Resilience in torture survivors: reflections, learnings and ways forward

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Experiences of torture confront the human being with the most incomprehensible and "animal" part of the very fact of being human. As Marcelo Viñar (2005) wrote, in torture, men - there are, as far as we know, few women torturers - become wolfs for other human beings, and are capable of dehumanising them, of destroying them, of breaking them and reducing them to an object in order to achieve ends that need not even be understandable, sometimes as a simple bureaucracy of power. When we say that torture is *inhuman*, we actually reflect an antinomy, because torture is human, *all too* human.

Disguised as professionalism, but torture has to do with experiencing power, with experiencing control and other's submission, with experiencing the transgression of the basic rules of life ethics with the maximum guarantees of anonymity or impunity.

Does it make sense to talk about resilience in the context of torture?

Resilience is one of the most fashionable terms in the field of self-help psychology and one of the most in decline in the field of scientific psychology. It mixes a multitude of concepts that have to do with resisting and overcoming stress, crisis or trauma to be that useful for science. In some cases, it refers more to inner strengths and character traits that enable a person to respond well to adversity, recover earlier and function better thereafter. In the self-help world it will relate to the potential elements to be developed that make the person "resilient" in any domain, from business to managing human relations.

To our knowledge, there is no specific academic research on elements of resilience in torture survivors with large samples and a consideration of both individual and environment-related elements, but only qualitative or semi-qualitative studies in some specific populations of survivors. Nor, for that matter, are there any meta-analyses of combined samples that have used shared or comparable methodologies. And yet, it is often heard in therapy groups with survivors that it would be important to be able to learn from how people resisted and coped during and after torture.

What follows is a reflection on which aspects might be relevant, on the basis that there is a lack of a systematic analysis to start from in the specific field of torture. These thoughts are, therefore, intended to provoke reflection and analysis.

Talking about resilience - or post-traumatic growth a linked concept - with survivors requires a moment and a time. The question, badly formulated or formulated at

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the wrong time, can lead the person to think that their suffering is minimised or underestimated. Only after listening and acknowledging the narrative of suffering and pain, and potential meanings attached to it, it is generally possible to open a space to think about *what was useful* - whether there was anything- or *what could be learned* - whether there was any learning at all.

And it requires asking the question in a way that helps to create a realistic framework for reflection: resilience or resistance cannot be associated with the idea of the detection of the woman or man of steel, unaffected by torture, the one to whom suffering has not left a dent. Perhaps the question has more to do with detecting the woman or man of clay, but of a clay that strives not to be dry - and therefore fragile under blows - but moist, and therefore which absorbs the violence of the blows. And it might then be appropriate to discuss whether, in this absorption of blows, the person *was* only *deformed*, or in some sense, it might also be thought that he or she was being *formed, learning* and thus taking on *new forms,* and in these forms, there is something more than pain that we can call resilience.

How, if the idea is not how to be made of steel, is it possible to become wet mud? Can we learn from the experience of others, or are all experiences from torture survivors unique and different?

To this end, this paper begins with some initial reflections on the possibility or not of resilience and what resilience would be in that case, who would be resilient and whether it is possible to learn to be resilient. The second part will suggest a non-exhaustive list of core elements that, in the voice of survivors, have been useful during and after torture. Many of the reflections are based on the work with torture survivors in the Basque Country, but also in other contexts.

Actually: Is it possible to be resilient to torture?

If the first reflection is on whether it makes sense to talk about resilience in torture, the second has to do with whether it is, in fact, possible to emerge unscathed from torture. There has been a deep and sometimes harsh debate on this issue. Marcelo Viñar himself, in his double capacity as survivor and therapist, said emphatically that it is impossible to emerge unharmed from torture. For him, no person, faced with absolute horror, defencelessness and cruelty, could emerge unscathed. Only denial, lack of reflection or self-deception could lead a torture victim to claim that torture had not affected them.

In a deep, existential sense, this is very likely to be the case. When we find studies from academia proposing this or that percentage of people who are *resilient* to torture, in most cases these are clinically based studies, generally using psychological questionnaires of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder and considering resilience as synonymous with low scores on the measures proposed and consequently the absence of a psychiatric disorder. From this perspective, resilient people would be those who in the clinical interview or in the questionnaires did not present a mental condition.

