



[boy, 12 years old, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, display picture in friend request to the class teacher on Facebook after being suspended from school in disciplinary proceedings for violently assaulting

colleagues] (Carvalho, 2016)

**“Can You Hear Us?”** Debating the stress of living in social deprived neighbourhoods in Portugal from children’s own accounts of their lives”

# "Can you hear us?"

\* Case study rooted in **Childhood Studies & Social Ecology** aimed to achieve a better understanding of children's socialization processes considering multi-problematic spaces, particularly concerning their involvement in violence and delinquency.

\* Ethnographic and child-centred research methods to explore children's own accounts of their lives in six public housing neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (high levels of social deprivation, violence and crime, although being located in one of the richest counties in the country).

\* **"Could you make a drawing of your neighbourhood?":**

**Participants:** 312 children aged 6-13 years (M=8.38) attending two primary state schools (1st-4th grade), living in one of selected neighbourhoods (70,8% of the universe). Exactly half were girls (n=156). Most were African origin from the former Portuguese colonies (62.8 %, n=196), 9.2% (n=29) were Roma. Nearly all were from lower SES households, with 86.7% getting financial support from social services at schools.

**PhD Sociology:** "The Other Side of the City. Children, Socialization and Delinquency in Public Housing Neighbourhoods" (Carvalho 2011) Available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10362/6132>



"I'm Portuguese, yes I am... I'm Portuguese like all other Portuguese people! That's it, that's it... I'm 'brown' but Portuguese..."

[girl, 9 years old, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Pink Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)



# Looking ahead: relating neurosciences & sociology

\* Advances in neurosciences promote a deeper understanding of how **children's adversity experiences alter brain development** and could affect the functioning of the neurocognitive systems and their present/future relationships (Duncan et al 1998; Perry 2004; Noble et al. 2015; Piccolo & Noble 2018)



\* **Children are not raised within a vacuum;** the social context where they live significantly works for or against their biopsychosocial development (Mayall 1996; Corsaro 1997; Loeber & Farrington 2001; Thornberry & Krohn 2003; Laub & Sampson 2006 ; Sampson et al 2008; Qvortrup 1009; Brito & Noble 2014)

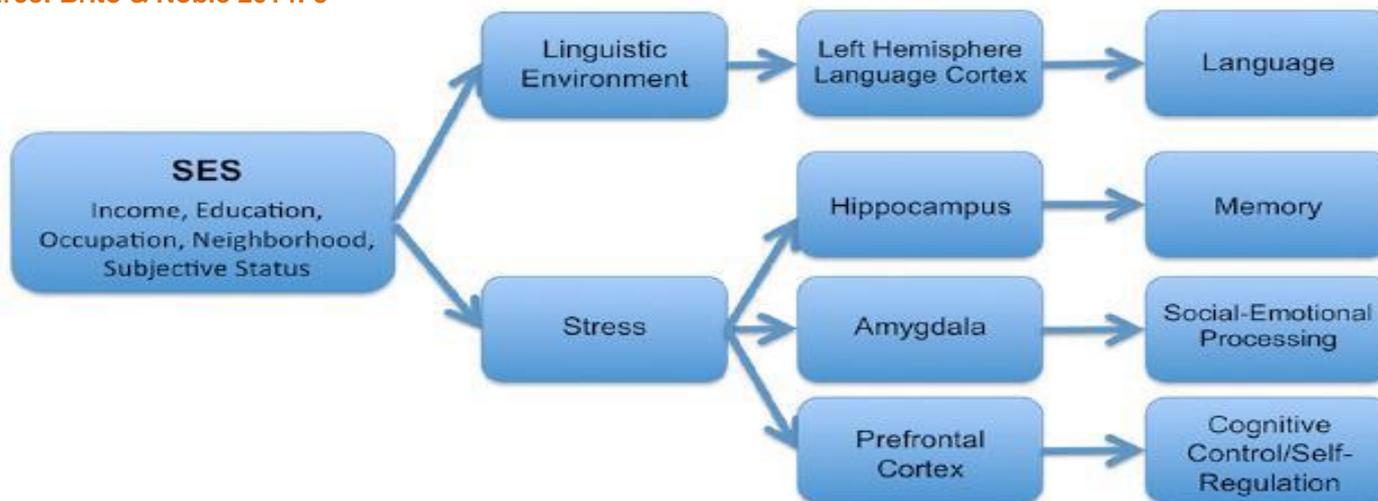
\* The **stress of living in social deprived conditions,** impoverished linguistic environments and regular exposure to trauma and violence are some of the most important key-factors affecting children's brain development (Picket et al 2001; Duncan & Magnuson 2012; Brito & Noble 2014; Ursache et al 2015; Noble 2017)

