

Research Article

Engaging Brazilian Street Children in Play: Observations of Their Family Narratives

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Received 21 April 2014; Revised 12 June 2014; Accepted 12 June 2014; Published 23 July 2014

Academic Editor: Ross Flom

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Story stem assessments allow children to create narratives in response to brief portrayals of family-based relational challenges. These methods can provide insights into children's perceptions of close relationships, which is particularly useful for vulnerable children. We conducted a feasibility study of story stem assessments with school-age street children—a previously unstudied population—to explore whether they would understand family-based story scenarios similarly to children in more stable families. Comparisons to children in low income and middle-class conditions were made on the basis of performance characteristics and “narrative coherence.” Street children demonstrated capacities to elaborate family narratives nearly as proficiently as children in the other groups, yet they also displayed unique vulnerabilities. Implications for research with this population are discussed.

1. The Universe of Street Children

“The exact number of street children is impossible to quantify, but the figure almost certainly runs into tens of millions across the world. It is likely that the numbers are increasing” [1]. Our understanding of the lives of street children is considerably hampered by unique methodological challenges in working with this population. Consistent definitions of the concept of “street children” and the fluid circumstances in which they live frequently present major barriers. Definitions of street children often include three categories: (1) children “on the street” earn or beg for money on the street yet have substantial contact with their families, typically returning at night, and may attend school; (2) children “of the street” have, in effect, made the street their home, where they seek shelter and food and have a sense of belonging among peers; family ties, if any, are weak; and (3) “street-family children” live with their homeless families on the street [2, 3]. Research and practice have informed us about the existence of an enormous diversity in children's experiences and considerable overlap among these three groups. The reasons for

which children may come to live on the street cover a broad spectrum, including poverty, maltreatment, parental death or incapacitation, immigration, and war. The adversities they have faced and the corresponding difficulties involved in making contact with them pose considerable challenges to researchers attempting to understand their lives. Since the early 1990s, researchers have been carrying out studies on street children; however, our understanding of them is still far from complete. Continuing gaps in the field exist regarding geographic differences and similarities, methodological and measurement problems, and the most effective directions for policy [2, 4]. Despite the fact that most street children worldwide are between ten and fourteen years, most previous research has focused on somewhat older children, between twelve and eighteen years [5, 6]. Most studies have also lacked meaningful comparison groups. Those that have had them tend to compare street children to middle-class children in stable circumstances and not to other disadvantaged children, such as those in extreme poverty or victims of maltreatment [7]. Inclusion of younger children between the ages of 6 and 12 is also notably lacking in this research, despite the special

vulnerabilities of this age group. It is also difficult, however, to find children this age because of the fluidity of their lives, where they often circulate between street, shelter, and family settings. Thus, they may be a transitory group in the process of “street-connectedness,” a circle representing the reluctant movement of a child to enter the harsh world of the street [8, 9].

In some respects, street children have found a way of adapting, in that they feed and clothe themselves, find shelter, and provide one another with mutual support. Celia [10] pointed out that for vulnerable children battling for survival, the vitality of a close group of children may compensate to some extent for a lack of family ties. In this way, the street is where these children attempt to find their identities and organize social relationships. It is important to understand the extent to which this is the case, so that attempts to help do not inadvertently deprive them of psychological resources that they have developed as street children.

At the same time, evidence from animal and human research suggests that peers alone cannot adequately provide for the emotional needs of children. The lack or loss of an adequate relationship with an adult caregiver poses the greatest developmental challenge for children living in extremely stressful family circumstances [11], and this is particularly so for most street children [12]. The absence of a caring relationship with a protective adult often precipitates the choice, or forced acceptance, of street life [13]. The instability and vulnerability many street children face daily includes risk of serious injury and death [14]. The lack of parental figures and the unpredictability of everyday life also take a toll on the developing minds of street children. The instability and lack of structure of daily life and the demands of daily survival may interfere with developing capacities for reflection on past and future time and force a preoccupation with present time. Even normal perceptions of daily events may be impaired [15]. Constant insecurity and fear associated with life on the streets, over and above their troubled histories, subject street children to the risk of emotional trauma.

The study of young children who have neither parent figures nor teachers to provide reliable reports of their functioning poses particular challenges, especially when the children are homeless and living on the street. In many instances, this means that self-report is the only source of information about the children. Self-report measures of emotional or behaviour problems are generally designed, however, for ages 11 and upwards [16]. Moreover, in the face of instincts toward self-protection, caused by the circumstances of living on the street, self-report and/or interview assessments can trigger mistrust and therefore result in misleading, false, or even no information.

While self-report measurements and interviews are likely to be problematic in research with vulnerable young children, there is growing evidence that children can provide invaluable information about the way they see themselves and their close relationships through more indirect methods, such as standardized play assessments. Play, after all, is central to child development, as it promotes cognitive, physical, social, cultural, and emotional well-being [17] and should be considered, according to the Office of the United Nations

High Commissioner for Human Rights [18], among the rights of every child. Hence, research assessments that incorporate play can take advantage of what is a natural part of a child's developmental ecology. Thus in several ways the play of young street children may provide insights into the nature of their vulnerabilities and adaptations and the challenges they face in achieving more social integration.

