

# Between Rationality and Intuition: A Social Psychology Approach to Ex-Combatant Children in Colombia

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**Abstract** Throughout its history, Colombia has been marked by different forms of violence. The involvement of children as soldiers is a phenomenon that recurs across generations. This article asks how the methodology governing social interventions should be designed so that it becomes possible to interrupt the circuits that lead to the intergenerational reproduction of violence. It reports on a human rights training aimed at children who are no longer active participants in Colombia's armed conflict. The project incorporated an educational approach and a social psychology focus which, taken together, were able to make progress towards overcoming the effects of violence. The article seeks to show the importance of intuition and the coming together of different areas of knowledge in the educational and social psychology models the project employed. A strong focus on active therapeutic listening has been particularly important.

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## 1 Introduction

Throughout its history, Colombia has been marked by different forms of violence. Historically, girls and boys under the age of 18 have been actively involved in acts of war. For this reason the case of child soldiers should not be characterised as an emerging phenomenon in the country, but a recurrent one. This makes the question which informs the current article particularly relevant: How to design methodologies for social interventions which interrupt the intergenerational circuits that lead to the reproduction of violence?

Since its inception in January 2007, I have coordinated the Human Rights School, a project of the Office of the Colombian Human Rights Ombudsman which has been attempting to answer this question.<sup>1</sup> The project developed a process of human rights training aimed at girls and boys demobilised from the armed conflict and who are immersed in attention programmes run by state institutions under the leadership and overall control of the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare).

In part, this article seeks to demonstrate that the methodological design of the Human Rights

School project incorporated an educational approach and a social psychology focus which, taken together, were able to make progress towards overcoming the effects of violence. The article also seeks to show that the construction of the educational and social psychology models employed in the project has not resulted from a purely rational process, but has been illuminated along the way by intuition and the coming together of different areas of knowledge, among which the focus on active therapeutic listening has been particularly important. Readers will no doubt feel at times that some of the reflections in the text are akin to expressing surprise that the earth is round. Far from blushing at this, in this article I endeavour to narrate the ways in which these reflections emerged, in an effort to show why they appeared novel to us, even if they were appeared thoroughly understood by others.

## 2 Children in the war in Colombia

Colombia has a long history of armed confrontations. In the wake of the Wars of Independence which culminated in 1821, the entire fabric of society was affected by nine successive civil wars. The nineteenth century closed and the twentieth came in amid the devastating civil war known as the *Guerra de los*

*Mil Días* (the Thousand Days' War, 1899–1902). The first half of the twentieth century was characterised by the confrontation between the Liberal and Conservative parties, which reached its maximum expression in the mid-century conflagration known as *la Violencia* which left over 300,000 dead. Subsequently, starting in the late 1950s, initially as an expression of the overwhelming need for agrarian reform, the nation has been submerged in the current internal armed conflict, yet to be resolved.

Historical evidence shows that children have participated in warfare at least from the time of the *Guerra de los Mil Días*. The historian Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo (1989: 91) writes of the conflict:

Children also went to war: some marched to war in groups that were formed in the classroom, others were fleeing their homes attracted by the military 'heroes' who enshrined the ideals of the young; the rest were trapped by force, caught between the contending bands and obliged to join one or the other of them. It was not unusual to see children of 12 or 14 marching in file, carrying weapons that exceeded them in size, or scampering between advanced combat positions carrying orders or a fistful of cartridges to those who were fighting.

Bearing in mind the massive participation of the Colombian population, including children under 18, in the *Guerra de los Mil Días*, one might reasonably conjecture, first, that the presence of girls and boys in war in Colombia is not an emerging phenomenon, but constitutes a distinct social dynamic with a long trajectory; and second, that the current participation of girls and boys in the internal armed conflict is proportionately lower than that reported at the start of the twentieth century. I refer to reasonable conjecture because there are no reliable figures that permit a precise longitudinal survey of the period to be constructed. Neither are there official statistics that make it possible to ascertain the precise number of girls and boys linked with the diverse armed actors in the current internal armed conflict.

### **3 The participants in the process**

However, there are statistics covering girls and boys no longer involved in the conflict who have

participated in the programmes run by the ICBF between November 1999 and July 2008. According to the ICBF's information system (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar 2008), a total of 3,700 boys and girls left armed groups in this period; annual figures rose from ten in 1999, reaching a peak of 775 in 2003, and fell to 239 in the first seven months of 2008. Of the 3,700, 38.4 per cent were 17 years old, a further 28 per cent were 16, and 17.35 per cent 15. Ages ranged from 18 to less than 11. Of the total, 73.19 per cent were male and 26.81 per cent female. In terms of educational level, 61.83 per cent had not gone beyond the fifth year of primary school; 25.02 per cent did not finish secondary education; 8.8 per cent had never been to school and 4.2 per cent did not provide information.

