The Question of Agency and the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers into Civilian Society – A Case Study of Colombia

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PhD

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Post-War Recovery Studies

September 2016

Abstract

Children living in conflict environments are tactical agents. Even though their agency is highly constrained, the majority of them manage to maximise the immediate circumstances of their environment. However, the dominant approach to the reintegration of former child soldiers fails to reflect children's personal experiences and self-perception, as well as the understanding of childhood and child soldiering prevalent in the receiving communities. This thesis focuses on the previously under-researched case of Colombia. It examines the question of what kind of agency children exhibit in their recruitment and participation in the armed group, together with the implications of such agency for the reintegration process. The core of this empirical analysis is based on twenty life history interviews conducted with adult former child soldiers in Colombia at the beginning of 2014. The thesis makes an original contribution to the existing literature on child soldiers by examining the constraining factors to, and manifestations of, children's agency in the reintegration period; most existing literature focuses on the pre-recruitment period. Recommendations are also made regarding how to incorporate the question of agency into reintegration programmes. Finally, this study provides a detailed examination of the double role of social capital: enabler and constrainer to children's agency.

Agency played a central part in the stories told by the research participants. Voluntary decisions and actions taken before and during children's involvement in armed conflict have shown to have significant implications for their reintegration process. The study also confirms the crucial consideration of social factors in prevention and reintegration programmes. However, the thesis argues that the importance of social capital can only be understood if combined with other structural factors, examined within the context in which it functions and if its various characteristics are distinguished.

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Acronyms

ACR	Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Agency for Reintegration)
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia)
BACRIM	Bandas criminales emergentes (New criminal bands)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAE	Centro de Atención Especializada (Specialised Care Centre)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICS	Centre for International Cooperation and Security
CNN	Cable News Network
COALICO	Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto

armado en Colombia (Coalition against the involvement of boys, girls and youth in the armed conflict in Colombia)

CONPES	Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social (National Economic and Social Policy Council)
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (National Administrative Department of Statistics)
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
EDRP	Emergency Demobilisation and Reintegration Project
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

GMH	Grupo de Memoria Histórica (Historical Memory Group)
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDDRS	Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEGAP	Instituto de Estudios Geoestratégicos y Asuntos Políticos (Geostrategic Studies and Political Issues Institute)
ILO	International Labour Organization
INMLCF	Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (National

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	Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril (19th of April Movement)
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SENA	Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Service)
SIR	Sistema de Información de la Reintegración (Information System for Reintegration)

UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UP	Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union)
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

Acknowledgements

Completing my PhD has been a four-year process of ups and downs, happy moments, disappointments, doubts and unexpected turns. Even though doing a PhD is primarily an isolated process between the researcher and his/her research, without the right support system and environment, it is not possible to be carried out. In this section I wish to acknowledge the great support I have received in the past four years which was indispensable for the conduct of this research and without which assistance this study could not have been materialised.

First of all, I would like to offer my gratitude to the people of Colombia, especially those who participated in this research as interviewees. Had it not been for these people who gave up their time to sit down with me and did not hesitate to share their story - even when these anecdotes were highly personal and sensitive - this research could not have been realised. I will always be grateful to these people for providing me such a great and selfless help, which I may never be able to pay back. I hope that my research has done justice in reflecting your narratives truthfully and by listening to your stories and conducting this research - in a small way - I was able to give something back.

My appreciation and thanks also go to the policymakers working in the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), as well as Daniel Campo from Benposta Colombia, who helped me identify and get in touch with the research participants of this study, gave up their time to answer my questions and did their best to accommodate my needs. Especially I would like to thank Ernesto Mendez

Martán and Oto Romero from the ACR office in Bogotá, who made my research experience smoother and more enjoyable. You showed me how it looks like when one does not see his/her job as work but as a vocation to help others. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to all NGO personnel who participated in this research, namely Santiago Sánchez Jiménez from Redprodepaz, Heidi from World Vision Colombia, Lleyson Casas from the Don Bosco House, Felix from Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, and Sinthya Rubio from the Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims. Thanks to your insights and knowledge, I got more familiar with the Colombian context, which contributed to the authenticity of this research.

My home during the biggest part of my stay in Colombia was at my Colombian 'sister' and great friend, María Isabel Aristizábal Bustamente and her precious family, who welcomed me as part of their family in their home and did their best to make my visit to their homeland as enjoyable as possible. They showed me that being a Colombian is something one should be proud of and that their country is full of beautiful landscapes and amazing people.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to my friends and family, on whom I could always count and who, throughout these four years of my PhD studies, provided me with great support and encouragement in everything I did. Thank you for always being there for me and for always finding the right words to say to me. At the University of York I would like to thank the following people for having enriched my professional and personal life in some way: (in no particular order) May Elin Jonsson, Jelena Horvatić, Jelena Loncar, Pelin Dincer, Sheray

To all those mentioned and all those I forgot to mention but influenced this work in some way, I again offer my gratitude. This work could not have been possible without you and my experience throughout these years would have been less rich and eventful. Thank you for being there for me.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter 1

<u>Introduction</u>

1.1 <u>Discussion of Main Research Question</u>

Hundreds of thousands of children are currently involved in dozens of armed conflicts around the world. In some cases this involvement is voluntary, in others the children are abducted and forced into fighting. Some willingly engage in war activities in the ranks of an armed group, others look for an opportunity to escape. Once out of the armed group, some take up legitimate jobs and embark upon the path of reintegration into civilian society, others re-engage in military or criminal activities.

Within the agency literature, three main approaches can be distinguished, all of which are thoroughly studied in the present thesis. The humanitarian approach is the most commonly applied one by NGOs and states, which argues that child soldiers need to be considered victims under all circumstances due to the environment in which they operate that leaves them with no options and forces them to get involved in conflict against their will. On the other hand, advocates of the conscious actor narrative argue the opposite: children are viewed as active and capable agents in shaping their life and making decisions, such as joining an armed group or committing atrocities during their involvement in armed conflict. Even though each narrative has various strengths - which will also be discussed

- they both fail to provide an integrative and contextual understanding of childhood and child soldiering which would reflect the views of child soldiers themselves and of the local communities. Therefore, a different narrative needs to be introduced for the analysis of the present study, namely the tactical agency approach, which argues that even though children's actions are significantly driven by their agency, due to the highly constraining environment in which such agency is exhibited, child soldiers need to be considered both agents and victims. In this way, the main research question the present study explores is

"What kind of agency characterizes the actions of children in the context of war and what are its implications for the reintegration process of former child soldiers into civilian society?"

Such a discussion of children's agency is embedded in the long ongoing debate of how human agency is shaped and limited by the structure - also called 'social space' or 'social terrain' - in which it is exhibited and which is characterised by unpredictability, instability and flux. Some of the most prominent figures of such a debate include - among others - Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, Ralf Dahrendorf and Anthony Giddens.

Because of the authenticity of the tactical agency approach - according to representatives of the critical subsection of the child soldier and agency literatures - it was chosen as the leading lens to analyse children and child soldiers' agency in the case of Colombia. In order to present the different components of tactical agency approach - agency and structure - the different structural factors will be explored which influence children's actions - either by

enabling or constraining them - together with the different ways children's agency might manifest itself. In order to provide a systematic and holistic analysis of such influencing factors, Kimmel and Roby's model is applied which distinguishes six different dimensions that are considered to interact to facilitate institutionalised child soldiering. These dimensions include politics, policy, culture and religious beliefs of the larger society, community, family and psychosocial factors (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741-743).

The acquisition of such rich information required the researcher to use ethnographic research methods and rely on the in-depth life histories shared by the twenty research participants interviewed for the present study. The selected research method also reflects the overarching theme of this thesis, since instead of the researcher taking charge of the interviewing process, research participants are empowered to determine the direction, length and depth of the interview. Life history interviews allowed the researcher to gain an authentic insight into, and understanding of, former child soldiers' perception of their identity, past experiences and how the question of agency fits into these. Based on the collected accounts and their analysis, the suitability of tactical agency approach was confirmed to authentically reflect the experience of childhood and child soldiering. Therefore, it is considered the most suitable approach to be used to design effective programmes in the future to prevent the recruitment of children into illegal armed groups and contribute to the more sustainable reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian society.

1.2 Aim of the Study and Contribution of the Research

The aim and contribution of the present study is manifold. First of all, the research is intended to contribute to the exisiting literature on 'Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration' (DDR), child soldiering and the agency debate, by using the previously poorly documented Colombian case to test, challenge and contribute to the arguments identified in the literature. The mainstream humanitarian narrative was found unsuitable in explaining the reintegration process of former child soldiers due to its inability to reflect the perception that former child soldiers have of their identity and past experiences, as well as the receiving communities' view on childhood and child soldiering.

Furthermore, even though the reintegration process has been attributed great importance in the DDR literature, no study has previously focused on the agency debate in the reintegration period. Moreover, the thesis is original in its attempt to examine the implications that agency which is exhibited in the pre-recruitment period and in the armed group have for the reintegration process of former child soldiers. The study looks at the continuities and differences regarding the factors which constrain children's agency in the various stages of their involvement in armed conflict. It is considered crucial to give special attention to identified recurring factors due to their particularly limiting impact on children's agency. Among such 'thinners' to agency, the role of social capital will be highlighted. This has been shown to be the most important structural factor - both as a constrainer and an enabler - to children's agency before, during and after their involvement in armed conflict. However, neither the agency debate nor the child

soldiering and DDR/reintegration literatures offer an in-depth examination of social capital and therefore, its dangers and potentials remain unexplored. The present study investigates the complex relationship between social capital, children's agency and reintegration.

The underlying aim of this research is to make prevention of (re)recruitment and reintegration programmes designed for children and former child soldiers in conflict-affected areas more effective and sustainable. Therefore, the present study may be of interest not only to other researchers, but also practitioners and policy-makers working in this field.

1.3 <u>Main Conceptual Underpinnings of the Research</u>

1.3.1 Child Soldiers

The Paris Principles of 2007 define a child soldier as "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes" (The Paris Principles 2007: 7). Therefore, the definition does not only refer to children who have been or are taking direct part in hostilities, but also to those whose involvement has been or is indirect to armed conflict (The Paris Principles 2007: 7). Such an interpretation of child soldiers has been adopted by most NGOs and states, and replaced the widely used definition approved in the Cape Town Principles of 1997. This newly accepted description is intended to be more

inclusive, and ensure that those children whose participation was indirect in the hostilities are also provided with appropriate support in their reintegration process. However, by trying to be inclusive, the definition becomes vague and easy to manipulate by those who illegitimately want to claim benefits.

Following the adoption of the Paris Principles, the term 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups' started replacing the concept of 'child soldiers' in order to recognise the diverse roles children fulfil in armed groups. This is the official phrase currently used by NGOs and governments to refer to children involved in armed conflict. However, this new term underemphasises the direct and active contribution that children make to contemporary war; it diminishes their agency and hinders the understanding of individualised experiences of war (Denov 2010: 3, 4; Drumbl 2012: 3).

It also prioritises children who take part in armed violence (militarised children) over children who might meet all the requirements to be considered a 'child soldier', but are engaged in social, economic or cultural violence (criminalised children) (Drumbl 2012: 43). This includes gang members or those affiliated with criminal organisations, sex trafficking rings or drug cartels (Drumbl 2012: 43). In this way, once the context changes within which children's engagement in violence is discussed, the discourse shifts from presenting "the mindless captive of purposeless violence" and "the hapless victim" to describing the individual as "an intentional author of purposeful violence" and "a dangerous youngster" (Denov 2010: 13, Drumbl 2012: 129). Instead of explaining and in a way justifying the 'criminalised child's' behaviour with situational factors - as

is done in the case of the 'militarised child' - the blame is put solely on the individual (Drumbl 2012: 129). The case of Omar Khad is a well-known example of this contradictory approach adopted by the West. Omar is a Canadian citizen who was captured and sent to the maximum security US military prison at Guantanamo Bay at the age of fifteen for his alleged killing of an American soldier in the Afghan conflict and his involvement with al-Qaeda (Drumbl 2012: 21, Foran 2011: 196). He was held in the detention camp for ten years - from 2002 to 2012 - without trial and was convicted for war crimes committed while he was still a minor (Drumbl 2012: 21).

The West's double standards regarding children involved in violence in cases when the West is affected and with regard to those who fight wars in faraway countries is also evident in other ways. Western countries which are great advocates of the fight against child recruitment and the use of children in armed groups - such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand - admit sixteen and seventeen-year-olds into their national armed forces (Drumbl 2012: 34, Schmidt 2007: 65, Wessells 2009: 17). Furthermore, children's voluntary participation - maybe enforced by their parents - in military camps has become an emerging trend in several European countries, such as Hungary and Russia (CNN Photos 2014, Light Mediation). These camps aim to teach children about the basics of military training, discipline and the military culture at large. Moreover, besides this normalisation of military culture for children, Western states also provide aid to countries which are known to use child soldiers in their national armed

forces. For instance, the US continues to provide military aid to countries such as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and South Sudan, all of which are known for their widespread recruitment of children into their army (The Independent 2015).

For the aforementioned reasons, the use of the term 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups' will be avoided in this thesis. With regard to the concept of 'child combatant', there is an issue in that it does not cover the full scope of the child population involved in armed conflict that is examined in the present study. According to the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 combatants are "[m]embers of the armed forces of a Party to a conflict (other than medical personnel and chaplains covered by Article 33 of the Third Convention)… [who] have the right to participate directly in hostilities" (Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 1977: 23). Consequently, this concept is limited to include only those who have direct involvement in armed forces and groups.

Considering all the previously discussed points, the term 'child soldier' is found the most suitable and will be used in this thesis in favour of 'child associated with armed forces or armed groups' and 'child combatant'. This choice is significant because it emphasises the agency children exhibit in their recruitment process, as members of the armed group and in the reintegration period, as well as the diverse roles they fulfil during their participation in armed conflict.

1.3.2 Recruitment

Children's recruitment into and use in armed groups are listed among the United Nations' six grave violations committed against children (United Nations 2013). Children are considered to be recruited into armed forces and armed groups either forcedly or voluntarily. Forced recruitment might take different forms: (1) it might involve the use of brutality and death threats targeting children or their family members; (2) children might be press-ganged and abducted collectively from marketplaces, streets, IDP camps, schools or orphanages; or (3) a quota system might be applied based on which families and communities are obliged to give up their children to the armed group (Schmidt 2007: 56; Singer 2006: 59; Wessells 2009: 37, 40). For instance, in Nepal - in the period between 2002 and 2006 - an estimated 22,000 children were abducted by the Maoist rebel forces due to the group's imposition of the "one family, one child" policy (Becker 2010: 109, Mapp 2011: 72). According to this policy, each family was obliged to provide a recruit to the armed group for the 'cause' or face severe punishment (Mapp 2011: 72).

Despite the general emphasis on forced recruitment, field reports show that recruitment is predominantly voluntary (Human Rights Watch 1994: 25, Schmidt 2007: 54). Voluntary recruitment includes cases in which "children take the initiative of joining armed groups themselves, without being under immediate physical threat" (Schmidt 2007: 56). The reasons for voluntary recruitment are manifold and will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

However, Schmidt argues that the enlistment of children into armed groups happens along a spectrum and should not be considered as a clear dichotomy between either voluntary or forced recruitment: "while they may not be forcibly recruited in a physical way, structural or emotional factors may force them to volunteer" (Schmidt 2007: 56). A number of scholars - including Wessells (2002), Brett and McCallin (1996), as well as Goodwin-Gill and Cohn (1994) - have acknowledged the blurred line between voluntary and forced recruitment.[1] In the same manner, the International Labour Organization (2003) distinguishes between three categories of enlistment: (1) 'abductions' which means that the child has been taken forcibly or under threat of arms; (2) 'forced recruitment' which involves imposing moral pressure or legal obligation on the child to join the group; and (3) 'personal decisions' which reflect the child's initiative to join, without being coerced by physical, moral or legal pressure (Schmidt 2007: 56). Therefore, due to the complexity and particularity of each case, children's recruitment into armed groups needs to be assessed based on the extent of voluntariness and force applied in the process.

1.3.3 Reintegration

In the previously discussed Paris Principles child reintegration is defined as "the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful

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[1] Evidence shows, for instance, that children in the Mozambican Civil War often decided to join the armed group voluntarily to avoid being forcibly recruited, since this often meant being more harshly treated and sent into combat more rapidly than those who volunteered (International Labour Organization 2003: viii).

roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation" (The Paris Principles 2007: 7). Therefore, the reintegration process of former child soldiers consists of the child becoming enrolled in education or sustainable employment, acquiring civilian status, gaining acceptance from his/her family and receiving community members, as well as having his/her war-related psychological problems addressed. In general - unlike in Colombia - the reintegration process is preceded by the disarmament and demobilisation of former child soldiers; nonetheless, the third stage of DDR is the most complex and challenging one due to the reasons discussed below.

First of all, there can be inhibitions on speaking about 're'integration *per se*. Post-conflict environments - where the majority of DDR processes are carried out - are characterised by shattered economies, damaged social networks and weak democracies. In this way, it is not only the former child soldier who needs to resettle into an alienated environment. The society, the economy, as well as the political system of the country also need to reinvent themselves to fully adjust to the post-conflict situation. Furthermore, the concept 're'integration implies that children were integrated into their communities before their recruitment into the armed group, which is often not the case (Kohrt *et al.* 2010: 92). Some children join armed groups precisely because they feel excluded and marginalised socially, economically and politically from their community (Kohrt *et al.* 2010: 92). Moreover, particularly in long-lasting armed conflicts, some children who later become child soldiers are born into the armed group;

therefore, their post-demobilisation process cannot be called 're'integration since they have never been members of civilian society before (Wessells 2006: 251). In addition, some children have no option to return, or intention of returning, to the place and the family where they lived before their recruitment due to security reasons or because they joined the armed group precisely in order to escape from that life. Therefore, in cases when former child soldiers opt to move away to a new place to start afresh after their demobilisation, it is not possible to talk about 're'integration, but rather integration.

Besides the limitations of 're'integration, another major challenge in the reintegration process is funding. Since donors want to see tangible and immediate results for their investment, they tend to focus on disarmament and demobilisation programmes in contrast to reintegration, which is a long-term and slow process. It also often requires follow-up monitoring, evaluation and assistance; therefore, demands significant financial commitment from donors but produces few visible results for a long time (UNDP 2005: 24). However, where insufficient funding is allocated to the reintegration of former child soldiers there is a real potential risk of a return to violence. For instance, the United Nations in its first operation in Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s directed just US $965,000 to the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of tens of thousands of child soldiers, spending the remainder of the earmarked US $34 million on the demilitarisation of adult soldiers (Thomas 2008: 34). Such mismanagement of financial resources contributed to the re-emergence of violent conflict in the African country (Thomas 2008: 34).

The issue of how to define and measure sustainability when it comes to reintegration is also challenging since the results vary depending on the specific challenges of the individual, as well as the social, political and economic environment he/she is reintegrated into (Nilsson 2005: 89). Humphreys and Weinstein (2007), and Pugel (2007) designed a set of tools to measure the sustainability of the reintegration process of demobilised combatants on the micro level. In the surveys conducted by these scholars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, respectively, four indicators were identified for this purpose. These included de-linkage from factional ties, employment, confidence in the democratic system, and acceptance by family and community (Humphreys & Weinstein 2007: 541, Pugel 2007: 5). In contrast to focusing on the micro level, the previously discussed Paris Principles rather concentrate on macro level factors when defining the sustainable reintegration of former child soldiers: "[s]ustainable reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured" (The Paris Principles 2007: 7). In the present study, sustainable reintegration is interpreted as being when the demobilised child soldier is not exhibiting his/her agency to return to military life, but is showing willingness to cope with current life difficulties using the means and resources of civilian life.

1.4 <u>Significance of the Current Research</u>

Reintegration is not only the most complex and challenging stage of DDR - as discussed above - but it is also the most significant one (Muggah 2009: 134). Its significance lies in its long-term nature: former child soldiers embark upon a journey to become civilians (again) and adjust to live in an environment in which they will spend the rest of their life. This is one of the main strengths of the reintegration phase of DDR in contrast to the stages of disarmament and demobilisation, neither of which are able to provide sustainable solutions to former child soldiers' socio-economic and psychological problems. This weakness can be attributed to the short timeframe in which these processes are carried out and the 'abnormality' of the environments - such as cantonments and interim care centres - in which they take place.

The reintegration of former child soldiers should be considered even more important than the reintegration of demobilised adult soldiers. According to official estimates, the number of children involved in contemporary armed conflicts around the world totals 300,000 (Human Rights Watch 2002, Machel 2001, United Nations 2015a).[2] It is often claimed that children are our future,

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[2] Several scholars suggest taking this guesstimate with a grain of salt. Drumbl discusses how no precise number of child soldiers could ever be presented, which he attributes to different factors (Drumbl 2012: 26). First, commanders hardly ever acknowledge the presence of children in their ranks to avoid criminal charges and children often do not know their age or rather hide it (Drumbl 2012: 26). Moreover, the line between mobilisation, demobilisation and remobilisation is often blurry among former child soldiers; and the roles children fulfil in the armed group might not be visible and might be carried out in isolated parts of the country (Drumbl 2012: 26). Similar to Drumbl's argument, Gates and Reich claim that this estimate used in most sources and documents has never been justified in terms of hard data, has no clear basis, and has never been accurate and now it is certainly not (Gates & Reich 2010: 11).

but what if such a future is shaped by boys and girls who lived a significant part of their life in an armed group? Wessells argues that the reintegration of former child soldiers is crucial for breaking cycles of violence and building peace (Wessells 2006: 244). The lack of an effective and sustainable reintegration strategy can cost another war and allow organised crime to flourish in the country.

There is a lot at stake, therefore, in getting former child soldiers' reintegration right. Those designing and implementing programmes to facilitate the reintegration of this population need to disentangle the complexity of the process and identify its most important components. Other authors have suggested that the consideration of children's agency exhibited in the different stages of their involvement in armed conflict is a crucial element. Peters, for instance, calls overlooking the agency of children and youth dangerous since it provides an essential explanation regarding why children join armed groups, persist in fighting, and after their demobilisation are willing to re-join illegal groups (Peters 2004: 31). The humanitarian narrative adopted in reintegration programmes overlooks this determinant and this negligence hinders the sustainability of the reintegration of former child soldiers. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainability, the question of agency needs to be considered and incorporated into prevention and reintegration programmes targeting children and former child soldiers.

Colombia is a suitable case study to investigate the subject of children's agency in the context of war and how such agency influences former child soldiers'

reintegration process. In Colombia the vast majority of children join illegal armed groups voluntarily, are not under the influence of drugs and alcohol during their involvement in the group, and make a conscious and strategic decision to escape from the armed group. The current estimated number of children involved in the armed conflict is around 11,000 - 14,000, despite the past demobilisation of thousands (Thomas 2008: 13). Due to the recently concluded formal peace negotiations (2012 - 2016) between the Colombian government and the main guerrilla group - the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) - the reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian society now has a special relevance in Colombia. Even though the topic of child soldiers was not explicitly included in the agenda, thousands of children will soon need to be demobilised and provided with reintegration assistance. Their successful reintegration into civilian society is one of the pre-conditions to achieve sustainable peace in the country. Therefore, there is a lot at stake to get former child soldiers' reintegration right in Colombia. Additionally, on 30 March 2016, the start of formal peace talks between the other significant guerrilla group operating in the country - National Liberation Army (ELN) - and the government of President Juan Manuel Santos was announced. The guerrilla group has a significant number of children enrolled in its ranks who will need to be reintegrated into civilian society if an agreement is reached between the Colombian state and the ELN.

1.5 Structure and Summary of the Chapters

The present thesis consists of nine chapters in total. The structure and summary of these chapters is showed below.

Chapter Two presents the social and political environment in Colombia, in which the recruitment of children into illegal armed groups and the reintegration of former child soldiers take place. Besides these structural elements, special consideration will also be given to the conflicting parties involved in armed conflict, the situation of child soldiers, as well as the demobilisation and reintegration process of former child soldiers in Colombia. The discussion of Colombia as a special case for study is situated upfront in the thesis in order to start with an analytical presentation of the background and context in which agency is examined, particularly in relation to the ongoing armed conflict. Moreover, this analysis explains why Colombia is a suitable case study to discuss the question of agency, further elaborated in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

Chapter Three addresses the two main competing approaches identified in the literature on the agency debate, namely the 'humanitarian narrative' and the 'conscious actor narrative'. The main shortcomings of these approaches will be critically analysed, combined with the implications of such limitations for the reintegration process of former child soldiers. Furthermore, an alternative narrative will be introduced within the agency debate, the 'tactical agency approach'. This approach is considered the most suitable out of the three

narratives to be applied in the presentation and analysis of the fieldwork findings of the present thesis.

In **Chapter Four**, the various constraining factors to, and manifestations of, children's agency identified in the literature are explored, focusing on the three different stages of children's involvement in armed conflict. The final part of the chapter examines the role of social capital as the most significant structural factor - enabler and constrainer - to children's agency in the context of war.

In **Chapter Five**, the methodological tools applied in the present research will be presented. The chapter is divided into four sections which focus on research method and design; life history interviews conducted with the research participants of this study; methodological challenges and limitations; and ethical assurances.

In **Chapter Six**, the different constraining factors to children's agency will be identified and discussed, focusing on the pre-recruitment period in the context of Colombia. This is the first of the three empirical chapters which present and analyse the fieldwork findings. This and the following chapters are aimed at testing, challenging and contributing to the existing literature.

