



# LIFE AND DEATH IN THE FAVELAS OF BRAZIL

Undertaking research in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro is a dangerous business, as **Sandra Jovchelovitch** relates. But by involving local community groups she has been able to chart what helps some survive and prosper in the favela, while others sink.

In 2009 I was undertaking fieldwork in Vigário Geral, a favela in the north of Rio de Janeiro, when our research team heard the first sounds of fire exchange between the police and the drug dealers who control the area. Our guide and research partner from Afroreggae, a grassroots organisation that works in Rio's favelas, immediately told me to retreat so that he could negotiate our entrance. After some discussion we were allowed to cross the "border", which is overseen by armed men working with the drug factions. More than once I had been prevented from entering favelas by curfews imposed

by the narcotraffic but I had never before experienced the fear of a *bala perdida* (stray bullet).

As a Brazilian social psychologist I am well aware of the survival strategies and patchwork of loyalties that make up the favelas. Officially called urban subnormal agglomerates, Rio's favelas are ecosystems of great complexity, where the raw beauty of Rio's human and natural landscape co-exists with chronic lack of state services, heavy social control imposed by drug bosses and police violence. From the 1980s onwards drug cartels have gradually gained control of favelas, which offer an ideal territory for the illegal drug trade: the

hillsides of the Atlantic rainforest are hard to reach and navigate and provide perfect hideouts. During this period the drug business became a major organiser of favela life, imposing parallel state-like structures and offering protection and jobs for those living in these areas. The police, historically the only face of the state in favela life, opted for a policy of violent confrontation.

Despite the extraordinary success of the Brazilian economy and the huge prospects opened up by the hosting of the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016, for young people growing up in these segregated communities life chances are still very limited. Rio's urban landscape continues to be riven by socio-economic disparities, and sharp geographical, social and psychological borders separate favela life from the city. The result is two very different worlds living side by side: one rich and glamorous; the other poor, riven by armed conflict and hidden as far as possible from public view. ►





Social exclusion becomes not only a socio-economic but also a social psychological process, affecting the identity and the self-esteem of favela dwellers.

These conditions made the young Afroreggae activist who guided us into Vigário Geral all the more remarkable and could not have been more illustrative of our research. Since 2009 an inter-institutional research partnership between LSE, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, the charitable foundations of Itaú Bank – Itaú Social and Itaú Cultural – UNESCO and grassroots organisations Afroreggae and CUFA has worked to investigate routes of inclusion and exclusion in Rio's favelas. We want to understand how communities living in conditions of poverty, social exclusion and violence develop positive routes of integration and socialisation.

To this end we have mapped the work methodology of Afroreggae and CUFA, local grassroots organisations that use the arts, sports, cultural identity and civic engagement to redraw favela contexts and establish lines of communication with the city outside. One of our main objectives is to identify key indicators of best practice that can be used to inform public policy in Brazil and beyond. We have worked in four different favelas throughout Rio and have undertaken surveys, field observation and over 220 interviews with favela dwellers, grassroots activists, expert observers in academia, the media, the United Nations' Brazilian offices, industry, government officials, politicians and the police forces of

Rio to understand why some people break free of their backgrounds while others are sucked under.

The fieldwork and the data analysis have given us a tremendous opportunity to understand the feelings, perceptions and experiences of ordinary favela residents. What is immediately striking is the human cost of poverty and segregation: the psychological suffering that accompanies the destruction of self-esteem. The interviews we conducted with children, young people and mothers were often painful, and it was hard to listen to how pessimistic and fatalistic they could be. Kids, usually those without support from family or any other institution, can be enrolled in the gangs as young as six or seven, initially acting as scouts. There is a careful hierarchy in the gangs, one that offers power, identity and respect. But it is a deadly game – colleagues in Rio have calculated that the average life expectancy once you join the drug trade is three years.

And yet, it would be misleading to think that these are the only characteristics of favela life. Our interviews and fieldwork could equally be inspiring and uplifting. Listening to stories of survival and self-renewal, observing workshops and artistic initiatives that connect the favela and the city, systematising the

dialogue between government, grassroots activists and the police, observing how government officials and business leaders engage with local organisations to learn how to intervene in these areas – all this has allowed us to see the energy and the potential of favela communities, the extraordinary amount of social capital they contain and their determination to make an impact in the new Brazilian public sphere.