Some 80.16 per cent of the total handed themselves over to the authorities voluntarily and the remaining 19.84 per cent were recovered from the armed groups by the authorities. Of these, 54.45 per cent came from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC); 28.08 per cent, from the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC); 13.7 per cent from the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and 3.7 per cent from other armed groups.

This article offers reflections on the methodology used in the intervention. The opinions presented are my own and do not represent official positions of any of the institutions responsible for the project.

The design stage of the Human Rights School took place in 2007. It involved a study group composed of 20 young men and women, most of whom were university graduates or members of Bogotá youth organisations, who displayed a capacity for critical thinking and engagement with different sectors of society; all participated on a voluntary basis during the initial testing phase.

After the design stage, the project was implemented with 50 boys, girls and young people aged between 14 and 18, who were no longer connected to the conflict. There was a rough balance between males and females in the group and it is interesting to note that the baseline showed that the girls displayed greater leadership qualities and exercised more influence over the group than the boys, showing

more initiative too when it came to participating in the project. Over 80 per cent claimed to have voluntarily joined the armed groups to which they belonged.

#### **4 Events that influenced the design of the methodology**

It would be perfectly possible to present the events that marked the design phase in rational terms such as the following: first, the establishment of the educational objectives of the human rights training; second, the design and employment of the methodology used to explore and interrogate<sup>2</sup> day-to-day attitudes and practices of the participants (the here and the now); and finally, an educational approach rooted in art and musical expression.

But this falls short of the truth, because there were other ways in which we learned, and I believe it was because of these that the methodological advances were made. Something occurred that proved to be very enriching: the active listening to what the boys, girls and young people said in all the sessions.

The basic introduction to human rights was designed and tested jointly with the study group; it consisted of three short training experiences, each two days long. The topics chosen were dignity and domination; dignity, recognition and confidence; and dignity and personal and collective transformation. In all cases, the sessions themselves and the subsequent activities were intended to generate conditions, which would make it possible to interrogate the lived experiences of the participants, in order to help them construct new narratives that placed the quest for dignity at the centre of their daily lives before, during and after their connection with the armed group.

The assumption behind the methodology was that the participants had been, and remained, actors in and authors of a history of violence, but that they could become actors and authors of a different civilian and democratic story if they were able to recognise the role they had played in their own stories and take responsibility for their actions within a process that did not treat them either as victims or as victimisers. Our understanding of dignity is taken from a definition offered by the Colombian Constitutional Court in the form of three short

admonitions: to live according to one's own life plan, live well and live free from humiliation.

The first training sessions, on dignity and domination, began with an analysis of the presence of habitual punishment in areas of life, such as relationships between couples, the family, among friends, at school, in the neighbourhood, at work, in churches, the army or illegal armed groups. Habitual punishment is an articulating factor that runs through all aspects of everyday life; it is intended to produce obedience, but has other effects too, filling us with anger and hatred. Following on from this, the participants explored the question of habitual punishment through artistic activities such as modelling with clay and drawing, in an effort to help them to uncover ways to move beyond the rage and hatred locked up inside their bodies.

A young woman of 17, speaking of working on a painting intended to help express feelings said:

*When they suggested we expressed our feelings in a drawing I grabbed some black card and a bunch of crayons and I listened to what you lot were saying, that we should express our feelings, and I felt something here and I started to draw like crazy, but angry, really angry. The more I drew the harder I did it and I let it all out, like I got rid of a little more of the anger I had.*

(From Jiménez Caballero *et al.* 2009)

In this first experience, it was important to get the idea across that democracy and freedom are projects that are still under construction. In other words, that the achievement of personal dignity implies the generation of a social context in which this construction is possible.

The second experience opened with a musical performance, employing percussion to activate deep memories in the participants, associated with their early infancy and the care they had been given by their mothers. The aim of the exercise was to uncover a kind of memory that Humberto Maturana (1998) terms *matristic*, defined in opposition to another, more recent, memory that is *patriarchal* in nature. Subsequent sessions focused on artistic activities, with the aim of strengthening the idea that democracy is rooted in the emotional experience of meeting the other in daily egalitarian, cooperative relations.

Important to the success of this second experience was the validation of feelings as the key to decoding experiences involving dignity, and the legitimisation of feelings associated with human rights, such as indignation and rebellion. In both cases, rather than simply accumulating new facts, the process sought to interrogate the experiences of the participants in the hope of bringing about an exchange of views and the collective construction of shared knowledge.