Following the chronological order of children's involvement in armed conflict, **Chapter Seven** examines those elements which impede children from fully exhibiting their agency in the armed group and in the reintegration period. Special attention will be given to the recurring factors due to their highly constraining impact on children's agency.

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Chapter Eight considers the various ways children's tactical and strategic agency is manifested in the three different stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia. Moreover, the two 'faces' of social capital are explored in the Colombian case: social capital as a constrainer and an enabler to children's agency in the context of war. Besides a discussion of the various social capital-related factors, other structural elements influencing children's agency will also be presented in order to understand and test the role of social relations in children's actions and decisions.

Chapter Nine draws the present study to an end with concluding remarks. Based on the previously presented research findings, a conclusion is drawn regarding the importance of considering children's agency in designing and implementing prevention and reintegration programmes. Moreover, recommendations are offered to future researchers about potential research areas which were beyond the scope of the present thesis but might deserve further attention.

Chapter 2

The Context of the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

2.1 Introduction

The conflict Colombia has been enduring for over fifty years is highly complex. Its complexity is not only due to the diversity of legitimate and illegal actors involved in the fighting, the regional particularities and the prolonged nature of the conflict, but also because of the merging of different types of violence. Based on the findings of a report published in 2013 by the Colombian National Centre for Historical Memory (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*), in the period between 1958[3] and 2012, the estimated number of people killed in the armed conflict totalled 220,000, of which 81.5% were civilians (GMH 2013: 20, 32). However, the Colombian conflict is about more than the high number of casualties: displacement, drug trafficking, child soldiering and human rights abuses committed by all the involved parties are some of the 'by-products' that can be linked to the armed conflict.

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[3] Gutiérrez Sanín claims that following the internationally recognised definition of armed conflict - presence of two or more organised actors, a thousand casualties per year, with no more than ninety-five percent of them belonging to any one side - the Colombian armed conflict did not start until 1983, but definitely not before 1978 (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004: 262).

This is the environment in which children are recruited into armed groups and into which former child soldiers are reintegrated. The entangled social, economic and political problems - presented below and in later chapters - facilitate and enable the recruitment of children into armed groups and hinder their reintegration into civilian society. Such problems require urgent attention from those aspiring for peace in Colombia; failure to do so is likely to perpetuate the conflict and will present a considerable obstacle to sustainable peace.

The aim of this chapter is to present this environment in order to contextualise the factors that might enable or constrain children's agency in Colombia.[4] In the first section, the conflicting parties involved in the Colombian armed conflict will be presented; while in Part Two, the Colombian particularities of the issue of child soldiering will be explored. The next section will address the procedure of the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers in Colombia, including the various institutions involved in the process. In Part Four, the social and political environment in which the prevention and reintegration process is embedded will be presented. Special attention will be given to the issue of displacement, the discrediting factors to the Colombian state's reputation, drug production and trafficking, as well as the ordinariness of the armed conflict in the eyes of the general public.

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[4] The direct structural enablers and constrainers to children's agency in Colombia will be presented in Chapters Six and Seven.

2.2 **The Colombian Conflict**

In the course of the history of the Colombian armed conflict, certain aspects have remained constant, while certain factors have gone through significant changes and transformation over the years.[5] The agrarian issue, the limited opportunities for political participation, the external influences and pressures from the international community, the institutional and territorial fragmentation of the state and the prevalence of drug trafficking have been permanent factors in the last fifty years of the conflict (GMH 2013: 111). By contrast, the actors with the greatest power and influence, the intensity of confrontation between the conflicting parties, and the possibility of a definite peace agreement are all factors which have varied over the years (GMH 2013: 111). In the following section, the main parties involved in the armed conflict will be presented.

2.2.1 Conflicting Parties

2.2.1.1 The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP)

The roots of the armed conflict can be traced back to the ten-year-long civil war (1948-1958) - also known as 'The Violence' (*La Violencia*) - between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party. Such conflict was triggered by the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán - the Liberal Party

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[5] For a detailed discussion about the primary drivers for the emergence and persistence of the Colombian armed conflict see Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín's work *¿Una historia simple?* (2015).

presidential candidate - in 1948, which set off a series of violent riots in the Colombian capital, known as *Bogotazo* (see Picture 1 below). In the aftermath of this bloody period, members of active communist and former liberal groups - mostly of peasant origins - remained active, particularly in the rural areas of the country, and formed the first wave of recruits for the left-wing guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP or FARC)) (Chernick 2009: 65). Colombia of the 1960s was infiltrated by the communist ideologies of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which guaranteed a new wave of supply for the FARC in the form of students with revolutionary ideas (Chernick 2009: 65). Later waves of recruits included political activists who joined the Patriotic Union (*Unión Patriótica* (UP)) leftist political party, as well as more recently rural and urban youth facing financial hardship, poverty, unemployment and lack of socio-economic opportunities (Chernick 2009: 65). Nonetheless, Colombian political scientist, Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, points out that the role of the guerrilla group was marginal in the 1960s and it was not until the early 1970s - after the newly emerged guerrilla movement called 19th of April Movement (*Movimiento 19 de Abril* or M-19) nationalized the conflict - that FARC gained major importance (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 123, 124).

Picture 1: The 10th of April Massacre (Masacre del 10 de abril) by Alejandro Obregón Rosés (1948) in the Colombian National Museum, in Bogotá, commemorating the start of 'La Violencia'

Being a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla organisation, the FARC's manifesto includes the issues of unequal access to, and usage and distribution of, land[6]; poverty; inequality; political exclusion; and the presence of a corrupt government as reasons for fighting (FARC Statute). Due to its active engagement in public issues in regions which lack state presence, the FARC is seen as a legitimate actor - 'paralel state' - by part of the Colombian society, primarily peasants

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[6] According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Colombia has the most unequal distribution of land in the world, with 52% of farms being in the hands of 1.15% of landowners (The Economist 2012).

(Trejos Rosero 2013: 109). Nonetheless, the guerrilla group is highly involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, killings, forced displacement, torture, sexual violence and forced disappearances, as well as illegal gold mining (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 13, Human Rights Watch 2016: 188, McDermott 2013: 19).

Regarding the group's policy on the involvement of minors in its ranks, in 1999, the FARC submitted an official statement to the United Nations claiming that recruitment into the group ought to be "by personal, voluntary, and conscious decision between the ages of fifteen and thirty" (Human Rights Watch 2003: 29). In February 2015, the FARC announced that the recruitment age had been raised from fifteen to seventeen; while in February 2016, the group committed not to recruit anyone under the age of eighteen into its ranks (Colombia Reports 2016, United Nations 2015b). Despite the guerrilla group's official opposition to the recruitment and use of children in military ranks, the FARC has been the greatest recruiter of minors in the historical records of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) (ICBF 2013a).

2.2.1.2 The National Liberation Army (ELN)

The other significant left-wing guerrilla organisation involved in the Colombian armed conflict is the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN)). The armed group was founded in 1964, was almost entirely wiped out by the Colombian Army in the Operation Anorí in 1973 just to be rebuilt and significantly transformed in the 1980s (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 124, 125). The group was initially made up primarily of university students and Catholics,

predominantly radical priests (Thomas 2008: 14). It was established with a strong political goal, namely to achieve improved social justice - inspired by liberation theology - and human rights in Colombia (Thomas 2008: 14). The group's key tactics include, among others, killing and extortion, primarily from multinationals and oil companies (Human Rights Watch 2003: 25, Human Rights Watch 2016: 189). Despite the original quasi-religious nature of the movement that once considered kidnapping "anti-revolutionary" and condemned such a practice, ELN members had become expert kidnappers by the 1980s and have ever since continued to carry out such atrocities on a massive scale (InSight Crime). Furthermore, the initial idea to avoid involvement in drug trafficking was also abandoned by the ELN in the late 1990s, when the organisation increased its influence in the drug trade by protecting large drug trafficking organisations and by creating its own production and distribution networks (InSight Crime).

Regarding the group's official policy on the recruitment of under-eighteens, the ELN's regulations state that "minors under sixteen years of age shall not be members of the permanent armed force" (Human Rights Watch 2003: 31). In 1998, two ELN commanders signed the Heaven's Gate (*Puerta del Cielo*) agreement in Mainz, Germany, in which the guerrilla group agreed not to recruit children under sixteen years of age into its ranks and to raise the minimum age of its soldiers to eighteen (Bartolomei 2012: 508, Human Rights Watch 2003: 33). However, the accord was never implemented.

2.2.1.3 The United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC)[7]

The United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC)) was a right-wing umbrella paramilitary organisation, established in 1997 by drug traffickers and landowners, as a response to the kidnappings and extortion executed by the guerrillas (Thomas 2008: 14). The AUC itself was also highly involved in forced displacement, killings, executions, extortion and drug trafficking which often funded the group's activities. By 2001, over two-third of the AUC's income came from the group's involvement in trafficking, producing and taxing coca (Colombia Reports 2012a).

In 2003, under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002 - 2010), the group declared a ceasefire which led to the collective demobilisation of over 30,000 paramilitary fighters by 2006 (Thomas 2008: 14). This was the largest demilitarisation in the history of the country, the first demobilisation that was explicitly called a DDR, and the first time that truth and reparation were in some way incorporated into the process and that the demobilised combatants did not enjoy full impunity for their past actions (Gutiérrez Sanín & González Peña 2012, IEGAP 2013: 22).

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[7] Gutiérrez Sanín provides an elaborate comparison between the left-wing guerrilla groups - primarily FARC - and the right-wing paramilitary movement of the AUC. The main differences that he identifies include having a different social composition (FARC members tend to be younger, less educated with a higher percentage of peasants and women in the group's ranks than the AUC), different repertoires of violence (FARC engages more frequently in fighting, kidnappings and committing massacres than the AUC), a different institutional style and organisational arrangement (offer of salary and economic selective incentives for AUC combatants) and a different relationship with the population (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 5, 6, 10, 19). Members are subjected to a different process of adaptation and transformation in the different groups: while enlistment into the ranks of FARC is a lifelong commitment with no possibility to desert, AUC combatants have more room to leave and are expected to follow a looser morale and discipline than FARC members (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 6, 17, 18).

The demobilisation process was criticised for its lack of transparency, inflated numbers of demobilised soldiers, the insufficiency of the reparation of victims and the slow pace of judicial processes (Gutiérrez Sanín & González Peña 2012, Human Rights Watch 2017: 202, Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 10). In addition, based on the findings of the National Centre for Historical Memory, only ten percent of child soldiers fighting in the ranks of the AUC got officially demobilised in the collective process, while the rest of them were sent home through the back door or demobilised individually (Springer 2012: 52, Verdad Abierta 2015a). This strategy was used by the paramilitary group in order to avoid serious legal obstacles and maintain legitimacy in the peace process.

Moreover, the disbandment of the AUC led to the emergence of a large number of new criminal and drug trafficking organisations and networks, including - among others - *Los Paisas*, *Los Rastrojos*, *Los Urabeños* and *Las Águilas Negras* (Bouvier 2009: 10). Since the majority of the members of these BACRIMs (*bandas criminales emergentes*) are those ex-paramilitaries who demobilised in the period between 2003 and 2006, these criminal bands are also often called the "third generation of paramilitaries" (Puentes Puentes 2012: 27). According to ACR estimates from 2008, seven percent of the total number of demobilised AUC soldiers had re-engaged in criminal activities, while in a report carried out by Natalia Springer in collaboration with the National Centre for Historical Memory the author argues that BACRIMs absorbed forty-two percent of minors who were part of the original military structures of the AUC and six percent of those under-eighteens who demobilised but their reintegration failed (IEGAP

2013: 49, Springer 2012: 55). Former soldiers' re-engagement in criminal activities can be partly attributed to the wide availability of weapons that were not turned in as part of the disarmament process[8], as well as the uncertainty regarding the benefits provided to the demobilised and their legal status (IEGAP 2013: 50). The illegal activity of these newly emerged criminal groups was not at the forefront of Uribe's political agenda since the demobilisation of the large number of AUC soldiers served as a success story for his presidency, which also contributed to his re-election in 2006. The Colombian government continues denying claims that BACRIMs have any political objective and does not consider these groups having any linkage to the armed conflict (Gutiérrez Sanín & González Peña 2012).

In 1998, in the Declaration of Paramillo, the AUC agreed not to recruit and use children under the age of eighteen for intelligence and surveillance activities, and reassured its pledge in the framework of the Justice and Peace Law (*Ley de Justicia y Paz*) of 2005 (Mago 2011: 10). Since the AUC financially reimbursed its members for their services[9], it was not heavily reliant on child soldiers (Springer 2012: 30). Therefore, the proportion of minors involved in the ranks of the paramilitary units was always lower than in the guerrilla groups. However, at the moment, the BACRIMs are considered to be the number one recruiters of

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[8] Even though the number of soldiers who demobilised from the AUC as part of the collective DDR process was 31,671, the number of small and light weapons that were collected was only 18,051 (IEGAP 2013: 33).
[9] The average salary paid to AUC combatants was around $200-250 per month - with regional and longitudinal variance - and members also acquired an additional income from selective incentives (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 14).

minors in Colombia with approximately fifty percent of their members thought to be under eighteen (Springer 2012: 30, Verdad Abierta 2015b).[10]

2.2.1.4   The National Army of Colombia

Besides the two major guerrilla groups, FARC and ELN, and the paramilitary movement of AUC, the National Army of Colombia (*Ejército Nacional de Colombia*) has been the other key player in the Colombian armed conflict. Regarding the recruitment and use of minors in armed forces, the Colombian government has previously ratified several international agreements which control the involvement of children in military ranks, and also passed a great number of national laws to protect children from being forced into participation in armed conflict. These international agreements and national laws will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

2.3 Child Soldiers in Colombia

Even though children are documented to have been active participants in armed conflict as early as the early nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter Six, direct and indirect use of boys, girls and adolescents (*niños, niñas y*

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[10] Since the BACRIMs are not recognised by the Colombian state as official participants of the armed conflict, children participating in these criminal groups are not granted the status of a 'child soldier', but are regarded as juvenile delinquents (Ernesto Mendez 2014, Sinthya Rubio 2014). In this way, they are less protected, are deprived of the benefits being a 'child soldier' involves and are not provided further assistance once they reach the age of adulthood. Such a differential treatment of children fighting in armed groups, on the one hand, and criminal organisations, on the other hand, supports Drumbl's argument about the discrimination of criminalised children against militarised children, presented in Chapter One (Drumbl 2012: 43).

adolescentes) in military ranks became a visible phenomenon in Colombia only in the 1990s, and it has grown significantly in recent years. The first time it became apparent that minors were actively involved in the armed conflict was in 1997, when the ELN publicly released six children between the ages of fifteen and seventeen in Media Luna (Cesar Department), and during a military operation (Operation Berlin) in Santander Department in 2000, in which seventy-three minors were recovered from the ranks of the FARC (Mago 2011: 33).

There is no precise data regarding the current number of children and adolescents involved in the Colombian armed conflict, but it is estimated to be between 11,000 and 14,000 (Thomas 2008: 13).[11] One in four soldiers is thought to be under eighteen years of age; and out of the thirty-two departments of Colombia, Springer claims that active child recruitment is believed to take place in twenty-two, while Mago reckons this number to be much higher at thirty-one (Mago 2011: 10; Springer 2012: 30, 64). An estimated ninety percent of minors fighting in the ranks of one of the illegal armed groups are from the rural areas of the country (Alvis Palma 2008: 233). However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of minors recruited in bigger cities, such as Medellín, Bogotá and Cali: in 2012, a child living in urban areas was seventeen times more likely to be recruited than in 2008 (Springer 2012: 21, 64). Oto

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[11] The Ombudsman's Office of Colombia estimates the number of currently recruited minors to be around 6,000, Human Rights Watch believes this figure to be around 11,000, while Springer's report from 2012 talks about 18,000 (GMH 2013: 84, 85; Springer 2012: 30).

Romero - a professional working in the ACR office in Bogotá - calls the recruitment of minors into illegal armed groups "one of the most invisible issues in Colombia" (2014).

2.3.1 Pre-recruitment Period

Some of the main push factors for children to join illegal armed groups in Colombia - discussed in the literature - are considered to be the desire to seek revenge for a loved one's death, prior enlistment of other family members or friends, poverty, lack of economic or educational opportunities, and domestic violence (Human Rights Watch 2003: 36, ICBF 2012: 7). On the other hand, the pull factors include - among others - appeal of lifestyle, weapons and uniforms associated with the armed groups, as well as curiosity and financial promises (ICBF 2012: 7, Naeve 2012: 6, Santiago 2007: 43). In Colombia forced recruitment is the exception rather than the rule: eighty-one percent of the 491 interviewed former child soldiers in Springer's report stated that they joined the armed group voluntarily, while only eighteen percent of them said that their recruitment was forced or coerced (Springer 2012: 30; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 122). However, according to the Colombian legal system, even in cases when the decision of the child to join the illegal armed group might seem voluntary, it has to be considered as forced recruitment - *reclutamiento ilícito* - since he/she is thought to be pressured by external factors, such as poverty, family problems and unsatisfying life conditions (María José Torres 2014; Springer 2012: 10, 31; Verdad Abierta 2015b).

2.3.2 In the Armed Group

The roles child soldiers fulfil in the ranks of the armed groups are diverse and manifold. The basic tasks all members have to carry out include cooking for the group (*ranchar*), spying, carrying weapons and equipment (*mula*), providing guard (*prestar guardia*), functioning as a human shield and going forward to check the position of the enemy (*campanero*). Other compulsory duties involve gathering intelligence, harassing and intimidating civilians (*hostigar*), collecting and chopping wood, manipulating and forcing civilians to join the group, as well as extorting civilians normally in the form of special taxes and food requisitions levied upon the wealthy population (*remolcar economía y alimentos*). Furthermore, depending on their training and experience, recruited children might also be mandated to engage in more specific jobs. These may include coordinating the radio communication between different sub-groups, becoming a nurse, transporting drugs, managing food supplies (*ecónomo*), taking and guarding hostages, making and deploying landmines, building explosives, seducing and killing targets, getting involved in frontline fighting or acting as the group's designated assassin (*sicario*). Such tasks are also subject to the extent of mobility inherent to the child soldier's affiliated armed group, with some groups dependent on fixed camps while others being more fluid and nomadic.

2.4 The Demobilisation and Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

Most child soldiers who demobilise from the illegal armed groups - *desvinculados* - take the initiative individually, rather than collectively or by being captured (Naeve 2012: 33, Springer 2012: 45). The main reasons for leaving the group - discussed in the literature - include increasing hostility toward violence, desire to be reunited with the family, aspiration for a different life, lack of commitment to the armed group, exhaustion and fear of death (Bjørkhaug 2010: 20, Mago 2011: 12).

The DDR process is primarily led by state agencies, even though external assistance is provided by international organisations including - among others - the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Save the Children UK (Mariño Rojas 2005: 152). The two state agencies responsible for the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers are the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*) (ICBF) and the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (*Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración*) (ACR). Before turning eighteen, former child soldiers are under the protection of the ICBF. After they reach the age of majority, they are offered the possibility to continue in the reintegration programme run by the ACR. In addition to the ICBF and the ACR, the Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims (*Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas*) -

established as part of the Victims Law 1448 of 2011 - is the third state institute involved in the transition process of former child soldiers into civilian society, offering a more indirect reintegration assistance compared to the other two agencies.

2.4.1 The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF)

The ICBF's rehabilitation programme offered to former child soldiers - 'Programme of Care for Boys, Girls and Adolescents Demobilised from Irregular Armed Groups' (*Programa de Atención Especializada a Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Desvinculados de Grupos Armados Irregulares*) - is built upon three foundations. These include re-establishment and guarantee of rights, construction of citizenship and social integration (Mago 2011: 18). In order to provide professional assistance to children regarding these matters and others, the ICBF has been working closely together with other governmental and non-governmental agencies, such as *Hogar Don Bosco* (see Pictures 2 & 3 below), *Benposta Colombia* (not anymore), *Corporación Educación y Desarollo*, *Fundación CreSer*, *Fundación Semillas de Amor* and *Fundación Hogares Claret* (Puentes Puentes 2012: 44).

Pictures 2 & 3: Don Bosco House in Armenia (Quindío Department)

Once the child is handed over to the ICBF he/she is transferred to a 'transition home' (*hogar transitorio*). Most of these institutions are located in big cities and demobilised child soldiers usually stay here for the first eighteen to forty-five days of their rehabilitation period (Mariño Rojas 2005: 164). In these homes, a personal file is opened for former child soldiers recording their name, age, particular characteristics, information about their family, situation before joining the armed group, role(s) within the group, mental and physical health, as well as pedagogical assessment (Puentes Puentes 2012: 47). They are also provided with medical attention, counselling and psychosocial assistance with the help of social workers, psychologists and pedagogues (Puentes Puentes 2012: 47).

Later, based on their necessities and condition, around thirty percent proceed to a foster family (*hogar tutor*)[12], while the majority are transferred to a Specialised Care Centre (*Centro de Atención Especializada* (CAE)) for an eight to twelve-month period (IKV Pax Christi 2006: 17). In case the family of the former child soldier is successfully identified, tracked down and assessed by the ICBF, the child is offered the possibility to move back with them or his/her close relatives (*hogar gestor*). In this phase of the rehabilitation process, children get involved in education and skills training run by the National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (SENA)), and they are provided with medical attention and psychotherapeutic assistance (Mariño Rojas 2005: 168, Thomas 2008: 27).

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[12] The number of families willing to look after former child soldiers is very low - particularly when it comes to youth with psychological and drug issues - partly due to the negative image this population is associated with and a lack of appropriate assistance by the state (Thomas 2008: 5).

During the child's stay in the transition home or in the Specialised Care Centre, the ICBF tries to locate the child's family in order to reunite them. However, in a great number of cases, reunification is not a feasible option. The parents or the child might oppose the idea of being reunited, and the fear of reprisal from the guerrillas or the paramilitaries can make parents reluctant to welcome their child back into the family (Human Rights Watch 2003: 113). Moreover, security reasons and the failure to locate members of the family - who might have been displaced or died since the child joined the armed group - can also hinder the reunification process (Human Rights Watch 2003: 113).

Once they are ready to move on to the next stage of their rehabilitation period - usually around the age of seventeen - minors are transferred to youth homes (*casa juvenil*) which are typically apartments located in urban areas (Mariño Rojas 2005: 171). This is the first phase in the rehabilitation process when social interaction with the outside world is encouraged (Mariño Rojas 2005: 173). The period spent in the youth home - a maximum of twelve months - is the last stage before the child becomes independent and leaves the care system of the ICBF. While they are institutionalised, minors are offered the possibility of turning to sexual and reproductive health services and counselling provided by Profamilia, a Colombian NGO (Thomas 2008: 23). This is a crucial service because the majority of children start living an active sexual life in the armed group, between the ages of five and thirteen (ICBF 2012: 7).

Between 1999 and March 2013, 5,156 children got involved in the ICBF's rehabilitation programme; of these, seventy-two percent were boys while

twenty-eight percent were girls (ICBF 2013a). Eighty-three percent of these programme participants entered the programme voluntarily, while seventeen percent of them were captured and handed over to the ICBF (ICBF 2013a). However, it is important to note that the vast majority of minors who demobilise from illegal armed groups do not seek help from official authorities and therefore, do not participate in the special programme offered by the ICBF (Mago 2011: 33). Former soldiers' fear of, and distrust toward, state agencies can be explained by the fact that while in the armed group they are told that if they turn themselves in, they will be killed or imprisoned (Mago 2011: 46). Moreover, low attendance in the rehabilitation programme can also be attributed to lack of knowledge about the existence of the programme. Furthermore, the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic of Colombia documented that in the period between 2006 and 2014, thirty-one percent of programme participants in the ICBF left the programme (Verdad Abierta 2015a). Nonetheless, the government agency has no information about the whereabouts of half of these dropouts, which entails a high probability of re-recruitment into one of the illegal armed groups or engagement in criminal activity (Thomas 2008: 35, Verdad Abierta 2015a).

2.4.2 The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)

When former child soldiers reach the age of majority - based on Article 190 of Law 1448 of 2011 - they are given the possibility of entering the ACR reintegration programme, together with those soldiers who were recruited as children but demobilised after they turned eighteen, as well as other adult former

soldiers. According to official data provided by the state, only fifty-three percent of those participating in the ICBF rehabilitation programme in the period between 1999 and February 2015 transferred to the ACR reintegration programme, while twenty-one percent of participants returned to their families and twenty percent of them voluntarily resigned from the programme (Verdad Abierta 2015a).

Since the implementation of the new reintegration policies in 2013, the ACR has adopted a more personalised and individualist attention service, in contrast to the group-based and collective approach used in the past. Moreover, the government agency formulated eight interlinked dimensions of reintegration, namely personal, productive, family, habitability, health, educational, citizen and security (ACR). These dimensions shaped the content of the 'package' of benefits provided to ACR programme participants. Such a 'package' contains psychosocial assistance, one year of free health care, help with enrolment in education and skills training, as well as legal advice (ACR). Other benefits include provision of insurance and financial help with relocation (if necessary), as well as financial contribution (to a private house, a business or university studies) in the final stage of the programme (ACR). Furthermore, since the end of 2013, those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are provided with special assistance besides regular psychosocial help.[13]

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[13] Karen Johana Corpues - a professional involved in therapeutic work in the ACR service centre in Medellín - argued that statistics showed that three out of ten programme participants suffered from PTSD; therefore, there was a high demand for this more specialised therapy (2014).

