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How Do Brazilian Street Youth Experience 'The Street'?: Analysis Of A Sentence Completion Task

Marcela Raffaelli
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mraffaelli1@unl.edu

Silvia H. Koller
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Caroline T. Reppold
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Mateus B. Kuschick
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Fernanda M. b. Krum
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Marcela Raffaelli, Silvia H. Koller, Caroline T. Reppold, Mateus B. Kuschick, Fernanda M. b. Krum, and
Denise R. Bandeira

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Marcela Raffaelli
University of Nebraska

Silvia H. Koller, Caroline T. Reppold, Mateus B. Kuschick,
Fernanda M.b. Krum and Denise R. Bandeira
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

This study investigated how homeless Brazilian youth experience the street and examined factors linked to positive and negative feelings about the street. An opportunity sample of 35 boys and 34 girls aged 10–18 completed a structured interview and sentence completion task aimed at eliciting open-ended responses in a standardized manner. Analyses revealed great diversity in youths' views of the street; moreover, in analyses controlling for age and gender, youth reporting feeling positive on the street differed from those who felt negative in reasons for leaving home, family situation and daily survival. The findings support the value of the sentence completion task in exploring the subjective experiences of street youth.

Key words: Brazil, homelessness, poverty, street children

Around the world, children and adolescents can be found working, and sometimes living, on city streets. In recent years, the empirical literature on 'street youth' has increased dramatically as social scientists and advocates have described these youngsters' lives and experiences (for reviews, see Aptekar, 1994; Connolly and Ennew, 1996; Raffaelli, 1997; Rizzini, 1996; Rizzini and Lusk, 1995). Attempting to understand the developmental impact of street life, some researchers have investigated the daily contexts that provide developmental opportunities for youth (e.g. Alves et al., 1999; Campos et al., 1994; Silva et al., 1998). This research has yielded important information about external aspects of the lives of homeless and working street youth. For example, Campos et al. (1994) found differences in the daily activities and social networks of youth depending on age, gender and living situation. Absent from most research, however, are youngsters' own opinions about their life situation. Although many anecdotes about street youths' experiences can be found in the popular press and in materials produced by agencies set up to advocate for or directly assist these youngsters, the lack of an insider perspective in scholarly research limits how street youth are portrayed and understood.

One question that has not been satisfactorily answered is the extent to which street youth show positive adaptation to street life. Researchers have found that individual children and adolescents differ in their adaptation to street life (e.g. Aptekar, 1989; Diversi et al., 1999; Tyler, et al., 1991; Verma, 1999), and observers report that at least some children and adolescents 'like' being on the street or are on the street by choice (Aptekar, 1994; Felsman, 1989; Hecht, 1998; Lucchini, 1996a). However, others suggest that youngsters may be choosing the lesser of two evils by abandoning the home for the street. For example, South African street youth describe their families as disorganized, punitive and hostile, and talk about seeking a better life in the streets (Swart-Kruger and Donald, 1996). In Brazil, Hutz and Forster (1996) found that children had more confidence in people from child welfare agencies and the media than in their families. A study in another Brazilian city showed that children identified their homes as a source of risk because of family violence and neglect as well as poverty, and sought protection, companionship and survival on the street (Martins, 1996a). Thus, the question of whether youth are truly on the street by choice, and whether they are adapting positively to the street environment, remains open.

The current study was designed to explore homeless youngsters' reactions to the street and identify factors linked to different reactions to being on the street. In recent years, developmental scholars have noted that research often ignores the voices of participants (e.g. Rabello de Castro, 1996) and drawn attention to the need for developing participatory research methods (e.g. Bemak, 1996; van Beers, 1996). By neglecting youngsters' own views of their lives, researchers run the risk of forgetting that these youngsters 'interpret the world in which they tenuously exist' (Hecht, 1998: 25). Developmental theorists such as Magnusson (1995) have argued that the environment does not just 'shape' development; instead, it serves as a source of information, and the meaning individuals make of their situation influences how they experience their lives. Therefore, to understand the development of homeless youth, we must explore not only the objective reality of their situation but also its internal dimensions.

