

The Social Construction of Street Children: Configuration and Implications

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Summary

This article analyses the literature on street children, and identifies patterns of descriptions, characterizations and explanations of the origin of the phenomenon. It is argued that the discourses on street children naturalize social deprivation and stigmatize poor families and children. Street life is presented as the outcome of an organic and linear chain of adverse factors including migration, economic hardship, family dysfunction and child abuse. Street children and their families are portrayed as displaying socially unacceptable attributes which place them outside mainstream society. It is also argued that the social construction of street children prompts interventions which sustain the status quo of social inequalities. It is suggested that a potential way to move forward is to employ these arguments along with other perspectives in a communal reflexive exercise, as the foundation for the co-creation of a new future for children and adolescents.

Social inequalities are among the most prominent features of contemporary societies, and the existence of people living on the streets provides the most obvious evidence of this phenomenon. Every aspect of their lives is exposed to the public gaze and appraisal, and their appearance, life conditions and behaviour arouse pity, disgust, horror and disapproval among spectators. Ultimately, people living on the streets epitomize social degradation, and this is further emphasized when they are unaccompanied children and adolescents. According to the prevailing social norms and cultural assumptions of western societies, these young individuals are vulnerable and in need of adult protection and guidance (Boyden, 1990). Children and adolescents are expected to be at home or attending school, and not spending most of their time

in public places without adult care. Policy-makers and scientists have been increasingly concerned with this social phenomenon since the early 1980s, and a considerable number of publications are devoted to the description of such individuals and their street life, and the suggestion of possible interventions.

The terms used in the literature and media to refer to children living on the streets vary according to the geographical area of their home country. Despite the fact that some authors (e.g. Boyden, 1991) use the term 'homeless' interchangeably with that of 'street children,' or equate homelessness with a specific type of street children (e.g. Panter-Brick *et al.*, 1996), the term 'homeless' has been almost exclusively reserved to studies of individuals living in North America and Western Europe. The term which is most frequently used with reference to children and adolescents in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia is 'street children'. Considerations about their existence, way of living and problems may be traced back to the Brazilian literature in the publications of Gonçalves (1979) and Ferreira (1979). On an international level these individuals were brought to public awareness by Peter Taçon (1981), at the time a representative of UNICEF. Since then street children have become the focus of discourses about the adverse effects of poverty on children.

Discourses on street children are well established among policy-makers and scientists, and they are most frequently understood as descriptions of the reality of millions of children around the world. However, such discourses may be understood in an alternative way. In line with the anti-essentialist ideas put forward by Berger and Luckmann (1966), they represent social products created and sustained through social activity. Accordingly, Gergen states: 'The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people' (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). One important implication of this alternative perspective is the consideration of these discourses themselves as the object of study, particularly in terms of their performative qualities. As was emphasized by Burr: 'A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995, p. 48). According to this perspective, the discourses found in the literature construct the subject of street children. Although they do refer to the individuals' material world and events surrounding their lives, they do not simply represent descriptions of reality but rather construct versions of a social event. What is argued here is not that these discourses are flawed or unimportant. Instead, it is suggested that the literature on street children is one-sided and disregards other aspects of human existence and social life. Street children are socially constructed by discourses introduced by different social actors who share the same cultural and historical context. Moreover, different descriptions or social constructions of the world lead to different types of social action (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985). Accordingly, the social construction of street children invites or guides certain kinds of interventions at the expense of others.

Although the term 'street children' and its corroborating discourses are not found in the literature concerning young people who live on the streets in Britain, the theoretical perspective and the discussion presented in this article are pertinent to British social work theory and practice. This article augments the relevance of the

social constructionist perspective to social work theory and practice, particularly in raising professionals' awareness of the performative properties of the discourses used to describe groups of individuals who are considered problematic according to the norms and values of contemporary societies. The social constructionist perspective has already influenced contemporary social work in Britain by inspiring both the view of social work theory as a product within social work—a creation which involves workers, clients and agency contexts (Payne, 1997)—and the awareness of the role of language. The distinction between truth and methods of communication in social work has also been contested. Language is no longer thought simply to reflect reality but to create it: as Howe states, 'different languages produce different values and worlds of meaning and experience' (Howe, 1994, p. 522). The powerful influence of language on social policy and practice has also been voiced by British social workers who are not explicitly aligned to social constructionism. For example, Jack (1997) highlights the discourses of 'child protection' and its effects on social work practice. It is also argued that the negative representation of children and youngsters who commit crime is associated with punitive policy and practice (Goldson, 2000).