However, in case the 'person in the process of reintegration' (*persona en proceso de reintegración*) gets involved in any kind of illegal activity or is re-recruited into one of the illegal armed groups, all the benefits are withdrawn and he/she has to go to prison. Moreover, if a participant fails to attend the required sessions of the programme for three months and does not provide any valid explanation to the agency for his/her absence, his/her process gets deactivated. After meeting all the requirements and completing the programme (*culminarse*), a three-year process of follow-up and monitoring (*proceso de monitoreo posculminación*) starts. Since 2013, some of those who reached the end of their 'reintegration route' have been hired by the ACR to fulfil the position of 'promoter' (*promotor*), whose responsibility is to accompany and support programme participants in their reintegration process. At the moment, there are about twenty promoters around the country (one of the interviewees was also a *promotor*).

2.4.3 The Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims

The Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims is the third state agency which aims to contribute to the successful reintegration of former (child) soldiers. Every former child soldier is entitled to receive support from this unit including compensation, satisfaction, restitution, rehabilitation and guarantees of non-repetition (Sinthya Rubio 2014). They are eligible for these benefits on the basis that they are all considered victims for their past involvement in an illegal armed group, besides being victims of other crimes committed against them, whether collective (internal displacement of indigenous communities) or individual (sexual abuse) (Sinthya Rubio 2014).

The unit also provides a special space for children who have become victims of the armed conflict, called the Centre for Attention and Reparation for Young Victims of the Armed Conflict (*Centro de Atención y Reparación Integral para Jóvenes Víctimas del Conflicto Armado*) (Sinthya Rubio 2014). In this safe space, young victims are offered the possibility of sharing their stories and are given professional assistance to enhance their ability to deal with their past and move on with their lives (Sinthya Rubio 2014). Furthermore, a strategy called 'DIME: Dignity and Memory' (*DIME: Dignidad y Memoria*) was created by the unit to help minor victims to recover emotionally, develop dignity and build memory through different workshops and activities (Sinthya Rubio 2014).

However, it is important to keep in mind that even several years after their demobilisation, former soldiers are approached by illegal armed groups and criminal organisations on a regular basis, offering them a greater life if they decide to join their ranks. Former soldiers have the necessary skills and experience, and usually face severe economic and social hardship in their reintegration process, which factors make them an appealing target and an easy prey for illegal groups (Ernesto Mendez 2014). Besides the tempting promises, disappointment with the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, absence of clarity regarding the programmes, lack of family network, as well as personal issues with others are considered to be some of the push factors of which presence increases the likelihood of demobilised soldiers' re-recruitment into illegal armed groups or criminal organisations (Mago 2011: 61, 62). On the other hand, the reasons to stay in civilian society are considered to include family,

freedom and tranquillity of the civilian lifestyle, desire to keep themselves and their families away from danger, and personal determination not to return (Mago 2011: 64, 65).

Because of the diversity and complexity of factors which influence one's determination to return to the military lifestyle or stay in civilian society, it is crucial to reach out to each former child soldier and to address their unique needs and concerns. The reintegration process of an indigenous former girl soldier from the rural areas of the country who used to be a FARC member will be very different from the reintegration of a non-ethnic former boy soldier demobilised from the AUC. Acknowledging the importance of such an individual-specific approach, in 2013 the ACR adopted a so-called 'differential focus' (*enfoque diferencial*). The reintegration programme is now structured and implemented in a personalised manner in order to make a clear distinction between the specific needs and circumstances of each programme participant and to address these issues accordingly.

2.5 The Environment for the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

The reintegration process of former child soldiers does not take place in a vacuum, but is significantly influenced by social, economic and political structural factors. These factors might facilitate or hinder the challenging process of reintegration. Those elements which have a direct influence on children's

agency will be presented in Chapters Six and Seven, while in the section below the broader context in which the recruitment and reintegration process is embedded will be examined.

2.5.1 Social Environment

2.5.1.1 Displacement

Colombia has the largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world with over 7.2 million people, a huge percentage of which population is made up of minors (see Picture 4 below) (Human Rights Watch 2017: 201, IDMC & NRC 2017: 29). This high number can be partly attributed to the long-lasting nature of the armed conflict, which has been the primary trigger for internal displacement. Flight from rural to urban areas is the predominant trend, even though intra-urban displacement is also increasing, which reflects the changing nature of the armed conflict (IDMC & NRC 2014: 42). The indigenous and Afro-Colombian population has been the primary victim of internal displacement (IDMC & NRC 2017: 29). Law 387 of 1997 was the first comprehensive law which addressed the importance to prevent forced displacement and acknowledged internally displaced persons as a special population entitled to receive assistance and protection from the state (Stirk 2013: 1). Later, the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011 created a formal framework for the restitution of land and other reparations to the IDPs (IDMC & NRC 2017: 30).

Displacement is a long and complex process, usually preceded by exposure to threats, intimidation and other kinds of violence (GMH 2013: 296). One of the main reasons for internal displacement in Colombia - according to a 2007 report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers - is the fear of one's child being recruited into an illegal armed group (Thomas 2008: 10). A number of research participants shared the story about how their families had to leave their homes with nothing and become IDPs due to the bad security situation of the place where they were living in the countryside: all their possessions had been taken by the armed groups and the young members of the family had been approached by the groups on a regular basis for recruitment purposes (Interviewees 1, 4, 9, 12, 18).

Displacement goes hand in hand with a loss of economic stability, social relations (both at family and community levels), cultural ties, past memories and future plans (García Acuña 2012: 93, 95, 154; GMH 2013: 296). Furthermore, unlike in the majority of countries with a large number of IDPs, in Colombia there are no camps designated for this vulnerable population. Therefore, displaced people usually live in so-called 'invasions' (*invasiones*), which are informal settlements in the outskirts of bigger cities. Because of the location and the poor condition of their homes, they are more exposed to the impact of natural disasters - such as floods, landslides and earthquakes - which are common phenomena in Colombia (IDMC & NRC 2015: 20, Stirk 2013: 3). Furthermore, IDPs remain vulnerable even in their new homes also due to the high levels of crime and drug trafficking, as well as the wide presence of gangs in these poor

areas of cities. In this way, as Martha Nubia Bello from the National Centre for Historical Memory points out, due to the violent events happening before, during and after displacement, the displaced population is disadvantaged not only in the demographic, political and economic sense of the word but also because of the negative impact such occurrences have on their dignity, identity and therefore, emotional wellbeing (García Acuña 2012: 84).

Picture 4: Displaced (Desplazados) by Fernando Botero (2004) in the Colombian National Museum, in Bogotá (Source: Springer 2012: 63)

2.5.2 Political Environment

2.5.2.1 The Colombian State and Its Bad Reputation

The state-society relations in Colombia are far from being ideal, and are predominantly characterised by hostility and distrust. These negative feelings are fuelled by the 'parapolitics scandal', the 'false positive killings', as well as impunity and political corruption linked to the state.

The 'parapolitics scandal' (*parapolítica*) involves the allegation that a great number of politicians and members of security forces collaborated with the paramilitaries on several occasions in the past. The scandal - which broke out in 2006 - was followed by the resignation of the foreign minister and the head of the national intelligence service. Moreover, detentions, further investigations and the conviction of legislators were some of the consequences of the surfacing of the scandal (Human Rights Watch 2017: 203). The debate still prevails and there are alleged continuous links between political elites and the BACRIMs, successor groups of the paramilitary units.

Another scandal which further damaged the Colombian state's reputation involved so-called 'false positive killings' (*falsos positivos*), mostly happening in the period between 2002 and 2008. Colombian military personnel were accused of having murdered innocent civilians and reported them to the authorities as guerrillas killed in fighting in order to manipulate the army's body count system, be promoted or gain access to other benefits (Interviewees 14 & 17; see also Human Rights Watch 2017: 203). Since 2009, the number of alleged

extrajudicial killings of civilians executed by security forces has reduced dramatically, nonetheless, there have been new cases reported each year ever since (Human Rights Watch 2017: 203, Verdad Abierta 2013). The primary victims of such atrocities are peasants, workers, students, political opponents and traders (Verdad Abierta 2013). Despite the public outrage, Juan Manuel Santos - current Colombian president - denied the existence of any reported case of *falsos positivos* in 2012, and false positive investigations have been discredited by the defence minister and several senior military officials (Human Rights Watch 2015: 169, Verdad Abierta 2013).

Besides the 'parapolitics scandal' and the 'false positive killings', impunity is the third factor which has discredited the Colombian state. Impunity is not only an obstacle and a threat to peace, but it also undermines the legitimacy of the rule of law. According to data by the Human Rights Watch, as of July 2016, only 182 of the more than 30,000 paramilitaries who had participated in the collective demobilisation process were convicted of crimes (Human Rights Watch 2017: 202). The number of those who have been prosecuted for the recruitment and use of children in the armed group - which acts are considered a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) and a crime under Article 162 of the Colombian Penal Code (2000) - is very low. The case of Freddy Rendón Herrera (aka '*El Alemán*' meaning 'The German') - accused of the recruitment of 329 minors into the AUC block he was the leader of - is among the few (Verdad Abierta 2011).

Impunity was one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics associated with state activities by the interviewees as well. One of them (Interviewee 4) recounted how she had shared with the police all the information she held about crimes committed by people in high-ranked positions, but no investigation was started in any of such cases. Another research participant (Interviewee 14) shared the story about how the national army attacked the house of a family and killed everyone in there in the belief that they were guerrillas, and how these soldiers ended up in a luxury military prison. Yet another interviewee's (Interviewee 12) family was victim of a similar kind of crime committed by the military: when his brother was captured by the army, his whole family was accused of being collaborators of the guerrillas. Therefore, the army visited and searched his family's house on a weekly basis and if they found something they liked just took it, while his mother could not object or do anything about the situation (Interviewee 12).

The fourth factor that has become widely associated with the state in Colombia is political corruption. Out of the 176 countries examined in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 by Transparency International, Colombia is ranked ninety (Transparency International 2017). The extensive corruption practised by Colombian politicians was a commonly discussed topic among the research participants as well (Interviewees 3, 12, 14). According to their accounts (Interviewees 2, 3, 10, 17), the government consists of politicians whose only concern is to make as much personal financial benefit as possible and who fail to represent the Colombians' interest: "[a]ll those up there, those wearing ties,

rob the people" (Interviewee 17). The interviewees (Interviewees 3, 10, 14, 17) also talked about how heavily the government invests in the armed conflict, instead of spending money on helping people living in vulnerable neighbourhoods, on preventing the recruitment of minors into illegal armed groups and on improving the health and education system.

2.5.2.2 Drug Production and Trafficking

Despite the logistical, tactical and military aid and the billions of dollars invested in fighting drug production and trafficking in Colombia by the governments of the United States of America[14] and European countries, the Latin American country is still the number one producer of cocaine in the world (Colombia Reports 2012b). In 2013, Peru temporarily overtook such a title, but Colombia 'gained' its status back in 2015 (InSight Crime 2015, UNODC 2015). The Colombian drug trade is estimated at US $10 billion and - besides the provision of global coca supply - the Latin American country is also involved in exporting marijuana and heroin poppy, even though to a much smaller extent (Foreign Policy 2014). Therefore, despite the partial success of the eradication efforts in Colombia, the country remains the epicentre of drug production, drug processing, drug storage and drug trafficking in the Americas; transporting drugs to the US, Europe and Brazil.

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[14] Plan Colombia - a US $9 billion military aid programme - was launched in 2000, as part of the country's War on Drugs. The primary goal of this initiative has been to combat the drug trade, increase the Colombian state's authority and capacity throughout the country, as well as decrease the influence of the FARC.

Drug production and trafficking are tightly intertwined with the Colombian armed conflict. All conflicting parties - the FARC, ELN and AUC - have been greatly involved in the drug trade. Since the 1990s, participation in such illegal activities has become the number one source of income for the illegal armed groups, primarily the FARC. The guerrilla group's intensive engagement in these criminal activities can be attributed to the high maintenance cost of its force, that is estimated to be around US $200 million per year (McDermott 2013: 4). According to data provided by the Colombian state, sixty percent of the country's coca-cultivating zones are under the control of the FARC, channelling millions of dollars to the group's bank accounts (McDermott 2013: 20). However, despite its indisputable involvement in the Colombian drug trade, the FARC has never owned up to participating in such illegal activities.

2.5.2.3 The Ordinariness of the Armed Conflict

The largest part of today's Colombian population grew up with war being a normal part of everyday life. There is nothing extraordinary about war anymore. Television news and news in the papers which report the death of people who fell victim to the country's armed conflict have lost their news value. In a way people have become desensitised and rather indifferent toward what is going on around them. Oto Romero - a professional working in the ACR office in Bogotá - claimed regarding this issue that "In Colombia, in our behaviour and in our imagination, the war is part of us. We are no longer surprised at death, this is very disturbing." (2014) A new genre of soap operas has recently emerged, the so-called *'narconovelas'* including - among others - 'Elite Command'

(*Comando Élite*), 'The Leader' (*El Capo*) and 'Three Cains' (*Tres Caínes*). These new television programmes popularise and romanticise the negative figures of the armed conflict and those involved in drug trafficking. The Colombian media's presentation of war as something glorifying and soldiers' participation in conflict as heroic may have an influence on children's determination to join the armed group.

Besides the normalisation and romanticisation of violence in the media, another way in which war has become ordinary in Colombian society is demonstrated in people's adaptiveness to the armed conflict. In the 1990s, when kidnapping rates boomed, it was common among people travelling to the countryside to bring a kidnapping kit with themselves (Kline 2003: 178). This included comfortable shoes, a warm coat, a toothbrush and a good book in order to be prepared in case one got kidnapped (Kline 2003: 178). Furthermore, there is a great number of places and landmarks around the country which are reminders of the violence and conflict the country has been enduring for over fifty years. Such landmarks include the El Nogal Club in Bogotá hit by a terrorist attack in 2003, and the remains of Fernando Botero's 'Bird of Peace' (*Pájaro de Paz*) statue in Medellín destroyed in 1995 as a result of a bomb detonated under the sculpture (see Picture 5 below). Next to the damaged statue there is an identical replacement as a "homage to stupidity", a symbol of peace and a memorial to the victims of the FARC bomb attack.

Picture 5: The remains of Fernando Botero's 'Bird of Peace' (Pájaro de Paz) statue in the Parque San Antonio, Medellín

2.6 Conclusion

The Colombian armed conflict has not only infiltrated into every sphere of life - whether social, economic or political - but it also crept into people's mind. Violence and death have lost their extraordinariness; Colombians have learnt to live in the midst of war and everything that comes with it. In this way, the recently signed peace agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government can become the starting point for a change of culture, from the culture of war to the culture of peace.

This is important not only because without such a change peace will not be sustainable, but also because the current social, economic and political

environments in Colombia facilitate children's recruitment into illegal armed groups and criminal organisations, and hinder former child soldiers' reintegration into civilian society. Therefore, without addressing the country's broader issues, recruitment cannot be halted and reintegration cannot succeed.

The next chapter is the first of the two chapters which discuss the agency literature combined with the child soldier and social capital literatures. In Chapter Three, the three main approaches in the agency literature will be presented and critically analysed. Such a discussion will continue in Chapter Four that will explore the different constraining factors to, and manifestations of, children's agency in the three different stages of their involvement in armed conflict, paying special attention to the role of social capital as a constrainer and enabler to children's agency in the context of war.

Chapter 3

<u>Agency: The Misunderstood and Neglected Piece</u>

<u>of Child Soldiering</u>

3.1 <u>Introduction</u>

In the literature addressing the issue of child soldiering there is disagreement and ongoing debate regarding what level of agency children exhibit in their recruitment to an armed group, in the actions they take while a member of an armed group and also in their reintegration process into civilian society. Here agency is understood as "one's active engagement with the world and their own efforts to cope with adversity" (Lee 2009: 25). Thus, agency implies that the agent is not just a passive observer in the midst of the circumstances around him/her which determine the course of events happening to him/her, but rather actively and consciously shapes his/her actions or inactions in the environment he/she operates in.

This chapter is divided into five main sections. In the first two parts, two of the main competing narratives within the agency debate will be discussed, namely the humanitarian and the conscious actor narratives[15], followed by a critical

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[15] Huynh calls these two different narratives the 'caretaker or liberal humanitarian perspective' and the 'free-ranger or critical childhood studies perspective' (Huynh 2015: 123).

analysis of the principal shortcomings of such approaches and the implications of these limitations for the reintegration process of former child soldiers - which is the primary focus of this thesis - in Part Three. In the next section, the third approach within the agency debate will be introduced, namely the tactical agency approach[16] which narrative is considered the most suitable one to be applied in the presentation and analysis of the fieldwork findings of the present thesis for the reasons discussed below.

3.2 <u>Humanitarian Narrative</u>

3.2.1 Childhood

Childhood is seen by advocates of the humanitarian narrative as a fixed concept which has universal meaning through time and space: anyone under the age of eighteen should be considered a child regardless of their cultural background (Lee 2009: 8). This is called the Straight 18 position (Drumbl 2012: 4). In the United Nation's Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), it is stated that "the age of a person must be the key factor in deciding whether he/she is considered to be a child or not, rather than what is considered to be the customary understanding of childhood or adulthood in his/her culture" (IDDRS: 2006: 5.30: 24). Childhood is separated from

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[16] In the literature, the concept of 'tactical agency' is interchangeably used with the terms 'thin agency', 'restricted agency' and 'limited agency' (Klocker 2007, Punch 2007, Robson *et al.* 2007).

adulthood in the sense that it is a period associated with innocence, weakness, inherent physical and emotional vulnerability, irrationality, psychological and intellectual incompleteness, education, as well as dependence on adult care, guidance and nurturance (Berents 2009: 5, Honwana 2007: 3, Lee 2009: 12, Wessells 2009: 34).

In the light of such perception of childhood, military participation in armed conflict - which is linked to strength, aggression and responsible maturity - becomes the antithesis to 'normal' childhood which is "safe, happy and protected" (Boyden 2015: 168, Hart 2006: 219, Honwana 2007: 3, Lee 2009: 12). The oxymoron of a 'child soldier' upsets social norms and codes, and is highly disconcerting for the Western audience because the "imagery of childhood and that of violent criminality are iconologically irreconcilable" (Jenks 1996: 125; see also Honwana 2005: 37, Huynh 2015: 126).

3.2.2 Child Soldiers

The humanitarian narrative sees child soldiers as innocent victims of manipulative adults; adults who, through barbarity, abuse, unscrupulousness and exploitation "use them [the child soldiers] as cheap, expendable, and malleable weapons of war" (Rosen 2005: 132; see also Boyden 2006: 8, Peters 2004: 5, Waschefort 2015: 45). Advocates of this narrative view child soldiering as a recent phenomenon, and attribute its emergence primarily to the development of

'New Wars'[17] in the 1990s and the global proliferation of small arms and light weapons[18] on the international black market following the end of the Cold War (Brett & Specht 2004, Lee 2009: 12, Shepler 2004: 6, Singer 2006: 45).

3.2.3 Causes of Child Soldiering

The humanitarian narrative adopts the 'common causes approach' which identifies universal causes of child soldiering, such as poverty and lack of enrolment in education, among others (Brett & Specht 2004, Waschefort 2015: 45). Within the context of violence, children's desire to become members of the armed group is viewed as a human adaptive strategy or as West calls it "an extremely practical survival mechanism", considering that by joining they gain access to food, power, shelter, clothing, full-time employment and a surrogate family (Wessells & Strang 2006: 215, West 2004: 106). Nonetheless, even when children seemingly exercise a voluntary decision to join the armed group, this is interpreted as being a response to economic, cultural, social and political pressures (Machel 2001: 11, Wessells 2009: 33). In this way, children's recruitment and participation in the armed group is deemed forced in all instances. They are, therefore, considered to be acting from the position of a

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[17] For a detailed discussion of 'New Wars' - also labelled as fourth generation warfare, counter-insurgency warfare, post-modern warfare, asymmetrical or low intensity warfare - see Lind *et al.*: *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation* (1989); while for its critiques see chapters in Terriff *et al.* (eds.) *Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict: Debating fourth-generation warfare* (2008) and Kalyvas' article titled *"New" and "Old" Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?* (2001).

[18] The switch to the use of small arms and light weapons - such as grenades, rifles, light machine guns and land mines - is considered to have facilitated children's engagement in armed conflict, since this weaponry is easy to carry and operationalise (Singer 2006: 45-48).

victim which consequently rules out criminal responsibility for their actions (Lee 2009: 9). Fisher calls this the 'non-responsible child narrative' (Fisher 2013: 11).[19]

3.2.4 The Foundation of the Narrative and its Advocates

The humanitarian narrative is founded on psychologistic and human rights frameworks. The former is based upon orthodox developmental models of childhood - Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development[20] being the most prominent one - which consider children as irrational, immature and incompetent who later transform into rational, mature and competent adults through enculturation and socialisation (Rosen 2005: 133). Children are not seen as 'beings' but as 'people in the process of becoming' (Berents 2009: 6, Boeck & Honwana 2005: 3). As Rosen puts it: "Children only believe or feel or sense. They do not know, understand, judge, or decide" (Rosen 2005: 134). Furthermore, children are often portrayed to act instinctively, to react against and respond to events happening in their surroundings, rather than "actively doing, constructing, representing, or overcoming extremes of environment and experience" (Boyden 2006: 23).

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[19] Gutiérrez Sanín argues that legal unaccountability of minors for their past deeds and participation in conflict has become one of the incentives for their recruitment by armed groups and criminal organisations (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 125).
[20] Piaget claims that cognitive development consists of an ordered and irreversible sequence of four major stages, each stage containing certain defining features and developmental expectations irrespective of the social, cultural, economic and historical environment (Boyden 2006: 11). He allocates each stage to a particular age range, in this way contributing to the idea of age being a scientific indicator of child development (Beirens 2008: 145).

Besides the developmental models of childhood, the humanitarian narrative can also be characterised as being rights-based since 'child soldiering' is perceived as the clear violation of universal children's rights and breach of international humanitarian law (Lee 2009: 6). The humanitarian narrative is a clear advocate of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children, and which is by far the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history (Happold 2005: 5).

The humanitarian narrative is predominantly adopted in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, social work, as well as among international legal and advocacy circles: United Nations agencies and NGOs, such as Save the Children, Child Soldiers International, Child Rights International Network, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (Drumbl 2012: 8, Huynh 2015: 126).

3.3 Conscious Actor Narrative

3.3.1 Childhood

Wyness argues that "[c]hildhood is basically an elaborate and very powerful adult myth, a series of stories and accounts that locates children as subordinate figures in society" (Wyness 2006: 26). The conscious actor narrative highlights that the currently widespread idea of childhood - as a stage in life characterised by inherent vulnerability and innocence - entered into people's mindset only in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries (Berents 2009: 5, Schmidt 2007: 57).

This image was introduced by Genevan political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who claimed that "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil" (Rousseau 1993: 5; see also Berents 2009: 5, Schmidt 2007: 57). Childhood is seen by advocates of the conscious actor narrative as a social construct which is understood differently across time and place (cultural relativism) (Denov 2010: 2). Rosen argues against the idea of having a universal concept of childhood by claiming that "there are a multiplicity of childhoods, each culturally codified and defined by age, ethnicity, gender, history, location, and so forth" (Rosen 2007: 297).

Therefore, while the image of a "safe, happy and protected childhood" (Boyden 2015: 168) presented by advocates of the humanitarian narrative might be relevant in Western societies, social norms and traditions in non-Western societies might interpret the concept of a 'child' in a very different manner. As Schmidt puts it, childhood as imagined in the West "is less applicable to contexts where poverty is the norm, reasonable-quality education only exists for an elite and lives are short" (Schmidt 2007: 57).[21] Dupree, talking about adolescence in Afghanistan, claims: "[a]dolescence is primarily a function of a literate,

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[21] In the majority of countries where child soldiers are recruited and used in armed groups, the average life expectancy at birth is very low. Based on the data published by the World Health Organisation, in 2015, the average person was expected to live fifty-two years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, forty-six in Sierra Leone - the lowest in the world - and fifty-four in Mozambique (WHO 2015). In this way, in these countries, minors represent an "absolute demographic majority" (Schmidt 2007: 50): in 2012, countries in sub-Saharan Africa had the youngest proportion of population in the world with over seventy percent of the region's population aged below 30 (Euromonitor International 2012). In some countries, over fifty percent of the population is made up of under-eighteens (Peters 2004: 25). Consequently, there is a constant ready supply of children for recruitment (Shepler 2004: 5).

pluralistic society, which can afford to waste half a man's life in socialization or preparing him to live as a productive member of his society… life in Afghanistan is too short and resources too scarce to allow such a luxury" (Dupree 2014: 194).

Unlike in the West, a great number of societies perceive and conceptualise the difference between childhood and adulthood not by biological age, but in terms of physical size or structural relations of power and social hierarchy, patriarchy and kinship, where transition to adulthood is often marked by initiation rites (Lee 2009: 14, Mawson 2004: 136, Schafer 2004: 88, Schmidt 2007: 58, Wessells 1998: 640). For instance, girls in Afghanistan are considered adults once they get married and particularly after giving birth to their first child; while a boy only transitions to social adulthood once he becomes the head of family after the death of his father and takes on responsibility for the household and his relatives (Lee 2009: 14). At the same time, in Mozambique, childhood is understood in patriarchal structures as being a 'child of someone' rather than being a child *per se* (Schafer 2004: 88). Therefore, in societies like the Mozambican one, childhood, in a certain sense, is a never-ending process (Schmidt 2007: 58).

