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The Political Economy of Everyday Life: Working Children in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil

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Abstract

Numerous articles about working children in Brazil focus on HIV-Aids, child labor, crime, and petty thievery; however, social science literature does not analyze their positive contributions. From the perspective of working children, this article discusses the contributions that they make to their families as they navigate between home, school, and the informal labor market. Data are presented on the types of work that working children perform, time spent working, money earned, and contributions to their family household incomes. In addition, this article argues that the lack of extra-familial support networks within *favelas*¹ contributes to the high numbers of children working within informal markets in Brazilian cities. Finally, Brazil's legacy of slavery is linked to the political economy of patron-client relations as it impacts working children and their families.

Introduction

Social discourses about street and working children (hereafter referred to as working children) tend to be negatively constructed, focusing on their "deviant behaviors," while ignoring positive and worthy contributions that they make to their families and communities (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Organization of American States 1997; Guy 2002; Dimenstein 1991; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent 1998; Zanton-Blanc 1994). Indeed, social science researchers report that working children are frequently viewed as disposable (Mikulak 2002; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent 1998; Hecht 1998; Mickelson 2000). The working children studied in this research are conceptualized to have more commonalities with the working poor and homeless population than their status of "street children" and the stereotypes that term implies (Kilbride, Suda, and Njeru 2000). Research has found that most working children never become children of the street, but rather, continually move between street and home, eventually becoming absorbed into the informal economy as adults (Impelizeri 1995:30).

Conducted over a four-year period between 1996-2000 while living and working with *favela* children in various NGO settings, this research explores the political economy experienced by working children in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil. In spite of daily hardships, working children make positive contributions to their families and communities as viable social agents. Exploring these contributions from their points of view is important, since such data assist in re-casting them as viable contributors in Brazil's informal labor market, while clearly identifying social inequalities that require their participation as laborers.

The bulk of the data is based on ethnographic fieldwork, fifty-six life-history interviews of working children, their families, and non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) members, and a variety of survey data on working children's incomes in relationship to the political economy of Curvelo.

Who are Working Children?

In 1989, UNICEF created two categories that defined working children: 1) children *in* the streets (working children), and 2) children *of* the street (children living in the street). Lusk (1989) expanded UNICEF's classification into four categories:

1. Family-based street-workers
2. Those living on the streets with their families

3. Those with no family ties
4. Those dividing their time between living on the street and maintaining contact with their families.

Most working children in Brazil maintain contact with their families, either living at home, or visiting home on an occasional basis (Aptekar, 1994; Connolly, 1990; Rizzini & Lusk 1995; Westhoff, Coulter, McDermott, & Holcomb, 1995). Lusk's first definition is the most descriptive of the working children studied here, which is working on the streets daily yet living at home.

Due to their awareness of negative stereotypes associated with the term "street children," informants refer to themselves as working children; however, popular perceptions held by most middle and upper class Brazilians about them is highly pejorative (Júnior, Bezerra, and Heringer 1992). By contrast in this research, working children stated their work was an activity that brought them respect and dignity in their own and their parents eyes. It was common for working child informants to say, "I work so I won't be worthless," or, "I work because I want to help my family;" it was equally common for middle and upper class Courvelianos to characterize these children as deviant and dangerous, for working children are frequently represented in the media as *menores* (minors – a negative term describing adolescents, usually of dark skin, who are poor), *pivetes* (urchins), *ladrões* (thieves), and *moleques*; according to the Dictionary of Latin American Racial and Ethnic Terminology, the latter literally means a "small, young black slave" (Stephens 1999:613; Júnior, Bezerra, and Heringer 1992). The growing literature on race relations in Brazil by social scientists such as Sansone, Reichman, and Twine, provides additional evidence of racism experienced by the working youth (Sansone 2003; Reichmann 1999; Twine 1998). In 1998, Amnesty International noted that working children are overwhelmingly darker-skinned Afro-Brazilians who experience human rights abuses in the form of physical abuse and racial, social, educational, and economic discrimination (Amnesty International 1998; Wood & Lovell 1992; Aptekar, 1994; Connolly, 1990; Rizzini & Lusk, 1995; Westhoff, Coulter, McDermott, & Holcomb, 1995).²

Social Science Literature: Classical Theories vs. Constructionist Views of Childhood

Post-industrial Western European modern classical theories characterize childhood as a time of innocence, where children are coddled and protected from the dangers of an adult world (Ariès 1962). My approach, however, is informed and influenced by social constructionists such as Jens Qvortrup (1994), Wacquant (1990), and James & Prout (1990) who characterize children as viable, cogent social agents. Classical theory dis-empowers children, excluding them from participation in the world of adults, while constructionist views empower them to participate in socially sanctioned activities normally reserved for adults. Some classical theorists have supported practices that remove children from the streets, building on the work of Roberto da Matta, author of a seminal work on the symbology of street-versus-home in Brazilian society (da Matta 1985; Rizzini 1994; Impelizeri 1995). Here, children are relegated to the protected and protracted sphere of the home, while the streets are deemed unholy realms. Such realms are dualistic, but not necessarily mutually exclusive. Working children do traverse social classes while experiencing social constructions that positively and negatively define them by race, gender, and age; however, working children in my sample were excluded from the more protected spheres of economically privileged children, who frequently purchased goods working children vended. For example, a boy (age ten), Cleveson, stated that his red-dirt stained shoes and tattered clothes were a constant embarrassment since they "marked" him as living in the *favela*. The public school he attended, the NGO programs in which he participated, and his general appearance identified him as a working child. Another boy (age fourteen) said, since he was *preto* (black), he "smelled" differently than *os brancos* (the whites): "I always keep my distance from them, in stores I wait until they are gone, and on the streets I get out of their way."

