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Identity and Trauma in Adolescents Within the Context of Political Violence: A Psychosocial and Communitarian View

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Abstract The author explores the concept of identity as a frame of analysis in adolescents responding to various actual experiences of trauma. The author looks into numerous themes including the impact of broken identities, different ways of understanding the "victim identity", the identities of trauma, the role of transitions, as well as identity dilemmas. By examining the experience of young Mapuche in South America, the experience of war and political violence in Mexico and el Salvador, the identity of displaced young people in Colombia, and a multilevel analysis of child suicides among the Embera ethnic group in Choco, Colombia, a psychosocial and communitarian analysis of the impact of violence and war on youth is offered.

Keywords Trauma · Identity · Adolescence · Worldviews · Political violence · Latin America · Colombia

The identity is the idea one has of oneself and his role in the world. It has been constituted since childhood through a dialectic process between a human being and his environment. Collective identities result when a person naturally incorporates a group in defining himself (Matsumoto 1996). A person develops an identity concept in a process that combines two elements. On one hand, he non-consciously learns about relevant aspects of himself from his environment, especially parental figures. On the other hand, he develops a personal narrative in every environment that he interacts with based on an introspective process. Therefore, identity is not an intrinsic attribute, but rather a dialectic one, between man, as object and subject in a symbolization process of his relationships with the others, and the world (Goffman 2000, 2001). This is why identity, as a perspective of oneself, is not a group of defined comprehensive elements articulated in a definition, but rather, a group of aspects, more or less salient at a personal and social level, which are slowly and constantly being corroborated and re-elaborated.

To summarize, identity comes from a socio-cognitive view. It is the conscious or unconscious meaning that every person has of his own place in the world; it determines how one interacts in it, the meaning that one assigns to the subjective groups of belonging, and the multiple roles that one plays in each of them. In this context, childhood and adolescence are key moments of identity development. They are periods of life in which the persona begins to formulate its first hypotheses regarding to who one is and what one's references are (Erikson 1987), and are thus moments of particular vulnerability to traumatic impact (Pérez-Sales 2006).

In normal conditions, for adults, political violence may be associated with distrust phenomena, fear, social polarization, ideological absolutism and biased thoughts stemming from one searching for group and social cohesion. Political violence, maintained over time, provokes important identity changes of an adaptive nature. We can call this "identity of conflict" or "identity of violence", which is to say, identities which logically and understandably result from the totalitarian and violent context in which they were formed. This idea is related to traditional Latin-American

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psychology. Viñar (1987) defined torture as a process of systematic total annihilation of a person's identity. Similar analyses have been made of global institutions (such as jails and concentration camps) as huge machines of identity nullification and replacement. Lira (1989) and many other Chilean authors have shown the transformation of a social identity as consequence of threat and fear. Barudy (1989) has defined the exile's trauma and refuge as an attack to the person's identity, referencing Rogers and Erikson. Martin Baro (1989) investigated the concept of psychosocial trauma as it applied to the war in El Salvador. He showed how the trauma of war is incorporated into people's identities and how every person influences the social identity development's process. There is a mutual and constant dialectic interaction between the individual and the social process.

