

Life trajectories of children and adolescents living on the streets of Rio de Janeiro

Irene Rizzini¹
Udi Mandel Butler
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This paper is based on a study carried out by the authors entitled '*Children and adolescents situated on the street in Rio de Janeiro – weaving their stories...*'², which took place between October 2001 and January 2002 and involved in total 120 people, over half of whom were the youngsters interviewed on the street. The research group consisted of researchers and 22 educators – members of the 13 organizations that composed the *Rio Child Network* - many of whom were street educators working directly with street children. A participative approach to the research was chosen whereby the educators were able to contribute their experiences of working with street children, both to the process of formulating the themes of the research, as well as in the manner in which the children were to be approached on the street. Sixty interviews with children and adolescents between the ages of 8 and 18, with a greater concentration of those aged between 11 and 15, were carried out - 45 of these interviews were carried out on the street and 15 inside shelters, comprising a total of 67 youngsters interviewed, since in some interviews more than one youngster spoke.

These children and adolescents told us about their rich and intense life trajectories. In this paper we will highlight their stories, focusing on the following

¹ **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 serves as Vice-President of Childwatch International Research Network. She is the author of several books, among which are: *The art of governing children: the history of social policies, legislation and child welfare in Brazil* (edited with Francisco Pilotti, 1995); *Desinherited from society: street children in Latin America*, 1995; *The lost century: the historical roots of public policies on children in Brazil*, 1997; *Images of the child in Brazil: 19th and 20th centuries* 1997; *Children and the law in Brazil- revisiting the History (1822-2000)*, 2000, 2002; *Globalization and children* (Edited with Natalie Kaufman, 2002).

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 CIESPI and is currently working on his Doctorate at the University of London, Goldsmith College, UK.

Rizzini and Butler are also co-authors of the article: *Young people living and working on the streets of Brazil: revisiting the literature* (2001).

² 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.

dimensions: 1) the multiplicity of links and trajectories; 2) day to day life; 3) mobility; 4) identity and subjectivity.

1) The multiplicity of links and trajectories.

a) The family.

When we talk about children and adolescents who leave to the street their family is never far away from our thoughts. Who are the families of these boys and girls and how are they structured? Can we really speak of the 'breakdown' of these families, or are we witnessing new forms that the family takes perhaps in consequence of late capitalism and the new social structuring resulting from this? Global indicators do show a trend that families are changing in their structures. Families today tend to be smaller, in Brazil in particular this has been seen over the last four decades. Also in Brazil, a growing number of households is headed by females, a figure that changed from 21.9% in 1992 to 26% in 1996. Shrinking families, have generally meant an improvement in material conditions of their children, but this has also meant that the family has become more isolated, since both parents are having to work. Migration to the cities has also meant that the extended family is not relied upon to the same extent as before, creating more insular nuclear family units (Rizzini, 2001).

These changes to the structure of the family in Latin America have been exacerbated by a restructuring of the economy, in particular as a result of the IMF and World Bank's 'structural adjustment programs', adding extra pressures on mothers and fathers trying to abide by more traditional family models. Clearly though, there is no one ideal type of family, and neither can the term be separated from society's moral idealization of 'family'. Different kinds of family operate in Brazil, some of which may involve the 'circulation' of the child through relatives or non-related adults, who bring up the child, acting as surrogate parents (Fonseca, 1994).

Swapping families, swapping homes.

What becomes clear when listening to the stories of children on the street are the constant episodes of ruptures that exist in their lives, in particular the rupturing of affective ties with parents and relatives. Painful ruptures are always present in their tales, where the protagonists appear as father or mother, step-mother or step-father, grandparents, aunts and uncles or adults bearing no blood or marital relation. As a background to the relationship to these various adults, and to the flux between these, the youngsters narrate a constant movement between localities and communities.

[Roger 15 years old]

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.

[Roni 16 years old]

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.

Difficulties in establishing family relationships that are solid, continuous and lasting appear as a catalyst for leaving home. On the streets the children end up creating other ways of relating, developing important competencies for surviving on the street, like quickly becoming part of a group.

