rio de Janeiro which was undertaken by the authors together with a team of street educators. The paper highlights the children's life trajectories in terms of their own perceptions and representations and addresses key themes, such as the family, the process of going to the street and day to day living on the street. It discusses relationships with regard to the formation of groups and children's interaction with adults on the street, and the processes of identity formation on the street which includes the perception of self and of others. The children's perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of the street and their hopes for the future are discussed.

Keywords: Brazil; street life; self-identity

Introduction

This paper is based on a study undertaken by the authors between October 2001 and January 2002. It was entitled: *Children and Adolescents Situated on the Street in Rio de Janeiro– Weaving Their Stories*.¹ The study aimed to record the routes followed by children and adolescents on the streets, the people with whom they established or maintained links, details of their daily lives, their levels of mobility, and their sense of identity.

The research team included street educators from the *Rio Child Network* which works directly with street children. Their experience of working with street children was valuable both in formulating the themes of the research as well as in guiding the approach to children on the street. Altogether 67 youngsters living on the streets aged between 8 and 18 years of age were interviewed. Forty-five interviews were carried out on the street and 15 took place inside shelters for street children.

Varied Life Routes and Relationship Links

The Family

When we discuss children and adolescents who leave home for the street, we wonder who the families of these boys and girls are and how they are structured. Should we really speak of the "breakdown" of families when we are perhaps witnessing new family forms and a new social structure arising from late capitalism? Global indicators show that family structure is changing. Families today tend to be smaller than before; in Brazil, in particular, a decline in family size has been evident over four decades. In Brazil, female-headed households are also on the increase; in 1992, they comprised 21.9 percent of households but this statistic increased to 26 percent in 1996. Smaller families have generally led to improved material conditions for the children, but more isolation for the family, since both parents have to work to maintain an improved standard of living. An increasing migration of families to the cities leads to more insular nuclear family units and less opportunity to draw on the extended family in times of need, as before (Rizzini 2001).

These changes to the structure of the family in Latin America have been exacerbated by a restructuring of the economy. In particular, the structural adjustment programs of the IMF and World Bank have put extra pressure on parents who try to adhere to traditional family models. Clearly though, there is no single ideal type of family and society has a moral idealization of "family." Different kinds of family operate in Brazil; some of these may involve the "circulation" of the child through the households of relatives or non-related adults, who act as surrogate parents (Fonseca 1994).

Swapping families, swapping homes

The stories of children on the street contain repetitive episodes of ruptures in their lives, in particular the rupturing of affective ties with parents and relatives. Painful ruptures feature father or mother, step-mother or step-father, grandparents, aunts and uncles or adults bearing no blood or marital relation. The fluctuating relationships are mirrored in the youngsters' narratives of their constant movements between localities and communities:

When you were small who did you live with?

I lived with my dad and my mum, but my dad was arrested and my mum abandoned me in some woman's house, some friend of hers.

How old were you?

I was two.

So who raised you?

It was an orphanage; this woman put me in an orphanage.

You stayed in the orphanage until what age?

Up to ten.

Are you still in touch with your dad?

No, he died.

And your mum, are you in touch with her?

I know where she is, but I am not in touch with her, no I... I don't like her.

How do you know where she is?

Because my dad, before he died, he took me there. But I didn't like staying there; he wanted me to stay there but I didn't want to. So I went away, I came to the street (Roger, 15 years).

Say something about your life from when you were born. Who did you live with? How was it?

My life was very messed up because I never stopped in the same place. I was always swapping family, swapping home. I was with my mum, then I was in my step-father's house, then suddenly I was in my dad's house. I was always raised this way.

Why did that happen?

I don't know. I don't remember very well what happened. I only remember that I was always swapping family. Damn! That is why I think that now I am not well adapted to being with my mum (Roni, 16 years).

The difficulties that youngsters experience in establishing family relationships that are solid, continuous, and lasting seem to be the catalyst for their leaving home. Once on the streets, they create other ways of relating to people. They develop important competencies for surviving on the street such as quickly becoming part of a group of youngsters who are already street wise.

It is significant, when considering the family, to note how the father and mother are perceived. Mothers were very often idealized by the youngsters we interviewed:

Because half of the people here don't have mothers, so we survive like a family on the street. A family that we didn't have and we want to have amongst them, with someone to talk to, to dialogue with, the majority of girls [here] everything that happens they come and sit, cry, talk, say that if only their mums had been here. So we who have a mother begin to feel sorry for her, we know that when you lose your mum you don't have anyone else in the world (Filomena, 15 years).

Youngsters have an idealized vision of "the mother" even when they describe their own mothers as negligent or violent. They speak of their mothers admiringly, as if punishment given was deserved, or they equate the position of mother as endowed with the right to behave in the way in which their mothers behaved.

