# An Analysis of a Small Favela-Based Youth Organization

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**Abstract:** This research identifies the value of a community-run NGO (non-govermental organization) in its work to advocate for a more positive image of Rio's favelas (urban slums). Basic interpretive inquiry is used to analyze interviews with the principle spokesperson for the organization. Recommendations for further research are made.

In June of 2009, I was introduced to Morrinho, an arts-based community youth organization in the Pereira da Silva favela, urban slum, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I spent the summer volunteering with the NGO. The physical site of Morrinho is a 350 square meter model made of painted bricks of the city's favelas, which can be seen on the surrounding hills. Morrinho's unique story is that this model was started as part of a game by a group of kids in the late 1990s when the community was at the height of its drug war. The game involves role-playing favela life as the youth see it: neighbor interactions, local dances, as well as gang and police violence. A new generation of local boys still plays the original game, but the organization also now works in tourism, as a film studio, travels nationally and internationally reproducing the original model in arts festivals, and works to supplement the public school education of the local youth. The story of how Morrinho grew from a child's game to a non-governmental organization (NGO) intrigues many who come to know the project. However, when I was first introduced to the project, there was no information addressing Morrinho's value to the local community. This posed a problem for the organization since they sought external funding and wanted to broaden their image as valuable. Also, Morrinho is the only social program in the Pereira da Silva community.

In order to address this problem, the purpose of this research is to answer one central question: According to its original founding member, what has been the value of Morrinho over the course of its history? When I began this research, Morrinho was facing the real prospect of closure if they did not get additional funding. This research was used to provide more detailed information in order to attract funding for the project. Due to time constraints, this paper used one principle source, whom I will call Thiago. Thiago originally conceptualized of the game, and has since been an integral part of the project since its inception. Although Morrinho is a team project, my research through dozens of newspaper and magazine articles on the project, and experience volunteering with it since 2009, has led me to believe that Thiago is the primary spokesperson. Therefore, interviews with him are a good place to start in this initial analysis.

## Context of the Study

A general understanding of favela history and culture will help to elucidate the specifics of the Morrinho project. Since their beginning in the late nineteenth century, there have been nearly continuous government plans to either destroy, displace, or integrate Rio's favelas (Medeiros, 2007). Present-day estimates place approximately 20% of the city's residents in a favela. The most common images that come out of Rio de Janeiro's more than 600 favelas are of drug trafficking, violence, and poverty. This culture of violence began in the mid-1980s, when cocaine supply networks in the Middle East were dismantled, and "Rio emerged as an important

transshipment hub for Andean cocaine en rout to Europe and North America" (Arias & Rodrigues, 2006, p. 61). Over the next 10 years, drug dealing and crime networks consolidated under the umbrella of only a few prison-based networks. At the same time, these drug traffickers began to employ favela residents in their operation. In exchange, they would provide assistance to the poor such as "financial assistance for funerals, water service and vans to take residents to and from stores and hospitals" (p. 61). In contrast to the social services provided by the crime bosses, the lack of government coordination led to "many bureaucrats, police and politicians [taking] kickbacks or otherwise [working] with traffickers to accomplish personal objectives" (Arias, 2004, p. 3).

This cycle of corruption and entrenched crime, combined with Brazil's recent history of a military dictatorship, resulted in an official heavy-handed police approach in the favelas, with a murder rate that stands out by international standards. In 2008, Rio's police "acknowledge killing eleven hundred and eighty-eight people who were 'resisting arrest' . . . . By comparison, American police killed three hundred and seventy-one people - classified as 'justifiable homicides' - in the entire United States in the same period" (Anderson, 2009, p. 50). Other research finds that the most common victims of marginalization and of police violence in Rio are young Black males who have not finished their elementary education and live in a favela (Rieter, 2009; Roth-Gordon, 2009). Important to this study is that this is the category with which Thiago and many of the Morrinho youth identified.

With several hundred favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the history of violence and abuse cannot be generalized. Pereira da Silva, located in the wealthy southern zone of the city, is the favela where Morrinho is located. Today, Pereira da Silva is a small and peaceful community, home to about 6,000 residents (Rocha, 2009). However, until the spring of 1999, the community had regular bouts of violence. Due to its small size, close proximity to the governor's mansion, and easily controlled exits, the community was one of the first to be integrated by the government's *favela-bairro*, favela-neighborhood, model (Rocha, 2009). According to this model of integration, first, the local organized crime was targeted. The government then provided sanitation systems, other basic infrastructure, and spatial and social integration to the community.