Equally significant when considering the family is how the figure of the mother and the father are perceived by the children. The mother is very often idealized by the youngsters we interviewed.

[Filomena 15 years old]

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 then. 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.

This idealized vision of the mother happens even when the evidence points elsewhere. Even when mothers are described as negligent, as violent, they are often never the less spoken of admiringly, as if the punishment given was deserved or else her position as mother endowed her the right to behave in such a way.

[Camarada 15 years old]

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.

On the other hand, the figure of the father is not idealized in this way. Instead the father figure is more often than not conspicuous by his absence. Of the 60 interviews, only 10 youngsters maintain some kind of relationship with their father. Thirteen youngsters said their father had died and 20% of the children said that they had not been in touch with their father for a long time.

So is it right to blame the family? It is easy to attribute the reason for children leaving their families and homes to the street upon the negligence, lack of supervision and affection on the part of their families. But this would be too simplistic an answer. In fact the children attribute their leaving home to many other reasons as we shall see in the next sections. The desire for freedom is very prominent in these, a desire that reflects the children's perception that they felt they were confined in their homes, that the family was controlling them too much. According to parents in the communities from where these children come from, children are kept at home for their own protection, to keep them away from the possible malevolent influences of the area in which they live and to keep them out of trouble. This protection, however, if it isn't followed up by explanations or affection can be interpreted as a form of imprisonment by the children. Instead of blaming the family it is important to look at the systemic forces at work behind the situation that may lead to both a situation of conflict within the family, as well as the ways in which these families attempt to raise their children.

The notion of *support bases*, as devised by Rizzini and Barker, come to mind here, in a way it is a concept that is diametrically opposed to that of social toxicity, describing the support bases that are the crucial elements which come to contribute to the wholesome development of the child. These are the formal and informal supports existing in the community and in the family that catalyze in the child and adolescent the development of their abilities and potentials, giving them a secure environment where friendships and affective ties may arise that come to contribute to their cognitive, emotional, cultural and vocational development (Rizzini, Barker, Cassaniga, 2000). Failing to provide such an environment the forces that might have otherwise held the child lose their power and s/he gravitates towards spaces where s/he feels her needs will be met.

b) The process of going to the street.

In the majority of cases going to the street is a gradual process whereby the child begins to frequent the street during the day but returns home at night, eventually spending a night on the street. This gradual process allows for the child to get used to the new surroundings and make new friendships, eventually becoming habituated with the street.

[Bolinho 19 years old]

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.

[Jonas 18 years old]

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 6 years, I stayed only 2 years at home, I went back to the street...

Those we interviewed related a constant flux between the street and the home, going to the street to earn money, hang out with friends or else as an escape when things got too turbulent or confined back home. In only 6 cases was there a definitive rupture with home that took the child from one moment to the next to the street. What we see then are the fields of influence of the home and the street exerting their forces differently at different times, but with a tendency of a growing influence of the street.

Our research shows that approximately half of those interviewed had their first experience of being on the street, that is, working or sleeping there, between the ages of 7 and 11. This is precisely the age when the child begins to take on board other references than those of the family and close friends. And it is precisely at this age that the support bases appear not to meet the increasing demands of the child. Between the ages of 12 and 15, 25% of those interviewed had their first street experience, the period of entering adolescence where the prerogative appears as the forming of groups and pairs.

A very interesting finding of the research was how many of those we interviewed when asked if they knew someone who lived on the street before they went there, replied that they had. They were 29 in total. Of these 19 said they knew them from the area they lived. This knowledge appears as a very important factor in the gradual move to the street. The knowledge that friends, sometimes relatives, or other youngsters of similar age, have been living on the street, that there they can be economically independent, have fun and hang out with their peers in an unsupervised environment, proves a very important ingredient in the decision of leaving home for the street.

[Roger 12 years old]

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.