Constructionist social scientists Benno Glauser (1997), Judith Ennew (1994), Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1989), Sharon Stephens (1995), and Cristina Zanton-Blanc (1994) have written about poor children in developing countries and the social constructions that define their childhood. According to Ennew, "One of the clearest cross-cultural findings in the 'Childhood as a Social Phenomenon' project is that,

in developed countries, children inhabit spaces within an adult constructed world” (Ennew 1994: 409). Ennew has linked the intense organization of children’s temporal experience (day care, nursery school, pre-school, school, extra-curricular activities) to industrialization, where time is commodified and conscripted, especially children’s time. Moreover, she argues that “free time” is related to idleness, which has no economic value. Viviana Zelizer re-defines children in post-industrial western cultures as economically worthless, but emotionally priceless (Zelizer 1994). The idea of children governing their own time while working in adult spaces on public streets is viewed as a serious threat to society’s best interests. Indeed, while nineteenth Century Western European cultural constructions define children as innocent and in need of protection, working children in Brazil are often considered to be a danger to society. Current social science theories about children and childhood are both discordant and contradictory such that a polemical debate currently exists among social scientists who conduct research on, about, and with children: How reliable are child informants, especially those who work in informal markets and/or traverse social spaces sanctioned only for adults? Can children speak truthfully, and with insight, about their needs as laborers and actors while they are embedded in spaces socially constructed for adults only? Can researchers sufficiently remove their own learned cultural constructions about who children are so as to gather data about them objectively? Taking a constructionist approach to childhood, I concur with Wacquant (1990:9) that social reality is a “contingent ongoing accomplishment of competent social actors who continually construct their social world via the organized artful practice of everyday life.” With working children as principle informants, my research includes their participation in the marketplace as supplemental family income generators and their own descriptions of daily life on the streets and at home. The data discussed here are drawn from child informants.

The City of Curvelo: Cultural Context of Working Children

Curvelo is a blend of the colonial and the pre-industrial, mixed with the bustle of early twenty-first century technology, caught between two worlds – the rural poor and the small number of urban rich. For Curvelo’s poor, lack of educational opportunities, inadequate nutrition, and illness remain common; for Curvelo’s rich, life’s necessities tend to be abundant. Curvelo (population, 63,467) (IBGE 1996) is distinct from larger Brazilian cities; compared to the extremes in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Brasília, and other large cities, violence against working children in Curvelo is relatively low, as is their membership in street gangs (Rodrigues Alverez, personal interview 1997; Couto 1998).

In Curvelo (as in Brazilian cities at large), upper and middle class families live in the city center, where homes are walled, gated, and locked (Riechmann 1999; Sheriff 2001; Twine 1998). Satellite dishes, cell phones, telephones and computers are common; by contrast, the poor families of Curvelo live in hill-side *favelas* surrounding the city. At best, *favela* homes are constructed from salvaged lumber, found cinder blocks or purchased bricks, or at worst, constructed of plastic garbage bags or discarded sheets of corrugated metal. Commonly, *favela* homes have pieces of cloth hung in doorways and windows and lack internal plumbing. *Favela* children bathe in polluted streams and drink from wells often contaminated with sewage that percolates into ground water.

Since Curvelo is surrounded by small farms, child agricultural labor as well as domestic service is common and reflects the same types of ethno-labor performed by child slaves prior to slavery’s abolition (1888) (Meznar 1994; Conrad 1984). Within Curvelo’s city limits, various types of informal labor are performed by poor children: selling ice-cream, shining shoes, gardening, caring for household animals in wealthy homes, domestic service, driving horse-drawn carts, loading and carrying stones for street repair, and begging and petty thievery (Mikulak 2002).

In 1996, I was introduced to Curvelo by a fellow researcher and invited to participate in a local NGO. At that time, there were nineteen registered NGO projects serving working children in Curvelo, and approximately ten percent of the total child population of Curvelo was registered as attending one of these NGOs (*Conselho Municipal de Assistência Social de Curvelo* 2000). I accepted the invitation to work with a local NGO, and upon my return to Curvelo in 1997, I broadened my research to include five NGOs representative of the types of organizations offering programs for working children: popular

culture, religious, sports and human rights, social justice, and disabled children. My child informants attended NGOs operating closest to their *favelas*. Hence, the children in my sample represent a variety of *favela* populations and provide a reasonable sample of working children in Curvelo. As a former musician, I worked in all five NGOs instructing music and performing various other educational services that included tutoring, participating in NGO activities, cooking, and mingling with children and NGO staff.³

Data Collection, Methods, and Tables

My research was based on participant observation, the standard method for ethnographic research. Fifty-six interviews (life history and informal) were collected from working children, their parents, NGO upper level staff, NGO coordinators (teachers), local business owners, and professionals living in Curvelo. Types of data collected are outlined in the following tables:

Table 1: Demographics of Children Interviewed
n = 14

Gender	Age	Identified Skin Color	Attending School	Parents at Home	Number of Siblings	Mother's Type of Work	Father's Type of Work
Male	12	Moreno (lighter brown)	Yes	Mother	4 (3 brothers 1 sister)	Farm Labor	No Father
Male	12	Moreno	Yes	Mother	4 (3 brothers 1 sister)	Farm Labor	No Father
Male	11	Moreno	Yes	Mother & Stepfather	1 (brother)	Domestic Servant	Part-time Truck Driver
Female	11	Moreno	Yes	Mother	1 (sister)	Begs on Street	Street Repair Lays Stones
Female	14	Moreno	Yes	Mother	3 (2 brothers 1 sister)	Farm Labor	Handy-Man
Male	12	Pardo (darker brown)	Yes	Mother & Father	2 (brother)	Washer Woman	Part Time Worker - Day Labor
Male	9	Moreno	Yes	Adopted-Step-Mother	2 (1 brother, 1 sister)	Domestic Servant	Begs on Street
Female	14	Parda	Yes	Mother	2 (1 brother, 1 sister)	Cook	No Father
Male	11	Pardo	Yes	Mother	5 (5 brothers)	Cleaning Woman	No Father
Male	15	Pardo	Yes	Not Living at Home	Abandoned	None	None *
Male	18	Pardo	Yes	Not Living at Home	Abandoned	None	None*
Male	16	Moreno	Yes	Not Living at Home	Abandoned	None	None*
Male	18	Moreno	No	Mother	4 (3 brothers, 1 sister)	Domestic Servant	Part-time Day Labor
Female	15	Morena	Yes	Mother	3 (1 brother, 2 sisters)	Domestic Servant	Part-Time Day Labor

