

The Power of Stigma: Encounters with ‘Street Children’ and ‘Restavecs’¹ in Haiti

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1 Introduction

We rarely speak about class inequalities, external domination or dependence; this language is unfashionable – and is often dismissed as ‘unsophisticated’ – now. However, back in the 1970s, this was rousing political language throughout much of the Caribbean. Academics and activists such as Walter Rodney and Michael Manley explained, in most accessible terms, the ways in which colonial and neocolonial power were often exercised as domination and repression. They exposed the legacies of racial and class inequalities and encouraged ‘people power’, which they defined in terms of collective resistance to secure ‘liberation’. ‘People power’, as these leaders conceptualised it, required independence, initiative and self-belief. With respect to the latter, they recognised that slavery and colonisation had left a lasting, though not necessarily irreversible, imprint on the minds of the people. As Palmer (1968) describes in the context of Jamaica, ‘one of the more harmful by-products of European domination was the effect of that rule on the minds of sections of the Jamaican populace: A white bias had come to prevail and with it a concomitant devaluation of the sense of self of the citizens of African descent’. ‘Mental slavery’ – as Bob Marley famously depicted it – had many dimensions and could result in tacit compliance with various forms of injustice.

As a student in Jamaica in the 1980s and 1990s, I was familiar with this political language. Despite the limitations to that discourse, I am persuaded that many of the broad observations about how power actually works were as relevant then as now: power, in practice, can be repressive and even lend itself to violence; conversely, power is crucial for producing healthy changes in social relations, such as would profit those subsisting in conditions of poverty or

those subjected to various forms of injustice; repressive power is most potent and durable when people accept and uphold the (mis)perceptions and conditions that underpin their own inequality; therefore, much hinges on the extent to which, in the emerging social contexts, people are adequately challenged to recognise, confront and transform the socially acquired dispositions that allow for repression, both of others and of themselves.

Historical (social) dispositions are not easily changed. Some 40 years after independence in much of the English-speaking Caribbean (Haiti gained independence in 1804) analysts still contend that experiences of inequality and poverty are, in no small part, rooted in long-standing beliefs about – and socially acquired attitudes to – race, ethnicity, wealth, class, age and gender, among others. Historical (social) dispositions inform many current practices; many current practices in turn reinforce these dispositions. This synergistic relationship can persist even where there are comprehensive institutional reforms and economic development.² (There is a popular but erroneous assumption that institutional reforms and economic development will, necessarily, stimulate transformation in social relations or that they are themselves sufficient for tackling all forms of inequalities and injustice.)

This is uncomfortable terrain for many development actors. There is perceptible silence on critical issues, such as racial prejudice and other substantive concerns, such as how relationships of power – and the socially acquired dispositions which underpin them – influence inequalities and impair social justice. This silence is, in part, rooted in a sense of incapacity: it is difficult to make sense of and plan for intangible factors such as ‘socially acquired dispositions’. It is also rooted in

frameworks that simply cannot conceive of individuals as social beings and, accordingly, focus on satisfying people's rational, egoistic utility – maximising tendencies. However, the silence may well be rooted in cowardice or even dishonesty. *As development actors, we tend to downplay our own biases – assuming we do recognise them – and to assert our objectivity. Yet, our own socially acquired dispositions, including our prejudices, infiltrate our practice and are consequential for outcomes. Development actors, through their actions and inaction, can have a role in upholding the adverse power relationships that sustain inequalities and injustices.*

This article considers two substantial questions: How significant are socially acquired dispositions for development? To what extent do we as development actors – influenced as we are by our own historical and social frameworks – reinforce or help to mitigate the social conditions and practices that breed negative dispositions, and through what mechanisms? The article uses a case study of select groups of stigmatised children – 'street children' and 'restavecs' – in Haiti to reflect on how negative dispositions can be reproduced, including how these dispositions are reinforced and challenged by extant social relations and structures; and how development actors – with their own socially constructed dispositions, including biases and prejudices – intervene in these social contexts, and with what consequences. Haiti is an important country for study. It is one of the most stigmatised both within and outside of the Caribbean and there is increasing evidence that some Haitians also hold very negative views of themselves. Stigma, particularly self-stigmatisation, is consequential for development. The focus on children is deliberate. Children have comparatively little space on the development agenda, yet the power relations that shape their lives have enormous short- and long-term implications.

The following text initially gives a brief background of Haiti. It then goes on to use aspects of Bourdieu's (1980) theory of society – particularly his deliberations on 'habitus' – to outline a framework for analysis. This is followed by a delve into the case study, exploring how various authoritative state and non-state actors label and treat 'street children' and 'restavecs' in Haiti; how these children view themselves; and the ways in which they resist and comply. Finally, the article outlines the challenges to the development expert and emphasises the importance of self-reflection.

2 A brief background of Haiti

They think of us as people who were once good but not anymore. They treat us as people who are not worth anything and they have forgotten that we used to be good.