Given all of the above, this article will analyze the relationship between identity and trauma from its simplest to its most complex forms. The identity, as frame of reference, is one of the main theoretical avenues which shows the conceptual insufficiency of current clinical models based on post-traumatic stress.
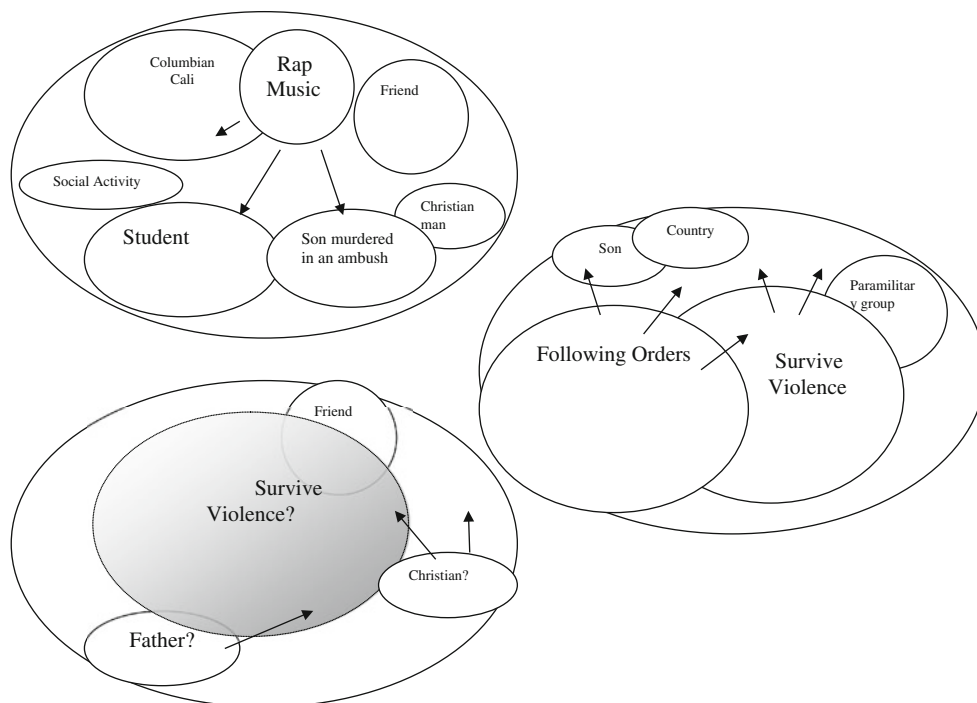
Broken Identities

John Jairo (J.J.) is a young Colombian adolescent who was forcibly recruited by a paramilitary group when he was 14 years old. He would desert 5 years later. He returned home after hiding for several months. The following extracts are from an informal street interview among peers:

> "My profession is killing people (he is nervous and uneasy.) The only thing I know how to do is kill…. Now, I am tired of that, I want a job. My family is happy that I've changed, but there is unemployment. My life has been horrible. I've had to kill and dismember…. I want a quiet life now…, I have children, but there is hunger, brother. There is no chance for those who want to reinsert themselves in the system here. Everyone wants to kill you…. Marihuana is my only friend (laughing.)." *How are you psychologically?* "Fine, I am fine, I have no problems. It's just that I'm tired of this life…. There are many like me. We don't want to kill anybody else…" *What is your support?* "Nothing and nobody. You can't trust anyone. You can only have faith in God. God is the only one…. I am going to tell my children they need to have faith and stay away from violence." *Why?* "Because violence was brought from outside…. We do not like to kill. But we have hunger. We have nothing. I don't know what's going to happen. Only God, brother."

When J.J. was 14 years old, before being recruited by the paramilitary group, his main identity was one of son (one of seven children and perceived as a problem). His identity was also based on being a part of a small group of boys and girls from the neighborhood. He was a rap song writer (writing songs for others gave him an important leadership role). He occasionally participated in church activities. He enrolled in the paramilitary organization based on the promise of money and power and because his friends had done it with some success. He soon realized that there was no turning back. He was subjected to brutal training where he had to kill in order to stay alive. Other friends who joined the group with him were executed and cut into pieces for not being "efficient" or for being distractions from the "task." He had to kill people he knew. As a 17 year-old, his identity became one of someone proficient at performing tasks requiring extreme cruelty. His identity's horizon had two axes: obeying orders without asking any questions and surviving using violence. He made friends in the paramilitary group and had a vague notion of belonging to a "native land," fighting against "communism" and "subversion". During these years he met a girl and had two children. She insisted that they live together. He was scared. When the group suggested that he kill the girl and leave the children somewhere, he decided to escape. When he was 19 years old, changes in the paramilitary regime allowed him return home with certain guaranties of "protection". His identity developments are constituted (see Fig. 1) principally by his identity previous to being recruited; the identity of father that has been unknown for him (what is it like to be a father when all your role models, education, and guidance were brutal, and when your own biological father was negligent?); the identity of "friend" in relation to others in the same situation; and a self-image dominated by the idea of being a survivor ("I am better than anybody else… I am fine. I have no problems… I am just tired.") through a controlled and efficient use of violence. What makes him unique in an empty context is his past and his capacity to kill. If he renounces these identities, what is left? In this sense, for instance, God is a resource, a source of strength. It is a positive factor that allows an external end to the use of violence and introduces some elemental and basic social norms. The challenge in the work with J.J., from this perspective, is threefold: (a) rescue identity aspects that J.J. lost when he went to the war, writing music, for example; (b) accept his wartime identity, not deny it, but rather circumscribe it to the need of surviving in an earlier period of life, establishing distance between the past and his new role as an "adult" (this would be a conscious mechanism of denial and unconscious dissociation); (c) fill the enormous void left after renouncing to his previous way of life and confront the challenge of facing his responsibilities without