But the forms of harm to the human being that torture can inflict go far beyond psychiatric diagnosis and relate to much deeper elements of the human being: the belief in kindness, empathy, care and compassion for others as basic elements of human coexistence; the possibility of establishing a dialogue, of conversing and convincing using logical reasoning; the certainty, necessary to live, that in the world there are unwritten rules that give sense to the relationships between human beings and in which there are basic principles of care and reciprocity.

From this perspective, no one can escape torture untouched as an experience that undermines the very roots of what it is to be *human*. It will not be a clinical harm, but as most survivors report, torture marks a before and after in their lives and leaves a mark that is both indelible and unerasable.

Who decides who is resilient?

This fascinating debate brings us directly to a third essential point of discussion. Is resilience *objective* or *subjective*, that is, who defines whether the survivor is resilient or not?. This is not an easy question. It is certainly necessary to bring here the words of Jean Amery (1966) when, as torture survivor, wrote that torture pushed the human being beyond the limit, to a *breaking point* that would mark them for the rest of their life. And what Amery did not accept under any circumstances was that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts would come to cheapen his testimony and his obsessive search for truth and justice by labelling him as a person who showed the symptoms of this or that "syndrome". In that deep rage, one could read that he alone was the master of his experiences and the only one who could qualify the consequences in one way or another.

It is part of daily clinical work to meet survivors who consider that the effects of torture are part of what was to be expected in militant contexts. Under this perspective, there would be no major considerations in terms of illness. Moreover, thinking of oneself as resilient is, in itself, a mechanism of resilience. Those who observe themselves by scrutinising symptoms find symptoms. Those who do so by interpreting the signs of affliction as marks of suffering, but not of harm, will likely find reasons to feel even stronger and more capable of facing the future.

But this legitimate perspective cannot hide other realities, at least four: (a) those survivors who do not want to consider themselves victims of torture because this means looking at the horror and *giving it a name*; (b) those survivors who *compare* their suffering with that of other people they know who have also suffered torture or who even died during torture to conclude that theirs is not so serious to call it torture; (c) those survivors who consider that, if they talked to the family or the therapist, there are those among listeners who may think that *they did something* if managed to get alive from torture; and (d) those that have some *memory too humiliating, too painful or too complex* to put into words. All the more so, if several of the above reasons combine.

Faced with the dilemma of who decides who would be resilient, the temptation is to say that everyone is the master of their past and how it should be read and interpreted. But there is no doubt that we are touching on such intimate and profound aspects of the human being that it is necessary for survivors to allow themselves to listen to the people around them. It is worth remembering, in this sense, how pain and hurt can come out through arguments with a family that seem not to understand, the safe space of a relentless and unrelenting activism, the excessive consumption of alcohol at every meal, or the screaming and kicking in bed at night suffered by the partner for years.

Are you a resilient person or do you have resilient resources?

One of the dangers of the idea of resilience would be to think that there are inherently resilient people and, thus, inherently "weak" people). But the voice of survivors shows that people are not inherently strong or weak, resilient or vulnerable, victims or survivors, but that they *have a range of responses* in which elements of strength and weakness, resilience and

vulnerability coexist, with positive and negative emotions experienced in a mixed way.

Three ideas are important here. First of all, no one faces extreme experiences in a vacuum, but at *a certain point in their life, with a* personal backpack of traumatic events and losses -but also of learnings and examples of resilience-, with certain priorities in life and elements that give meaning to it -or with a lack of them-. Therefore, we may or may not be resilient *at a given time and in a given context of our lives*.

Second, the strategies can be simultaneously adaptive and non-adaptive, depending on the type of traumatic event and the context. Thus, for example, because of their personal history or their way of understanding life, a person who is resistant to a chronic disabling illness or cancer may be very fragile and vulnerable to separation. Furthermore, the emotional resources available might change with time. Consequently, in the face of extreme experiences, people *articulate contextually and trauma-dependent resilient* (and therefore contextually vulnerable) *responses*.