In one third of the cases, work was mentioned as the motivation for going to the street. Friends who were already working there encouraged the youngsters to do the

same. In at least 10% of cases this work begins with the child going to the street with his/her mum or dad, and after the death of one of these, the street becomes more important.

[Luiza 15 years old]

I started going to the street selling sweets, when I was 9... then at 10 I stopped selling sweets and got more involved with the boys and girls [there]...

In the majority of cases going to the street is not a solitary act, the youngster goes there with someone, whether this be a friend or a relative. Once on the street the youngster establishes new friendships enhancing his/her confidence and familiarity in this space.

Contrasted to the confined and restrictive spaces of the home and the community, the street appears, at least in the imaginary of these youngsters, as a carefree open space where one can indulge in all that elsewhere appears to be forbidden. Close to the notion of 'freedom' expressed by the children as the positive side of the street, we find the value of non-interference with the freedom of others sometimes referred to as the '*não alugação*', not lecturing or 'being a drag'. This value reflects the absence of adults figures in the role of supervision on the street.

[Andrade 15 years old]

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.

[Bill 12 years old]

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...

2) Day to day on the street.

a) The group.

After arriving on the street, youngsters begin to behave in a way that can be said to be indicative of a 'street culture'. In forming groups on the street and together engaging in work activities, drug taking or, in some cases, petty thefts, youngsters acquire knowledge and ways of behaving through their co-existence with others more experienced on the street than themselves. Normally, as we gathered from the interviews, nowadays the groups of youngsters on the street tend to be relatively small, between 4 and 6 individuals. The well-publicized murders of the early 1990's, appear to partly account for the reduced numbers in the groups. No longer, as was the case in the past, do we find large groups of children and adolescents roaming the city center, to do so would attract far too much unwanted attention. As we found out, youngsters who had been on the street during the early 1990's, identify the murder in the Candelária in 1993, where a death squad that included off-duty cops, murdered 7 children who were sleeping by the

church of Candelária at the heart of Rio's business district, as a significant date that marked the transition from a relatively non-violent existence on the street to one where fear was a constant. The smaller groups of youngsters we found can then be seen as an adaptation to this increased violence, an easier and less conspicuous way of moving through the city. At night, however, youngsters still report gathering in larger groups to sleep, a form of protection against the possible 'nastyness' of the street.

[Raul 17 years old]

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.

[Filomena 15 years old]

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.

The group also appears to treat differently its youngest members, 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.

[Aldair 17 years old]

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.

Whilst grouping up can be seen as a defence strategy, relations within the group can also be strained at times. Arguments and fights between youngsters can remove the individual from the group. Whilst many speak of the solidarity and brotherhood on the street, of the group being like a family, there is also a discourse of distrust. The co-existence of these two sentiments point to 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 existing within the group.

The group is also subject to a series of external forces that lead it constantly towards fragmentation. We saw that groups are very fluid in their make-up, and youngsters circulate through many groups throughout their stay on the street. This is not only because of the high mobility of the youngsters themselves, a topic we will address in the next section, but also because of their constant removal by the council authorities and their occasional internment in youth correction institutions.

b) Gender.

Another important differential on the street is gender. Girls feel very protected in groups for their existence on the street appears as one even more precarious than that of

boys. As we gathered from our interviews ‘being a woman’ on the street is fearful. 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. The reason for this is because of the supposed greater fragility of girls before situations of violence and danger.

[Aldair 17 years old]

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.

[Luiza 15 years old]

It is better being a boy because the girls suffer more consequences... there are men who abuse them...

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

[Luiza 15 years old]

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...

[Cássia 17 years old]

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...

It is also worth noting that of the 51 interviews that tackled this question, 42 were with boys. Only 8 answers affirmed that they thought it was better to be a girl on the street, and of these 5 came from boys. The motives they gave, related to the ease with which girls were perceived to be able to acquire things on the street.

[Andrade 15 years old]

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...

