

ARTICLE



Negotiating Pathways to Manhood: Rejecting Gangs and Violence in Medellín's Periphery

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Abstract

Gangs around the globe are paradigmatic of urban violence and predominantly made up of male youths from poorer neighbourhoods. However, even in the most violent urban contexts, the majority of young men do not join gangs. This paper uses original empirical data collected in Medellín, Colombia and a conceptual focus on masculinities to understand why some male youths negotiated a pathway to manhood without joining a gang, arguing that two factors are central: family support in developing a moral rejection of gangs during childhood, and these youths' subsequent ability to form socialisation spaces away from the street corner. These factors helped them circumvent the influence of what this article calls the "gang male role model system".



Keywords

gang, violence, youth violence, urban violence, violence prevention, Medellín, masculinity, masculinities, habitus, Bourdieu

INTRODUCTION

Almost a century ago literature began to emerge from the Chicago School, where scholars such as Thrasher sought to understand the phenomenon of urban gangs (Thrasher, 1927; also see Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Yablonsky, 1997). Although the definition of gang has been contested (Pitts, 2008), since then substantial literature has been produced on gangs around the globe. Much has been published on gangs including multi-country comparisons (Rodgers, 1999; Alexander, 2000; Klein et al., 2001; Bourgois, 2003; Covey, 2003; Rodgers, 2006; Jensen, 2008; Hagedorn, 2008; Pitts, 2008; Pitts, 2011). This has included a surge in policy-oriented publications over the last five years, as governments, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean region, scramble to control rising urban violence,

which has become a major political issue (for example: Small Arms Survey, 2010; UNDP, 2011; OECD, 2011a; World Bank, 2011b; The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, 2011; Costa, 2012).

Research on civil society responses to gangs and violence is less common than studies of the gang phenomenon itself. In fact, in Colombia, the focus on belligerent groups has been so intense it has led to the emergence of the disciplinary term *violentología* – 'violentology'. Gangs themselves have long been the targets of state-led intervention policies where punitive *mano dura*, or zero-tolerance, approaches reflect the dominant discourse across the region. However, such intervention has met with limited long-term success and has been strongly criticised by the academic world, civil society organisations and international development agencies. Urban violence in the southern hemisphere is largely conceived as a reproduced,



multi-causal and socially generated phenomenon,¹ where gangs are understood as epiphenomena of deeper systems of structural exclusion linked to the political economy of the modern city (see Bourgois, 2003: 319; Rodgers, 2010). However, some debate the importance of exclusion and poverty as a motivational factor for gang affiliation (Rubio, 2008), and in policy circles in Latin America and the Caribbean, the penetration of the narcotics industry into communities has been presented as the main factor correlated with homicide rates (Costa, 2012). The socially generated conceptualisation of violence has led to recent human security (UNDP, 1994) perspectives gaining ground, which advocate more nuanced approaches to violence reduction with a focus on prevention and development (Abello Colak and Pearce, 2008: 11-15). This discourse is increasingly reflected by multilateral institutions including the UNDP, OECD (OECD, 2011a; OECD, 2011b; UNDP, 2010; UNDP, 2011) and the World Bank, whose recent report argues for a developmental response to crime and violence in Latin America with the increased involvement of civil society organisations (World Bank, 2011a). However, methods of urban violence reduction remain highly contested and linked to regional political-institutional cultures, the debate about which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Since the mid-1990s, in Medellín, Colombia, amongst civil society organisations there has been a generalised shift in violence reduction methods from direct intervention and conflict resolution with gangs, to prevention work with vulnerable youths living in socio-economically deprived contexts with abundant gang activity (Baird, 2011: 125-8; Baird, 2012). Despite significant levels of civil society activism in Medellín, few scholars focus on the progress made by such activism or on nonviolent youths in Medellín but rather, in the *violentología* tradition, focus on belligerent groups (for example Hylton, 2007; Rozema, 2008; Bedoya, 2010). Pertinently, Barker (1998; 2005) argues that scholars need to ask why, even in the most violent urban contexts, *most youths do not* actually engage in systematic violence and join gangs. If we are to interrupt the continuum of gang membership – hence cycles of violence – it is crucial to understand why youths *do not* join gangs.