2.1 From 'victor' to 'vanquished': changing dispositions in Haiti

Anyone familiar with Haiti's history of resistance, revolt and strong defence of its independence will be struck by its tragic decline and the dramatic reversal both in the way Haitians are recognised and in how many Haitians now recognise themselves. Two centuries ago, after executing the first successful slave revolts, Haiti was widely celebrated as the first black republic (Dayan 2004), inspiring pride among would-be revolutionaries and nervous apprehension across colonising countries. Conversely, today's headlines commonly depict Haiti as a 'wretched place on Earth'; a place of 'unending and worsening agony' (Daniels 2004), which some suggest confirms the dangers of premature independence: 'The physical chains may have been removed, one resident missionary explained, but the mental chains remain. The people have never had the opportunity to see what a family unit looks like. The masses of the people are uneducated – not meaning unschooled or untrained – but ignorant. Children, from the time they are able to walk, have to do so much work – especially girls – and so much of a child's learning before being able to read and write is stolen from children in Haiti'.³

Haiti still evokes 'fear' (Maignot 1996) but now of a different sort: there is fear of being bombarded by Haitian 'boat people', fear of being infected with 'Haitian diseases' and across the Caribbean countries that once desired to be like Haiti, unspoken fear of suffering the same unfortunate fate. Haiti's long and seemingly irreversible decline is now used to frame the ways in which Haitian people, on the whole, are regarded: from 'poor and wretched Haiti' comes 'poor and wretched Haitians'. The poverty and decline are represented as the people's whole stories and the persistent suffering as retribution for their own wrongdoings. Thus, labelled as poor, wretched and even ill-deserving people, Haitians, particularly those in poverty, are subjected to discrimination and abuse within the Caribbean and in countries external to the region (Brodwin 2003). The Minority Rights Group and Anti-Slavery International have documented the gross treatment of Haitians –

including children – who labour on estates in the Dominican Republic (Ferguson 2003). They equate the labour conditions to a modern-day form of slavery. In Guadeloupe, Haitians are commonly treated as second-class citizens; many are denied French citizenship and legal status. Between November 1991 and 1993, Haitian men, women and children were imprisoned at the USA naval base in Guantanamo Bay, the 'world's first and only detention camp for refugees with HIV'.⁴ As one interviewee explained, 'they think of us as people who were once good but not anymore. They treat us as people who are not worth anything and they have forgotten that we used to be good' (Dayan 2004: 2).

Rather than being protected by their state institutions, Haitians have become accustomed to appalling abuses within their own country. There is a long history of violent repression, though certainly of some Haitians more than others: Haiti is, after all, a highly unequal society, with a legacy of racism.⁴ From day to day various forms of victimisation create and harden differences across segments of the population. Class and racial distinctions are prominent: visible and even vulgar displays of wealth and consumerism coexist much too easily with some of the worst forms of depravity, and people from designated 'underclasses' are regularly treated with the disrespect that 'suits' their station. Foucault's (1991) description of the process of objectification and resocialisation that typifies modern-day prisons is pertinent here for, in Haiti, the use of force against various groups does punish the body and compel conformity but it is the pervasive and systematic discrimination that 'punishes the soul', such that some eventually accept and even endorse the negative perceptions of themselves. Self-defamation is pervasive in Haiti and is projected, quite commonly, in regular conversations: 'nothing good can come to us Haitians, it's we sin why we're suffering'; 'Haitians are stupid, we behave like animals'; and according to one popular proverb, 'we have been trying to make "dough" since 1804 but it will still not sit evenly, that's how stupid we are'. However, this is merely one part of the story. Those labelled as the 'underclasses' still have and exercise their capacity to resist and even dominate in particular spaces. Some trade upon the labels assigned to them and act in the violent ways expected, while others persevere with stubborn resilience:

People may be shooting and killing but the people will continue with business. The thieves

will burn down the market today but tomorrow you will see people again. This is their form of resistance. In some countries, people would not go out. We Haitians are not passive people. (Interviewee 1)

In summary, Haiti's post-independence decline – economic, social and political – has produced substantial changes, both in how Haiti is regarded, and in how many Haitians now regard themselves. Haitian children are growing up in a context where their country is stigmatised regionally and internationally, a situation which is then compounded by multiple and pervasive forms of prejudice, discrimination and inequalities within the country; particular labelled groups – such as 'restavecs' and 'street children' – are most at risk. For the majority who live in conditions of poverty, their social world breeds negativity and futility, which coexists with instances of stubborn resilience. How are the prevailing social dispositions reinforced and challenged by existing social relations and structures? How do various development actors – with their own socially constructed dispositions, including interest biases and prejudices – intervene in these social contexts, and with what consequences, particularly for 'restavecs' and 'street children' in Haiti? Bourdieu's (1980) concept of 'habitus' provides a useful analytical framework.

3 'Habitus': what is it and why is it significant?