One form of play-based psychosocial assessments with young children makes use of “story stems.” In this technique a standardized set of doll characters is presented together with a social challenge such as conflict or a need for care, and the child is then asked to, “show me and tell me what happens next. . .” The MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) is the most widely used of the story-stem techniques [19]. It assesses children's representations of qualities such as parental caregiving, moral behavior, parental prohibitions, family conflict, peer relationships, and attachment and exploration [20], as enacted in the narratives they create. Findings with narrative methods over the past thirty years indicate that there are rich individual variations in the areas of empathy, prosocial behaviour, adherence to roles, reciprocity, and aspects of family relationships and that these are associated with important developmental characteristics (see reviews by [21–23]).

Narrative story-stem techniques have been applied to many areas of child development and mental health, discovering concordances between characteristics of children's narratives and antisocial behaviour [24–26], maltreatment [27–32], adoption [33], interparental conflict and violence [34], young's children social and emotional adjustment to divorce [35–37], attachment in infancy [38], cultural differences in representations of physical punishment [39], and cultural differences in representations of family and social relationships [40, 41].

Franieck [40, 41] explored differences between German and Brazilian school age children using the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB). Emotional and social competence in the play assessments was associated with parental reports of adult participation with children in their day-to-day activities, such as eating, playing, and accompaniment to school. Although direct extrapolations from this predominantly middle-class sample cannot be made to street children, the findings support the general proposition that the way children's lives are organized day-to-day, especially through adult participation, may impact the content and quality of their representations of social relationships.

The focus of the current pilot study is on street children living in Brazil who may have suffered in multiple ways, from poverty, lack of family life, lack of housing, and maltreatment. Our principal aim was to find out whether children in these conditions would create narratives in response to common family-centered scenarios using doll characters, similar to the ways in which children in other samples, living with families, have done. This study is the first to use a narrative method with street children to learn about their perceptions of family interactions. We include comparisons to children in two other conditions, intact, middle-class families, and children living with their impoverished families in shanty towns.

Our major research question was: Will Brazilian street children demonstrate that they understand a family-centered narrative story stem task and can respond to it by creating their own narratives? We were further interested in whether qualitative differences among the 3 groups of children could be discerned on the basis of three dimensions: story coherence, investment in the narrative task, and children's responsiveness to the examiner. Based on findings from previous MSSB studies on maltreated children [27–31], we believed it likely that the street children's story enactments would be rated lower on these dimensions, given their extreme poverty and almost certainly exposure to maltreatment. Nevertheless, due to the absence of comparison studies, the general lack of literature concerning street children, and our limited sample size, we advance no formal hypotheses. Selected examples of children's narratives are presented to illustrate the ways in which the children told stories, with basic descriptive statistics pertaining to response frequencies.

2. Methods

The study was approved by the Juvenile Court of Campinas, Brazil, and the ethical commission of the Institute of Psychology of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Children gave their own assent to participate; no recompense was provided beyond the enjoyment of the play protocol.

3. Sample

This is a cross-sectional, pilot study of children aged 6–11 living in Campinas, an industrial city of approximately 1 million inhabitants in Sao Paulo State in Brazil. A total of 30 children participated (mean age = 8, 85; $M = 22$ and $F = 17$): 10 living with their families in poverty, in shanty towns; 10 living with their families and not impoverished; and 10 living on the streets. The children in shanty towns and living on the streets were recruited specifically for this study; the nonimpoverished children were recruited in an earlier study [40] and incorporated here for comparison to the other conditions.

4. Recruitment

Parents and children were told that the study would involve one appointment (approximately 45 minutes) with each child, involving the creation of stories with doll figures to gain a better understanding of child development. They were also advised that the appointment would be videotaped and that no adverse effects were expected by participation in the study. Children living with parents and not impoverished were recruited from schools. The first author contacted the head of the school, who in his/her turn organized a parents' meeting to introduce the study and researcher. Assessments were done during school time, with the signed consents of parents and head of the school.

Children living with their families in shanty towns were recruited from schools, using the same procedure as for the previous group. Contact with the head of the schools was made through introductions by staff members of nongovernmental agencies (NGOs) working in the shanty town.

Street children were recruited through nongovernmental public shelters, coordinated by the Social Municipal Program of Campinas. Daytime public shelters provide occupational activities; night-time shelters provide a place to eat, take a shower, and sleep. Other shelters promote family reunion and support. There was very little information available about the children. The first author contacted the heads of the public shelters, provided a letter of consent from the Juvenile Court of Campinas, and had shelter heads also sign letters of consent. The first author went to shelters during the day and waited until children arrived. Children were asked whether they would like to play and gave verbal assent. Assessments were done in an empty room in the shelter.

5. General Procedure with All Children

The play session was mostly done only with the examiner and the child in an empty room. Each play session was videotaped and ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the child's play and narrative. The purpose of the camera was introduced to the children by the researcher. No child refused to participate. One child from the street children group was unable to complete the assessments because other children disrupted the play session. One story from another child from this group could not be recorded due to technical problems. When young street children appeared at the shelter, they were asked whether they would like to have a member of the NGO accompany them. Just one child asked for a member to watch his play.