This article seeks to address this point by investigating a particular group of young men in the poor and violent Montecristo neighbourhood in Medellín. These youths not

only avoided joining gangs, but came to work with the local community organisation, Corporación Vida para Todos (Corporation Life for All) from now on *CoVida*,² and developed values that strongly rejected violence and crime.³ It should be noted here that this group of youths was chosen in particular because of the *antithetical positions* they took towards gangs, crime and violence, with the intention of uncovering how such positions developed.⁴ The wider intention of this paper is to contribute to debates around the prevention of gang membership and hence the reduction of urban violence.

First, this article provides a brief contextual background of the Montecristo neighbourhood. Secondly, it argues the relevance of masculinities in understanding modern-day urban violence. Third, the empirical data is analysed to reveal how youths negotiated pathways to masculinity whilst rejecting violence, and in particular, the gang.

SOCIAL CONTEXT IN MONTECRISTO

Medellín has been affected by urban violence since the 1950s, which became more intense from the late 1980s onwards (Medina Franco, 2006). Most of this violence occurs in poor neighbourhoods. In 1991 Medellín achieved the ignominious record of the highest per capita homicide rate in history, at 381 per 100,000 inhabitants (Suárez Rodríguez, 2005: 203).⁵ This violence is linked to the dynamics of the broader armed conflict in Colombia, and was brought about by a cocktail of gangs, youth assassins (*sicarios*), cartel violence, urban militias linked to left-wing guerrilla groups, paramilitary and state violence. This period coincided with the childhood of the young men interviewed for this paper. There were still large numbers of gangs and paramilitary groups⁶ in the neighbourhood in 2008 when the data was collected despite the paramilitary demobilisation process, about which there has been much debate (Amnesty International, September 2005; Rozema, 2008; Llorente, 2009; Palou and Llorente, 2009; Insuasty Rodríguez et al., 2010).

Montecristo is the last neighbourhood in north-western Medellín before the slopes become too steep for any

1 Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois claim that violence is mimetic and reproductive “so we can rightly speak of... a continuum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004).

2 *CoVida* and *Montecristo* are pseudonyms.

3 Other literature describes these youths as ‘prosocial’ (see Daly and Wilson, 1997; Barker, 2000).

4 When interviewed, these youths estimated that only a small minority – approximately 5% – of local young men work for community organisation. As such, this group can be described as an ‘outlier’ compared to the ‘average’ youth in the neighbourhood.

5 In a city of 1.6 million a staggering total of 6,349 homicides were recorded that year, and in total between 1986 and 1993 there were 33,546 homicides (Márquez Valderrama and Ospina, 1999: 14). For comparative purposes, Perlman refers to Rio de Janeiro being one of the most violent cities in the world in 2004. The homicide rate then was 37.7 per 100,000 (Perlman, 2008: 52), a tenth of the homicide rate in Medellín in 1991.

6 Paramilitary groups controlled many street gangs from 2003 in Medellín, although their control began to fragment in 2009. During the fieldwork period in 2007-8, in the eyes of community members the words *gang member* and *paramilitary* became largely synonymous, both of which are used in this article.



dwelling to be built, and is classified as socio-economic strata one and two, the poorest on a scale of one to six. The location of CoVida, after a long, winding ride on the 247 bus from the city centre, is itself an indicator of the exclusion of the neighbourhood. Life history interviews were conducted with fifteen male youths with an average age of 23.4 years old during a period of participant observation at the organisation in 2008 (for detailed methodology see Baird, 2009).

Growing up in Montecristo is particularly challenging. Generalised poverty and socio-economic exclusion limit opportunities for young people. The ubiquity of the drugs trade and irregular armed groups spanning a number of generations has led to chronic levels of violence, which promote social and family disorder with fatherless households the norm. Generalised police and institutional corruption at a local level and absence of the rule of law provided illegal armed actors with a space to proffer 'security services', which, although based on extortion (Bedoya, 2010), have gained local legitimacy. Sexual and domestic violence are pervasive in the community, as are levels of alcoholism and drug addiction – the latter the principal economic pillar of gangs and paramilitaries. Whilst Montecristo is not in a Durkheimian anomic state, turf wars between rival gangs shaped the childhood experiences of the youths interviewed: "In the 90s I watched my friends die, and even at school you weren't safe. I was there when they [a gang] came into school and grabbed a classmate of mine, dragged him off to the toilets and killed him... so we ended up spending our youth either locked up at home or at school, because that's what you had to do." (Gabriel, 11/07/2008) Life is hard. Home economics – putting food on the table – alongside security remain the main preoccupations of local inhabitants. Whilst these realities bite, there is another face to Montecristo; it is also a vibrant community and locals have developed tremendous resilience to poverty, exclusion and violence, using agency to find creative ways to get by – known locally as *rebusque*.