The things that the young people said and did in these first two experiences were very interesting, because they differed greatly from the way in which young Colombian men and women usually act in interventions of this kind. In this case, there was a marked difference in respect of how participants in the original study group had acted. To a certain degree, the participants spoke and acted so as to provide an adequate response that they assumed we wanted to hear. But this also amounted to a stubborn passive resistance to the challenge of accepting themselves or imagining a role in the new social and political environment they now occupied as a result of severing their connection with the armed groups.

Examples of this passive resistance included: drawings and posters signed in the name of the armed group they had belonged to; frequent representations in clay of armed figures; songs composed to the armed groups and an almost irrepressible desire to recount random stories of the times they spent in them. The scenario for this passive resistance was the group of participants. When a member of the team approached them as individuals they invariably showed another face – committed to the process we were proposing and interested in thinking for themselves and to change. The passive resistance acted as a factor of group cohesion; it was accompanied by moments of merciless mockery, engaged in by the whole group and aimed at anyone who openly expressed opinions that the others could interpret as critical of the armed groups. This occurred at several points in the process: the contrast between the cohesive group response and individual responses contradicting the apparent group cohesion.

But what was most heard was the silence that invariably followed mention of the word ‘death’. This aspect attracted our attention powerfully, because we had not really expected that these

fighters would appear so troubled when they heard words like ‘death’ or ‘the dead’. It was a terrifying silence.

Our first interpretation of these signs of passive resistance was that while there had been a physical breaking of the connections with the armed groups, sometimes as a result of desertion and sometimes because they had been captured, there had not necessarily been an ‘emotional disconnection’ and that the armed groups continued to constitute a powerful reference point. Expressed in another way, the symbolic link with the armed group remained intact, operating as a personal point of reference and providing group cohesion.

The young men and women were physically in civilian life but their reference points were the armed groups, which retained an enormous emotional impact. The separation from the armed group can be lived as a single event after which the young person goes on to construct an ordinary life. But in fact, this separation tends to become frozen and extended over time without being subject to a process of alteration. The participants did not appear to process their experiences nor construct a new personal narrative. They just repeated anecdotes. Little by little we came to understand that this was because the central reference points which inhabited their memories were not being questioned or otherwise dealt with.

This led the project team to ask what it was that the participants had been unable to deal with. What was it that meant that although they had confirmed that they did not want to return to the armed groups, those groups continued as their central points of reference? We therefore insisted on mentioning the word ‘death’, on listening more carefully to the silences and on trying to untangle a latent narrative.

At this point, intuition played a part. We felt (and I insist on the word ‘felt’) that they felt within themselves a debt, a shackling of the imagination that weighed on them like a debt. The debt was paid off by maintaining their emotional link with the armed groups. The question of symbolic debt as a structuring factor has long been accepted in psychology and psychoanalysis, but it was not a hypothesis we explicitly developed when designing the methodology.

We presented the question of debt in the following way: people who fight in an armed group do not consider they are committing murder because the group lends them a powerful symbolic justification which legitimates the 'neutralisation' of their 'enemies'. This symbolic coverage or protection is based on a justification linked to the aims of the armed group and expressed in its discourse and the weapons used to achieve its aims. The symbolic coverage is established through the repetition of rituals, the display of emblems, martial songs and flags, all of which provide emotional cohesion to the collective; it is maintained through the daily exercise of discipline. In other words, the agent is the armed group as a whole; individuals are mere instruments who find legitimisation for their acts to the extent that they give themselves, body and soul, to the group. But when a person leaves an armed group, how are they to find a new symbolism capable of dealing with the fact they have killed, and might well have killed outside the confines of the conflict? There are testimonies of children and young people having killed comrades – and in some cases their friends – as punishment for infractions of discipline, acts for which obviously they can find no meaning or justification once they have left the armed group. If, on top of this, they deserted – are they not, as well as murderers, traitors?

We felt that the impossibility of encountering a spontaneous way to re-symbolise the fact of the people they had killed tied the participants to the armed group by way of a symbolic debt: an emotional link that lent them a justification they could not elaborate by themselves.

This interpretation had a profound effect on the methodology. We developed an additional training experience covering dignity, memory and mourning. The supposition behind this was that the symbolic debt operates as an obstacle to the construction of individual dignity. A possible way of overcoming this obstacle was through the generation of conditions which would enable mourning to occur so that participants could 'let go of the things that no longer exist', in other words, the emotional weight symbolised by the image of the soldier.

More precisely, we came to believe that it was necessary to establish circumstances that would help the participants, by way of a mourning

process, to take control of their most painful acts and to advance towards a state where they could forgive or pardon themselves, thereby freeing themselves from the weight of their symbolic debt. We realised that we would need to initiate the processes of mourning and accompany the participants afterwards, in the particular direction that their personal reflections took them.