Social workers in Britain deal with several groups of people identified as socially problematic, and street children are not among them. However, those professionals are concerned with other groups of people who, similarly to street children, are not only problematic but represent special categories of social actors such as 'traveller children and families', 'young offenders', 'single mothers' and 'disabled individuals.' Consequently, the interpretation of the discourses about street children as a social construction invites British social workers to critically approach the prevailing discourses about other special categories of people and consider their implications.

This article takes a critical position by deconstructing the discourses found in the literature on street children. In other words, it dismantles different texts and indicates those particular aspects which describe and portray children. Finally, it discusses the main features of the social construction of street children and their implication for social policy and action.

Who are street children?

Researchers, policy-makers and the media refer to street children as a pre-given entity in nature which is revealed through variables and visualized and defined by the investigatory gaze. However, they have been unable to provide a clear and unanimous definition of who the subjects are in their narratives. Different authors try to explain who the main characters or subjects in their stories of vulnerable children are, and in so doing open Pandora's box. There is a tendency to generate broad and ambiguous definitions which encompass a wide range of possibilities. For instance, Juarez (1992) puts forward a phenomenological and circular definition in which individuals' relationship to the street environment is not clear. To him, 'street children are those who attend organizations which assist street children' (Juarez, 1992, p. 94). In contrast, other definitions, in which the street environment does have a

role to play, include both children who live on the streets as well as those who live with their families and carry out activities on the streets (Ataide, 1993; Bose, 1992). Most frequently, definitions of street children tend to oscillate between the portrayal of them as either victim or deviant. On the one hand, the deficient conditions of street life are emphasized. Accordingly, Dallape defines these individuals as 'those whose basic rights to food, shelter, education and health are continuously violated' (Dallape, 1989, p. 8). On the other hand, other definitions incorporate ideas and concepts which indicate the deficient characteristics of these individuals which differentiate them from others who are assumed to be normal, as in this definition introduced by Cosgrove (1990):

A street child is any individual under the age of majority whose behaviour is predominantly at variance with community norms for behaviour and whose primary support for his/her developmental needs is not a family or family substitute (Cosgrove 1990, p. 192).

Although different definitions of street children cover a wide range of youths and situations, this imprecision is often ignored or considered irrelevant by authors. Scientists, policy-makers and the media talk about street children as if they are referring to a clearly defined population. As Glauser remarked: 'The frequency of its use seems to suggest that such a group exists as a homogenous phenomenon in reality' (Glauser, 1990, p. 139). However, far from making reference to a uniform group of youngsters, references to street children create a mythic image (Ennew, 1989).

The problem of broad and divergent definitions is generally overlooked. The designation of individuals as street children is seen as a useful tool to help call attention to the difficult circumstances of children and adolescents around the world (Bose, 1992). Apparently the perpetuation of this social construction, even in the face of its contradictions, is a powerful strategy to sensitize audiences. The use of rhetorical devices is evident in the estimates of the number of street children in different parts of the world. There are large discrepancies between different sources which are explained by scientists as the result of these contrasting definitions of street children (Agnelli and Rizvi, 1986; Lusk, 1992), the mobile character of this population (Agnelli and Rizvi, 1986; Bose, 1992; Lusk, 1992) and its marginalization by official statistics (Agnelli and Rizvi, 1986). However, there are aspects of the question of estimation of street children populations which suggest that this is a strategy which sensitizes readers at the expense of consistency and reliability. Estimates of street children frequently fail to quote their sources (Ennew and Milne, 1989) and are clearly stamped with rhetoric and contradictions. Ress and Wik-Thorsell (1986) declare that in Brazil there were 30 million children living on the streets at that time. Four years later, Connolly (1990) affirmed that there were more than 20 million children growing up on Brazilian streets. Neither of these authors provide their sources of information. If one takes into consideration the Brazilian official survey of 1991 (IBGE, 1991), which estimated about 50 million of its population to be aged between 5 and 19 years of age, then these estimates of street children suggest that almost half of the Brazilian population of individuals in this age group are street children.