To elicit youths' opinions and feelings in a systematic yet open-ended way, we developed a sentence completion task, taking advantage of a methodology that to our knowledge has never been used with street youth. The advantage of this methodology is that it permits the collection of qualitative information while providing sufficient structure to overcome some of the difficulties street youth may have responding to completely open-ended questions due to lack of formal education (results in a limited vocabulary) and short attention span due to the need to remain vigilant to danger and opportunities on the street. In the current article, we examine how homeless youth experience the street and examine factors linked to positive and negative experiences on the street.

Method

Procedures

The study was conducted in Porto Alegre, a middle-sized city (population 1.5 million) in southern Brazil. Although no exact statistics exist, it is estimated that there are between 400 and 500 homeless street youth (i.e. children and adolescents who spend most of their time in street settings, who frequent institutions set up to serve street youth and who have limited family contact) in Porto Alegre (Koller and Hutz, 1996). In the current study, an opportunity sample was recruited by approaching youth in governmental and non-governmental street youth agencies (e.g. shelters, open houses providing meals and recreational activities). This recruitment strategy is commonly used in research with homeless children, who are rarely found in contexts that permit random sampling (Hutz and Koller, 1999; Matchinda, 1999). Following procedures approved by institutional review boards at the coinvestigators' home universities, interviewers approached potential respondents, explained the study and invited them to participate in a two-part interview. The first part of the interview consisted of a sentence completion task, and the second part of a semi-structured interview. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese by trained university students.

Participants

Sixty-nine youngsters (35 boys, 34 girls) aged 10–18 (*M* 14.4 years, SD = 1.9) completed the entire study and provided demographic information (nine others completed the sentence completion task but not the interview and are excluded from these analyses). Over one-third (36 percent) of the respondents were white; the majority were black (41 percent) or of mixed/multiracial descent (23 percent). Two-fifths (41 percent) of the participants were not attending school, 30 percent were in the formal educational system and 29 percent attended alternative schools set up to serve youth who are no longer involved in the formal educational system.

As might be expected from the sampling strategy, all of the youths frequented institutions serving 'street kids'. When asked what they did during a typical day, youngsters said they went to institutions (61 percent), went to school (48 percent), played games or sports (26 percent), worked (19 percent), 'hung out' (19 percent), or begged (6 percent) (categories are not mutually exclusively so percentages add up to over 100). Only a few youth said they spent time at home during either the day (*N* = 3) or night (*N* = 5), and about 20 percent went home on weekends. When asked where they typically slept, two-fifths (42 percent) of the respondents said institutions, 26 percent the street, 7 percent both institutions and the street, 10 percent home only and 14 percent some combination of home, street and institutions. Although there is considerable debate over what constitutes a 'street youth' (e.g. Hutz and Koller, 1999; Koller

and Hutz, 1996; Martins, 1996b), all of the youngsters in the current sample were interviewed in agencies set up to serve street youth and were entrenched in street life and physically detached from their families of origin.

Measures

Sentence completion task: In conducting this research, we faced the challenge of eliciting information without 'leading' the participants by relying exclusively on direct questions (Aptekar, 1994). However, we did not want to conduct completely unstructured interviews for a number of reasons, including standardization of the data and appropriateness of the method for the population (Hutz and Koller, 1999). To reconcile these competing goals, we developed the 'Sentence Completion Task for Street Children and Adolescents'. Drawing on prior research using sentence completion tasks (e.g. Cunha et al., 1993), a pool of 33 potential sentence stems was developed. These stems were written in simple language and reflected the reality of street youths' lives. Twenty-four items assessing different domains were selected for inclusion in the measure based on whether the items were understandable and not redundant with other items. This article focuses on six sentence stems about 'street life' developed for the current study ('In the street, I feel . . .'; 'When I sleep in the street, I don't feel . . .'; 'What I most like about the street is . . .'; 'What I don't like about the street is . . .'; 'In the street, people . . .'; and 'The street is not . . .').

The sentence completion task was presented as a game. Respondents were told that the interviewer would read some unfinished sentences and that they should 'finish the sentences with the first thing you think of'. These instructions ensured that answers were spontaneous and as close to uncensored as possible. Interviewers worked in pairs; one conducted the interview and the other wrote down the responses given by the child. After the child had responded to all the stems, the interviewer read back the responses and asked for an explanation of the answer, which was also noted down verbatim. The sentence completion task was very successful in eliciting responses. Interviewers reported that youngsters became readily engaged in the task, and levels of missing or uncodable responses were low.