As Wacquant (2005) explains, Bourdieu's (1980) conceptualisation of 'habitus' 'helps us to revoke the duality between the individual and the social by capturing the 'internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality'; that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which then guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu'.⁵ Because 'habitus' is socially acquired, it varies across contexts (time and space) and, significantly, 'across distributions of power'; it can also be transferred across different domains, producing consistency in consumption patterns (such as in music or food) and in other lifestyle choices, such as in political or cultural preferences within and among different social classes. Thus, we construct our social world by applying socially derived categories of judgement, which we share with others who were exposed to the same conditions and experiences. However, as individuals, we have a

unique set of experiences and, therefore, internalise and project 'a matchless combination of schemata' (Wacquant 2005: 317). Habitus, then, is both 'structured by the past and structuring of the present'. It is not derived from a single social structure but from the diverse environments that one encounters. Contrary to economic approaches, which conceptualise individuals as rational, egoistic and bent on maximising utility, Bourdieu (1980) emphasises that these socially derived dispositions can produce unpredictable and seemingly 'irrational' actions. Correspondingly, Kabeer (1999), in her reflections on measuring women's empowerment observes that there is an 'intuitive plausibility' to equating power and choice, when the disempowered use their power to improve their welfare.⁶ In contrast, analysts have much more difficulty accommodating those instances when women not only accept but choose their inequality (cited in Moncrieffe 2004a).⁷ Thus, people can be socialised in ways that cause them to become complicit in their own poverty and inequality.

However, while 'habitus' is 'enduring', it is not 'static or eternal'. Socially derived dispositions can be challenged, eroded, and even dismantled when there is exposure to effective counteracting external influences. Yet, 'habitus' has what Wacquant describes as 'inbuilt inertia': there is a tendency to reproduce practices that are 'patterned off the social structures that spawned them' and to use this frame of reference to 'filter' subsequent experiences. Bourdieu (1980) accounts for the tensions and contradictions that arise when people encounter and are challenged by different contexts. His theory can be used to explain how people can resist power and domination in one domain/social arena (which Bourdieu (1980) describes as a 'field') and express complicity in another. In one interview, a prominent Member of Parliament in Uganda, a female Muganda, expressed pride in women's achievements and her own efforts to gain authority in what was long regarded as 'male domain' (her public face). However, she also described her acceptance of her husband's domination at home: she was not allowed to eat high protein foods, could not sit at the table with him and was required to kneel before all male visitors to her home (her private face). Bourdieu's (1980) theory has other noteworthy applications to development. Here, it is critical to reiterate that as development actors, we invariably bring our own mindsets/frameworks, which inform how we interpret and work within

different contexts. Bourdieu (1980) emphasises that 'genuine science' requires reflexivity, meaning 'systematic and rigorous self critical practice' (Swartz 1997: 10–11). This is crucial for exposing and tackling the symbolic struggles that we are all involved in and for then 'producing real knowledge about a given context' (Navarro, this *IDS Bulletin*). Furthermore, it is important to examine the extent to which the social contexts, and the ways in which we as development actors – with our differing socially constructed dispositions – mediate them, offer real scope for transforming the durable negative dispositions that obstruct empowerment.

3.1 Categories, labels and symbolic struggles

To facilitate this analysis and, particularly, to emphasise the implications for development, this article seeks to analyse how differing socially acquired dispositions feature in and influence the practices of categorisation and labelling, which are now commonplace in development. It starts with the assumption that the categories and labels we use to define issues, individuals and groups reflect our social conditionings. As Goffman (1963: 11–12) describes, 'society establishes the means of categorising persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories ... The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought'. Thus, categorisation and labelling are inescapable and integral to the construction of identities: how one perceives herself, how she perceives others and how others, in turn, perceive her. Identities and labels shift and change, and there may well be a mismatch between self-perceptions/self-labelling and the perceptions and labels that others hold. Following Bourdieu (1980), discrepancies such as these can produce symbolic, social or cultural struggles, since people may gain or lose depending on how they are categorised. Conversely, struggles may not ensue where people accept – willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously – and endorse the labels they are assigned.

Labelling has special significance in development. The categories and labels used tend to reflect particular organisational and social dispositions and goals. However, these labels may have very different meanings for the persons charged with managing policy on the ground; for communities and the subgroups among them; and for the labelled groups themselves. Again, such multiple inconsistencies can produce power struggles over labels and recognition,

though not all persons have the capacity, means and willingness to contest.