NOTE: Skin color terms are fluid in Brazil and difficult to confirm. Terms used were self-selected by child informants:

5/14 Pardo/a = 36% dark brown - black person or person with darker brown skin color, considered a pejorative term

9/14 Moreno/a = 64% brown – varying degrees of light to dark brown person whose skin color implies racial mixture, generally between blacks and whites (Stephens 1999:415 & 352; Chamberlain and Harmon 1983:420)

* The three abandoned youth in my study were part of an NGO project that provided them with a small house in which to live.

Table 1 presents demographic data on fourteen child informants (from the five NGOs discussed above) who provided life history interviews, their gender, age, self-identified skin color, school attendance, number of parents and siblings at home, and the type of work their parents performed.

**Table 2: Surveys
n = 607**

Informants	Surveys	Number
Working Children	Prepared survey of working children	50
Parents of Working Children	Health-clinic household survey of <i>favela</i> households in <i>favelas</i> where working children lived	401
Middle and Upper Class Population	Purposive sample survey of middle and upper class people in local shot clinic	156
Total Surveys = 3		557 household surveys + 50 Working children surveys = 607

Table 2 encodes the three surveys conducted in Curvelo on household incomes for working children, their parents, and middle and upper class Courvelians.

Daily field notes, newspaper accounts, popular television news shows, and popular magazine articles were also data sources. All interview data, newspaper and popular media accounts of working children, and field notes were entered into [Atlas.ti](#)® (a qualitative data analysis program). Working as a music teacher and doing participant observation in five different Curvelo NGOs, I met my child informants. As a Portuguese speaker, I soon gained entrance into the daily lives of the children.⁴

Initial selection of working children and families was based on the recommendations of coordinators in the five projects and on the willingness of the children to participate. Over time, children volunteered to be informants, and asked to be interviewed. Often, I accompanied them to their homes, worked with them in the NGOs, and walked the streets with them as they worked.

In order to demonstrate economic inequality in Curvelo and to understand the significance of economic contributions made to family income by working children, data was collected from three social locations:

1. Working children on the streets
2. Selected households in *favelas* where child informants lived

3. The city center, representing middle and upper class Courvelians

Data presented here compare what working children said that both they and their parents earned, and demonstrates the income disparity between social classes (defined here economically)⁵ that necessitated children working in the local labor market.

In 1997, those employed in informal Curvelo markets earned an average of less than one minimum monthly salary (\$R130), while professionals frequently made up to \$R10,000 (or more) per month.⁶ One minimum salary did not have enough purchasing power to buy enough rice, beans, salt, coffee, and bread for a family of four people each month.

Findings: Discussion of Nominal Data

Working Children's Income Data

The city government of Curvelo did not collect official statistics on working children; therefore, the actual number working in the streets was unknown. Given the absence of "official" data, my own survey was conducted of fifty street youth (all male) who shined shoes, sold ice cream or various home made foods and sweets, or worked as manual laborers in the city center. The age range was seven to eighteen years of age, with a median of fifteen years. A prepared survey instrument with standardized questions was used; it included sections focusing on the following:

- If the children chose to work, were asked, or were forced to work
- The kinds of work that they performed
- The ways in which working children distributed their income (household and personal expenses)
- The household income of their families

After months of observation to choose an optimum site from which to collect data, the central plaza, used most often by working children, was selected for collection of survey data; the active summer months (January and February 2000) were chosen for data collection. On any given day, ten working children on average were observed in the central plaza from 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., the peak time for vending and working on the streets.

Table 3: General Working Data: Reasons for Working (Survey - Working Children)
n = 50

Reason for Working		Right to Work	
Works or Wants to Work	Works or Made to Work	Right to Work: Yes	Right to Work: No or Doesn't Know
94% (47)	6% (3)	86% (43)	14% (7)

*Right to work yes & no refers to the working youths stated belief that he/she should have or should not have the right to work. Survey was taken during January and February, 2000.

Table 3 shows only three youths (6 percent) worked because their parents forced them to, whereas the remaining forty-seven (94 percent) worked because they wanted to. When informants were asked if children should have the right to work, forty-three (86 percent) responded "yes," while seven (14 percent) stated they "didn't know."⁷ The 86 percent who responded positively regarding their "right" to work knew that, in Brazil, children over fourteen had the legal right to work, in this sense, understanding what a "right" to work meant for a child. Informants stated various reasons why they considered it appropriate to work; the most common were: "It's good to have responsibilities," "I need

to help my family survive,” or “I want to be responsible and earn my own money so that I can be responsible for myself.”