THE GANG MALE ROLE MODEL SYSTEM AND THE REPRODUCTION OF VIOLENCE

Ninety-five percent of the 5,450 homicide victims in 1990 were men, and 65% were between the ages of 15 and 29 (Revista Planeación Metropolitana, 1991: 3). Young men

are also the main perpetrators of lethal urban violence – the human capital of insecurity. This male youth demographic rubric has remained remarkably constant over the last two decades.⁷ At a global level, young men remain the protagonists of violence: In 2002, the WHO reported that "Males accounted for three-quarters of all victims of homicide, and had rates more than three times those among females: the highest homicide rates in the world – at 19.4 per 100,000 – were found among males aged 15-29 years" (Krug et al., 2002: 6).

Given the overwhelming amount of youth male-on-male violence, it is logical to conclude that something about the construction of the male identity makes this possible. Despite increasing literature linking the urban periphery – namely inequality, poverty and exclusion – to violence, very little research brings these perspectives together to reveal how masculinities might interact with contexts of exclusion and poverty to generate violence.⁸ Masculinities alone do not generate urban violence (Rodgers, 2006); but rather, the way that deprived socio-economic conditions interact with masculinisation can cast light on the generation of violence. For this reason it is pertinent to ask how some youths become men, in contexts of exclusion, without joining gangs and engaging in violence.

Understanding how masculinity is reproduced can help us understand the reproduction of violence itself. Youths are *disposed* – that is, they have a less than conscious tendency – to reproduce existing versions of masculinity they are exposed to while growing up. This is understood here as masculine *habitus*,⁹ drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' from his *Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977). In short, boys are disposed to 'become men', or go through a process of masculinisation that reflects existing masculine identities. Whilst, of course, this reproduction of practice is imperfect, allowing for multiple identities, agency and social change, masculine *habitus* helps explain the generalised intergenerational transmission of masculine comportment. To understand how the reproduction of certain masculinities are related to the reproduction of violence let us consider the meanings of masculinity in peripheral Medellín, and in particular in relation to violent armed actors.

Masculinity can be employed in a variety of frameworks. In this paper it is understood from a sociological perspective as the cultural construction of the gendered self (see Hearn, 1996: 203-4), an 'achieved' identity. Recognising that there are multiple masculinities (Hearn, 2005: 61), hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987) in particular

7 In a longitudinal study between 1990-2002, the vast majority of homicide victims in Medellín were consistently young males between 15-34 years old, a trend which remained unchanged in 2009 (Suárez Rodríguez, 2005; Hylton, 2010).

8 Gary Barker and Steffen Jensen have studied masculinities and violence in contexts of exclusion (Barker, 2005; Jensen, 2008). Pearce also asks pertinent questions about masculinity, socialisation and the transmission of violence (Pearce, 2006).

9 Masculine habitus has also been used by Coles (2009).



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have been related to violence.¹⁰ Basic hegemonic characteristics of becoming a man are: success, status, income, strength, confidence, independence, aggression, violence and daring (Edley and Wetherell, 1996: 101). A somewhat exaggerated form of hegemonic masculine identity is widespread in much of Latin America, and commonly referred to as *machismo*, although we should be careful not to essentialise concepts of masculinity in the Latin American region (Gutmann, 1996: 245; see also Gutmann and Viveros Vigoya, 2005: 115). These masculinities are synonymous with social status, respect, money, sexual access to women and often violence, but there is contextual definition, or localised nuances, to masculine performance. The young men interviewed in this paper from a poor neighbourhood in Medellín were asked to outline what was locally understood as being a man.