Have you suffered any form of violence?

Ah, no; no form of violence; only my mother has hit me. She used to hit me a lot. Just that, nothing else. My mum was cool. (Camarada, 15 years).

On the other hand, the father is not idealized in this way. The father is, more often than not, conspicuous by his absence. In 60 interviews, only ten youngsters

reported that they maintained some kind of relationship with their father. Thirteen said that their father had died and 20 percent of the children said that they had not been in touch with their father for a long time.

The question arises as to whether the family should be held liable for the presence of children on the streets. It is easy to ascribe negligence, lack of supervision and disaffection by families as causes for the street child phenomenon. But this would be too simplistic an answer. In fact, the children attribute their leaving home to many other reasons. One prominent reason is a desire for freedom, a desire that reflects the youngsters' perceptions that they feel overly confined in their homes and subject to too much control by their families. Parents agree that they keep youngsters under tight control but maintain that this is for their own protection; it is meant to keep them from harm in their neighborhoods and out of trouble. Youngsters to whom this is not sufficiently or affectionately explained, however, construe the control as a form of personal imprisonment.

Rizzini and Barker have devised a notion of *support bases*; these counteract social toxicity and are crucial elements in the wholesome development of youngsters. Support bases are formal and informal community and family maintenance systems that enable children and adolescents to develop their abilities and potential. Support bases offer secure environments where children and adolescents may build friendships and affective ties which contribute to their cognitive, emotional, cultural and vocational development (Rizzini, Barker and Cassaniga 2000). If support bases such as these are not provided, children and adolescents will gravitate towards environments that have more personal appeal.

The Process of Going to the Street

In most cases, leaving home for the street is a gradual process. The child begins to frequent the street during the day but returns home at night, eventually spending a night on the street. This process enables the child to become used to the new surroundings, to make new friendships and eventually to become habituated to street life:

I came to the street when I was 12, but I stay more at home. I stay two days on the street and one at home (Bolinho, 19 years).

I went from the street to my home, from home to the street, but I spent more time on the street. If I stayed on the street, I stayed a long while, about six years, I stayed only two years at home. I went back to the street... (Jonas, 18 years).

The youngsters we interviewed related a constant flux in their lives between the street and their homes. They would go to the street to earn money, hang out with friends, or as an escape when things became too turbulent or confined at home. Only six youngsters reported definitive ruptures with people at home that led them directly from home to the street. The fields of influence at home and those on the street therefore exert their forces differently at different times, but the influence of

the street tends to grow, particularly for youngsters with fragile affective ties at home.

Our research showed that about half of the youngsters interviewed had their first experience of working or sleeping on the street, during middle childhood, i.e. when they were between seven and 11 years old. This is the age when children begin to internalize references other than those of the family and close friends. It is at this age too, that family and community support bases appear not to meet increasing needs and demands of the child. A quarter of the youngsters interviewed had their first street experience between 12 and 15 years old, i.e., in early adolescence when the formation of groups and pairs is clearly present.

The question of whether children and adolescents are prepared to go into entirely uncharted territory was investigated by including a question during interviews about whether youngsters had known someone who lived on the street before they went there. Forty-eight percent (29) replied that they had. Of these, 19 said that the person they knew came from the area in which they lived. This knowledge appears to be very important in the gradual move to the street. Knowing that friends, relatives, or other youngsters have been, or are living on the street, and that they can be economically independent, have fun and hang out with their peers in an unsupervised environment, proves a very important ingredient in decisions to leave home for the street. Once on the street, a youngster will establish new friendships which enhance personal confidence while he or she gains familiarity in this space.

I already had some acquaintances, some friends of mine, so one of the dudes said: 'Hey, there are some dudes who hang out there in the Pedra de Guaratiba, you want to go?' so I went there. I stayed on the street for a long time then I'd go back home (Roger, 12 years).

I started going to the street selling sweets, when I was nine... then at ten I stopped selling sweets and got more involved with the boys and girls [there]...(Luiza, 15 years).

In one third of the cases, youngsters mentioned work as the motivation for going to the street. Friends already working on the streets encouraged this. In at least 10 percent of cases youngsters had gone to the street with a parent and after the parent had died, they had found the street to assume more personal significance.

Youngsters reported that, in contrast to the confined and restrictive spaces of the home and the community, the street appears to be a carefree open space where one can indulge in all that appears to be forbidden elsewhere. The street is, therefore, a permissive space allowing personal "freedom." Youngsters also place value on non-interference with the freedom of others, sometimes referred to as the "*não alugaço*," not lecturing or "being a drag." This value reflects the absence of adult figures in supervisory roles on the street.