"It's my neighbourhood. There are the thieves and the police and the policemen are searching for the thieves. (...) Where? We don't see them because everyone is hidden trying to catch each other all the time! (...) Everyday it's the same, it's too much... too much for me!" [boy, 11 years-old, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Green

*Neighborhood*] (Carvalho, 2013)

# Looking ahead: relating neurosciences & sociology

Source: Brito & Noble 2014: 3



**FIGURE 1 | Hypothesized mechanisms by which SES operates to influence structural and functional brain development.**

\*  
**Correlations between neighbourhood disadvantage and cognitive outcomes independent of individual level SES have been found in some studies**

(Wight et al., 2006; Sampson et al., 2008), but not in others (Hackman et al., 2014). (cit. in Brito & Noble 2014)

\* It is a fact that **not all children respond to the social conditions in the same way** and the effects of the environment on development are not just negative ones. (What are the key-factors in this process?)

**"In my neighbourhood there are many dogs and there are a lot of people I don't like. I want to say that I would like very much the neighborhoods to be improved, it is not that they only have bad things, but people have to be... have to be more friendly with each other, even if they are 'Black', 'White' or 'Gypsies' ..."**

[girl, 9 years-old, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Yellow Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2013)

# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

- \* The territory where one lives clearly **influences the choices and opportunities children have** at their disposal in daily life (Kingston et al., 2009; Sampson, 2012).



- \* The children's perceptions of the neighbourhoods show how they can **be identified by socio-economic disadvantage and apparently accept and approve their social condition of being poor**, recognizing them as places of spatial concentration of socio-economic disadvantage that could potentially exclude them from participating in the city's social life **and undermine their expectations**

"It's a bad day in the neighbourhood! ... What we need in my neighborhood is houses, more houses for people and a playground. Here what we have more are poor people, there's only poor, poor people, just poor..."

[boy, 8 years-old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Yellow Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2013)



# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

"Teacher, can I take those cookies?... I'm hungry because my father does not have any Euro to give me for lunch and I did not eat anything." [boy, 11 years, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Green Neighbourhood, field notes] (Carvalho 2010)