Although scientists and policy-makers put forward a variety of definitions and estimates of street children which paint a vague outline of the phenomenon rather than its clear image, they are consistent in their accounts of children's family background, life trajectories and characteristics. Moreover, discourses on street children have profound implications for the way readers perceive and judge poor families and their children.

Becoming a street child: from poverty to social limbo

Although the social problems in different countries and their cultural background and social policies differ substantially, international agencies and scientists tend to focus on similar issues to characterize and explain the genesis of street children. One possible explanation for this similarity would be that they are reporting on a worldwide social phenomenon regardless of peoples' geographical location and historical, social and cultural context. In contrast, it might be argued that this agreement does not represent evidence of reality but is rather an indication of consensus. Social scientists, academics and other professionals share the same language (e.g. categories, concepts) that they use to describe the world in order to raise public awareness of social problems.

The first relevant documents about street children on an international level that have been traced in the literature came from UNICEF. In a document dated 1986 (UNICEF, 1986), street children were classified in three categories: candidates for the street, children 'on' the street and children 'of' the street. According to this document, candidates for the street are working youths who live with their poor families, while children 'on' the street are those working individuals who maintain some family connections but who receive inadequate and/or sporadic support. The third type, children 'of' the street, refers to working individuals who have been abandoned or have been sent away by their families and consequently live without family support. This classification is still to be found in most of the literature on street children to date and is assumed to reflect the process of becoming a street child. In other words, besides classifying a specific group of people, it proposes a linear theory of causality based on the degree of family connection.

The assumptions about causality in this initial document from UNICEF are to be present in most of the inferential and empirical information on the construction of street children. In agreement with UNICEF's propositions, these individuals are portrayed in most publications as the result of a linear and organic chain of adverse factors. Accounts of the causality of street children are frequently associated with a defined set of adverse factors which are intended to demonstrate and support the most commonly appointed cause: the declining family as it is explicated in CHILDDHOPE: 'The breakdown of traditional family and community values and structures is, however, a major factor in the increase of children on and of the streets' (CHILDDHOPE, n.d., p. 21).

The family situation of street children is suggested to have its origins in the macroeconomic problems of countries where street children live. These places are

reported as being characterized by migration to urban areas (Lusk, 1992; Martins and Ebrahim, 1993; UNICEF, 1991). Children's families are invariably presented as suffering economic hardship (Martins and Ebrahim, 1993; Oliveira *et al.*, 1992). Moreover, these are large families (Ataide, 1993; Dallape, 1996; Lusk *et al.*, 1989), living in poor and overcrowded conditions (Dallape, 1996) in slums and shantytowns (Ress and Wik-Thorsell, 1986).

The ultimate reason for children's initiation into street life lies within the family. Its economic hardship and/or harmful nature leads young individuals to be introduced to street society. Children carry out activities which generate income to help their families (Lusk, 1992), and their departure from home is frequently linked to family dysfunction and disintegration (Martins and Ebrahim, 1993; Oliveira *et al.*, 1992; Dallape, 1996). Accordingly, their parents are described as having degrading and morally reprehensible characteristics. In the cases where both parents exist, the mothers are presented as highly fertile individuals (Lusk *et al.*, 1989), who together with the fathers indulge in alcohol (Connolly, 1990; Dallape, 1996) and drugs (Dallape, 1996). According to several articles, street children are said to come from female-headed households (Dallape, 1996; Lusk, 1992; UNICEF, 1991), with reproachable lifestyles, including short-term relationships with several partners (Ataide, 1993; Felsman, 1984). This phenomenon of family disarray and badly-behaved mothers is evident in Ress and Wik-Thorsell's statement:

Very often, after experiencing the harsh extremes of slum poverty the family begins to disintegrate. Then a tragic pattern emerges. First the father abandons his family; alcoholism, prostitution and dependency of the mothers on other men are the only way to survive (Ress and Wik-Thorsell, 1986, p.12).