I thought the street was good because you can go where you want to, when we want to. At home you couldn't do that (Andrade, 15 years).

But at home... I don't really like staying at home, because she [mum] confines me too much. I wanted to go out and play... (Bill, 12 years).

Daily Life on the Street

The Street Group

After arriving on the street, youngsters begin to behave in ways that are indicative of a "street culture." The new lifestyle is learned from those more experienced on the street. It includes the formation of street groups, engaging in work activities, and sometimes drug taking and petty theft. Interviews revealed that street groups tend to be relatively small, between four and six individuals. Before 1993, large groups of children and adolescents used to roam the city center. In 1993, however, seven young people who were sleeping at the church of Candelária, in the heart of Rio's business district, were murdered by a death squad that included off-duty policemen (*cf.* Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1994). Youngsters on the street marked this off as a significant date in reducing the size of their street groups and in marking a transition for children and adolescents from a relatively non-violent existence on the street to one where fear was a constant. The smaller groups of youngsters reflected an adaptation to this violent mien; they were able to move more easily and less conspicuously through the city. At night, however, they still gathered in larger groups to sleep as a form of protection against the possible "nastiness" of the street.

Sometimes we stayed with other guys, with other girls, sometimes we stayed alone. But when we went to sleep, we all slept together, everyone like this, side by side (Raul, 17 years).

Here I have more friends, you know. When I sleep I always have someone awake looking out for me, seeing if someone is going to abuse me (Filomena, 15 years).

The group also appears to treat its youngest members differently, with the older ones protecting the younger ones. The experience of the street is very different according to the individual's age; the older one gets the harder it is to survive on the street.

On the street it's good when you are small, but from 15, 16 up, things get even worse, because the police hit more, they think we are bigger and should take the stick for the little ones. So they get a big one and hit him, the little one they just give a little slap and send them away, the big ones they put inside the van and break them. The big ones take the stick for the little ones (Aldair, 17 years).

Although grouping together can be seen as a defense strategy, relations within the group can also be strained at times. Arguments and fights between youngsters can

force an individual out of the group. Many speak of solidarity and brotherhood on the street, and of the group being like a family, but there is also an element of distrust within street groups. The co-existence of these sentiments highlights the precariousness of surviving on the street, of having to remain in groups for safety, fun and affection, but also of having to bear the constant struggle and possibility of rupture and betrayal within the group.

The group is also subject to a series of external forces that threaten constantly to fragment it. Groups are very fluid in their make-up and youngsters circulate through many groups throughout their stay on the street. This is due partly to the high mobility of the youngsters themselves, a topic we will address in the next section, but also to their constant removal by the council authorities and their occasional internment in youth correction institutions.

Gender

Gender is an important differential on the street. Girls feel very protected in groups since their existence on the street appears to be even more precarious than that of boys. Interviews showed that "being a woman" on the street is frightening. Of the 51 youngsters who answered the question "on the street, is it better to be a boy or a girl?" 30 replied, "a boy." This is due to the supposed greater fragility of girls in situations of violence and danger.

It is better being a man, because women go through many hassles. People come and try to feel them up when they are asleep; people coming back late from the dance all high, they abuse, grab them up (Aldair, 17 years).

It is better being a boy because the girls suffer more consequences... there are men who abuse them... (Luiza, 15 years)a

In order to cope with this perceived disadvantage, girls adopt very particular ways of behaving on the street. One of the most distinctive of these is that they dress to appear more like boys. It is common to see girls on the street with their hair cut short or even shaved, wearing baseball caps and baggy clothes.

Many girls, if you looked at them, you'd say it was a bunch of boys, all with their heads shaved, wearing a cap, with men's clothes, all talking slang, all cocky...(Luiza, 15 years).

When I stopped on the street, for you to have an idea, tio (uncle), during the day I stayed as a girl but at night I dressed like a man. I always wore a cap, a big coat, long trousers, like an urchin, if you saw me you would say I was a boy... (Cássia, 17 years).

Only eight youngsters of the 51 who answered the question, thought it was better to be a girl on the street, and of these, five were boys. The boys' motives were related to the ease with which girls were perceived to acquire things on the street.

On the street? A girl, because with a girl, the women don't get scared. When a boy goes to ask for something the Mrs already thinks he is going to steal something... (Andrade, 15 years).

During fieldwork we also tried to establish the nature of the affective relationships youngsters established on the street so as to map the possible support networks that they relied on. Twenty-two youngsters reported having fixed partners on the street. Of the 16 girls interviewed, nine had children, a disproportionately high number in relation to the norm for Brazilian teenagers. On the whole, however, the girls appeared to have strong and stable affective ties with their children.

Questions about sex led boys and girls to show great concern about privacy and the difficulties of having sexual relations on the street.