6. Children's Assessment

The MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) has been used widely, and detailed descriptions are available elsewhere [42]. The MSSB is one of several protocols involving the presentation of story stems to children, designed to capture their perceptions of relationship qualities through the spontaneous narratives they create. Children are first introduced to a family of doll figures, and a series of "story stems" is presented, each of which contains a dilemma or challenge. The child is then asked to "show me and tell me what happens next." The task of the administrator is to be an interested and supportive observer and listener. Standard prompts are used to clarify narratives. The play assessment is videotaped and coded for themes of interest. The story stem battery used in this study is composed of six stories from the original MSSB Battery [43] and two others from the MSSB-Version Tübingen-Basel-Wien [44] (see Table 1). The central problem presented in each story is conceptualized to reflect one or more thematic types: transgression of a parental rule, emotional conflict, child-parent attachment, and/or loss. Parent figures were portrayed as present in each story stem. The order of the stories was not varied.

7. Assessment of Narrative Coherence

To examine and compare the quality of responses children enacted to the story stems, we first assessed the relative distributions of ratings of narrative coherence, as this is described in the MacArthur Narrative Coding System [45] and

TABLE 1: MSSB stories.

Story stem (and story type)	Brief description
Barbecue (transgression)	After the mother tells the child not to get too close to the fire, the child tries to get a sausage to eat and burns him/herself
Lost Keys (emotional conflict)	The mother accuses the father of having the lost keys and an argument ensues
Gift for mom or dad (emotional conflict)	The child, who has made a beautiful drawing at his or her school, shows it to the parents on coming home. The interviewer asks who the child gives the picture to: mom or dad
Scary dog (attachment/emotional conflict)	The child is in the park with his parents, playing together with his friends with a ball. The ball is thrown into a bush and the child goes to catch it when suddenly a dog jumps out of the bushes and barks loudly at him: "woof, woof"
Injured child (emotional conflict)	The child has a plaster on his/her foot. It is Sunday and the parents suggest going on an outing and ask the children what they would like to do. The brother/sister answers that he/she wants to ride a bike.
Lost Dog (loss)	Part I: when going outside to play, a child discovers the family dog is gone. Part II: the dog returns
Departure (attachment)	The parents go on an overnight trip while the grandmother babysits
Reunion (attachment)	The parents return from their trip

the Tübingen coding system [40, 41]. Narrative coherence reflects the degree to which the child responds to the story stem with a logical sequence of events, clarity of focus and ending point, elaboration of relevant details, and a relevant resolution of the conflict. Narrative coherence, as assessed in story stem protocols, has been shown in numerous studies to be meaningfully associated with important developmentally relevant qualities such as attachment security, prosocial behavior with peers, and parental sensitivity [25, 40, 41, 46, 47]. Narrative coherence is rated on a 10-point scale, which is divided for interpretive purposes into 3 levels: the lowest ratings (0–3) are used for story responses that fail to address or resolve the conflict; middle ratings (4–5) are applied to story responses that may resolve the conflict indirectly, perhaps by changing the constraints provided by the original story stem or by handling it indirectly and offering an easier solution. The higher ratings on the scale (6–10) are applied to responses that directly address the central conflict and offer a pertinent solution to it but may still vary in degree of elaboration (i.e., details). A coherence score of six, for example, might be applied where a child demonstrates an understanding of the conflict or story and/or offers a resolution but without any story embellishment. Typically, these stories are very short, as the child offers the minimal amount necessary to tell the story. The highest scores (9 and 10) are given to story responses that not only provide a relevant resolution, but are very logical and detailed, with sequential events that are related to the story stem and are not digressive.

8. Evaluation of Interpersonal Performance

Interpersonal performance was rated on two scales: investment in performance and child responsivity with examiner [45]. Both of these dimensions have been evaluated in previous research with vulnerable children [30, 31].

Investment in performance is rated on a 3-point scale and refers to the degree of directness of the child's response to

the story stem: (0) no response; (1) indirect, when prompted, child either provides no response or half a direct response (i.e., nods head); examiner needs to clarify what is going on more than once; and (2) direct, there is an unmistakable direct response to the story stem.

Child responsivity to examiner is rated on a 3-point scale and assesses the degree of enjoyment and eagerness the child displays in response to the examiner's prompts to respond to the story stems: (1) no engagement and no enjoyment noted, child does not respond to examiner's prompts, no pleasure is seen, and there may be outbursts of anger or distress; (2) child responds to examiner when prompted, child occasionally smiles, but effect is primarily neutral; no negative effects directed towards the examiner; and (3) average or above enjoyment/engagement, the child is often ready to respond before the examiner invites response and displays frequent smiles or occasional laughter; subject clearly enjoys the give and take and never hesitates to respond.

8.1. Interrater Reliability. The first author rated all scales for all children (including the categorization of the coherence ratings among the 3 major levels). Interrater agreement was established for each scale with two coraters masked to children's conditions. Coraters assessed 20% of the sample ($n = 6$) on the basis of written transcripts only, as a way to ensure the anonymity of children and their conditions. Intraclass correlation coefficients obtained were .84, .85, and .70 for coherence, investment, and responsivity, respectively, for the nonpoverty sample and .90, .70, and .70 for the street children sample.

9. Results

9.1. Narrative Coherence. Of the 30 narratives, coherence was rated as low for 8, middle for 8, and high for 14. Within the 3 groups, the street children were distributed as 3 low, 4 middle, and 3 high; children living with their families in

shanty towns were distributed as 3 low, 2 middle, and 5 high; and children living with their families and not impoverished were distributed as 2 low, 2 middle, and 6 high.