Moreover, responses not only depend on the moment of life and the circumstances and symbolic connotations of the traumatic experience, but they are also in place *in interaction with the torturing environment and the characteristics and circumstances of the perpetrator*. In other words, the same coping response that allowed one victim to survive, for another meant increased vulnerability and harm. Thus, for example, an attitude of confrontation and dignity in the face of ill-treatment may in one case elicit a response of respect to the victim, and in another, a response of outrage and further harm. Even with the same person at different times. Torture is very often guided by the logic of the absurd, precisely to prevent the victim from having a sense of control, however minimal it may be.

Resilience in general, but surely in the case of survivors of torture, would not be an attribute or a set of attributes that the survivor either possesses or does not possess, although we may see, later on, that some individual and collective responses seem to favour resilient outcomes.

The resilience we learned from our parents

There are forms of resilience that have to do with culture, with what we learned from our grandparents and parents, what has been experienced in group and society. This is especially relevant for societies who have suffered violence, oppression or torture for generations.

The Mayan peoples in the territories that are now southern Mexico and Guatemala have experienced violence, extermination, massacres and torture from colonial times to the present day. This has led them to develop strategies of *passive resistance* that allow them to survive on the edge. These strategies are linked to a cosmovision linked to the integrity of the person, nature and the community, in which reality transcends the individual, which existed before and will survive its temporal condition. Passive resistance is linked to a notion of a circular time, in which there is no separation between past and present and time is linked to the rhythms of nature, and where the ancestors are present in rites and dreams. In contrast to the mainstream notion that understands speech as a vehicle for mutual support, Mayan people defend silence as a coping mechanism of invisibilisation that protects against threats and protects others from their own suffering. And accordingly, instead of direct confrontation there is silence, self-control, containment and passive resistance. (ODHAG, 1999).

The Palestinian people have associated resistance with the idea of *Sumud*. In the face of invasion, oppression, torture, and what is now increasingly being firmly established in the eyes of the international community as a calculated and systematic extermination, Pal-

estinian people have developed a set of strategies and among them the idea of *Sumud*. There have been several anthropological studies of Palestinian torture survivors on the idea of *Sumud*. *Sumud* is linked to a notion of haughty stubbornness, historical stubbornness. It is linked to standing firm despite the continuous assault. It is not simply passive endurance, but an act of "unwavering passive resistance and defiance" that makes it possible to endure life in refugee camps or under military occupation. (Hammad & Tribe, 2021) To this end, there is a process of building a legend of resistance from a collective narrative based on oral tradition, music, ceremonies and rituals (Meari, 2014) and the public respect and role given to former prisoners and torture survivors in society. (Meari, 2014) *Sumud* is the determination to adapt and maintain life in the midst of oppression, it is about daily coping, the tenacious insistence on continuing with daily life as a form of collective affirmation. *Sumud* means despite fear, anguish and humiliation, questioning the soldiers who invade the house and mobilising family, economic and cultural networks of survival. Meari (2014) exemplifies *Sumud* in this dialogue between a Palestinian prisoner and his torturer: "Have you ever interrogated a table? I am a table now. Question a table. If it answers you, come back again, and I will have become a mountain. Then I will be a mountain…"

In Rwanda, there are several qualitative studies on resilience conducted years after the genocide and the policy of ethnic cleansing through systematic rape of women, in many cases with subsequent pregnancies. Forms of resilience were grouped around the culturally and linguistically specific concepts of *kwihangana* (to resist), *kwongera kubaho* (to live again) and *gukomeza ubuzima* (to continue with life/health), and comprised multiple socio-cultural processes that enabled social connection with

similar others to make meaning, regain normality and endure suffering in everyday life. And in this resisting, there were two positions on torture: while some women preferred to see themselves in the socially normative identity of widows and assume *"normalcy"*, others claimed the status and label of rape survivors and the active search for memory and justice in the face of torture. (Zraly & Nyirazinyoye, 2010).

