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Media and Communication Studies

CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF ARMED CONFLICT

From Victimization to Peace Promoting Narratives

MARIA CAMILA OSPINA ALVARADO
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Taos Institute advisor: Prof. dr. Kenneth Gergen
VUB Promoters: Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots
Dr. Julia Villanueva
Prof. dr. Leo Van Audenhove

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Research

This document centers on the process and results of a research project on children in early childhood¹ in contexts of armed conflict, oriented both to comprehension and the strengthening of peace-building processes. The project aims to progress from the victimization of these children towards narratives that contribute to the realization of peace. It is carried out within the framework of a research program on the political meanings and practices of children and young people in contexts of vulnerability in Bogotá, Antioquia, and the Colombian coffee growing region. The research program aims to provide a possible route to the consolidation of democracy, peace, and reconciliation by means of citizen education processes. It is sponsored by Colciencias, the organization responsible for research in science and technology in Colombia, and carried out by a consortium for democracy, reconciliation, and peace, involving young peace-builders, including children in early childhood. The consortium is made up of three Colombian entities, la Fundación Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano – CINDE, la Universidad de Manizales, and la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.

The present research builds on the activities of a center for advanced studies on childhood and youth (Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Niñez y Juventud) of the CINDE foundation and the University of Manizales. It was conducted within the framework of the peace-building practices carried out during the 20 years of execution of a program involving children's and young people's agency as peace-builders (Niños, niñas y jóvenes constructores-as de paz), and during the 9 years of execution of a peace-building project (Convidarte para la Paz).

The above program and project are carried out in an alliance between the center for advanced studies on childhood and youth (Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Niñez y Juventud) of the CINDE foundation, the University of Manizales, and co-operating entities: UNICEF, Fundación Restrepo Barco, Save the Children, Children of the Andes, Secretaría de Educación Municipal de Manizales, Secretaría de Educación Departamental del Huila, and Secretaría de Educación del Distrito Capital. The children's and young people's peace-building program, Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Constructores de Paz, has been implemented in 18 Colombian regions since 1998. This program aims to promote peaceful attitudes, concepts, and political practices by developing ethical, affective, creative, communicative, and political human potentials for peace-building. The peace-building project Convidarte para la Paz, which began in 2009, took these ideas and trajectory as a starting point in its work with children in early childhood and their

1 From here on, children in early childhood are referred to as *children*.

families. This project has been conceptually and methodologically enriched by the present study.

For many years I have been present in and participated in the children's and young people's peace-building program, Niños, Niñas y Jóvenes Constructores de Paz. Below, I describe some elements of my recent history and personal experience.

Some Details of My Life Experience: A Note on My Identity as a Researcher

Previous experiences have marked my interest in peace-building with children and their families. These include practices that I undertook as part of my graduate and master's degrees, and master's thesis in centers for the protection of minors; direct work with families in a condition of vulnerability (such as homeless people); and research work with children and families from contexts of armed conflict. Both in my personal experiences and research projects, I have noted that, in general, the view that professionals and researchers had concerning these children and families constructed them in terms of deficit and shortcomings. The present study builds on the findings of previous research in which I participated (Gallo & Ospina-Alvarado, 2010; Ospina-Alvarado & Gallo, 2011; Alvarado, Ospina, Quintero, Ospina-Alvarado & Patiño, 2012; Ospina-Alvarado, Alvarado & Ospina, 2014). The present study takes a critical position regarding educational, community, and therapeutic practices, and the framework of public policy that supports these practices. It questions a role assigned to the children and their families based on the viewpoint of their protection. This orientation emphasizes deficit, and describes the children using concepts such as aggression and bad behavior. It also positions them as victims.

My work has been oriented, and continues to be into the present study, towards the construction of alternative stories based on individual and relational resources and potentials. I have carried out this commitment using a social constructionist approach that has become a useful lens for understanding, and also a way of life. The approach also represents an affinity with my family life and history.