**Table 4: Types of Work Done by Working Children (Survey - Working Children)
n = 50**

Type of Work	Frequency	Percent
Selling Ice Cream	38	76
Gardening	2	4
Begging in Streets	2	4
Shoe Shine	2	4
Street Seller (foods)	1	2
Raising Frogs	1	2
Masonry	1	2
Farm Labor	1	2
Domestic Servant	1	2
Laying Stones in Streets	1	2

Table 4 indicates the types of work that children performed on the streets and plazas in Curvelo. By far, selling ice cream, especially during the summer months, was the most common form of employment.⁸ Child workers stated that it was difficult selling ice cream, since many vendors compete for a relatively small clientele. Informants stated that they needed to be on constant alert for stronger and older adolescent boys, who frequently tried to overturn their carts and steal their popsicles. If this occurred, child vendors were held responsible for the cost of stolen merchandise and required to pay the owner from their earnings, which could amount to several month’s wages. Commonly, six hours of selling on the streets typically netted them profits ranging from \$R1 to \$R2 per day (in 2006, 37 to 72 cents, US).⁹ Regardless of the form of labor, the wages earned did not amount to more than \$R2 per day, on average. Families with one or several children working part time find such income frequently making the difference between survival in a shelter rather than survival on the streets.

Larger cities such as Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, or São Paulo, offered more opportunities for lucrative, albeit illicit and illegal employment in drug trafficking and prostitution. While such opportunities also existed in Curvelo, they were not common enough to draw large numbers of youth in 1997-2000. My sample of working children, attending a cross-section of NGO projects, tended not to be engaged in such activities,¹⁰ and were more commonly engaged in informal sporting events such as *favela* soccer teams, NGO activities (wood shops, bakeries, and handy-crafts), or helping out at home with sibling care and household chores.

Curvelo is located in a region of Minas Gerais where cattle, agriculture, and tree farming (particularly eucalyptus trees), represent a large sector of the economy (V&M Florestal: 2004). While child workers identified farm labor as comprising only two percent of the sample, it was probably more prevalent than reported, since Curvelo is situated in a region of tropical savannas with many medium to small *fazendas* or *sitos* (farms or small farms respectively), and where large corporate farming of eucalyptus trees for charcoal production are located. Many of the children had fathers and mothers who worked

as day laborers on such *fazendas* or *sitos*, eucalyptus tree farms, or charcoal production. Children in projects also reported that they were hired to raise pigs, chickens, or other small farm animals for middle to upper-middle class land owners.

**Table 5: How Earned Money is Distributed (Survey - Working Children)
n = 50, 84% (42) of whom contributed to household income**

Reported Use of Money Earned	Percentage*	Number of Children
Food	61.9	26
Household Bills (light & water)	40.5	17
Household Items	35.7	15
Used For Personal Needs Only	19.0	8
Own Needs (Clothes)	14.3	6
Medications	11.9	5
Own Needs (School Supplies)	9.5	4
Own Needs (Toys, Candy, Bread)	9.5	4
Own Needs (Video Games, Soccer Fees)	6.8	2

Table 5 demonstrates the distribution of children's income. Out of fifty children who were interviewed, forty-two children (84 percent) stated they contributed to their family's household expenses and distributed their income as follows: 61.9 percent (26) bought food, 40.5 percent (17) paid household bills, 35.7 percent (15) bought household goods, 19.0 percent (8) kept all their income for themselves, 11.9 percent (5) bought medicines, and 38.1 percent (16 = 6+4+4+2) used some of their money to play video games, pay soccer fees, buy clothes, school supplies, and other personal items (toys, candy, bread., etc.). The significance of working children's income becomes apparent when comparing it to the total income of their families.¹¹

**Table 6: Comparative Income: Working Children's Income to Total Family Income (Health Clinic Data)
n = 107**

Description	Number of Families	Mean Family Size	Mean: Total Family Income	Mean: Father's Income	Mean: Mother's Income	Mean: Children's Income
Only Children Working	18 (17%)	6.3	\$R 188 (100%)	\$R 0 (0%)	\$R 0 (0%)	\$R 188 (100%)
Father & Child Work	55 (51%)	6.9	\$R 322 (100%)	\$R 163 (51%)	\$R 0 (0%)	\$R 159 (49%)
Mother & Child Work	13 (12%)	6.7	\$R 315 (100%)	\$R 0 (0%)	\$R 120 (38%)	\$R 195 (62%)
All Work in Family	21 (20%)	5.9	\$R 398 (100%)	\$R 158 (40%)	\$R 108 (27%)	\$R 132 (33%)
Total	107					

*Children refer to those in households who were working; exact number and age of working children in each household is unknown. I estimate that each household has three to four working children who

contribute to household income. Sample data were collected by nurses from files in health clinics from each *favela*.

*Eight *favelas* were surveyed: Ponte Nova I, Ponte Nova II, São Geraldo, Bandeirante I, Bandeirante II, Santa Cruz, Ipiranga, and Bom Jesus:

- 50 households from each of the 7 *favelas*
- 51 households from 1 *favela*
- Total households 401
- Out of 401 households, 107 reported children working

Table 6 demonstrates that when comparing working children's income to total family income, the significance of their earnings in relation to their own survival and that of their entire family is significant. Several children were found to be the sole providers for their families, since their father had either left home or had been seriously injured and was incapable of working, while their mother had either passed away or was also seriously ill. In these cases, working children's income comprised the total household earnings, usually of less than one 1997 minimum salary. Where only fathers and their male children worked, children's income comprised 49 percent of their family's income; when only mothers and their female children worked, the income comprised 62 percent of the family income (households generally have more than one working child – see Table 6). Based on information from seven interviews with women coordinators in NGOs and mothers of girls attending NGOs, women and children's salaries were stated to be higher than men and their male children's salaries. Women frequently find work for their daughters as maids, and their earnings (\$R65 to \$R130) are sent home, accounting for higher incomes for females.¹² Working children provide, on average, 33 to 62 percent of their families' monthly incomes, a significant sum considering the subsistence level at which these families live. (see Table 6, Column 7)