9.2. Evaluation of Narrative Responses to a Story of Parental Conflict. We present here the responses of 9 children to the Lost Keys story: three children were chosen from each of the 3 groups of children to represent each of the 3 levels of coherence. The story stem is presented as follows: *Mary/John comes into the room and sees Mom and Dad looking at each other like this (examiner shows angry expression). Mom says "You lost my keys!" Dad says, "I did NOT!" Mom says, "Yes you did, you always lose my keys!" Dad says, "I didn't lose them this time!" Show me and tell me what happens next!*

In this story stem, 2 major imperatives are presented. First, children are expected to address the problem of the lost keys, for which some explanation and resolution is required. The second and most potent imperative is how to address the parental quarrel. Ideally, this will be resolved with a relevant narrative that links both issues and provides a sense of richness in its detail.

9.2.1. Level 1 (0–3). Child may exhibit an understanding of the conflict but does not offer any real resolution or does not offer an ending to the story.

Vignette 1 (Female, 8.5 Years Old). "Mary comes in the bedroom ... Then she sees them arguing with each other. She is crying. She closed the bedroom and goes away..."

Vignette 2 (Female, 7.5 Years Old). "They withdrew to different rooms in the house and Mary goes to stay with her Mom!"

Vignette 3 (Male, 9.2 Years Old). "They had a quarrel. Then John goes between the parents and says: "Stop it! Stop it!" And they don't stop!"

9.2.2. Level 2 (4–5). Child demonstrates an understanding of the story conflict but handles it indirectly by offering a very simple or practical solution.

Vignette 4 (Male, 7.5 Years Old). "Then they are going to look for the key until it will be found!"

Vignette 5 (Male, 9 Years Old). "Then John comes in and says that the key was with him ... then the two ... then they sort out ... and stop with the argument."

Vignette 6 (Male, 10 Years Old). "I don't know!!" (Prompt: *Mom is blaming Dad that he has taken her key!*). "But he is telling that it was not him! The key is found! It was with him (John, the child)!"

9.2.3. Level 3 (6–10). Child demonstrates an understanding of the story conflict and handles it directly by offering a relevant resolution with (at the highest ratings) some story embellishment. The following are examples of obtained scores of 9.

Vignette 7 (Female, 9 Years Old). "then ... then Mary says: 'Why are you two arguing?' Then Mom came and said: 'Because

he has taken my key, the car's key. And now I cannot find my key ... I don't know who has taken it and I guess it was your father!' Mary says: 'Dad, have you seen where John went, because I have seen him carrying a key in his hand.' Then Mom says: 'Oh, my daughter, I guess he went out carrying my key then. I will follow him.' And the quarrel stops!"

Vignette 8 (Female, 9 Years Old). "Then Mary comes and says: 'Dad ... Mom what are you doing?' Then Mom says: 'He took my key!' Then Dad says: 'It is not true! I didn't get anyone's key!' Then she (Mary) says: 'I'm going to go and try to find the key! ... but without any quarrelling!' Then they went to try to find the key ... they found it ... and Mary gave it back to Mom ... Mom gave her a hug and that's all. Then Mary said: 'Come on! I have found the key! Now stop arguing!' Then everyone gets happier!"

Vignette 9 (Female, 7 Years Old). "Then Mary comes and says: 'You two don't need to argue. Let's go to look for Mom's key and stop with this argument!' Dad went to look for them and he found them. As soon as he found them he said to Mom: 'Look, I have just found the keys' and Mary said afterwards, 'Mom! Dad! Can you see there is no reason to quarrel!' And they get happy! Then Mom and Dad said together, 'Mary, you will be a very good mother!'"

Vignettes 1, 6, and 8 were told by street children; vignettes 2, 4, and 9 belong to the group of children living with their families and not impoverished; and vignettes 3, 5, and 7 were told by the group of children living with their families in shanty towns.

9.3. Interpersonal Performance. Of the 30 narratives, investment in performance was rated as indirect for 10 and direct for 20; all children responded when prompted. Within the 3 groups, the street children were distributed as 6 indirect and 4 direct; children living with their families in shanty towns were distributed as 3 indirect, 7 direct; and children living with their families and not impoverished were distributed as 1 indirect, 9 direct.

Of all 30 narratives, child responsivity to examiner was rated as (2) for 16 and (3) for 14. Within the 3 groups, the street children were distributed as 9 (2) and 1 (3); children living with their families in shanty towns were distributed as 6 (2) and 4 (3); and children living with their families and not impoverished were distributed as 1 (2) and 9 (3).

9.4. Qualitative Comparisons at Level 1 and at Level 3 of Coherence. We were further interested in whether qualitative differences among the three groups of children at the lowest and highest levels of coherence could be discerned. We surmised that a qualitative analysis of these responses could provide insights into the unique experiences and perceptions of vulnerabilities encountered by these children. We present here the verbatim responses for all narratives rated at Levels 1 and 3 of coherence for the purpose of comparing the responses of the street children to the other two groups of children. Our major questions for this analysis were: Would there be representations that may illuminate specific features of adaptive behavior among these street children? Might

there be indicators within their story responses that could enlighten reasons for which these children find themselves living on the street?

9.4.1. At Level 1 of Coherence. As previously mentioned, of the 30 narratives, coherence was rated at Level 1 (low coherence) for 8. Within the 3 groups, children living with their families and not impoverished were distributed as 2 low, children living with their families in shanty towns were distributed as 3 low, and the street children were distributed as 3 low.

