

COLOMBIAN CHILD SOLDIERS: CASE STUDY OF AN ADULT SURVIVOR

By

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Abstract of Master Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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Children have been become targets as well as weapons of war around the world. The following study addresses literature on child development, war trauma, resilience and counseling child victims of war. This case study will explore the impact of Colombia's civil war during childhood as perceived by an adult survivor. In Colombia, the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) recruits children for their political and military agenda. This study presents a single case study of a former FARC member who joined the ranks as a child. Using a narrative approach, this qualitative research study attempts to advance present knowledge on the impact of war on children as well as to further the understanding of children's experiences as participants of the fighting forces in Colombia. Narratives were coded and then analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings revealed themes that centered on socio-political-historical and economic systems, family, identity creation, and emotional transformation.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

"Children are killed or maimed, made orphans, abducted, deprived of education and health care, and left with deep emotional scars and trauma. They are recruited and used as child soldiers...uprooted from their homes, displaced children become very vulnerable" (United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and the Armed Conflict, 2006). Worldwide, there are 37 ongoing wars in which children are the primary victims. In the midst of armed conflict as well as in post-war life, children's suffering takes many shapes and forms. They become targets as well as instruments of war.

Recent scholarship within the counseling field has recognized that advocacy is critical for addressing marginalization (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009; Khamphakdy-Brown, Jones, Nilsson, Russell & Klevens, 2006; Savage, Harley & Nowak, 2005). War victims are one of the most marginalized groups in any society in which war experience strips away all types of essential components of human dignity. Furthermore, children are deprived of the essential components of their development that in turns hinders their own empowerment to fulfill their needs as well as hinders their opportunity to become integral members of their societies. Advocating for the mental health of these children, especially those affected by political violence, makes it essential for the counseling profession to take a more proactive role in the international arena. As such, contemporary methods and counseling and counselor training must be implemented to advance this commitment to advocacy (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2009) beyond our borders. Counselors have been increasingly engaged in action for social justice as a necessary component of multiculturalism (Vera & Speight, 2003). Events such as man-

made disasters worldwide demand the need for counselors to be more involved in offering the proper services that would promote social justice in the context of global disaster. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to include the definition of child soldiers:

A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. .... It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. (UNICEF 1997, 1)

In this study the author attempts to advance present knowledge on the impact of war on children as well as to further the understanding of children's experiences as participants of the fighting forces in Colombia. The following case study will explore the impact of Colombia civil war during childhood as perceived by an adult survivor as well as the meaning he makes out of his experience.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Child Development**

In societies around the world, children experience political violence as common component of daily life as victims, participants, and/or observers. In these same societies many children experience developmental risk and challenges due to family and individual factors (Garbarino & Kolsteny, 1996). Euro-American perspectives on child development mainly address the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional, social, and emotional skills necessary to engage entirely in family and society. However, cultural competencies, including spirituality, are pivotal parts of the development as well, which has largely been unacknowledged in current developmental psychology theories (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994). Thus, child development is defined as the process of becoming fully human in whatever cultural context the child is a part of (Kostelny, 2006).

Children who witnessed the atrocities of war, indirectly or directly, are affected in many ways; yet, the invisible wounds are the ones that have the strongest impact. Some of these invisible wounds are the effects of traumatic events in the child development (Wessells, 2007). Likewise, when children experience disaster, both their immediate states and their ongoing development are likely to be changed (Franks, 2011). Healthy child development is what leads to a competent adult equipped to be part of a society and to confront life challenges. War trauma presents a unique challenge to child development as it intensifies the complex process of becoming competent adults as well as altering the range of roles for the child (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003). Based on Erikson's child developmental stages, research on the first four stages of development has shown that children victims of war develop affect dysregulation,

aggressive behavior, insecure and atypical attachment patterns, and social withdrawal among other symptoms (Alkhatib, Regan, & Barrett, 2007).

There are different types of disasters that children get to face, such as natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, or floods; on the other hand, human-made disasters of armed conflict, genocide, industrial accidents, or terrorism; in addition to disease outbreaks (Osofsky & Masten, 2010). Such disasters become threats to personal safety, overload defense mechanisms, and obstruct the community and family structures. The effects of disaster can also create mass casualties, destruction of property, and collapse of all social networks and thus breaks with daily routines. The psychological trauma emerging from the experience and its consequences can lead to severe breakdown of a child sense of security and self, including central organizing fantasies and meaning structures (Lubit & Eth, 2003; Williams, 2007).

Conversely, psychological research tends to pose a mechanical relationship between exposure to violent events and impaired mental health or social functioning (Boyden, 2003). In the review of literature, it was found that there has been a scarcity of research on the implication of war-related trauma on normative development, thus there is a need for research to move beyond investigating distress symptoms and place a greater emphasis on examining the impact that war, violence, and displacement has on children's development (Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Richters & Martinez, 1993). Posada and Wainryn (2008) found that children and adolescents subjected to war-related trauma made judgments about stealing and physical harm in the context of survival and revenge, demonstrating a reservoir of moral knowledge. It shows that even in the most

poverty stricken environments of political violence and displacement, children and young adults are presented with opportunities for reflecting on the inherent characteristics of actions that negatively affect others, while presenting potential vulnerabilities to the child moral development. This study also highlights that concerns with survival prevailed over moral judgments in some respects; for instance, participants in this study expected other people to steal when confronted with an overpowering need, but also judged that doing so would be morally incorrect.

Similarly, development of personality or identity can be affected as a result of disasters. For a child, this terror and quick social changes may destroy the internal sense of home and community that represents the reality upon which his or her identity is based. This can disrupt the child emerging sense of personality and personhood, which are integral to normal childhood development (Farwell & Cole, 2002). As previously mentioned, the development of children is characterized by the material, social, and cultural contexts of their lives. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006) has contributed to the understanding of how proximal interactions of the child systems are critical in the immediate responses of children to adversity as well as long-term outcomes; thereby, considering the different "systems"—family, school, community, etc.—assist in determining the developmental outcomes of children (Boothby et al., 2006).

Children's developmental stages are particularly susceptible to recruitment, for one child physical capabilities to perform, body size, physical performance, and psychological disposition such as a sense of adventure, excitement for power, recognition, and willingness to embark on risky behavior might be of great benefit for

commanders (Wessells, 2007), although this is for some of the cases in which enlisting in the ranks is “voluntary.” For instance, coming from a neglectful environment, the child may be seduced by the power that weapons, command, and war in general can offer. Accomplishing such power develops into a personal goal. Ideology, as in some cases, is not a crucial motivating component. Some children and young people do not care which armed group they enlist with. However, those who have been exposed to violent events such as the murder or disappearance of a member of their family, or who have witnessed a massacre, can grow up with a strong desire for vengeance that prompts them to join the armed group opposed to the one they believe was responsible for such acts (Arias, 2005).

The nature of war-related experiences varies significantly from child to child. Some children will undergo episodic bombardment of their neighborhoods or villages, but may not have direct exposure to violence; others will be separated from their families. Some will witness the killing of family members; others will be tortured, sexually abused, or forced to fight into armed groups. Understanding how war affects children starts by clarifying type, degree, and duration of traumatic events (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006).