In other contexts, religious beliefs have played an important role, generally from more individualistic perspectives. Thus, in Cambodia resilience would be associated with a sense of transcendence, of spirituality and acceptance of destiny that goes beyond life, of grounding oneself in the body and consciousness and avoiding negative emotional thinking, in connection with Buddhist moral principles. (Wyatt, 2019, 2023). One study describes how in pre-Taliban Afghanistan, resilience after the war emerged from a sense of moral and social order embodied in the expression of key cultural values: faith, family unity, service, effort, morality and honour, (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010)

In South Africa, by contrast, resilience is associated with the well-known concept of *Ubuntu*, a term that has been universalised to indicate an essentially *relational* ethic, which values relationships of interdependence, friendship and trust, reciprocity and reconciliation, harmonious relationships, in which actions are morally right insofar as they honour the capacity to relate communally, reduce discord and restore communal balances (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Collective resilient procedures similar to Ubuntu have been described in other African settings (Babatunde, 2018).

In all these forms of collective coping, some of the resilience strategies listed in the table below are put in place.

It is from these cultural frameworks that it is worth thinking, in the second part of this paper, about resilience mechanisms before, during and after torture.

Is it possible to prepare for torture?
It is well-known that there are many military programmes to train elite troops to resist torture (Leach, 2011; Wagstaff & Leach, 2015) some of them including submitting soldiers themselves to torture methods. But ordinary citizens, neighbours or young activists in social movements are not elite troops. There are testimonies of survivors that alleged being mentally prepared for suffering harsh treatment or torture, but many more people describe that you are really never prepared for torture. No matter how much you know, no matter how much you have listened to the testimony of others, this theoretical knowledge did not protect you when it came to the truth. In the end, each person's experience is unique in the face of their past, their fears and their expectations. That is why torture is so destructive: because actually most people is never prepared to face it.

What works during torture?: Resilience mechanisms during interrogation, imprisonment or torture.
Although, as said, there has been no system-atic study of the mechanisms people have used to resist during torture, if one were to list the things that have come up most often in the dialogue with survivors, they would probably include the following:

- *Time as a source of support and break*. Knowing that detention has a certain time limit is a powerful resilience mechanism. Time limits are marked in some contexts by the law and in others by the time it takes for family and friends to find out about the detention and to set in motion legal and media support mechanisms. Time is such a fundamental factor that Uruguayan interrogators repeated as a mantra to political prisoners: "We have all the time in the world". In the testimonies of the Basque tortured, the judicial prolongation of incommunicado detention, after the initial five days, marked a breaking point for many people. To resist is to resist the moment.
- *Enduring the day to day*. As a resilience mechanism, it is generally related to not having excessive hopes and perspectives of future, but focusing all one's energies on overcoming the small daily challenges.
- *Militancy*, understood in terms of ideology and political commitment or partisan discipline, but not only. It is about knowing that one is part of a wider movement and that

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Table 1. Collective resilience

- Collective search for validation and meaning. Building collective narratives in terms of resilience from oral tradition, art or the construction of a collective memory. Tributes, acknowledgements and remembrances.
- Forms of social support for survivors or relatives of imprisoned or tortured persons, both affective (visits, memories...) and practical (forms of practical solidarity for survival), giving them a specific place in the community.
- Creation of physical (monuments, clothing...) or symbolic (dates, celebrations...) elements or spaces of memory. The physical and the symbolic as spaces for preserving the truth in the face of the perpetrators' versions, as spaces of dignity and remembrance.

other people depend on one's own silence. That is why a core element of political torture is the mockery of ideals, pursuing an ideological breakdown, instigating suspicions of betrayal, minimising the moral damage of naming others. Part of this mechanism, some survivors recount, is knowing the unbearable ostracism and isolation that awaits the person suspected of having spoken out.