Level 1—Children Living with Their Families and Not Impoverished

Vignette 1. Mary says: “Stop you two, stop! You must solve this discussion! Do that, I am going to my room!” . . . Then they stopped the quarrel . . . One of the two has taken the key. . . And she (the mother) disappeared! . . . She took his key when he wasn’t looking! She went to his car and took it! Then she went to work, while he was at home! . . . Then when he decided to go to work, his key was not there anymore! He could not start his car. Then he was angry! He didn’t go to work!

“What is her name?”—(researcher replies) Mary.

And Mary says: “Daddy, why didn’t you go to work?” And he said “Because your mother took my key!” And Mary says, “Then go and watch TV!” . . . While he was watching TV, she was in her bedroom! (She lives in her room) . . . Then he was tired and went to bed. And so did she! . . . The mother came back! The father woke up! He said: “You took my key!” “Of course I took it, you disappeared with mine! And . . . I don’t know what happening [sic]! Now let’s go to bed! It’s over!”

Vignette 2. Ouch! It will be difficult! Then they will be separated from each other (child moves the parent dolls to opposite sides of the table—an apparent splitting movement), and Mary stays with Mom. That’s all, it’s over.

Both of these children exhibit an understanding of the conflict but do not offer any mutually satisfying resolution. At least a substantial portion of the narrative is incoherent in that a logical and focused sequence of events directed to the story conflict is missing. In both vignettes the child doll is active in the conflict, either by siding with one parent or by appearing to play an inappropriate parental role by taking charge of the situation. In addition, their representations of marital interactions are clearly negative, based on rivalry and exclusion.

Level 1—Children Living with Their Families in Shanty Towns

Vignette 3. Then and . . . Then the key wasn’t with him . . . then he didn’t lose the key and . . . Then John sees them talking (Not arguing) . . . And that is it

Vignette 4. Then the little girl came in and said: “Why are you arguing?” Then he said: “None of your business!. Go to your room and get some sleep, while mom and I finish arguing.” Then she went to her room, and stood there thinking, “why would my mommy and my daddy be arguing? Why?”

“Ah, I think I know why! They always argue because of mom’s keys. I think I know who took it. I think it was Miguel”, but her brother wasn’t in the story. “I’m going to the living room again to ask, why are they arguing?” Then she went there and asked. They say: “Why are you here, didn’t I tell you to go to your room?” Then she went and didn’t come back to the living room.

Vignette 5. They had a quarrel. Then he went between the parents and said . . . “stop it! Stop it!”

Similar to the previous 2 vignettes, each of these shows an understanding of the conflict but none offers any resolution or definite ending to the story conflict. Vignette 4 in particular illustrates how the child stays within the storyline but does not address the conflict. Like the prior group, of these three vignettes, two show a direct involvement of the child in the conflict; however the type of involvement is different from the previous group. Here, the child’s involvement is restricted to interrupting the conflict only. Vignette 3 is distinguished from the others in that it shows the child as an observer who only narrates the scene without being involved in it. This response is also notable for its disjointed sequence and absence of emotional expression. Furthermore, in contrast to what we see in vignette 1, the parents are represented here as less directly involved with each other.

Level 1—Street Children

Vignette 6. And then he (showing the father doll) says that he has not taken her key. Then she goes on saying “Where is my key? Where is my key?” And he said, “I have not taken your key!” . . . So it is over!

Vignette 7. It wasn’t the father who took it. It was the son and . . . He tried to tell them but they didn’t hear him. He stopped trying to tell them because he would have a slap from mum; because he has interrupted an argument with dad, who had not taken the keys.

Vignette 8. Mary comes in the bedroom. Then she sees them arguing with each other. She is crying. She closes the bedroom door and goes away. . .

Similar to the group of children living with their families in shanty towns, all vignettes from the street children group show an understanding of the conflict but offer neither resolutions nor endings to the story. Furthermore, in none of these stories are children portrayed with any direct involvement with parents. As in the only other story like this, vignette 3 from the shanty town group, the street children portray the story child as an observer. In vignette 7, the child figure is portrayed as trying to tell his parents about the key, but there is no real involvement with them or interruption of their conflict, despite a clear sense of emotional connection to them. The parents are portrayed as not being able to hear the child and in fact this child must desist in trying to get his parents’ attention because of the threat of physical punishment for interrupting a parental quarrel, notwithstanding his good intentions. We are left with the impression that good intentions and a desire to speak the truth are not reliably regarded as virtues,

at least in this conflict situation between parents. Parents are represented as powerful, and each of these vignettes portrays a remarkable quality of the child's disengagement from them, caused apparently by the awareness of their impotence.

These last 3 vignettes appear to be distinguished by representations of the children as without any hope of influence, without being recognized and attended to, and absence of resolution to the parents' hostility. On the contrary, the hostility goes on and they portray their awareness of their powerlessness to influence it. Whereas in vignette 7 the child is portrayed as unheard; the girl in vignette 8 cries, but whether this is from hopelessness, anger, or impotence, we cannot know. In each of these last 3 stories we see expressions of children's disengagement from parents, absence of trustworthy and responsive parents, and a reality of having only oneself to rely on. They appear to understand their parents' power and their own lack of it. These children do have reflective self-representations and differentiated perceptions of themselves and others. From this point of view, however, their isolation could be understood as an attempt at self-preservation, which may be an influence in them turning to life on the street, since their abilities to influence their families do not appear to exist.