Particularly since the 1980s, development agencies have used targets and labels to categorise 'needy populations' in order to prioritise assistance. There are many benefits to framing issues so that they emphasise specific needs among segments of the population. For many people, classifications such as the 'poor', 'marginalised' and 'dispossessed' have been used, successfully, to highlight needs that may have otherwise remain ignored; provide a basis for making claims; and open spaces for contestation. However, Wood (1985) emphasises that processes of defining and reaching target groups are inherently political, as authoritative state actors must convince both those excluded and included in the target that the criteria used are legitimate and should be accepted. Similarly, Escobar (2000) argues that the postwar development discourse classifies whole countries and regions in ways that assume predictable patterns of behaviour and uniform solutions. Thus, countries within the 'Third World' or those designated as 'underdeveloped' are constituted and treated as the labels benefit. Classification and labelling, he suggests, reflect what Foucault (1991) describes as the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality. Escobar reinforces that processes of classification and labelling are intensely political.

The development discourse that Escobar describes has been changing slowly, as 'radical' ideas, such as on participation, power and agency permeate and contest accepted dogma. However, the emerging discourse is still markedly silent on issues such as racism in development (Kothari 2006; Crewe and Fernando 2006; White 2002) and development actors are yet to seriously acknowledge and confront the ways in which stigma and biases – overt and covert – influence practice and outcomes. Yet, if we are honest in our self-reflections, we would likely admit to various long-standing/socially acquired biases, preferences and prejudices which influence our practice, including the ways in which we categorise, label and subsequently relate to people.

3.2 Assumptions, labels, stigma

As argued above, we inevitably make assumptions about individuals and categorise and label them based on our own socially acquired preferences and perceptions and/or based on the (mis)information we

obtain. Typically, Goffman (1963: 12) notes, we are unaware of the assumptions we hold 'until an active question arises as to whether or not they [the assumptions] will be fulfilled'. Where we persist in labelling at a distance, we circumvent the encounters that can potentially challenge our assumptions. Correspondingly, when we are unduly fixed in our assumptions, we may fail to recognise and accept the challenges that encounters may bring.

Stigmatised individuals and groups are often so discredited – 'reduced in our minds from whole and usual persons to tainted, discounted ones' (Goffman 1963: 12) – that they are excluded from the spaces that would allow for encounters and from real opportunities to contest. Notably, persons who accept or feel unable to confront the stigma may opt to exclude themselves.

4 Constructing children's social world: authoritative state labelling and non-labelling

As in many other countries, children and their concerns have very low priority at all levels of the Haitian society. Particular groups of children – those that are stigmatised – often suffer gross abuses, including from state representatives who ought to act in their interests; otherwise, they are ignored when human rights infringements occur. There are huge implications for accountability and for citizenship over the long term. Influenced by this wider social disregard for children and facilitated by a long history of unaccountable and irresponsible leadership, successive governments have helped to create and sustain social structures and practices that reinforce children's lack of rights.

All respondents confirmed that the Haitian government is weak, ineffective, unable and, in large part, unwilling to commit to dealing with matters such as child protection and child rights:

Haitian governments are not stable. You hardly find any kind of child policies. Even where isolated policies exist, there is no plan of action. Children are not a priority for the government. What government does is very negligible. (Interviewees 2 and 1)

Certain groups of children are seemingly dismissed, even by prominent government representatives. For example, 'restavecs' are children who come principally from the rural areas to live and work in

urban homes. Many of these children are promised food, shelter and education opportunities. There are a number of reasons for this migration:

Poverty is not the only reason why these children leave their homes. Some leave because there are no schools in their local area. Others leave because of their parents' superstition: parents believe that if children stay in the rural areas, something diabolical will happen to them. Some leave because of their perception that conditions must be better on the other side. (Interviewee 1)

While some children are treated well or moderately well in the receiving families, the majority are treated badly, enduring merciless beatings, rape, very hard workloads and long working hours.

Foyer Maurice Sixto is a private organisation which was established to provide for the educational needs of these children and to ensure temporary security in the periods they are allowed to leave their homes. The organisation also attempts to work with the receiving families to reduce and ultimately prevent child abuse. 'When we started this project, every week we had children with marks. We always had to meet with families. Now, we rarely see these'. However, abuse does continue in other forms:

There is a lot of evidence of rape, particularly of girls, within homes that take them in. Children are considered as things. This is a taboo subject. The children won't tell what they are going through easily, even if they are being ill-treated or raped. A lot of times, children prefer to be victims rather than being embarrassed. (Interviewee 1)

One major difficulty for organisations such as Foyer Maurice Sixto is that there are widely diverging views on the true costs of the 'restavec' system. Within government, for example, there are members who consider the system 'a huge sore for Haiti'; there are also prominent political leaders who consider it a useful arrangement, given the economic situation. According to one respondent:

The President is not categorically against the restavec system. Rather, he thinks it is good that if parents see that they cannot take care of their children, they give them to someone else. The President has said that as NGO workers, we should make the effort to help families to come

out of misery. He would support us but we should do the work. I was flabbergasted to see that at the highest level of government, our representatives had totally resigned themselves from responsibility to the population. (Interviewee 3)

Thus, at the level of government, the label 'restavec' has different meanings. While there is a contingent of representatives who desire to eradicate the system, this group does not have sufficiently strong support from some of the more powerful leaders and has not managed to frame the issues in ways that engender serious attention to the plight of the majority of children who are suffering as a result of the system. Consequently, ambivalence and non-commitment continue.