As a result of their exposure to degraded and abusive families and economic need, youths are presented as surrendering to the 'temptations of the street' (Campos *et al.*, 1994, p. 327). The social construction of street children offers a powerful picture of young individuals and their street community as aliens to 'normal' mainstream society. Once on the streets, children are part of a different social realm and display personal characteristics which defy the norms and values praised by western societies. Children away from mainstream society are said to be completely regimented by the lifestyle, values and norms of a subculture of their own—the 'street society' (Lusk, 1992, p. 297). According to Lusk and Mason (1993), this alien society is 'an environment and culture with people in transit, gangs, families who live on the streets, traffickers, police, tramps, criminals and adults ready to exploit them [the street children] . . . a very efficient 'school' of negative things' (Lusk and Mason, 1993, p. 161).

Children's nonconformity to moral values is highlighted by most of the literature on street children which often refers to drug use and sexual promiscuity. Drug use is frequently identified as an important characteristic of street children (Lerner and Ferrando, 1995; WHO, 1993), particularly those classified as children 'of' the streets (Lusk, 1992). Street children are also reported to be prematurely sexualized (Bernier and Ascensio, 1995; Campos *et al.*, 1994; Raffaelli *et al.*, 1993) and to be frequently engaged in high-risk activities such as prostitution (Bernier and Ascensio, 1995;

Ewart-Biggs, 1990), homosexual activities and anal intercourse (Bernier and Ascensio, 1995; Raffaelli *et al.*, 1993). Moral concerns are reflected in the discourses about the health and means of survival of street children. The majority of the empirical studies and publications on health are related to drug use and unsafe sexual practice (e.g. Foster *et al.*, 1996; Raffaelli *et al.*, 1993; WHO, 1993). In terms of survival strategies, although youths are reported to engage in activities such as begging, collecting paper and scavenging rubbish (Campos *et al.*, 1994; Loforte, 1994; Oliveira *et al.*, 1992), most of the literature notes the close association of life on the streets with crime, delinquency, robbery, theft and drug sale (Ataide, 1993; Campos *et al.*, 1994; Oliveira *et al.*, 1992).

Even as street children are characterized by reprehensible behaviour, they are also partially exonerated from blame for their faults. On the one side they are portrayed as feral and untamed, while on the other they are said to be driven to misbehaviour by their basic human needs and the influence of other social deviants. Often the authors who explore the motivation underlying drug use explain it in terms of imitation and group pressure (Lora *et al.*, 1989), and in terms of seeking to feel good, to have courage, to ease pain, to reduce solitude and fear, to escape sadness, to calm down, to forget their hunger pangs and to gain respite from their unbearable reality (Agnelli and Rizvi, 1986; Ataide, 1993).

Certainly the social construction of street children is a powerful discourse strategy which sensitizes audiences to the existence of children living in difficult circumstances. However, this construction represents more than just a description of a social phenomenon. The creation of a scheme to explain street children, a characterization of individuals and their families which draws heavily on moral values and the conception of an isolated and alienated street society, has important implications. It stigmatizes poor families and children on the street and helps to perpetuate their social exclusion.

Implications of the social construction of street children

The social construction of street children is a powerful and enduring instrument used to guide interventions. Discrepancies surrounding the definition and classification of street children are acknowledged, but are considered to be a minor problem of little relevance. The term 'street children' is regarded as a useful tool for the recognition of the problem, the identification of the different needs of each category, and the implementation of appropriate responses (Bose, 1992; Martins and Ebrahim, 1993; Williams, 1993). As argued previously, the stance taken in this article is the challenging of the idea of any discourse being a true picture of reality, seeing them rather as a series of interpretations which construct the object under investigation. However, such constructions are far from innocuous since they influence both the public's opinion and interventions from governmental and non-governmental organizations and international agencies. In other words, the social construction of street children is itself a form of social action. Gergen analyses this property of social constructions:

Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage. Descriptions and explanations of the world themselves constitute forms of social action. . . . They thus serve to sustain and support certain patterns to the exclusion of others. To alter description and explanation is thus to threaten certain actions and invite others (Gergen, 1985, p. 268).