## **Children, War Trauma, and Resilience**

### **Trauma**

Psychological trauma “occurs when an individual is exposed to an overwhelming event that renders him or her helpless on the face of intolerable danger, anxiety, and instinctual arousal” (Armsworth & Holaday, 1993; Eth & Pynoos, 1985). In defining trauma, counselors need to understand several factors that define the level of intensity of the trauma such as (a) the event itself, (b) the child ability to adapt, (c) the child

developmental stage, (d) the child support system, (e) whether the child observed the violence or was the recipient of violence, or both, (f) whether the violence was associated with an unanticipated single event, was a long-standing event, or was due to multiple acts, and (g) duration (Falasca & Caulfield, 1999).

Trauma in the context of war involves direct and indirect involvement of traumatic events. Direct involvement includes physical or emotional harm upon an individual as a participant in political conflict. Indirect involvement focuses more on the witnessing of violent acts, such as killings, rape, torture, or the results of violent acts, such as seeing dead bodies or bombed buildings, as well as experiencing nonviolent trauma in the case of homelessness or starvation (Martin-Baró, 1994). Exposure to warfare presents risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder and other behavioral and emotional adjustment problems, including attention problems in school, delinquent behaviors, and anxiety/depression and withdrawnness (Allwood, Bell-Doan, & Husain, 2002; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010).

Martin-Baron (1994) extended the definition of trauma to consider social class that defines the differential effects of war. For instance, military recruitment is discriminatory in that it heavily recruits from the lower socioeconomic sectors of society. Martin-Baron also advanced understanding children's involvement in political conflict. Like adults, children also have direct or indirect involvement in traumatic events during war as child soldiers or civilians. Finally, Martin-Baron proposed that time is a factor when assessing trauma. The longer the experience in war time, the more profound the effects will be.

Research has shown that child victims of armed conflict and displacement develop a series of mental health problems (Betancourt, Speelman, Ontango, & Bolton, 2008).

Exposure to war-related events can instigate mental distress, and, in some cases, long-term psychopathology (Betancourt & Kahn, 2008). A number of studies have found anxiety disorders, particularly posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), occurring in very high rates among war-affected children (Betancourt, Speelman, Ontango, & Bolton, 2008). In an ethnographic assessment method used to describe and explore local perceptions of mental health problems among Acholi children displaced by war in northern Uganda, researchers found similar symptoms to those described in Western cases. Based on the report of local participants, the symptoms described for the criteria for major depressive disorder, such as being sad or tearful, lack of interest in activities, tiredness, feelings of worthlessness, excessive guilt, inability to concentrate, and repeated thoughts of death or suicide were also common in this culture. Similarly, Anxiety Disorder symptoms were described as sleep disturbance and increased arousal and restlessness. Other symptoms, such as defiant behavior, violation of major societal norms, and other aggressive behavior were part of what characterizes Conduct Disorder (Betancourt, Speelman, Ontango, & Bolton, 2008).

During times of war, both violent and non-violent trauma may have serious effects on children's adjustment (Allwood, Bell-Doan, & Husain, 2002). In a longitudinal study with children during the Gulf War, results continue supporting the empirical evidence that from non-war societies to war situations, posttraumatic stress reactions in children and adolescents persist. This study in particular shows that even when the symptoms continue, the intensity to some extent declines over time. However, researchers indicate that such events continue to influence children and adolescents and may affect their development of personality, moral values, and views about life. The psychological

impact of war is not over when the fighting ceases (Dyregrov, Gjestå, & Raundalen, 2002).

When trauma is left untreated, the aftereffects continue with children for long periods (Falasca & Caulfield, 1999). In one instance, research has shown that trauma can be passed intergenerationally in societies (Roysircar, 2004). According to Danieli (1998) transgenerational trauma is defined as the “trauma that is passed down from one generation to another,” and trauma that can reoccur without direct stimulus (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008). In war-related trauma, especially child soldiers, stories that become part of the intergenerational narrative promote fighting and children’s participation in the armed group (Wessells, 2007).

## **Resilience**

Present research is bringing a different light onto child soldiers’ experiences. In the past, there has been a sensationalist factor picturing these children as predatory child killers or a “lost generation.” Likewise, there have been one-dimensional psychological portrayals of child soldiers as emotionally crippled and damaged for life. The emphasis on deficits, which undermines the child’s resilience, is now offering a new way to comprehend that most former child soldiers are functional and, with adequate support, can transition to positive civilian life (Wessells, 2007).

Following previous literature on transgenerational trauma, the discussion is extended by including intergenerational factors, not just of risk, but resilience as well. Resilience within this context is considered as part of the protective factors for clients. While transgenerational trauma can generate trauma in future generations, it could also instill unique coping skills and resilience (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008). Resilience can be defined in numerous ways; one definition entails the individual’s ability to endure

hostile experiences, avoiding long-term negative effects, and/or overcoming developmental threats. Nevertheless, resilience is not absolute; every child has a breaking point on stress absorption ability (Garbarino, 2008).

Children who have been exposed to community violence have a high risk for problematic outcomes in development; however, the majority of those exposed do not present psychological problems. Resilience and posttraumatic growth may act as protective factors for children, shielding them from the adverse effects of political violence. Studies that have looked specifically at resilient functioning among children exposed to community violence have identified three key factors as being important: parent support, school support, and peer support (Lynch, 2009).

Human reactions to trauma vary broadly (Brewin, 2003). In understanding resilience and post-traumatic growth, an empirical study looked at the relationship between these two in a sample of survivors of war and terror. The authors define resilience as “a broad cluster of personal characteristics that facilitate the ability to manage despite trauma.” On the other hand, posttraumatic growth represents a change for the better following adversity. “It only occurs if trauma has been upsetting enough to drive the survivor to positive meaning-making of the negative event.” Another explanation suggests that posttraumatic growth is a positive illusion of “wishful thinking” (Johnson et al., 2007; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). It is also a cognitive bias that reflects unrealistically optimistic beliefs (Taylor, 1983). The findings support the argument that resilience conceptualized and measured by a lack of PTSD following adversity is inversely associated with posttraumatic growth. Clinically speaking, this suggests that showing little distress and little growth following adversity may be a healthy sign of

resilience, rather than signifying pathological coping (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009).

As part of the role of counselors in working with clients who have experienced trauma, it is important to mention that resilience has to be nurtured and supported because the ability of the client to cope can erode over time. Furthermore, without adequate skills, mental health counselors can potentially exacerbate any pre-existing stress experienced by disaster survivors (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008). In efforts to acknowledge protective factors associated with transgenerational trauma and resilience narrative tools can be of great use as well. Such tools might include story-telling about the trauma, in which counselors can access elements of the trauma as well as can empower the client to re-story their trauma experience (Duvall & Beres, 2007).

Understanding resilience factors in Colombian child soldiers led a couple of researchers to investigate how Colombian former child soldiers overcame the traumatic event of armed conflict. Six Colombian child soldiers were recruited to participate. In the narrative analysis, results show six common themes in the children's stories: (a) sense of agency; (b) social intelligence, empathy and affect regulation; (c) shared experience, caregivers figure, community connection; (d) sense of future, hope and growth; (e) connection to spirituality; and (f) morality (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007).