Inductively derived content-coding schemes were developed for responses to each sentence stem; two coders working independently classified the responses and discrepancies between coders were resolved by a third coder. The coding categories, and examples of responses falling into each category, are presented in the results section as findings are described.

Semi-structured interview: The interview, which was administered after the sentence completion task, assessed various aspects of youngsters' experiences (e.g. daily activities, life events, schooling). Again, responses were written down verbatim by the interviewer. In this article, we focus on three aspects of youths'

lives that were expected to influence reactions to the street: reasons for leaving home, family situation and daily survival.

Plan of analysis

In the first half of the results section, we describe responses to the sentence completion stems regarding street life and examine patterns related to gender, age and overall emotions experienced on the street (positive vs negative). For age analyses, the sample was divided into two groups roughly equivalent to an 'early adolescent' and 'middle adolescent' division: 10- to 14-year-olds ($N = 36$; 57 percent male) and 15- to 8-year-olds ($N = 33$; 43 percent male). In the second half of the article, we examine factors linked to different reactions to being on the street. Because the data are categorical, chi-square or Fisher's exact tests were used to examine distribution of responses by age and gender. In analyses that control for age and gender, Maentel–Hantzel chi-squares (a variation on the standard chi-square test that permits stratification by control variables) were computed. Because the small sample size resulted in limited statistical power, actual significance levels up to .20 are reported rather than setting a specific cut-off for reporting results.

Results

How do street youth experience 'the street'? Results of the sentence completion task

Overall feelings on the street: When asked to complete the sentence stem 'In the street I feel', about a third of the respondents listed positive emotions, just over half negative emotions, and over a tenth a combination of positive and negative emotions (Table 1). Examples of responses coded as positive are 'Free, I don't like to stick to a schedule', 'Great, I have a lot of friends, pals, clients'. Negative responses included 'Sad, something could happen to me or my sisters' and 'Lonely, there's no one to talk to or to help you'. Mixed responses were 'so-so' or a combination of positive and negative emotions. No differences in the overall percentage of youth reporting positive, negative or mixed emotions emerged attributable to gender ($p > .20$) or age ($p > .20$).

Perceptions of the street: Five of the sentence stems dealt with different aspects of street life, including overall perceptions of the street, likes and dislikes, and views of people in the street. Analyses were conducted to examine differences in views of the street according to gender, age and overall reactions to being on the street. For the latter analyses, youngsters were divided into two groups according to whether they reported positive or negative emotions on the street.

Table 1 Responses to sentence stem 'In the street I feel . . .' by gender and age group

	Total (N = 67)	Gender		Age group	
		Girls (N = 32)	Boys (N = 35)	10–14 (N = 36)	15–18 (N = 31)
Positive emotions	33	37.5	29	33	32
Good/happy	21	22	20	22	19
Free	6	6	6	6	6
Better than at home	4	6	3	3	6
Other/unspecified	1.5	3	0	3	0
Negative emotions	54	53	54	53	55
Bad/sad	28	25	31	28	29
Lonely/abandoned	16	22	11	22	10
Afraid	3	0	6	0	6
Other/unspecified	6	6	6	3	10
Mixture	13	9	17	14	13

Note: Percentage of youth giving each response.

The 'mixed' emotions group, which included only nine respondents, was too small to allow meaningful analysis and was omitted from these comparisons.

Completing the sentence stem 'The street is not', two-thirds of the respondents said 'a good place' or 'good' (Table 2). These youngsters emphasized negative events on the street: 'There are those guys who kill kids in the street', 'You learn things you shouldn't know, like sniffing glue, stealing', and 'There are a lot of criminals'. The remaining two-thirds of youth said the street was not 'a place to live', 'a future', or 'bad/what people think'. No gender or age differences in responses to this item emerged ($p > .20$). However, more youngsters who felt positive emotions about the street said it was not 'a place to live' than those who reported negative emotions (26 vs 6 percent) and fewer said it was not 'a future' (5 vs 17 percent) or 'bad/what people think' (5 vs 8 percent) ($p = .126$).