NUTRITION

SOME SOCIAL  
BASIC ISSUES

HOUSING

SCHOOL

PARENT'S  
(UN)EMPLOYMENT

MOBILITY

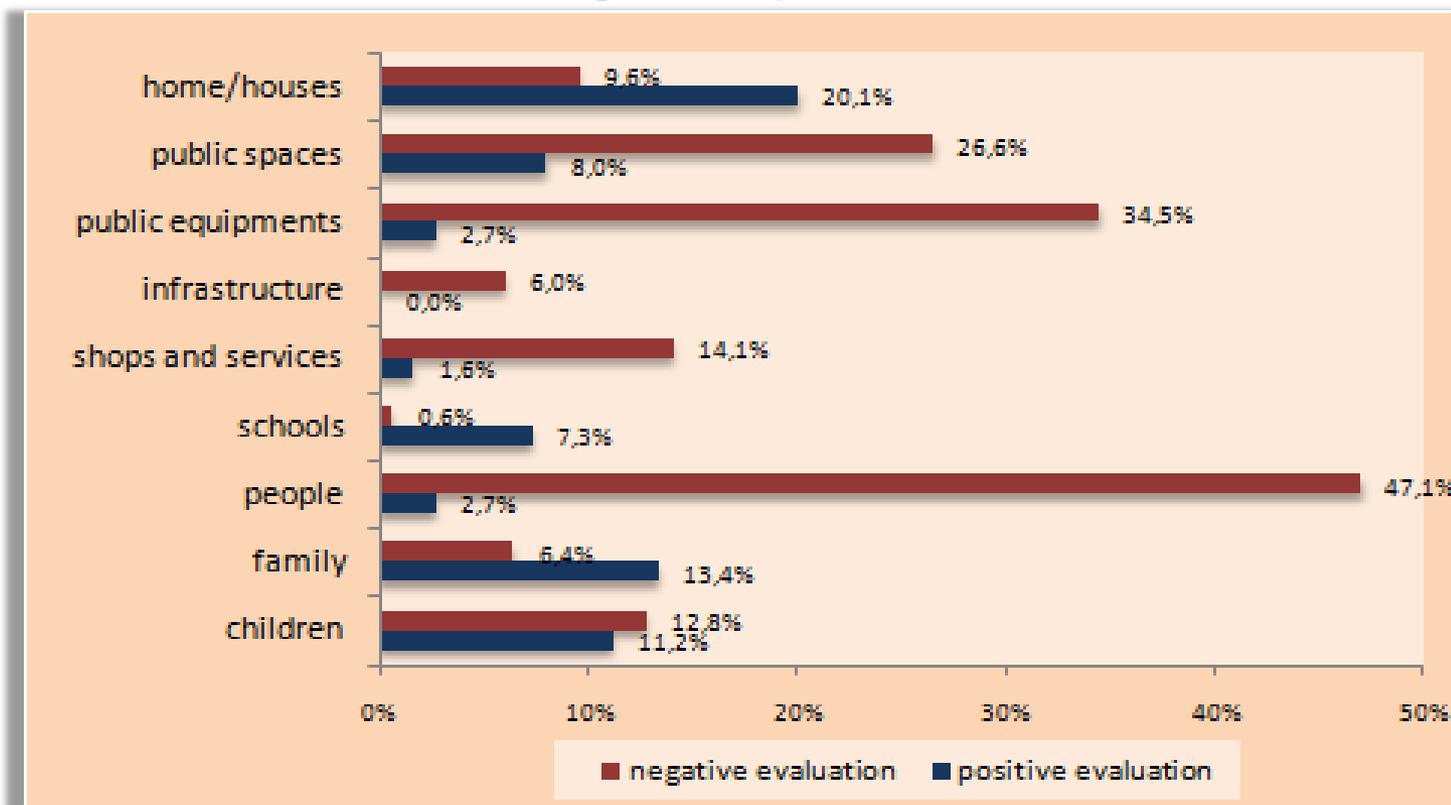
" I was ironing at home and the iron ran away and then burned my hand. (...) I often spend time ironing, a lot... [explaining by gestures how she does] My mother was not there, she was not home. It was later. I live alone until my mother arrives." [girl 7 years old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, White Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)

"Having a job?!!! No work, it's not cool, it's really tiring ... I do not want to work [when I grow up], no, no..." [boy, 9 years old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Green Neighbourhood, field notes] (Carvalho 2010)

"I cannot attend school because my house burned on Christmas [grandmother set fire to the house ]. I don't have any school materials and now I have to take care of my younger brother once my mother does not leave him alone at home anymore. " [boy, 11 years old, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, White Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)

# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

\* Children's evaluation: the **negative aspects** overshadowed the positive ones.



\* **Violence, physical and social disorders, and crime, were labeled the most prominent problems.**

"I don't like my neighbourhood ... In my neighbourhood we really need people's behaviours to be better, the biggest problem is people, people are... people do not like... all over there is theft, loud noise, fights, shootings, robberies and cars, and more stolen cars. I don't like it!" [boy, 10 years old, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Green Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2013)

# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

"They are using the dogs to scare people, many dogs are used for fights and to do harm to people."

Garbage on the street



[Six 7 years-old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Yellow Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)



\* "We" and the "other(s)":  
getting along together?

## Social disorders

physical and verbal violence as a form of communication in many families and in the public spaces;

public spaces;

verbal harassment and threats, fights, conflicts

loud noise, day and night, and rowdy groups of young (males and females) in public spaces (and children's spaces);

public alcohol beverage and alcohol selling;

drug consumptions.

"Stolen"/abandoned cars



Building entrance



Sidewalk



Garbage on the street



Vandalized litter bin



The surrounding land



## Physical disorders

deterioration of urban landscapes: graffiti; abandoned or 'stolen' cars; broken windows and doors; garbage on the streets; street lighting damaged; water and

"Yeah! All the people go fighting here, there is always someone against me and (...) Bang!!!

There she goes! I give her them a punch hard too!" [Girl, 8 years-old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, White Neighbourhood] (Carvalho, 2010)

# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

\* The residence context is associated with various health outcomes (Pickett & Pearl, 2001): in these neighbourhoods mainly as a source of potential exposure to stressors (e.g., conflict, disorders, violence, social segregation).