Since I can remember, I have felt a great sensitivity for the pain of others, and had an interest in social justice and peace-building, having participated in social work, voluntary work, and research and social projects (Niños, niñas y jóvenes constructores de paz, presently, Convidarte para la paz). In my family, many of our conversations have been about the importance of our own participation as a family in the construction of a more equitable and humane country, and of being coherent in our daily lives with the ideals we have for our country.

I aim to continue working in contexts of high vulnerability, such as the armed conflict, with an orientation towards the potentials of a social constructionist perspective. This path arises out of my background, and brings my previous experiences into play with my research interests. Because I aim to contribute to strengthening the potentials of

children, working with constructionism and its recognition of individual and relational resources and potentials offers useful advantages. The work also begins with a critical perspective in social psychology, in which I have been interested since my graduate and master's studies, and the seminars I guide. The naturalization of deficit-based language in contexts of vulnerability was found to be problematic. It was thus important to focus on relational contexts such as the family and the child care centers, aiming to promote alternative family and educational relational practices.

Finally, the Colombian context of violence has always affected me and caused me great distress.

The Present Research and Its Relevance

The present research begins with the recognition of a context of armed conflict, in which certain hegemonic narratives have been constructed, legitimized, and reproduced.

These narratives include the actors involved, and the ends, the means, and consequences of all forms of violence and violation of rights. In the narratives, the experiences, knowledge, needs, and expectations of some social actors are considered as immature, and have been left aside. This has meant that from children's first years of life, narratives concerning them position them as victims, and in some cases as aggressors. This situation leaves them in a state of dependence and passivity in relation to adults. That is, in the history of the Colombian armed conflict, society has assigned children a role in which violent or aggressive practices are reproduced and repeated. Yet, they have not been accepted as subjects with a creative capacity for building peace.

The study, carried out in the cities of Bogotá and Pereira, took, as starting points, these victimizing readings about children in early childhood, and the lack of recognition of their creative potential for peace-building. In the light of this situation, the objective of the research was to comprehend the effects of the armed conflict suffered by the children, their families, and their teachers; to comprehend their resources for defense from those effects, and their potentials for contributing to peace-building; and to provide an educational proposal that, based on potentials and future possibilities, contributes to peace-building from children's early years. In this sense, the research aimed to illuminate the peace-building potentials already present in children's relational practices in the context of armed conflict, by means of a commitment to both comprehension and transformation. This implied setting in motion a process of action research effected through the children's narratives and relational practices, and those of their families, teachers, and other community agents.² The action research orientation is allied with social constructionist theory and narrative theory. Thus, some strategies from these

2 Agents relating to the children, such as their families, teachers, and other community agents are referred to from here on as relational agents or socializing agents.

perspectives were adapted, transformed, and implemented, in educational, and community settings. As will be seen below in the results of the research, these theories, when put into practice, fostered the strengthening of individual, relational, and collective potentials for peace-building that were already present among the group of participants, by promoting relations based on affection, acceptance of others, and respect.

The research project also aimed to bring about impacts and transformations by contributing tools to the local contexts and everyday interactions of children in early childhood, their families, and other relational actors. The project aimed to promote strategies to enable breaking circles of violence in which violence present in contexts of armed conflict is naturalized and internalized. This was to be achieved by strengthening the construction of narratives based on the children's agency from their early years, in preference to a position that reinforces their victimization. The promotion of dialogue with the designers and executors of public policy on early childhood in Colombia is also of continued interest, in order to foster peace-building from macro spheres.

Beginning from these research interests, I ask: In what ways have the children, their families from contexts of armed conflict, and their teachers resisted a deterministic reproduction of circles of violence and hegemonic narratives of violence, violation, and victimization? What social constructionist strategies and narratives may contribute to peace-building from their early years?

Taking into account my experiences and previous work, the Colombian context and its implications for children in early childhood, as well as the research objectives and questions described, I carried out the study in the light of the following arguments that may be added to the dialogue.