Conversely, in many circles the label 'street children' evokes a firmer response. One NGO representative reported that in one meeting, a ministry official argued that 'the only way to deal with street children is to build a big jail and put them inside'. 'Street children' are the most reviled of the groups within Haiti, the NGO respondent contended. 'Across the majority of government institutions, even those concerned with social affairs, street children are regarded as thieves and killers'. This stigma gives license to abuse, particularly from the police.

Yet, street children do not choose to be where they are. The reasons for their situation are deep and the solution is to develop the communities they are coming from. When responsible decision-makers think that the only solution is a big jail, we have a very difficult problem. (Interviewee 2)

4.1 'Habitus': missionaries' mindsets and attitudes

Stigma has the power to produce what Goffman (1963) describes as a 'discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity'. Likewise, unqualified beliefs (including self-beliefs) in the moral superiority, objectivity, fairness and unguarded commitment of development actors can serve a similar function; that is, they can mask actual social identities. For example, it is naive but not entirely unreasonable to assume that missionaries to and within Haiti would not display many of the prejudices described. However, interviews revealed that relations between missionaries and various labelled groups of Haitians vary considerably.

Missionaries (local and expatriates) have prime roles in providing child services, particularly through schools and orphanages, in Haiti. There is little coordination among them and according to all former and current missionaries interviewed, little effectiveness:

Missionaries are notorious for being independent. We don't branch out and join with others; we create our own thing each time. Missions would make a better impact if we cooperated.

Missionaries, particularly those of us from America, have not been effective. There is an inability to build true relationships with Haitians. We have come in and given a lot and that is a great thing. However, we have not given Jesus Christ. We come in saying we have this wonderful God and when things get bad in the country, we are the first to leave.

Missionaries go everywhere *we're* comfortable. When I came to this country, I resided with a missionary family who had been here for about eight years. None of the family could speak Creole; none knew the names of the people in the church. This family had so many walls that they had never allowed Haitian people in. (Interviews, various missionaries)

Misperceptions and labelling come from both communities. There is a view that while many Haitians distrust Americans, including missionaries, they also regard them as wealthy, clever and racially superior. Conversely, while one missionary reported being intimidated by the 'beauty and pride of the Haitian people', there is agreement that especially in their private circles, the majority of missionaries speak about the people in very derogatory ways and that particular groups, including 'street children', are stigmatised.

According to one missionary:

I have seen missionaries act in ways that keep Haitian people below them. For example, there was one occasion when some Haitians came to the door of this couple I was visiting. They sent their workers out to them as they didn't like Haitian people coming in. On another occasion, a number of missionaries visited me and was surprised that we had Haitians eat with us. They

said, "You have Haitians at your table!"

I will give *our* [emphasis added] girls [meaning servants] things they need to do because we run a guesthouse. Other missionaries give *their* [emphasis added] girls a job and say, "they'll never get it right".

Even the most benevolent of respondents (from among the missionaries) spoke of her resentment towards 'street children':

I have myself got angry at these kids begging me. I don't like it. It's just that bother of someone peeking at your window and getting in your space and the guilt of not knowing what to do.

There was agreement that most orphanages are run as 'businesses', which means that many parents who are unable to pay are excluded. There are complaints, too, that children are frequently mistreated: 'I started this orphanage after working in 11 others. None of these orphanages provided a home setting. Most times, the children were treated like pigs' (Interview, 26 May 2005). Further, 'street children', in particular, are not accommodated in many faith-based orphanages (whether they are run by local or foreign missionaries), as there is genuine fear that they will 'corrupt' the 'normal' children in their care. Interviews conducted at one of the few reputable orphanages indicated that while the responsible missionary was convinced that she had received a special commission from God to help children in Haiti, she was not persuaded that this involved 'street children'. She outlined practical reasons:

There are two categories of street children in Haiti: children of the street and children in the street. Those in the street left home for different reasons and have come to search for a better way of life. Some, such as former *restavecs*, have been severely mistreated. Those of the streets were born there. Their parents are people in the streets. Both groups of children need attention; they didn't choose to be in that position. However, I wouldn't take in any of them because they have been their own government and will not accept to be told to do anything. They do a lot of bad things in the streets and they will spoil your own children if you invite them in.

As the account below shows, this stigma is pervasive throughout the society.

Mark's account

Mark⁸ is an immigrant from the USA who, having heard reports about child slavery in Haiti, decided to visit the country 'to check out the situation'. The conditions, he explains, are even worse than he thought. He decided to help in the best way he could and, therefore, rented a shack to house five 'street children'. After two months, he had responsibility for 36 children. Currently, he claims, there are about 2,000 children who come to him when they are in crisis.

