

Working Kids on Paulista Avenue

Martha K. Huggins

Department of Sociology

Union College

Schenectady, New York 12308 USA

Sandra Rodrigues

New York, New York

**ABSTRACT**

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In six weeks of field research on fourteen poor youth who sell services or products on Sao Paulo, Brazil's opulent Paulista Avenue, we explored their work, play, and aspirations, and childhood outcomes. Classifying the twelve youngest youth according to their work--as "squeegee" windshield washers or "sweets" candy and gum sellers--we describe their technologies, financial expenditures, earnings, and work lives. Comparing these twelve younger youth to the two older workers who supervised them, along with the few Brazilian longitudinal accounts of street youth, we seek to understand the longer-term prospects for young street workers. Placing our findings within two dominant theoretical contexts--the micro interactionist 'new paradigm' and the structural sociology perspective--we explore the relevance of these perspectives for poor youth in Brazil for understanding childhoods and childhood outcomes. We call for a theoretical interface between theories that focuses on the micro-interactionist actions that children use to shape and control their surroundings and the structural realities that limit such control.

### Working Kids on Paulista Avenue

It is 7:00 on Saturday morning in a shanty town inside Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city. 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 out the door of his scrap-and-cardboard house, Elizabeth hands her son a plastic one-liter Coke bottle with a few drops of soap in it and a "squeegee," his tools for washing car windshields. With a good-bye kiss from his mother, Edson scurries along the narrow corridor between slum dwellings of cement, wood, and cardboard, leaping back and forth across the stream of raw sewage and jumping over mounds of garbage. 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, and Luciano and Danilo, both 11. But, today, only three of these youth have shown up at the 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 twelve are entitled to ride the bus free; the fare collector is nice today, he lets those over twelve travel free as well. Given the children's paltry earnings, they could not come up with the two *Reais* (\$1.00) that it costs to travel to and from work each day.

On the bus, three of the youth laugh, play, and argue; the other two try to catch some sleep before beginning their nine-to-fourteen-hour workday in South America's wealthiest city. It is 10 by the time the young workers arrive at opulent Paulista Avenue, 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. After stopping briefly at a parking lot water spigot to fill their soap-added Coke bottles with water, the youth cross Paulista's six lanes of fast traffic to 'their' corner. There, they will begin the ritual of waiting for the traffic light to turn red 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 ten hours of work, the youth will each return home on average with only about \$6 Reais (\$3U.S.), having earned less than 30 cents (U.S.) an hour.

### Theorizing Street Youth

Based on six weeks' field study on one street corner of Sao Paulo City's Paulista Avenue, this ethnography examines twelve young children and their two older 'supervisors.' One set 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, of course, by traffic lights: When the light turns red on the Avenue, the youth quickly fan out into the traffic lanes, approaching each driver as quickly as possible. When the light changes to green, they retreat to the sidewalk where their 'supervisors' have been talking to each other and waiting to count the children's earnings. Yet while technology structurally regulates important aspects of their work, other activities within this structure are shaped by the children themselves: How they sell themselves and their wares to drivers, how they use spare time, how they explain their work and their worlds. This study demonstrates the interface between the actions that children can take to shape and control their surroundings and the structural realities that limit their control over those surroundings.

Yet the theoretical relationship in the sociology of childhood literature--between structural control and human action--is far from clear. Most scholarship in fact still falls at one or another of two theoretical extremes. The structural control perspective, based on socio-structural and human rights sociology, sees youth as the product of adult institutions that are beyond their control, making such youth little more than victims of adult abuse and neglect. The human action perspective, an outgrowth of social constructionist sociology, considers poor youth to be agents of their own socially constructed worlds. An important variant of this--labeled a 'new paradigm' for the sociology of childhood--proposes that childhood is "an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted" (Prout and James, 1990: 7; see also Solberg, 1990).

Solberg (1990) hints at a central aspect of the new paradigm's paradigm's theoretical position, stating that researchers "attempt...to give voice to children [by seeing them] as not just receptacles of adult teaching...[Children are] not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes." Yet while the new paradigm recognizes that childhoods result from the actions of people and factors beyond the child actor him--or herself--for example, recognizing the role of socialization--this paradigm does not address the relative balance among children, supervising adults, and socio-structural and historical processes in making some childhood constructions and outcomes more likely than others.