Fig. 1 Identity and change: the challenge to fill the gaps

social support, a job, or personal elements that make him feel valuable as a human being, outside his capacity to be cruel. In the past context, J.J. was efficient and resourceful in using violence as a survival strategy; however, this is precisely what he can't do now. J.J.'s environment gives meaning to his experience and it is where his new identity will be derived from. Only within this complex psychosocial view can J.J.'s identity process properly be understood.

Ximena: Trauma Identities

J.J. tries to escape from his boyhood ex-military past as torturer. The opposite may happen, that one's role associated with a traumatic past could become source of identity and invade all aspects of one's identity. Ximena is an 18 year-old woman who works in tourism in Mexico City. She belongs to a student college committee which joins forces with the zapatista urban movement. She has a special role in this organization. She is in charge of many activities. It is surprising that even though Ximena didn't finish her high school studies, nobody questions her belonging to the group. Whenever anything is said about her, it may vaguely allude to "what happened", which is a taboo subject in the group. "What happened" was an episode that occurred when Ximena was 15 years old. Along her high school classmates, Ximena was participating in a support rally for the zapatista movement when she was brutally captured along with dozens of other young people

in a combined operative between the police and the Mexican military. During the time she was detained, she was insulted, beaten and sexually abused by the police. After the episode, Ximena didn't give much importance to the incident and wished to come back to her classes as soon as possible. The University provided support to the high school students. Ximena was invited as speaker. She shared her experience of massive abuse with her audience. Her demand for justice against police brutality and torture made her popular. Ximena's life began to revolve around events denouncing political activity associated with Mexican tribunals. Ximena's friends become concerned about her well-being and suggested that Ximena begin therapy for "the trauma." As time passed, Ximena and her family developed a victim's identity that was interwoven with the idea of irreparable damage. After 2 years, Ximena's friends encouraged her to enroll in a college attended by people who would support her. As a result of academic failures, difficulty concentrating, and traumatic memories of the events that, by this time, had transpired 4 years earlier, Ximena decided to seek professional help.

At first, Ximena refused to allow her family to participate in her treatment. She said: "they never understood my political work." "They left me alone after what happened." "They are liberals who do not understand anything." After several sessions, Ximena began to allow her family to participate in her sessions. The work with her family was to reconstruct Ximena's identity structure as a 14 year-old. Her family described her as "concerned" and "good", but also as "lonely", a "bad student" and "unable to stay

seated for more than 5 min." They thought that Ximena was hypersensitive and that therefore, it was difficult to discuss important issues with her without her reacting with aggression or anger. Despite this, Ximena and her family thought that her current academic difficulties and family problems were of secondary importance in comparison to her post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from "what happened."

Ximena was able to understand her life in relation to her "victim's role." Anything that happened was in relation to this particular role which she could use to justify everything to herself and everybody else. A psychosocial analysis shows Ximena's logical difficulty of abandoning some aspects of her identity that leave her as a "poor martyr", and mediocre student with relationship conflicts with her family and environment. Ximena could not tolerate the thought that her symptoms were a consequence of trauma. When it was suggested to her that she use her public appearances to demonstrate her power and resilience, she started to postpone sessions and finally quiet therapy.

Traumas may become, especially when they occur in adolescence, the vital center of one's meaning. From a psychosocial perspective, this part of an individual and collective process must be addressed with particular care. The stories of John Jairo and Ximena begin an inquiry regarding dilemmas associated to the victim identity. Nevertheless, reality is even more complex. Both cases show different ways of being a victim. Another good paradigm to explore, which delves deeper into this idea, is one regarding young people displaced by violence.

From Invisibility to Vindication: Identity and Dignity in Young People Displaced by Political Violence in Colombia

There are over two million people directly displaced due to political violence, and more displaced for economic reasons, who have been pushed from out of the system due to a rupture of the social network, or poverty, or as consequence of violence (Bello and Arias 2002). Families have abandoned rural areas affected by war to live in the suburbs they convert to neighborhoods without urban structures. They have no educational or health infrastructure, no job opportunities, and live totally rooted out from society. An adolescent, who has undergone this type of situational displacement, has frequently witnessed terror and violence. Sometimes, family members have been tortured, massacred, been part of group assassinations, or were kidnapped. These situations forced families to look for security. In other cases, people move to avoid forced recruitment into armed groups (Mosquera et al. 2000).