In another article, authors review studies on resilience and the interplay of risk and protective processes in the mental health of war-affected children. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development as the basis for understanding the multilayer aspects that influence children's resilience, the authors highlight the importance of a social-ecological model as framework to use resilience factors in

prevention and intervention programs. Authors argue that the individual's characteristics do not act as sole predictors of resilience (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Moreover, research has found that community acceptance was a key protective factor for adjustment of child soldiers after their return to the community (Betancourt, Borisova, Williams, Brennan, Whitfield, & de la Soudiere, 2010). However, other authors also highlight the danger of being seduced by the optimism of resilience and missing the undeniable, children that have been severely traumatized (Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

### **Counseling Child Victims of War**

A review of the literature on counseling child victims of war reveals that there is inadequate research on effective counseling interventions for this client population. Yet, it is known that war related exposures and unsuccessful transitions into civilian life are thought to position former child soldiers at higher risk of mental health problems, re-recruitment, and many other forms of exploitation (Betancourt, et al., 2010; Betancourt, Borisova, et al., 2008; Betancourt, Pochan, et al., 2005; Eyber & Ager, 2003). A review of theories and practices related to counseling child victims of war is provided to articulate current discussion.

### **Theory**

The Eurocentric counseling approach embraces the values of autonomy, independence and mastery of one's life, self-awareness, and personal growth (Sue et al., 1998). Well-intentioned promotion of these values in counseling reinforces and emphasizes these dominant values while marginalizing clients that embrace a non-dominant worldview (Arredondo, et al., 1999). When aiming to empower and liberate clients to improve their lives, counseling needs to be enriched if theorizing and conceptualizing begins from the point of view of the client's culture (West-Olatunji,

Goodman, Shure, & Lewis, 2010; Nwachuku, & Ivey, 1991). Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on issues of culture since it also facilitates understanding of indigenous perceptions of childhood, well-being, and healing practices. Lack of awareness of cultural issues leads to violations of the “do no harm” (Kostelny, 2006) as also exemplified in the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics: A4. Avoiding Harm and Imposing values (ACA, 2005).

Additionally, counselors need to have an ample knowledge-based approach to trauma. In expanding concepts of trauma, Martin-Baró (1994) provides a framework in understanding trauma based on political violence; thus, he introduces the concept of psychosocial trauma. As opposed to the medical model that overlooks the socio-historical realities, insists on locating disorders in the individual and also gives little attention to the human’s social nature, instead, psychosocial trauma entails understanding trauma from the relationship between the individual and society. Freire (1994) posited that people’s themes or views are based on their relationship to the world; that is, as to how they think and face their environment. These generative themes, continuing with Freire’s view, cannot be found in people independent from reality; or in reality alone independent from people. These can only be captured in the human-world relationship. In the case of older children, understanding disasters may be essential for full recovery and integration, since in some cases it is only with the passage of time and cognitive growth that they fully comprehend what has happened to them (Franks, 2011). This can also be understood as helping children to deconstruct their own environment (Freire, 1994) and experiences thus allowing a new understanding—consciousness—to be part of their healing process. Martin-Baró’s

(1994) psychosocial trauma model also attests that trauma is chronic when the factors that bring it about stay intact. The ontology of trauma then originates from maintaining these social relations that feed, multiply, and perpetuate the trauma.

Knowledge-based approaches for children affected by war require the inclusiveness of individual and community resources as part of healing methods, so that sustainable recovery can be achieved. Community is the context of life which, in the relationship with its individual members, influences feelings, evaluation, and coping responses (Farwell & Cole, 2002). In the counseling profession, these views resonate strongly as such that counselors have recognized the need of intervention beyond face-to-face counseling. Counseling practitioners have felt a responsibility to make the environment more conducive to positive human development, which has led to the creation and later to the adaptation of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

As a last important component in theory of counseling, it seems deem appropriate to include literature that embraces the values of social justice. Lee (2007) indicates that at the core of social justice is to improve society by challenging systematic inequities; thus, this effort has been one of the main objectives of the counseling profession. As such, Lee proposes counselors establish a personal social justice compass to guide both life and work through the use of documents that embraced social justice ideals such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (2007) as well as Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## **Practice**

It is necessary for counselors to have an understanding of child development, mental illness, and mental health in addition to healing practices which are widely

diverse among cultures (Adler & Mukherji, 1995; Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Gielen, Fish, & Draguns, 2004). How children make sense of experiences is culturally scripted, based on the beliefs, values, and practices within their community (Boothby et al., 2006). Furthermore, it is fundamental that counselors become more culturally competent so that they can better meet the growing need for disaster response within global and multicultural contexts (Goodman, & West-Olatunji, 2009)

Children who joined the armed forces face changes to their lives that result from their new status. Their previous roles, as part of the family and community in general, will no longer help them define themselves but instead these new roles will be defined by their new comrades. Fundación Dos Mundos, an organization that works with child victims of war in Colombia, describes how there is not a “typical type” child who becomes involved in armed conflict as a fighter. Based on Fundación Dos Mundos’ work, they highlight some significant characteristics which tend to be found in this population. First, children who leave the ranks face difficulty in establishing emotional connections separate from the members of their armed group. Second, due to the fact that these children are being used to base their actions on the commands of others or the rules of the group they belonged to, they display minimal autonomy on their own lives. Third, children and young people find difficulty in learning from more traditional forms of training which focus on individual achievement and the delivery of knowledge from teachers as experts, as opposed to children learning from each other. A possible explanation that Dos Mundos mental health practitioners describe is that within the armed group individual accomplishment is measured in terms of group achievements and learning is confined to knowledge or experience which is useful for achieving the

group's goal. The last characteristic based on Dos Mundos observations is that the moral development of the children as well as ethical values is determined by the deep-rooted logic of war.

In reviewing trauma literature, it shows that understanding trauma symptoms and the difference between acute stress, acute PTSD, and chronic trauma reactions is an important task for counselors working with trauma victims. According to Marotta (2000), counselors can address trauma issues by focusing on developmental approaches during treatment. In addition to that, the counselor educational approach in intervention is also very useful due to the fact that the psycho-educational approach in many instances becomes primary or secondary in treatment approaches. Psycho-education facilitates the sense of normalization of the traumatic experiences and symptoms of clients. This also works as emergency education in crisis intervention. It refers to the provision of educational activities early on in a crisis. It has been argued to be an important means of restoring predictability and social support to children (Aguilar & Retamal, 1998; Betacourt, 2008). In another example, working with refugees, Roysircar (2004) uses the didactic education modality to address the topic of mental health with clients suffering from PTSD as it relates to war experiences. The author adds the importance of the counselor's awareness in issues of cultural stigmatization of mental health problems among ethnic minorities when providing psycho-education about psychiatric disorders.

Some research interventions with child victims of war highlight the use of narrative exposure therapy. In a study, six Somali children diagnosed with PTSD received brief psycho-educational intervention following therapy. Therapeutic intervention focused on

the transformation of the generally fragmented narrative of traumatic experience into a coherent chronological narrative, as well as working through emotions, sensations, and reactions relevant to the traumatic event. Children were encouraged to describe their hopes and aspirations for the future. This approach was based on two constructs: confronting and reconstructing. After nine months, four of the six children no longer met the criteria for PTSD. The study showed that despite the small number of participants who initially presented clinically significant depression, this intervention approach proved to be a potential short-term treatment with child clients (Onyut, Neuner, Schauer, Ertl, Odenwald, & Schauer, 2005).