Just the same, by challenging researchers to pay attention to children's own definitions and constructions of their worlds, the new paradigm provides a powerful theoretical tool for making children visible actors rather than passive objects of adult action. Yet as a theory about the relative impacts of various factors--interpersonal, social, historical, and structural--in the construction of children's lives and in creating outcomes for youth, the new paradigm may raise more questions than it answers. Do youth ultimately construct their worlds within and according to patterns established by adults? Are childhoods patterned according to socio-economic and political factors and pressures? Do factors external to children, in other words, make some childhood outcomes more likely than others? Would it be useful to document the patterning of childhoods according to structural realities created by the intersections of class, race/ethnicity, and gender?

Such questions grow out of socio-structural and human rights perspectives on childhood. Such perspectives can be especially useful when examining the lives of poor children in general and of poor youth in developing countries in particular. Especially, such structural realities as lack of affordable

housing, a viable educational system, extremely low (or no) wages for their parents, and extensive unemployment--combined with sluggish and largely ineffective administrative and legal systems--render children in peril even before they are born. These realities for developing country poor provide a foundation for the socio-structural perspectives' asserting the relative powerlessness of poor children to take full charge of constructing their worlds.

For the purposes of this analysis, we accept the new paradigm's theoretical recommendation that childhood researchers see children as more than the sum of their surroundings--studying children as "capable agents of their own lives" and not simply as "small and helpless...victims of adult misbehavior...or...of the lack of justice..." (Solberg, 1990). However, we argue that powerful socio-structural conditions can limit (or enhance) the ability of children to be fully independent agents--capable or not--of their lives.

### Poor Children in Brazil

According to Simonetti (*Veja*, 1999), in 1999 20 million young children and adolescents grew up in poverty in Brazil (see also Klintowitz, 1999:116; Rosemberg, F, 1999). The Brazilian government's Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), discloses that forty 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 (U.S)." (DP, 11/7/99:6; 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 (see Dewees and Klees, 1995:81). In 2002, there were fifty-three million living below the poverty line in Brazil, according to the Instituto de Pesquisa Economico Aplicada (SOURCE). Such adult Brazilians and their children cannot even afford to maintain a basic diet of 2,000 calories a day (*Veja*, 1/23/2002: 84), a fact that fundamentally structures these children's ability to eek out an active childhood of any kind.

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) 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 *Veja*, one in every six Brazilian children in 1999 entered the job market before the age of sixteen (Klintowitz, 1999:117). 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 out of necessity. This necessity to work has consequences for the kinds of childhoods that they will be able to create.

Perhaps among the most disadvantaged of Brazil's poor are those youth who work on the streets--victims of Brazilian society's social and economic failures. These children, who often come from unsanitary homes in unsafe neighborhoods, carry out hard and dangerous street work, face negative social stigma, and suffer frequent physical violence (Huggins and Mesquita, 2000). They are considered totally detached from family and other humanizing social relationships, an image that contributes to their victimization, while in fact most such youth live at home. They alternate, rather than replace, one unsafe space for another.

The common assumption that the youth who work on Brazilian streets also live there, is false. In fact, scholarly research in Brazil since the late 1980s has demonstrated that, contrary to popular perceptions about street youth, the majority of such children maintain familial connections. (Alves-Mazotti and Alda, 1996:77; see also Huggins and Mesquita, 1995; Mickelson, 2000). Looking at the different social realities of youth on Sao Paulo City streets, a 1999 study found that of 423 children and adolescents eighteen and under working and/or living on Sao Paulo City streets, sixty-nine percent reported almost never sleeping on the street. Ninety-nine percent of them lived with their families (SOS Crianca, 1999). In 1996 and 1997 in Brazil's national capital, Brasilia, only twenty-five percent of the 1466 interviewed youth actually slept on the street (Soares, 1999:6).

As “street youth” poor Brazilian street workers are transformed into deviant adults, erasing others’ positive sense of their child status. Schepper-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....” Being considered ineligible for designation as innocent children, Brazilian street youth face serious problems constructing a childhood that is free of life threatening danger and physical and psychological abuse.

### Getting Into the Field

Before the researchers had entered the field, Brazilian “street educators”--outreach workers who educate street youth and their families--had pointed out that these youth normally have an adult with them on the job --a “*tia*” or “*tio*” (“aunt” or “uncle”). This person, who may or may not be their biological relative, is an older supervisor who makes sure that the children work and oversees their safety. For performing such services, the supervisors usually extract a proportion of their charges’ profits.

We were told by Brazilian “street educators” that the supervisors were suspicious of outsiders and often unwilling to let them interact with ‘their’ working children. This made us initially concerned about how the children’s *tias* and *tios* would receive us. A functionary of the *Nucleo de Trabalhos Comunitarios* (Community Worker Nucleus), explained that “We [street educators] are often threatened by *tios* [who tell us] that we must leave the children alone. They say that we take away from the children’s work time.” We concluded that if relative insiders were seen this way, then a cultural and national outsider would be considered even more troublesome.