Forced displacement implies loss of multiple social and family roles. Men go from agricultural workers to menial service workers, if they are lucky. Women go from having agricultural activities and traditional roles at home, to being street vendors or cleaning ladies. Young people insert themselves into neighborhoods where they learn to survive the high level of group violence. A migratory dream of a better future without violence and threats, progressively gives way, for all family members, to the reality of marginality and lack of opportunities. The past and the present cannot be reconciled. A familiar family space is dashed by doubts and accelerated identity changes. Young people who run away to avoid forced recruitment into armed groups, face guilt for leaving their family (NRC & IDMC 2007). The psychosocial work with displaced communities mostly involves considering the impact of displacement on the identity.

In this sense, it will be important to analyze the story behind the displacement, from the children's comments, to adolescents, to the whole group. In other words, what imaginary meanings exist behind the word "displaced". What other people say (lazy, coward, guerrilla, farmer), as well as what parents say, impact children's and young people's experience.

Fear associated with the escape, in conjunction with the above-mentioned perceptions of others, are reasons that the forced displacement is silent and invisible at a familial and social level, as well as within the neighborhood (Daniels 2006). There is a conflict between the lost identity (the place of origin's identity), an imposed identity—rejected and frequently invisible-, and a public and manifest identity (the one associated with marginality and new area's poverty). It is in this clash of identities, especially crucial in adolescents, that it is imperative to analyze the different implications of the term "victim" (see Table 1). This term may identify the idea of somebody hurt, and therefore, vulnerable and fragile (left column). But, it may also identify a vital and legal circumstance which entails rights and spaces for action (right column.) That is to say, the possibility of continuing being the agent of one's life. To accomplish this, it is important to emphasize certain elements. Assume the action of displacement as a sign of strength instead of a process of escaping. Distinguish identity conflicts, and distinguish the difference between being poor or marginal and being displaced. Distinguishing this affords one the possibility of recuperating one's legal rights to defend violated personal rights, as well as regaining control over their lives, and having the power of decision in their lives, instead of perceiving the world and the environment as that which decides for them. In this context, the goal is to make decisions about how to confront the crisis and where to go, as well as to see the displacement as a pathway, not as a destiny. It could also

Table 1 Identity and forcedly displacement in Colombia

	Identity disorganized by the displacement	Displacement organizing identity
Symptoms	Individual symptoms: insomnia, nightmares, sadness, general discontent	Symptoms are normal expression of corporal discomfort. This view emphasizes the importance of the environment instead of every individual's symptoms
Narrative	People determined by the circumstances	Displacement as temporal solution. Group and individual resistance. People perceive themselves as owners of their own lives
Identity and role	Poverty and marginality as destiny	Active vindication of violated human rights by assuming an active social role stemming from the victim's identity
Conflict's distance from identity	To be a "displacement's victim" articulates the whole identity	Capacity to protect the higher number possible of identity aspects from the traumatic event
Perception	Displaced people	People in situation of displacement

be useful, to distinguish the difference between people in process of displacement, and displaced people, and providing these families with a sense of strength from considering the victim identity as an active social agent.

Identity References in Conflict: Chilean Young Mapuches

In some occasions, the identity conflict is linked to inter-culturation conflicts where there are multiple incompatible identity frames, instead of imposed identities (Pérez-Sales 2005). The case of the young Mapuches may help to analyze this conflict.

The Mapuche community is an indigenous group found in South America. It is a strong and indomitable group. It was not "pacified" by the Chilean and Argentinean military until after the XIX century. Later, they had undergone successive land expropriation processes, community land fragmentation, and linguistic and ethnic discrimination, which led them to a critical situation. Since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, the young Mapuche have initiated a progressive revival of language, culture, medicine and social and political ways of the Mapuche organization. There are certain Mapuche organizations that have chosen direct strategic actions, such as peacefully occupying several historical Mapuche land as consequence of the inefficacy of dialogue with the government. These actions have been met with brutal acts of legal and political repression, with arbitrary detentions, torture and the incomprehensible application of antiterrorist laws to the young indigenes. These sentences range between 10 and 15 years of prison and have been repeatedly denounced as illegal and arbitrary by international human rights organizations and the speaker of the United Nations indigenes affairs (UNWGIP 2006).