Sammy: Here you notice particularly the strong difference between men and women. Being a man is to be strong, being a man is to be a brute, being a man means bringing home money, being a man means being a protector, being a man is being skilful, being a man is being a womaniser, being a man is being a chauvinist, being a man is being macho, being a man is being manly, being a man is to have power, being a man means being respected. Being a woman is the inverse of being a man... being weak, fragile, not having power, not having status, to be subordinated... (Sammy, 03/06/2008)

They go on to explain how gangs, particularly gang leaders, become strong symbols of male success, the standard bearers of masculinity for boys and young men, becoming localised models of hegemonic masculinity.

Pepe: ...Well, there is one stereotype of a man, which is the armed actor, the head of the gang, or the person who has been getting involved with armed groups, and has begun to rise through the ranks. The one that starts as a *carrito* [a child] who carries guns and then the next thing you know he has become the boss... They enjoy significant status and recognition. (Pepe, 11/04/2008)

Licit opportunities to secure desired, or dignified, livelihoods are scarce, leading to many “frustrated dreams” (Pelicorto, 10/06/2008). A number of youths then search

for other options through crime and gangs. These illicit options, by contrast, appear ubiquitous and accessible in the youths’ immediate social world when presented with the imaginary¹¹ or role model of the materially wealthy gang members and standard bearers of male success.

Pepe: One of the reference points here that is latently constructed is that of the *cacique* or boss [the leader of the local gang or armed group]. Well of course, imagine during their whole life at home there’s not enough food or basic utilities; there are no loving relationships but high levels of domestic violence; and the whole time they see this bloke who lives locally who enjoys strong economic solvency, who’s got... I don’t know what to call them, but accessories. He’s got a motorbike, designer trainers, girls, expensive clothes, all that sort of stuff. But also he’s got *respect, recognition, power* [emphasis added]. So of course the young lads round here say “fuck me, this is the ticket!” It’s also seen as the easy route... So they are given a *gun, and a gun is already a big deal* [speaker’s emphasis]. I think that a gun is a very resounding symbol. (Pepe, 11/04/2008)

Although multiple male role models exist at any one time for boys and young men growing up in these communities, it was common for gang members, particularly gang bosses, to occupy a significant ontological position in the field of masculinity, symbolised, albeit in an exaggerated way, through the masculine capitals of power, respect, money, access to women and so on.¹² The gangs and their members can become powerful imaginaries and role models for impressionable boys, a mechanism to ‘do masculinity’, accumulate and show off such locally valued capitals. In addition, gangs’ ontological significance in the field of masculinity is enhanced where young boys and youths have narrow perspectives of the world, due to stymied spatial and social mobility. Hernando noted, “four blocks” would become the youth’s nation state from which they would rarely venture (Hernando, 21/06/2008). In the masculinisation process, youths would gain more esteem, status and masculine capital by joining a gang, than by working for a poverty wage in the informal sector. The gang therefore had the added incentive of catering for youths’ need for respect or dignity.¹³ As such, the meanings of masculinity for boys and young men in Montecristo were significantly shaped by what this paper calls the gang male role model system – *system* indicating reproductive capacity.

10 When we theorise men and masculinity, a sociological approach should rightly talk of ‘masculinities’ rather than ‘masculinity’. Like all identities, masculine ones have to be constructed and negotiated via interaction in different socialisation spaces, and at any one time there can be multiple expressions of masculinity itself (Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Hearn & Collinson, 1996; Hearn, 1996).

11 The youths interviewed often referred to the *imaginario* of the gang boss. *Imaginario* can be translated from Spanish as ‘imaginary’ or ‘role model’.

12 *Field* and *capital* after Bourdieu (1977). Capital is used here in reference to ‘masculine capitals’, the localised assets or signifiers of identity. These *capitals* confer male identity in a relational field, linked to male esteem and dignity.

13 Bourgois and Jensen have written incisive accounts on urban socio-economic exclusion and individual struggle for respect and dignity respectively (Bourgois, 2003; Jensen, 2008).



The following section analyses how these youths managed to grow up and establish dignified masculine identities whilst rejecting the gang as a pathway to manhood. This can provide us with an insight into how positive, non-violent masculine identities emerge in contexts of violence in the urban periphery where gangs are most widespread.