Streets were connected with surrounding neighborhoods and space was set aside for the operation of social projects (Freire Medeiros, 2007, p. 581). Pereira da Silva remains one of the few pacified Rio favelas, and one of the only favelas, which had a successful execution of the favela-bairro plan. Though, during my two-month stay in Pereira da Silva the summer of 2010, I realized that the community is not immune to gang control and drug trafficking. I witnessed regular selling of cocaine and marijuana. There was also one instance when Rio's military police entered the community with the assumed aim of attacking the gang presence. A few months after I had returned home to the United States, I received word that a male youth who was involved in drug-trafficking in Pereira da Silva was killed by the military police. I found no news coverage of the event, but my contacts in Pereira da Silva all said that the murder was unjustified.

## Methodology

Given that this is a basic exploratory study and there is scant literature on the Morrinho organization, I used basic interpretive inquiry. Merriam (2002) describes basic interpretive research as one in which "the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning [that] a phenomenon has for those involved" (p. 37). Social constructionism is the basic theoretical framework of this study. According to Merriam (2002), constructionism posits that "individuals

construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (p. 37).  I show in the following pages that the social reality of the Periera da Silva favela, and the boys' experience in this social context, led to them creating the game of Morrinho.

During the initial five weeks that I worked at Morrinho's headquarters in Rio, I was present during and filmed a number of interviews that Thiago gave for the purpose of promoting the project.  I chose to use two and a half hours of two interviews as data for this research.  One interview, lasting one and a half hours, was conducted by Guillermo Planel, a photojournalist who is well known for his work covering the violence that exists in Rio's favelas.  The second interview was conducted by Zezinho Yube, a representative of the Vídeo nas Aldeias organization.  This took place during a cultural exchange between the members of Morrinho and their team of Ashaninka and Hunikui peoples from the Brazilian state of Acre.  These interviews were chosen because of their comprehensive nature. All interviews were loosely structured, and Thiago often started telling aspects of Morrinho's story without being prompted.  My experience working with Thiago since June of 2009 led me to believe that he gives much richer information when allowed to talk about loosely guided topics.

I transcribed and coded 45 minutes of the interview with Mr. Planel, but due to time constraints, I devised a note-taking system for the rest of the data.  I noted verbatim only key statements, and noted the exact time in the video, which allowed for easy referencing.  I coded and chunked all data into emergent themes, then designed interview questions to ask Thiago about issues that I believed needed clarification.  I then transcribed, coded, and chunked the final interview into themes.  Finally, I coded and organized the data two more times further deducing emergent themes to arrive at my conclusions.  Through this analysis, I constructed a narrative of the context in which Morrinho was born.  I also found three overarching messages which Thiago said are central to Morrinho's value in Pereira da Silva.

I used a variety of trustworthiness strategies during my analysis process.  I found that the richness in Thiago's descriptions of the history and relationship with Morrinho allowed me to see recurring patterns in the data.  I was able to achieve data saturation as Thiago repeated the same messages through all interviews.  Merriam (2002) addressed member checking as a common integrity strategy "you ask the participants to comment on your interpretation of the data" (p. 26).  I worked closely with Thiago via telephone, e-mail or instant messenger to validate the analysis that I was undertaking.  According to Merriam (2002) another trustworthiness strategy is peer review, which "can be conducted by a colleague either familiar with the research or one new to the topic" (p. 26).  During the research process, I worked with a group of fellow graduate students that became familiar with my research over the course of a few months.  These colleagues helped me to take a step back from Morrinho, so I could analyze the data of the project that I myself had become so familiar with over my continuous association since mid-2009.  Finally, I sought the insight of a Rio-based researcher who knows Morrinho, and another Miami-based researcher familiar with community development issues.  Both researchers were able to offer me guidance in scientifically structured research methods.