An important implication of the social construction of street children is the ‘naturalization’ of social deprivation. This is achieved by different means including the conception of a linear and organic scheme which explains the introduction of children into street society.

The creation of an articulated scheme to explain street life equates social life and events to occurrences in the natural world which are unveiled, explained and predicted by predefined factors. According to the social construction of street children, macroeconomic problems favour migration, which in turn leads to migration to urban areas where a sequence of adverse events unfolds. Family dysfunction and the subsequent insertion of children onto the streets to work are the ingredients in the recipe for street life. Children’s introduction to street society is seen as the beginning of a drifting process towards total integration in an alien society.

The bigger picture provided by the social construction of street children is one of hermetic configuration. Poor and dysfunctional families, their children and other deviants who inhabit the streets lack the characteristics belonging to the mainstream social realm: they do not share the same values of other citizens and do not behave according to ‘normal’ standards of morality. Their lives are not governed by the same laws which are applied to ‘normal’, ordinary and law-abiding citizens. This scenario of isolation from the outside world is further supported by the fact that nothing and nobody intervenes in the chain of events which culminates with children’s ‘enchantment’ with and ‘entrapment’ on the streets. Street children do not have any future other than a criminal career. Inferential and empirical data do not refer to their adult life other than in terms of them becoming adult criminals. Just as the social construction of street children creates fictional characters, it bans them from occupying any legitimate position in mainstream society. The linear and organic explanation for the movement of children onto the streets is also selective in the sense that it abstains from touching on contradictory aspects, such as the role of local government intervention in the process.

The focus on moral values in the literature on street children has another pervasive and negative implication: it stigmatizes poor families and their offspring. As argued by Goffman (1963), society creates both the categories of people and the attributes which characterize the individuals who constitute these categories, while stigma concerns attributes which bring people into disrepute. In the social construction of street children, poverty and street life become synonymous with wilderness and lack of moral values. Parents are characterized by alcoholism, sexual promiscuity and child abuse, and they are mostly to blame for the movement of their children onto the streets. The families’ inability to cope with economic hardship and their inherent moral deficiencies cause their children to be engulfed by street society. The children themselves carry the legacies of a defective upbringing which favours the

adoption of the values and behaviour cultivated by other social pariahs on the streets. Although street children are presented as the victims of poverty and malevolent adults, they also display undesirable behaviour; sexual promiscuity, prostitution, use of drugs and criminal acts. In the name of generalization and the search for the real, poor families are represented as a breeding ground for moral corruption and street children as lacking any ethical awareness of the civilized world.

The influence of the stigmatizing property of the social construction of street children is clearly demonstrated by governmental policy and practice in São Paulo, Brazil. As far as professionals dealing with street children are concerned, the Brazilian experience is an example of commitment and innovation, and an illustration of top-down policies which foster effective interventions guaranteeing the rights of street and working children (Deweese and Klees, 1995). However, closer examination of some of the governmental programmes shows how stigmatized representations of children and adolescents are used to support disputable actions.

In 1997, the Secretariat for Children, Family and Social Welfare for the government of São Paulo launched the programme *Moeda Legal* (nice currency). This intervention was conceived to put an end to the children's practice of begging on the streets (Serviço SOS Criança, internal report, 1997). The public's donation of cash to children and adolescents was understood to damage individuals' self-esteem and to sustain an 'entanglement of bad behaviour' linked to their exploitation by other individuals (e.g. drug dealers). Instead of cash, members of the public donated vouchers or *legais*, which were obtained on the purchase of goods (e.g. petrol). In order to make use of *legais* street children had to deposit them in a mock bank at a child welfare centre, where they were also provided with a series of interventions such as hygiene, legal support and medical treatment. The project foresaw that street children would develop a sense of responsibility and would learn to quantify and to understand the concept of credit.