CHILDHOOD UPBRINGING AND THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Whilst all of the youths interviewed suffered from social and family challenges caused by poverty and exclusion (see Dowdney, 2007), they viewed their upbringings in a largely positive light. Eleven out of fifteen youths said they were taught good values, felt cared for in affectionate relationships and supportive homes, and in nine cases mentioned their parents' insistence on education. In general, they spoke of good communication with both mothers and fathers. Only Pepe and Pelicorto appeared to view their family upbringing in a predominantly negative light, and there was only one experience of significant domestic violence. Of course, there were some bad experiences and fractured relationships at home. In three cases the father was absent, due to his death or a parental separation, and in three more cases the fathers had problems with alcoholism. However, these cases are not straightforward, for example absent, alcoholic or violent fathers could demonstrate both positive and negative facets of influence over their children.¹⁴

As they grew up, each youth's decision-making and consequent social action was shaped by a complex of context, agency, opportunity and happenstance. However, their narratives suggest two factors that helped keep them out of gangs. First, their families contributed to the emergence of a moral self that rejected violence, criminality and gangs in their neighbourhoods. Second, youths were encouraged to participate in socialisation spaces that were alternatives to hanging out on the street corner, particularly after dark, or other places associated with gangs. The relevance of socialisation will be explored below.

Here we should mention that these life experiences were nuanced and at times contradictory; even youths from the best families could join gangs (Galán, 19/06/2008). Hence, whilst some authors have made efforts to categorise resilience factors¹⁵ we should caution against using them in a straightforward deterministic fashion.

Ángel: Look, in my family, my life was always about education... My Dad wanted me to be *really* educated [speaker's emphasis]... I ask myself why I did not get into drugs and violence if I grew up with them all around me... Sometimes I arrive at the conclusion that it's because of the education I received at home, because I'm someone who thinks differently because I wanted to finish my studies... (Ángel, 15/05/2008)

Chiner: ...When I got to the age that I could join a gang I was conscious of things. Because apart from having a reference point at home we also had reference points through our friends... and despite the fact that we were only young, we had a clear understanding... I think because of the education that we received. That's important because we studied hard... (Chiner and Felipe, 10/07/2008)

The case of Quien shows that we should not generalise that single mothers find it more difficult to deal with sons (see also Moser, 2009: 239). Interestingly, Quien refers to his mother's disciplinary side as a male attribute.

Quien: The paternal figure in my life has never been present... Normally when mums say "don't get involved in drugs, don't join gangs" and all that, their sons don't pay any attention... So it depends on having a strong figure in the family. Probably that's the father but with me it was my mum. If I arrived home late she'd say "Hey dickhead! Where have you been! You son of a bitch, what are you thinking!" She'd speak like a bloke... she'd be tough as if she were a man... My mum's a real personality! I think she was the paternal figure as well. (Quien, 20/06/2008)

ALTERNATIVE SOCIALISATION AND JOINING THE COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Parental influence did have an impact on these youths' choice of socialisation space when they were growing up. In turn, socialisation spaces appeared particularly influential in shaping their identities and masculinisation processes.

¹⁴ In the cases of Chiner, Pelicorto and Sammy, even though their fathers had significant problems with alcohol they were strong advocates of their sons' education. Pelicorto's father was very violent domestically, especially when he came home drunk on payday, but also tried hard to keep Pelicorto away from the dangers of violence on the streets and was persistent in making sure all of his homework was done. Sammy's father had alcohol problems and separated from his mother when Sammy was seven. Nevertheless he still drove his three children to and from school every day in an attempt to keep them safe from local gang violence. Chiner stated that despite his father's alcohol problems he supported his children's education strongly and was affectionate at home.

¹⁵ See gang prevention theory around risk and resilience (Small Arms Survey, 2008: 229; Small Arms Survey, 2010: 234).



These youths tended not to hang out on street corners at night getting up to no good, and avoided being *amurrao* – literally: “sitting on the wall”, figuratively: sad, bored and desperate (see Henao Salazar and Castañeda Naranjo, 2001: 90). *Amurrao* after dark was generally perceived as a precursor to gang exposure and potentially gang membership. The youths at CoVida tended to demonstrate alternative interests and pursuits, which led them to socialise in spaces away from the street corner. They were often studious, church-going, had strict parents, were members of youth groups or school clubs, or socialised with small peripheral peer groups who liked niche music such as rock, punk or reggae. Their upbringing was an influential precursor to the development of alternative socialisation spaces, except perhaps following ‘niche’ music tastes, which appeared more arbitrary.