We were also apprehensive about the police. Besides the well- documented pattern of police violence against street youth, the Sao Paulo street educators had warned us that they had been “approached on two occasions by police with threats: ‘If you do not leave the kids alone, we will take you all--children included--to the police station.’” Fearing such an outcome, Rodrigues, the primary field researcher, was initially very hesitant to approach working street kids. Besides the potential threat posed by the police, Rodrigues did not want to be confronted by an angry *tio* or *tia* who resented the youth workers’ time being wasted by an interview.

These apprehensions notwithstanding, we began seeking children to interview. With a focus exclusively on children and adolescents working *on* the streets--*criancas na rua*, we sought such youth from an eight-block area near the Consolacao area of Sao Paulo City’s Paulista Avenue. After selecting a particularly busy Paulista Avenue corner, the field researcher began striking up a conversation with the first child she found working there. This brought up another significant challenge: How could we ethically conduct research on children? We at least needed permission from their immediate adult guardians, the *tia* or *tio*, the youth’s own consent, and ideally from their parents as well.

Locating the parents would be difficult because, according to the youth, most of their parents were not at home when we could travel to their communities. In addition, there were issues of safety: As a total outsider to the child’s slum 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 fourteen of the kids who called that Paulista Avenue corner their workplace--although nine of them had to convince their *tia* or *tio* first. To obtain this, the field researcher introduced herself to the *tia(o)*, gave a brief summary of the research, and requested permission for the child to be interviewed. The adult 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 they 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 twelve observed children had their meal at the McDonald’s itself, six requested a McDonald’s “take-out” meal; two wanted payment in cash. These youth were each given 10 Reais--roughly equivalent to \$5 U.S. This more than

compensated for the work time lost during an interview, as our data on work profits will illustrate shortly.

The field research involved six weeks of tri-weekly visits to the children's corner. The youth were observed for ten to fifteen minutes each from approximately three yards away. The interviews, conducted at least once with each child, lasted approximately 45 minutes, with each youth 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 work place. 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 work place. Their choice of vocabulary raised a series of questions, with some having more theoretical importance than others: Had we had misheard or misunderstood their Portuguese? Did the youth simply not speak Portuguese correctly? Did their choice of '*posto*' rather than '*ponto*' suggest a conscious preference for the former label over the latter one? If the latter was true, why had the children designated their work place in such a manner?

Talking with the interviewed youth, we confirmed that they had indeed intended to call their work place a '*posto*' and not a '*ponto*.' Wondering why, the researchers first thought through the common meanings of these two words: '*Posto*'--a position, place, or rank--can be combined with a preposition or noun to mean 'place of,' as in 'place of work'; "*ponto*" can refer to a place to stop--"*ponto de Onibus*," bus stop--or a place to hang out--"*ponto de encontro*." Given that the children were working on a street corner where cars stop, it would have made greatest 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*' ('transvestite' hang-out), '*ponto de drogas*' (location where drugs are sold), or '*ponto de prostitutas*' (prostitute hang-out). Apparently for the interviewed youth, the word *ponto* would have obscured the corner's central role as a location for conducting *respectable* work. The choice of vocabulary was an indication of the seriousness they placed on their work, a fact that was verified over and over again in interviews.

### Profile of the "Squeegee" and "Sweets" Kids

Focusing on the twelve youngest working street children first, they were predominately male, young, dark-skinned, and from large families headed by a biological mother and sometimes a step-father. Most of the children claimed to be attending school at the time of the interview. More specifically, the age range of the street workers was from eight to fourteen; only two were female. None of the twelve was White: Two boys were Black, the other ten were brown-skinned. The two older 'supervisor' youth, their *tio* or *tia*, included a 20 year-old female and a 25 year-old male. These older street adults, to be introduced later, are not included in this initial discussion.

Examining the size of the working youths' family of origin, eight of the twelve had between six and twelve siblings: One had one, two more had two siblings each, and one had three. Ten of the children lived with their biological mother; only four households had a biological father. Five of the fathers had left the youth's mother; three had died. Three of the youth who were without biological fathers, had a step-father (*padastro*) in their household.

All of the youth designated the region where they lived as the "*periferia*," a term in Brazilian Portuguese that indicates a slum location on the periphery of a city. Six of the interviewees in fact came from the "Capitao Redondo" neighborhood, an area with one of the highest murder rates in the Sao Paulo metropolitan area (see Huggins, 2000); two others lived in "Gerao," two more in "Artur Alvin," and another two in "Francisco Morato." All of these are poor working-class-to-very-poor neighborhoods on Sao Paulo City outskirts.