From Victimization to the Constitution of Children as Political Subjects

The major logic of this action research is that we are bringing about a shift from victim to political actor, in effect, a re-narration by the children and their families from contexts of armed conflict. This logic draws from the theoretical bases of social constructionism and narrative therapy literature, used at an opportune moment during the application of the methodology. In chapters 8 to 12, I include my proposal for peace-building and deal with some of the theoretical points of reference connected with practice. However, in this introductory section, I include some of the references that guided my research.

The transformation from victimization to potentials implied understanding that, as proposed in social constructionism, truths about the self are historical constructions, subject to a social context and to certain networks of relations (Gergen, 1996, 2006a, 2006b). In this sense, it was possible for me to embark, with the children, their families, and their teachers, on the task of co-constructing possibilities to re-narrate their life stories in a way that does not repeat their victimization.

In this context, re-narrating made sense, given that as Shotter (1996, in Pakman, 1996) proposes, the self exists only in language, implies negotiation, and is organized within social groups. These ideas led me, rather than understanding language as a representation of reality, to contemplate the generative function of language as action (Burr, 1995). The contributions of Gergen (2006a; 2007) were fundamental inasmuch as Western culture, and its indiscriminate appropriation in other latitudes has led us to make use of terms that refer to people in terms of defects, anomalies, problems, deficiencies, and incapacity, resulting in the emergence of feelings of insufficiency and obligation.

As may be seen throughout this document, such deficit-based narratives are intensified in contexts of armed conflict, in which children, especially those in their early years, are seen as defenseless and immature, the only approach to them being one of protection as victims of the conflict. This view, in the form of a hegemonic discourse or dominant story, has enabled a commitment to their protection and to the guarantees that they and their families have as victims, but has also led to their lives being understood from a view of impossibility and impotence.

These conditions made up a horizon of understanding in which the present research aims to recognize collective and individual resources in situations of violence, without ignoring the ravages the children and their families have suffered. This aim is shared with such authors as Barudy and Marquebreucq (2006) and Pérez-Sales (2004). These kinds of approaches have emerged within the framework of the decolonial proposals of authors, who like Santos (2011) in the sociology of emergences, have proposed an orientation towards capacity or potential and the possibilities and future potentialities of social actors.

In addition to determining the movement from victimization towards potentials, I emphasized the importance of participation in collaborative processes. This was one of the motives in carrying out the present study by means of action research. Consequently, following Anderson and Goolishian (1998) it was of key importance that comprehension be generated by establishing communicative acts in which new meanings are constructed, fostered by collaborative processes. Starting from this perspective implied undertaking the research as a collaborative practice.

As well as the contributions of social constructionism to this research, those of narrative therapy were fundamental. This perspective was of key importance with regard to understanding narrative as including a temporal dimension, as White and Epston (1993) put forward, in that events occur within time, in which meaning is prolonged, an organization of experience is formed, and experience is narrated in order to comprehend it.

In this sense, perhaps the principal contribution of the emphasis on narrative was that stories not only describe people's lives, but at the same time form their lives (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 2001). Narrative therapy has also enabled me to understand that the children's and families' narratives do not include the totality of their

experience. Accounts may often discard experiences that do not fit with the dominant narrative (White & Epston, 1993). Yet, with each new version, people rewrite their lives (White & Epston, 1993, p. 30).

In particular, the narrative approach was of great use. On recognizing that a deficit-based view has led to violence being seen as an inherent element among the children and their families, it was important to undertake a process of identification of, not only the effects of the armed conflict, but also of the resources for defense from them, as well as individual and relational potentials, and possibilities for orientation towards the future that contribute to peace-building.

In line with this approach (White & Epston, 1993), I take it as understood that the children are not the problem. The problem is violence, and, in line with the proposals of Monk and Winslade (2013), the narrative approach enables a person to leave aside feelings of guilt for violence, and to act with regard to it. In chapter 7, the reader may find a methodological description of the application of these ideas, put into operation for peace-building.

Narrative therapy, in coordination with the ideas of social constructionism, enabled me to understand that the co-construction of multiple alternative stories of peace was both possible and necessary. Experiences in the context of armed conflict lead, in many cases, to the construction of one sole dominant story based on violence, in which a history of violence is repeated as a unique possibility. In the present research, the commitment to the construction of alternative stories of multiple instances of peace implied inquiring about the multiple voices, of which, among other authors, Shotter (1996, in Pakman, 1996) and Carey and Russell (2002) have spoken.