### The Early History of Morrinho

The following section is a narrative of Thiago's experience with favela life and the beginnings of Morrinho.  This data is used to deduce the value that he places on the project.  Thiago came to live in the community in 1997 when Pereira da Silva had a reputation for being very dangerous.  Moving to Pereira da Silva at the age of 14 from a small rural town in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Thiago found himself in a much different environment than what he was used to.  He found himself at a severe societal disadvantage.  In the interview with Guillermo Planel,

he says, "everything was very different for me. Everything that I saw was a show for me. The police coming in, the manner in which they confronted the youth, the way in which they confronted them" (Thiago and Planel). Thiago and his family experienced much discrimination from the police and other favela residents, and witnessed much violence in his first years in Pereira da Silva. Thiago saw his family targeted quite a bit, "They abused us, offended us, they kicked us [long pause], they beat us up . . . . It was just like that. Ignorance, general ignorance by the police; they are trained to be like that" (Oliveira and Hafemeister). Furthermore, school, the institution that would generally be expected to be a source of normalization for children in such a situation, did not help much. Thiago describes how his learning environment was adverse to organized structure. "There were a lot of kids smoking pot inside of the classroom, there were kids that didn't want to study and they made a lot of confusion . . . so, I was kind of lost" (Thiago and Planel). In this type of environment it is not surprising that most of his teachers did not provide the type of support he needed as an impoverished inner-city youth.

Many times in my data, Thiago refers to memories of prejudice and violence but admits to important lessons that he took from his experiences. "I came into this world fighting. My brother fought too. We did whatever we had to. I think opportunity came and I went after that opportunity" (Thiago and Planel). Thiago later told me, "I learned that I had to respect myself, I learned that I couldn't lower my head to anybody; that I had to become a real fighter" (Thiago and Hafemeister). Thiago also says that he was more curious about his surroundings than scared or surprised. Referring to the violence by Rio's military police in the initial phase of the favela-bairro plan, Thiago says

> Ugly, ugly didn't scare me . . . . I wanted to understand why. Why was it that they were killing the kids of the community? Why was it even that they were coming into the community? Why were they killing and shooting? Why did they oppress people inside of their own homes? Why would they provoke us, talking, calling us names? (Thiago and Planel)

It is within this context, and with this curiosity that Thiago started a game that would become a long-term hobby and profession. When newly introduced to city life, and admittedly not knowing what a favela was, or even that he lived in one, Thiago and his friends started to construct Rio's hillside communities as he could see them from afar. Spending long hours in the rather expansive hillside land around their family's modest house, Thiago and his younger brother Samuel began to tinker with the materials that their father used for his job in construction. The brothers realized how to get bricks to look like the houses in the hills. Soon after, this game attracted the other boys of the community. Poverty necessitated creativity, and before the 'residents' of the model favelas graduated to being Lego-characters, they were painted bottle caps that were found from what others considered to be trash. To Guillermo Planel, Thiago admits, "The more violence that I saw, I played in that same way at the model. After a while, we started to copy the exact reality, the gangs, we started building the model" (Thiago and Planel). This game imitating a local reality proved to be popular with the local boys.

Thiago says that "there were times when there were 30 boys here wanting to play. They wanted a space at the model. They wanted to make their own shack" (Thiago and Planel). In this way ,Morrinho grew to be much larger than what Thiago claims that he could have done alone. "As a team, we've constructed more than 40 favelas of pure creativity; I could not have done this all by myself" (Thiago and Planel). As Morrinho the game grew to attract more youth, it started becoming a popular pastime for boys that may otherwise have been attracted to the local organized crime.

Since, at times, there were dozens of boys that wanted to participate in the building and play at Morrinho, Thiago says that there came a time to make rules. He was considered by others to be the "boss" of the project, so "I started to make the rules, as if it were a game of reality" (Thiago and Planel). Demonstrating the seriousness of the play at Morrinho, Thiago emphasized the reality aspect of Morrinho. He described how the boys were playing at the model, but the play was not taken lightly. "There wasn't Superman at the model . . . . I never liked this idea of playing with these kinds of characters . . . . Inside of a favela, reality is reality . . . . If you die, you die for good" (Thiago and Planel). In reality, there is no point in rules if there is no rule of law. Being considered the boss of Morrinho, the young Thiago made sure the rules were followed. If the rules were not being followed, "I would come and take the games of the other kids . . . . It was a bad idea to cross me . . . . If you don't follow the rules, it was mandatory that we kick you out" (Thiago and Planel). This aspect of the Morrinho game would later prove instrumental in pursuing the project's objectives.