In these societies, children are viewed as competent and capable agents with duties, who are expected to bear significant social, economic and political responsibilities for their families and their communities as part of existing cultural norms (Lee 2009: 14). These responsibilities - including child labour - are even considered beneficial to children's moral and social development, and children who are bearers of these duties often feel pride for being able to contribute to their family's life (Lee 2009: 15). Children who do not work are

seen as 'bad children' and parents who do not make their child perform some kind of labour - such as fetching water, cooking or cleaning - are considered to be 'spoiling' the kid (Lee 2009: 17, Shepler 2004: 12).

In time of war, these responsibilities might expand to participation in the conflict, as happened in Afghanistan, where young boys, sacrificing their own personal safety, joined militias for their family and community's survival and wellbeing (Hart 2006: 218, Lee 2009: 16). Furthermore, in many societies - such as Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone - getting involved in the armed conflict is considered as a "fast track into adulthood" that entails the establishment of the child's social status, respect, as well as adult dignity; in the words of Schmidt it represents a "means of strategic upward mobility" (Schmidt 2007: 58; see also Lee 2009: 23; Vigh 2006: 112, 138). Shepler (2004) explains how established practices of youth - such as child labour, fosterage, education and apprenticeships, as well as secret societies - were continuous with the participation of children in armed conflict in Sierra Leone.[22] The recruitment of children into armed groups needs to be seen in the contexts sketched above. Local values and responsibilities may make the involvement of children in armed conflict appear rational, reasonable, organic, compatible and far from being paradoxical (Rosen 2007: 297, Shepler 2004: 13).

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[22] For a detailed discussion about how children transitioned from such everyday life practices to involvement in armed groups in the context of Sierra Leone, see Shepler's (2004) paper titled *The Social and Cultural Context of Child Soldiering in Sierra Leone.*

Advocates of the conscious actor narrative often highlight children's military participation in warfare as early as the Children's Crusade in 1212, the American War of Independence at the end of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in Hitler's troops during World War Two, among other conflicts (Brocklehurst 2006: 34, Denov 2010: 21). There are numerous well-known historical figures who were, in fact, child soldiers in times when the active participation of children in wars was considered ordinary. For instance, Carl von Clausewitz - one of the most prominent military theorists from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries - joined the Prussian army at the age of twelve; Alexander the Great became a regent at the age of sixteen in 340 BC and launched notorious military campaigns; and Joan of Arc, French heroine of the early fifteenth century could also be considered a child soldier (Drumbl 2012: 28, Schmidt 2007: 69). Therefore, in contrast to the humanitarian narrative, child soldiering is not considered a recent phenomenon by the conscious actor narrative. Lee argues that it is only the perceptions associated with the concept of childhood and the child soldier phenomenon that have changed with modern principles questioning the morality and legitimacy of this reality (Lee 2009: 4).[23] Honwana claims that it is the visibility of civil wars after the 1990s and the extent to which children have become involved in violence - representing a shift from acting in complementary roles to them being substitutes for adult soldiers - that can be considered novel (Honwana 2007: 1;

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[23] It was the 1996 study by Graça Machel, titled *Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, that raised awareness and attracted international attention regarding the reality of the child soldier phenomenon (Berents 2009: 9).

see also Andvig & Gates 2010: 79, Drumbl 2012: 28, Huynh 2015: 129). In contemporary conflicts, there can be entire units made up of children in certain armed groups, such as the Baby Brigade and the Leopard Brigade in the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Mapp 2011: 75, Wessells 2009: 16).

3.3.2 Child Soldiers, Causes of Child Soldiering and Advocates of the Conscious Actor Narrative

In the conscious actor narrative, children are seen as conscious decision-makers, cogent agents and rational actors who exercise a choice to join the armed group and participate in conflict (Waschefort 2015: 45). Advocates of the narrative adopt the 'sui generis approach' which focuses on the particularities and unique situation of each child, and rejects the idea of having a universal childhood and universal causes of child soldiering (Waschefort 2015: 45). As Rosen puts it: "[t]he specifics of history and culture shape the lives of children and youth during peace and war, creating many different kinds of childhood and many different kinds of child soldiers" (Rosen 2005: 132). Wessells agrees with the argument made by Rosen by claiming that "[c]hildren become soldiers through many different channels and for many different reasons" (Wessells 2009: 32). Some children become child soldiers by making a conscious decision to join the armed group, others are abducted, while a number of them are born into the group and later become soldiers themselves. Once children become soldiers, their experiences also vary based on their age, gender, role in the group, the group's profile and their local context. Therefore, the conscious actor narrative

highlights the uniqueness of each child soldier's experience and urges against generalisation and reductionism, but suggests addressing former child soldiers' needs on an individual basis.

The conscious actor narrative is predominantly advocated in the fields of anthropology, history and sociology, and is heavily criticised by advocates of the mainstream humanitarian narrative.

3.4 Criticism of the Humanitarian and Conscious Actor Narratives and Their Implications for the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers

Both the mainstream humanitarian approach and the conscious actor narrative have certain aspects which can be considered as strengths. The main strength of the humanitarian narrative lies in its focus on the vulnerability of children and the importance of the special care children require, mostly in the context of war. On the other hand, advocates of the conscious actor narrative refuse to look at children who join armed groups and willingly participate in armed conflict as irrational actors, and emphasise the individual agency exhibited in their actions. This is considered a strength because such a perspective aligns better with the way most former child soldiers interpret their own identity and past experiences, as well as with the perception of the receiving community on childhood and child soldiering.

However, both narratives have a great number of shortcomings - examined below - which prevent them from becoming the most appropriate approach to use to design sustainable prevention (of recruitment and re-recruitment) and reintegration programmes targeting children and child soldiers in conflict-affected countries. Therefore, there is a need for the introduction and application of a third narrative, namely the tactical agency approach, which will be discussed in the next part of the present chapter.

3.4.1 Gap between Humanitarian Narrative and Local Experiences of Child Soldiering

One of the main shortcomings of the humanitarian narrative is its failure to reflect the local experiences of child soldiering. Denov argues that child soldiers are "exoticized, decontextualized and essentialized"; while Shepler claims that the image of the child soldier portrayed in the West is an almost fictitious one, and can be seen as a target population that was selected and later categorised and classified by the state (Denov 2010: 13, Shepler 2005: 207). Therefore, in a way, it can be considered to be distorted and fabricated for political or economic purposes.

The dominant discourse of childhood and child soldiering can be seen as part of the 'politics of age', and as a political and emotive construct, which is used by various international, regional and local actors to mobilise resources and promote legal and political agendas (Berents 2009: 16, Drumbl 2012: 37, Rosen 2007: 296, Schmidt 2007: 64). Greitens (2001) argues that besides states, the aid

industry, the media and relief agencies also have a great interest in portraying children as weak and vulnerable in order to "sell their products, promote their stories, and enhance the profile of their organisation" (Schmidt 2007: 64). Charli Carpenter, human security analyst, states that "the symbolic victim must be seen as entirely lacking agency; s/he must be both unable to help her/himself and an unequivocal non-participant in the political events from which his/her misery results" (Drumbl 2012: 37). Moreover, Western countries are believed to use the issue of child recruitment in their mission to delegitimize certain states - such as in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan - as well as non-state actors who are seen as enemies, and to legitimize their own interventionist agenda (Drumbl 2012: 37, Hart 2006: 222).[24]

Nonetheless, Drumbl warns scholars and policy-makers that "the easier path that assuages our sensibilities is not necessarily the best path to protect children from endemic conflict, to safeguard and heal societies from the pain that children may inflict, or to promote the best interests of those children who commit international crimes" (Drumbl 2010: 227). Misunderstanding children's participation in armed conflict and imposing a specific narrative on them, which does not reflect their own self-perception and the way they interpret their identity and past experiences, can pathologise former child soldiers, undermine their self-image as survivors of difficult experiences, and further isolate, objectify,

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[24] The double standard exercised by Western societies - rooted in these countries' admission of minors into their own national armed forces - was discussed in Chapter One.

stigmatize and disempower them (Klocker 2007: 92, Ladisch 2013, Wessells 2006: 262).[25]

Disproportionate attention is given to the narrative of the child who got abducted, drugged, manipulated and abused, or saw no way out of his/her life circumstances other than by joining one of the armed groups, even though such an image only reflects one possible reality of child soldiering. This narrative diminishes the rationality behind the child's action and silences the voice of those who self-claimedly made a conscious decision to join the armed group, whether it be as a survival mechanism, due to cultural background or for ideological reasons (Lee 2009: 4). Lee calls the discussion of the 'voluntary' factor in child soldiers' recruitment "a window into young people's underlying concerns, grievances, needs, and aspirations, which may otherwise be ignored in the 'all-are-victims' discourse" (Lee 2009: 20). In a similar way, Drumbl argues that acknowledging the voluntary nature of children's participation in armed conflict is "a condition precedent to the genuine eradication of the practice of child soldiering" (Drumbl 2012: 80). As Brett (2003) puts it, only when one understands the reasons why children decide to join armed groups is one in a position to help them reintegrate in a way that addresses their real social, economic and political needs and goals.

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[25] It is important to note that being resilient does not equate to being unaffected by war (Wessells 2009: 136).

Drumbl expresses his further concern about the failure of policy-makers and scholars in the international community to distinguish between those children who demonstrate great enterprise to minimise the risk of abduction by the armed group and those who willingly join the group (Drumbl 2010: 222). For instance, the 'night commuters' in Northern Uganda walk long distances each night from the IDP (internally displaced persons) camps to sleep in the relative safety of larger towns - churches, bus stations, hospitals, verandas, temporary shelters - in order to prevent their abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) which group uses camps as recruitment grounds (Berents 2009: 14, Wessells 2009: 40). The 'common causes approach' to child soldiering, advocated by the humanitarian narrative, might describe the environment in which children are recruited into armed groups and provide a landscape to understand why some children are more inclined to become members than others, but it does not offer an explanation as to why only a small percentage of children join armed groups (see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 138). Ninety percent of children living in war zones do not enter armed groups, even if they are impoverished, have broken families, do not attend school and are unemployed (Brett & Specht 2004: 65, Peters 2004: 7, Wessells 2009: 43).

Furthermore, putting those children who end up in the armed group - either by being abducting or joining voluntarily - and willingly stay with the group in the same category as those who put their life at serious risk by escaping from the group in full knowledge of the potential fatal consequences if caught, denigrates the great courage and initiative these children exhibit (Drumbl 2010: 222). In

addition, the discourse used in official documents when talking about the desertion of child soldiers from armed groups - the concepts of 'release' and 'exit from an armed force or group' - fails to reflect the great agency children exhibit when escaping the group. Former child soldiers often express pride for having been able to show subtle resistance and trick the rules of the game set by the group leadership during their involvement in the armed group (Honwana 2007: 69).

Drumbl argues that when the agency exhibited by children in their recruitment process and during their participation in armed conflict is considered non-existent, there is a risk of seeing them as playing a minor role in their own reintegration process, as well as in post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building (Drumbl 2010: 218). Even though they are frequently called 'the lost generation', children and young people often show no regret for their military involvement, and consider their war experiences liberating, meaningful and empowering (Lee 2009: 22). Belittling their achievements and the skills they acquired as soldiers by the adoption of the humanitarian narrative - which considers war as a senseless and destructive phenomenon that can offer no benefits for the child - generates feelings of frustration and disappointment. Berents claims that such negligence increases the likelihood of the involvement of former child soldiers in gangs and criminal organisations, which provide them with what reintegration programmes refuse to acknowledge, namely feelings of personal self-worth and participation (Berents 2009: 20). Moreover, in the framework of the humanitarian narrative, the adoption of the "straightjacket of

innocence", as Ladisch calls it, does not leave room for former child soldiers to exhibit their moral agency and deal with the often felt shame, remorse and guilt for their past deeds (Boothby *et al.* 2006: 97, Ladisch 2013).

3.4.2 Gap between Humanitarian Narrative and the Community's Understanding of Childhood and Child Soldiering

A further limitation of the humanitarian narrative is its inability to reflect the receiving community's understanding of childhood and child soldiering. Forcing the ideas of the humanitarian approach on the local population which might have a different interpretation of childhood and child soldiering, is not only unethical, but also shows a lack of cultural sensitivity. Moreover, it has a significant implication for the reintegration of former child soldiers, since - as demonstrated in the next chapter - the receiving community has a very significant role in the process.

Members of communities into which former child soldiers are (re)integrated are expected to adopt the humanitarian discourse on child soldiers as 'innocent victims' lacking any agency and criminal responsibility. However, this idea is highly challenging to achieve considering that these community members are victims of the same war themselves and might even be victims of atrocities - such as human rights abuses (murder, kidnapping, rape and physical abuse), looting and destruction of property - committed by the same child soldiers they are required to welcome (back) to their neighbourhood (Nilsson 2005: 19, Porto

et al. 2008: 149). The view of an 'innocent child' is often diametrically opposed to the local perception of child soldiers and generates anger and feeling of injustice among the population, thereby hindering the process of reconciliation and truth-seeking (Drumbl 2012: 58, Fisher 2013: 15, Lee 2009: 31, Rethmann 2010: 13). In Sierra Leone, for instance, child soldiers were not seen as 'innocent victims' but as willing perpetrators of atrocities, fully aware of the impact of their actions (Maclure & Denov 2006: 121, Wyness 2012: 121). A number of them were even killed, burnt alive or injured after returning to their communities (Schotsmans 2012: 225).

Furthermore, the ongoing global project to promote children's rights around the world is considered to diminish the significance of established local norms and practices, which process is compared by Hart to the work of missionaries seeking to spread Christian faith and replace local beliefs (Hart 2006: 219). The humanitarian approach - which advocates the fundamental rights of children to receive special assistance in their reintegration period, as well as their right to self-expression - might even cause resentment among members of the receiving community. For instance, Lee discusses how programmes that aim at restoring the 'lost childhood' of former child soldiers are seen as an unjust privilege by community members, in a context where children who are members of the civilian population have no possibility to live a 'normal childhood' themselves (Lee 2009: 30). Moreover, Shepler (2005) argues that the fact that former child soldiers were encouraged to speak up in community consultation meetings as part of the reintegration programme in Sierra Leone had a negative influence on

the reconciliation process. Members of the receiving community expected former child soldiers to be mute and to demonstrate repentance and humility as a pre-condition for forgiveness and acceptance, and to return to their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy instead of trying to explain themselves (Shepler 2005: 205-206; see also Vigh 2006: 226). This demonstrates that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has limited relevance in countries where the social, economic and political conditions which would guarantee the realisation of the childhood portrayed in the international document are missing, and where the right discourse is considered less important than it is in Western countries (Hart 2006: 223).

3.4.3 Gap between Conscious Actor Narrative and the Reality of Human Agency

The way advocates of the conscious actor narrative view childhood and child soldiering has its shortcomings. Even though childhood might be interpreted very differently in different cultures and child soldiering might have diverse causes, as argued by the conscious actor narrative, it is important to acknowledge that despite the uniqueness of each case there are certain characteristics and factors which are universal regardless of which part of the world one looks at. These commonalities should be utilised to facilitate the design and implementation of prevention and reintegration programmes in war-affected countries.

Nonetheless, the main weakness of the conscious actor narrative is its overemphasis on human agency. By providing a polarised approach to agency, advocates of the narrative tend to locate the individual in a vacuum and underplay the significant influence of external circumstances on agency. The individual is seen as a rational decision-maker who is fully aware of the consequences of his/her actions, a view which does not reflect reality. Although considering the environment in which children operate in times of war might serve to provide a rationale for their decision, the structural factors influencing their actions significantly limit the choices they can make. Therefore, in contrast to the view advocated by the conscious actor narrative, children cannot be considered to be acting from a position of power and unlimited free-will.

The image of child soldiers as entirely rational utility-maximizing agents might also hinder their reintegration process, since they can be held legally accountable for their recruitment and the atrocities committed while in the armed group. In this case, the role of situational factors is underestimated and the shared accountability by the family, local community, state and international community is downplayed, while the influence of dispositional factors relating to the individual is highlighted and overestimated (Drumbl 2010: 217, 229; Drumbl 2012: 20).[26] Those who want to shift the blame onto children can easily abuse this strong focus on individual responsibility. Moreover, the portrayal of

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[26] The image of child soldiers advocated by the conscious actor narrative is similar to the portrayal of children engaged in criminal organisations in the wider society, discussed in Chapter One.

children as cogent agents and conscious perpetrators might make community members reluctant to receive former child soldiers (back) into their neighbourhood and in this way hinder their social reintegration.

3.5 <u>Tactical Agency Approach</u>

3.5.1 Child Soldiers

Compared to the humanitarian and conscious actor narratives, advocates of the tactical agency approach take a more intermediate position on how child soldiers are viewed. As Honwana puts it, child soldiers live in a "twilight zone" between the worlds of childhood and adulthood: biologically speaking they are still children, but lack the characteristics associated with childhood; "they perform adult tasks, but they are not yet adults" (Honwana 2007: 3). Roméo Dallaire has a similar understanding of child soldiers when he states "[t]hey [child soldiers] are not truly children in any definition except biological" (Dallaire 2011: 4). In this way, child soldiers are considered to be navigating a multiplicity of simultaneous identities and states of being, and lack a permanent, socially defined place: they are children and adults, victims and perpetrators, civilians and soldiers (Honwana 2007: 4, 73, 74). According to Honwana, in the case of child soldiers, 'tactical agency' also means 'interstitial agency' which is derived from the borderland condition these children find themselves in and is "not defined through a logic of identity but through a logic of hybrid, of the in-between" (Honwana 2005: 44, 50; see also Oswell 2013: 59).

In the framework of the tactical agency approach, children in conflict settings are considered to exhibit their agency in many different ways, even if that agency can be seen as highly constrained by the socio-economic and political environment. Advocates of this narrative argue that children who decide to join the armed group, stay in the group and re-engage in military or criminal activities after their demobilisation from the group, cannot be considered fully responsible for their actions due to the highly limiting nature of their environment, but at the same time they cannot be seen completely deprived of agency either (Honwana 2005: 48, Honwana 2007: 69). Drumbl describes children's constrained agency by claiming that "it may not be a fair decision, and it certainly is not one undertaken in a situation of untrammelled free-will, but it is some kind of a decision nonetheless" (Drumbl 2010: 223). The different manifestations of, and constraining factors to, children's agency will be discussed in the next chapter.

3.5.2 The Foundation of the Narrative

The idea of examining the agency of individuals within the context in which they operate has a long history and has been studied by scholars from various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and philosophy. In structuration theory, British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1984) discusses the interconnectedness between what he calls the structures[27] of social systems (and the norms and values that reinforce them) and the agency of the individuals, and

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[27] Structure is defined by Giddens as "rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems" (Giddens 1984: 169, 377).

suggests that the relationship between these two factors is formed through human actions (Maclure & Denov 2006: 119, 131). French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1998), uses the concept of 'social space'[28], while Danish anthropologist, Henrik Vigh (2003, 2006), talks about 'social terrain' or 'environment' in his book *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*, to refer to the same concept Giddens describes as 'structure'. Nonetheless, the structure in which individuals operate and take actions is not a stable, solid or transparent one, but it is one in constant motion and in a state of permanent transformation where its unpredictability stems from (Vigh 2006: 12). Movement within such an unstable environment, therefore, requires the agent to be "attentive towards both the immediate and the future social configurations and possibilities in order to secure his safety" (Vigh 2006: 13; see also Vigh 2006: 10, 208). This means that when taking actions, individuals need to take into consideration the circumstances of the present, as well as the possible conditions of the future, or 'the imaginary' as Vigh calls it (2006: 13, 130). Besides being unpredictable, the structure - or 'field' as Bourdieu (1998: 32) names it - is also characterised by competitiveness and struggle, for being inhabited by agents with similar trajectories who confront one another to obtain the same capital with the aim of acquiring a more desirable social position within the structure (Utas 2005b: 407, Vigh 2006: 80, 171). In contrast to other scholars

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[28] Bourdieu defines social space as "a set of distinct and coexisting positions which are exterior to one another and which are defined in relation to one another through their *mutual exteriority* and their relations of proximity, vicinity, or distance, as well as through relations of order, such as above, below, and *between*" (Bourdieu 1998: 6).

who have examined the relationship between structure and human agency, Giddens argues that the structure of social systems is not always constraining, but can also have an enabling impact (Giddens 1984: 169). Based on the same idea, Australian human geographer, Natascha Klocker, distinguishes between 'thinners' and 'thickeners'. She calls 'thinners' the factors which shrink one's agency, while 'thickeners' are structures, contexts and relationships which expand one's range of viable options (Klocker 2007: 85).

The structure is shaped primarily by the individuals' actions operating within. Such actions are predominantly determined by the agent's social position and trajectories within the structure which then shape the level of power, as well as the configurations and amounts of capital they possess and can turn to their own advantage (Bourdieu 1998: 34). Based on their position within society, individuals have a different "realm of possibility" available to them for action (Vigh 2006: 14). German sociologist, Ralf Dahrendorf (1979), refers to 'life chances' - determined by the interrelations between options or choices, and ligatures or bonds[29] - that concept was developed from Max Weber's (1965) idea of 'social options' (Dahrendorf 1979: 30, 34). Vigh uses the concept of 'horizons' to refer to Dahrendorf's idea of 'life chances' which he describes as "the spaces of possibilities and spheres of orientation that constantly arise in the interaction between agents in motion and the shifting social and political

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[29] While options - or choices - are conceptualised as possibilities or alternative actions individuals have available to them within the social structure they operate in; ligatures are bonds or linkages individuals are placed into due to their social position and which determine the choices that emerge for them (Dahrendorf 1979: 30; see also Vigh 2006: 14).

circumstances they seek to move within" (Vigh 2006: 30). Along the same argument, Giddens argues that the way individuals exhibit their agency does not reflect their intentions, but rather their capabilities to take certain action (Giddens 1984: 9). Therefore, in Giddens' understanding of the concept, agency is the exercise of an action, in which the individual is the agent who "could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently (Giddens 1984: 9). To be in a position to 'act differently' entails that the perpetrator of the action is in the possession of "a range of causal powers" and by deploying such powers one has the capability to influence "a specific process or state of affairs" and those powers deployed by other social actors (Giddens 1984: 14).

Based on the amount of power the agent holds in relation to the structure, French scholar, Michel de Certeau, distinguishes between so-called strategies and tactics.[30] He defines strategy as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" from its environment (de Certeau 1984: 35-36).[31] On the other hand, a tactic is considered by de Certeau "an art of the weak", which is "determined by the *absence of power*" (de Certeau 1984: 37, 38). It is described as

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[30] The differentiation between strategy and tactics was initially introduced in the Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz's work, *On War* (2007). He distinguishes between strategy that he defines as "the use of engagements [combats] for the object of the war", and tactics that he describes as "the use of armed forces in the engagement [combat]" (Clausewitz 2007: 74).
[31] At the same time, Bourdieu refers to the field of power as "the space of the relations between the agents who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field" (Bourdieu 1998: 34).

"a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper[32] locus... it is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'... and within enemy territory... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them... This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers." (de Certeau 1984: 37)[33]

Using this distinction between strategies and tactics, Honwana argues that child soldiers' agency cannot be considered strategic since none of the three requirements identified by de Certeau, which would make their agency strategic, are present: "[t]hey are not in a position of power; they may not be fully conscious of the ultimate goals of their actions; and they may not anticipate any long-term gains or benefits" (Honwana 2007: 51). However, they are thought to use their tactical agency, the 'agency of the weak', to cope with and maximise the concrete, immediate circumstances of the environment in which they operate by seizing and carving out opportunities available to them for improvement or at least survival (Honwana 2007: 51).

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[32] De Certeau defines the 'proper' as "a triumph of place over time" (de Certeau 1984: 36). He further argues that it "allows one to capitalize acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions, and this to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances" (de Certeau 1984: 36).
[33] Vigh argues that tactic or *dubria* - as it is called in his country of analysis, Guinea-Bissau - is used by the individual to "navigate a given, already constructed, terrain" or space and can be understood as the use of "shrewdness and craftiness" with the aim of manipulating and manoeuvring within a space governed by rules set by those in power (Vigh 2006: 126, 133, 134).

3.6 <u>Conclusion</u>

Despite it being a highly controversial subject, the discussion, understanding and acknowledgement of agency is important because former child soldiers often perceive their own identity and interpret past experiences through such agency. Moreover, the receiving community and the society at large see child soldiers through such lenses. Therefore, in order to design and implement successful and sustainable prevention (of recruitment and re-recruitment) and reintegration programmes, alternative visions of child soldiers need to be adopted which reflect such perspectives (Bjørkhaug 2010: 21, Denov 2010: 17, Schmidt 2007: 49).

The question as to which determinant has the greatest influence on one's actions - whether it is human agency or structural factors - should not be seen as having a clear dichotomous answer as suggested by the humanitarian and the conscious actor narratives. The complex dynamic between human agency and structural factors needs to be disentangled and a balanced, more holistic perspective needs to be applied in the form of the tactical agency approach. This approach highlights the importance of human agency, but also recognises and stresses the significance of structural constraints. Due to its ability to provide a more authentic view on the agency debate, the tactical agency approach can contribute more effectively to the sustainable reintegration of former child soldiers and therefore, is considered the most suitable to be applied in the presentation and analysis of the fieldwork findings of the present thesis.