Favela Income Data

In order to compare parents' incomes to their children's eight *favelas* were selected for a household survey (Table 6). These *favelas* represented the areas in which the children lived who attended the various projects where I worked. Data also represent those children who worked on the plazas where surveys were collected. Household survey data were drawn from health clinics (in *favelas*), where nurses randomly pulled a total of 401 charts (anonymously and with the permission of clinic directors). For each household, health clinic nurses provided the following data:

1. Number of people in household
2. Father employed and amount of salary
3. Mother employed and amount of salary
4. Number of children employed and amount of salary

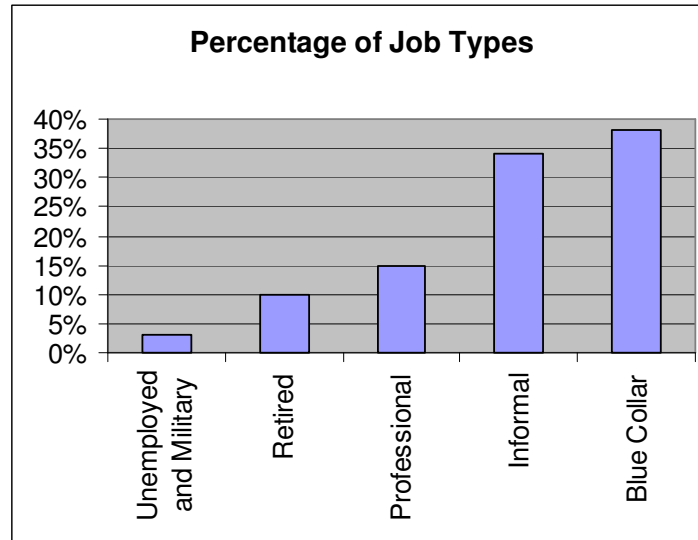
Of the 401 households, a total of 107 (27 percent of my total sample) reported children working (See Table 6). Clinic charts did not record the age or number of working children per family; however, some clinic charts did indicate whether a child was working. Clinic nurses stated that due to the stigma attached to working children, economic or other data from parents about their working children may be incorrect, and the number of working children represented may be significantly higher. From the 27 percent of households reporting child labor, data produced intriguing insights about the impact of child labor on poor households in Curvelo. *Favela* households tend to be heterogeneous economically and educationally. The results of such heterogeneity, as it impacts access to resources and life possibilities, are discussed in the analysis below.

City Center (Middle to Upper Middle Class) Income Data

In order to compare *favela* household income data with middle and upper middle-class household income, data were collected (with the assistance of a hospital head nurse, during a two-day, public health clinic immunization event utilized by the middle and upper-middle classes) that consisted of an

additional purposive sample of 156 short survey forms. Hence, a total of 557 household surveys (401 *favela* households and 156 shot clinic survey forms) were collected in *favelas* and in the city center. Typically, shot clinics in the city center are used by a wide range of populations, from *favela* residents to upper-middle class Curvelanos. This survey collected information on the kinds of professions most commonly performed by Courvelians across these social classes, and the monthly incomes that they received.

Figure 1. Percentage of Job Types in the City Center Shot Clinic Sample
n = 111



Of the 156 people interviewed at the shot clinic, 111 described the type of work performed and income received; the other 45 declined to talk about their income. Data are ranked in order of income levels, and as such, represent a simple categorization of social class in Curvelo. This sample may not necessarily be representative of the population of the city center (middle to upper middle classes), but reasonably captures the range of working to upper-middle class occupations present in that population.

Table 7: Income Distribution – City of Curvelo
n = 111

Type of Job	Income Level	Percentage
Blue Collar/Informal	\$R120 to 450 per month	72%
Professional	\$R2,000 to 6,000 per month	15%
Unemployed and Military	\$R0 to 500 per month	3%
Retired	Unknown	10%

As shown in both Figure 1 and Table 7, of 111 respondents where job types were recorded from the clinic data, informal labor market jobs *and* blue collar jobs that pay from \$R60 to \$R450 per month (informal labor: street sellers, street workers, charcoal makers, etc.; and blue collar jobs: public

service workers such as stone cutters for street work, stone layers for street work, factory workers, clothes washers, taxi drivers, etc.) comprise 72 percent of my sample. Professionals, defined here as the middle to upper middle-classes who earn from \$R1,000 to \$R6,000 or more per month (dentists, doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists, medium sized business owners, etc.) comprised only 15 percent of my sample. In Figure 1, the informal and blue-collar categories of workers are shown separately. Upper class Courvelianos (wealthier individuals with families typically do not use shot clinics) choose instead to select private doctors, and hence, are probably not represented in my data. This convenience sample may or may not be completely representative of the population and, therefore, should not be used to estimate the percentage of professionals in the population at large; however, this sample could be used to compare middle to upper middle class families to the very poor families of working children.

Qualitative Data - Interviews: Economic Relationships between Parents and Working Children

An important finding was the reluctance that *favelado* parents felt about admitting and discussing their children's labor. Many parents were unwilling to state that their underage (less than fourteen) children worked, while others admitted that they wanted to hide the reality of their poverty by avoiding the social stigma attached to having a child that worked the streets.

Typically, working children's days were comprised of work, study, and various responsibilities. Irmã (Sister) Melândra (A Catholic Nun), director of one project explains:

There are times where the parents don't have enough to give their kids anything, so the child becomes preoccupied with selling Popsicles – so that they can help their mothers. They say to me, "Ai, Irmã Melândra, I'm not coming here today, or I'm going to leave here early today, so I can go and sell Popsicles and help my mother, because the money that my father makes isn't enough." So the little that they get, they give to their parents and they feel that they are valued at home. So, in reality, they are valued because they also produce income, for what they contribute to their families. And where rich kids receive everything, poor kids fight to give what they can to their families.