Afroreggae and CUFA, both partners and objects of study in the research, are favela-grown organisations that have turned the traditional model of social intervention on its head. A combination of political activists, highly popular musicians and hip hoppers, successful cultural entrepreneurs and agitators, conflict mediators and social workers, they are firmly grounded in favela life. Their leaders and activists were born, grew up and continue to live in the favelas. Crossing borders and expanding networks is an essential part of their methodology, which they combine effectively with psychosocial intervention at individual and community levels. At local level their activities range from holding clinical workshops exploring what it means and how it feels to be a favela person, to the development of literacy, artistic and IT skills. At city level they are powerful cultural agitators playing the

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mainstream circuit and engaging heavily with the media to showcase the vibrancy and cultural richness of favela life. They have been presenting what they do nationally and internationally for some time. Afroreggae, for instance, has been brought to London by the Barbican to perform and to run its methodology with children in Hackney.

Our research has found that these groups introduce profound changes in the traditional way that social movements work in Brazil. They bring to the public sphere a new type of social actor – young black favela residents, fiercely independent and not interested in delegating voice to traditional political actors. They are not afraid of working with governments, markets and the media; their activities are sponsored and they have acquired the status of “brands”, engaging a wide range of corporate partners in what they do. Through these partnerships they bring the mainstream to the favela and have a real impact in the lives of its residents. In 2010, for instance, Santander Bank opened a branch in the notoriously violent and difficult to reach Complexo do Alemão favela, and other banks are now considering doing the same. Our research partnership is one example of how these groups engage with academia and international organisations. Indeed one of the key lessons of our research is that academics alone could not have conducted this investigation.

So what are the conditions that have enabled these experiences to emerge and grow in the favelas of Rio? What turns a young person away from the drug dealers to a more positive life? We have amassed a great deal of quantitative data to underpin our interviews. Mapping the complexity of individual life stories onto the trajectory of these social movements, we found that the major predictors of social integration and social exclusion are the inter-personal and institutional structures of support that provide resilience to cope with adversity and allow individuals to stand up when loss, violence and lack of opportunities push them underground. We call these structures of support psychosocial scaffoldings, which refers to the enabling role others have in the development of the human self. Psychosocial scaffoldings are given to all of us by those who support our individual and social development: they originate in the actions of a care-taker and constitute the source of our internal security and trust in the world and others.

While provision of psychosocial scaffoldings is traditionally found in the nuclear family and further enhanced by state services, our findings make clear that grassroots organisations and community social capital can take this role too. Our data show that the family is central to pathways of socialisation, but so are grassroots organisations that work as parents by proxy. Mentoring people, offering them strong role models and emotional support alongside educational and training

opportunities, is what ultimately allows the re-writing of life stories and a belief in the future to flourish. In the favelas this can mean the difference between becoming a drug dealer or becoming an activist – and that, for many, means the difference between life and death. ■



#### **Sandra Jovchelovitch** (PhD

Social Psychology 1995) is a professor in the Institute of Social Psychology at LSE. For more information and photographs from the project see [www.undergroundsociabilities.co.uk](http://www.undergroundsociabilities.co.uk). The final report will be launched at two seminars with UK and Brazilian academics, government policymakers, activists and the private sector in Rio (13 September 2012) and London (2 November 2012).

LSE is home to more Brazilian master's students than any other UK institution, and over 60 Brazilian students were studying at the School in the 2011-12 academic year. The LSE Students' Union Brazilian Society provides a focus for these and all students who love the country. Financial support is available to eligible Brazilian students at all levels of study, and the School enrolls a number of Brazilian Chevening Scholars. Staff from LSE's Student Recruitment Office visit cities in Brazil annually and, together with the Alumni Relations Office, fund pre-departure events for Brazilian offer holders. For more information visit [lse.ac.uk/study](http://lse.ac.uk/study)