Although the project *Moeda Legal* and the services provided by the SOS *criança* might be criticized on several grounds, such discussion is beyond the scope of this article. The argument raised here is that the programme *Moeda Legal* was guided by the negative attributes of the social construction of children and adolescents on the streets. In contrast to other social actors, street children were considered too inept to deal with money in productive and honourable ways since they were driven by defective values and norms of behaviour. Perhaps one of the most important flaws of the *Moeda Legal* programme was that it assumed that street children are uncritical and passive targets for manipulation and control.

The children and adolescents who attended the child welfare centre rapidly grew disaffected with the *Moeda Legal* (Moura, 2000). Those who had collected *legais* and approached the child welfare centre, independently of the amount of vouchers they had, were only allowed to open an account at a minimum level. Both the increase in the balance of the bank accounts and the provision of meals at the child welfare centre depended on their attendance on training courses. Furthermore, individuals did not have any control over how, where or when they would spend their savings. The institution established that clothing was only to be purchased at a

shop in the child welfare centre or during supervised visits to fashionable shopping centres in the city.

Another example of the influence of the stigmatizing features of the discourses surrounding street children on policy and practice is observed in those concerning preventive measures at the family and community level. There have been progressive voices attempting to amend aspects of the social construction of street children during the 1990s, arguing that families are no longer to blame for their children's conditions but should rather be recognized as victims of careless policies themselves (Leonardos, 1995). Accordingly, effective strategies should not be limited to rehabilitation but should incorporate preventive measures such as the provision of support to the families. However, the liberating appearance of this reconstruction—the shifting of blame from poor families to powerful others—is misleading since it retains the original message that poor families are breeding grounds for deviance. In line with the view of prevention of the phenomenon of street children, the non-governmental organization, Undugu Society of Kenya, has tried to improve the socio-economic conditions of communities by increasing 'the sense of responsibility for their own development' (UNESCO, 1995, p. 60). Similarly, Bosco (Bangalore Oniyavara Seva Coota) which works with street children in Bangalore, India, has implemented a community-based project involved in 'identifying the measure of responsibility of every member of the community for growth and development of each street child and for the prevention of delinquency, truancy and other related problems' (UNESCO, 1995, p. 215).

Finally, the ultimate effect of both the naturalization of social deprivation and the stigmatization is its contribution to social exclusion. Sposati (1996) defines social exclusion as a process of collective deprivation, incorporating poverty, discrimination, subordination, inequality, inaccessibility and lack of representation. The social construction of street children comprises elements which justify and legitimize certain types of social action at the expense of others. The representation of a street society alienated from mainstream society inspires interventions aimed at improving the life conditions of 'outsiders', rather than long-term and comprehensive social support for excluded 'insiders'. Most of the time the interventions are implemented by non-governmental agencies rather than local governments and tend to be palliative and fragmented. Although these actions make deprived life conditions less harmful and/or more bearable, their scope is limited. Ultimately, the social construction of street children does not favour holistic and comprehensive practices, but inspires interventions which sustain the status quo of social inequalities. In other words, the actions aimed at helping street children perpetuates life on the streets.

Education for 'normal' individuals is usually a formal and institutionalized process, with the ultimate objective of fostering full development and facilitating their insertion into the labour market. In contrast, street children are prescribed with special types of education, which are thought to be suitable for their specific needs. Their ultimate aim is to help children to cope with their reality on the streets. For example, one of Bosco's main aims in India is '[t]o assist each street youngster to cope with life on the street, to take advantage of the street situation and of opportunities that may present themselves, and to assimilate these experiences so as to change

into a well-rounded individual' (UNESCO, 1995, p. 214). The prescription of remedial solutions, which ultimately maintain the status quo of social inequalities, is also observed in the interventions of the Undugu Society of Kenya. This non-governmental organization tried to fund formal education for street children who had dropped out but in the face of resistance from the schools' directors the NGO opted for a non-formal educational activity named 'school for life'. Its aim is to provide basic vocational, literacy and numeracy skills to enable these individuals to deal with the reality of their lives (Leonardos, 1995; UNESCO, 1995). Likewise, Lugalla and Mbwambo (1999) recommend that the authorities in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, should improve the public infrastructure of the city to assist street children. The authors argue that children would have better living conditions if pavements and public toilets and bathrooms were kept clean.