Galán is an example of how strict parenting kept him away from gangs.

Galán: When we were young, thirteen or fourteen years old, I wasn’t allowed out later than 10 pm on the street... So at 10 pm I’d have to say to my mates “I’m going home, it’s 10pm”. So they would all say “Haaaaaa! Piss off then so [your parents] can put your nappy on!” ...It’s easier to stay out than go home because of the pressure... If you don’t have resilience... if you don’t have those values, then you get sucked in really easily. It’s a lot easier being accepted in these parts being a delinquent than being the goody-two-shoes of the neighbourhood... (Galán, 19/06/2008)

Joining the community organisation CoVida involved elements of chance, agency and opportunity. Eighty per cent of the male youths in Montecristo, as estimated by those interviewed, were not members of gangs, but only a small minority of local youths went on to join CoVida. Although rejecting crime, violence and gangs did not lead them directly into CoVida, it did make joining a possibility. Two factors stand out; first, a fundamental precursor for joining CoVida was that youths were not members of gangs. Furthermore, no ‘reformed’ gang member had ever joined, pointing to a strong organisational culture that rejected violent actors. Secondly, their socialisation spaces were crucial to staying out of gangs and joining CoVida. Church, youth or extra-curricular school groups acted as foundational processes to enter the organisation where several youths joined because they had friends there.

Pepe: I think that they are not conscious that they want to take part [at CoVida]. They don’t say “oh, I want to participate and I want to do that”. I think their first organisations, like the youth group for example, are important factors that influence the development of youth towards social views and interest in doing something for the community... We worked on

characterising these youth groups and found that, first of all, someone gets involved in a youth group because they can meet friends there, because they want to share, to find a socialisation space with peers, to hang out and have fun. But also with ideas about supporting the community, to take care of kids, clean the streets, celebrate Easter, things like that. Supporting the community themselves. This begins to develop another type of attitude and other types of public action by these youths, different to a youth that isn’t in a youth group, one that simply hangs out on the corner doing nothing... (Pepe, 11/04/2008)

These processes influenced youths’ decision making when some of them were confronted by violence in their lives: they became tools with which to negotiate violence. However, this negotiation is complex and youths struggled to articulate why they followed one pathway and not another. For example, Pelicorto sought refuge in CoVida when a friend was murdered; he did not seek revenge but could not explain why. Gato’s cousin was shot in gang-related activity; he reflected that it had pushed him closer to the church youth group. Sammy said he didn’t join a gang like his older brothers because he had the opportunity to join a youth group which saved him.

Gato: To go through that is really tough... Yeah, you can have money, women, motorbikes, luxuries [as a gang member]... but it doesn’t last, it’s fleeting. [After my cousin’s death] I said to myself once and for all “this is not what I want to do with my life”... It made me more religious... I started to get involved more with youth groups at the church... (Gato, 19/06/2008)

Sammy: Put it this way, I had a different option to [my brothers], they offered me a youth group but not them. That’s it! I found a youth group and they didn’t... After seeing the damage that guns do, that the conflict did... and no, I don’t want to be bad, I don’t want to be one of those guys, I want to be someone else. And I got the opportunity to do that... (Sammy, 03/06/2008)

DEVELOPING POSITIVE MASCULINE IDENTITIES AT COVIDA

In Montecristo in the early 1990s, at the height of the violence in Medellín, there were a number of community and youth groups struggling to survive. This was when CoVida was established, as a coordination of disparate local organisations, with the accompaniment of experienced



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NGOs, academics, and staff from the municipal welfare system Fundación Social. CoVida aimed to organise local civil society organisations and give them a vision and strategy for the future. CoVida founder member Gabriel stated:

“There were a lot of community groups but they weren’t articulated and we didn’t know how to work in a conflict context... so CoVida was formed with the Fundación Social and Corporación Región [NGO]. With community organisations we decided to form an organisation that would accompany us, make us more dynamic and help us form a mission and vision for the future” (Gabriel, 11/07/2008).