The police will beat and even kill them. The orphanages won't take them in. All get razor slashes while they are sleeping. They are treated as animals. The teachers victimise them because they are street kids. They beat them for not understanding. Teachers call them coco-red, which is a name used in Haiti for little insects that come out of the garbage. Since I have been here, not one Haitian has offered to help.

4.2 'Habitus': elite perceptions and attitudes

One common assumption is that elites inevitably discriminate against lower segments of the society. However, there is no one elite perception of poverty or standard reaction to stigmatised groups. There is, instead, a diversity of responses. Goffman notes that 'the attitudes we normals have towards a person with a stigma' include 'varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances'. People can also respond with benevolent social action. Interviews conducted among select elite groups, including schoolchildren in Haiti, revealed both unawareness and unconcern about the conditions of these 'other' children as well as acts of kindness and acknowledgement that 'street children' and 'restavecs' are victims of the dire social and economic conditions in Haiti. Of course, without sufficient cross-group encounters, the dominant perception is that all elites characterise 'street children' as 'little vagabonds who are on the street because they want to be there'. Interviews indicate that this is how many 'street children' believe they are perceived and that the more common experience is that of elite prejudice.

Reginald's account

Reginald was the most eloquent of the boys interviewed. He explains that he was forced to leave home when he was nine years old because his parents did not have the means to provide for him.

He reports that Mark had paid for four of them to have piano lessons. All the other children in the music school were racially mixed and wealthier. Though his elderly teachers did not treat them unfairly, the children were especially cruel. 'They didn't want to come near us. They say we are black pigs because most of the pigs in Haiti are black'. Reginald decided not to pursue piano lessons. However, 'I would have been good at the keyboards if I had stayed. Then I would have found a band and played for them'. Therefore, as Reginald sees it, 'bourgeoisie people do not want to speak to us. Bourgeoisie people have a complex when it comes to poor people. Bourgeoisie only speak to bourgeoisie'.

Normalised cruelty

However, the focus on class distinctions and inter-class discriminations can downplay the everyday cruelties that children who survive on the streets experience. Daniel is 14 years old, though he is of such small stature that he has the appearance of an average nine year old. Throughout the interview, he appeared shy and withdrawn and frequently fell asleep, as did a number of the boys. (One of the boys explained that if there is nothing to do and nothing to eat, the best recourse is to sleep.) Daniel has nine fingers. He explained that when he was nine years old, he stole a cake, as he was very hungry. The vendor grabbed him and severed his finger with a machete. Other respondents reported being beaten, chopped and attacked in other ways by various community members and by older children.

4.3 From social conditionings to social dispositions: how the stigmatised respond

Labels that have the power to stigmatise are propped up by discourses (Goffman's stigma theory) that dehumanise and discriminate, and that explain the labelled group's inferiority in terms such as inherent/essential biological differences, status/breeding or just reward for prior action. Stigma theories can be used in ways that generate fear. As Reginald explained, 'there is a general feeling that all children in the streets will steal from you'. Thus, even benevolent social action is best conducted at a safe distance, avoiding an encounter: Missionaries restrict themselves to 'comfortable areas'; development agents with responsibility for improving child rights and welfare may complete years of work without venturing into areas where 'street children' and 'restavecs' actually subsist. There is also the fear of being touched; contaminated by

those considered less human. Consequently, children from the 'superior classes' may reject social associations with the 'underclasses'; religious personnel continue their missions but would prefer that their personal space is not invaded.

Stigma theories often give license to rights abuses. Persons considered 'not quite human' can suffer physical and psychological torture, seemingly without recourse. For 'restavecs' in Haiti, sexual and physical abuses continue without serious acknowledgement in policy debates and little commitment to fundamental change. The government conceives its mandate as to 'regularise' the system rather than to uproot it.

It would be simplistic to suggest that there is no justification for fearing children on the streets in Haiti. As interviews with the children indicated, there are politically supported gangs of youth on the streets who specialise in kidnapping for ransom or that kill 'on order'. Foreigners and prominent members of the society are prime targets. The groups of children who were interviewed for this study insisted that it is important to differentiate between gang members and ordinary 'street children'. Gang members do try to influence them, they explain; however, there are many 'street children' who recognise that 'while gangsters are well paid, they will die'.

To what extent do labelling processes reproduce conditions that facilitate the behaviours that the public expects? There is ample evidence that the alienation, forced exclusion, poverty and the techniques learnt for survival on the streets substantially increase the opportunities for 'antisocial' behaviours. These behaviours are, in turn, taken as justification (prime proof that the labels are not misplaced) for the categories and the labels. Similarly, children who are dehumanised and suffer sexual abuses have been known to abuse other children in turn.⁹ Sexual abuse is often 'licensed' on the streets (such as through group initiation rights, by paedophiles, as part of normal everyday 'interactions'). As described, it is also common within 'restavec' host families, where many children have no effective rights. This learnt behaviour is then perpetuated in other contexts. Thus, the director of the orphanage who feared that 'street children' and former 'restavecs' would 'spoil' her own children referred in particular to a specific case in which a

street child – known to have been sexually abused – who was admitted, against advice, to an orphanage reputedly raped a young girl, which then left that orphanage in disrepute.