We began by telling them about the beautiful Mexican cultural tradition of the Day of the Dead, emphasising its non-Catholic nature. We designed this third training experience as a mourning ritual in which each participant made images of the faces associated with the painful experience, a raised altar these faces would be placed upon, and paper coverings and flowers for the altar. Finally, they lit candles on the altar. Then, before the altar, the participants wrote a letter to the people whose faces appeared on the altar, in which they expressed their feelings. While they were writing the letters, we encouraged them to make a profound effort to forgive themselves.

Concerning this experience, one 18-year-old young woman said:

*I got really involved with the 'altars workshop' because I felt all this pain that I had never been able to express to the person who had gone. I wanted to cry for him, mourn for this person who had gone. I felt at peace because I had been able to say goodbye. I also said goodbye to all those horrible emotions and feelings I felt about other people. I felt calmer, I wasn't angry any more. Lots of emotions came up. I noticed it in my comrades too. I think it was in this workshop, when they were all totally involved in the activity, that they became emotionally involved in what they were doing, uncovering feelings. It was in this workshop that they found meaning in everything we had done before. It was where they began to get involved with the project properly and to find that it made sense.*

(From Jiménez Caballero *et al.* 2009)

The final training experience consisted fundamentally of a meeting with the complex and intricate world inhabited by the young activists of the organisations from the poor neighbourhoods, so as to generate conditions that might enable multiple and varied processes of re-insertion into larger society. The intention was that, via a capillary process and through the

discovery of shared tastes, feelings and practices, the participants could move on to another experience of life where they might advance in the construction of their personal dignity.

On completion of the basic introduction to human rights, we carried out a process known as the cycle of support – moments of personal and collective exploration of the questions that had been mentioned but that had been left unresolved, in order to understand them better.

### **5 Some final reflections**

The methodology used in the project demonstrated that it is important to recognise the life experience of the participants. It also demonstrated how their experiences, like our own, need to be questioned critically in order to construct the understanding necessary for them to establish and develop roots in everyday life.

In the case of the Human Rights School, this interrogation of the life experience of the participants was developed with the intention of contributing to the construction of a personal and collective narrative about dignity. The fact that the process began by exploring the concepts of dignity and domination meant that the construction process was understood as a political one which required personal commitment.

The emphasis on dignity made the necessary connection between the construction of a political project and the ideas linked to the matristic, which themselves are rooted in the idea that democracy is an emotion, reliant on the recognition and acceptance of the other, within a set of egalitarian and cooperative relations.

Finally, more analysis and reflection is needed around the re-symbolisation of experiences of death through mourning rituals associated with the search for 'forgiveness of oneself'. It should be made clear that these processes were subjective, interventions with a social psychology focus that sought to enable the participants to

become reconciled with themselves; they were not intended as, nor were they, judicial in nature. When pardon comes from outside, it serves to re-establish relationships of subordination, with the subordinated party in chains, and reproducing a master-slave relationship (Lefranc 2005; Zamora 2008). The one who forgives is the master, able to lend symbolic protection that makes it possible for this process of capture and forgiveness to exist. Looked at in this way, it would appear that the person who forgives co-opts a network of servitude. The experience demonstrates that what is really significant and emancipatory is to propose and carry out a process of forgiveness towards oneself – a forgiveness that does not restore the symbolic protection of any discourse.

As a result of this experience, I have become convinced that it was the decision to focus on processes of mourning and personal forgiveness that made it possible for the young people to let go the warrior in them, and the armed group itself, and to take control as individuals capable of creating a new symbolic understanding of their experiences. They found themselves reborn, capable of constructing a project for their lives, as part of a political process that contributes to the construction of democracy. I think that until the participants learn to throw off the symbolic debt contracted with the armed groups they will tie themselves desperately to this image which no longer exists and receive from it, as a loan, the symbolic protection they need in order to continue to justify themselves.

In analysing the sources of the methodological construction, two factors are key. First, that those involved were able to combine a rational capacity to construct knowledge in conjunction with others, and an emotional capacity to engage in therapeutic listening: to receive, take on board, and untangle, silences. Second, the prime importance of listening and of intuition, without for a moment forgetting that we have been schooled as rational beings.

## Notes

1 In addition to myself, in 2007 the technical team consisted of Ángela Muriel, Hugo Buitrago, Laura Jiménez and Andrés Domínguez.

2 Translator's note: *Interpelar* in the original. In the context of the article the Spanish verb *interpelar* suggests the process of questioning the assumptions of the group so as to encourage their re-assessment.

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