• For some people, resistance is linked to *religion and faith*, Christian, Muslim or other, and to have in a sense of transcendence a spring to sustain oneself during torture. Resilience is linked to either seeing suffering from the lenses of stoicism or from the inner peace and strength of doing what is thought to be morally correct, among others

• But much more frequent than militancy or religion are the testimonies that speak of the *family* as a source of resilience. The family appears in multiple dimensions and nuances, but in at least five different ways: (a) *the duty to protect*. Testimonies in different countries and places show the systematic use of threats of detention, interrogation or torture, including sexual torture, against parents, siblings and close friends. The use of threats to the family is effective as a breaking mechanism because relatives are the main source of resilience for most people, and the mandate to protect them overrides all other considerations. (b) *survival:* the need to get out of detention for those who have family members who are dependants on the survivor: babies, young children, elderly parents or sick people, (c) *other family members as models of resilience:* to imagine what other family members have already experienced and to have them as an image and model to resist (d) *complicity*: in some cases more than one family member have been detained and interrogated in parallel. Some people refer the strength linked

to be able to identify lies and manipulation trying to induce contradictions and how, in the midst of madness, realising these lies provides a point of control and complicity with the other person being interrogated.

• *To hermetically seal oneself in.* For many people, to resist was to build a protective shell that made the person unreachable. There are testimonies that tell how, for instance, from the very first minute, as a symbol of resistance, people refused to give even the most known and banal information: to acknowledge one's name, age or place of origin. The interrogator became more vicious but the victim remained firm in the idea that if she started by giving banal information, it was impossible to know which the limit was and she would finally break.

• One of the most complex elements in the testimonies of survivors has to do with the *sense of dignity*. On the one hand, maintaining a strong sense of honour and pride is what allows some survivors to continue to feel human in an environment that seeks to dehumanise. The testimonies describe, as examples, about maintaining dignity in the personal aspect, in the internal conviction and self-affirmation, in the small actions inside the cell that help to maintain a sense of active control and combat the idea of helplessness and of being completely in the hands of the other. Other examples relate to listening to understand noises, remembering what was and was not said during interrogation, anticipating answers or detecting emotions and what triggers them.

Perhaps that is why, again, the torturers seek to break that dignity through humiliation, forced nudity, mockery about the body, appearance, smell, bodily needs or menstruation. Again, dignity is a resilience mechanism, but as Paul Steinberg (1972), a survivor of

a German concentration camp reminded us, people who were excessively rigid were the first to succumb, unable to adapt to an environment that used precisely that strength as a form of brokenness. Dignity was an element of vulnerability when survivors were not able to consider it as an internal attribute but as something to be honoured by the perpetrator,.

Coming out of torture.
Sometimes families explain what they believe helped the survivor to cope, and this does not necessarily coincide with what the survivors themselves say or what an external observer - including therapists - might consider. Even knowing the limitations of having an answer depending on who you ask, there are a number of elements that seem to have been relevant to the experience of people who have subsequently been able to process the experience of torture better.

• *Understanding silences.* Talking is not easy and in many cases it takes time, the time needed to put distance and words. Semprún (1996) said that after the experience of torture the survivor had to choose between *speaking or living*, because the two were hardly compatible. To pretend to remember everything that happened was to return to the pain of torture and, in turn, not to speak was not to respond to the mandate to bear witness and share. Perhaps those who have survived better were those whose relatives were able to care and protect them *by making it clear that they knew, but without asking directly about the torture*. Silence, when it is a silence based on complicity and speechless knowledge, is protective, very different from the silence that denies reality, that isolates, that makes experience invisible and denies it. There are wise silences and there are deafening silences.

• *Circumscribing negative emotions to the perpetrators* and those who are part of the network that trained, protected and shielded them. Torture breaks human trust and it is quite often impossible to overcome for many survivors, because it leads to fear of the other, anticipation of harm, abuse or abandonment in past or future relationships. However, some people report how they have been able to preserve healthy and fulfilling human relationships by understanding that the cruelty of torture was limited to an exceptional context and situation. That there is evil, but that it is not the norm but, in normal circumstances, the exception. Even, in some cases and cultures, it might lead to understanding that there is a complexity in human beings that makes them capable of both the best and the worst.

Perhaps, and this is especially noticeable in some torture survivors, for example from Navarra (Soto Nolasco, 2023) who defend non-punitivist approaches based on the idea of not wishing on the perpetrators what they did to us. It is in the moral strength of believing that there are other ways of relating between human beings that survivors find the grounds for an ethical resilience, which connects to a large extent with the idea already mentioned of South African Ubuntu.