In our fieldwork we also tried to establish what kinds of affective relationships the youngsters were establishing on the street. We did this in order to try to map out the possible support networks that youngsters relied on, on the street. We found a large number of what appeared to be stable relationships amongst those we interviewed. In total, 22 youngsters reported having fixed partners on the street. Of the 16 girls interviewed, 9 had children, a disproportionately high number for Brazilian teenagers. Yet we noted that in almost all these cases the girls appeared to have strong and stable affective ties with their children.

c) Fear and insecurity: other adults.

In all accounts of their experiences of the street, night-time appears as a threatening period, a time of danger and fear where youngsters are most vulnerable to all kinds of violence. If, as we previously mentioned, the promise of freedom is frequently mentioned as the prime incentive for going to the street, soon the youngsters discover that together with this 'freedom' comes a fearful existence. When we asked what the youngsters were afraid of, we often heard that they were scared of the police and of being set on fire at night.

[Wando 15 years old]

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...

[Alba 17 years old]

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...

Related to danger and fear, and appearing frequently in the youngster's discourses, are the figures of the military police, the municipal guard and private security guards. The latter in particular appeared as very feared figures on the street, being the main 'enemies' of youngsters on the street. Some exits from the street, or from particular localities, are prompted by encounters with such figures because of death threats or physical violence.

[Aldair 17 years old]

There are] many wrongs on the street, the guards chasing you, taking our things away, hitting us, aggression. When V.[name of guard] 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?

[Andrade 15 years old]

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...

d) Drugs.

An important issue for youngsters on the street is drugs. Indeed 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. Yet when the question was posed indirectly, by asking them what were the most common drugs on the street, all youngsters replied. Marijuana and thinner was cited

as the most popular drugs on the street, each being mentioned by 17 people, this was followed by cocaine (4 mentions) and glue (also 4 mentions). Cigarette, the only legal drug mentioned, was cited 10 times. The popularity of marijuana drew our attention, those interviewed mentioned that the drug conferred a sensation of relaxation and relief from a day to day marked by tension and conflict. Also of significance is the popularity of thinner – pronounced tchiner in Brazil - a solvent-based paint stripper that has a similar effect to glue with mild hallucinogenic properties, but is much cheaper than glue.

e) Earning and Spending money.

As we previously noted, money – or the chance to be economically independent – is a big attraction for youngsters who go on to live on the street. On the street it is possible to obtain money in a variety of ways and there are also many avenues of consumption open to youngsters on the street. Shinning shoes, selling sweets, flowers, peanuts, juggling at the traffic lights, carrying shopping at the market, parking cars, begging and stealing, are some of the ways youngsters earn money on the street. Asked what they do with the money they earned, 1/3 of the children reported that they buy food. Even though the youngsters reported that they were also given food on the street, by passers-by or the left-overs from bars and restaurants, money allows them buy a more ‘elaborate’ meal than they would otherwise have got, in a restaurant or fast food outlet. 12 youngsters reported that they used the money they earned to buy drugs, and 10 of them mentioned buying clothes with their money. A further 7 reported that they helped out their family with the money and 8 mentioned they spent it on their own entertainment.

[Sandra 15 years old]

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.

[Alba 17 years old]

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...

As our last interviewer mentioned, we often found instances where money was used to buy clothes or items of personal hygiene, as well as to pay for hotel rooms where some youngsters reported to going either for a break from the street and to have a bath, or else to have sex with their partner. That consumption on the street should be related not only to survival but also to a symbolic statement – i.e. buying a ‘better meal’, clothes that are in fashion or beauty products, is very important. As we shall see when addressing the theme of identity and subjectivity, these are significant ways of asserting one’s identity as a ‘citizen’, as being ‘like anyone else’, as strategies for maintaining self-esteem.

f) Leisure.

The beach appeared as a key space for leisure in the talk of the youngsters; a free, open and democratic space where the possibilities for fun are plentiful. Rio's other public spaces are also sited as arenas of entertainment, its squares, football pitches and parks as well as its water fountains. Having fun appears as the key expression of the freedom that is sought for on the street and is encapsulated in the much heard term '*zoar*'- to fool around. Fooling around is essentially a social activity, and one that we could constantly observe the youngsters engaging in. For many this fooling around is related to consuming drugs. And in some cases fooling and boisterous acts of physical violence between the youngsters appear quite close together.