Fear and Insecurity: Adults

In their accounts of street experiences, night-time appears as the most threatening period; this a time of danger and fear where youngsters are most vulnerable to many forms of violence. Although they frequently mention personal freedom as their prime incentive for going to the street, youngsters soon discover that this is paired with a fearful existence. Their fears center on the police and on being set on fire at night.

It is dangerous on the street to lie down in the early hours, without knowing what tomorrow will bring, because there are people with evil minds and good minds... (Wando, 15 years).

When it's time to sleep it is really bad. I am afraid of sleeping on the street and suddenly someone coming and setting us on fire or doing something... (Alba, 17 years).

The military police, the municipal guard and private security guards pervade the narratives of fear of children and adolescents on the streets. Security guards, in particular, appear to be greatly feared and are categorized as the main "enemies" of youngsters on the street. Encounters with guards who have threatened death or physical violence sometimes underlie the relocation of youngsters from one locality to another or from the streets altogether.

[There are] many wrongs on the street, the guards chasing you, taking our things away, hitting us, aggression. When V. is on duty he disses us. He is a guard that we have here, he works with a gun. He said I would turn into compost the next time he catches me here so late. That is, that I am going to die, right? (Aldair, 17 years).

I was passing by on the street and a policeman mistook me for someone and started to diss me, gave me a big smack here on the head with his truncheon... the policeman disses, saying you are a bum, wanting to diss us...(Andrade, 15 years).

Drugs

Drugs are an important issue for youngsters on the street. In the popular imagination, the image of the street child has become one that is often inseparable from the pot of glue. Of those we interviewed, 27 mentioned having used some kind of drug on the street. When the question was posed indirectly, by asking what the most common drugs on the street were, all youngsters replied. Marijuana and thinners were said to be the most popular street drugs; each was mentioned by 17 youngsters. The next drugs mentioned were cocaine (four responses) and glue (four responses). Cigarettes, the only legal drug, were mentioned by ten youngsters. The popularity of marijuana was attributed to the sense of relaxation and relief from daily tension and conflict that it instilled. The other popular drug, thinner—pronounced *tchiner* in Brazil—is a solvent-based paint stripper. It has mild hallucinogenic properties similar to shoe glue, but is much cheaper than glue.

Earning and Spending Money

The street attracts youngsters with its offer of economic independence. It is possible to obtain money in a variety of ways and there are also many avenues of consumption. Youngsters can earn money by shining shoes; selling sweets, flowers, or peanuts; juggling at the traffic lights; carrying shopping bags at the market; parking cars; begging and stealing. A third of the youngsters said that they buy food with their income. Although they were given food on the street by passers-by, or left-overs from bars and restaurants, they were able to buy more elaborate meals with their earnings, from restaurants and fast food outlets. Twelve youngsters said that they bought drugs with the money they earned and ten of them said that they bought clothing. Seven reportedly helped out their families and eight mentioned that they had spent it on their own entertainment.

I used to spend money on drugs, marijuana, cocaine, thinner. Today I am getting to be a young lady... so I try to avoid it. I buy things for me, clothes for me to wear (Sandra, 15 years).

Sometimes some women went by and we asked them until we got enough money together to buy what I wanted... clothes, crème, because I didn't like being on the street without anything, like, without having a bath, so I bought things for me... (Alba, 17 years).

Often money was used to buy fashionable clothes or items for beauty products or personal hygiene. Sometimes it was used to pay for hotel rooms for a break from the street, for a bath, or for sex with a partner. Consumption on the street was, therefore, a symbolic statement related to a sense of aesthetics as much as it was related to survival. As we shall see when addressing the theme of identity and subjectivity, these are significant ways of asserting one's identity as a "citizen," of being "like anyone else;" they are strategies for maintaining self-esteem.

Leisure

The beach cropped up repeatedly in the narratives of the youngsters as a key place for leisure. It was seen as a free, open and democratic space, with unbounded

opportunities for fun. Rio's other public spaces were also seen as arenas of entertainment: its squares, football pitches and parks, as well as the water fountains. "Having fun" appears to be fundamental to the notion of freedom that is sought on the street and it is encapsulated in the much heard term "zoar"- to fool around. Fooling around is essentially a social activity and one that researchers constantly observed the youngsters to engage in. For some youngsters this fooling around is equated with drug consumption. In some cases, fooling about and boisterous acts of physical violence between the youngsters are virtually indistinguishable.

What is 'fooling around'?

It's a lot of things, playing, throwing things at each other, flying at each other (Geisa, 14 years).

Fun on the street is glue and thinner, only that, nothing else (Aldair, 17 years).