In summary, this article has argued that discourses on street children are not reflections of reality but a series of interpretations which construct the subject. The resulting product naturalizes deprivation and stigmatizes poor families and young individuals. Moreover, the social construction of street children is far from innocuous since they influence policy and interventions from governmental and non-governmental organizations which in turn help to perpetuate the status quo of social inequality.

Conclusion

The descriptions of poor families and street children and the explanations for their existence in society are powerful discursive devices. They create a category of individuals with particular characteristics, which in turn elicits and legitimizes certain types of interventions at the expense of others. The argument that the concept of street children is just a neutral attempt to describe certain individuals and their life conditions is appealing but open to challenge. Descriptions, terms and concepts related to what is seen and experienced in the world are meaningful in a particular historical context and according to particular convention. There are many other possible accounts which could have been used by experts to refer to young individuals on the streets, and these would potentially lead to different policies and actions being taken.

According to social constructionism, the use of different concepts, definitions and descriptions inspires alternative policies and interventions. However, this theoretical approach does not challenge dominant narratives through the proposal of more real constructions. While 'constructionist arguments do invite moral and political deliberation, they do not champion one ideal over another' (Gergen, 1999, p. 231). This position leads us to ask ourselves what social constructionism has to offer to the discussion, social work and other forms of social action concerning children and adolescents who live on the streets, since it is not committed to any particular type of discourse. It is doubtful that the analysis of prevailing discourses and practices in academic journals will defy such dominance (Willig, 1998), or give rise to innovative action. The answer is that although social constructionism is not committed to

any particular social or political tradition, it does furnish social work and other forms of social action with a proposal for a generative posture in the face of social problems. Inspired by the constructionist formulations of Gergen (1999), it is suggested that the prospect of replacing the prevailing discourses about street children with alternative constructions should give way to a project presided over by different voices aiming to create new realities together.

In this constructive project, diverging positions would come together in search of common goals and the constitution of joint actions. A wide range of social actors interested in or somehow involved with the phenomenon of young individuals living on the streets are potential contributors to this enterprise. The most important participants in this co-creation are those children and adolescents who spend part of their lives on the streets, since it is based on the assumption that these individuals are in need of help. This project may also include social actors such as social workers, politicians, shop owners, and representatives of local communities, police forces and non-governmental organizations. Although there would probably be many disagreements between the different parties, a potential strategy to establish a collective arrangement would be the engagement in 'reflexivity'. According to Gergen (1990: 50), this means 'to attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the 'obvious', to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiples standpoints'. In other words, this reflexive exercise would be a forum for conciliation between different values, moralities and interpretations of reality, and a means of establishing a dialogue grounded on the recognition of the co-existence of multiple perspectives bound to historical, cultural, social and experiential contexts. However, it should not be expected that people will abandon their own perspective and embrace a better or more commonly shared interpretation of the phenomenon. The acceptance of the co-existence of a variety of frames of reference is meant to create favourable conditions for the identification of action which will lead to a collectively conceived future. It is also foreseen that there will be difficulties in generalizing the deliberations and outcomes from individual communities or societies. The product of co-creation, unlike the discourses concerning street children, is not suited to generalization. People living in different communities, cities, regions and countries have distinct life experiences, interpretations and expectations. Consequently joint deliberations and actions are essentially meaningful in the context in which they are generated. However, the experience of co-creation and the lessons learnt in one community may be useful resources for other groups concerned with the phenomenon of young individuals on the streets. The project of co-creation may also be hampered in societies where traditions (e.g. culture and religion) do not encourage relationships between people from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, the social constructionist perspective provides for innovative interventions to tackle phenomena which are perceived as problematic in contemporary societies. It suggests and brings into discussion the performative property of discourses, and invites different voices to come together in a communal and creative enterprise.

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