In therapeutic work with young Mapuches, children of parents detained and disappeared during the Chilean

dictatorship, as well as in therapeutic work with young Mapuches in support groups who have been retaliated against for belonging to ethnic movements, the concept of identity emerges repeatedly. For some young Mapuche, their Mapuche identity gives meaning to their social and political actions. They do not overanalyze contradictions dominated by the major culture, in which frequently, they perform better than in their own culture. For other young Mapuches, the confusion produces severe emotional problems. A young Mapuche who was born and grew up in a traditional community, is exposed through school, television and college to another language and another culture, which is in many respects much more interesting and fascinating than his own (music, images, books, etc.), and allows him to feel more integrated to other people his same age. However, being excessively "wingka", it is to say, Hispanic-Chilean, means to be rejected by other young radical Mapuches, family members and traditional authorities. This situation generates a great amount of anxiety. To be excessively Mapuche, the other hand, means to renounce all the above-mentioned, which already took a part in the process of identity configuration in childhood and adolescence. The traditional healer women (machi) in Mapuche medicine have a special category for mental disorders (longo-kutran) associated to the idea of losing the mind or the spirit. These disorders appear when the person is not able to deal with one's identity appropriately. Many machis suggest that in order to regain sanity, people must abandon their high schools or college and go back to their families in the community until they find the right path.

Confronted with two worlds, the only solution seems to be to accept themselves as part of these two worlds, that is to say, to recognize that a person does not have just one identity outline, but that there are many of them, and that this richness stems from not denying any of them. The problem is not so much the existence of two cultures in conflict, but converting the conflict into a matter of choice, because it is, as a matter of fact, a false choice. It is often

an imposed election by others who set forth extreme positions: "you are with them or with us." It is not easy for an individual to say, "I am with both," or for the environment to accept this choice.

The pathway lies in going from *a life between two worlds* to *a life with two worlds*. A major part of the identity conflicts in the context of violence and war are related to the existence of false dichotomies, in the logic of the prisoner's dilemma. The therapeutic work would be to explain the mechanisms in order to look for integrative solutions.

Shaking Identities: Strengths and Weaknesses in Young People "Re-Encountered" in El Salvador

This type of prisoner's dilemma in the world of identity reaches its more extreme development in the case of identities completely imposed upon during adolescence or in the early youth clash with pre-existing identities. This is the case of the young "re-encountered." This concept covers cases of minors whose parents have been detained, forcibly displaced, incarcerated, tortured or assassinated. Children are sometimes adopted by soldiers, military, or people of means who support the regimen, as well as through high priced international adoptions. In this process, first names and last names are changed, birth certificates are altered, and a new identity is created for the child.

Many Latin American associations have the goal of recovering these children: Pro-Búsqueda (2001) in El Salvador, Mayo (1997) in Argentina, and Hasta Encontrarte in Guatemala, to name some of the more known organizations. During the last few years, the movement Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (H.I.J.O.S.), which emerged in Argentina, has been extended to another eight Latin American countries and also to another 15 countries around the world. It has constituted itself in an international network.

All these organizations are assuming or supporting the basic right to live: the possibility of recovering a kidnapped child or grandson. However, this task involves a difficult and painful process. The search includes, at its most cruel and extreme point, the dilemma of informing somebody about the existence of a second identity (an identity unknown or vaguely recalled due to the person's early age at the time of the kidnapping) and another family, the biological family.

The complexity of this situation may be grasped by the fact that after 780 cases of documented disappeared children at Pro-Búsqueda, it has been possible to find 317 after the peace agreements (approximately a 40%), most of them are already young adults. After sensitive and patient work of the psychosocial accompaniment team only 181 (57%)

chose to meet their biological family personally. The rest of them preferred to not learn about, or to learn only a part of their history, even though the data and documentation were solid proof.

The drama of "re-encountered" children in Argentina has national impact, especially due to some popular cases in the media in which some children denounced their adoptive parents when they learned the truth about the kidnapping and complicity of the adoptive parents with regards to the disappearance of their biological parents.

The challenge for the psychosocial accompaniment team in Pro-Búsqueda has been to respect the desire of biological parents or grandparents to recover their children or grandchildren and to know when and how to deliver any news, how to help people to confront the effects of this communication, and finally, how to facilitate a meeting with an unknown family.