9.4.2. *At Level 3 of Coherence.* As previously mentioned, of the 30 narratives, coherence was rated at Level 3 (high coherence) for 14. Within the 3 groups, children living with their families and not impoverished were distributed as 6 high, children living with their families in shanty towns were distributed as 5 high, and the street children were distributed as 3 high.

Level 3—Children Living with Their Families and Not Impoverished

Vignette 1. "Mary said: 'Stop! Stop! You two don't need to argue because of this issue, Dad is saying that he didn't take them! But I'm not sure' (Actually John has taken them). Then Mary said to Mom: 'Anyone else could take them ... could be John, or the dog ... Surely neither me nor Dad has taken them ... perhaps you have lost the keys yourself ... and Dad please don't talk to Mom like that, because she gets sad ...' Mary left the room. Mom and Dad were alone and started arguing again. Then Mary listened and went back to the room, as soon as they saw Mary, they stopped arguing. In order to avoid another argument, Mary took Mom to another room and suggested to Dad that he take a shower. After his shower, he returned to the room where Mom was and both started arguing again ... Mary came back ... they stopped ... then Mary left the room, but kept an eye open to see how they would behave ... they started arguing ... and Mom said: 'Give my keys back, otherwise I will take yours!' Dad answered: 'I have already said I didn't take them. Mary went between the parents and said: 'Please, could you stop with that?' and both said: 'No!' Then Mary said: 'I will call John!' (Mary whispered a plan to John to make them stop arguing). Mary and John returned to the room and asked the parents with tender voices to stop arguing ... they played with the parents until they became a family again ... then the parents stopped arguing and just after that Mom was informed that John had taken the keys."

Vignette 2. (The child subject was silent for several seconds) ... "Mary said: 'Stop you two! Please, Dad, tell us the truth ... did you take them?' Dad said: 'No' Then Mary said: 'Mom it might be anywhere, as Dad said he didn't take them! Let's play a game called 'searching for the keys' ... like 'searching for treasure' ... and let's try to find them.' They began to play the game ... suddenly Mary said: 'I found them! I found them!' Mom came and asked 'where were they?' Mary answered: 'Just here under the sofa!' ... and Dad said: 'See ... it was not me!' ... Mary suggested: 'what about a party, just us three, as John is at his friend's?' ... the parents agreed ... they turned on the radio and began to dance."

Vignette 3. "Then Mary said: 'please stop arguing, please stop! What is going on with you two?' Mom answered: 'Your father took my keys!' Dad replied: 'I have just said I didn't do that' Then Mary suggested: 'Let's first look for them in Dad's stuff, and if we don't find them, then let's have a look in yours, Mom! Otherwise if we don't find them, Mom, you must have lost them! And in that case we will need to get new ones. So as you both are under stress, please stay here and wait for me; I will look for the keys!' Mom tried to come with Mary, but Mary refused Mom's help and said to her parents: 'Stay here and don't argue ... otherwise if I see you are arguing I will stop looking for them.' She left the room and started looking for the keys ... she checked all Dad's stuff and didn't find them ... she returned to the room and said: 'The keys are not in Dad's stuff!' Then Dad said to Mom: 'See?' ... Then Mary left them again and went to check Mom's stuff ... she spent a lot of time looking until she found them ... Mary went back in the room saying 'Look, here are your keys!' Then Mom hugged Mary saying: 'Thank you! Thank you!' Then Mom apologized to Dad!"

Vignette 4. "Mary said: 'Mom, Dad what is going on ... what keys?' Mom answered: 'It's the carkeys [sic], my darling! Your Dad lost them again! And now he will buy a new car for me!' And Mary said: 'Keep cool Mom ... keep cool Dad! ... The keys are with me ... I was playing with them in my doll house ... keep cool ... keep cool ... I'll get them ... here Mom ...' Then Mom said: 'Mary now you will be punished!' ... and Mary replied: 'But Mom I took them just to play ...' and Mom answered: 'Go to your bedroom now!' ... Mary went ... Mom apologized to Dad ... and Dad went to stay with Mary ... Mom left the house ... Dad talked to Mary and ended the punishment ... Mom came back and got angry because Dad ended the punishment ... Dad explained to Mom that he talked to her and that she won't do this again ... Mom gave gifts to both of them."

Vignette 5. "Then Dad said to Mom: 'Why don't you check to see if they're in a door?' and Mom replied: 'I have already done that and I could not find them!' ... then John said: 'Surely they're somewhere else ... try to remember the last time you saw the keys, Mom' ... Mom left the room and came back later saying, 'I found them! Thank you John!'"

Vignette 6. "Then Mary comes and says: 'You two don't need to argue. Let's go to look for Mom's keys and stop with this argument!' Dad went to look for them and he found them. As soon as he found them he said to Mom: 'Look, I have just found

the keys' and Mary said afterwards, 'Mom! Dad! Can you see there is no reason to quarrel!' And they were happy! Then Mom and Dad said together, 'Mary, you will be a very good mother!'"

All of these children exhibit an understanding of the conflict and offer satisfying resolutions for the 2 major imperatives of the story, the problem of the lost keys and how to address the parental quarrel. They portrayed relevant narratives that not only link both issues but also are logical and very rich in details; the narratives of this group were rated at points 8 and 9.