Researchers found that youngsters engaged in many forms of indoor entertainment. They went in significant numbers to *funk dances*, for instance, which are very popular amongst Carioca youth. Funk dances, or *baile funk*, happen every weekend in *favelas* throughout Rio; and until recently funk dances were frequented primarily by those who live in the *favelas*. They attract thousands of youngsters, take place in large community halls and comprise of loud sound-systems and DJ's who play funk- a very simple and catchy jingle often with very erotic lyrics and matching choreography- to a background of thumping drum beats. The taste for the funk dances and the funk culture surrounding it, for the youngsters interviewed was reflected in the number of songs they sang during the research; most of the songs referred to the drug *Comandos*, that is, drug gangs and to sex.

Look uncle, I get money the whole week to enjoy the pagode [another form of music and dance] there on Praça XV, there in Mr Zé's bar. Every Friday there is pagode there. I save all week and when Friday comes I go there. Even if it is just to have soft drink and eat a burger, but samba is in my feet. It is damn good! (Sandra, 15 years).

We would argue that the funk dances are important factors in the lives of these youngsters (Rizzini, Barker *et al.* 2001). For youngsters on the street, funk dances appear as democratic spaces of entertainment where they can interact with others from varied social backgrounds. The fact that they can mingle comfortably and feel part of this phenomenon is a positive sign that their identity and experiences are not restricted to the world of the street but show many continuities with Carioca youths, or at least with Carioca youths from the *favelas*. Similar continuities are evident in other leisure activities and spaces, as when the street youngsters frequented shopping centers, played football and arcade games, visited theme parks and the cinema.

Mobility

Being on the street is inevitably associated with a high degree of mobility. Even if children and adolescents have particular areas as points of reference, they will rarely remain solely within this region. It might be necessary to move for economic reasons, for instance to a place where it is easier to obtain resources, or for reasons of safety, for instance to escape personal threat. There may be better opportunities for leisure elsewhere in the city. The police may remove youngsters when they commit crimes or the council might remove them to shelters for street children in Rio.

This constant flux of children and adolescents, from home to the street, from the street to different parts of the city, and to shelters or correctional institutions, recurs for as long as youngsters are on the street. This perpetual motion hampers research since it becomes extremely difficult to map the life routes of youngsters from one day to the next. Personal narratives remain fragmented and difficult to piece together in any orderly or chronological fashion. Life stories are narrated in a non-linear and discontinuous way.

Leaving the Streets

The constant circulation of children and adolescents from their homes to the streets and to several types of institutions is punctuated by shorter or longer stays in shelters, *abrigos*, which are open to them mainly when they are in need of protection. They circulate a great deal through the existing shelters. Adolescents who commit any kind of infraction are placed in correctional institutions.

There is an important difference between leaving the street to enter a shelter, and being removed from the street and placed in a shelter or a correctional institution. The first situation, but not the second, entails an act of personal agency. Entering a shelter is rarely the end of a career on the street. Instead, there is a constant circulation of youngsters between many different shelters and the street. Leaving the street to stay in an institution driven by rules and time-tables is not easy and the restrictions, when compared with the freedom enjoyed on the street, are often cited as reasons for leaving a shelter.

Most educators working with children and adolescents on the street emphasize that the desire to leave the street should come from the youngster. However, council authorities do exert pressure through a program of "removal" (*recolhimento*) from the streets. Youngsters on the street sometimes viewed the research team with suspicion, or even fear, when they were mistaken for council workers who carry out such removals, especially since some of the researchers were also employed in this capacity when not engaged in the research.

Lucchini (1998) distinguishes three types of exit from the street: an active exit, an exit because of the depletion of resources or because of inertia, and a forced exit because of removal or expulsion. The active exit entails a conscious choice by a youngster: to leave the street and take an alternative course; it derives from the path his or her life has taken on the street. When the exit stems from an exhaustion of resources or inertia, a dead end has been reached on the street, where resources for survival, mobility and sociability have become depleted. This

form of exit differs from an active exit since the youngster doesn't have a project or a viable alternative to the street. This kind of exit, therefore, is marked by its instability and by many returns to the street. The third form of exit occurs because of forced removal, such as prolonged institutionalization or imprisonment, and as such, is no real exit but only a temporary break.

Youngsters also take temporary leave of absence from the streets. Sometimes this may have been because of a threat by the police, security guards, members of the drug *comandos* or other youngsters.² In other cases, the youngster may just need a break from the constant stress of street life, somewhere to rest for a while, to have a good meal and to get cleaned up. In these cases, youngsters state that leaving the street is only a temporary measure.

I wanted to get out of the street for a while...; I only wanted to go there to eat and sleep, afterwards I left [the shelter]. Eat, have a bath and get out. I slept there a day, two days, then I jumped out again, I went to the street again. Just like that (Roger, 15 years).