In the next chapter, which is a continuation of the discussion of the literature, the various constraining factors to, and manifestations of, children's tactical and strategic agency will be explored in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict. Furthermore, in the final part of the chapter, the contribution of social capital theory to the agency debate in general and the tactical agency approach in particular will be analysed, primarily highlighting the role of social capital as a significant constrainer and enabler to children's agency in the different stages of their involvement in armed conflict.

Chapter 4

The Constraining Factors to, and Manifestations of, Children's Agency in the Context of War and Social Capital as a Structural Factor to Human Agency

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, advocates of the tactical agency approach argue that, in the context of war, children's agency is highly constrained by the structure, nonetheless, they still manage to navigate around such constraints and carve out opportunities for themselves.

Part One of the present chapter will discuss the various constrainers to children's agency, looking at the time before, during and after the child's involvement in armed conflict. In order to provide a systematic and holistic analysis of such factors, Kimmel and Roby's model of the institutionalisation of child soldiering will be applied (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741-743). In the second section, the different ways in which children's tactical and strategic agency is manifested will be examined in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict. Part Three of the chapter will analyse one of, if not the, most important structural factor to children's agency in the context of war, namely social capital. By

getting a better understanding of how social capital, or the lack of it, affects children's agency in their decision to join the armed group, desert the group and stay in civilian society instead of returning to the ranks of the group, recruitment and re-recruitment could be prevented more effectively, and the reintegration process of former child soldiers could be made more sustainable.

4.2 <u>Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in the Context of War</u>[34]

As discussed in the previous chapter, the presence and interplay of certain structures, contexts and relationships surrounding children might shrink their range of viable options and therefore, limit their agency (Giddens 1984: 169). These are called 'constraining factors' or 'thinners' (Klocker 2007: 85). In order to design and implement sustainable prevention and reintegration programmes for former child soldiers, it is important to understand the environment in which the children operate before they join the armed group and while they are members of the group. Furthermore, the consideration of constraining structural factors might facilitate the receiving community to forgive the atrocities committed by former child soldiers during their participation in armed conflict; it may support former child soldiers to interpret their past experiences and also

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[34] See Table 1 at the end of the section which contains the various constraining factors to children's agency in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict that have been discussed in the literature. The recurring constrainers to children's agency in the various stages of their involvement are indicated in bold.

help to ease the remorse they often feel after they return to civilian society. Moreover, it is important to note that some structural factors which constrain children's agency before and during their involvement in armed conflict might recur in the reintegration process. These factors are crucial to consider because they can have a particularly limiting impact on former child soldiers' agency and therefore, can hinder their sustainable reintegration.

The elements which are analysed below as 'constraining factors' are interpreted as having a negative and limiting impact on the child's agency under the assumption that the best interest of the child is to be as remote from war as possible, because proximity to war would hinder their psychosocial and moral development, and would also impose a security risk on them. In the light of such an understanding, recruitment, involvement and re-enlistment in the armed group are deemed detrimental and therefore, none of the elements which reinforce and/or facilitate such outcomes - either in a direct or indirect way - can be considered of a favourable nature.[35] Even though some of the analysed factors might seemingly be beneficial to the child and have positive associations - such as the provision of protection, shelter, belonging and power to children by the armed group during their involvement in conflict - because of the context and the long-term impact of such factors they are not considered as enablers to

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[35] Prevention of recruitment needs to be prioritised under all circumstances, nonetheless, once the child actively engages in war (prevention fails), such a reality needs to be acknowledged, and the skills and knowledge acquired by child soldiers during their involvement in conflict need to be recognised and incorporated into their reintegration programme (distinctiveness from humanitarian narrative).

children's agency, but as constrainers which disempower them and deprive them of their full capacity to exhibit their agency.

The various factors which constrain children's agency before their recruitment into the armed group have been widely discussed in the literature by a great number of scholars, primarily advocates of the humanitarian narrative, due to their inclination to emphasise the limiting impact of structural factors on children's agency in general and in their recruitment process in particular. Nonetheless, there is an imbalance between the literature focusing on the pre-recruitment period and the two other phases of children's involvement in armed conflict. Regarding the reintegration period, this gap can be attributed to the belief that once demobilised and perhaps engaged in the reintegration programme, former child soldiers are empowered and are able to practise their agency to the fullest. However, it is important to recognise that, even though they are removed from a direct proximity to war, former child soldiers' agency is still not unconstrained in this stage of their life.[36] Some of the constrainers to children's agency in the post-demobilisation period are recurring, while some appear for the first time in the reintegration period.

In the present thesis, the constraining factors are categorised using the model designed by Kimmel and Roby, which distinguishes six different dimensions that are considered to interact to facilitate institutionalised child soldiering.

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[36] It is important to note that the elements presented below as constrainers to former child soldiers' agency in the reintegration period were identified in the general DDR literature, in particular as part of the analysis of the challenges that former (child) soldiers face in their reintegration process, and not in the agency literature *per se*.

These dimensions include politics, policy, culture and religious beliefs of the larger society, community, family and psychosocial factors (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741-743) (see Figure 1 below). Kimmel and Roby can be considered advocates of the humanitarian approach because they argue in favour of viewing children as "victims of institutionalized child abuse who have suffered human rights violations and psychosocial harm" (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 750).[37] Nevertheless, their conceptual model is a suitable one to apply to carry out a holistic and systematic analysis on the structural constraints to children's agency in the context of war. The various dimensions identified by Kimmel and Roby will be used; however, because their discussion of the individual macro and micro-level elements is fairly limited, within each dimension more specific factors found in the literature will be added to enhance the analysis. It is important to highlight that the list is not exhaustive, but the discussed factors are recurring elements identified in the literature.

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[37] It is interesting to see how both the psychologistic and human rights frameworks appear in the discourse used by the authors, as key characteristics of the humanitarian narrative, discussed in Chapter Three.

Figure 1: Descriptive model of the institutionalisation of child soldiering
(Source: Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741)
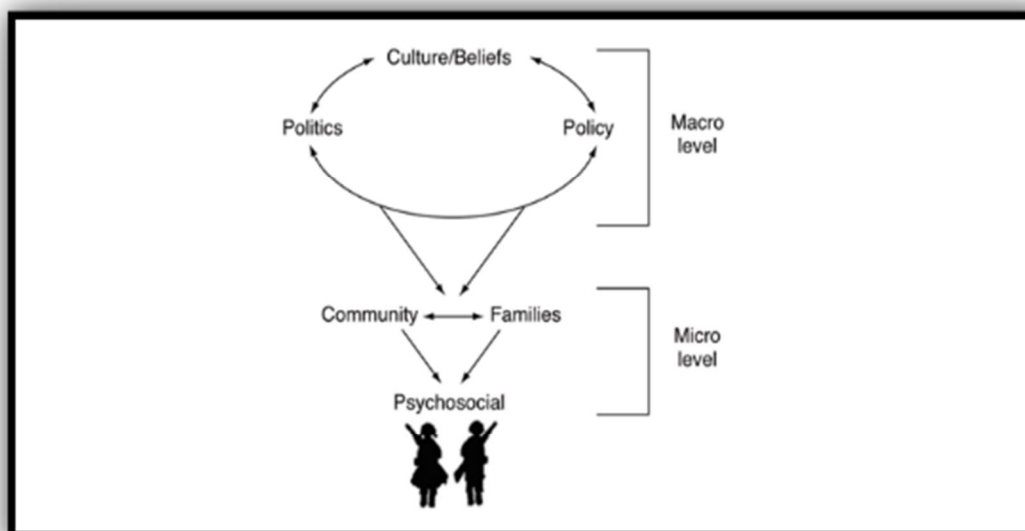
4.2.1 Pre-recruitment Period

4.2.1.1 Politics

On the macro level, Kimmel and Roby (2007) identify three dimensions which are considered to increase the probability of the child becoming engaged in armed conflict. The first macro-level dimension of the model is politics. With respect to politics, the different factors which are discussed in the literature as constraining children's agency in the pre-recruitment period include a general lack of respect for human rights (Mapp 2011: 70), the presence of an unstable government (Mapp 2011: 70), as well as political violence and terror (Honwana 2007: 51). The latter is expected to have little importance and relevance in the case of Colombia, because the country does not have an authoritarian regime

(The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017: 8) - even though human rights are violated by state actors too as discussed in Chapter Two - and forced recruitment into the national armed forces is no longer practiced. The negative influence of the two other factors is rather indirect and entails children's rights being unprotected and neglected, and state-provided services (health, education, security[38]) being somewhat limited and ineffective.

4.2.1.2   Culture/Beliefs

The second macro-level dimension which is considered to facilitate child soldiering, presented in Kimmel and Roby's (2007) model, is culture and religious beliefs of the larger society. Some of the structural factors addressed in the literature which can be put into this category include social and cultural norms, such as child labour and lack of enrolment in education (Mapp 2011: 70, Brett & Specht 2004, Shepler 2004), as well as traditional power structures, including gender stereotyping (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 744). In a great number of conflict-affected countries, children and youth join armed groups because in this way they are provided with opportunities of training and education that the state has not made available to them (Wessells 2006: 248). In Sierra Leone, in an environment in which schools were shut down because of the raging war in the country, some armed groups - such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) - provided free bush-schools in their main camps (Peters 2004: 21). Richards

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[38] Children often willingly leave behind a civilian life associated with a lack of safety, to move to a dangerous position which offers the illusion of security and in which one feels to have more agency and control over risk factors (Bjørkhaug 2010: 10). Nordstrom argues that the "least dangerous place to be in a war today is in the military" (Rosen 2005: 17).

discusses the relationship between apprenticeship and child soldiering in the following way: "The arts of war are better than no arts at all. The army was simply seen as a new form of schooling. Where recruits were gathered together for training in the field, in advance positions, the commander in question would take young volunteers as personal 'apprentices', rather than as formal recruits" (Richards 1996: 24; see also Peters 2004: 21, 30). In addition, in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nepal and several other countries, girls decided to get involved in the conflict because it provided them with a "greater range of movement across social and geographical landscapes" (Beirens 2001 in Wyness 2012: 123) than if they had stayed in their villages where their lives would have been limited to fulfilling traditional roles including "tending agricultural fields, carrying water, cooking and caring for children" (Beirens 2001 in Wyness 2012: 122; see also Lee 2009: 22, Mapp 2011: 71, McKay 2006: 95, Rosen 2005: 17).

Moreover, being a victim of domestic abuse and sexual violence also acts as a constrainer to children's agency. Besides being a push factor for a child's decision to become a member of the armed group (Brett & Specht 2004: 87, 92), enduring this traumatic experience at such a young age makes the child more inclined to develop long-term trust issues and psychological problems - such as Stockholm Syndrome[39], major depression, generalised anxiety disorder - and can

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[39] A psychological phenomenon which involves the development of bidirectional strong bonds between hostages (victims) and captors (perpetrators) (Wessells 2009: 66). Dee Graham applied the Classic Stockholm Syndrome Theory to explain the perverse relationship that can develop between a child and a child abuser, among other potential scenarios. Graham hypothesised four indicators of the syndrome, namely (1) perceived threat to survival, (2) perceived inability to escape, (3) perceived kindness from captor within a context of terror, and (4) isolation from perspectives other than those of the abuser (Graham *et al.* 1994: 33).

lead to higher substance abuse and suicide rates, as well as higher levels of involvement in criminality (Helander 2008: 136, Wessells 2009: 66).

In addition, the wide presence of a culture of war created by the presence of an armed conflict of long duration is also believed to make children's involvement in conflict more likely (Mapp 2011: 70). The fact that the recruitment of children into armed groups and armed forces takes place in the context of war can be considered a restricting factor or, as Brett and Specht put it, it is the war that comes to children and not the other way around (Brett & Specht 2004: 123; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 122). Wars also have a multiplifier effect according to Schmidt, since they create situations where various constraining factors to a child's agency are generated, such as closure of schools, death of family members, lack of food and income, as well as the presence of armed groups in the child's immediate neighbourhood (Schmidt 2007: 52). The wide presence of such groups might also lead to the spread of their ideology and the child's identification with the cause of the fight, which increases the likelihood of the child's recruitment into the armed group (Mapp 2011: 70, Wessells 2006: 249, Wessells 2009: 45).

Furthermore, in countries where the ideology of martyrdom is part of the society's belief system, it can act as a significant push factor for children to join armed groups (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 743). Child suicide bombers have been recruited in various armed conflicts through religious indoctrination, for example by Iranian militant groups in the Iran-Iraq War, Palestinian militant groups in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the

Islamic State in Syria (Boutin 2014: 157, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008: 259, Kimmel & Roby 2007: 743). However, martyrdom is not expected to be relevant to the discussion of children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia because such an ideology does not form part of any of the illegal armed groups' tenets and it is against the religious beliefs of the majority of the Colombian population since suicide is considered a mortal sin by Roman Catholic faith.

4.2.1.3 Policy

The third macro-level dimension identified by Kimmel and Roby (2007) is policy. The absence of policies, poor enforcement and misguided policy application are all named by the authors as equally important factors in the institutionalisation of child soldiering (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 742). Within this dimension, there have been several elements discussed in the literature which were found to facilitate the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, such as poverty and lack of opportunities (Brett & Specht 2004, Mapp 2011: 71, Shepler 2004: 6, Singer 2006: 62, Wessells 2009: 54), as well as forced recruitment (Schmidt 2007: 56, Singer 2006: 45, Wessells 2009: 37). All these factors are expected to have a significant constraining impact on children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia.

4.2.1.4 Community

On the micro level, there are three dimensions identified by Kimmel and Roby (2007) which are considered to act as constrainers to children's agency in the

pre-recruitment period. The first micro-level dimension is community. Children's recruitment into armed groups is often seen as the result of acts of commission and omission perpetrated by 'failed adults' in 'failed communities' (Boyden 2006: 8, Huynh 2015: 132). Kimmel and Roby also discuss how children's forced recruitment by illegal armed groups might not be prevented by community protection and resistance due to the community's fear of reprisal (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 744).

Moreover, besides living in a 'failed community', marginalisation and exclusion from the community and the society as a whole is also discussed in the literature as a constraining factor to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period. Youth often develop a collective sense of their marginalisation and exclusion from the society they live in and, in this light, the violent rebellion can be understood as young people's "conscious attempt to transform power structures and gain access to resources" (Boyden 2006: 20; see also Vigh 2006: 96). In South Africa, a great number of black youth who grew up during the apartheid period adopted the ideology of liberation struggle, and started considering violence meaningful and a legitimate means to achieve social justice and equality (Wessells 2006: 249, Wessells 2009: 45). Children and adolescents joined insurgency movements for similar reasons in Palestine (*intifada*), El Salvador and Bhutan - that is, to access a platform where their voice was heard despite their powerless position (Lee 2009: 20, 21).

In addition, peer pressure can also be listed as a constrainer to children's agency because it facilitates the recruitment of children into armed groups (Brett &

Specht 2004: 71; Goodwin-Gill & Cohn 1994: 40, 168; Singer 2006: 67). All three factors are expected to be relevant to Colombia.

4.2.1.5 Families

The second micro-level dimension considered to facilitate child soldiering in Kimmel and Roby's model (2007) is family. The financial situation of the family is thought to have great importance: children from wealthy families are less exposed to the risk of being forcibly recruited since their families can afford to use bribes, legal measures or relocation to prevent their enlistment happening; for children from poor families this protection system is not available (Mapp 2011: 70). Furthermore, separation from the family is also considered to increase the likelihood of children's recruitment to, and participation in, the armed group (Mapp 2011: 70, Singer 2006: 59). Orphanages, schoolyards and streets are frequent target places for abduction because children are separated from the protective proximity of their family (Singer 2006: 59). Therefore, in countries where the tradition of fosterage is a common practice - such as in the case of Sierra Leone - recruitment is expected to be even more likely (Shepler 2004: 15). In addition, the family might act as a constrainer to children's agency by practising certain cultural norms and beliefs, such as giving the child up to become a suicide bomber (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 744). Other family-related constraining factors which the literature suggests to facilitate child soldiering include circumstances when a child joins the armed group to protect his/her family, when a child is seeking revenge for a family member's death and/or when he/she is endeavouring to provide financial support to the family (Hart

2006: 218, Kimmel & Roby 2007: 745, Lee 2009: 16). All these elements are expected to act as constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia.

4.2.1.6 Psychosocial

The third micro-level dimension identified by Kimmel and Roby (2007) which is considered to increase the likelihood of children's recruitment into, and use in, the armed group relates to the psychosocial. These factors include weakness, inherent physical and emotional vulnerability, immaturity, incompetence, irrationality, psychological and intellectual incompleteness, an underdeveloped concept of death and a lack of understanding of the future (Honwana 2007: 3, Human Rights Watch 1994: 40, Lee 2009: 12, Schmidt 2007: 70, Shepler 2004: 7, Singer 2006: 80, Wessells 2009: 34). Adolescents are also seen as vulnerable because they are in that stage of life when they try to define their identity and search for meaning (Wessells 2006: 249). In addition, they are also going through a very stressful period regarding their psychosocial and physical development (Brett & Specht 2004: 29). These psychosocial features are considered to make children and adolescents easier to abduct, brainwash, manipulate and turn into more obedient soldiers (Singer 2006: 57). Based on the arguments of the tactical agency approach, the relevance of such psychosocial factors is unclear and questionable in general and in the case of Colombia in particular.

4.2.2 In the Armed Group

4.2.2.1 Culture/Beliefs

Enforced drug ingestion - of marijuana, amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine/heroine mixed with gunpowder called "brown-brown" - and alcohol intake is a widely applied practice by armed groups and armed forces in order to desensitise their members and make them fearless fighters (Mapp 2011: 68, Singer 2006: 81, Wessells 2009: 76). Nonetheless, such a practice is expected to have limited relevance in the case of Colombia, despite the country's notorious status as the world's number one producer of cocaine. This expected lack of importance is due to the fact that, according to Article 3 of Chapter I of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)'s statute - the greatest recruiter of minors in Colombia - the use of drugs is not allowed and is considered a crime (FARC Statute). Nonetheless, despite such an official restriction on drug use, substance abuse might still be happening, which could act as a constrainer to children's agency in the armed group.

Besides enforced drug ingestion and alcohol intake, gender is also considered to have a constraining impact on children's agency in the armed group. In addition to carrying out the same tasks that boys do, girls are more inclined to be used as concubines of commanders or seducers of the enemy, and their duty also often includes securing future recruits for the group (Dallaire 2011: 129, McKay 2006: 95). Furthermore, they often fall victim of rape, mass rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced marriage, forced child-bearing, mutilation, forced sterilisation and termination of pregnancy (Human Rights Watch 2003; Kamya

& Bwana 2012: 363; Singer 2006: 34; Wessells 2009: 34, 100). Moreover, girls and women are frequently excluded from activities which strengthen the group members' sense of solidarity, such as tattooing and peer mentoring among others (Denov 2010: 118). Such gender-based violence and exclusion is often systematic, and reflects gender discrimination and social marginalisation against girls practised within the existing patriarchal structures of the wider society (Wessells 2009: 87). However, it is important to note that in several armed groups girls are highly respected and are not treated any differently from boys. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and opposition groups in the Philippines, for instance, prohibit the rape or sexual exploitation of girls in their ranks (McKay 2006: 96, Wessells 2009: 90).

4.2.2.2   Community

Isolation, both physical and emotional, from the family and members of the civilian population can also be considered a constrainer to children's agency in the armed group (Wessells 2009: 62, 63). Keeping its members isolated fulfils multiple strategic aims for the armed group. First, it is safer to be out of sight of the national army and other opposing groups and, secondly, it is a tactic used to prevent any kind of external influence from (norms, knowledge) or links with (social networks) the outside world. Moreover, isolation increases children's dependency on the armed group and its control over them, and ensures an ideal community-building environment which can encourage soldiers to inadvertently get close to each other (Wessells 2009: 63). Furthermore, it also guarantees the

invisibility of child soldiers which then conceals the group's accountability for the recruitment and use of children in its ranks (Wessells 2009: 63).

Moreover, obligation and creation of collective fear due to harsh punishment are also considered to be constrainers to children's agency in the armed group (Wessells 2009: 60, 65). So is the presence of 'perverse social capital' in the armed group, as Mauricio Rubio (1997) calls it. Perverse social capital implies that the high levels of internal trust and reciprocity, as well as the strong sense of identity and security within social groups, are manipulated and perverted in such a way that they are beneficial exclusively to the group members, while members of the wider community and the society at large are put at a disadvantage (Haynes 2009: 14, McIlwaine & Moser 2001: 968). The values which often support the social network of the group with 'perverse social capital' include fear, hatred toward members of the opposing group or the government, as well as anger. 'Perverse social capital' is often based on the use of force, violence and illegal activities and is used by the group leadership to indoctrinate, to achieve increased loyalty and obedience, and to create herd mentality among group members (McIlwaine & Moser 2001: 968).

Herd mentality - or 'platoon solidarity' as Gutiérrez Sanín calls it (2010: 132) - means that the member of the armed group "must be stripped of his individual identity and distinctness" in order to make himself ready for self-sacrifice and to achieve unity within the group (Hoffer 1951: 61, 114). Moreover, a 'good' soldier should have "no purpose, worth and destiny apart from his collective body" and "[h]is joys and sorrows, his pride and confidence must spring from

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the fortunes and capacities of the group rather than from his individual prospects and abilities" (Hoffer 1951: 61, 62). Such a strong attachment to the armed group also increases the likelihood of the child developing Stockholm Syndrome toward their commanders who become to be seen as the child's provider, source of protection and nurturing influence (Denov 2010: 143, Vargas-Barón 2010: 215, Wessells 2009: 66).[40]

There are different methods used by the group leadership to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the group and to reinforce herd mentality among group members. Such tactics include rituals (Micolta 2009: 81); persuasion and coercion (Hoffer 1951: 102); ideology (Hoffer 1951: 125); use of family discourse (Schafer 2004, Shepler 2004, Vigh 2006)[41]; peer mentoring (Denov 2010: 105); tattooing (Denov 2010: 106, Singer 2006: 197); adoption of military nicknames (Drumbl 2012: 88, 89; Wessells 2009: 83); creation of a common enemy (Schmitt 1976); and obligation to commit atrocities against family members and/or members of the home community (Human Rights Watch 1994: 36, Singer 2006: 74, Wessells 2009: 59)[42]. Using these strategies, the group

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[40] For a critique of the idea of child soldiers developing Stockholm Syndrome toward their commanders see Opiyo Oloya's book *Child to Soldier: Stories from Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army* (2013: 73).

[41] The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone used the language of fosterage and patronage both in the recruitment process and after the child became member of the group (Shepler 2004: 15, 16). In the Mozambican civil war the discourse of family also gained great significance: the war itself was portrayed as a fight within a family, and the enemy and fellow comrades as brothers and sisters, while the leader was represented as the father who bore complete responsibility and absolute authority over his 'children' (Schafer 2004: 93, 94). In the Guinea-Bissau civil war, the conflict was understood as a war between relatives - *guerra di hermonia* - fought not against a distinguished enemy, but rather for a possibility and a better position in society (Vigh 2006: 73, 76, 85).

[42] Hazen calls this practice "the most violent blow to social unity" which leaves no other alternative for the child but to dedicate his/her life entirely to his/her new social network, the

slowly becomes a replacement for family in the child's eyes, the "war family" as Hazen calls it, for whom one is willing to fight and die for (Hazen 2005: 4).

All the previously discussed community-related factors are expected to act as constrainers to children's agency in the armed group in the case of Colombia.

4.2.2.3 Psychosocial

Despite fulfilling adult tasks and being treated as equals, child soldiers are still children and therefore, are considered to have the same psychosocial limitations in the armed group than they had before joining the group. These characteristics, associated with childhood and adolescence, were discussed above.

4.2.3 Reintegration Period

4.2.3.1 Politics

The present research focuses on a case study where there is an ongoing conflict, therefore, the factors which acted as constrainers to children's agency before their recruitment into the armed group are likely to have a continuous limiting impact in the post-demobilisation period as well. These factors include the general lack of respect for human rights in the country, the presence of an unstable government, as well as political violence and terror, all discussed above.

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armed group (Hazen 2005: 2). This tradition has been documented in the conflicts of Liberia, Angola, Northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique, among others (Denov 2010: 104; Wessells 2009: 12, 14).

Such recurring constrainers might enhance, or contribute to, children's return to military lifestyle or engagement in criminal activities.

4.2.3.2   Culture/Beliefs

- Gender

Reintegration is a highly challenging process in itself and brings with it a great number of constraining factors that will limit one's agency. The difficulties are intensified when one is a former girl soldier. As discussed earlier and illustrated in Table 1 below, gender has a constraining impact on children's agency in the pre-recruitment period and in the armed group, and continues to have such an influence in the reintegration period as well. Mapp reports that former girl soldiers are fifty-two percent more likely to commit suicide than their male counterparts (Mapp 2011: 82; see also Kamya & Bwana 2012: 373).