Only two of the twelve working children claimed not to attend school: 13-year-old Luana said that she had stopped attending after the third grade; nine-year old Anderson, claimed to have stopped going after one week in the First Grade: "I didn't like school and never returned." Anderson says that

his mother plans to enroll him in school next year. Among the ten children who claimed to be attending school, one boy said that he was in the second grade; three boys declared that they were fourth graders, five said that they were in the fifth; and one that she was a sixth-grader. All of the youth except Anderson can write their names. Since this is all they were asked to write, the extent of their writing ability cannot be determined.

### Working Lives

Street work was seen by the youth as a positive alternative to a range of other less 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 it pleases him to see his mom happy when he brings home money. Three of the children said that their financial contribution to the family was a primary reason for their 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). Indeed, a 1997 study of 460 Brazilian working youth between the ages of 7 and 14 in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, yielded similar results. These youth "enjoy having their own money, contributing to the home, and having something to do." (Rizzini, 1999:390).

That said, three of the youth in our study were taken to the street by an adult, suggesting that they had come to view the positive aspects of street work or to see it as a positive alternative to other available negative ones. The other youth came at the invitation of an older youth already working on the street. Most commonly, once a youth found that they could make money on the streets, they invited other kids--usually from their own home neighborhood--to join them. Presence on a corner appears to establish and confirm that it is a child's or a group's "turf"--their *posto*. Thereafter, like a business person whose work is always conducted out of the same office, the "squeegee" and "sweets" kids always worked 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 their turf in the past suggest other motives as well: Fights with other working youth over turf, police repression, and being hassled by shop owners. Pointing to a combination of reasons for changing his 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 twelve Paulista Avenue street youth worked between three and six days a week--six worked only on weekends, including Fridays, the other six worked between three and six days depending on the weather and the money they had earned the prior week. That these 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. This makes it unlikely that they attended school regularly. Even the ones who worked only on Fridays and weekends would have had trouble attending school. Moreover, 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 attend school. In any case, it is very likely that the interviewed youth' demanding work schedule did not leave much energy for classroom learning, even if the schools that they attended provided such an environment in the first place.

### Securing Technology and Earning Money

The "squeegee kids" brought their work "technology" with them to the "*posto*," stopping along the way at a local parking lot to put water in their soap-filled two-litre Coke bottle. The 4-liter container of concentrated liquid soap, which was purchased and left at home, cost about \$2 Reais

(\$1U.S.). Since the squeegee kids only use a little soap each day, their supply lasts up to four months depending on how often the child works. The windshield washers need a "squeegee" for cleaning soapy water off car windshields. Purchased from a local merchant, the "squeegee" has a long handle with a right-angle strip at one end; there is 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* (\$15 to \$30), depending on its quality. The strip on the end of the squeegee is removable, a replacement costs about 5 *Reais* (\$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 away, or lost.

The "sweets kids" are able to make a significantly lower initial investment in their work. They need between 10 and 15 *Reais* (\$5 and \$7.50) for a box of individually wrapped hard candies--gum, mints, cough drops, fruit-flavored drops. Each candy sold nets a "sweets kid" one *Real*, or fifty U.S. cents. The "sweets kids" sell, on average, a box and a half of sweets a week. Each box of bulk candy, purchased at a local supermarket, contains approximately thirty pieces, with each sold for one *Real* (.50 US), brings 30 *Reais* (\$15.00) per box. "Sweets kids" net between \$7.50 and \$11.25 a week, or an average of less than \$2.00 (US) each day for a five-day, sixty hour, work week.

However, it is actually 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 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* (\$25) in one day. This was met with shock, laughter, and disbelief by the other children: Fourteen year-old Vilma called Edson a "*mentiroso*" (liar); ten 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* (\$2) an hour during a twelve-hour work day. Indeed, on average during the observation period, only one out of every twenty-five to thirty cars paid "squeegee kids" either money or penny candy for their window-washing services. Payments ranged from a few cents to one *Real* (fifty cents). This paltry outcome would probably not net over 15 *Reais* (\$7.50 U.S.) for a twelve-hour day.

During the observation period, both sets of youth workers--the "squeegee" and "sweets" children--estimated their average daily earnings at 5 *Reais* (\$2.50), or approximately \$12.50 (US) for an entire five-day work week. They guessed that on a "good day" they might earn up to 20 *Reais* (\$10), although more than 15 *Reais* (\$7.50) a day was not very common. Even before the child's family got its share, the on-site young adult care giver had to get a portion. We could not find out about the care giver's cut since the children were unwilling to discuss this either in front of or away from them. The care givers were not willing to tell us either.