The problem with the young disappeared has provoked political confrontations in El Salvador between progressive social sectors that consider this area as an essential obligation to persons assassinated and disappeared during the war, and others who believe that these initiatives should not be supported by the government and should be denied access to any kind of official information.

The day to day work with the double identities of disappeared and re-encountered young people from a psychosocial and communitarian perspective requires one to be able to understand and accept the context in which it is possible to find perpetrators who were sure they were doing the right thing, and doing good for others by changing the name of a "poor" boy and giving him up for adoption to a "wealthy" American or European family or keeping the children themselves. Perpetrators can't understand why they are being persecuted and interpret the biological families' efforts for wanting to find their kidnapped loved ones as a depraved attempt to reopen already healed wounds at the insistence of some political parties.

In addition to orphanage or military officials involved in the trafficking of children who may have acted with good intentions, there were some who premeditated kidnappings, trafficked defenseless human beings as merchandise, sold children to the highest bidder, and treated children as exchangeable toys from one family to another, believing they were owners of human lives.

From the perspective of the families, there will be some occasions where biological parents will not start the search for their children, perhaps for fear of hurting the children now, or, from thinking that their children may feel abandoned after learning that their biological parents' disappeared and incomprehensively never reappeared. Some other families, on the contrary, need to find their sons or grandsons as the only possible way to reconcile the past. There will be some children who want to know about their

true origin and will even investigate it themselves. There will be other children who prefer not to know and who may even present legal demands for damages resulting from having been "localized" (Pro-Búsqueda 2001).

Without further detail in the complexity of the therapeutic work and different interventions, the case of young disappeared children allows us to highlight several additional elements in the analysis between identity and trauma. It is not possible to work with preconceived archetypes or action schemes since every person, family and circumstance is different and unique. The social polarization that obligates one to choose sides, systematically forgets that, when speaking about identities, there are persons with unique lives involved. Because of this, it is necessary to work with a committed bond with the victim (Lira 1989) avoiding the ideological confrontation that overlooks people and creates stereotyped answers to complex human situations.

This article began with a focus on the person, the family, and the dilemmas regarding a person's origin references. It is now necessary to add cultural elements and those elements related to the introjections of the dynamic of war. There were a series of chained suicides of young Embera-Katie indigenes in Colombia in 2003 and 2004. The analysis of these cases and their possible causes may allow an overall view about the complexity of these situations.

Suicide Among Young People from Embera: The Need for an Integrative View

The indigenous communities have frequently suffered epidemic suicides among their youth. Some examples are the Guaranies in Paraguay, Brazil, and the state of Michacan in Mexico, and the Embera in Colombia. Four young Arquia people committed suicide by hanging themselves between 1998 and 2000. Since March 2003 and March 2004, a number of children at Embera in Choco began to commit suicide by hanging themselves. Among an ethnic group of just over a total of 3,000 people, there were 30 children that attempted to commit suicide by hanging themselves, and a total of 14, between ages 10 and 14, actually accomplished it over a 1 year period of time. Two other people, approximately 20 years old, also hung themselves during that time period.

Suicide among children and young people allows multiple frames of comprehension. Each view provides relevant arguments, but none alone provides a comprehensive explanation.

The Fig. 2 shows the psychosocial perspective of the phenomenon of Embera suicides integrating social and political reality, the social, individual and collective identities, as well as individual clinical factors:

1. *Macro-political view*. Colombia has been in a state of civil war for over 40 years. Choco's territories, where Embera's refugees are located, have been coveted for their wood and mineral resources. Since the nineties, paramilitary groups began to appear in the area. These are armed groups which are also trained in clandestine methods of territorial control displacing by force populations considered not to be "useful" to the political and economical powers. The paramilitary provoked deaths and kidnappings. They made several leaders and old people disappear causing an economic and social rupture. This is a reality linked to multinational and governmental interests as well as macro-projects which have caused the social destruction of the Embera world. This involves fears, hopelessness, fragmented collective identities and vulnerability of an invaded and broken world.