This can be attributed to difficulty in resuming traditional gender roles once demobilisation has taken place and in the face of the physical, social and psychological consequences of participation in armed conflict (Berents 2009: 13, McKay 2006: 101). The physical consequence of rape and sexual violence includes internal bleeding, cervical tearing, infection, sterility, death during pregnancy or childbirth, uterine deformation and sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, syphilis or gonorrhoea (Denov 2010: 176, McKay 2006: 96, Wessells 2009: 116). In terms of the psychological damage affecting these girls, they often see themselves as damaged and impure, and experience self-esteem, identity and trust issues later in life (McKay 2006: 96, Wessells 2009: 94). The social implications are also significant: when a girl has been the victim of rape,

she may be considered unmarriageable, morally compromised and outcast in a large number of cultures where being unmarried is a form of social death (Dallaire 2011: 175, Denov 2010: 167). Moreover, they are also often seen as constant reminders of the violation of local cultural norms rooted in the armed conflict, including the norm of maintaining virginity until marriage, the importance of the child's paternity and community-sanctioned marriage (Mapp 2011: 83). This leads to further marginalisation and hinders former girl child soldiers' social (re)integration into the receiving community.

In addition, girls are less likely to have access to the benefits offered to former child soldiers as part of the DDR process (Berents 2009: 13). In Sierra Leone, for instance, out of the 6,845 demobilised child soldiers only eight percent were girls, despite the high number of female child soldiers involved in the armed conflict (Denov 2010: 162, Williamson 2006: 191). Girls' low participation rate in DDR programmes can be attributed to various factors. First, just like their male counterparts, girls are often not aware of their right to participate or are deliberately excluded from these programmes (IDDRS: 2006: 5.30: 20). Others decide to stay away out of shame, fear of stigmatisation and punishment, or because they are prohibited from entering the programme by their commanders/'bush husbands' (Denov 2010: 163, Williamson 2006: 191). Moreover, the 'one person, one gun' criterion also hinders girl soldiers' access: children are often required to present a weapon and show operational familiarity with it as part of the eligibility criteria to be admitted to the DDR programme (Williamson 2006: 188). Therefore, those children who fulfilled non-combat

roles in the armed group - particularly girls - get excluded (Williamson 2006: 188). In this way, girls are expected to have a more challenging reintegration process than boys due to their past participation in armed conflict, which leaves behind severe psychological and physical stigmas, and makes girls' social and economic readjustment to life in civilian society more difficult.

4.2.3.3 Policy

- Poverty, Unemployment and Economic Marginalisation

As discussed above, poverty and the lack of opportunities are considered to significantly increase the likelihood of children's recruitment into the armed group. These issues continue to constrain former child soldiers' agency in the reintegration period and act as main push factors for former (child) soldiers to re-join the illegal armed group or engage in criminal activities. Nonetheless, the state's capacity to provide alternative livelihoods and employment to demobilised soldiers - who might have no education or training in skills - in an economy which is characterised by poverty and a high unemployment rate is severely limited. Therefore, former soldiers are usually offered skills training and enterprise development, such as the Emergency Demobilisation and Reintegration Project (EDRP) in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, which aimed at providing vocational training to 35,000 demobilised soldiers (Heinemann-Grüder *et al.* 2003: 16). However, such an initiative - though initially beneficial - can easily backfire if not built on proper labour market analysis and if skills training is not conducted in areas where there is a gap in the employment market (Specht 2000: 7). This can cause frustration among former

soldiers and might result in severe social and security consequences for the society at large. Lack of job opportunities may leave no option for former soldiers other than to engage in low-paid jobs in which they are exploited; to return to the only thing they have already proved to be good at, namely being a soldier; or to get involved in illegal activities, banditry or organised crime (Denov 2010: 175). In Sierra Leone, for instance, there is an estimated number of 10,000 children employed in artisanal diamond mining with a high number of former child soldiers among them (Withers 2012: 208).

Besides the difficulties in offering appropriate apprenticeship training and employment opportunities to former soldiers, providing education for children with a military background is also challenging for several reasons. The context in which education needs to be provided is not ideal: schools might have been destroyed during the conflict, teachers might show prejudice toward child soldiers and lack skills on how to handle children with learning and concentration difficulties (Singer 2006: 204). Moreover, demobilised child soldiers might themselves have no aspiration to enrol in education and to be treated as children again after the military experience they acquired in the ranks of the armed group and after having fought in the war as adults.

Therefore, economic hardship caused by lack of skills and employment, as well as lack of enrolment in education, acts as a significant constrainer to former child soldiers' agency in the reintegration period.

- Institutionalisation

After being demobilised from the armed group, child soldiers are often transferred to an institution run by the state or an organisation. However, these institutions generally lack adequate protection and are located in isolated parts of the city (Petty & Jareg 1998: 159). Moreover, children are separated from their parents[43] and there is a high concentration of them in the same place (Petty & Jareg 1998: 159). Since former child soldiers staying in these institutions have previously acquired experience and certain skills due to their participation in armed conflict, they are ideal targets for armed groups and criminal organisations looking for new recruits. Due to the previously cited reasons, these institutions are often used as recruitment grounds by military units, whether it be voluntary or forced recruitment. Such a practice has been documented in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Northern Uganda, Sri Lanka, Burma, Peru, Angola and Liberia, among other countries (Petty & Jareg 1998: 159).

Moreover, the staff working in these institutions often lack proper training and qualifications and, due to the large numbers of children, they are unable to provide the close personal support and appropriate care to former child soldiers that is necessary to contribute to the regeneration of self-esteem, hope and development (Petty & Jareg 1998: 155). Furthermore, due to the isolation of children in these facilities all ties with the child's family and community are cut off. Such a situation where a child is withdrawn from social dynamics,

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[43] Separation from the family appears again as a constraining factor to children's agency, just like it did in the pre-recruitment period.

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contradicts the main principle of reintegration as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in that it will hinder the child's right to special protection for physical, mental, moral, spiritual and social development (Mariño Rojas 2005: 162). Therefore, the length of a child's stay in these institutions should be minimised and alternatives to institutional care should be considered, such as community-based care arrangements, fostering and home construction programmes for adolescents (Petty & Jareg 1998: 163, 164).

4.2.3.4 Community

- Stigmatisation, Marginalisation and Social Exclusion

Marginalisation and exclusion from the community are considered to be two of the main constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period (related to their social status as children) and they continue to have a constraining impact in the reintegration period as well (related to their past status as soldiers). Social acceptance is considered a crucial element in the reintegration process. Denov argues that the greater the perceived support from family and receiving community members, the more likely it is for the former child soldier to regard his/her reintegration as a positive experience (Denov 2010: 170). In Nepal, for instance, those child soldiers who described their family and community members - including teachers, neighbours and friends - as being supportive and caring, showed lower levels of psychosocial distress than those who were not accepted (Kohrt *et al.* 2010: 106). This demonstrates how family connectedness and social support can have a significant positive impact on the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers (Annan *et al.* 2006: 10, Denov 2010: 163).

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Moreover, Denov argues that stigmatisation and social exclusion do not only have a damaging emotional and psychological impact on former child soldiers but might also be detrimental to their long-term socio-economic wellbeing (Denov 2010: 166). Having a limited social network is considered a major source of disadvantage to one's employability and poverty, especially in the rural areas of war-affected countries, in this way hindering one's possibility to sustainable socio-economic reintegration (Denov 2010: 166).

4.2.3.5 Families

- Impossibility of Family Reunification

Besides the provision of opportunities for education and livelihood and psychosocial assistance, family reunification is considered one of the most important and urgent measures to be implemented in the child's best interest in the reintegration period (IDDRS: 2006: 5.30: 23, Verhey 2001: 15). However, the reunification process is highly challenging for several reasons. First of all, tracing and locating families might be difficult, just as much so as finding alternatives for those children for whom it is not possible to be returned home for security reasons (Singer 2006: 200). Mediating between children who might not want to return home because they feel betrayed by their family for not having prevented their abduction, and families/communities who might fear violent retribution for what their child did or show unwillingness to receive a former soldier in their home, is also equally challenging (Singer 2006: 200). Furthermore, when the child's closest family members are either dead or cannot be traced, he/she gets allocated with his/her extended family where the child

often gets to be treated as a domestic servant and is exploited (Williamson 2006: 196). Therefore, the reunification of the child with his/her birth family needs to be considered a priority, of which failure constrains the former child soldier's agency in the reintegration period.[44]

- Lingering Attachment to War Family

In the post-demobilisation period, it often appears highly challenging to break up the strong ties which connect the child to his/her military past. As previously discussed, due to the enforcement of 'perverse social capital' and herd mentality by the group leadership during wartime, the armed group often becomes the child's 'war family' (Hazen 2005: 4), a family he/she is willing to fight and die for. Richard Gabriel argues that "the bonds combat soldiers form with one another are stronger than the bonds most men have with their wives" (Grossman 1996: 149). Furthermore, former group members might be the only ones who understand the struggles the demobilised child soldier has to face during the reintegration process. That said, unless overcome, the difficulties in breaking the bonds with the 'war family' might hinder the sustainable social reintegration of former child soldiers and consequently prolong their transition process from a military to a civilian identity.

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[44] It is important to acknowledge that in case the family lives in a region with a high security risk, is incapable of guaranteeing the child's best interest or exposes the child to domestic violence, sexual abuse and mistreatment, family reunification is not in the best interest of the former child soldier (Wessells 2009: 184, 185).

4.2.3.6 Psychosocial

- Psychosocial Impact of Participation in Armed Conflict

The psychological wounds of war are often invisible at first sight and might have no manifestation for years, but if not addressed appropriately they can have a significant constraining impact on former (child) soldiers' agency. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common psychological responses to participation in armed conflict.[45] A study by Ilse Derluyn *et al.* reports that as many as ninety-seven percent of child soldiers may suffer from PTSD in the post-demobilisation period, regardless of the time spent in war (Derluyn *et al.* 2004: 862). PTSD is a severe syndrome which has both physical and mental symptoms such as weight loss, the distressing recollection of traumatic incidents in the form of flashbacks or nightmares, a desire to avoid any reminder of the traumatic event, insomnia, paranoia, an inability to concentrate, chronic depression, memory and cognition issues, as well as hypersensitivity (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 271-280, Singer 2006: 194, Wessells 2009: 129). These symptoms often lead to anti-social and aggressive behaviour, further marginalisation, increased divorce rates, disruption of family life, bullying, learning difficulties, substance abuse and a greater likelihood of

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[45] There are a number of factors which determine the severity of the developed trauma: those with ideological, religious or political convictions tend to report fewer post-traumatic symptoms and stronger psychological resilience than those with weak commitment (Berents 2009: 21, Mapp 2011: 79, West 2004: 107, Wyness 2012: 122). Moreover, former child soldiers' psychological problems are often related to their present everyday distress - such as lack of education and security, unemployment, poverty, impossibility of family reunification and loss of hope - rather than to their past war experiences (Singer 2006: 192, Wessells 2006: 257, Wessells 2012: 62).

suicidal tendencies (Grossman & Siddle 1999: 139). In this way, psychological problems might hinder the economic, social and political functioning of the individual. As such, participation in armed conflict leaves a mark on the psychosocial wellbeing of the majority of child soldiers, which might constrain their agency in the reintegration process.

- Physical Impact of Participation in Armed Conflict

Since while in the armed group child soldiers are required to fulfil the same tasks as their adult counterparts and are exposed to great physical difficulties, they often end up injured or disabled. These injuries might include, for instance, loss of hearing, blindness and loss of limbs (Singer 2006: 111). Most war-related injuries and disabilities are caused by landmines, particularly in the case of child soldiers who are more likely to have a permanent disability caused by landmines than their adult counterparts (Tamashiro 2010: 8). Moreover, due to exposure to extreme conditions and the enforced drug ingestion often practised in armed groups former child soldiers are highly inclined to suffer from diseases and drug addiction (Singer 2006: 111). Besides being physical constraints on former child soldiers' freedom, such injuries and diseases might also hinder children's social and educational development, and serve to foster a long-term economic disadvantage (Singer 2006: 112). Therefore, the physical injuries suffered during children's involvement in the armed group often cause a significant difficulty in the socio-economic reintegration process, and further increase marginalisation and social exclusion.

- Hybrid Identity

After leaving military life behind, former child soldiers are required to adopt a civilian identity which is characterised by less power and prestige than they had when they were part of the armed group. Since a great number of children join the armed group to be given adult responsibilities and authority, after demobilisation they might find it challenging to adjust to the role of being a child again. It is also the case that during their involvement in the armed group, child soldiers consider themselves to be perpetrators of atrocities, while in the reintegration period they are granted the victim status by the official authorities. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many may experience difficulty in transitioning from the identity of a respected and feared soldier, adult and perpetrator to the degraded position of civilian, child and victim (Faltas 2005: 7, Kamya & Bwana 2012: 369). This challenge can have a constraining impact on former child soldiers' agency in the reintegration period.

Table 1: Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict

	Pre-recruitment period	**In the armed group**	**Reintegration period**
Politics	• **General lack of respect for human rights** • **Presence of an unstable government** • **Political violence and terror**	-	• **General lack of respect for human rights** • **Presence of an unstable government** • **Political violence and terror**
Culture/Beliefs	• Child labour and lack of enrolment in education • Martyrdom • Domestic abuse and sexual violence • Culture of war due to the presence of an armed conflict of long duration • Traditional power structures (e.g. **gender stereotyping**)	• Enforced drug ingestion and alcohol intake • **Gender**	• **Gender**
Policy	• **Poverty and lack of opportunities** • Forced recruitment	-	• **Poverty, unemployment and economic marginalisation** • Institutionalisation

Community	• 'Failed adults' in 'failed communities' • **Marginalisation and exclusion from the community** • Peer pressure	• Isolation • Obligation and the creation of collective fear • The presence of 'perverse social capital' and herd mentality	• **Stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion**
Families	• Family's bad financial situation • **Separation from the family** • Practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs by the family • Child's desire to protect family, avenge a family member's death, provide financial support for the family	-	• **Impossibility of family reunification** • Lingering attachment to war family
Psychosocial	• **Inherent characteristics of childhood and adolescence**	• **Inherent characteristics of childhood and adolescence**	• Psychosocial impact of participation in armed conflict • Physical impact of participation in armed conflict • Hybrid identity

4.3 Manifestations of Children's Agency in the Context of War[46]

4.3.1 Pre-recruitment Period

Children's agency in the pre-recruitment period is highly limited due to the presence of the various constraining factors discussed above. Nonetheless, even in this environment with seemingly no choices, there are different ways through which children's agency is manifested, such as voluntary recruitment and resistance to recruitment[47].

4.3.2 In the Armed Group

Life in the armed group is strictly controlled by the group leadership. However, Giddens rejects the idea of total oppression and argues that even those who are in a subordinate position can influence the activities of their superiors and "manage resources in such a way as to exert control over the more powerful in established power relationships", a practice that he calls the "dialectic of control" (Giddens 1984: 16, 374). Indeed, even in the highly regulated environment of the armed group, children often create their own space for manoeuvre to avoid causing harm to themselves and others. These

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[46] See Table 2 at the end of the section which contains the different manifestations of children's tactical and strategic agency in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict, as discussed in the literature.

[47] See the case of children living in IDP camps in Northern Uganda discussed above (Berents 2009: 14, Wessells 2009: 40).

acts of deviance and resistance are almost always indirect since direct refusal to fulfil commands is potentially fatal (Honwana 2007: 71).[48]

One of the actions through which agency is manifested is the refusal to kill or fight. For instance, child soldiers in the conflict in Sierra Leone often opted for non-lethal shooting in combat (Maclure & Denov 2006: 129). If refusal to comply with the commands is to be illustrated on one end of a spectrum, obedience would be located somewhere in the middle of the continuum, while 'doing more than mandated' would occupy the other end of the spectrum. It has been documented how child soldiers consciously show exceptional obedience and excellent performance in combat to receive the chance to gain increased access to food and health care (Wessells 2009: 70). Furthermore, by such acts they have the possibility to enrol in more specialised training which often lands them in a new role that comes with less exposure to warfare (Bjørkhaug 2010: 18). Therefore, 'doing more than mandated' can also be considered a manifestation of children's tactical agency in the armed group.

The use of deception is another practice through which children's agency is exhibited in the group. Since the regulations under which child soldiers are kept are very strict and non-compliance is followed by severe punishment, sometimes the only way they can carve out some level of control over their emotions, values and actions is through pretense and lies. Deception can take

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[48] A former child soldier recalled his experience of being ordered to kill his friend in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), in Northern Uganda, in the following way: "I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, "Why are you doing this?" I said I had no choice" (Mapp 2011: 73).

many forms depending on circumstance, opportunity and need. It may be tactical or it may be strategic. Or it may simply be a means of maintaining a sense of individuality, identity or humanity. The line between these different types of deception is often blurry and case-specific. For instance, child soldiers often fake illness, weakness or stupidity in order to avoid dangerous missions and certain tasks (Honwana 2007: 67). Schmidt also mentions as an act of deception the example of a boy who was kidnapped by the armed group and gave a false name to his captors in order to prevent his family members getting harmed by the group (Schmidt 2007: 61). Furthermore, girls in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone are documented to have resisted sexual violence and rape by pretending to be menstruating (Denov 2010: 134).

Psychological distancing and change of identity is another form by which child soldiers' tactical agency is manifested. 'False identities' are often constructed, which help child soldiers rationalize their actions in wartime, and keep psychological and emotional distance between the violence committed by them in the bush and their 'true identity' (Denov 2010: 141, Singer 2006: 73, Wessells 2009: 71). Schmid and Jones (1991) call this 'suspended identity', while Wessells (2009) talks about 'compartmentalisation strategy'. In the autobiographies written by former child soldiers, Emmanuel Jal (2010) from South Sudan, Ishmael Beah (2008) from Sierra Leone and Senait Mehari (2007) from Eritrea, the authors talk about how they navigated their involvement in the armed group in order to create a sense of normality and to

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keep their 'true identity'. Child soldiers often seek to remain true to their 'real identity' through the creation of their own world in the armed group, in which they share stories about home and their families with each other, play, laugh and listen to music (Honwana 2007: 71). These are generally forbidden and highly punishable activities in the armed group.

Moreover, Maclure and Denov discuss how child soldiers in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone often resisted the commonly practised enforced drug ingestion with sly evasion, and how they provided assistance to 'enemy' civilians despite the prohibition of such acts by the group leadership (Maclure & Denov 2006: 129; see also Denov 2010: 136).

There is also evidence of child soldiers pairing themselves up with powerful or high-ranking soldiers who are able to provide them some level of protection (Honwana 2007: 96). Such acts can be interpreted as their conscious or unconscious attempt to exhibit tactical agency in the armed group. In the case of girl soldiers, they often aspire to become the wives of commanders and soldiers in higher position who can offer them a relatively stable life, as well as power and safety in the context of war, and might provide them access to shared booty and material comforts (Utas 2005a: 75).

Finally, escape from the armed group also requires significant agency from child soldiers since such an act needs complex planning, strategic thinking and bravery in the face of severe retaliation if discovered (Denov 2010: 136, Honwana 2007: 70).

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4.3.3 Reintegration Period

In the reintegration period, it has been suggested that - based on de Certeau's definition of strategies and tactics (1984: 36-38) - children's agency moves from tactical to being more strategic. Children project plans and goals into the future; due to their older age and past experience they are better equipped to anticipate long-term gains and benefits; and, ideally speaking, they are able to exercise more power than before (Berents 2009: 18, Honwana 2007: 51). In this way, former child soldiers can be seen to play an active role in their own transition from military to civilian life - e.g. they can decide to exit or benefit from participation in the reintegration programme - and can acquire a wider 'menu' of options to choose from than they possessed before.

Due to unfavourable socio-economic reasons or other challenges in their reintegration process, former child soldiers often choose military re-recruitment as the best option for economic survival and become 'regional warriors' or members in local gangs and criminal organisations (Denov 2010: 200, Lee 2009: 29). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, a great number of former soldiers who found no civilian employment in the post-demobilisation period got involved in mercenary activity in Kosovo, Chechnya (Russia) and Zaire (former the Democratic Republic of the Congo) (CICS 2008: 11). Nonetheless, if they are offered opportunities in which they can exhibit their strategic agency - such as through planning, implementation, evaluation and advocacy of peace-building initiatives and reintegration programmes - children can become significant stakeholders as peace-

builders[49], peer educators, positive leaders and advocates (Denov 2010: 198). Sanford argues that these actions "construct new modes of agency and citizen participation, which are necessary for peaceful resolution to the internal armed conflict as well as for post war reconstruction" (Sanford 2006: 78).

Seeking to achieve restorative justice, post-conflict peace-building initiatives often include the set-up of truth and reconciliation commissions. However, participation of children - mainly of former child soldiers - in these commissions poses a moral dilemma. Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that when dealing with children the actions undertaken by "public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies" should have the child's best interest as their primary consideration. However, the child's right to be protected (Article 3) and to be given the opportunity to participate in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child (Article 12) often conflict. Children's participation in truth and reconciliation commissions in the framework of transitional justice processes might not only contribute to achieving reconciliation between former child soldiers and their receiving communities, but it might also be a means for children to exhibit their moral agency and to address wounds of the past. Former child soldiers were included in such commissions in the case of Sierra Leone in 2001 and Liberia

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[49] In Nicaragua, former soldiers were requested to take the role of mediator in local conflicts; while in Somaliland, the direct involvement of ex-combatants led to a more effective peace-building programme design and delivery (Nilsson 2005: 49, Özerdem 2009: 50).

in 2006 in the form of participation in statement-taking and regional hearings (Fisher 2013: 162). However, in order to avoid further stigmatisation and ensure their own survival children often opt to stay away from these initiatives and try to keep a low profile. For instance, in Sri Lanka, even though a cease-fire agreement was signed between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the beginning of 2002, the hostilities resumed a few months later and thousands of former child soldiers got re-recruited into the ranks of the militant group till the conflict finally concluded in 2007 (Becker 2010: 110, Human Rights Watch 2004). This example demonstrates how fragile a post-conflict peace process may be and how easily conflict may re-emerge. Under these circumstances, therefore, former child soldiers' desire to remain invisible as a protection mechanism and refusal to participate in peace-building initiatives can be considered just as much a form of agency as participation in these processes is.

There are additional ways in which former child soldiers' strategic agency is manifested. Former girl soldiers, for instance, often refrain from sharing their stories and war experiences with others. However, Honwana points out that "silences... are also a significant form of agency" (Honwana 2007: 97). In traditional societies, silence is often used as a coping mechanism and a natural response to suffering, pain and death. D'abbraccio Krentzer argues that silence can be used as an action to express what one remembers but wants to forget, especially in the context of an ongoing conflict - like in Colombia - where victimizers and victims keep living next to one another and questions

about the conflict remain unaddressed (D'abbraccio Krentzer 2004: 71). He calls this (in)action "[a] therapeutic forgetfulness, not a cowardice that hides in the silence… [a] sepulchral silence, pragmatism to continue living" (D'abbraccio Krentzer 2004: 71). Wajnryb argues that silence is indeed a powerful form of communication: in the wake of unspeakable trauma it might be the only 'language' capable to communicate what cannot be communicated (Wajnryb 2001: 82).

For instance, the Alto women - living in the Northeast Region of Brazil - show no grief for the death of their infant and do not visit the grave of their deceased child (Scheper-Hughes 1989: 13). "No tears are shed" as Scheper-Hughes describes it (1989: 13). This kind of behaviour - which might seem rather indifferent and insensitive - can be primarily attributed to the extremely high infant mortality rate in this deprived community which then encourages mothers to actively avoid personalizing their babies and developing attachment to them as a coping mechanism (Scheper-Hughes 1989: 12, 13). Meanwhile, in Bali, public display of negative emotions - may it be sadness, anger, fatigue or grief - is met with indignation and mockery by other members of the society (Littlewood 1993: 170). Instead, silence, laughter and the act of putting on a 'happy face' is encouraged as an alternative practice (Littlewood 1993: 171). In order to understand such a phenomenon it is important to examine it in a cultural context: in the Balinese society the fear of offending others - and in this way inviting magical revenge upon oneself - is so pervasive that people try to avoid any kind of situation that could upset

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others or trigger their disapproval (Keeler 1994: 434). Feeling is considered to be a form of moral agency which one can choose within the constraints of everyday contingencies (Littlewood 1993: 172).

Furthermore, silence is used not only where there is an intention to forget or to cope with the suffering and the pain of the past but also where speaking out means getting death threats or even being silenced forever. In the context of war, where journalists, human rights defenders, community leaders and other activists are targeted with threats and attacks on a regular basis for raising their voice against injustices and the malfunctions of the system - like in the case of Colombia (Human Rights Watch 2017: 201, 205) - silence becomes a safe space and a survival strategy (see also Mazurana *et al.* 2013: 16).

In addition, Utas argues that one's ability to emphasise his/her victim status, cultivate one's passive victimhood and downplay one's responsibility for what he/she has done, can also be seen as a practice to exhibit agency (Utas 2005a: 57; see also Furedi 2006: 106, Wessells 1998). By the adoption of such a discourse, the individual strengthens his/her claim on resources and relies on the benefit that is inherent in the victim status or as Utas phrases it "the benefit of other people's pity" (Utas 2005a: 57; see also Furedi 2006: 106). He calls this 'victimcy' which he considers to be the most limited form of agency (Utas 2005a: 57).