However, by 1999 financing for this support had run out and the adults left CoVida, so local youths stepped into the void taking over the organisation as volunteers. Remarkably, as Gabriel says, “we produced results that the municipality, Fundación Social, or even we didn’t expect. We stayed open, became self-sustainable and gained respect for our work in the community... Youths began to join because they wanted to help the community to learn something” (Gabriel, 11/07/2008). CoVida began to run workshops as a community centre and youth club, opened a public library, a kindergarten, as well as a small audio-visual business supplying PA services at local events, and later an Internet cafe. In recognition of their competence the municipality let them administer the funding for the local Social Action Plan welfare programme in 2006, and they became instrumental in the implementation of the Mayor’s Participatory Budget in Montecristo between 2008-2011. Perhaps the most striking feature of CoVida is that in 2008 it was run almost entirely by youths with an average age of 23.

Given the influence of expert NGOs, academics, the Mayor’s office and even the international donor community, not surprisingly, the youths running CoVida developed a different outlook on life than the average youth in their community. They had a strong ability to reflect critically and analytically upon the realities of violence and exclusion in their neighbourhood. They promoted nonviolence, participation, equality and inclusion, and politically, most could be considered liberal or left-wing and progressive. It was unsurprising that a former member of CoVida later became the director of Metrojuventud, the Mayor’s Office on Youth, for the entire city.

As a workspace and socialisation area CoVida was significant for these youths in terms of the development of their identities and values. The organisation helped them expand their horizons despite the generalised lack of mo-

bility in their community. CoVida also broadened the field of masculinities for these youths, that is, what it meant to be a man, by providing a number of alternative models of masculinity to the gang male role model system. The organisation also gave youths opportunities to replicate these models by working at the organisation and acquiring recognition, belonging and identity there.

Hernando: I looked up to Pelicorto [former Director of CoVida] and we became good friends... He was a reference point for me because he had a different discourse to many people, a community discourse... I ended up coordinating a project... and became Director of CoVida and I got recognition from that. (Hernando, 21/06/2008)

This process was not uniform or easy, and not all identity development can be attributed to CoVida alone, but the organisation did influence what it meant to be a man for these youths and then provided them with dignified possibilities to masculinise.¹⁶ These were tied to developing self-esteem and importantly, a reputational project. They ran workshops on community development and human rights, organised local youth and sports events, helped run the audio-visual business and made video documentaries, participated in local and municipal level political debates, amongst other activities.

Pepe: I’ve also had the chance to get to know a lot of people [via CoVida]... to travel and get to know other spaces, other places in the world... This has helped me to see the world in a different light... That’s basically down to my participation in CoVida... I’ve been linked to social processes... That has given me job opportunities, training, so I’ve been able to develop skills that other youths don’t have... We have status and a position in the community, we’re not always out with girls, showing off in an ostentatious way... (Pepe, 11/04/2008)

The organisational culture and maxims at CoVida had a strong influence on these youths. The environment facilitated personal development, broadening their horizons beyond just four blocks, contributing to these youths growing intellectually and becoming critical thinkers, particularly of violent groups. As these boys were coming of age, the organisation allowed them to forge identities with recognition and status, shaping what it meant to be a man, and simultaneously provided them with masculinisation opportunities to plot pathways to manhood and to construct their gendered self. These youths, disposed via masculine

¹⁶ Individuals are complex and youths at CoVida were not committed to a single version of masculinity *all of the time*, nor were they entirely disassociated from hegemonic versions of masculinity, for example occasionally displaying macho traits in their attitudes towards women.



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habitus to achieve a form of normative manhood that would give them locally valued recognition, and ultimately self-esteem, found positive ways to establish male identity through CoVida. Ten of the fifteen youths interviewed spoke about gaining recognition specifically. For example, Pepe, Galán and Hernando:

Pepe: CoVida has created a very strong image in the community, which means that the youths here gain a certain status. People have always been keen “hey it’s cool being in CoVida” and that’s because you get recognition from it... (Pepe, 11/04/2008)

Author: For you, what are the elements of your life that make you feel good?