In the African tradition, whether or not based on Christian roots, perhaps this ethical is more related to the idea of *forgiveness*, which is one step further than idea of non-punitive justice. Forgiveness is also one of the most complex elements of resilience for overcoming torture. It has often been said, especially by non-survivors, that being able to forgive is a sign of ethical stature and resilience. Jean Amery (1966) himself showed his indignation at this idea by insisting that forgiveness is a survivor's privilege and by no means an en-

forceable standard of superior morality. *Resentment*, and why not say it, *hatred* can be as morally correct sources of resilience as forgiveness. Resentment and hatred can be healthy feelings that restore an order in which perpetrators and survivors are in opposite dimensions, in which a clean slate that equates the two allegedly for a better future as if nothing had happened, is not an acceptable option. It is in these blurred contexts that forgiveness, as some studies in post-conflict societies and after truth commissions have shown (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Leunissen et al., 2013; Wilson, 2001) becomes a re-traumatising element rather than an element of resilience. This obviously does not mean that acts of revenge are morally desirable, but that symbolic ways of revenge or even revenge compensatory fantasies can be a resilient mechanism in that they restore a certain moral order.

- *Recovering day-to-day life and the psychosocial context*. Resilience also means returning to an environment with challenges and tasks: taking care of the land, family and loved ones, having a job or going back to school, recovering routines and being able to devote energy to new projects. Resilience is far more difficult when torture survivors return to contexts of oppression and misery, without job opportunities and in a situation of ostracism or marginalisation, the chances of making sense of the experience and moving on are much lower, as testimonies from Colombia, the Sahara, Cambodia or Palestine show, to give a few examples. Building resilience is also about providing resources and livelihoods (Brinkman, 2000; EGE, 2020).
- The *feeling of belonging*, those persons that know and feel part of a wider group of survivors and not individualise or privatise ones harm. Being part of collectives of survivors

and especially those who find in the search for truth and justice a sense of challenge and transcendence is mentioned also as a powerful resilience resource.

- To be able to belong, it is first necessary to *recognise oneself as a victim* (affected person, victim or survivor, depending on the meaning attributed to each term) and, therefore, to be able to call things by their name or at least to be able to name them to oneself by their true name. To call torture as torture and to know that it leaves traces.
- *To understand the inner purpose of torture*. It is also described as a resilient resource to understand that the marks of torture are an intended consequence of a strategy aimed to break. That the harms are not accidental but that there is a political and psychological rationale that has models, trainings and theoretical constructions behind it. And knowing that, therefore, the experiences of loneliness, of humiliation or guilt, or having to face the absurd are the result of a calculated strategy that should be somehow dismantled and overcome.
- Finally, and although it may seem obvious, believe in the possibility of transcending and surviving torture. Not to remain anchored in identities of harm and in ruminations and pain without having strong confidence in one's own possibilities to grow from torture, as difficult as this may seem, and to keep a sense of future, including thinking that it is worth fighting for a world in which things will be different.

Cross-cutting resources
Finally, there are some elements that we can call *transversal or cross-cutting* and that have to do with dispositions or ways of facing reality. All of them, used in moderation, can be also elements of resilience. The main important

ones are:

- *Optimism*, in a moderate way and not a deluded, unrealistic optimism. Optimism as the tendency to believe that, in general, things will turn out well, that it is worth the effort to resist.
- A *sense of humour* and *irony,* which allow for some emotional distance from the horror. Excess can end up being destructive or generate more violence and outrage.
- *Curiosity.* Interest in what is going on around to try to understand the mechanisms of the underworld of torture, absurd in appearance, but with some rules. Curiosity about the other victims and how they are coping with the situation.
- *Rationality*, as the effort to understand the breaking mechanisms behind apparently banal aspects and how to counteract them. Understanding the logic of everyday violence. However, too much rationality would lead to circling ruminations and ultimately to cognitive and emotional exhaustion.
- *To try to actively forget* what does not help to survive.
- Navigating the *absurd* or the grotesque, the surreal situations, accepting them as abnormalities of an environment that constitutes a world apart from the real world.
- Accept with humility the role of *chance* and *luck.* Taking responsibility for everything that happens around may give a temporary sense of control, but in the end it will be a pain generating mechanism. There will always be something to blame.
- *Managing and understanding guilt* and *shame* as a goal of torture and avoiding judging oneself by the rules of the outside world regarding what was thought or done during torture. Understand that others are responsible for the things that happen inside the detention. Assuming the decisions you made