\* Children's exposure to **neighborhood violence** seldom occurs only once or just in one form. **The 'normalization' of violence perceived by children** influences their use of the neighborhood's places and reduces their sense of the seriousness and effects of violent acts. **The street has a central place in children's socialization.**



"This here is a man running over a little boy... On the other side is the youngster who killed the other near my house, he went home to pick up the gun and then came back and killed him... In the building there is a man shooting at his wife, and she was pushed away by him. She fell out of the window and the neighbours called the firemen and there's nothing else... I don't like to live here, there are too many sad things, and it's very sad to live here, it's like this..."

[girl, 9 years-old, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, White Neighbourhood] (Carvalho, 2010)



# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

"I have a mother who does not like me, I have a father who does not want to know about me..." says the boy [6 years old, 1<sup>st</sup> grade, Yellow Neighbourhod], while his grandmother laments "My grandson is already ruined, I do not know what to do with him anymore, he's ruined and there's no future.!

[field notes] (Carvalho 2010)

A BASIC  
ISSUE:  
FAMILY

\* **Children who grow up in negligent and violent households are more likely to suffer a wide range of physical and psychological effects** that can be negatively reflected in their health and development. At stake is their ability to learn, to trust, to communicate and to develop positive relations with peers and adults (Margolin and Gordis, 2000; Krug et al. 2002; Bartlett 2002). |

"My father hit my mother, and then my mother tried to kill my father.

[girl, 8 years-old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Pink Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)

\* In some situations, children's positions in the family seem to be the exact opposite from what is expected, with the **children serving a parental role and acting to protect some of the adults** from violence from other family members. |

"In my home my father and my mother are always fighting and every day it's getting worse ... I don't let my father beat my mother. I take him out of the way." [boy, 10 years-old, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Blue

Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)

# Children's voices on their neighbourhoods

"My neighbourhood is cool!... We do a lot of motorcycle racing and also car racing, everything is cool..."

"We don't need anything else here!"



[boy, 11 years-old, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Green Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)

- \* Part of the **childhood cultures generated in these neighbourhoods is underpinned by a street culture of violence**. Children's family and group involvement, especially with older ones, are key-factors in this process.
- \* For the 6-12 year-old boys and girls, **delinquency coexisted with conventional actions of social conformity**, although for many of them the ties to deviant and criminal models present in the neighbourhoods were more expressive and significant than the others.
- \* Children's **social development through violence is already structuring how they interact with peers and adults** and may be reflected in their future roles in society. **Violence and delinquency play a functional and instrumental role**, providing attractive and rewarding forms of socialization (which vary from what they consider to be just child's play to the need to obtain recognition in socially stigmatized areas).



# In conclusion

\* **Children's awareness of the neighbourhood's social problems is strong and their willingness to be heard** and to intervene was expressed. Overall, children revealed a special concern about the neighbourhoods' sustainability, approaching the idea of an **"healthy city"** (Hancock & Dull, 1999). To improve their life conditions, they propose:

access to **essential goods** and services (health, welfare, justice)

more play **space** for children

improving public space and public **equipment's** maintenance

better access to **transports**

more **security**

**adults and children** must behave better (families)



**"A playground is very much needed here, so we can have a space where we can go play. We need space to play, we can go to the street and there we have space, but then the balls go into the road and sometimes the cars are running so fast in street races that someone can be killed. "** [girl, 7 years-old, 1<sup>st</sup> grade, White Neighbourhood] (Carvalho 2010)



# Looking ahead: relating neurosciences & sociology

\* Children's voices on their neighbourhoods lead us to reinforce:

i) the need to understand the emerging **relationships between social inequality and brain function** in childhood:

key-factors/mediators in this process

gender issues

models of social and justice policies for children

ii) how legislators may use scientific evidence from domains such as sociology and neuroscience **to impact the effect of public housing policies in child development**, especially in children's involvement in violence and delinquency:

State/local authorities responsibilities

enforcement of Children's Rights

reforming urban environments within a child-sensitive framework

"I think... and I do not think that being a child in this neighbourhood is different from other places. I think it's good because now and then you get along with other people and learn good things. But other times I think it is not good being a child here because I see the boys smoking, doing crap and they try to steal and then they will stay like the others. I think the girls are less naughty [laughs], the boys like to go out at night and do other crap. Girls... only a few do the same, we are more timid. (...) But some girls are rude and also go in the same way of the boys ... I'm not saying that the boys are naughty, not all, right? But some are bad, they are very bad.