Frequently, child informants took on the task of being their parents' hope for future economic security and well-being. When asked what her long-term vision for herself was, Ana (a thirteen year-old girl working as a domestic servant) exemplified the attitude of many:

My dream, is to have a good home for my mother and my father, and to work and to study, so they won't need to keep working like they are, to have money to pay them too.

Out of the fourteen life history interviews with project children, more than three quarters stated that they felt the need to provide for their parents. My data suggest that working children frequently see themselves as economically and emotionally responsible for the survival of their parents and younger siblings. A thirteen year-old girl told me about her most constant worries:

I don't know from day to day what is going to happen to me; what's going to happen to my family. I'm worried about my brothers and sisters and about myself. I am more worried and afraid that I'll lose my mother, that we'll be homeless, because we have tax bills that we can't pay, I worry about my little sister and how to take care of her, I need to be more competent.

When asked whose idea it was to start working, most children stated it was their own; however, in further conversations, many admitted that their family's economic need heavily influenced their "desire" to work. In the *favelas*, the need to be respected as a financial contributor in their household was a major component of a young person's identity. Working children describe having strong

emotional ties to their families, but family relations are often circumscribed by the hardships of daily life. Five girls and thirteen boys (average age, thirteen years) from three different projects were asked if they spent leisure time with their parents. In all cases, the answer was, “No.” Commonly, working children reported returning home to prepare dinner (rice and beans), and look after and discipline younger siblings. Working children stated that they did not feel they were coddled or given special treatment due to their status as a “child”; instead, they reported participating in sibling care, and household economy and maintenance on a daily basis. Out of ten interviews with parents of working children, 80 percent reported the necessity to create emotionally and physically “tough” children.

Aggressive Individualism versus Childhood Innocence

While working at one NGO, a monitor at the project (referred to here as Martin), discussed the aggressive nature of the children: “The children are naturally aggressive because, at home, they are at times hit, yelled at, ridiculed, and sometimes, beaten.” Such treatment (while seemingly antithetical to the respect and love working children say they feel for their parents), may in reality better prepare them for survival as they move between the street, school, and home (Bourdieu 1984: 99-112). Five out of six children interviewed at this NGO stated they know friends who must stay at home to help their mothers instead of going to school; one noted:

It’s a bad thing. It’s very difficult for these kids. They need both things, because they learn one thing at home and another at school. They need school to be able to survive in the world, but they need to help at home or they won’t survive at all.

A striking difference exists between the social/racial status of working children and children from middle and upper class families, where in the latter, imported Western European constructions of childhood are firmly rooted and pertain principally to lighter-skinned upper-class children. Table 8 identifies the social constructions that create the dichotomous childhoods for working children and middle and upper class children in Brazil.

Table 8: Dichotomous Childhoods: *Situação Proprio* (Proper social/racial positions)

Favelado Children	Middle and Upper Class Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not protected, nurtured, or coddled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protected, nurtured, and coddled
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged to be aggressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged to be “childlike”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoctrinated onto streets (age seven ≥) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not permitted to inhabit streets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventive and determined to work in informal market among adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not permitted to work, formally or informally
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earn 33% to 62% of family income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not earn money for household income
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care-givers to siblings and parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive care; do not give it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend school four hours per day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend school four hours per day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work the streets four to six hours per day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not work to earn money
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not expected to have leisure time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have leisure time of four to six hours per day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surpass expectations of “normal” child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraged to succeed in “children’s normal” activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood is defined by the realities of adult world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood is defined by reified notions of purity and protection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feared by public-at-large 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not feared by public-at-large
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society must be protected from working children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society must protect children from adult world

Table 8 illustrates the social constructions that define how working children and middle and upper class children conflict within the everyday world of Brazilian society. In this model, as constructions

overlap, I hypothesize that working children are re-cast in popular discourse as deviant, while economically privileged children are reified in daily discourse by the constructions that define and delineate them into protected and protracted social spaces. In essence, the working child is symbolically transformed into a “dangerous” child from which middle and upper class adults feel the need to be protected, increasing working children’s social marginalization. To illustrate this point, while having dinner at the home of an affluent Brazilian family, I was asked what I thought about working children. I replied that as a researcher, I need to study the complex social ramifications of child labor from many perspectives. My host informed me on his opinion of working children: “they are dangerous vermin in need of extermination.”

Social Responsibility and Lack of Support Networks in the Favelas

The types of social welfare systems that existed in the *favelas* surrounding Rio de Janeiro described by Janice Perlman in *The Myth of Marginality* are minimal, if not completely non-existent in Curvelo (Perlman 1976).¹³ My research found that poor families had two possible support systems: working children, or *patroas* (bosses). Working children’s income has supplanted the extra-familial social welfare systems found by Perlman. When asked who would assist the family if they were unable to bring home supplemental income, child informants replied, “No one.” Instead, children mentioned a ‘*tia*’, which normally meant their mother’s patron, an ex-employer, or perhaps a teacher. Sixteen mothers who had children attending one of the five projects were interviewed. All sixteen mothers stated they did not rely on help from friends or neighbors and did not have support systems within their immediate families.

Lack of support networks among *favelados* and close family members was further evidenced in conversations with project coordinators and monitors. A project monitor at one NGO, a twenty-one year-old woman named Ana-Eliza, talked about the harshness of life in the *favelas* as producing a sense of hopelessness and isolation.

Marcia: What do you think about this saying?

Ana-Eliza: About this phrase, *a vida é um osso duro de roer?* (life is a bone that’s hard to chew)

Marcia: What does this phrase mean?