Critical to Morrinho's impressive nature is that nobody taught Thiago or the other boys how to build the model. On a piece of hillside land, not cleared of foliage for any type of construction, over the course of a few years, the boys had populated a few hundred square meters of land with model favelas. To Mr. Planel, Thiago recounts, "We disguised our own reality in Morrinho. All of the negativity that we took from the violence we saw in our day to day lives, we threw all of our energies into Morrinho." For years Morrinho was a game that the boys kept to themselves within the Pereira da Silva community. "For us, it's just something that we like a lot. It helps with the stress" (Thiago and Yube). "If you are ever having a bad day, it's much better to take it out with a Lego character at Morrinho, than to unleash your negative energy at home" (Thiago and Planel). Not everyone in the community liked the game, but it proved to be so popular amongst the boys that they would regularly skip other obligations to play at Morrinho.

Thiago says that a pivotal moment in time came when he and some of the boys started taking classes near Pereira da Silva in order to finish their basic education. Laughing, Thiago remembers, "the whole class was all girls. There were 34 girls and six boys" (Thiago and Planel). When the teacher asked about the root of the gender imbalance, Thiago says that the girls told him, "The guys don't come to class, because they are all at Morrinho. We girls control the classroom and the boys control Morrinho" (Thiago and Planel). Soon the teacher realized that if he was to understand what was so important for these boys, he would need to see Morrinho for himself. However, the boys were still distrustful of those from outside of the favela. Demonstrating a divide that is often felt between favela residents and those from wealthier neighborhoods, Thiago was worried that Morrinho would be copied and he and the other boys would not be given the intellectual and artistic credit as that he says was common to ingenuity that originates in the favelas. However, after much persistence, this teacher gained the boys' trust, repeatedly asking for permission to visit Morrinho, and showing that he respected the boys for their talents.

After several visits and several more months, this teacher introduced Morrinho to a friend that worked as a filmmaker. As Thiago describes, this was the slow process of opening a homegrown, private project of a group of impoverished boys to the larger population of Rio de Janeiro, then to the world. "We visited various countries in Europe, some states in Brazil . . . . And I think that something that is born inside of the community here, many, many, many people talk of how this reality is hidden. Almost very few can see, and I think that we've opened up like this" (Thiago and Planel). This communicated what Morrinho identifies as its mission. My analysis of the specific value of the project according to the data for this research follows.

**Morrinho's Value**

Today Morrinho is an incorporated non-profit organization with an international presence and a history that spans over a decade.  However, Thiago is currently the only full-time employee of the organization, and devotes part of his time to showing today's youth this positive alternative to organized crime. I have found that Morrinho's value is the message that it broadcasts of empowerment, socioeconomic equality, and change from the official lines of government and press.

**Youth Empowerment**

My data reveals that the most demonstrative role that Morrinho has played is in its importance to the youth in the Pereira da Silva community.  As described in the history of Morrinho, and most illustratively with Thiago's own story, Morrinho allowed him to change from untrusting of those from outside of the favela, to someone with confidence in spite of discrimination, who now works to bridge the divide between social classes.  The pride and confidence that Thiago takes from Morrinho is furthered by the inclusion of about 10 boys that now regularly participate in the upkeep of the Morrinho model.  Each boy has one or more model favelas that he takes care of.  This is a requirement, since several years ago the boys started giving tours of the Morrinho model, and now receive an average of 10 visitors per week.

In accordance with the rules that Thiago established when Morrinho was a much newer project, only when a youth properly takes care of his model can he participate in the cultural exchanges that take place amongst different communities.  According to Thiago, when the boys are at Morrinho, "They are not playing, they are working.  They are doing better for their families [being here], than they would be at the bottom of the hill smoking pot" (Thiago and Planel).  Thiago says, "If it's against favela, it's against our organization.  If it brings problems for the favela, it's problematic for our organization" (Thiago and Planel).  This discipline and structure works to instill pride in youth that do not have many other positive outlets through school or community programs.