2. *Anthropological and social view*. The poverty discourse. Sociologically speaking Embera's village is considered to be in extreme poverty externally. Neonatal and infantile mortality indicators are five times higher than the national average and the percentage of infantile undernourishment is ten times higher than the national average. This is not the view that the Embera group had of itself (collective identity) just over a few decades ago. The young adults still recall a period in their lives where people lived from fishing and hunting where everything was fine and balanced. The arrival of some new cultural frameworks and the accelerated cultural invasion has provoked a collective identity that went from abundance to the poorest among the poor in just a short time—the forgotten ones of the jungle.

3. *Communitarian view*. Accelerated changes have brought about a value crisis, changes in family roles and the loss of the family as a mutual support space. Young people consider family and community as obstacles, the respect to the elderly and authority is missing. The traditional ways of decision-making and leadership are in crisis.

4. *Religious view*. In addition to the above, there is crisis in the religious world. The traditional healer women or jaibanas lost their influence as catalysts of positive spiritual power. For them, the suicides are provoked by maligned spirits. According to them, the war has caused many abandoned dead bodies whose spirits wander without tranquility. Sacred spaces have been perturbed, as well as mountains, rivers and animals. These offended spirits enter into children, making them crazy and hang themselves. Children hang themselves by sitting on the floor, hanging a cord around their necks to a stick, letting themselves go forward until they die.
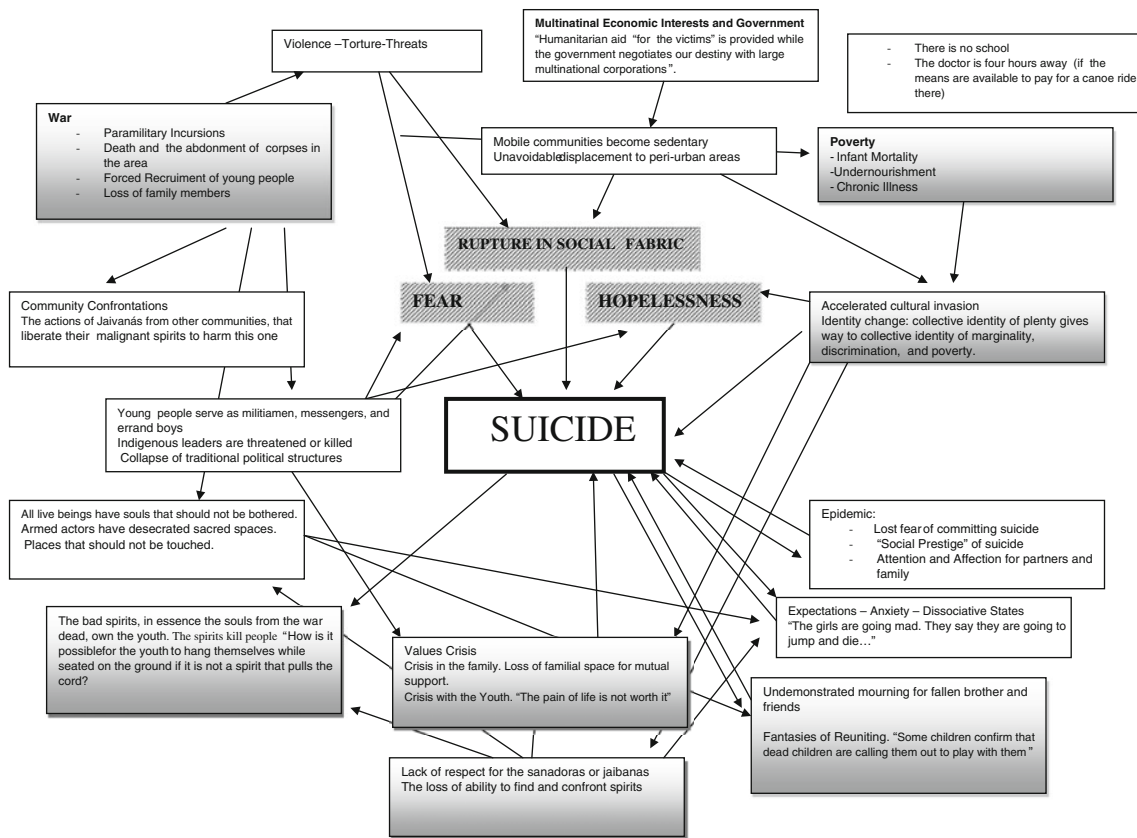
Fig. 2 Psychosocial view on child suicide: pathways to care

5. *Individual view.* All these phenomena have an incidence in children that normally consider suicide as something unthinkable until the first suicide seems to break the fear and allows access to the prohibited. Suicide is not only possible, it also allows one to become the center of attention in the community and receive the affection and care of parents and siblings. Furthermore, chain suicides and warnings about bad spirits cause anxiety among young people. Therefore, high levels of anxiety, states of dissociation and crises are common in the younger community. Finally, the death of siblings, cousins, and friends entail a mourning process difficult to cope with. In addition, young people may have fantasies of a reencounter ("my brother comes sometimes and asks me to go to play where he is").