Table 2: Manifestations of Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict

Pre-recruitment period	In the armed group	Reintegration period
Voluntary recruitment	'Refusal to kill and fight' vs. 'Exceptional obedience'	'Re-engagement in criminal activity' vs. 'Resistance to re-engagement in criminal activity'
Resistance to recruitment	Use of deception	'Stakeholders of post-conflict peace-building initiatives' vs. 'Staying away'
	Psychological distancing and change of identity	'Exiting reintegration programme' vs. 'Making benefit from participation'
	Sly evasion of enforced drug ingestion	Staying silent
	Provision of assistance to 'enemy' civilians	'Opposing the role of victim' vs. 'Victimcy'
	Pairing up with high-ranking soldiers and becoming the wives of commanders	
	'Escape/surrender' vs. 'Stay in the armed group'	

4.4 <u>The Contribution of Social Capital Theory to the Agency Debate</u>

As previously implied and further analysed in later chapters, relationships matter (Field 2003: 1).[50] When discussing the various factors which constrain children's agency in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict, several elements were examined which can be linked to social relations or the lack of them (see under the 'community' and 'families' dimensions of Kimmel and Roby's model). Nevertheless, it is important to note that besides having a constraining impact on children's agency, social relations also often enable children's decisions and actions.

Therefore, the examination of social capital needs to be considered crucial to the agency debate. However, it is noticeable that much of the literature relating to this debate fails to move beyond giving evidence to support the argument that children do have agency and perceive it so themselves. Consequently, apart from a limited analysis of the constraining structural factors, the agency literature fails to examine in depth what factors influence children's decisions and actions. By contrast, the DDR literature - more specifically the reintegration literature - highlights the importance of social relations (Banholzer 2012, Kaplan & Nussio 2012, Leff 2008), mostly in the

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[50] For a discussion about the general benefits of having a big 'stock' of social capital on the individual's physical and psychosocial wellbeing, see Field (2003: 57), as well as Kawachi and Berkman (2000: 181, 184, 185).

form of prioritizing family reunification of the former child soldier (IDDRS: 2006: 5.30: 23, Juma 2012: 384, The Paris Principles 2007: 33, Verhey 2001: 15, Wessells 2009: 183) and a community-based reintegration process over an individual-focused one (Mels *et al.* 2012: 22, Özerdem & Podder 2011: 314, Wessells 2012: 58).[51] However, since the reintegration literature rather focuses on the dos and don'ts of the process, it only includes a limited discussion about the importance of social relations in the reintegration period.

Therefore, due to such a limited discussion about social capital in each relevant literature, the analysis that follows relies on a mixture of agency, child soldier (reintegration) and social capital literatures. Because of the limited intersection between these three literatures, the researcher had to explore the complex relationship and dynamic between these different areas herself while drawing on concepts and ideas from each field. The researcher uses the case of Colombian child soldiers in order to deepen and further develop the discussion about the relationship between social capital and human agency, in this way addressing such a conceptual gap. The social capital-related factors which will be discussed next are primarily extracted from the previous sections of the present chapter and are presented based on the general categorisation of social capital (bonding social capital, bridging social capital, synergy). The following analysis is a general one, which will

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[51] In a similar way, the importance of social relations is also highlighted in the literature on the reintegration of former prisoners (Hattery & Smith 2010, Workman 2009) and offenders (Bazemore & Erbe 2003, Braithwaite & Mugford 1994, Farrall 2004).

be further detailed and applied to the case of Colombian child soldiers in later chapters of the thesis drawing on the interviews conducted with the research participants of the present study.

4.4.1 Social Capital as a Structural Factor to Children's Agency

This section examines how social capital influences children's agency, looking at the three different stages - before, during and after - of their engagement in armed conflict.[52] As previously suggested, social capital has the potential to constrain or enable human agency. The researcher suggests - as one of her key contributions to the agency and social capital literatures - that the impact social capital has on one's agency depends on the context in which the action is taken (conflict vs. peaceful environment), the influence of other structural factors (e.g. socio-economic elements), and the character/function of social capital.

According to the character or function of social capital, one can distinguish between three different kinds: bonding social capital, bridging social capital and synergy. Bonding social capital - also known as strong ties - is characterised by exclusivity and inward-lookingness which strengthens intra-group relations and maintains homogeneity (Field 2003: 32, Halpern 2005:

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[52] See Table 3 at the end of the section which contains the various social capital-related structural factors to children's agency in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict that have been identified in the literature.

19). This type of social network is believed to play a key role in the emotional well-being of the individual and can be observed among close friends, family members and other close-knit groups, such as armed groups, terrorist organisations or gangs (in the form of 'perverse social capital') (Bexley *et al.* 2007: 24, Gilchrist 2009: 12, Halpern 2005: 19).

By contrast, bridging social capital - also known as weak ties - is inclusive, outward looking, and brings people across very diverse and non-homogenous social groups together, such as colleagues, classmates, neighbours and members of religious organisations (Gilchrist 2009: 12, Granovetter 1973: 1373, Halpern 2005: 19). It implies connections between people who share fairly similar demographic characteristics (Woolcock 2001: 10). Granovetter argues that this kind of social capital is more important than bonding social capital, not only for the individual in that it can be used for information gathering and also as a source by which to find jobs and gain access to opportunities, but also for the community at large because it contributes to its cohesiveness and makes cooperation more feasible (Granovetter 1973: 1373, 1376).

Finally, synergy is usually not included in this group of categorisation; however, it is considered crucial because it shows how the state - leaders and government institutions - is engaged in, and interacts with, the community and the individual (Colletta & Cullen 2000: 7).

4.4.1.1 Pre-recruitment Period

As implied above, in the pre-recruitment period damaged bonding social capital is thought to be one of the main reasons why children decide to join illegal armed groups. Coming from a dysfunctional family (being victim of domestic abuse and sexual violence) (Brett & Specht 2004: 87, 92), the murder of a family member by the adversarial group (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 745), the practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs by the family (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 744), the desire to guarantee the family's survival and wellbeing (Hart 2006: 218, Kimmel & Roby 2007: 745, Lee 2009: 16), or other family members' previous recruitment to the armed group are all factors which push and motivate children to become members of the group themselves. Moreover, as previously discussed, broken or disrupted bonding social capital (e.g. separation from the family (Mapp 2011: 70, Singer 2006: 59)) is also thought to increase the likelihood of both forced and voluntary recruitment.

Bridging social capital usually plays a less significant role in the life of children than bonding social capital does, even though peer pressure often has a great influence on children's determination to join the armed group (Brett & Specht 2004: 71; Goodwin-Gill & Cohn 1994: 40, 168; Singer 2006: 67). This can be attributed to the fact that the scope of children's social network is more limited than it is for adults and might be controlled by their parents. Moreover, children and young people are generally not active members of their community which marginalisation and exclusion might motivate them

to join the armed group (Boyden 2006: 20). In addition, the lack of a community protection net, or as it was previously referred to 'failed adults' in 'failed communities' (Boyden 2006: 8, Huynh 2015: 132), is also thought to be an important factor which enables the recruitment of children into illegal armed groups.

Synergy is usually absent in the pre-recruitment period since the child generally has no relationship with the state that may not even be present in the region - mostly in rural areas - where child recruitment predominantly takes place. Furthermore, in the majority of conflict environments, the state is characterised by a lack of respect for human rights (Mapp 2011: 70), instability (Mapp 2011: 70), as well as the exercise of political violence and terror (Honwana 2007: 51). Therefore, damaging social 'capital'[53] on the micro level is embedded in an environment that is absent in social capital on the macro level, which increases the likelihood of the child's recruitment into the armed group.

4.4.1.2   In the Armed Group

In the armed group, the line between bonding and bridging social capital is often blurred due to the isolation of group members (Wessells 2009: 62, 63) and the group leadership's strong enforcement of herd mentality on its

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[53] Due to the predominance of norms and networks that are not only non-beneficial to the child's development, but are rather detrimental and constitute push factors to join the illegal armed group, 'social deficit' is a more accurate term to characterize the social networks present in the child's environment in the pre-recruitment period.

members (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 132). In cases where herd mentality and the feeling of loyalty develop and are strong enough, they might act as constrainers to one's determination to escape from the armed group (Bjørkhaug 2010: 20, Hirschman 1970: 77). Powell and Smith-Doerr express the downside of being member of a group with such strong bonds by claiming that "the ties that bind may also turn into ties that blind" (OECD 2001: 42).

Besides the military social network, civilian social networks can play an important role in influencing children's agency in the armed group. Despite the group leadership's efforts to repress one's civilian identity and cut off all relationship with the family and the home community, missing the family and homesickness often play a central role in one's decision to escape from the armed group (Bjørkhaug 2010: 20). In this way, bonding and bridging social capital might act both as a constrainer and an enabler to children's agency in the armed group.

Synergy is often characterised by hatred and hostility, mostly in cases when the state is depicted as the armed group's main adversary. The rather negative association with the state can be attributed to the training and indoctrination children are exposed to when recruited into the armed group, in which 'the other' (Schmitt 1976) is villainised in order to strengthen the group's common identity and create unity among members.

4.4.1.3 Reintegration Period

In the reintegration process, social relations - with the family (bonding social capital), friends or community members (bridging social capital) - can be considered the most significant enablers to former child soldiers' agency in their decision to choose civilian lifestyle over re-recruitment into the armed group or involvement in criminal organisations (Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 4, Machel 2001: 18, Schafer 2004: 94, Verhey 2001: 15). On the other hand, stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion by the family and receiving community members (Denov 2010: 170); lingering attachment to the war family (Hazen 2005: 4); as well as the challenge to be reunited with the birth family (Singer 2006: 192) might constrain former child soldiers' agency in their reintegration process.

Regarding synergy between the state and former child soldiers in the reintegration period, it is characterised by a more ideal relationship than in the two previous stages of the child's involvement in armed conflict. In a great number of cases the reintegration programme - that provides benefits to former child soldiers - is run by the state. Nonetheless, distrust toward the state often persists due to past experience and the image forced on children by the armed group.

Even though social capital is considered by scholars and policy-makers as being one of the most important enablers in former child soldiers' reintegration process, its potential can only be understood if examined within the context in which it operates, in combination with other structural factors

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and if its function is distinguished (bonding social capital, bridging social capital, synergy). When looking at the reintegration of former child soldiers in countries like Colombia, where the process is carried out in a conflict environment (in contrast to a post-conflict environment), the structural factors which co-exist and interplay with social capital include - among others - wide presence of armed groups and criminal organisations with ready availability of weapons, weak state institutions which fail to guarantee human rights and basic services (e.g. the safety of their citizens), high unemployment rate and often a lack of possibility to pursue education. In such an environment, having a high stock of bonding social capital - strong ties with the family - might be the main motivation for former child soldiers to stay and pursue a civilian lifestyle, despite the severe difficulties and the appeal to return to the armed group. In this specific scenario, there is a combination of a conflict environment, high levels of bonding social capital and a great number of constraining factors to children's agency. Social capital acts as an enabler for the former child soldier's determination not to re-enlist. Nonetheless, in case the former child soldier maintains strong bonds with his/her former - also demobilised - comrades who decide to return to the military lifestyle, while also lacking strong relations with his/her family, he/she will be more inclined to engage in criminality again. In this scenario, the conflict environment is paired with the presence of a damaging bridging social capital and the absence of a strong bonding social capital to keep the former child soldier on the path of reintegration. Therefore, social capital acts as a constrainer to the child's successful reintegration. The two different roles of social capital - enabler and

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constrainer to children's agency - can only be understood and distinguished

in the context of reintegration being seen as the ultimate goal and the most

positive outcome.

Table 3: Social Capital and Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict

	Pre-recruitment Period	In the Armed Group	Reintegration Period
Bonding Social Capital	presence of damaged, broken, disrupted bonding social capital (-): • dysfunctional family (domestic abuse, sexual violence) • killing of a family member • practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs by the family • concern for family's survival and wellbeing • family members' previous recruitment • separation from the family	presence of constraining bonding/bridging social capital in the military network (-): • herd mentality and loyalty	presence of facilitating bonding/bridging social capital in the civilian network (+): • social relations with family, friends and community members

Bridging Social Capital	absence of bridging social capital (-): - marginalisation and social exclusion - lack of community protection net ('failed adults' in 'failed communities') peer pressure (-)	presence of facilitating bonding social capital in the civilian network (+): missing the family and homesickness	presence of constraining bonding social capital in the military network (-): - lingering attachment to the war family absence of bonding/bridging social capital (-): - stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion - difficulty with family reunification
Synergy	absence of synergy (-)	negative synergy (-): feelings of hatred and hostility	improved synergy (+): reintegration assistance and provision of benefits

4.5 <u>Conclusion</u>

As discussed in Chapter Three, according to Giddens, agency always implies power (Giddens 1984: 9). Nonetheless, considering the great number of factors which can constrain children's agency in all three stages of their involvement in armed conflict, such power can be declared highly limited. These constraints increase the likelihood (but not explain) of the child being recruited into the armed group, staying in the group and re-engaging in criminal or military activities in the reintegration period. However, as demonstrated through the different examples, children often navigate around such limitations and exhibit their tactical or strategic agency in various ways by using their acquired knowledge and seizing the opportunities of the moment.

Social capital, for reasons discussed above, is considered to be one of, if not the, most important of these factors. Therefore, the examination of social capital provides an important lens through which scholars and policy-makers can gain a deeper understanding of children's agency and behaviour in the context of war. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that although social capital is expected to play a crucial role both as a constrainer and an enabler to children's agency in all three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia, there can be other factors which might prove to be equally important, such as socioeconomic factors. According to twentieth-century American psychologist, Abraham H. Maslow - who created the hierarchy of innate human needs - the need for belongingness and love

(social relations with family and friendship) are only ranked on the third level in the hierarchy, preceded by physiological (food, breathing and water) and safety needs (physical, economic, health and well-being) (Maslow 1954: 80-91). Therefore, without examining these other factors, social capital may not be sufficient in itself to explain children's decision to join an armed group, desert the group or stay in civilian society after demobilisation. Consequently, the potential and the importance of social capital can only be understood and appreciated if combined with other structural factors and examined as part of the environment in which it operates.

The findings of the Colombian case study - presented in Chapters Seven and Eight - support the argument of the literature that children's agency shifts from tactical to strategic in the reintegration period, based on de Certeau's definition of strategies and tactics (de Certeau 1984: 36-38). Nonetheless, as demonstrated later in the thesis, there are still a great number of macro- and micro-level constrainers - some of them are newly emerged while some of them are recurring - which make former child soldiers inclined to return to the armed group or join criminal organisations. In the case of Colombia the ongoing armed conflict has a particularly significant limiting impact on former child soldiers' agency in the reintegration process, since it generates a great number of 'thinners' which would not be present in a post-conflict or peaceful environment (e.g. impossibility of family reunification), and it also shapes the practices through which children's agency might be manifested (e.g. reluctance to turn oneself in to one of the state authorities for security

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reasons, decision to hide one's military past for fear of stigmatisation, intention to keep in touch with the armed group even after demobilisation). Moreover, the particular characteristics of Colombian child soldiers (being from the rural areas of the country, coming from a minority ethnic background) and the special structure of the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes offered to former child soldiers (institutionalisation, paternalistic approach) also influence the capability of individuals to exhibit their agency.

Before the examination of the fieldwork findings, the next chapter will present the methodology through which data was collected and analysed. It will also discuss methodological challenges and limitations, as well as the ethical assurances of the present research.

Chapter 5

<u>Methodology</u>

5.1 <u>Introduction</u>

The sustainable reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian society is a very important issue, which has great significance not only for the individual in the process of reintegration, but also for the family, the community and the society child soldiers become members of after their demobilisation. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that this process is supported and facilitated by the reintegration programme provided by the state or NGOs. However, in order for the programme to be sustainable and address the key issues of reintegration, elaborate research needs to be conducted which focuses on the accounts of former child soldiers themselves: their past experience from childhood and the time they spent in the armed group, as well as their current post-demobilisation reality. The right methodological components are indispensable in order to get the most out of such research and to obtain the most authentic results, which can be later channelled into the pool of other research findings.

In the first part of this chapter, the chosen research method and design will be presented and justified, discussing qualitative and case study research. Part

Two will focus on the life history interviews conducted during the fieldwork, more specifically on the identification of gatekeepers, as well as the selection of the sample population and interview locations. In the next part, the methodological challenges and limitations of this research will be outlined, while in the final part of the chapter, the ethical assurances will be detailed.

5.2 Research Method and Design

5.2.1 Qualitative Research

This research is based on a qualitative research design, which is rather exploratory. Exploration here is defined as "a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life" (Stebbins 2001: 3). Qualitative research design is prioritised over quantitative research design because this research is a small-scale study of which primary goals are to provide an authentic account of the research participants' individual life histories and find the common thread in these narratives, in order to contribute to the improvement of future reintegration programmes designed for former child soldiers. The qualitative

research methods used in the conduct of this study include ethnographic methods, life history interviews and elite interviews.[54]

5.2.1.1 Ethnographic Methods

Within qualitative research, ethnography was the applied style of research, in which the researcher aims to "understand particular processes, events, ideas and practices" and see these through the eyes of the informant rather than his/her own eyes (Shaw 2007: 188). In this way, the researcher, instead of imposing his/her pre-formed ideas and assumptions on the studied population, opens him/herself up to having his/her perceptions challenged and previously learnt knowledge unlearnt (Della Porta & Keating 2008: 350, Shaw 2007: 188). Vigh also argues that conducting an ethnographic study allows the researcher to "gain the depth needed to achieve an insight into people's lives and thereby to properly contextualise their actions" which is a key element of a study that focuses on the question of agency (Vigh 2006: 22). Even though ethnographic research is generally composed of participant observation and informal ethnographic interviews, these methods were not possible to be carried out in the traditional sense (Shaw 2007: 188).

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[54] The idea of using focus group discussions was ruled out as an appropriate research method for this study because of the highly sensitive nature of the conversations and the participants' reluctance to be seen or interviewed in the presence of others, even if these were former child soldiers themselves. Powell and Single define a 'focus group' as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (Powell & Single 1996: 499).

Participant observation was not feasible because participants of the reintegration programme run by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) - who acted as primary informants - are not concentrated in designated areas. In this way, the participants' behaviour, communication, body language and mannerism could only be observed during the interview process. Moreover, as a result of the limited availability of research participants due to other commitments - most of them were working or attending school - entirely unstructured ethnographic interviews were not feasible. Despite such limitations, the applied methods were ethnographic and participatory, because the researcher considered it essential to 'hear out' and understand the participants' words and ideas. This intention is also reflected in the data analysis and presentation process.

5.2.1.2 Life History Interviews

Regarding interviews with the primary target population of this research, namely the former child soldiers themselves, semi-structured interviews were planned to be conducted (see Appendix 3). This choice was made under the assumption that the interviewees had other time commitments, such as work or school. However, the researcher wanted to leave enough room for research participants to have control over the length and the direction of the interviews. Moreover, due to the low educational level among the majority of interviewees, it was important not to engage them in complex analytical and technical exercises (see also Podder 2010: 170). Therefore, taking into

consideration all the aforementioned factors, conducting semi-structured interviews was seen as the most appropriate tool to collect first-hand information from research participants.[55]

In-person interviewing was selected as the most suitable method for several reasons. First, in order to guarantee the anonymity of research participants and ensure confidentiality, it was essential to have face-to-face meetings with them rather than exploring alternative ways of contact, such as Skype interviews. Secondly, considering that the issues discussed in the interviews were very personal and sensitive, it was found more appropriate to have an intimate interview setting. Finally, building trust with the interviewees would have been much more challenging - almost impossible - without a personal encounter.

Despite the initial intention and plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with former child soldiers, the great majority of interviews turned out to be in-depth life history interviews. Bell argues that life histories provide "culturally shared images and conventions to present and interpret experience, as well as to draw connections between individual and society"

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[55] The difference between structured/standardised and semi-structured/semi-standardised interviews is quite significant, and their application depends on the interview subject and the interview environment. In structured interviews the interviewer strictly follows the question order, the questions are worded exactly as written, there is no adjustment in the level of language, no additional questions are added and no clarifications are given by the interviewer (Berg 2007: 93). On the other hand, in semi-structured interviews the questions might not be asked in the pre-planned order, the wording of the questions is flexible, the level of language may be adjusted and the interviewer might give clarifications (Berg 2007: 93).

(Bell 2004: 49). In life history interviews the interviewee is an active agent empowered to determine the direction of the interview. This makes him/her feel more at ease and hence more likely to share extensive information with the researcher (Bowd 2010: 143). In the life history interviews conducted as part of this research, participants were entirely in charge of deciding the degree and depth of information that was passed on to the researcher (see also Bowd 2010: 142). Nonetheless, the free story-telling of research participants was also accompanied by the researcher's structured questions on the age of the respondents when joining the armed group, family background, affiliation and challenges in the reintegration process among others. These interruptions were necessary in order to gather clear relevant information which could be later analysed in consideration of the research questions of the present thesis.

The duration of the life history interviews varied, ranging from 35 to 145 minutes, in order to leave space for the interviewees to decide on the length of time they required to share their story. Despite the difficulty of making sense of the special terminologies used in the Colombian Spanish language and the challenge of understanding the accent of the interviewees with low levels of educational attainment, no interpreter was needed in any part of the data gathering and analysing process due to the researcher's knowledge of Spanish. All interviews were audio recorded with permission of the interviewees and hand-written notes were also taken during the interview process. The data was later transcribed, coded and analysed by the researcher

herself in order to yield the most beneficial results for the research and respect the confidentiality of the information shared in the interviews.

5.2.1.3 Elite Interviews

The researcher found it important to conduct elite (structured) interviews in order to gain an insider perspective on the policy aspect of the reintegration programme and also to learn about the viewpoint on reintegration from those working with former child soldiers on a daily basis. Interviews were conducted with professionals working in the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), the government institute which runs the reintegration programme for former soldiers and child soldiers after they reach the age of majority. This agency has thirty-two service centres scattered around the country, where programme participants are provided with benefits and certain services. In the Bogotá office, professionals working in the policy-making process were interviewed, while in the other service centres, those professionals who work directly with programme participants were consulted. Even though these interviews were designed to be structured - under the assumption that the interviewees only had limited time availability because of their tight working schedule (see Appendix 4) - in the end, the interviews took the format of semi-structured interviews. This change in the structure was thanks to the generous time commitment of the interviewed professionals and their willingness to accommodate the needs of the interviewer. They did

so in order to make sure that all questions were answered and the information passed on to the researcher was accurate.

Besides the professionals working in the government agency, elite interviews were also conducted with representatives of different non-governmental and religious organisations, whose work is indirectly related to the reintegration of former child soldiers (see Appendix 5). These institutions include *World Vision Colombia*, *Benposta Colombia*, *Don Bosco House*, *Redprodepaz* (*Red Nacional de Programas Regionales de Desarrollo y Paz*) and *Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris*. The semi-structured interviews conducted with these professionals were intended to provide an insight into the wider scope of peace-building initiatives undertaken in the country that these organisations were involved in.

5.2.2 Case Study Research

Based on Ragin's (2000) idea, Vennesson describes 'case study' as "a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation of one, or a small number, of phenomena in order to explore the configuration of each case, and to elucidate features of a larger class of (similar) phenomena, by developing and evaluating theoretical explanations" (Vennesson 2008: 226). Case study research which focuses on a single case was considered the most suitable for exploring the research questions of this study. The individual case study is a research approach which allows for in-depth analysis of a single phenomenon and generates very rich, systematic and detailed information on

the examined individual, group, institution or social setting (Berg 2007: 283). Having such an extensive pool of data enables the researcher to provide a holistic explanation and description of the studied phenomenon, while also capturing "various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements" which might be overlooked by other research methods (Berg 2007: 284). (The limitation of conducting case study research will be addressed below.)

The country under investigation in this research is Colombia, where the current estimated number of children involved in the armed conflict is around 11,000-14,000 despite the past demobilisation of thousands (Thomas 2008: 13). Colombia is a suitable case study to explore the subject of this thesis for several reasons. Firstly, the Latin American country is ranked sixth among the countries with the highest number of children involved in illegal armed groups, after Somalia, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Afghanistan (CNN 2013). Therefore, the child soldier phenomenon is a key element of the Colombian armed conflict and requires a thorough understanding. Secondly, as discussed in Chapter Two, in Colombia the majority of children who join illegal armed groups do so without the use of coercion and force, and perceive their recruitment as voluntary. Furthermore, most child soldiers are not under the influence of drugs and alcohol while fighting, and make a conscious decision to escape from the armed group. This factor of voluntariness both before and during the child's involvement in armed conflict might have significant implications for their reintegration

process and is, therefore, worth discussing and further exploring. Regarding the issue of voluntariness, Colombia is a typical case study since it is documented by scholars that - contrary to popular belief - children and young people join armed groups voluntarily in the majority of cases (Human Rights Watch 1994: 25, Schmidt 2007: 54). Therefore, even though it is important to acknowledge the unique nature of each case study and the significant implications of the particularity of structural factors, the patterns and trends identified in the examination of the Colombian case study can be generalised and applied to other cases as well.

Nonetheless, regarding the environment in which the reintegration process is carried out, Colombia is an atypical case. Generally the reintegration of former child soldiers takes place in a post-conflict setting, and the official measures to be taken by the government and the international community are included in the peace agreement signed by the conflicting parties. In Colombia, the fifty-year-long armed conflict has just recently come to an end with the signing of a peace agreement between two of the key actors of the conflict, namely the Colombian government and the main guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The ongoing violence and the absence of a peace agreement have had serious implications for the reintegration process of former child soldiers into civilian society. For instance, demobilised child soldiers have often had no opportunity to be reunited with their family, to join the community they used to be members of

before their recruitment into the armed group due to security reasons, or to be open about their past identity as soldiers in a society which has over 8.2 million conflict-related victims (Unique Register of Victims 2017).