[Geisa 14 years old]

What is 'fooling around'?

It's a lot of things, playing, throwing things at each other, flying at each other.

[Aldair 17 years old]

Fun on the street is glue and thinner. Only that, nothing else.

But we also found forms of entertainment within closed spaces. We found significant numbers of youngsters who went to *funk dances*, a very popular phenomenon amongst Carioca youth, that had until recently been confined to those living in the *favelas*. Funk dances, or *baile funk*, happen every weekend in *favelas* throughout Rio. Attracting thousands of youngsters, these dances, taking place in large community halls, 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. This taste for the funk dances, and the funk culture surrounding it, was also noted by the number of songs we heard the youngsters sing during our research, in their majority referring to the drug *Comandos*, that is, the drug gangs and to sex.

[Sandra 15 years old]

Look uncle, I get money the whole week to enjoy the pagode 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!

We believe that the presence of the funk dances are important factors in the lives of these youngsters. As noted by Rizzini, Barker and their research team (2001) in the project *Children, Adolescents and their Support Bases* these spaces are important as one of the few areas in *favelas* and other poor communities, where youngsters assemble freely and have fun. Likewise, for youngsters on the street, funk dances appear as democratic spaces of entertainment where they can interact with youngsters from all sorts of social backgrounds. That youngsters on the street feel part of this phenomenon, can be seen as 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 Carioca youths from the *favelas*. This continuity with Rio youth culture more broadly was also seen in some of the

other leisure activities and spaces, the youngsters we talked to frequented; going to shopping centers, playing football, playing arcade games, going to theme parks and going to the cinema.

3) Mobility.

Being on the street is necessarily an existence of high mobility for children and adolescents. Even if the youngster has one particular area as a point of reference, s/he would rarely remain solely within this region. There are many reasons for this. The youngster may have to move to another area for economic reasons, to a place where it is easier to obtain resources, or else s/he may have been threatened in that particular place. S/he may also move because other places in the city provide more opportunities for leisure. The youngster may also be removed from a particular area by the police if s/he has committed some crime, or else by the council where s/he is removed and placed in one of Rio's shelters.

These constant coming and goings, from home to the street, from the street to shelters or youth correctional institutions, are movements that recur in the lives of youngsters on the street. This perpetual motion also makes the job of the researcher that much harder in trying to get a sense of the life trajectories of those we talked to, making it extremely difficult to piece fragments of experiences together in any orderly or chronological fashion. Instead the youngsters we talked to narrated their life stories in a non-linear, discontinuous way.

a) Leaving the streets.

The lives these children and youth include constant circulation from the home to the streets and to several types of institutions as pointed out. The most common ones are the *abrigos*, or shelters, where they are supposed to stay temporarily, mainly when in need of protection. They do circulate a lot through the existing shelters. The adolescents that commit any kind of infraction are placed in correctional institutions

It is important to single out the difference between an active leaving of the street to a shelter, and when the youngster is removed from the street to a shelter or a correctional institution. Even when agency rests with the child or adolescent, going to a shelter is rarely the end of a career on the street. Instead we find a constant circulation between many different shelters and the street. Leaving the street to an institution filled with rules and time-tables is not easy and the restriction of the freedom enjoyed on the street is often cited as a motive for leaving a shelter.

Though most educators working with children and adolescents on the street emphasize that it is necessary that the desire to leave the street come from the youngster him or herself, pressurized by council authorities a program of 'removal' [*recolhimento*] from the streets is also found. Our research crew was at times met with suspicion or even fear when we were mistaken for the council workers who carry out such removals,

particularly since some of the researchers also acted in this capacity outside of the research.