**Socioeconomic Equality**

Similar to its message of local youth empowerment, Morrinho also communicates messages of social equality in their public image.  However, it is by this message being communicated through role-playing with two-inch tall characters made out of Lego-blocks that brings humor to an otherwise tragic issue, and in turn allows the message to be broadcast to a larger audience.  At the beginning of his interview with Mr. Planel, Thiago has Lego characters talking into the camera.  In a high-pitched voice, adult Thiago communicated a message of racial equality, representative of the majority racial minority that resides in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Thiago communicates through a Lego character the equality that Morrinho strives for:

> He's Black, he's White, he's dark skinned, he's brown, he's Indian . . . . This is not something to kill each other over and to fight about.  There's no reason for this . . . . Let's think about this a bit, let's stop being asses, because the worse ass is one that doesn't try to improve himself . . . . (Thiago and Planel)

Later, when talking about the general discrimination that any favela resident may face regardless of relative wealth, or skin color, Thiago communicated through a Lego character, "It's not easy living in the favela.  You have to be careful.  You have to be disciplined.  Whoever lives in the favelas has to be creative, be educated and cultured" (Thiago and Planel).  Referring to Pereira da Silva's centuries-old history, Thiago communicates through a Lego character, "This thing about wanting to study the communities [favelas] to destroy them, I don't like this at all my brother.  We've got 100 years of history here my friend . . . . [The government] has to think of

schools, in education" (Thiago and Planel).  Later, Thiago emphasizes the social divides that Morrinho bridges, "The project opens a vision for other people of what a favela is like, it shows that it's not all war and violence [here], it shows a positive side.  Now a lot of people come to the community and love it" (Thiago and Planel).  The socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil are seen as being connected to the official government discourse, which leads to the last message.

**Official Change**

Finally, the data revealed that Morrinho broadcasts a message of change that needs to come about through official channels like the media and the government.  Without any major changes to the status quo, Thiago does not see any promise for the betterment of the underprivileged of Brazil.  During 20 minutes of the interview with Planel when Thiago communicated through the Lego characters, he criticized the press's portrayal of the favelas.  "Whoever wants to speak the truth, the press covers it up.  This is what it's like.  Are we in agreement?  The truth needs to come out" (Thiago and Planel).  In another interview, Thiago says, "The media is always going to portray that the young kid is the drug trafficker, not those who are students" (Thiago and Yube).  The press was not the only source of official discourse that was identified as being biased.

Communicating through the Lego characters once again, Thiago criticized the government's aggressive policing strategies of the favelas.

> The government is stupid, it's blind, it doesn't know how to use its head.  It's stocking up on weapons, see.  It's using technologically advanced weapons.  This isn't helping at all.  I don't know when this is all going to end.  (Thiago and Planel)

While my analysis has broken down the Morrinho's message into the three components of youth empowerment, social equality and official change, Thiago gives a concise, yet holistic mission for Morrinho:

> Our point of view is to always show the positive side of the favela.  The game shows confrontation, but this is the day to day of our lives.  This isn't something only of Brazil, but of the whole world.  People all over the place go through personal emotional, and community violence.  I don't think there is any way to get away from this, this prejudice, and violence, and racism. (Thiago and Planel)

## Implications and Recommendations

Through a basic interpretative approach, I have found that Morrinho's main value lies in the messages that it broadcasts.  According to my analysis, Morrinho works to counter negative stereotypes of favela life by focusing on the messages of youth empowerment, socioeconomic equality, and official change.  In order to make the conclusions of this study more robust, it is suggested to collect data and conduct analysis of the perceptions of the other 10 incorporating members of Morrinho.  This analysis also raises several questions for future study.  How does Morrinho's positive message of the favelas coincide with the violence played out in the game?  It is possible that the violence portrayed as a game makes the reality of the Morrinho youth more digestible to someone who would otherwise not pay attention to the daily reality of a favela resident.  Another question asks what the real benefit is of participating with the Morrinho organization.  All of the Morrinho youth that have not been victims of the drug and police violence are still living in poverty in Pereira da Silva.  None of them are university educated and all of them face bleak employment prospects.  Is it possible that participation in Morrinho provides a stronger sense of identity to combat racism commonly faced by favela youth and that participation deters an individual's association with the local drug trade?  These questions are

suggested for further research in pursuit of understanding the role of this unique community-based youth organization.

## Interviews

Thiago and Guillermo Planel, Rio de Janeiro photojournalist. July 7, 2009.

Thiago and Zezinho Yube, representative of Vídeo nas Aldeias. July 4, 2009.

Thiago and Bryn Hafemeister. March 29, 2010.

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