A case study that also uses narrative therapy presents a clinical application for using puppets to externalize the child problem. The authors describe this intervention in several steps. These steps are: (a) defining the problem; (b) mapping the influence of the problem; (c) evaluating and justifying the effects of the problem; (d) identifying unique outcomes; and (e) restoring. In this particular clinical work, the authors found puppets to be an effective tool for externalizing the problem in narrative therapy. They suggest using puppets, especially with young children. Older children, adolescents, and adult clients might also benefit from the use of objects to help externalize the problem or other approaches such as letter writing and naming the problem (Butle, Guterman, & Rudes, 2009).

Among other treatment approaches, play therapy and expressive therapy facilitate the telling of stories by traumatized children. Play therapy offers younger children, who may not be able to verbalize their trauma, to do so with play or expressive therapy. In Erikson's words (1980), play is "the infantile way of thinking over difficult experiences

and restoring a sense of mastery” (p. 89). Counselors who specialize in play therapy use a wide variety of materials such as miniature figures, sandboxes, puppets, dolls, or art, including drawing and finger painting. These children can also tell stories from poems that they may recite or write themselves (Falasca & Caulfield, 1999).

As another example, an intervention program with the Guatemala Mayan community, play, stories, and dramatization were also used to enable children from this community to share and express the consequences of living in situations of political violence. These approaches facilitate children’s self-expression, communication, and emotions related to the traumatic event. According to the authors, play is a natural activity that does not need to be taught. Play is among the child universal strategies for expressing and communicating (Brinton, 1994).

In efforts to refocus Eurocentric views to be able to understand and assist victims of war from other countries and cultures, it is not enough to direct our attention to the posttraumatic situation, as previously mentioned, but also the pre-traumatic conditions, which includes the analysis of trauma as a normal consequence of the way of functioning of a social system (Martin-Baro, 1994). In examining these pre-traumatic conditions, it is of great importance to consider, in the creation of interventions and in assessment procedures, an understanding of the effects of transgenerational trauma, especially in communities that have a history of political violence. Assessing the effects of transgenerational trauma can improve the efficacy of counselors when providing services in disaster areas (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008).

## **Research**

Research in counseling, as in practice, also needs to follow the foundations of social justice, multicultural, and advocacy guidelines. It is important to consider that in

thematic investigation, or studying the meaning of the client's relationship with their world, is only justified when it returns to the people what truly belongs to them, to the extent that it represents, not an attempt to learn about the people but to come to learn with them the reality which challenges them (Freire, p. 110). For the researcher and the individual(s) to co-construct that knowledge into a new experience has the potential to transform the individual and community into taking collective social action (West-Olatunji & Watson, 1999).

### **Rationale for Proposed Work**

An area of inquiry that has been neglected in terms of child development and well-being has been that of a constructivist narrative of former child soldiers. Several case studies have illustrated the trauma and resiliency of former child soldiers but few have focused on a constructive, narrative approach (Boothby, 2006; Macksoud, 1992). The narrative perspective has as a goal to deconstruct dominant narratives in order to re-author new stories. This is done through the process of externalizing the problem and developing new events (White, 2000). In addition, the narrative approach moves away from individualizing suffering and locating problems within a person and instead places them in the shared social surround (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The author employs a narrative framework to allow the participant to draw his own story in a non-invasive manner. The following case study intends to explore the question: How does a former Colombian child soldier articulate meaning in his life and personal truths as an adult?

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

**Participant.** The participant for this study was a 30-year old, married, male Colombian native. He was asked to participate in this study due to his background: an adult survivor of child soldiering in Colombia's conflict. He is of indigenous or mixed descent and came from an impoverished background in rural northern Colombia. Considering his history of having lived in and around armed conflict, he has been at risk for developmental and/or psychological disorders as well as having been at risk for potentially developing significant health problems.

The participant was involved with a guerrilla movement, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) (FARC), since he was 12 years old and until his early 20s. After working for the FARC for almost a decade, the participant was captured by the Colombian army and was sent to prison where shortly after the terrorist attacks on the U. S., now known as "9/11," guerrilla members in prison were no longer identified as guerrillas, but terrorists. The participant was viewed as a terrorist despite the fact that, as a recruiter, he had never killed a person. As a self-advocate, he found himself powerless due to the lack of legal representation and decided to learn the Colombian constitutional code. He also found himself in a crossfire position for having deserted the FARC and yet continued carrying his FARC status in the eyes of the paramilitary. At the time of the interview, the participant worked for a non-governmental agency in a major city in Colombia where he facilitates the reintegration of ex-combatants to Colombian society.

**Procedure.** This study was approved by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board. The participant was informed that the purpose of the study was to learn

about his experiences as a child soldier and what those experiences mean to him. Participation was voluntary. Following the signing of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form, one 150-minute interview was conducted by the researcher. The interview took place in an office room at a non-governmental agency in a major city in Colombia on December 16, 2010. The sessions were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed and analyzed.

**Interview: style, approach, and areas of inquiry.** The research design for this study utilizes a critical qualitative methodology that is based upon constructivist, advocacy, and participatory perspectives (Carspecken, 1996). It allows researchers to position themselves in the construction of meaning along with the participant. Additionally, critical qualitative research focuses on a phenomenon while studying the complexity of the experiences and relationships of individuals embedded in social and political contexts. Critical qualitative research methods also provide the space for personal values and beliefs to emerge and contribute to the creation of knowledge (Creswell, 2008). Giving voice to those who are otherwise silenced in the production of knowledge contributes to a deeper understanding of the localized discourses of resistance that permeate disadvantaged communities (Ungar, 2003). As such, in collaboration with the participants, critical qualitative research facilitates an agenda for change or reform (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 2008). A case study approach is used as a tool to deepen the reader's understanding of the participant's phenomenology in a manner that also extends the reader's own experience (Yin, 1993, 1994).

Principal researcher contacted participant through a non-governmental agency that provides services to former child soldiers. Upon agreement, researcher traveled to Medellin Colombia to interview participant in his natural setting.

**Data sources and protocols.** The interview was guided by questions the researcher developed based upon a review of the literature (Appendix). In addition to that, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of three Spanish speaking faculty members from the School of Human Development and Organizational Studies in Education at University of Florida and Counseling & Counseling Psychology from Arizona State University. After the completion of the interview and consequently its transcription, the document was sent to the participant for the sake of clarification, accuracy and consistency of his narrative. Participant agreed with the final version of the transcription which was then used for data analysis purposes.

**Data analysis.** The interview was transcribed by three Spanish native speaker research assistants for accuracy of transcription and finally revised by the researcher. In the initial step of data analysis, the researcher and two more Spanish speaking graduate students read through all data to gain a perspective of the overall picture. The system for keeping track of these initial data and understanding was through the use of a Microsoft word encrypted document and from which notes on main themes were added on the margins of the document. The main themes found in the data were listed, and the list was organized into themes and subthemes. For data analysis, a team of researchers independently coded the data by highlighting and organizing key expressions into summary statements in the margin of the transcript. Finally, domains of meaning were created from the summary statements and then paired with related

quotes. The research team examined and discussed all domains of meaning and then reached a consensus on the common and outlying themes and subthemes.

**Threats to credibility.** To ensure trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility, member checking was used wherein the results of the study were shared with the participant to obtain his feedback. Transcription was carried out by three research assistants in addition to the principal investigator. Transcription accuracy was approved by participant. A peer debriefing strategy was also used to ensure accuracy of the account by consulting with a colleague throughout the data collection process. Back translation was performed with the assistance of two assistants, a native Spanish speaker and native English speakers, both fluent in both languages. Additionally, an external auditor reviewed the entire project to provide an assessment of the project at the conclusion of the study. Finally, a possible researcher bias in the design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases of the study was acknowledged to create an open and honest narrative of the research process.