Lucchini (1998) distinguishes three kinds of exits 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. Considering the active exit, there is a process of choice involved that is elaborated through the trajectory of the youngster on the street and that take him or her to seek another perspective. When the exit stems from an exhaustion of resources or inertia, a dead end is reached on the street where choices to do with survival, mobility and sociability have become depleted. This form of exit differs from an active exit in as much as 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 cases of prolonged institutionalization or prison, and as such is no real exit but only a temporary break.

Another mode of leaving the street we encountered, is when the youngster wants to get out of it for a while. In some cases this may have been because of a threat, by the police, security guards, members of the drug *comandos* or other youngsters³. Also, in some 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 the youngsters state that this is only a provisional measure.

[Roger 15 years old]

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.

Being removed from the street because of an infraction was also found in some of the stories of those we interviewed on the street. Whilst the Law⁴ has a series of 'socio-educational' provisions for such internment, the youngsters refer to these institutions as 'prisons' and as particularly violent and unpleasant places. We heard from the youngsters who had been interned in such places stories of physical and emotional abuse, and of a regime that is contradictory to what appears in the Statute as children's rights.

4) Identity and Subjectivity.

Tracing the subjectivity and the identity construction of youngsters on the street, we approached two interconnected perceptions: *the perception of the street*; before and after dwelling in this space and including the theme of the perception of the street as a site of liberty and autonomy in contrast to the fear which is also experience there. Secondly, *the perception of the self and of others*; where the identities that are

³ One can find in Rio de Janeiro at least the current use of the expression *children in exile* to refer to those cases in which children or adolescents say they cannot go back to their homes or communities for fear of being killed.

⁴ The Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, July 13 1990.

appropriated on the street and the diverse strategies used by children and adolescents to strengthen their self-esteem, including their values and dreams for the future are explored.

a) Perception of the street – the street on the imaginary of children and adolescents.

In the research we sought to identify how the street was imagined before the children entered its space, how it emerged in their imaginary and whether there were friends or parents who frequented the street before the child. We also sought to identify how this vision of the street changes once the youngster has lived there for a period of time. Here we also focused upon what these boys and girls felt to be the good and bad aspects of the street.

Freedom

Twenty youngsters – from the 57 who answered the question – mentioned “freedom” or “play” as their key motivation to go to the street; the street, in these cases, was imagined as a free and fun space where resources for survival are easy to find. The chance to live amongst other boys and girls, fool around, hang out with youngsters of the opposite sex, 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’, so present in the voices of these boys and girls. As Vogel & Mello write:

"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" (Vogel & Mello 1991:145).

Also as cited by Hecht (1998) and Gregori (2000), we noted the importance of freedom as autonomy, as the absence of restrictions and of being reprimanded by adults – or as the boys and girls sometimes said ‘*alugação*’ or ‘*jogação na cara*’ a slang that can be roughly translated as ‘being a drag’ or ‘lecturing’ and ‘rubbing it in your face’.

[Sandra, 15 years old]

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.

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:

[Roger 15 years old]

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...

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.

We encountered many statements where the perception of the street and its possible advantages change once the child becomes an adolescent. In this life stage, the adolescent finds it more difficult to obtain resources, especially by begging, since many passers by become scared when approached. Also the police see them more as 'thieves' than as adolescents treating them, in many cases, more brutally. We found statements, like the one above, which show a certain tiredness of the street and its possibilities of leisure after a certain age.

The issues of freedom, autonomy, leisure and drugs were cited by 26 out of the 56 boys and girls who answered the question 'what is good on the street'. Another important factor is friendship, cited by several of them. But what is considered friendship for them? How are these bonds created on the street?

The children and adolescents interviewed related examples of strong friendships created on the street and of groups which lived together for many years. In some cases, this friendship already existed inside the community of origin, facilitating the initiation into the street as we have already seen. We could observe that friends do help each other on the street. In this way we consider the term 'groups of street children' to be mistaken, for what appears to exist are groups of friends of different sizes who '*param*' – that is literally 'stop' or 'hang out' together and who transit through different spaces where they can meet other groups of friends. As we noted before, this larger group is sought normally at night, for protection since at this time they feel more vulnerable. For children and adolescents who effectively live on the street this experience of friendship and group bonding is what gives them a sense of protection and support, and perhaps, the feeling of a social belonging absent in their past with their families. It may be because of this that many affirm to feel safer on the street than at home. And it may be also because of this, that children are so easily accepted by groups on the street and easily form friendships.