### On the Job

Working at the stop light and getting drivers to pay for services or purchase candy requires stealth, agility, and imagination. 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 beeped horns, 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 short of hitting us to get us away from their cars." The "sweets kids" usually got less hostile responses from drivers, 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.

With hostility the most common reaction from drivers, imagination was a critical ingredient for a successful 'sale.' The youth devised a number of "performances" (see Goffmen, 1959) to promote

themselves positively or sympathetically to drivers, including developing a carefully thought out “sales pitch” and “persona.” Edson’s co-worker explained that 8-year-old Edson makes the most money in their group because he is the “cutest” and uses his physical innocence and youth to evoke sympathy from drivers. Danilo, a playful, smiling, and energetic eight year-old while waiting on the sidewalk for the light to turn red, changed his presentation when he approached stopped cars. With a sad and pained expression, Danilo placed 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 that Danilo was hungry--all the interviewed children were--this fact was not advanced when Danilo was in his energetic sidewalk persona.

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. These moments of play required the working youth to do what children everywhere do to play: Tap their creative imaginations. They discovered little “*joias*” (treasures)--random throwaways tossed onto the street by pedestrians or drivers--and turned them into toys. During a two-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 to 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, thirteen-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 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 out among the business and shopping public, with the street transformed into the children’s private play space.

### Violence

Violence is constant in the lives of the interviewed “squeegee” and “sweets” children, whether as fights with members of the street group itself, or with competing youth, or carried out by family members, or the police, or adult strangers. In-group squabbles were common: One day a fight broke out when 11-year-old “squeegee” kid 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 portion of the driver’s payment. Danilo prevailed against the pushes and shoves of three other street youth in his group, but when the generous driver pulled away, 13-year-old Francinaldo demanded that Danilo give him some of the money from his 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 problematical by the interviewed youth than conflicts with competitor street youth. Indeed, half of the twelve youth maintained that “*meninos de rua*”--those they said lived permanently on the street--caused them the most trouble. They described such permanently-based 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 and stole their money. The children angrily denounced such youth as “robbing from those who have nothing.” The negative experiences 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, thieving glue-sniffers.” As 11-year-old “squeegee kid” Danilo put it, “Those deviant street urchins are a bunch of thieves who take our money because they are too lazy to earn it themselves. They use it to get high, while we’re bringing it home to our poor families.”

Violence did not end for the interviewed street youth when they returned home. The majority indicated that they suffered harsh physical discipline, especially when their earnings fell short of what was expected by their family. As one interviewee put it, “If I spent any of [the money], my mom would hit me.” Fourteen-year-old Vilma proclaimed, “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 step-fathers as harsh discipliners, asserting that they were alcoholics who beat them and their mothers.

All but four of the twelve youth had experienced at least verbal abuse at the hands of 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 notorious juvenile reformatory--to "We're going to take you to jail." Some children reported that police had beaten them with night sticks, at times so forcefully that they bled. There is no doubt that the twelve working children feared the police. For example, when a police patrol car approached a group of four "squeegee" kids and their adult "squeegee" supervisor, Alessandra, the four younger children took off running. When twenty-year old Alessandra and her sister, 15-year-old Isabella (who was visiting for the day), were unable to flee in time, the two policemen grabbed them, cuffed their hands behind their backs, forced them into the patrol car, and drove the young girls to the police station. Claiming to want information from the girls about the youth who had fled, the police held the two girls in custody from 3:00 that afternoon until 8:00 the next morning.

Once the police had given up trying to get information, the young women were released. Besides having to pay for the two hour metro and bus ride home, Alessandra missed work and had been unable to supervise her charges' earnings (and extract her percentage from them). Alessandra worried that her two children at home (4 and 2 years old) had no one to care for them. Only after returning home did Alessandra learn that her younger brother had been with her children. Undaunted by her arrest, the next day, Alessandra --a recent widow-- was back on a different corner washing windshields: "I have two little girls to feed at home. If I don't work to bring them food, nobody else will."

Even seemingly friendly strangers could represent violent threats to the children. Moses, one the older 'tios,' remembers at twelve 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 be taken for a "shopping spree" at the mall. Filled with excitement, Moses got into the man's car. He immediately became concerned when the man suddenly 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's seat, stabbed the man in the face, jumped out of the car, and ran as far as he could without stopping or looking back.

According to Moses, street children "are always in danger of being raped by a stranger," strengthening this observation with a story about two female street workers who, were talked into following a 'nice' man who promised to give them each a large doll. The girls invited [Moses] to go along with them and, [although] skeptical about the stranger's motives, [he] tagged along. Moses knew something was not right when the man "had us follow him into the vacant parking lot of an old meat market," where:

the stranger grabbed one of [the girls and] tried to take off with her.  
[Moses] and the other girl started screaming and pelting [the man] with rocks until he finally ran away cursing and saying that he was going to call the police.