**Subjectivity statement.** The principal investigator in this study is a female, a native (Bogota) Colombian graduate counseling education student. Despite my having grown up in a major city, the constant fighting among guerrilla, paramilitary, and government forces were a part of my daily life. Even though the conflict was in other sectors of the country, especially in rural areas, the capital city eventually felt its effects. As a result, internally displaced persons (IDP) from the rural areas began to mobilize to big cities. In my own neighborhood, we had a significant number of IDPs who were searching for shelter, food, and an opportunity to live in a peaceful environment. Yet, what they found was a neighborhood that refused to help them and a society that

unfairly despised them for being poor, campesinos (peasants), and indigenous people. As a teen, I was introduced to the experiences of child soldiers while watching the news. From the first time that I saw them on the news, girls who looked just like me, I felt drawn to learn more about child soldiers. My passion to help children, who were unwillingly recruited to war and unjustly scorned by society, was born. I felt the need to make this topic the focus of my future studies. During a service trip in 2008, I had the opportunity to meet the participant for this study. His story, full of hope, humility, courage, and resilience, impacted me deeply and reinforced my passion to advocate for this global issue, especially the counseling profession.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

After reviewing the entire transcript for descriptive themes of D (pseudonym used) narrative of his experience in the guerrilla forces in Colombia, results aim at answering the research question: How does a former Colombian child soldier articulate meaning in his life and personal truths as an adult? The findings were divided in five different overarching descriptive themes. The first theme encompasses the Macro-systemic challenges which deeply inform D experience. The second theme is the Micro-systemic: FARC system where his story evolves. The third theme, Family connotes what drives D to take certain decisions in his story. The fourth theme of Transformation of Feeling reflects the emotions experienced through his narrative. Finally, Transactional Identity is the fifth theme that epitomizes an outcome of personal growth and change in perspective, values, and ideals.

Narrative therapy pursues to embrace a respectful, non-blaming approach which centers people as the experts in their own lives. As such, the following themes, subthemes and corresponding quotes from the literally translated narration of D's story, map his experience of guerrilla involvement over time.

**Macro-systemic challenges.** This theme is defined as the source of information from a broader social context, such as government, political philosophies, culture, nationality, and social structure. It is reflected in D's articulation of his environment and how his environment directly and indirectly influenced the way in which his story unfolded.

There were significant political events in the 1990's in Colombia. Some of the most remarkable are the government's attempts to demobilize major guerrillas groups.

Although some groups were able to surrender weapons to the government, FARC remained from engaging in any governmental agreement. Instead, this period became an era of new and advanced military tactics in which FARC was able to destroy major army bases across the country. In 1998-2002, the elected president for this term, Andres Pastrana, began a period of intense and unsuccessful peace talks with FARC. During this period, the government demilitarized certain regions of the country as part of the peace settlement with FARC. Yet, the guerrillas group took advantage of this settlement to strength their forces in an open and government forces-free space. D made reference to this period of time and how the country's political state of affairs influenced how his experiences developed. He also highlighted some of the social factors that most characterized this period for him, such as the political environment, poverty, lack of opportunities, lack of access to education, and violence.

When asked how he would like to start his narrative, D opened his story describing the political environment at the time he was considering joining the forces:

At that time, there was a negotiation going on between the FARC and the government, so the guerrillas took over the towns in Uraba [where he is from] so everybody belonged to the UP (Patriotic Union) so it was normal that all youths were part of the communist youth group. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D described how, coming from a striving environment, defined the beginning of his story:

The hardest thing when I was small, that I did not see at that time, but I now see it...the most difficult thing I went through, was that I was never really a kid.... at 5 or 6 years old, we were already working. And since we lived on a hut, one starts to work at the age of 7....that seems very tough to me. Now I think it's awful. But at that time, I never knew what a toy was, but, well, I would have liked that. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

Given that there were few opportunities to get out of poverty conditions, D made the connection between his participation in FARC and his struggle to get out of poverty, "It got nailed to my head, that that was the way, that to defeat... to get out of poverty that was the way to leave." Due to the lack of access to formal education, the guerrillas were perceived by D and others as a resource to acquire knowledge and skills. It was an option to learn something, gain admiration from peers and community members, and gain positive social positioning.

And at that time, since working with the guerillas was seen as positive, and even more so for someone, well, ignorant like me, who hadn't received an education, and well, now, I still haven't been educated and so, well, I really didn't get to know anything [about the world]... (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D is originally from one the most violent regions in his time in Colombia. As a result of the massacres and other violent acts, D decided to move along with his family to escape the effects of war.

Uraba [the region he is from] became very violent. So my family, my mom and my dad too, they came [reference to moving to a big city]. This was in the '90s, or in 96? That was in 96. And so they came here too, and when they came, well I had a little hut ready for them...I built the hut for them in whatever way I could, and they went to live there. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

As indicated in the literature, recruitment is one of the most discriminatory military practices as it draws members from the most underprivileged communities (Martin-Baró, 1994). Similarly, poverty is one of the most cited considerations in children's decision to join the armed groups (Wessells, 2007). D articulated the meaning making that informed his decision to enlist in FARC and the environmental factors that played a vital role in that decision. From a narrative perspective, According to White and Epsom (1990) problems are created in social, cultural and political contexts which serve as

basis for life stories. Thus, D was given space to express socio-historical and political narratives.

**Micro-systemic: FARC system.** This is the system closest to D as this became his most immediate environment for almost a decade. This theme explains the dominant aspect in his narratives as his story is based on his experience with the FARC. Colombia's conflict is not two-sided, but is multifaceted. One side is the governmental forces and the paramilitaries. Another other side is the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Forces of Colombia – People's Army). FARC originated in 1966 and it is considered a political armed group based on communist ideology advanced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. During this same period, there were some active precarious living conditions (social inequality, poverty, and corruption) in the country that fuelled the expansion of the guerrillas. In discussion this historical-political time period, D described how the social conditions informed his decision to join the FARC.

D stated, "I joined the guerrillas when I was approximately 12 years old. I joined the guerrillas because... because it was the normal thing to do." He described in detailed how the recruitment process worked, especially for adolescents who lived in areas where access to education was scarce. Thus, their only source of skills or hope for the future was found through the activities provided by FARC. The main activities offered were music, theater, and poetry while, at the same time, children were getting exposed to FARC ideology.

We signed up for... theatre clubs, or choir groups, and there began the process to become part of the communist youth. They would begin to enter us into... the political ideologies of Marx and Lenin and taught us about the way the guerrillas functioned. And little by little with those stories that were just so pretty, that they would narrate to us so beautifully, we then started

falling in love with that way of working. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

FARC set the stage for children to find meaning in fighting which was framed as a work for the greater good, for the collective. While the idea of working for the greater good was D's main goal, FARC also provided other type of incentives, such as food.

So, what one would get every month is some groceries, a little bit of groceries, right....just a little bit here and there. In reality, it's as if one were working because of their conscience, or because I liked it... to contribute to that project. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D described how *FARC training* gives options to children to become fighters or to become political leaders and how both roles required intense and separate training.