Similar to the narratives of this group at level 1, the child doll is very active in the conflict, indeed, even playing an inappropriate parental role by taking charge of the situation. In all narratives (except for vignette 4, where the child is punished following the resolution of the conflict) the child doll is portrayed as the main character to overcome the conflict situation. Some representations of marital interactions include qualities of rivalry, exclusion, or ineffectiveness, despite their reconciliation at the end.

Level 3—Children Living with Their Families in Shanty Towns

Vignette 7. Then she [mother] kept saying, "give my keys back right now!" And he [father] said: "I am giving them back, hold on! I am going to get them in the living room . . . in the kitchen . . ." Then he went there and got them. "Here're your keys!". John pushed Dad "why were you arguing with Mom, come on, tell me!" Then John confronted Mom and Dad, and Mom punished (slapped) him. He cried. Then Mom went to rest in her bed. John followed her. She asked him to leave her bedroom, because she needed to rest. John went to Dad and asked for his help (to mediate). The two knocked on Mom's bedroom door and went into the bedroom, then Dad invited Mom to go out. Mom said yes and the three went out together.

Vignette 8. "then . . . then Mary says: 'Why are you two arguing?' Then Mom came and said: 'Because he has taken my keys, the car keys. And now I cannot find my keys . . . I don't know who has taken them and I guess it was your father!' Mary says: 'Dad, have you seen where John went, because I saw him carrying keys in his hand.' Then Mom says: 'Oh, my daughter, I guess he went out carrying my keys then. I will follow him.' And the quarrel stops!"

Vignette 9. "Then John had them ! John wasn't telling the truth . . . then Mom and Dad's quarrel went on . . . then John asked his mother to stop arguing with Dad . . . And he said: 'The keys were with me, Mom; it was me who took them!' Then Mom apologized to Dad . . . then it is over!"

Vignette 10. "Mom said that he should give the keys back, but he said he didn't take them. Then Mary asked to stop it (the quarrel). Then her mother said she should leave the room. Mary obeyed her mother, although the keys were with her. They kept arguing."

Vignette 11. "Then John said: 'Mom, no Mom, don't argue, I have the keys, I was looking after them'. Then they (parents) hugged and said sorry to each other."

Similar to the group of children living with their families and not impoverished, each of these shows an understanding of the conflict and offers adequate resolution for the imperatives of the story. Even vignette 10 shows a pertinent resolution for the imperatives, despite its sad end. All narratives equally connect the two imperatives of the story; however, unlike the previous group they are shorter in details, except for vignette 7. The narratives of this group were rated at points 7, 8, and 9.

Similar to the narratives of this group at level 1, there is a direct involvement of the child character in the conflict, however the type of involvement is different from the group of children living with their families and not impoverished. Here, the child's involvement is restricted to interrupting and quickly solving the conflict, without playing an inappropriate parental role and taking charge of the situation. Compared to the previous group, the child doll is portrayed more as an outsider (an observer), as someone who is not emotionally involved as an element in the parents' conflict per se, despite a clear sense of emotional connection to them. All the same, their representations of marital interactions are mostly positive and based on reconciliation. Representations of the interaction between parents and child are portrayed as more positive, although in at least one case (i.e., vignette 7) a parent is represented as striking the child.

Level 3—Street Children

Vignette 12 (Male, 11 Years Old). "John says to Mom that he has taken the key in order to hide it from Mary . . . then he got the key and gave it back to Mom . . . that is all!! Mom apologized to Dad."

Vignette 13 (Male, 9 Years Old). "She found the keys for sure! I guess so . . . in his car. They were so happy . . . they stayed together forever. They held John's hand and went out together (by car) to celebrate . . . to eat."

Vignette 14 (Female, 9 Years Old). "Then Mary comes and says: 'Dad . . . Mom what are you doing?' Then Mom says: 'He took my key!' Then Dad says: 'It is not true! I didn't get anyone's key!' Then she (Mary) says: 'I'm going to go and try to find the key! . . . but without any quarrelling!' Then they went to try to find the key . . . they found it . . . and Mary gave it back to Mom . . . Mom gave her a hug and that's all. Then Mary said: 'Come on! I have found the key! Now stop arguing!' Then everyone gets happier!"

Similar to the two previous groups, all vignettes from the street children group show an understanding of the conflict and offer adequate resolutions for the imperatives of the story. However, these narratives are much less rich in details and achieve their resolutions more through expressions of logical consequences. The representations of marital interactions are positive, with no sense of rivalry or exclusion. While scored high in coherence, these were rated relatively lower than the other examples, at points 6, 8, and 9. Vignette 14 is distinguished from the others in that it shows more details. This response is also notable for its similarity with the narratives from the group of children living with their

families and not impoverished, as the child doll is actively portrayed in the conflict by taking charge of the situation.

In vignette 12, like those of the group of children living with their families in shanty towns, the child's involvement is portrayed as interrupting and quickly resolving the conflict, without playing an inappropriate parental role or taking charge of the situation; the "outsider" feature of the child character is also evident. Vignette 13 is notable for its quick resolution as well as its intense sense of emotional connection with parents. Across all the narratives presented, this response is unique in its expression of the family staying together "forever," coupled with the celebratory eating together. One cannot help but wonder about the particular poignancy of meaning of these images for a child whose reality actually centers on life on the streets.