Two sentence stems assessed what youngsters liked and disliked about the street. There was considerable overlap in responses to these two stems, so the same codes were used for both likes and dislikes. The most commonly named likes and dislikes were activities (including being with friends, talking, shopping, going to institutions and stealing), people (passers-by, specific individuals, other street youth) and specific places. Other likes and dislikes were the physical conditions (e.g. food, weather, living situation), authority figures or violence ('the police hitting us', 'assaults, murder') and drugs.

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Table 2 Responses to sentence stem 'The street is not ...' by gender, age and overall feelings on the street

	Total (N = 66)	Gender		Age group		Feelings on street	
		Girls (N = 31)	Boys (N = 35)	10–14 (N = 34)	15–18 (N = 32)	Positive (N = 19)	Negative (N = 36)
Good	68	68	69	68	69	63	69
A place to live	14	16	11	12	16	26	6
Future	11	6.5	14	12	9	5	17
Bad	8	10	6	9	6	5	8

Note: Percentage of youth giving each response.

Table 3 Responses to sentence stem 'What I like most about the street is ...' by gender, age and overall feelings on the street

	Total (N = 66)	Gender		Age group		Feelings on street	
		Girls (N = 31)	Boys (N = 35)	10–14 (N = 35)	15–18 (N = 31)	Positive (N = 22)	Negative (N = 36)
Nothing	12	10	14	17	6.5	0	19
Activities	45.5	42	49	34	58	42	36
Drugs	1.5	0	3	0	3	0	3
People	30	35.5	26	37	23	42	33
Authorities/violence	1.5	0	3	0	3	5	0
Physical conditions	4.5	3	6	6	3	4	6
Specific place	4.5	10	0	6	3	10.5	3

Note: Percentage of youth giving each response.

Table 4 Responses to sentence stem 'What I don't like about the street is . . .' by gender, age and overall feelings on the street

	Total (N = 68)	Gender		Age group		Feelings on street	
		Girls (N = 33)	Boys (N = 35)	10–14 (N = 36)	15–18 (N = 32)	Positive (N = 22)	Negative (N = 36)
Nothing	1	6	0	3	3	0	3
Activities	9	6	11	8	9	5	14
Drugs	9	6	11	6	12.5	5	14
People	21	30	11	28	12.5	24	22
Authorities/violence	35	27	43	36	34	48	19
Physical conditions	22	24	20	17	28	19	25
Everything	3	0	3	3	0	0	3

Note: Percentage of youth giving each response.

The overall distribution of responses to these two stems are shown in Table 3 (likes) and Table 4 (dislikes).

Because of the number of response categories and the small sample size, statistical analyses by gender, age and overall reactions to being on the street could not be conducted. However, examination of the pattern of responses to the sentence stem regarding likes revealed few differences attributable to gender. More of the early adolescent youth said there was *nothing* they liked about the street, and nearly one-fifth of the youngsters who felt generally negative about the street said there was *nothing* they liked about the street, compared to none of the positive emotions group. Turning to what youth disliked about the street, nearly three times as many girls as boys named people, and fewer referred to authority figures or violence. Few age differences could be discerned. Nearly half of the youngsters who felt generally positive said they disliked authority figures or violence; in contrast, youngsters who felt generally negative were more likely to name activities, drugs or physical conditions as what they disliked.

Because street youth spend much of their time in public locations, they often receive attention from people who are in the street. One sentence stem focused on this aspect of their lives ('In the street, people . . .'). As shown in Table 5, the most common responses reflected negative treatment ('Are rude, aggressive', 'Can be mean, insensitive, obnoxious') or suspicion directed at youth ('Are afraid of us because they think we're going to rob them'). Youth also gave responses indicating positive treatment ('Give us money', 'Don't hit us'), a mixture of positive and negative interactions ('Some are nice, others mean', 'Some give [money], others don't'), or lack of interaction ('Walk by and ignore us'). Differences in responses to this item emerged based on gender; more of the boys than girls reported suspicion, and fewer negative interactions (p = .10). Younger youth were more likely to report negative interactions than older youth, and less likely to report mixed interactions (p > .20). No differences linked to overall emotions on the street emerged in responses to this item.