[Filomena 15 years old]

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.

Though the exception, we also noted that in some cases children and adolescents didn't like to walk around in a group and preferred being alone walking through different parts of the city:

[Alba 17 years old]

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.

These problems, as we shall see, are often related to the perception and action of passers-by and the authorities.

'Nastiness' & 'dissing': violence and fear...

In the interviews we were surprised to find how frequently the children reported that the street didn't have anything that they thought was good. From the 30 interviews that directly tackled the question 'what is good on the street?' 20 answered 'nothing'. We noted in this respect that the answers were tied up with a vision of the street as violent and as a place of suffering. Of the 43 interviews that answered the question 'what is bad on the street?' 26 mentioned violence. Also mentioned was: hunger (6 answers), drugs (6 answers), the police (8 answers) and prejudice (7 answers).

[Ruanda 13 years old]

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...

The slang term '*esculachar*' – here translated as the English/American slang 'dissing' short for disrespecting – is commonly used to describe a form of physical, symbolic or moral violence. To get hit or be verbally abused are encapsulated by this slang which is very present in the voices we heard. We also noted that the police were very often the perpetrators of this 'dissing', the police, as well as the unarmed Municipal Guard, being greatly feared. Many statements refer to violence suffered at the hands of the police, for various reasons, even for just being on the street. Of the 30 children who addressed the question if they had suffered some form of violence, all affirmed that they had. Of the 28 who referred to who committed the act, 15 mentioned the police, 3

mentioned private security guards and 6 mentioned other children. This is also a theme that is very much discussed in the national and international literature. In Brazil's case, for at least the last 20 years, a great number of children have reported cases of enormous cruelty. There is no doubt that this is a point which demands more attention and urgent measures by the organizations active in the area of the rights of children and adolescents.

b) Perception of the self and others.

We could observe that boys and girls living on the street possess a range of options implicated in the fashioning of identities on the street. These options, or orientations, can also serve as survival strategies on the street, where socially constructed images of 'street children', such as that of the 'poor kid' or 'young thief' are manipulated by the youngsters to their advantage in particular encounters. Gregori terms this exercise '*viração*' – which can be translated as 'getting by', or 'making do' – a colloquial term that refers to the obtaining of resources for survival – 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

Whereas our research pointed to cases of the interiorisation or naturalization of the prejudiced discourse from certain segments of society against the youngsters, such as in the way they referred to each other for instance, more numerous and significant were the cases when the children showed themselves to be extremely sensitive to the prejudice of others. When we asked them what they thought other people thought about them, almost all replied that they had a sense of being discriminated. Of the 34 interviews which approached the subject, 29 reported that others feared them, believing them to be thieves. Only 3 reported positive perceptions that others have of them and all of these were children below 13 years of age and only worked but not lived on the street.

In some cases we observed that the fear of others can be useful and appropriated in the case of a robbery as in the interviews below.

[Andrade 15 years old]

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."

We could observe that although boys and girls are aware that many of them rob, they feel discriminated and hurt when they are mixed up with the real robbers. As we saw

there are those who assert that seeing them as robbers could even lead them to begin robbing since in the eyes of the other, he is already a thief anyway. If the boys and girls are aware of the different kind of behavior that exist on the street, they are also aware that there are many reasons why children end up on the street.

The other side of the experience of prejudice is the great necessity to project oneself as equal to others. We saw that being treated like a 'person', a 'citizen' or just like anyone else was a strong wish repeatedly expressed by the children, when asked what they would like others to think about them. Of the 25 who answered the question, 12 answered 'good things', 5 referred to 'understanding' and 4 showed the desire to be treated like a 'person' or a 'citizen'. Only showed the desire to project himself as a 'bandit'.