Ana-Eliza: This phrase is, it’s like a cross that I must drag. It’s a hard struggle every day. Many people want to escape from this, because life is always hard and tight here, you can’t think about any one else. You’re always pushing or shoving. Sometimes you try to hope and imagine. Do you know what it means to be *desesperado?* (a desperate person) This means that you wish you could be a criminal. This is how I feel a lot of times. I divide what I make for food that we’re going to eat, and I despair. If I don’t pay for what I need, nobody else is going to pay it for me.

Another example is Luiza’s mother, Rosa, who worked as a domestic servant. After leaving her abusive husband, Rosa moved to São Paulo, intending to “start over again.” Upon arriving there, Rosa did not have a support system, and instead, substituted her older daughter (eleven year-old Luiza) to work in her place to “extinguish the debts” she owed for their room and board:

Rosa: I took my two daughters to São Paulo and when we arrived, I broke my leg. I was there, unemployed, with my two daughters, with a broken leg – without a place to stay and without the ability to work. The work that I would have done, my daughter (eleven year-old Luiza) did, and this one (the younger daughter) stayed in school.

Marcia: So, does Luiza have to repeat a grade in school?

Rosa: Yes, there wasn’t any other way, I feel really badly about this.

Antonio’s experience provides another perspective on the benefits of child labor for parents. Antonio (sixteen years old) began working at the age of ten to help his father at his cooking job in a hotel.

While he was not paid for his labor, Antonio significantly added to his family's future potential income by increasing his father's productivity, and hence, his reputation as a good worker. When working, Antonio typically drops out of school:

Marcia: How many hours a day do you work with your father?

Antonio: I work six hours a day with him.

Marcia: Are you paid for your work?

Antonio: No, I'm not paid. I just help him.

Marcia: So, how does your work with your father help your family?

Antonio: When I work with him, he finishes his work faster with my help.

While education has improved significantly in Brazil in recent decades, illiteracy rates remain high for the poor; 15 percent of the white population and 35 percent of darker-skinned Afro-Brazilians are illiterate (Schmidt 1999). Curvelo has had school drop out rates (among the poor) as high as 70 percent; after the first grade, children frequently begin working in the streets to help support their families (Tião Rocha, Personal Communication, NGO Director 1997).

Working Children as Contemporary Slaves

When children living in poverty are compared with children of the middle and upper classes, the ideological differences that define their childhoods become apparent. The following excerpt is from my interview with a university professor, referred to here as Professor José Cardoso, who was asked if his nine year-old son worked, he replied:

Professor José Cardoso: No, he doesn't work.

Marcia: If he wanted to work, would you help him do that, or give your consent?

Professor José Cardoso: I don't know how to respond to this -- it depends on what kind of work he wanted to do.

Marcia: If he wanted to work at something so that he could buy a bicycle for example -- If he wanted to sell ice cream?

Professor José Cardoso: I don't think that I'd agree to that because this kind of work isn't very proper in the scheme of our lives.

Marcia: Why?

Professor José Cardoso: Because it determines what your social place will be. So, in my structure (social place) many times I can say that I agree or would agree, depending on the work, but, deep down, I don't agree. If I had a boy that wanted to work to earn money, and he wanted to sell ice-cream, I think I would think about my social position, the situation isn't just about social class, it's about your "*situação proprio*" (individual characteristics, your proper personal place within your community). To work at nine years of age, I don't understand this. I don't understand the need to have young children working. I don't understand why a child at nine years of age would have to work.

Stark differences between the social constructions that define "childhood" were evident (see Table 8). My research suggests that working children's labor has continued as a "rite of passage" for working children who are overwhelmingly darker skinned Afro-Brazilians (Amnesty International 1998). I argue that in Brazil, social, racial, and economic inequality begin within the hierarchy of social/racial class, and *both* poverty and skin color relegate working children and their families to the realm of the socially marginalized.¹⁴ Social science literature on race relations in Brazil document the dominant paradigm of racial inferiority for darker-skinned Afro-Brazilians during slavery (Reichman 1999; Mikulak 2002:39-45). After abolition, Brazil's uneven industrial and post-industrial development has increased Brazil's inter-generational poverty, racism, and social inequality (Skidmore 1995, Sheriff 2001). I suggest that the introduction of working children into the informal labor market today at age seven is historically and culturally linked to Brazil's slave trade. Early extraction of labor, typically at

age seven, from the children of slaves was common practice throughout Brazil prior to abolition (Conrad 1984:100 & 341-350; Mikulak 2002:37-50).

Theoretical Discussion and Implications

Poor children and their families in Curvelo held similar attitudes about their lack of resources, as did Mexican peasant communities studied by George Foster (1967:122-152), whose model of “cognitive orientation” describes the ways in which *Tzintzuntzenos* constructed a set of basic values and attitudes based on their belief that resources exist in limited quantities. Foster developed a model, which he termed the “Image of Limited Good” where,

...behavior...is patterned in such [a] fashion as to suggest that *Tzintzuntzenos* see their social, economic, and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which almost all desired things in life such as land, other forms of wealth, health, friendship, love, manliness, honor, respect, power, influence, security, and safety exist in absolute quantities insufficient to fill even minimal needs of villagers. (Foster 1967:123)

Foster's notions are applicable to Curvelo, since “social goodness” (defined as material goods and services such as medical, nutritional, and educational needs) is not conceptualized among *favelados* as a resource that can be shared. When “social goodness” appears, it, by necessity, must be taken from another, whose need is frequently as severe as the recipient. Static economic immobility within *favela* communities in Curvelo was common, as was fierce competition for jobs in the informal labor market, where an implicit cognition of limited resources drove interpersonal relations. Foster's idea of limited good has been widely applied not only to peasant societies, but also to developing countries (Hammel & Nader 1979).