Some youngsters' narratives revealed that they had been removed from the street because of an infraction of the law. While the Law³ has a series of "socio-educational" provisions for the internment of youngsters, they refer to these institutions as "prisons" and as particularly violent and unpleasant places. Those who had been interned in such institutions related stories of physical and emotional abuse. They told of a regime that is contradictory to children's rights in the official Statute.⁴

Identity and Subjectivity

In examining the subjectivity and the identity construction of youngsters on the street, two interconnected perceptions were considered:

First, *how did they perceive the street* before and after dwelling there? This question included their perception of the street as a site of liberty and autonomy as well as one of fear.

Secondly, *how did they perceive themselves and others?* This question was underpinned by awareness that identities are appropriated on the street; that diverse strategies are used by children and adolescents to strengthen their self-esteem; and that values and dreams for the future contain clues to self-perception.

Perception of the Street

Since the children and adolescents had not been researched prior to their time on the streets, an attempt was made to discover, retrospectively, how they had imagined the street to be while they were still settled at home. The question was raised as to whether they had friends or parents who frequented the street at that time. Insight was sought into how a youngsters' vision of the street changes once he or she has lived there for a period of time and the boys and girls were asked to give their views on the good and the bad aspects of the street.

Freedom

Twenty youngsters out of 57 mentioned "freedom" or "play" as their key motivation to go to the street. In these cases, the street was imagined as a free and fun space where resources for survival are easy to find. The chance to live among other boys and girls, to fool around, to hang out with youngsters of the opposite sex and go to parties and consume legal and illegal drugs- all in an environment without the supervision of adults- are extremely attractive, especially in the urban center where opportunities to have fun are never far away. Many researchers have commented on this issue of "freedom," ever present in the voices of these boys and girls. As Vogel and Mello (1991, 145) explain:

On the street there is no right time to do anything, and one is not forced to do or stop doing anything. To live on the street means to have no boss or father. Because of this, beyond attaining in time and space a liberty inconceivable to home children, the children are also able to use their bodies in the manner they please, through sexual experiences and drug consumption.

Our research shows the importance of freedom as personal autonomy, something that has been reiterated by others (Hecht 1998; Gregori 2000). Personal freedom, in the form of escape from adult restrictions and reprimands is greatly valued; as the boys and girls termed it: *alugação* or *jogação na cara*, a slang that can be roughly translated as "being a drag" or "lecturing" and "rubbing it in your face."

For you, what is good on the street?

Freedom. On the street you don't hear what you hear at home all the time. There isn't any rubbing in your face. Sometimes on the street you could be hungry, you know that you are risking your life but even so you know that in a certain way you are free; you can think what you want, you can do what you want, no matter what the circumstance, you can do the things you wish (Sandra, 15 years).

At the same time, parallel to this idealization of the street we also noted a process of disillusionment, especially through living in the street for a while:

Did you imagine the street to be a certain way?

It's a lot worse. A lot worse because we go hungry every so often... if we ask for something, some people swear at us, tell us to get a job... (Roger, 15 years).

How did you imagine the street to be?

Ah, I imagined it to be everything... that we got things easily, everything easy, walking around all smart. I imagined it would be that way- that it was cool. When I saw what it was like only some things are cool. Even your friends sometimes want to hit you.

Research revealed many statements where the perception of the street and its possible advantages change once a child becomes an adolescent. Adolescents find it difficult to obtain resources, especially by begging, since many passers-by are scared when approached. The police are also more inclined to see adolescents as 'thieves' and to treat them more brutally than younger children. The narratives of many adolescents reveal a certain weariness with street life and the possibilities of leisure it offers.

In answering the question "what is good on the street?" 26 of the girls and boys cited freedom, autonomy, leisure and drugs. Several of them mentioned friendship as an important factor. But what do they consider friendship to be, and how are friendship bonds created on the street?

The children and adolescents related examples of strong friendships that had been created on the street and of groups which had lived together for many years. In some cases, friendships had previously existed in the community of origin and this had facilitated initiation onto the street. Researchers observed that friends helped each other on the street and for this reason consider the term "groups of street children" to be inaccurate. Observation revealed the existence of differently sized groups of friends who *param*— that is, literally "stop" or "hang out" together and who travel through different spaces where they can meet other groups of friends. The larger group is normally sought at night for protection since youngsters then feel most vulnerable. For children and adolescents who live on the street, this experience of friendship and group bonding gives a sense of protection and support and perhaps provides a feeling of social belonging that was absent in their former relationships with their families. Perhaps it is because of this that many affirm that they feel safer on the street than at home. Perhaps too, this facilitates the acceptance of children into groups on the street and the easy formation of friendships.