Moses recognizes that "if the assailant had called the police, they would have believed his story over ours." Because of their image as dangerous deviants, street youth are considered guilty whether they actually commit a deviant act or not, a set of realities that could affect their aspirations.

### Aspirations

We in fact wondered if the harshness and danger of working youths' lives would leave a place for hopes and dreams? In order to explore this, each youth was asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. Three of the boys aspired to be a soccer player; two others wanted to be policeman. Yet when

12-year-old Luiz Ricardo initially declared a desire to be a policeman, the other kids flashed dirty looks at him, leading Luiz Ricardo to change his mind: "I want to be a fireman, because they are good cops." Anderson, 9 years old, the other boy who wanted to be a policeman, was chided by his co-workers for this choice, but stuck to it. As for the other male street workers' aspirations, two wanted to work in a bank, one hoped to be a lawyer, another a veterinarian, and another wanted to be a 'rapper.'

One young girl hoped to be a doctor and the other wanted to set up a baby-sitting service. According to that fourteen-year-old, the women in her neighborhood "need to work and have no one to take care of their children."

Hoping to probe the children's aspirations another way, we asked what they would do if they found a million *Reais* (U.S. \$500,000) on the street. The children's unanimous first response was that they would give it to their mother so that she could improve her family's life: She could "buy a house, and other good things." After that, five of the twelve children would use the money to leave Sao Paulo and return to their mother's birthplace--among these, four to the Northeast and one to Southern Brazil. The youth consider Sao Paulo "a bad city." As Luiz Ricardo asserted: "There are lots of bad people in Brazil and the most violent are in Sao Paulo."

The youngest child, Edson, an 8-year-old "squeegee kid," responded that he would use the money to "help the world," primarily its poor children, "by buying them clothes, shoes, and food." In particular, Edson would use the money to help poor institutionalized orphan children because "they are treated very badly" in the FEBEM state-run orphanage. The philanthropic attitudes of the younger children was also seen among the two young adults: Alessandra, the 20-year-old "squeegee" woman, stated that "you can't only think of yourself; there are many others you have to think of, too."

### Dreams and Realities

What are the chances of these youth realizing their dreams? Can Luiz Ricardo expect to buy his mother "a house and other good things"? Can Vilma depend on starting her own babysitting business? Can the boys expect to work in a bank, or become a lawyer, a veterinarian, or a rapper? Their prospects are not good. To explore the possibility of achieving their aspirations, we first looked at the lives of the two "street veterans" among them, and then at the scant longitudinal data about Brazilian street youth in general.

At 25 and 20, respectively, Anderson Moses and Alessandra and have been working on Sao Paulo streets since early childhood. Anderson Moses, who goes by Moses, had been a street worker for twenty-three years at the time of his interview, having begun at two when his parents--unable to support their children--found a woman who in exchange for Moses' labor, took Moses into her home. Moses grew up in a slum shack with the surrogate mother he calls "grandma" and her four 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 two years-old, Moses was taken to work on the streets. Being too young at that time 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 passers by, one of the older kids or "grandma" would take turns sitting with him. After three years of using Moses to beg, "grandma" decided that the boy, then 5 years old, was old enough to begin collecting cardboard himself. As Moses got older, he began spending more time on the streets--working days and sleeping at night in Sao Paulo's Praca da Se, a central city square where street youth often

congregate to work, beg, play, wash up, and rest. Explaining that in the winter he would curl up on a hot air subway vent, Moses remembers his life being “very hard: 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 violence at home, and it was an adventure, but it also posed new forms of danger and violence. Moses began smoking at 8, frequently got into fights, abused drugs--mostly glue and marijuana--and was generally “treated like a dog.”

At 25, Moses now lives in a slum with his biological brother, sister, and his two siblings' three children. Moses' 4-year-old son, Roberto, lives with his mother, a woman Moses had dated for seven months before she became pregnant. Now estranged from the mother of his son, Moses says that he still visits his son often and “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.” Moses explains that:

it's especially hard when you offer to wash someone's windshield and they look at you angrily and say something like, “Go fuck yourself!” People treat us like animals, but this is what I have to do to survive. It's humiliating.