The co-construction of alternative stories of peace with the children, and their families and educators ratified both what Carey and Russell (2002) have affirmed, in that the construction of alternative arguments is possible, and what Schnitman and Schnitman (2002) proposed, in that the consolidation of new storylines in which the subject takes an active position is also feasible.

It is worth pointing out that the construction of alternative stories of peace, to paraphrase the words of Freeman, Epston, and Lobovits (2001), reflects both the way in which children prefer to be known and the richness of their lives.

One of the ways I found for the construction of alternative stories of peace was an orientation to the participant's desired peaceful futures. Muñoz (2008) has proposed that, in order to construct peace, it is necessary to look to the future, and to participate in the present in the regulation of conflicts by peaceful means, while Lederach (2014) proposes the future as a horizon whose construction begins in the present. These assertions are relevant for the study inasmuch as a context of armed conflict leads in many cases to a vision in which there is no future: One knows one is living at the moment, but does not know what will happen next.

The logic set out here according to the referents of social constructionism and narrative therapy, and practical and experiential learning in a dialogue of knowledge and understanding with the participants, have been the principal horizon which guided my action research, as may be seen below in the subject matter of the chapters of this document.

Organization of the Thesis

The text is divided into three parts: Part I, The Context of Inquiry – Armed Conflict and Early Childhood; Part II, From Victimization to Peace Promoting Narratives; and Part III, Research and the Potentials of Generative Peace. Part I provides a background for the research on children in contexts of armed conflict. It is made up of chapters 2-6, which set out the context of the armed conflict, the impact of conflict regarding the rights of children and their families, the public policies and laws aimed at dealing with these effects, and some initiatives that have been carried out to reduce them.

The aim of part I is to set out the historic, social, cultural, and economic context that surrounds children in early childhood and their families from contexts of armed conflict. This context has an impact on what I will later describe as the negative effects of the armed conflict and resources for defense from violence. The emphasis in part I on laws, policies, and measures, and on previous research, aims to show the breach between policy and practice that my research aims to help to fill, as an educational proposal oriented to peace-building. Likewise, this first part shows that context, policies, and previous research have led to a vision of the children in terms of deficit, and a dominant discourse that ignores the multiplicity and richness present in their lives and relations, while maintaining readings and narratives that re-victimize them. The foregoing provides the reason for my research, which, as may be seen in Part II, goes beyond the negative effects of the armed conflict on the children and their relations, to include their resources for defense from violence, their individual and relational resources and potentials for peace building, and their orientation towards possible futures based on peaceful relations.

Part II contains the research itself. In Chapters 7 to 12, the action research and the results arising out of the transformation – from victimization to the co-construction of narratives that contribute to peace-building – are described. The methodological proposal set out in Chapter 7 arises as a critical reading of the context and of the public policies shown in the first chapters, 2 to 6. In it, I describe the methodological approach of my research, the participants, and their context; as well as a description of the workshops carried out, data analysis, and ethical considerations. As action research, the approach involved an active process of peace-building, which I explain. As may be seen in Chapter 7, my practical and methodological proposal transcends deficit-based views that are centered exclusively on the violation of children's rights. Rather, it centers on the relational practices of the children, their families, and teachers, and their actions against

reproducing ways of relating based on violence. The proposal has an orientation towards potentials, resources, and future possibilities that contribute to peace-building. In Chapters 8 to 12, I detail my proposal for peace-building, incorporating the results of the study according to an analysis of participants' narratives, in dialogue with some previous conceptualizations.

Part III contains the final chapter, Chapter 13, in which I include, in a proposal for generative peace, the main conclusions of the study, its contributions in methodological, theoretical, and practical terms, the discussion involving the results of the research and previous literature, and some recommendations for public policy. I invite the reader to join a commitment to peace-building with children from their early years. The more committed we are, and the more we listen to these children, the greater the impact will be.