[Alba 17 years old]

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].

c) Values and self-esteem.

Home, work, family and study

Related to the necessity of being respected and treated like any other citizen, a series of values and strategies are used in order to maintain self-esteem on the street. Although prejudiced sectors of society believe that the street is a place devoid of values and morals, our research, like that of other researchers, found precisely the opposite (Castro 1997, Hecht 1998). Almost all the interviewees valued the same things as society in general; being respected, having their own home, work, family and study as a form of social mobility. At least 33 children showed that they desired work, their own home, family and study for their future. Although the life 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

We could observe in certain moments that the children on the street are aware of having adopted an identity whose values are loathed by society at large. Many children refer to their life on the street as 'the bad path', frequently related to their use of drugs. We also noted that an initiation into the street, or at least the moment in which the child understands him/herself to have been initiated into a 'street culture', is associated with their experience with drugs. In this sense we could observe that life on the street is at times referred to as a 'vice', a difficult habit to break, something which, once one gets used to, it is hard to leave.

In some cases we noted the influence of the drug traffic within the myriad of identities of some of these boys and girls. Not that these would be directly involved with drug trafficking gangs – although some were – but that the territoriality of the drug gangs, the *comandos*, exerted an influence over their lives and over the way in which they saw themselves. We saw how drug trafficking gangs and the various demarcations of territory are present on the street as well as in the institutions. In a way the association of a boy with a certain area, and as a consequence a certain *comando* is inevitable, although this mark is not necessarily visible in all of his/her relationships.

Love

The values concerning the affective relations of boys and girls who live on the street is another area we explored. Of the 47 interviews that touched on this topic, we observed 21 cases of affective relationships, or couples on the street, including marriages. Of the 47 children and adolescents, 11 had children of their own. We noted that many relationships had persevered for many years, that some unions included both the mother and father of the child, although in most cases single mothers took care of their child. When we asked about sex, boys and girls showed a concern with privacy and related the difficulties of having sexual relations on the street.

Identity and Subjectivity: orientating oneself on the street...

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 this orientation manifests itself, seeking to give visibility to how and with what they identify; their strategies for maintaining their self-esteem; their values and dreams for the future.

We saw that the street offers for these children and adolescents the possibility of protection, release and freedom when contrasted with what they say about their family and community – described as repressive, confining, full of conflicts, violence and characterized by fractured affective ties. The pictures the youngsters narrated to us describe two worlds where affection, security and opportunities for their wholesome development appeared impossible - the worlds of the home and that of the street. In spite of this, we saw that the youngsters adopted strategies on the street that can be said to generate certain kinds of subjectivity, seen in the ways in which these boys and girls cluster in groups, earn and spend money, have fun and relate between themselves and with adults.

We can suggest that what unites these children and adolescents, coming from different family environments and entering the street for what can be quite diverse reasons, is that they find themselves in an environment where they lack the tutelary attention of a responsible adult who really looks out for them. We could say that these boys and girls share an experience of poverty, exclusion and prejudice, that they live in precarious circumstances where the lack of affection, of the feeling of protection, security

and solidarity probably pushed them away from their home and community. As a consequence, they moved from the nucleus of the family to an urban space in search for survival, protection, leisure and freedom.

We saw in the interviews that the journey to the street means that the lives of these boys and girls are always close to danger, fear and violence. We outlined above various factors that are associated to this kind of life, in particular we emphasized the experience of growing up predominantly without the care of an adult. In this way we heard, with sadness, that this trajectory left many boys and girls without a perspective for their future, without being able to remember anything good that had happened to them in their life.

On the other hand, we witnessed, with much hope, the examples of solidarity, creativity and the ability to overcome difficult situations shown by the boys and girls. United through the experience of discrimination which they encounter daily, a large number of those interviewed showed a strong desire to be considered 'normal', that is, like any other youngster. In their quest for acceptance by those who are indifferent, or who despise or belittle – the passer-by, the police, the shop-keeper, 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 for their future.

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