According to Moses, there is increased competition for “turf” today: “There are many more children living and working on the streets and they do not support one another as they used to.” Sociologist Irene Rizzini's research on Rio de Janeiro street youth, in fact, does not support Moses' first observation: In her three-month study Rizzini discovered that the absolute number of children on Rio streets has not increased markedly over the last ten years--from nine-hundred in 1990/91 to twelve hundred in 2001/02 (SEJUP, 4/19/2002). However, Rizzini's study does support Moses' second claim that conditions have worsened for street youth: Children now enter the streets younger and face much more violence than in previous times. Among Rizzini's Rio de Janeiro sample, all of the youth had suffered violence, with over half stating that police or security guards had been the source of such violence and another fifth saying that other street children had been the perpetrators of violence against them. According to Moses, most of the kids that he had known growing up had died or been killed: One was hit by a car, several died from bullet wounds, others from drug over-doses, or preventable illnesses.

Alessandra, a girl-turned-mother on the street, is Moses' ‘stepsister.’ Having begun street work at six, Alessandra, like Moses, was initially introduced to the streets by her biological mother, the woman Moses calls “grandma.” Alessandra's first memories were about working ten hours a day, four days a week, with her cousin Rosa selling chocolates to drivers. For seven years, on Fridays, her mother would bring blankets to work and 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 reasoned that sleeping on the street was “better than traveling” two hours every Saturday morning: The family would be able to minimize travel costs and maximize time at work. At the end of each work day, after the two-hour commute home, the two girls would count the day's earnings for their mother, with Alessandra and Rosa getting a severe spanking if they did not make “enough” money.

At thirteen, Alessandra switched from selling sweets to washing windshields. 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 four months at this activity, Alessandra's mother told her that she had to stop supervising the youth because the street “no place for a teen-age girl to be alone.” Alessandra then began cleaning a middle-income family's apartment three 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 Praca da Se. 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 knowing that she did not like to fight, Alessandra made it a point to “hang 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 sixteen she married Luis and had a baby girl. A year and a half later, Alessandra and Luis had another girl. Luis supported his family by working at 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 six and didn't want me to have to work again." Alessandra remembers her four years with Luis as the "happiest" of her life.

At eighteen, 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.” The policeman shot Luis “at point blank range and then the cops put Luis’ 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 gotten 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 “just on his way to drop something off at a neighbor’s house” when he was shot.

Alessandra, now raising her daughters alone, works “sometimes seven 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.” Alessandra's fears are well-grounded. The reality of her class status and gender position--as a poor single mother raising two children in a slum--will very likely lead to her having to put one or both of her young daughters to work.

### Broken Dreams

If the lives of Alessandra and Moises 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 street youth. Hecht’s (1999: 205) academic research on a group of street youth in the Northeastern city of Recife found that between 1992/93 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, 11/19/1999) of 17 young street workers in Sao Paulo City discovered that six years after the youth had been initially studied, four were still on the street, eight were in prison, two more were in a state-run orphans’ facility, and another two were dead. Only one of the seventeen had experienced some “positive change” in her life: As a domestic, she was earning the *Real* equivalent of eighty dollars a month cleaning houses.

Another journalistic examination (JB, 7/19/2000)--a follow-up on the sixty-four initial survivors of the 1993 drive-by shooting that left eight street children dead among the seventy-two who were sleeping in front of Rio’s Calandalaria Cathedral--suggests equally pessimistic outcomes for poor youth. Even among youth who received perhaps more national and international attention and assistance than the vast majority of poor Brazilian street youth, only nineteen of the sixty-four initial survivors were still alive five years after the well-publicized massacre.

Among the nineteen longer-term survivors of Candalaria, at the millennium, ten were in prison, primarily for drug-related offenses. Maria, one of these youth, had been awarded a scholarship by a German modeling agency right after the drive-by. But 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 other nine longer-term survivors of the Candalaria massacre, seven years later, four were working and living on the street--among them, Vanessa was dealing drugs, Tiago was living with AIDS, and Rogerio was in a wheelchair--paralyzed in a gang shootout. Sandro do Nascimento, the fourth longer-term Candalaria survivor, entered a Rio de Janeiro bus on June 12, 2001 to carry out an armed robbery. Hearing of the robbery in progress, police surrounded the bus while Nascimento held passengers at gun point for several hours. After overpowering Nascimento in a shoot out, police took their captive still alive to the hospital. Nascimento arrived dead, with autopsy reports later revealing that the boy had been strangled to death on the way to the hospital (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

The other five longer-term Candalaria survivors, according to a Brazilian youth outreach worker, were leading a "relatively normal life" at the millennium (JB, 7/19/2000): One had been granted asylum by Switzerland after being shot several times by angry Brazilian police for testifying about the Candalaria 'drive-by' police shooting. The young man had job in Switzerland, but was struggling with severe physical pain from bullets permanently lodged in his body. Two other male and two female longer-term Candalaria survivors were living with their families. One of the young women still had no "regular" work, another was married and had children. The other female longer-term survivor, Elizabeth Cristina de Oliveira Maia. Was murdered on September 26, 2000, outside her home as she was leaving to testify in the appeals hearing of a policeman accused of involvement in the 1993 Candalaria massacre (CDBBCA, 2000).