Figure 2 shows how all these causes are not isolated elements. They interact together in a complex multi-causal net in which all factors mutually interact with each other. There are difficult questions about social, cultural, familial and individual identity that are hard for children and adolescents to resolve.

It is in this reality context that the possibility of intervention has to be considered. A one-dimensional clinical,

ethnic, socio-political, or developmental view fails by considering each individually. This social problem could be confronted from a psychosocial and communitarian view which integrates all these perspectives.

The way to stop the infantile suicide epidemic may include a combination of:

- Participative diagnosis of the global community situation. Analysis of the vulnerabilities, strengths and possibilities of a community plan to strengthen social and organization aspects.
- Workshops supported by the psychosocial team in order to address the original causes of the conflict, and the agents and the type of violence executed. Understand and explain the violence's logic to be able to stand up as a community (as a not belligerent agent, for example) and develop strategies (for instance, look for international support, communicate and discuss the issues involved inside and outside the community).
- Workshops to address the impact of the conflict on the community: emotional aspects (fears, hopelessness, sadness), conflicts between neighbors, illnesses, and confrontations. Working with fear as an emotion, what could we do?

- Recuperation of religious and ethnic identities. Support healer women (jaibanas) and help them to be more integrated into the different communities, know more about the spirits that are making the children sick and support their ceremonies to cure sick children. This is a way of revaluing culture, language and the pride to be Embera.
- Analyze the constitution of an auto-centered community development model as a way to address the lack of expectation among youth.
- Traditional authorities may meet with parents to discuss different conflicts and advise them; the psychosocial team may also meet with them.
- Educational activities and play activities, in which the psychosocial team may work with adolescents and children in order to deal with strong emotions and past losses, discuss expectations and have open discussions about suicide.

An integrative plan that includes at least these seven points may help the community in its process of reconstruction. It is necessary to assume that working in the mental health field involves a global and integrative view.

Final Reflections

Gabarino (2001) edited a series of research reports on the community, family, and individual dynamics of violence and trauma in the lives of children and youth from settings in the United States—e.g., Illinois, Oregon, Iowa, and New York—to countries around the world—e.g., Chile, Canada, Palestine, and England. The issue was thought provoking and showed the conceptual communalities in the social dynamics of violence and trauma in western and non-western countries. Different North American authors have also worked on theoretical models linking identity and violence in adolescence sharing a psychosocial perspective (i.e., Spencer 1999; McMahon and Watts 2002; Bragin 2005). The cases drawn in this paper reflect the reality of Central and South American children and adolescents, but the nuclear concepts can be easily transposed to western contexts.

This article has addressed the link between identity and trauma in adolescents. Adolescents' behaviors and reactions are mostly determined by the experiences lived during their childhood. A repetitive traumatic situation during early childhood may provoke a chaotic and disorganized identity. However, a solid and consistent image of oneself developed during the early years may help to develop strengths and resources to confront a repetitive traumatic situation during later childhood or adolescence.

Traumatic episodes can cause a permanent transformation in the image one has of oneself. The victim identity (or survivor identity) is constituted from the moment one defines himself based on an actual traumatic experience or that experience turns into one of the essential components of one's identity, and consequently becomes an introduction to others.

An identity centered in trauma is a problem when it is associated with vulnerable self images and defenselessness. It also establishes relationships based on dependency, demand for help, compassion and complaint, impeding the possibility of developing other aspects in the person. However, the identity centered in trauma, may also serve as source of strength and vindication, providing one with a sense of being the author of one's life. A psychosocial perspective that integrates political and social issues as well as subjective conflicts shows the insufficiency of the clinical model based on posttraumatic stress.

Traumatic events change one's vision of the world, of oneself and others (Janoff-Bulman 1992; Pérez-Sales 2006). Providing meaning to experience, is by all means, giving meaning to oneself. This is identity.

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