Linked to Foster's notion of “limited good” is Bourdieu's theory of material and symbolic forms of capital. Both Foster's and Bourdieu's theoretical models are useful here when applied to patron-client relations in Curvelo. Maintaining congenial relations with one's patron can assist *favelados* in receiving financial help with medicines, food, clothing, and education. Bourdieu argues that social interactions are mediated through symbolic means, and result in complex forms of exchanges (Bourdieu 1980, 1984). I argue that symbolic capital (monetary and non-monetary) is the currency used by both patrons *and* clients to mobilize and distribute resources such as money, medicines and clothes, and emotional and perceptual values. Symbolic capital determines the rules of employment, the significance and meaning of the work performed, and the payment given and received by both patrons and clients, while also encoding inter-generational modes of behavior and racism inherently found within social classes. Embedded within the rules and codes of symbolic capital are the forms of ethno-labor performed by working children and their parents (Bourdieu 1980:108; Degeler 1986; Reichman 1999). In instances where a patron was non-existent, informants stated that living on the street and *pedindo esmolas* (begging for alms) was most frequently the end result.

Conclusions

Ethnographic data on working children in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil, demonstrates the economic relationships they have with their parents and the contributions that they make to their respective households. The data reveal four important themes regarding working children due to social and racial stigmas:

1. the absence of economic and social support networks among *favelados*
2. the reluctance of parents to report working children's incomes
3. the impact of working children's incomes to the economic well-being of their families
4. children's labor, both at home and on the streets, often makes the difference between survival and starvation for poor families.

Since “place” (as a social space “*situação proprio*”) is as much a social construction as gender, identity, or childhood, anthropologists are becoming increasingly aware of the implications of place on, and for, children. I agree with Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv (2003) who call for anthropologists to move beyond the dichotomy of home vs. the street; anthropologists are asked to re-examine the significance of place as assigned to adults vs. children, and while doing so, recognize that children have been relegated to specific locations by adults. Such relegated spaces do not, however, determine or define the life-needs of children as evidenced in my research on working children in Curvelo. Re-examining the significance of children’s places, from the perspective of the child, is key to understanding how social places are being constructed, expanded, and transformed by children. Of critical importance to research are the spaces “carved out” by working children: informal markets, the streets, and households are such locations. In the absence of such research, working children stand to experience continued social marginalization based on both popular constructions that define them as deviant, and social science paradigms that designate them as “unfortunate castaways and by-products” of intensive capitalism. In this research, the domains of the street and the home were of equal familiarity and comfort to working children.

I argue that ethnographies of working children must represent their views and not the agendas of adult researchers. Researching children, from the perspective of children’s voices, may disrupt our deeply ingrained and culturally defined constructions of childhood, but given the opportunity, children’s lives, as revealed by children themselves, can lead the study of children into uncharted and very interesting territory. Indeed, children’s voices can assist in liberating the young from voiceless innocence or dangerous adolescence, to active social agents, capable of explicating their experiences and perceptions through new networks that expand their life’s capabilities and possibilities. For working children, our hearing their voices must be used to initiate more effective programs within local communities that assist their real life needs and those of their families. Such programs must incorporate the organization of children for their right to work, to receive an ethical wage, to receive a quality education, and to gain recognition of their identity as workers and contributing citizens.

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Endnotes

¹ The term *Favela* is the Brazilian Portuguese word for slum or shantytown.

² See Penha-Lopes “An Unsavory Union: Poverty, Racism, and the Murders of Street Youth in Brazil” in Globalization and Survival in the Black Diaspora: The New Urban Challenge, 1997.

³ I have a Masters of Fine Arts degree in music and was an active concert pianist specializing in American contemporary music. Commonly, participant observation methods in anthropology require the researcher to contextualize their presence in their research site. I drew from my work as a musician and worked as a music instructor in several NGOs, assisting children in the design, creation, and construction of innovative musical instruments for use in theatrical performances of children’s life stories.

⁴ Having lived in Brazil for four years as a young child, I learned to speak Brazilian Portuguese.

⁵ Categorizing people into classes based on occupation and/or profession is complex. I do so only as a way to distinguish between the acquisition of capital amongst individuals referred to as social classes, frequently categorized by race, gender, age, and so forth. See Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste by Pierre Bourdieu, especially pages 102-103. (Bourdieu 1984).

⁶ In 1997, the Real, the Brazilian currency, was roughly equal to one US dollar.

⁷ In my sample, seven working children stated they didn’t know if children should have the right to work, but indicated they were aware of the legal working age for children.

⁸ Small ice-cream business owners in Curvelo frequently hired working children to work for them year round. Commonly, a working child vender received 10 cents for every \$1.00 popsicle they sold. Hence, they must sell over 20 popsicles during their work day.

⁹ The Real (July 29, 2005) was \$R2.40 ± US dollars. In 1997, the Real was equal to one US dollar. As of May 14, 2007, 1.00 US Dollar = 2.02140 Brazilian Real.

¹⁰ My sample of working children is representative of children who work on the streets and live at home in Curvelo.

¹¹ Frequently a household consisting of five or six people is comprised of three or four children, with a mother and father, or a single parent. Hence, several children are commonly working, each earning approximately \$R56.00 per month, depending on the season and local labor needs. Table 8 details the numbers of people per household.

¹² My findings on mother-daughter labor linkages are well documented in the work of various social science researcher, including Gender in Latin America by Chant and Craske, Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories by Caphne Patai, and Carol Stack's All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community..

¹³ See The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro (1976), also Janice Perlman's work on megacities seems to substantiate my findings in Curvelo (<http://www.megacitiesproject.org/perlman.asp>), 1998.

¹⁴ See Thomas Skidmore's Brazil: Five Centuries of Change (1999) for a thorough discussion on Brazil's development, political instability, military dictatorships, as well as Skidmore's Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought (1995). Also, see Robin Sheriff's Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil (2001).

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