Here where I stay everyone is a friend. If a police car comes by to get us, everybody goes, because here we are united. If someone wins something it is shared amongst everybody because half the people here have no mother, so we survive like a family on the street (Filomena, 15 years).

In some cases children and adolescents were found who did not like to walk around in a group but preferred being alone as they walked through different parts of the city. This was, however, exceptional.

I don't really like grouping together, I don't like it. I prefer being by myself. I like friendship but it depends on the friendship... because grouping up causes many problems (Alba, 17 years).

Problems of being in a group are often related to the perceptions and actions of passers-by and the authorities.

"Nastiness" and "dissing:" violence and fear

A surprising finding in interviews with the children and adolescents was their frequent response that the street didn't have anything to offer that they thought was good. Twenty of the 30 youngsters who answered the question: "what is good on the street?" answered "nothing." These answers were found to be associated with a vision of the street as violent and as a place of suffering. Twenty-six of the 43 youngsters who answered the question: "what is bad on the street?" mentioned violence. Other answers were: hunger (six answers), drugs (six answers), the police (eight answers) and prejudice (seven answers).

What do you think is good on the street?

The street has nothing good.

What is nothing?

Nothing good, nothing is good on the street, right!

And what is bad on the street?

A lot of things.

Like what?

People like, doing violence with the people on the street, people who like dissing. Sometimes there is nothing to eat and you have to stay hungry all day, that's it... (Ruanda, 13 years).

The slang term *esculachar*, here translated as the English/American slang *dissing* short for showing disrespect, is commonly used to describe a form of physical, symbolic or moral violence. This slang encapsulates the action of being hit or verbally abused and it was very present in the voices we heard. We also noted that the police were often the perpetrators of this *dissing*, and they, as well as the unarmed Municipal Guard were greatly feared. Many statements referred to violence suffered at the hands of the police and for various reasons, even for just being on the street. Of the 30 children who responded to the question of whether they had suffered some form of violence, all affirmed that they had. Twenty-four of them mentioned the perpetrators: 15 were policemen, three were private security guards and six were other children. The issue of street children being subjected to violence is a much-discussed theme in the national and international literature. In Brazil, for at least the last 20 years, a great number of children have reported cases of enormous cruelty. This is a matter which demands more attention and urgent measures by child rights organizations.

Perception of the Self and Other

Researchers observed that boys and girls living on the street possess a range of options when fashioning identities on the street. They are aware of socially constructed images of "street children," such as that of the "poor kid" or "young thief" and they adopt these, as required, to serve as survival mechanisms. Gregori terms this exercise *viração*, which can be translated as "getting by," or "making do;" it is a colloquial term that refers to obtaining resources for survival and particularly through informal means. For boys and girls who live on the street, this means something more than survival. This strategy is a way of manipulating "symbolic and identitary resources," that "communicate and position oneself to the city and its various characters" (Gregori 2000, 31).

"Pickpocket," "thief," "marginal" and "glue-sniffer:" the prejudice

Research revealed that, although children and adolescents on the street internalized some of society's prejudicial referents and used these as insulting epithets when speaking to each other, they were significantly sensitive to prejudice. They responded, almost unanimously, that they had a sense of being discriminated against. Twenty-nine of the 34 youngsters who spoke directly on the matter said that other people feared them, believing them to be thieves. Only three youngsters said that people had positive perceptions of them and these were children below 13 years of age who worked, but did not live, on the street.

It was notable that sometimes the fear induced on others was appropriated by youngsters if they were engaged in crime. But at other times researchers observed that although boys and girls were aware that many of them robbed people, they felt hurt and discriminated against when taken for "real robbers." An assertion by members of the public that youngsters were robbers could lead them into robbery since, in the eyes of the other, the youngster was already a thief:

[These people that pass by here] what would you like them to think about you?

Think about us? That we would go and rob them. They become scared so then we really go and rob them. Because they are scared if we get close to them so they go: 'Here take everything!' So we go and take it. If they didn't get scared, nobody would go after them (Andrade, 15 years).

Not all youngsters who experience prejudice want to show that they are as bad as people believe. Commonly, there is a great necessity to project oneself as equal to others. The children and adolescents repeatedly expressed a strong wish to be treated just like anyone else. Of 25 youngsters who were asked how they would like others to think of them, twelve answered "good things," five said they wanted to have "understanding" and four wanted to be treated like a "person" or a "citizen." Only one youngster showed a desire to be seen as a "bandit."

Even though you are living on the street you don't stop being a person, you don't stop being a human being. You are living on the street but in many cases you have an "educação" [education or more specifically a moral conduct or upbringing] (Alba, 17 years).