10. Discussion

The 10 Brazilian school-age street children in this study showed a pattern of responding to the story stem task in a manner that suggested that they not only understood the story stems, including family conflicts and options for resolutions, but they also welcomed and eagerly participated in the play assessment. Analysis of the verbatim text of the children's narratives showed similar features of the 3 major levels of quality of coherence for the 3 groups of children in regard to the elements of logic, embellishment, focus, and resolution. Notable differences were also observed between groups of children. The children living with their families and not impoverished tended to portray the child doll as actively involved in the conflict, as in taking charge of the situation and even displaying a parental role (observed at both levels of coherence). The children living with their families in shanty towns and the street children tended to portray their child characters differently, characterized more by restricted engagement with parents and focused on resolution of the conflict (at level 3) or more on interruption of the conflict (at level 1); their narratives are also often emotionally constricted. The narratives of the street children rated as lowest in coherence appeared to reflect qualities of disengagement and powerlessness that may be unique to their experiences. It seems that the street children portrayed less reliance on the parents and more reliance on the child figure himself/herself. We cannot help but wonder whether these are representations of specific forms of adaptive behaviour reflecting their lives on the streets. Experience may have taught these children that reliance on others is a dubious proposition and that their only real security will come from reliance on themselves [10].

With respect to the interpersonal performance ratings, while generally responsive, street children appeared to be less direct in response and less responsive to the examiner compared to the other 2 groups of children, a finding consistent with Toth and colleagues' work with maltreated children [30, 31]. Anecdotally, the street children were observed to be noticeably reserved and even submissive in their interactions with the researcher and NGO staff [2, 4], interpersonal qualities that very likely carried over into their performance on the narrative assessments.

All things considered, these qualitative results suggest that narrative story stem assessment methods should be used in future research with this vulnerable and hard-to-reach population as a way to understand their perspectives of close relationships.

11. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This pilot study was the first to use a play narrative technique with street children. The small number of children limited our analysis to descriptive and qualitative comparisons, which left us with remaining questions as regards to whether the differences observed in these narratives between groups might persist in a larger sample. A larger sample would also provide a better opportunity to investigate our expectation that the street children's story enactments would be rated lower for qualities such as coherence. Our results are not particularly consistent with previous studies using similar narrative assessments with maltreated children. These studies were notable for their portrayals of confusion and disorganization [27], grandiose self-representations and few representations of parental discipline [31], and role-reversal [29]. We believe that further study with direct comparisons of the responses of street children and of children with known maltreatment histories will illuminate important differences between these groups. Variability in scoring the narrative assessments is another issue that should be further investigated in studies with street children. Applications of diverse scoring systems could expand our understanding of the complexities of perception and communication of these marginalized children.

We are currently engaged in a larger study of street children that takes advantage of comparing children in two conditions, living in shanty towns and known victims of maltreatment. Through this, we anticipate furthering our understanding of the lives of these vulnerable children and extending the use of this narrative method as an important avenue for their self-expression.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgments

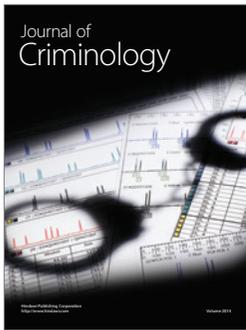
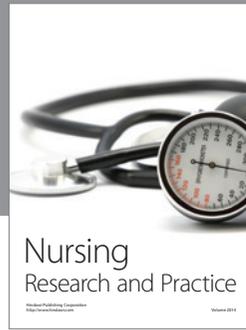
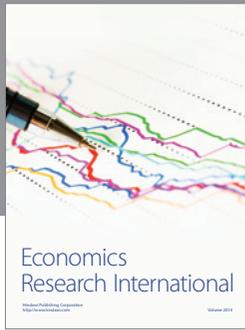
The authors would like to thank their nongovernmental organization partners for their generous support: Os Seareiros-Núcleo Mãe Maria; Projeto "Quero-Quero"; Lar da Criança Feliz, Lar Caminho da Verdade, CMPCA; PETI; CTPI; Casa Guadalupana; Aldeias Infantis SOS Brasil; Secretaria Municipal da Assistência Social da Comarca de Ribeirão Preto, and the Centre for the Study on Street Children (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul). The authors would also like to express their gratitude to Bob Emde, MD, and Helymar Machado. They thank Prof. Jonathan W. Hill for his comments on this paper. This is an ongoing postdoctoral study, in partnership with Brazilian NGOs and international collaborators from Brazil, USA, and UK, funded by

the International Psychoanalytical Association (Grant no. 1403873, 2009 and no. 825, 2013); Baden-Württembergisches Brasilien-Zentrum (Eberhard Karl Universität Tübingen); and Deutsche Forschung Gemeinschaft (DFG) (Grant no. AOBJ: 570625, 2009). Preliminary analyses were presented at the 12th World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH) in Leipzig, using measures of social awareness (intentionality) and coherence, which reflect the extent to which the child can respond to a challenge effectively in terms of the interpersonal demands of the situation portrayed in doll play [48]. A second preliminary analysis focused on ratings for positive and negative parental representations [45] was presented at 13th World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH) in Cape Town. An essay entitled "We were born on the street, how do experiences of transience and permanence affect us?" was presented at the 24th Annual Conference of the International Forum for Psychoanalytical Education, Philadelphia, USA, which will be published in 2014 in the Fall issue of the online journal, *Otherwise/Uncut*. Maria Leticia Castrechini F. Franieck is the First Author and Principal investigator.

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