When asked to complete the stem 'When I sleep in the street, I *don't* feel . . .', most (91 percent) of the 53 youngsters who had ever slept on the street said they did not feel good. Youngsters gave varied reasons for disliking sleeping on the street: 'I feel cold, hungry, guys keep bugging us'; 'It's horrible, there's no safety' and 'I miss my mother and siblings'. More girls than boys (17 vs 3 percent; p = .10) and more younger than older youth (18 vs 0 percent; p = .034) said they did not feel bad sleeping on the street. In addition, more of the youngsters reporting positive feelings about the street said they did not feel bad when sleeping on the street compared to those who reported negative feelings (17 vs 3 percent; p = .15).

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Table 5 Responses to sentence stem 'In the street, people . . .' by gender, age and overall feelings on the street

	Total (N = 65)	Gender		Age group		Feelings on street	
		Girls (N = 30)	Boys (N = 35)	10–14 (N = 34)	15–18 (N = 31)	Positive (N = 22)	Negative (N = 36)
No interaction/ignore	15	17	14	15	16	15	12
Suspicion	25	17	31	24	26	20	29
Negative interaction	28	43	14	38	16	30	29
Positive interaction	15	10	20	15	19	15	18
Mixture positive/ negative	17	13	20	9	23	20	12

Note: Percentage of youth giving each response.

Summary: How do youth experience 'the street'?

Analysis of responses to sentence stems about street life revealed great diversity in how youth felt on the street, what they liked and disliked about street life, and their opinions about the street. No strong patterns emerged to suggest that individual characteristics of age or gender were primary organizers of youngsters' experiences on the street. Differences in views of the street were linked to youngsters' overall reactions to the street (positive vs negative) as well as to individual characteristics of gender and age. The next step in the analysis was to attempt to identify factors linked to positive and negative emotions on the street as a way to begin identifying possible influences on youngsters' reactions to the street.

Factors linked to different reactions to being on the street

In the following analyses, youth reporting positive as opposed to negative emotions on the street were compared on three aspects of their lives: reasons for leaving home, family situation and daily survival. These analyses controlled for age and gender.

Reasons for leaving home: During the semi-structured interview, respondents gave up to two reasons why they had left home. The percentages reporting each of seven reasons (death of a family member, abuse in family, family conflict, poverty, drugs, friends and freedom) were cross-tabulated by whether youth felt positive or negative on the street. As shown in Table 6, youngsters reporting positive emotions on the street were less likely to have left home because of abuse (p = .11), and more likely to have left because of friends (p =. 09) or in search of freedom (p > .20) than those reporting negative emotions.

      To explore this finding further, respondents were classified according to whether they reported only factors that have been described as pushing children out of the home (parental death, poverty, conflict, abuse), only factors that have been described as pulling children to the street (freedom, friends, drugs) or a combination of factors. Youngsters reporting negative emotions about the street were more likely to report only 'push' factors (81 vs 56 percent of youth reporting positive emotions), as opposed to only 'pull' factors (16 vs 28 percent) or a mixture of 'push' and 'pull' factors (3 vs 17 percent) (p = .12). It makes sense that youngsters who go onto the street to escape family stress or conflict (factors that 'push' youngsters from the home) should feel worse about being there than those who experienced some kind of attraction or are 'pulled' to the street. The next issue addressed was whether the family situation of the two groups of youngsters differed in ways that may have contributed to their being on the street.

Table 6 Percentage of reasons for leaving home by overall feelings on the street

	Positive (N = 22)	Negative (N = 36)
Death in family	14	6
Abuse in family	9	31
Conflict in family	32	44
Poverty in family	4.5	6
Drugs	4.5	3
Friends	14	0
Freedom	23	14

Note: Youth gave up to two reasons for leaving, so categories are not mutually exclusive.