But the vast majority wanted to be a guerrilla soldier. If one wanted to be a guerrilla soldier, as I did [at the time], and not a political leader, then they would get military training. The political leaders there were given very little military training, but they still learned how to use a rifle, not to field strip it or anything like that, but just to defend themselves. So my military training was slight as well. I did know how to use weapons but, not like them [the soldiers] who would know how to take a gun apart with their eyes closed and put it back together again. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

After years of capacitation in the mountains, D described his job and the training; he had to go for months and complete the equivalent of 10 college semesters to be able to begin his assigned recruiting tasks:

Every semester you would have around eight courses [lessons, classes] to learn, and when you've learned that, you pass to a higher grade. Each school is like a level you go up in. But in reality there are ten, and I was on the third one, but according to them I was ready...I could recruit people. So when I was approximately 15 or 16 years old I started recruiting more youths for that [the guerrillas]... (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D described strategic or higher levels of recruitment:

I would recruit three people... then I would go a little higher [up a hill] and I would find another three [potential recruits]. But these three couldn't meet

those other ones, even though they knew each other. They didn't know if the others belonged [to the guerrillas] as well. And that's why they're called cells ... it's a very secretive job. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

After years of recruitment, D was able to send high numbers of members to the ranks. Yet, since his job was embedded in secrecy, and, consequently, there was not enough evidence to set a sentence; government forces needed to find more reasons to send him to prison.

There was this boy who had deserted [from the guerrillas], and he had seen me up there in the mountains [during his training]... so he started pointing me out me as a political leader of the guerrillas. They [the government] sought for a way to keep me [in jail] by force, to keep me for a long time [in jail]. And so they searched for a crime that could retain me and they accused me of kidnapping. So, kidnapping, extortion, rebellion, and since the guerrillas of the FARC at that time had been declared a terrorist group, I was also given another sentence, that of a terrorist. And so I had 4 crimes... kidnapping: 24 years, right, rebellion: 6 years, terrorism and extortion, altogether these gave me 40 years. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

While in prison, D became aware of a different side of the guerrilla movement as well as realizing the danger, to himself and his family, by being a guerrilla member:

I decided one day, with another friend, I decided that no, that I wasn't going to continue with the guerrillas. With a forty-year sentence, I was never getting out, and with the continuing pressure of the paramilitaries who were assassinating one's family members, it was better for me to leave so that the paramilitaries wouldn't do anything to my family. So I told our [FARC] commander, the one in the prison, that I was going to leave [the guerrillas]. But he told me that no, that a FARC soldier can never leave; that if I left, I would be declared a military fugitive... I told him I would be responsible for the consequences that I would prefer that I get killed instead of continuing [with the FARC] and get my family killed. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

The details of guerrilla recruitment, training and other factors related to it are not precisely mentioned in the literature. For one, political armed groups or terrorist around the world vary in practices. Thus, details about Colombian guerrillas' practices and their

effects on children are also very scarce. D makes reference to his personal truths and the meaning making that played a role in his enrollment in the political branch of the guerrilla forces. From a narrative perspective, truths are not objective or innate facts about the nature of people. Rather, it is the constructing of ideas that are the ascribed status of truths that become normalizing in the ways they shape or constitute people's lives (White & Epton, 1990).

**Family.** This theme represents D's most latent source of support, sense of responsibility, and care. D found himself becoming the provider and protector of his family. Ultimately, D's family played an important role in his narrative:

We came to Medellin, and I came first and later... Uraba [native city] became very violent. So my family, my mom and dad also came." "... when they came, I had a little hut ready for them...I built the hut for them as best I could, and they went to live there. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

Once D went to prison, his main source of encouragement came from his family and his wife:

I changed in prison. I changed for my wife. When I began to think that because of what I was doing [being the FARC], I could place her in danger, and I started to reflect. And so I began to change when I knew that there was a possibility she could get killed ... she was the key person in how much I changed, even today; today still she is the person who grounds me. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

Wessells (2007) asserted that, for many young men, a source of suffering is their inability to provide for their families. Other scholars have highlighted the importance of family and community that serves to enhance connection and promotes caring relationships with caregivers. Areas such, family and community were found to be protective factors that promote children's resilience (Cortes & Buchanan, 2007). D makes meaning of his family support and considered it as one of the most influential

factors in both joining and leaving FARC. From a narrative perspective, this theme can also be seen as an alternative story to the dominant ones.

**Transformation of feelings.** The emotional journey that emerged in the free narrative was very descriptive of the different stages in D's story. By providing children, who had been denied their basic rights, to education, housing, and food, D, in his teenage years, found a sense of purpose by believing in communist cause. Such sense of purpose became his motto that, at times, excused any alternative to leave, "In reality, it's as if one were working because of their conscience, or because I liked it... to contribute to that project."

Arias (2005) has suggested that, as youth become more attracted to the glamorized aspect of the guerrillas, they may be seduced by the power that guns, command, and war, in general, offers. Attaining such power becomes a personal goal. Given the limited resources and options to build a socially productive future, when children are provided a sense of power, this option can appear enriching and viable:

I would go to the theatre group with all the young men that were already there, and I would talk to them about the guerrillas, about what we did. In that time, being who I was, a person of high status, their desire was to be like me. It was like, "Wow... it is great, right?" they would get excited; there wasn't any need to try to convince them much. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

Safety was very throughout D's narrative. Due to the nature of his job and circumstances, he used to find himself in frequent volatile and unsafe situations:

Well, this ambush caught this girl precisely here, standing next to me... And they shot her here in the chest [pointed to his chest].... The shot threw her over a pot [as she was cooking], and a fierce gun battle began. I had barely just arrived and without knowing anything, we began to run...and they killed people, it was an ambush. And we ran, and this first one [gun fight] was very difficult; it was the first time that I was in such [military] confrontation. And I couldn't fight back, because I wasn't armed, I just had to see this.

Terrible- what one feels when they kill someone so close [in proximity] to you. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D also described how he took care of his safety every time the situation would start turning dangerous, especially in the city, his main territory of work.

When the situation gets tough [for us, the guerillas], it's not like the militia who can defend themselves, they must fight back. When a situation gets tough in one area, we simply go to another. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

On occasions when D had gone to prison, he found himself surrounded by many enemies; he was always afraid for his safety:

I had to be careful with those guerrilla soldiers, because they could suddenly stab me, kill me, or something; just as could the common street criminals or the paramilitaries. The common street criminals hated the guerrillas, the paramilitaries too, and the guerrillas were starting to hate me as well. So I had everybody against me. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

This concern was very common in his narrative, “And we changed neighborhoods constantly, for security measures, of course, we would go [move away], and we would go...” He was afraid of, not only came from being caught by the government or being uncovered by other FARC members, but also being killed by the paramilitary who were active enemies of the guerrillas,

Adding to everything was the pressure from the paramilitaries’ killing of one's families.” Fear became a state of being, “While in the guerrilla or in the armed groups, in reality one never sleeps. One keeps thinking, perhaps they're already coming? I need to change houses... (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D’s participation in FARC was mainly characterized by the levels of secrecy involved. The levels of secrecy not only implied hiding from government forces and paramilitary but also hiding from his own fellow FARC fighters given that in order to fulfill his job, he needed to remain hidden from everyone around:

But the actual [FARC] militias don't know one another, they can't know. Only the commander, so the commander simply says to the militias: "That family...emm...don't mess with them"... so that's how we [he and his family] enter it [a neighborhood]. One has nothing to do with other [FARC] militia groups, those that go down and kill people, but one has nothing to do with that. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

Levels of secrecy seem to run deep within the FARC itself, "...That, they all belong to the guerrillas, but no one knows."