Therefore, labelling processes that stigmatise can – and often do – produce the conditions and living experiences that teach behaviours that are consistent with the labels. This need not mean that people accept the meanings associated with the labels. For example, Reginald explained that 'even when I am called coco-red, I don't care. I believe that through education, anyone can become great. After all, Aristide was an indigen just like me'. Reginald's response is perhaps much too easily classified as indicative of his capacity to resist (Scott 1985), aspire (Appadurai 2004) and exercise his agency. The 'weak' may indeed have weapons to counter the stigma but public resistance and bravado can coexist with private shame, which may be revealed, as Goffman (1963: 18) notes, 'when only he and a mirror are about'. Thus, despite Reginald's public bravado, he was susceptible to the taunts from his classmates and left music lessons as a consequence.

Importantly, 'the weapons of the weak' need not be used to productively change circumstances. People may respond by wielding power in the spaces they are allowed to dominate. Mark reports that many of these boys who appear docile in the daytime become tough contenders at night or on occasions when they are forced to defend their turf. Similarly, representatives from VDH (Haiti Development Volunteers), a local organisation that works with 'street children', note that children often attend their local meetings armed with guns and other weapons, as these give them a sense of power. Therefore, labels that stigmatise can produce a perverse sense of empowerment that then corroborates the labels.

Stigma is most effective when persons come to accept the negative perceptions of themselves. This 'tacit consensus' was most visible among the young female 'restavecs' who were interviewed for this study. Maria¹⁰ is 13 years old and has been living with her aunt for five years. Her responsibilities are to wash clothes, wipe floors, cook, carry water and go the market. Victoria is only eight years old and lives with a woman who is not related to her. She has a heavy workload and goes to school in the evening. Victoria tries unsuccessfully to hide the scars on her neck, which she eventually explains came from

beatings with a belt. When asked how she felt about her circumstances, she stated:

I don't feel good. They are always shouting at me. If I was with my mother's family or in a good family, it wouldn't be the same. I feel low because I am going through a lot of trials. I want to go back home.

All the girls concurred that they felt like nothing. The director from Foyer Maurice Sixto explained that the 'children – particularly girls – feel as if they are zombies. They feel there is no hope. They are not living for tomorrow; just for today'.

5 Enter the development expert

These encounters with 'street children', 'restavecs' and various authoritative state and non-state actors in Haiti depict the power of stigma. Authoritative actors have the power to label people and to (mis)recognise them in ways that can have longstanding influence on how they perceive themselves, respond to opportunities, make claims and exercise agency. There are substantial and very troubling long-term implications when children are the object of this stigma. This article suggests that in the absence of 'effective counteracting external influences', learnt behaviours and socially acquired dispositions are reinforced and reproduced, even over generations. These stubborn dispositions and the social relationships that buttress them can dislodge and disrupt development initiatives, including those which seek to 'empower' while overlooking or underestimating the more and less obvious ways in which power relationships can underpin inequalities and injustice.

It is the responsibility of the development expert to seek to understand deep power relationships (see discussions in Gaventa, this *IDS Bulletin*) and to work towards cultivating environments that will facilitate counter-labelling, whereby socially derived dispositions can be 'challenged, eroded, and even dismantled'. The honest and judicious starting point ought to be 'systematic and rigorous self critical practice' (Swartz 1997: 10–11): Bourdieu's reflexivity. Critical questions might include: How do our socially constructed dispositions influence how we frame issues and conceptualise categories of people? Do we have deep knowledge of how social relations on the ground contribute to differing poverty experiences? How do we as development actors intervene in social

contexts, such as Haiti, and with what consequences? What is required to improve social conditions such that people can develop the capacity to contest, resist and transform the dispositions that block their own empowerment?

Should we strip away the virtual social identities (such as of rational, objective and committed managers) of many of us who are involved in development, would we discover actual social dispositions that are not unlike those of many of the kind missionaries within Haiti? As expert researchers, policymakers, programme managers and evaluators, we all harbour biases that are not displayed publicly but that may be the subject of our private conversations or become much more evident 'when only [we] and a mirror are about'. Our own socially acquired meanings (stated or unstated) that we then assign to labels – which may conflict with the meanings that our respective organisations publicly adhere to – influence how we perceive issues and shape the encounters that we willingly and less willingly engage in.