as the choice you were forced to do in a context where it was impossible to keep distance and be objective.
- *Avoiding isolation,* although relying on others has risks.
- *Choosing to survive* when there is a temptation to suicide and thinking about the reasons for doing so.
- The small *forms of solidarity* that can occur.
- Small *recreational spaces* where available: sport, music or other ways of escaping, if only for a brief moment, from the horror. Accept that there can also be *moments of happiness* and devoting energy to enjoy them*:* receiving a letter or a visit, having contact with nature or realising some element of resistance that went well.

In thinking about resilience, is torture different from other traumatic experiences?
All the above can help us to think whether torture is a distinctive traumatic experience that demands special considerations when resilience is considered.

The academic literature on trauma considers it essential to separate *resistance* (or the ability not to be negatively affected by a stressor or pathogen) from *resilience* (or the person's ability to recover to the pre-stressor state). (Layne et al., 2007). This core distinction seems however meaningless in the field of torture because, as discussed, (a) it seems impossible to resist torture without any clinical or ontological level of impairment and (b) there is in any case no return to a previous state, but torture leaves a mark, which uses to be a turning point in the person's life. In the field of anti-torture research, resistance and resilience would be synonymous and should be studied in a common and indistinguishable way. Moreover, it is essential to avoid any approach that suggests that resilience is equiv-

Table 2. Resilient mechanism.

BEFORE	
Cultural or culture-based strategies	**Personal preparedness strategies**
• Collective search for validation and meaning • Mechanisms of social support, both affective and practical • Memory – Physic or symbolic -	• Preparation and mentalisation • Strategies for practical training and preparedness • Training in psychological strategies

During torture	In the way to recover	Cross-cutting elements
• Managing time • Enduring the day to day • Militancy - sense of communion, conviction and discipline • Religion - stoicism and transcendence • Hermetically seal oneself in **Family** • Duty to protect - avoid harm • Survival - to care for dependants • Family members as models of resilience • Complicity and mutual support during detention **Elements that can be forms of resistance or vulnerability** • Sense of dignity	• Understanding silences • Circumscribing negative emotions to perpetrators (in a broad sense) • Ethical resilience: truth - justice - non-punitivist justice - forgiveness - non-repetition • Resentment - legitimate hatred - responsibility • Recovering daily life - challenges and tasks. Land, tasks and affections. - Opportunities and psychosocial environment - livelihoods. • Sense of belonging - survivor organisations • Recognising oneself as affected, victim or survivor. • Belief in the possibility of overcoming torture.	• Healthy attitudes and self-care in as much as possible • Curiosity • Rationality • Intention to forget what does not help to survive • Non-deluded optimism • Sense of humour and irony • Acceptance of the absurd and grotesque • Handling and understanding guilt and shame as an objective of the torturer • Accepting the role of chance and luck • Not isolating oneself • Small forms of solidarity • Space for recreation if it exists • Accepting moments of happiness • Choosing to survive

alent to the absence of psychopathology or that analyses resilience mechanisms from a health-disease approach.

Furthermore, research on resilience in torture survivors needs to take a historical and cultural perspective, integrating the psychosocial components of trauma and understanding that coping mechanisms have both individual and collective dimensions.

Understanding that each context is different, it is then possible to map elements of vulnerability and resilience to the trauma of torture. Thus, for example, family and social support appear to be elements of protection and resilience in the vast majority of torturing environments.

Finally, it is possible to reflect on therapeutic models based on the idea of resilience. Those models of rehabilitation would promote those factors that foster personal empowerment or post-traumatic growth in the face of torture. For example, early intervention strategies with torture survivors, often community-based, adapted to the characteristics of the group, discussing in an open way the inner logic, mechanisms of harm and impacts of torture and sharing coping strategies will be ways to strengthen resilient resources. Or if, as proposed, the family is a key element of resilience during and after torture, it will be an advisable intervention systemic therapy techniques that analyse communication between survivor and family, that rebuild bridges and overcome points of friction, misunderstandings or silences, or that encourage what we called above *wise silences* as opposed to *harmful silences*. Or, for example, interventions that enable survivors to return to their studies as soon as possible (and as realistically as they can), to have access to a trauma-informed job, or to have basic livelihoods can also be powerful strategies that strengthen the survivors resilient resources.