One of the most salient aspects of D's decision to leave FARC was his own feelings of abandonment; feeling betrayed by those who he once thought was a support network. D described how that support net, FARC, no longer existed once he was captured and sent to prison, "...many of the guerilla soldiers, when they get captured, they [FARC] stop providing food for their family. The guerrillas also didn't send anything to my family, and so we [he and his family] lost all protection." D described his experiences in prison and how he reached out to the FARC commanders for help while in jail and was denied. Knowing that FARC owned many hidden sites with buried money, D asked FARC to tap into those resources to help those in prison:

And on top of everything, they [FARC] didn't have money, the situation was really bad. But in the meantime, one could see that they could get large quantities of money in the suitcases that they had buried." ... "Watching the news [describing this] and knowing that it was true... we knew money was kept at the camps. And so our boss would call us, and we would ask 'why don't you take the money out from this place? Why don't you help us, and go take the money...?' And no, simply, no... They forgot about us... (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

As D grew tired of not receiving help from FARC and later learned about the enriching of the movement through drug trafficking, he started to become disillusioned about the communist-based movement, "We no longer believed in the original idea of helping the poor, instead now, we would see a lot of narco-trafficking as a way for the guerrilla leaders to get rich. There was no longer that purpose of social change that

used to exist before.” As D recounted his story and thinking more deeply about his own experience, at the time of this interview, he described a sense of happiness:

I still don't own a house, nor stay in good house or anything, but well, I still have a place to live. And I am very happy. And I have said it on many occasions...because I thought that happiness lies in the amount of money one could have and no, no, no it does not lay there... Happiness is to be well, is to be able to sleep well. And being in the guerrillas, or in the armed groups, well, in reality, one does not even sleep. One is always thinking, perhaps they are already coming? ... And I sleep with such tranquility [now], and I live well... poor, but I live well. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

The range of feelings demonstrated by D throughout the interview was more extensive than what can be presented here. However, the feelings presented reflect his lived experiences and are embedded throughout his narration. Moreover, D's feelings appeared to be more than an essential characteristic of D but rather reflected his attitudes toward his relationships with his family members, other fellow guerrillas, and even his relationship with FARC as an ideology. As suggested by Arias (2005), emotions are not solely viewed as intra-psychic realities which are located within the individual but rather emotions that emerge out of individuals' relationships with their ecology.

**Transactional identity.** The theme of *transactional identity* reflects a change that happened to D, a change in perspective and beliefs, starting from his own ideology, which was a driving force for him.

D recounted how believing in the cause gave me a sense of validation, belonging and purpose,

Previously, when I learned more about them [FARC], and how they were capable of getting a country to moving forward, I also got this nailed in my head, that it was the way to overcome, to get out of poverty... that this was the way to get out. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

D reflected on his experience in jail and how he constructed meaning from it,

Yes, I believe that prison... did change me. It taught me the value of people, the people who were with me in there as well as the most important people in my life, and [with emotion] she [his wife]... And well, above all else, my family... (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

In the following statements, D reflected on transgenerational violence and how it hinders peace:

Now I see that a person doesn't accomplish anything through violence. I mean, now I see, that violence creates violence. I can see how a young man, when the paramilitaries arrive and kill his father, or his mother, makes him... grow and change. And because this mother and father had 4 or 5 children, these children grow up embracing that hate, and that violence reproduces itself in each one of them. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

As D reflected on his experiences, emerging changing views of self were greatly expanded towards the end of his narrative. This is one of the most significant themes as it fully embraces a new meaning of life as well as the changing/evolving of his personal truths especially as an adult. Narrative theory suggests that individuals seek to articulate how much their life and relationships are shaped by units of knowledge (White & Epston, 1990). Stories that people negotiate and engage in give meaning to their experiences. From this last theme, D articulated the meaning of his experiences.

**Reflection on the interview.** After D concluded sharing his story, I asked him to reflect on the experience of the interview, of telling his story. He responded:

I've told part of my story, well, to many people, for sure. Not as long as we did here now, though... How to relive all that time. [Looks down and seems pensive] It causes in me... I don't know... A sadness to remember those moments in which I was in such a bad place, just so bad... There were very tough things, and all of them generated that change of leaving the guerrillas. As I tell you this, I remember them [past experiences], and I know that they [stories] were very, very tough. It's just that when one gets kicked and pushed on the ground and everybody is watching, and no one says anything, it is very horrible. And it makes awestruck... to see how I was

able to get out of there. And when I tell the story like this with so much detail... Yes, terrible...and now being here... Definitely, God does give us second chances. (Interview with former FARC guerrilla member, December 16, 2010)

As D ended the interview with this statement, he shared out loud his present sense of awareness of how much he has changed as well as present sense of split reality, realizing he was actually free. A moment where he was in such awe to be where he was, after thinking he was going to spend 40 years in prison, and that he was no longer working in secrecy and fear. The sadness sank in the room as he finished these words.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of a former Colombian child soldier's experiences and his own personal truths as an adult as well as advancing present knowledge on the impact of war on children from a constructivist, narrative perspective. The story shared was an original recollection of the experiences a former child soldier who reintegrated to Colombian society. The goal of this research was not to seek generalizability through inferential methods, but rather it was focused on acquiring descriptive statements within the given context (Guba, 1981). Thus, this study represents how a former child soldier understood his own unique experiences. The goal was to acquire narratives that described these experiences, and inductively search for any important themes that emerged through analyzing the text.

**Significance.** This study reinforces the importance of using an ecological approach when working with children victims of war. The first identified theme acknowledges the importance of Macro-systemic challenges. The macro-system is defined as the bank of information of societal norms, structures, cultures, beliefs and philosophies that exist in any given community, and how they indirectly/directly inform and affect individual personal lives and challenges as the social inequities or human rights violations. D's story categorization of his recruitment as a child into the political armed groups as "voluntary" may be questioned after an examination of his ecological system and the social-historical factors that contributed to his enrolment into war (e.g. poverty, lack of access to education, violence). Taking into consideration the socio-historical and political environment that permeated those years, it assists in the interpretive role they played in D's life.

The second identified theme was *Micro-system: the system of the FARC*. The most dominant story in D's narrative, it is where most of his story evolved. Within this theme, D depicts his role as part of the FARC as a political leader. He describes his commitment to the FARC and what it meant for him to do his job. D also forms meaning of justice and helping others and, conversely, his personal truth is that makes him desert from the ranks, given that for him the FARC was not following its ideology.

Moreover, the veracity of the perception of child soldiers as the worst off among youth in war zones seems to be questioned, given that child soldiers often have better access to food and protection (Wessells, 2007). This was exemplified in case of D who fulfilled basic needs (e.g. food and protection) as well as his sense of purpose and quest for knowledge, through FARC - his only resource available. This view is supported through literature which demonstrate that "voluntary" military enrollment might be a revised concept given that pre-conditions in many children's' life is a silent force that lead them to become part of these armed groups (Wessells, 2007).