Family situation: Four family variables assessed in the semi-structured interview were examined. The majority of youth in both groups had family members in the same city (84 percent of youth reporting generally positive emotions vs 81 percent of those reporting generally negative emotions) and around half had visited their family home within the last month (52 vs 53 percent). However, as described above (Table 6), parental death was more frequently reported by the subgroup of youth who reported positive emotions about the street (paternal death: 32 vs 14 percent, $p = .19$; maternal death 23 vs 14 percent, $p > .20$).

Daily survival: Street youth confront multiple challenges in their daily lives, having to exert considerable ingenuity to meet basic survival needs, and their success at meeting those needs is likely to influence how youngsters experience the street. We compared youngsters who said they felt generally positive as opposed to generally negative about the street on a set of questions assessing ability to obtain food, shelter, social and instrumental support and education. Several significant differences emerged between the two groups (see Table 7). More youth reporting negative emotions slept in institutions ($p < .10$) as opposed to the street ($p < .10$) or at their family home ($p = .12$). Youngsters in the two groups relied on different sources of help; those reporting positive emotions about the street were more likely to get help from friends or people in the street and less likely to get help from institutions ($p < .05$).

Several other items did not differ significantly between the two groups,

Table 7 Daily survival variables by how respondents feel on the street

	Positive (N = 22)	Negative (N = 36)
Go hungry	50	64
Sleep on street	59	33
Sleep at family home	27	11
Sleep in institutions	41	67
Sleep with friends	4.5	8
Feel safe where sleep	73	67
Someone helps	77	67
Who helps:		
Friends/people on street	47	12.5
Institution/church	35	71
Family	18	16.5
Currently attending school	54.5	58
If in school, type:		
Traditional	67	41
Alternative	33	59

Note: Percentage of youth responding 'yes' to each item.

but a pattern emerged suggesting that youth in the positive emotions group were better able to meet their daily needs. For example, only half of these youngsters said they went hungry, compared to nearly two-thirds of the youth reporting generally negative emotions on the street. Similarly, over three-quarters of the positive emotions group said someone would help them, compared to two-thirds of the negative emotions group. Finally, among the subset of youth attending school, a larger proportion of the positive emotions group were in traditional state schools as opposed to alternative schools set up to serve youth who are no longer involved in the formal educational system.

Summary: factors linked to different reactions to being on the street:
When compared on a set of questions examining reasons for leaving home, family situation and daily survival, youngsters who experienced negative as opposed to positive emotions about the street were more likely to report leaving home despite having intact families and made use of different sources of assistance, including alternative schools and shelters set up to meet the needs of homeless youth.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to investigate how homeless Brazilian youth experience the street and examine factors linked to positive and negative experiences on the street. The findings build on prior research in two main ways. First, the newly developed 'Sentence Completion Task for Street Children and Adolescents' widens the options of researchers as they attempt to collect systematic information about homeless youths' thoughts and feelings about their lives. Second, the analyses in this article suggest that researchers should move beyond examining differences in the experiences of street youth depending on external factors (e.g. age, gender, living situation) and begin to examine subjective dimensions of street youths' experiences. Our discussion focuses on these two issues.

Street youth researchers have been criticized for an overreliance on surveys and questionnaires as their main source of data (e.g. Connolly and Ennew, 1996; Hutz and Koller, 1999; Lucchini, 1996b). In recent years, scholars have developed new methodologies adapted to homeless youth, including collection of spontaneous stories (e.g. Diversi et al., 1999) and observations in natural environments (e.g. Alves et al., 1999). Other investigators have utilized multi-method approaches; such studies typically involve a range of data collection techniques including structured surveys, observations, focus groups and in-depth interviews (e.g. Campos et al., 1994) or biological methods (e.g. height and weight, blood tests) (e.g. Baker et al., 1996; Pinto et al., 1994). Use of a multi-method approach permits triangulation of findings collected in diverse contexts (Lucchini, 1996b). The sentence completion task described in this article has the potential to expand the methodological options available to street youth researchers (see also Raffaelli et al., 2000).