The three sets of longitudinal data about street youth--from Hecht's study and from 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 powerfully shape the lives of young street workers in Brazil. Such challenges limit to a few negative alternatives the kinds of 'childhoods' that they can construct on a daily basis. The structural parameters on their childhoods include familial 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 for the working youth. Structurally, such challenges are complicated even further by the absence of well paying entry-level jobs for their adult caretakers, grinding familial poverty, a growing, violent culture of drugs, negative stereotypes about poverty and race, and the brutalizing violence associated with, and justified by, such stereotypes.

### Social Dilemmas of 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 (1999), 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." He reasons that if poor children can no longer contribute to their family's support, such youth could be rendered even more vulnerable to domestic violence. It could also be argued that if Brazil were to make a real commitment to providing a range of 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 distribution and irrigation--so that families would not desert the land for 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, and young people would not have to become economic supports for their families. Keeping a child in school might then become an economic benefit rather than a social and economic burden. Of course, what these two sets of recommendations each suggest is that powerful structural realities outside the immediate control of poor families and their children forcefully shape the kinds of childhoods and childhood outcomes that poor youth can carve out for themselves.

As for how such structural realities might be incorporated into an academic theory of childhood that includes both a micro-interactionist and a structural perspectives, in this study we have described the daily work conditions for one group of poor children, pointing to a range of realities that limit the childhoods available to them. As the academic research cited earlier points out, the conditions with which millions of Brazilian children live--poverty, hunger, unsafe working conditions, violence--result in childhoods without consistent, safe, adult supervision, nutritional deficiencies, no preventive health maintenance and care, inadequate formal education, and inadequate legal protection. Under such circumstances, poor youth carry out their childhoods in adult worlds where they are at best ignored and at worst violently violated.

A sociology of childhood must be open to and describe the modes of interaction and survival that develop out of and within structural realities, a project accomplished impressively for a Philadelphia urban area by Elijah Anderson in *Code of the Street* (1999). This study has demonstrated that a group of poor Brazilian street youth create and construct their work life, with an understanding of the economics and technology required to carry out their project. They take time to play, to dream, to plan, and they often support one another. At the same time, the scarcity and precariousness of their lives, structures competition, conflict, and violence among and between them and other street youth. The childhoods of these youth are worked out within and in terms of the structural realities that shape their choices. An important lesson from Anderson's ethnographic research on poor youth in the United States is that these youths' daily survival modes--the childhoods that they create--cannot be separated from the conditions that create and make these modes necessary.

Without obscuring children's ability to creatively construct their own daily worlds, 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 one, or into one national or ethnic class rather than another--might influence the ability of such differentially situated youth to creatively construct their childhood. While a sociology of childhood must take seriously the new paradigm's recommendation that Western middle-class expectations of childhood not be the implicit or explicit norm for those studying childhood, it seems equally in error to adopt the Western liberal democratic notion childhood can be equally constructed in the first place. At most, the construction of childhood must be seen as occurring by degrees, with some children in some countries and in social and ethnic/racial classes more able than others to freely construct their childhoods. The very high probability of death from violence or from preventable diseases, critically limits the possibility of developing-country poor youth to construct any childhood at all. And for those developing-country children who survive the first years of life, their childhood options are shaped by poverty, hunger, disease, and violence, factors that this study has illustrated constrain to a few undesirable options the childhoods that they can work out.

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." In other words, it is not that such children should have, yet fail to have, an idealized and stereotypical Western middle- or upper-middle-class version of childhood, but that their alternatives--such as having to work long hours in tedious and often dangerous work--render their physical and psychological health and their overall development vulnerable, with direct consequences for constructing childhood.

A sociology of childhood would do well to document how poor developing-country youth cope with and create childhoods out of the disadvantageous structural conditions that shape their lives. But such a project must be comparative, discovering the patterned childhood outcomes that emerge under the different sets of structural realities that are associated with various class, ethnic, and gender

combinations. A central research focus of such a study would be the micro patterns of childhood that are found among children of similar social class, gender, and ethnic backgrounds in similar and different national settings. This would take the sociology of childhood a long way toward sorting out the relative weight of structural factors and micro interactionist ones in producing childhoods, a task only hinted at in this study of a group of working youth on Paulista Avenue.

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