Family was also a common theme through his narrative. When attempting to view it as an independent system, however, it does not stand alone. The role of family in his narrative seems to be an extension of himself; D and his family as a unit. His family was present throughout all places he lived in his narrative. One of the main reasons he joined FARC was to provide food, shelter and protection for himself and his family. These observations on systems can lead us to acknowledge the importance of embracing a collectivist orientation; in this case, his experience was fundamentally relational and socially processed rather than individually processed. In addition to that,

Family theme highlights important aspects of D's resiliency grounds for his desertion process from the FARC as well as life after military and prison time.

According to Yin (1994), the construction of the narrative brings forth a phenomenological sense of one's experience, crystalizing the inward meaning in one's life. This is strongly represented in the fifth theme, *Transactional Identity*. As the participant reflects on his own story, he first redefines the meaning of happiness based on his experience with FARC. Similarly, he recognizes that violence generates more violence and reflects on how his perspective has changed since joining FARC. His narrative clearly described how transgenerational violence is passed down through those who have lost loved ones due to political violence, and, consequently, those new generations carry the inherited hatred, fueling new ideals for further war. This is a theme evidently reflected in the literature as "trauma that is passed down from one generation to another" (Danieli, 1998; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2008).

The results of the study also depicted certain aspects of the child soldier narrative that are not frequently depicted in the literature. Most studies of this nature address psychological symptoms and other mental health illnesses. Little has been said about the actual array of emotions reintegrated child soldiers experience throughout their entire political armed group experience and post-war life. This case study provides detailed qualitative information about the most common experienced feelings: Fear, need for safety, isolation, disillusionment, gratitude and happiness, among many others.

Additionally, it is also important to recognize and analyze, from a different angle, the skills that D earned during his military training. He indicated that now he is currently using those same social and communication skills to advise FARC members, currently

in prison, to desert from the ranks, and instead join a non-violent and non-military-involvement path. He also advocates for these individuals by raising funds to bring different personal items to the prisons or assisting with what is most needed.

Another aspect highlighted from this study, is one of incredible resiliency. Child development literature often speaks of the importance of healthy developmental stages leading to socio-emotional and occupational competency (Fischer, 1980). However D's narrative illustrates that despite of growing up in a deprived and violent environment, he has become a competent and respected adult in his community. D's apparent high levels of resiliency have allowed him to transcend these environmental difficulties and find health and meaning.

**Recommendations.** For the counseling profession, this case study exemplifies the significance of the role of systems and the importance of relationships between individuals and their environment (Martin-Baró, 1994). The influence of individual socio-historical factors may have a larger impact on identity and meaning construction than previously established (Garbarino, 2008). Counselors may need to expand practices to learn the tools to competently map a client's community and conceptualize its impact. Moreover, this study advocates for the need of further integration of community or systematic interventions into treatment. In addition, adopting a collective orientation may also assist treatment conceptualization and planning. Knowing that community resources can ameliorate the effects of war-based trauma, practicing counselors can connect their clients to community-based supports. Likewise, counselors-in-training need to be trained outside of the classroom to learn to acknowledge and incorporate existing community-based interventions in their future practices.

The rapid demographic changes in the US greatly increase the possibility of encountering children who come from war-torn countries. Given the broad definition of child soldiers, each child's case needs to be treated as unique. Counselors would likely benefit from resisting general case conceptualizations when working with children victims of violence. Common conceptualizations of the child victim as damaged, including deficit moral reasoning, may greatly impair therapeutic interventions with children victims of war and obscure other important approaches that can actually provide more accurate methods to healing. Finally, as counselors become more involved in the international arena, it is fundamental we use multicultural competencies as a starting point when working in cross-cultural settings. Along with that, mental health professionals need to improve their knowledge and understanding of global issues (Oakland et al., 2011; Sue, 1982) such as the violation of children's rights. It also deems essential that as part of cross-cultural competencies, counselors need to learn culturally relevant healing practices based on clients or communities' world views, culture, socio-political history and other system/community base information.

**Future research.** Further research is needed to explore the long-term reintegration experiences of former child soldiers into their communities. It is also important to explore child soldiers' experiences and mental health effects of war across cultures and based on gender. From a narrative perspective, participant is the author of his/her own story; thus, the qualitative participation of children in the research can greatly contribute to a study's depth and quality. Given the spectrum of the effects of war, future research is needed to improve services for former child soldiers within an ecological framework of holistic, integrated care for all children and families. Finally,

there is a need for research that can contribute to the development of comprehensive global competencies in the counseling profession as the competencies may promote ethical and effective counseling interventions in cross-cultural settings (Chung, 2009). The development of such global competencies would aim at, not necessarily creating a one-size fits all approach, but instead, having guidelines that can assist in skill development, for the profession to honor, respect and learn from within the hosting culture's knowledge and wisdom.

**Conclusion.** Several themes were identified through the qualitative analysis of the transcribed narrative: Macro-systemic challenges, Micro-system: FARC system, family system, transformation of feelings, and transactional identity. Overall, results reaffirm previous research findings on the importance of ecological approaches in understanding child soldiers' experiences. The results also present themes under-identified in the literature such as the construction and transformation of complex integrated emotions and meanings as a result of his experiences.

The overwhelming global need to provide assistance to this population calls for the counseling profession to participate and thus bring the academic, the clinical along with the advocacy practice together in efforts to stop the cruel exploitation of children and the robbery of their childhoods. This study provides an attempt to further knowledge in this global struggle and hopefully it shed some light in the understanding of the need for effective healing practices as well as the moral imperative of the promotion of peace through the counseling profession. In the words of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children."

APPENDIX  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- 1) How would you like to start your narrative?

**¿Cómo le gustaría comenzar su relato?**

- 2) To the extent that you feel comfortable, can you recall some of the issues that you faced while a child soldier?

**En la medida en que usted se sienta cómodo, podría usted recordar algunos de los problemas o situaciones que enfrentó cuando participó como niño soldado?**

- 3) How did you respond to those issues?

**¿Cómo respondió usted a estos problemas o situaciones enfrentadas?**

- 4) How do you think these issues have shaped your growth and development?

**¿Cómo cree que cree que estas situaciones o problemas enfrentados han dado forma a su crecimiento y desarrollo personal?**

- 5) How have these experiences changed the way you perceive yourself?

**¿Cómo estas experiencias han cambiado la forma en que usted se percibe a sí mismo?**

- 6) What skills have you acquired as a result of this experience, if any?

**¿Qué habilidades ha adquirido como resultado de esta experiencia, si alguna?**

- 7) As you reflect on your story, who are some of the key individuals of this narrative?

**Al reflexionar en su historia, ¿quiénes son algunas de las personas claves de esta narración?**

- 8) What are your relationships to these individuals?

**¿Cuál es su relación con estos individuos?**

- 9) How have your experiences shaped your relationships with other people, if at all?

**¿De que manera estas experiencias han dado forma a sus relaciones con otras personas?**

10) I'd like you to take a moment and reflect on our conversation today. What awareness, if any, do you now have after our discussion today?

**Me gustaría que se tomara un momento y reflexionara sobre nuestra conversación del día de hoy. ¿Qué conocimiento, en su caso, tiene ahora después de nuestra conversación?**

11) Is there anything else that you would like to share that we have not talked about?

**¿Hay algo más que le gustaría compartir, que no hayamos tenido la oportunidad de haber hablado?**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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