The sentence completion task was developed to assess youngsters' view of the streets in an open-ended yet structured way. Youth were presented with a set of incomplete sentence stems and asked to finish each sentence in their own way. Critics may argue that responses to the sentence completion task are defensive or inaccurate; however, these responses provide important insight into how children view their world. Scholars have pointed out that although children's accounts may be 'distorted partial and biased', they assume 'an objective facticity within their own interpretive framework' (Visano, 1990: 145). To understand how individuals make sense of their own lives, we must allow them to speak in their own words. On a more pragmatic level, use of the sentence completion task to elicit responses may be one way of getting around the problems of 'scripting' and 'manipulation' that street youth researchers have described (Aptekar, 1994). Unlike a direct question that demands a specific response, the sentence completion task is more indirect and forces the respondent to generate his or her own answers. However, at the same time, it provides a degree of standardization that facilitates data collection and analysis by structuring children's

thinking and narrowing the task demands. Future research could expand on this research in several ways; for example, by replicating the study with other populations of youth or drawing on our findings to create structured measures to evaluate different dimensions of how street youth view the street.

Many of the findings from this study echo those reported in prior research, suggesting that despite the small, non-random sample we can have confidence in the quality of the data. For example, reasons for leaving home are similar to those found in other Latin American countries (e.g. Peralta, 1992; Rizzini and Lusk, 1995; Tyler et al., 1991; Visano, 1990), and others have described the multiple challenges street youth confront in their daily lives (Diversi et al., 1999; Felsman, 1989; Hutz and Koller, 1997; Tyler et al., 1991). Similarities between the findings and those reported using other methods of data collection in a variety of Brazilian cities also emerged (Bonamigo, 1996; Carpena and Koller, 1999; Hutz and Forster, 1996; Macêdo and Brito, 1998; Maciel et al., 1997, 1998; Martins, 1996a, 1996b; Menezes and Brasil, 1998; Peres and Dessen, 1999; Rosemberg, 1996; Silva et al., 1998). Additional findings from the sentence completion task permitted examination of subjective aspects of youngsters' lives. The majority of the homeless children and adolescents who participated in this study stated that the street is not 'a good place'. Despite this overall assessment, there was considerable variation in how youngsters felt on the street, and descriptions of experiences on the street as well as life situation varied depending on reactions to the street (Hutz and Koller, 1997). It appears that there is no one 'street' in which 'street children' exist.

Differences in descriptions of the street were linked to youngsters' overall reactions to the street (positive vs negative) as well as individual characteristics of gender and age. While claiming to like the street may be taken as denial or bravura, differences in youngsters' life situation were found depending on how they reported feeling on the street. For example, youngsters reporting positive emotions on the street were more likely to say they left home because of factors that have been identified as 'pulling' children onto the street (e.g. adventure, peers); in contrast, youngsters reporting negative emotions were more likely to say they had been 'pushed' onto the street by family problems, abuse, or poverty. Similarly, youngsters reporting positive and negative feelings on the street differed in how they met their daily survival needs. Youth who felt positive on the street relied less on institutions for shelter and help than those who felt negative on the street. Youth who felt negative were also most likely to be enrolled in alternative schools set up to serve youth who are no longer in the formal educational system due to academic or disciplinary difficulties. It may be that these differences reflect broader differences in social networks that influence youngsters' quality of life on the street. The importance of forming social networks on the street has been pointed out by street youth scholars (e.g. Brito

and Koller, 1999; Ennew, 1994; Swart-Kruger and Donald, 1996) and is an area that should be investigated further. It may also be that these differences reflect underlying differences in psychological functioning, an area that has received little attention by researchers (see Raffaelli [1999] for a review).

In conclusion, the findings and methodology reported in this article add to the existing empirical research literature on street youth. They also make a contribution to the larger field of developmental psychology, which has historically neglected children and adolescents from non-mainstream populations (Hutz and Koller, 1997; Raffaelli and Larson, 1999). However, aside from its scientific contribution, we hope that this study is useful to practitioners working to assist homeless youth. Children and adolescents largely responsible for their own survival can be found on the streets of most of the world's cities. The allure of the street is evident in the fact that many youngsters have difficult readapting to life off the street (Hecht, 1998; Tyler et al., 1991). Service providers struggle with the question of how to help these youngsters reintegrate into social institutions after experiencing the sometimes dangerous freedom of the street (Hanssen, 1996). Information on how youngsters view their lives on the street can be useful to individuals who are trying to develop programs to help improve the quality of life of homeless youth.

Note

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