Development agencies and donors in Haiti are in very authoritative positions, since the government has effectively allowed them to 'develop the country' without much guidance/constraints. There is a perception that the agencies are in an especially commanding position as the government is effectively more accountable to them than it is to the population. All the agency representatives interviewed described the inadequate coordination among them, the competition and the lack of accountability for outcomes. According to one representative:

It is really catastrophic how things are being done by the NGOs, international agencies and the government. We all have different starting points and methodologies. Everybody is free to do what they want. There is no focus point and no regulation. The government is totally absent and so there is no accountability. (Interviewee 4)

Without strong direction, many agencies focus on areas or projects that are likely to secure funding and show short–medium-term results. For some, this inevitably excludes Port-au-Prince and its myriad problems, including the plight of 'street children' and 'restavecs'. There are a number of agencies that have specific plans and programmes for these children;

however, there are questions, including from agency representatives themselves, about their effectiveness and complaints that agencies lack real knowledge of the children's experiences. (Too) many respondents were sceptical of the development agencies' long-term goals (it is important to note that this includes some former and current agency employees). One interviewee summarised what appeared to be a fairly common perception:

These agencies have no interest for there to be changes in Haiti. If they changed the way they do things, a lot of them would not eat or drink. It's an industry; without countries such as Haiti, the industry would not exist.

Encouragingly, one of the agencies interviewed, PLAN Haiti, has started a process of reflecting on the way it exercises power in Haiti, particularly its own – unintentional – role in perpetuating dependency and poverty among children. It has revised its programme

approach in order to transform the ways in which children and youth, on the whole, are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Thus, PLAN has begun to emphasise the importance of children's voices, using what it describes as a 'child-centred community approach'. One representative was convinced that 'PLAN's programmes are now getting to the heart of the matter. Not all agency representatives were as committed to this goal of transformation. One development expert explained her reluctance to engage in debates about the 'restavec' system: 'We are not in any country to destroy the culture. We have to work within it. We have commissioned some studies on the restavec system and some findings are very positive: some former restavecs are now ministers of government! We cannot change the system'. Meanwhile, another development expert reflected on his 16 years of work in Haiti and on the outcomes of the numerous studies on 'street children' and 'restavecs': 'I think we have failed in breeding a new day for children, as we stated in our mission'.

Notes

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- 1 'Restavecs' (which literally means 'stay with us') are children who come principally from the rural areas to live and work in urban homes. Normally, these children are promised food, shelter and education opportunities. While some are treated acceptably, many are subject to gross abuses.
- 2 In Cuba, for example, Fidel Castro's post-revolution government followed the founding ideologies of the nineteenth-century nationalist movement and made considerable efforts to uproot discrimination. The government systematically destroyed the public organisations that supported overt racism, such as segregated clubs. Furthermore, by stipulating free access to education and health services, it succeeded in improving living standards, including among 'black' Cubans. By 1962 Castro's government concluded that the race problem – which it viewed as rooted in economics – had been resolved and the matter was accordingly virtually

- banned from public debates. However, covert forms of racism continued and, particularly since the 1990s, racial and ethnic prejudices have become much more blatant. Similarly, France's strategies for building 'raceless equality' have masked or, perhaps more appropriately, circumvented, similar tensions. Départementalisation – which allows French Caribbean people to claim the same rights as other French citizens – has, in principle, extended social benefits but has not managed to prevent discrimination in areas such as employment. The ANC government in South Africa has adopted a similar strategy. The government contends that open discussions of inter-ethnic rivalries are likely to inflame tensions in a context where substantial structural programmes are required, and must be prioritised (Moncrieffe 2004b: 32–4).
- 3 Interview, former missionary to Haiti, May 2005.
 - 4 According to Max Paul (1996), these inequalities originated with the inappropriate land tenure system that Pétion adopted, for while neighbouring Saint Domingue, under Henri Christophe's leadership, used land to benefit the entire state, Pétion parcelled out land for the mulatto elite, which entrenched inequalities and racial divisions.
 - 5 Also see useful discussions in Haugaard (1997, 2002); Gaventa (2003).
 - 6 For example, various reports reveal that some women in Uganda have used the new political

spaces offered by the Movement's affirmative action policy to improve their economic and political standing. See, for example, Goetz and Hassim 2003.

- 7 Uganda's second participatory poverty appraisal (PPA2) depicts some of the ways in which women defend unequal gender norms. The Kasensero, Rakai site report notes that while some younger women are beginning to challenge the norms that sustain gender inequality, many older women tend to enforce traditions and sanction those who flout the rules. Thus younger women protested that were banned from the lakes to their detriment: 'We have to rely on men all the time because we cannot go to get the

riches ourselves ... Our poverty will be continuous until we are allowed to go the lake'. Meanwhile, many among the older women interviewed were firm: 'Women should not go into the lake at all because they are always dirty'. Since the young women had begun to challenge this instruction, the gods were now punishing the community; thus, 'the fish stock has already begun to deplete' (Moncrieffe 2004a: 28).

- 8 The name has been changed to protect the respondent's identity.
- 9 This is not to suggest that it is only sexual abuse that causes children to abuse others.
- 10 Note that the names have been changed to protect the respondents' identities.

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