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In this issue

With Julian Assange in our minds.
We are reaching the end of 2023 in an extremely complex environment. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to be entering a phase of attrition we are reminded of Julian Assange's reflection, based on the Wikileaks documents, that "*The goal [of the war in Afghaistan] is not to completely subjugate [the country] - the goal is to use Afghanistan to wash money out of the tax bases of the U.S. and E.U. through Afghanistan and back into the hands of a transnational security elite. The goal [of the war] is to have an endless war - not a successful war*".

WikiLeaks founder and Journalist Julian Assange was under extrajudicial detention for seven years, according to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions. He is now held under cruel and inhuman conditions in solitaire confinement for almost four years in a high-security prison in Britain designed for terrorists and the worst criminal offenders in the country, without having ever been judged. He has been and is being submitted to Psychological Torture, according to the UN Special Rapporteur Against Torture. Assange will have a final legal challenge to block his extradition from Britain to the U.S. in February 2024 at the High Court in London, the next step in a lawfare process rejected by the human rights community.

The anti-torture movement also observes with concern the support for the actions that breach international humanitarian law and the severe human rights violations taking place in Gaza as a response to terrorist attacks by radical Palestinian groups that do not represent the majority of the Palestinian population.

The eyes of the world are looking for an end to this situation.

In this issue

We take a look at the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Jana Javakhishvili introduces the concept of "*substitutive trauma,*" which refers to the utilisation of unprocessed collective traumatic experiences by political leadership to create shared feelings of victimhood and vengeful attitudes within a population. The analysis explores how a substitutive trauma-based psycho-political dynamic culminated in February 2022 in Russia's war against Ukraine. The article argues that the community of traumatic stress professionals, studying and understanding macro-societal processes, can contribute to reducing and ameliorating such destructive psycho-political developments. Most of Jana's reasonings can surely by applied to the situation in Gaza.

Lopatina et al., present an analysis of the impact of the Russian occupation on the activities of Berdyansk State Pedagogical University in Ukraine, explaining the different challenges faced by the university community under occupation, particularly emphasising human

rights violations and academic freedom and institutional resilience mechanisms to manage to maintain classes despite the invasion.

In a qualitative study with survivors and legal practitioners, Rud et al. also present data on resilience, but in this case of victims of torture in Russia. They analyse law enforcement institutions and ways they challenge an individual's resilience as torturing environments and how it is faced, regardless of the vulnerabilities of the individual, their social status and institutional context. It is a path-breaking study that provides fresh perspectives on a subject that has been scarcely addressed in the anti-torture field.

Also on resilience in torture survivors is the editorial, with reflections, learnings and ways forward in a field that lacks more scientific research.

The issue also addresses the topic of torturing environments. Alejandro Forero's paper reviews prison overcrowding as ill-treatment or torture under international law, focusing on three aspects: minimum standards with respect to living space, the use of tools to establish the existence of harm caused by inhuman conditions of incarceration and some corrective, restorative measures for prisoners that innovative jurisprudence is introducing.

Stroppa presents the work of Physicians for Human Rights Israel and Antigone on an International Guiding Statement of Alternatives to Solitary Confinement, proposing global guidelines for reducing and overcoming the use of solitary confinement in prisons.

Finally, a research study presented by Barbieri et al. examines the prevalence of hallucinations in a sample of treatment-seeking trauma-affected refugees. It analyses the relative role of torture and some other interpersonal traumatic events (i.e., imprisonment, sexual assault, non-sexual assault) as well as PTSD severity and a range of socio-demographic variables in the emergence of hallucinations.

Additionally, Castilla conducts a brief review of the recently published General Comment No.1 of the Committee against Forced Disappearances in the context of migration as a new opportunity to re-humanise the management of migrations in all regions of the world.