Values and Self-Esteem

Home, work, family and study

While on the street, youngsters harness a series of values and strategies in order to maintain self-esteem so as to meet the necessity of being respected and treated like any other citizen. Although society has a prejudiced view of the street as a place devoid of values and morals, our research, like that of other researchers, has found precisely the opposite (Castro 1997; Hecht 1998; Swart 1988). Almost all the youngsters valued the same things as society in general: being respected, having

their own homes, work, families and study as a form of social mobility. Although the projects of boys and girls who live on the street are normally linked to their immediate survival and security, their dreams are frequently related to overcoming the prejudices they suffer in their daily life, and in particular they dream of doing so by acquiring goods and status valued by society.

The bad path, the vice and drug dealing

It was clear at times that the children on the street were aware of having adopted habits that are loathed by society at large. Many children referred to their life on the street as "the bad path," and this was frequently related to their use of drugs. Our observation revealed that youngsters equated the moment of "real" initiation into "street culture" with their first experience with a drug. The moment of smoking a first joint or sniffing thinner, marked a firm step away from family authority and one into personal autonomy where you became responsible for your own actions. Youngsters referred, at times, to life on the street as a "vice," a difficult habit to break, something hard to leave once one had become used to it.

In some cases the drug traffic influenced the myriad of identities of some of the boys and girls. Very few were directly involved with drug trafficking gangs but the territoriality of the drug gangs, the *comandos*, exerted an influence over their lives and over the way in which they saw themselves. Drug trafficking gangs and the various demarcations of territory were clearly present on the street as well as in the institutions. The association of a boy with a certain area would inevitably imply a link with a specific *comando* although this would not necessarily be perceptible in other relationships.

Conclusion

Identity and subjectivity have to do with the way in which we orient ourselves in the world and how we understand our place within it. Together with these boys and girls who have made the street their primary space of survival, we tried to understand how and with what they identify; what strategies they follow to maintain self-esteem; and their values and dreams for the future.

The children and adolescents perceive the street as offering the possibility of protection, release and freedom in contrast to families and communities which they conceive of as repressive, confining, full of conflicts and violence and characterized by fractured affective ties. The narratives of the youngsters generated portrayals of two worlds where affection, security and opportunities for wholesome development appeared impossible- the worlds of the home and of the street.

Despite this, street observations revealed that the youngsters in their process of self-affirmation adopted socializing and survival strategies on the street; they clustered in groups, earned and spent money, had fun and interrelated with each other and with adults. We suggest that what unites the children and adolescents, who come from different family environments and who enter the street for quite diverse reasons, is the lack of tutelary attention from responsible adults in their home settings. We could say that these boys and girls share an experience of poverty, exclusion and prejudice, that they live in precarious circumstances where a

lack of affection and feeling protected and secure, probably pushed them away from their homes and communities. As a consequence, they moved from the nucleus of the family to an urban space in search of survival, protection, leisure and freedom.

Interviews with these girls and boys showed that the journey to the street brings the lives of these boys and girls close to danger, fear and violence. We outlined various factors that are associated with this kind of life; in particular we emphasized the experience of growing up predominantly without the care of an adult. We heard, with sadness, that this route left many boys and girls without a perspective for their future, unable to remember anything good that had happened to them in their lives.

On the other hand, we witnessed, with hope, the instances of solidarity, creativity and ability to overcome difficult situations of the boys and girls. United through the experience of discrimination which they encounter daily, a large number of them showed a strong desire to be "normal," that is, like any other youngster. In their quest for acceptance by those who are indifferent, or who despise or belittle them, i.e., the passers-by, the police, shop-keepers, society in general, the boys and girls related many ways in which they maintain their self-esteem. This manifests itself in how they take care of themselves– how they dress, what they eat– and in the way they conduct their affective relations and in what they dream of for their future.

Endnotes

1. The study, funded by the Swiss NGO Terre des Homes, was commissioned by the newly founded Rede Rio Criança– Rio Child Network– an initiative that is attempting to integrate the ideas, experiences and actions of 13 organizations that work with children's rights in Rio de Janeiro.
2. In Rio de Janeiro there is an expression currently in use: *children in exile*, which refers to cases in which children or adolescents say that they cannot go back to their homes or communities for fear of being killed.
3. The Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, July 13 1990.
4. Ibid.

Irene Rizzini is a Professor and a researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Director of The International Center for Research on Childhood (CIESPI). Professor Rizzini is the current president elect of Childwatch International Research Network. She is the author of several books about children in Brazil.

Udi Mandel Butler is a researcher at The International Center for Research on Childhood (CIESPI), in association with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Butler is involved in action research projects at CESPI and is currently working on his Doctorate at the University of London, Goldsmith College, UK.

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