Galán: First of all my family. Second, being listened to [in CoVida]. They make you feel important, they make you feel like you are part of another family. That’s really important because... when the youths join the group they make themselves heard using their own initiative, they mobilise and do loads of things. That’s good for self-esteem, which is completely different from the youths who don’t mobilise... they organise themselves with guns, and the gun becomes the object of self-esteem for them... (Galán, 19/06/2008)

Hernando: Lots of kids... [just want] money but others want to feel recognised in a context of poverty, to feel recognised to have a certain status... I think that what [CoVida] did was give us kids another status, a type of recognition... In other words, another way to link themselves to life of the city, to feel like someone in the city. [I] felt recognised and that energy fills you up. (Hernando, 21/06/2008)

CoVida became a central formative space for many of these youths, where they developed strong convictions to work in community development. Social actors in violent communities respond in a range of ways to mitigate the negative effects of violence. These factors militate against simplistic perceptions of exclusion, fear, and passivity and show how communities confront, collude with, and judge violent crimes (Moser, 2009). CoVida developed the rejection of gangs that emerged during the childhood of these youths, demonstrating that the Montecristo neighbourhood was not a passive recipient of social violence. The youths at CoVida faced significant challenges that were commonly financial - much of the work at CoVida was voluntary, part time and poorly paid. There were also threats and intimidation from armed groups; in one case, a member was assassinated by militias.¹⁷ Friendship, camaraderie

and shared adversity bonded individuals to CoVida, which became a refuge from the violence on the streets, and vitally, a key socialisation space for these youths “like you are part of another family” (Galán, 19/06/2008). Galán and Pelicorto said:

Galán: I think the difference between us [and gang members] has to do with our principles. What I’m saying is that each of us has moral standpoints and we share collective moral beliefs. Us lot at the organisation, there’s something inside each of us that has developed. (Galán, 19/06/2008)

Pelicorto: ...We had a feeling of resistance as well. “We’re not gonna give in... And whenever there’s a shoot out we’ll close the doors”... I said to Hernando, we took the most difficult decision given everything that’s happened. For us it would have been easier to buckle under pressure from our family or friends, that we should leave, or join one of those [armed] groups...

I feel that we have to be role models, but we have to be good role models, brother... But I insist that these factors of resilience are very important in these communities, but there is something that makes me worry a lot. How far do factors of resilience go? (Pelicorto, 10/06/2008)

CONCLUSION: MASCULINISATION, DIGNITY AND EXCLUSION

Medellín’s periphery and the young men that inhabit it are undoubtedly complex. Whilst charting the life-histories of these youths can help us identify resilience factors that contributed to them rejecting violence and engaging in community development work, it is important to warn against excessive neatness in the analysis and conclusions of this article. In one case, Ángel a former member at CoVida, joined a so-called community organisation funded by a paramilitary group because he could not bear the financial pressures upon him after his father died. He said “I’m the man of the house... It’s lots of pressure... How can I have a dignified life without money?” (Ángel, 15/05/2008). This shows the complexities of real life circumstance and how it interacts with youths’ agency to shape their decision making when seeking pathways in life that dignify them (for a discussion see Greig, 2010; also Rodgers, 2006: 286). We should not expect individuals to fall easily into neat categories.

¹⁷ The militias were urban vigilante groups linked to left-wing guerrillas from the broader armed conflict.



In Montecristo life is hard. For these youths CoVida was a symbolic and practical refuge from the hostile outside world, a site of opportunity for the development of ambition, the employment of agency and the construction of identity. This was bound together by the friendship and camaraderie of the socialisation space of CoVida itself. On balance, despite the case of Ángel, these youths reflected the field of influence at CoVida, developing nonviolent and largely pro-social male identities. In this way, the organisation nurtured their masculine *habitus* – their dispositions to become men – presenting them with opportunities to

secure positive type masculine capital, status, recognition, self-esteem and dignity.

Hernando was clear that CoVida gave him “another status, a type of recognition”. The struggle for dignity is the domain of the impoverished and excluded; “it is what powerless people have left when all else fails” (Jensen, 2008: 9). These processes were perhaps summed up best by Pelicorto who simply said: “you don’t dream of packing biscuits in a factory”. If we are to interrupt the reproduction of violence through young men living in contexts of exclusion and violence, we need to take this into account. ■

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