Therefore, considering all the aforementioned factors, Colombia is a suitable example to investigate the subject of agency exhibited by children. The atypical nature of the environment in which the reintegration process is carried out only adds to the agency debate and enables the researcher to show the different forms in which agency is manifested in an environment where there is still an ongoing conflict.

5.3 Life History Interviews with Research Participants

5.3.1 Access and Identification of Gatekeepers

The fieldwork, in which data was gathered took place in the period between January and April 2014. The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) was used as a primary gatekeeper to set up the interviews with former child soldiers participating in the reintegration programme run by the governmental body. Besides the ACR, the representative of the previously mentioned *Benposta Colombia* was also of great help to the researcher in making contact with potential interviewees. The support of these two organisations was indispensable for conducting the interviews with former child soldiers.

Owing to the widespread stigmatisation targeting this population and the ongoing conflict, former soldiers usually choose to keep their past identity hidden, which makes their identification impossible. In this way, because of the sensitivities of the circumstances of conflict, the researcher had no option to make a public call for research participants through conventional channels such as media advertising or university avenues (see also Cohen & Arieli 2011: 431). (The limitations of this approach will be discussed below.)

After the initial identification of potential gatekeepers, namely the previously mentioned Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) - governmental body responsible for the rehabilitation of former child soldiers before they reach the age of majority - the researcher contacted both institutes six months prior to the planned start date of the fieldwork. While the ACR showed willingness to assist the researcher by providing insider information about the agency's reintegration programme and arranging interviews with potential research participants, the ICBF did not respond to the researcher's continuous attempt to ask for the governmental authority's support. The researcher was requested to submit a number of official documents to the ACR prior to the fieldwork, such as the preliminary interview questions, informed consent form, information sheet, as well as the wanted criteria for potential interview recruits. In exchange for its help, the ACR expected the researcher to report her research findings back to the agency so that it could use these results to improve its future policies

and programme planning. Once in the field, after the initial delay in setting up the interviews, the agency did a great job in recruiting research participants and making its professionals available to the researcher.

5.3.2 Sample Population

Identifying the right informants is a key element of every research. In this particular study, one of the key methodological challenges for the researcher was not being able to interview children because of the ethical and psychological difficulties involved. Despite such an ethical consideration, during the conduct of the fieldwork, the researcher was proposed the possibility of conducting interviews with minors who had recently demobilised from the armed group.[56] However, this offer was turned down by the researcher out of principle.

When identifying the sample population and defining the unit of analysis, the researcher had no specific criteria regarding (1) the past affiliation of the informants, if they were members of the paramilitary or guerrilla groups; (2) what sex they were; (3) where they were from; (4) what status they held in the group, in this way allowing the researched population to reflect the general picture of Colombian former child soldiers.

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[56] This incident shows the lack of consistency regarding ethical considerations between a developed country like the United Kingdom and a developing country like Colombia.

In total twenty interviews were conducted with adult former child soldiers during the fieldwork (see Appendix 6). As for the gender distribution, thirteen of them were male, while seven of them were female. The youngest interviewee was nineteen years old at the time of the interview, while the oldest was thirty-one and the average age twenty-three.

The average age of recruitment into illegal armed groups among the interviewees was twelve, which is in line with the average age of recruitment of the majority of child soldiers in Colombia documented in Springer's report (Springer 2012: 22). Some of them, however, were as young as seven when they started their collaboration with the armed group. One of them only spent a couple of months in the group before escaping, while another one of the interviewees served as long as seven years as a child soldier. Nonetheless, the average time period spent in the armed group was three and a half years among the interviewees. As for which illegal armed group the research participants were members of as child soldiers, there is a predominant affiliation with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), with seventeen out of the twenty interviewees having served in the ranks of this guerrilla group. Only two participants had joined the other guerrilla group - National Liberation Army (ELN) - and only one participant was part of the paramilitary unit, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) (see Figure 2 below). Since the vast majority of the interviewees belonged to the

FARC, the word 'armed group' and 'FARC' will be used interchangeably in the following chapters, unless it is stated otherwise.

The two left-wing guerrilla organisations - FARC and ELN - are comparable for the purposes of the present thesis. In both groups, the majority of children join without the use of force ('voluntarily'), although both organisations resort to forced recruitment (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 132, 133). The main difference between the two groups is the discipline imposed on members by the group leadership: while it is very severe in the FARC with a military-driven routine, in the ELN it is medium or low level with more possibility for members to advance their individual interests (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 132, 134). For instance, while in the FARC desertion is punished with death in the majority of cases, ELN members are more likely to be allowed to leave and return, and deserters are not killed or threatened (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 134). Moreover, the isolation of group members is less extreme in the ELN and the group has a medium level of interaction with civil society while FARC has a low level (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 132). Therefore, the strength of bonds developed among comrades is less intense in the ELN with a less powerful 'organizational culture' (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 132). Furthermore, the FARC is more reliant on a constant flow of new members and therefore, more inclined to use lies and deception to draw young recruits in than the ELN (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 133). Consequently, even though there is some difference regarding the severity of some of the constraining factors to

children's agency in the armed group - e.g. obligation, isolation, presence of herd mentality, deception - between the two left-wing guerrilla organisations - the ELN being the less harsh one - the majority of constraining factors apparent before, during and after the child's involvement in armed conflict are equally present in both groups, also resulting in similar manifestations of agency among child soldiers.

Figure 2: Illegal armed groups interviewees were affiliated with as child soldiers
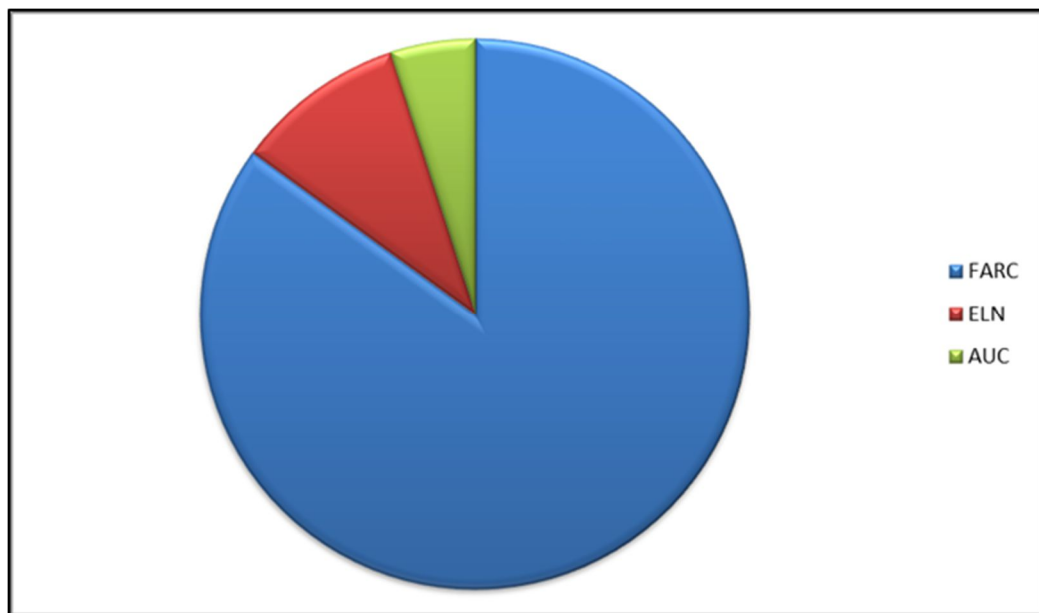
5.3.3 Location of the Interviews

A total of five sites were selected to collect data for this research. These were ACR service centres located in five different departments[57] of Colombia including Antioquia (Medellín), Cundinamarca (Bogotá), Quindío (Armenia), Risaralda (Pereira) and Valle del Cauca (Cali). The number of interviews was five in Antioquia and Valle del Cauca, four in Cundinamarca and Quindío, and two in Risaralda (see Map 2 below). Nonetheless, the distribution of departments where the interviewees were originally from was more spread out: Antioquia (five interviewees), Tolima (four interviewees), Caquetá (three interviewees), Meta (two interviewees), Amazonas (one interviewee), Caldas (one interviewee), Cauca (one interviewee), Chocó (one interviewee), Cundinamarca (one interviewee) and Norte de Santander (North Santander) (one interviewee) (see Map 3 below). In this way, ten out of the thirty-two departments of Colombia (see Map 1 below) were covered by the interviews in terms of places of origin of the research participants.

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[57] Departments (*departamentos*) here refer to country subdivisions in Colombia with a certain degree of autonomy.

Map 1: Departments of Colombia (Source: Wikimedia Commons)
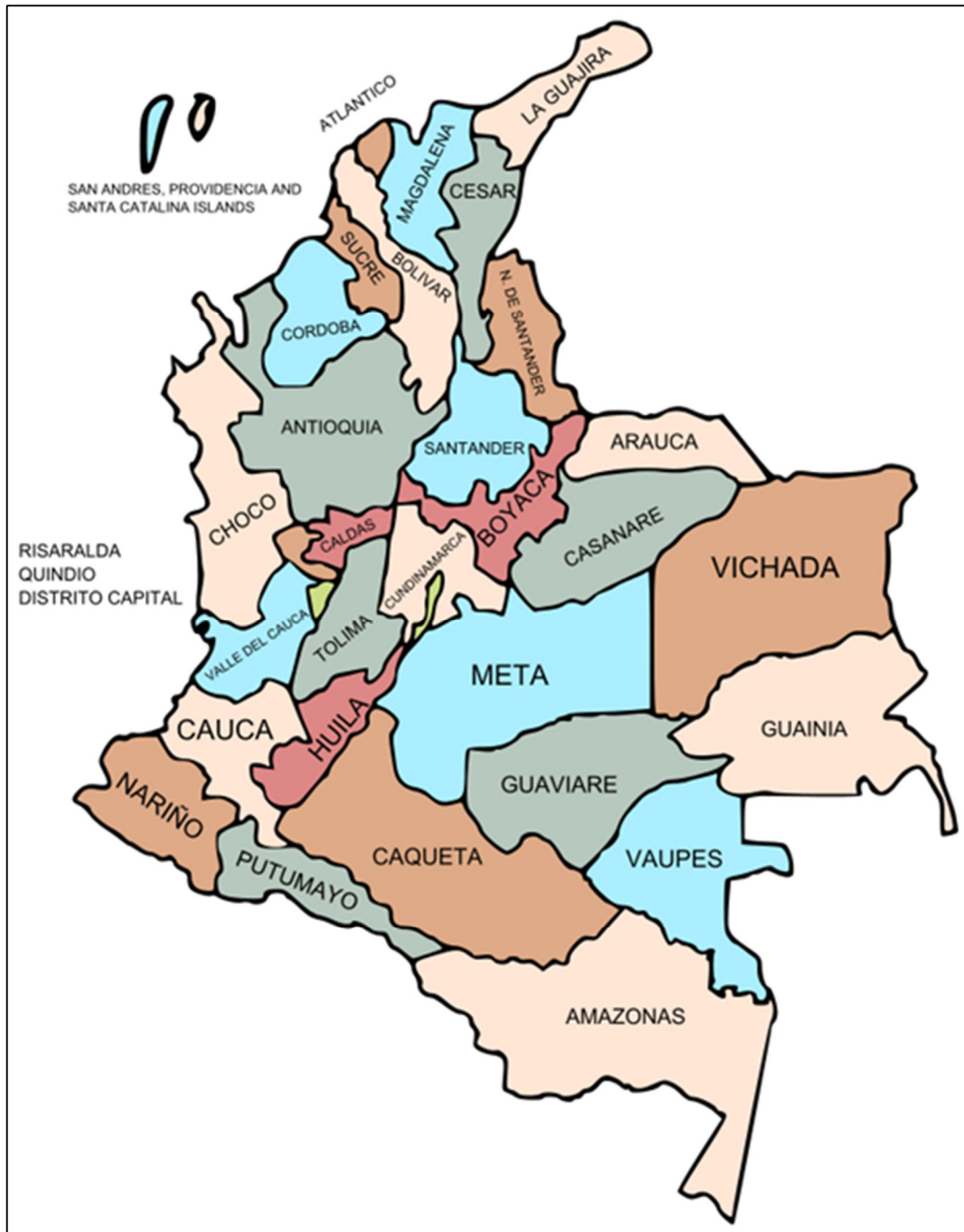
Map 2: Location of the interviews with former child soldiers in Colombia
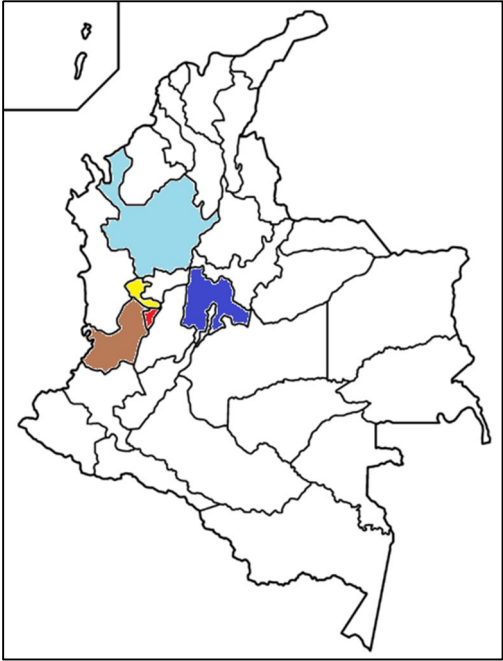
Map 3: Place of origin of the interviewees
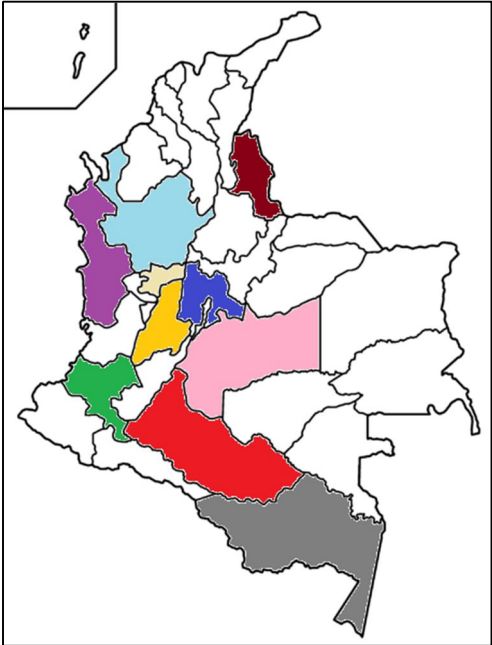
The concentration of interviews in the urban areas of the country had both logistical and practical reasons, namely access and presence of former child soldiers. During the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the armed conflict between the guerrilla groups and the national armed forces was pushed out of bigger cities, and today the countryside and the jungle areas of the country are the primary location of the fighting. However, due to high security risks for the researcher and the research participants, as well as ethical concerns, these areas are difficult and not desirable to access. Moreover, the fact that the majority of former child soldiers reside in the urban areas of Colombia also influenced site selection. Finally, the ACR service centres - which were in charge of arranging the interviews - are located in bigger cities of the country.

The location of the interviews was either an office in an ACR service centre, a room in a public school or a common room in a residential building. In order to protect the research participants' personal safety and avoid revealing their identity, public places - like cafes or parks - were neither ideal nor desirable meeting places to conduct interviews. Since the interviews set up by the ACR were given - it was the host who determined the location of the interviews - the researcher had no say in the selection of the venue. Nonetheless, with regard to the interviews arranged by *Benposta Colombia*, the place where the meetings were held was selected by the interviewer, based on the assumption that research participants required a quiet, safe and relaxed location for the

undertaking of the interviews (emotional safe space). The potential influence these places might have had on the information exchanged during the interviews will be discussed below.

5.4 <u>Methodological Challenges and Limitations</u>

Each study and applied methodology has its own challenges and limitations that need to be considered and addressed by the researcher. The methodological constraints which could potentially come up in the present research are the following: the limitation of conducting a case study research, selection bias in sampling research participants by the researcher and/or the gatekeepers, wrongly selected interview locations, unreliability of gathered information, trust-building with research participants, identity management, as well as subjectivity. Most of these issues are related to the fact that the research was carried out in a conflict environment[58], involving a group of people who are officially declared vulnerable and victims of the armed conflict. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that despite the highly challenging and constraining nature of conducting research in a conflict

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[58] For a detailed analytical discussion of the methodological and ethical challenges and limitations of conducting research in a conflict environment, see - among others - Barakat *et al.* (2002), Cohen and Arieli (2011), Ford *et al.* (2009), Mazurana *et al.* (2013), Sriram *et al.* (2009) and Wood (2006).

environment, there is a great need for such studies to be carried out using a methodology of the highest standard (Ford *et al.* 2009).

5.4.1 Case Study Research

Case study research is often condemned because its sample size is one and therefore, it is considered too narrow to be able to make observations applicable to the wider universe of cases. Nonetheless, it was not the intention of the present study to reach findings and conclusions which can be generalizable and applicable to a wider population, but to give an authentic presentation of the life stories of those former child soldiers who participated in this research.

5.4.2 Selection Bias of Research Participants

The selection bias exercised during the sampling process of potential research participants is a further methodological limitation of this research. Barakat *et al.* argue that some of the main methodological challenges of conducting research in a conflict environment are access to information, to research settings and to research participants (Barakat *et al.* 2002: 992). In a conflict setting, the depth and level of information the researcher is allowed to have access to is generally highly controlled and constrained by those in power (Kaiser 2013: 114). Moreover, because of security concerns and the limitation of access, there is a danger that the research will be determined by what is practically possible instead of what is best to investigate the research questions (Barakat *et al.* 2002: 992).

The researcher of this study had opportunity to gain access only to former child soldiers who had been participants of the reintegration programme run by the ACR. In this way, there were four groups of potential informants that were not accessible for the researcher. These groups include children who died on the battlefield[59]; those who were still involved in the armed groups; those who deserted the group but for some reason decided not to participate in the government-led programme[60]; as well as those who left the rehabilitation/reintegration programme and might have already re-engaged in criminal activity or re-joined one of the armed groups[61] (see also Bjørkhaug 2010: 18).

Besides selection bias of potential informants on the part of the researcher, there might have also been a selection bias in the way the government agency identified the research participants for this research and potentially only picked those who had a success story in their reintegration process. However, due to the ongoing conflict, the hidden identity of former child soldiers, and the fact that no other organisation but the ACR is responsible for the reintegration programme offered to adult former child soldiers; the researcher

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[59] Honwana also acknowledges such a limitation by claiming that "only the survivors can tell their stories" (Honwana 2007: 50).
[60] According to estimates of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers - now Child Soldiers International - only fifteen percent of all child soldiers in Colombia are able, or willing, to get involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration programme (Mapp 2011: 81, Thomas 2008: 20).
[61] The ACR has no record or follow-up tracking system for those programme participants whose involvement in the programme has been suspended or finalised.

was left with no option other than to rely on the help of the government agency. Furthermore, the agency demonstrated great willingness to accommodate the needs of the researcher, which showed their intention to be transparent instead of trying to conceal something. Despite the institution's readiness to make its participants available to the researcher, the database managed by the agency which contains detailed information about all programme participants - called Information System for Reintegration (*Sistema de Información de la Reintegración* or SIR) - was not made accessible to the researcher in order to protect the privacy of participants. Nonetheless, despite such a constraint, the richness and in-depth nature of the twenty life history interviews conducted with former child soldiers allowed the researcher to uncover the story and experience of these former child soldiers, gain an authentic insight into the reality - actions and circumstances - of these individuals beyond official discourses and stereotypes, and acquire a thorough understanding about how human agency is exhibited in such a constraining (but sometimes enabling) environment as a conflict setting.

5.4.3 Interview Locations

The majority of interviews - twelve out of twenty - were conducted in ACR local service centres to guarantee the security of the participants and the researcher, as well as the privacy and confidentiality of the interviews. Nonetheless, this might have had a constraining impact on what the interviewees shared in their statements. The participants might not have

opened up about their real experience in the reintegration programme, because in order to receive their benefits they might have felt obliged to stay on good terms with the agency and might have felt being watched in this setting (see also Denov 2010). However, in the majority of cases the location of the interviews did not seem to have an apparent limiting impact on the accounts shared by the interviewees.

5.4.4 Unreliable Information

A further methodological challenge which researchers need to acknowledge and address is the possibility of gathering inaccurate and unreliable information in the life history interviews (see also Cohen & Arieli 2011: 425, Wood 2006: 373). Podder also recognises the danger of fabrication when he argues that "narratives and self-reports always carry the possibility of bias, concealment, or exaggeration" (Podder 2010: 176). However, instead of attributing too much importance to this inherent and in a way inevitable weakness of relying on self-reports, it is considered more essential to reflect on why the person might be using these tools of conscious or unconscious deception. As Garbarino *et al.* (1992) argue, it is less important to ask whether someone is lying - or is twisting the truth - and more important to think about why he/she may be doing so (Boyden 2000).

There might be several explanations for this behaviour. The research participant might try to impress the interviewer and might even expect to trigger fascination or deep compassion in the researcher. Secondly, in an

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environment which imposes the "straightjacket of innocence" (Ladisch 2013) on former child soldiers and where stigmatisation is a challenge former child soldiers need to face, some participants might be reluctant to share the real story about their voluntary recruitment and the kind of atrocities they committed while in the armed group (Maclure & Denov 2006: 123). Thirdly, the provision of misinformation by the informant might also be attributed to the time factor: there was a fairly big time gap between the narrated events and the interviews, which could potentially influence the way stories were told and re-imagined.[62]

It is the researcher's responsibility to minimise the risk of using unreliable information. Boyden (2000) argues in favour of the use of multiple research methods and sources of information in order to cross-check the collected data. Therefore, the researcher of this study used the method of triangulation and compared the research findings of the life history interviews against the material found in the literature on the agency of children and child soldiers, as well as social capital theory applied in this thesis.

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[62] The time gap between the interviewees' desertion from the armed group and participation in this research was ranged between three to fourteen years, seven years being the average among research participants.

5.4.5 Trust and Emotional Access

Another concern the researcher had to address is the difficulty of gaining emotional access to, and building trust with, research participants due to the conflict environment and the shortness of time spent with them (see also Bowd 2008, Cohen & Arieli 2011). Trust is defined by Hosmer (1995) as "the belief of an individual in the good faith of others and their future intentions" (Cohen & Arieli 2011: 428). In the present context, trust is understood as the social relationship between the research subject and the researcher in which the former believes that the latter acts in good faith and by doing so exposes him/herself to vulnerability by sharing information with the researcher. Wood argues that trust - the degree of which often evolves - is something that has to be earned by the interviewer over time through a series of encounters with the research participants (Wood 2013: 297). However, time and financial constraints did not allow the researcher to conduct several rounds of interviews with the same sample of research participants. Furthermore, Cohen and Arieli argue that in a conflict environment, all segments of society - including 'normative' sectors - are highly likely to develop distrust and suspicion toward outsiders and therefore, often show reluctance to be exposed and to participate in research (Cohen & Arieli 2011: 425).

Nonetheless, the trust built with the research participants by the gatekeepers during their involvement in the reintegration programme made the researcher's work easier to be accepted and build some level of trust with her

interviewees. This meant a great help in the undertaking of life history interviews, which often involved sharing painful memories from the past that required a confidential rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees. Furthermore, this limitation was also intended to be compensated for by the openness of interview questions and the transferred control over the direction of the interviews to the interviewees. Moreover, the researcher demonstrated great compassion toward research participants, was willing to answer personal questions when asked, spoke the native language of the interviewees, and ensured that the informants felt at ease before, during and after the interviews; factors which also likely contributed to the successful establishment of some level of trust. In this way, the researcher's experience with her research subjects was in alignment with Cohen and Arieli's fieldwork experience in a conflict environment, namely that "integrity, transparency, continuity and sensitivity are the factors which increase trust between the research population and the researcher" (Cohen & Arieli 2011: 432).

5.4.6 Identity Management

In the field, the researcher is inadvertently received and judged based on his/her social identity including marital status, age, gender, social class, race, ethnic affiliation and nationality (Podder 2010: 174, Wood 2006: 373). Vigh argues that in a conflict environment social identities are often polarised and there is a "heightened awareness of newcomers and seekers of information",

which often results in the researchers' goals and agenda being misinterpreted and politicised by being linked to the context of conflict (Vigh 2006: 21). The researcher of this thesis, being a white single woman in her twenties from Europe conducting a study as part of her higher education, was perceived in a certain way by research participants.

In some cases, being a woman was an advantage for the researcher, because the interviewees felt comfortable talking about certain topics, such as their family or sexual experiences - of rape, for instance. In the same manner, the fact that the researcher was in her mid-twenties when conducting the fieldwork was beneficial for the research since the vast majority of interviewees were in their early or mid-twenties themselves. The lack of age gap between the researcher and the research participants resulted in the interviews having a rather friendly atmosphere and the shrinkage of the power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewees. Several interviewees, for instance, showed pictures of their children to the researcher and talked about their family in great length. The researcher's status as an affiliate of a western university might have conveyed a message of power and superiority in economic and educational background; however, such a potential inequality between the interviewer and the interviewees was identified and addressed. The researcher demonstrated an approachable, honest, respectful and friendly behaviour toward the research participants, and showed great compassion and empathy about their grievances and life

stories. The researcher's race and nationality did not have great relevance in the conduct of the interviews. A number of interviewees even expressed gratitude and felt impressed that a foreigner living in a peaceful country would show interest in, and travel to, a conflict-affected country and would also speak the local language. None of the research participants seemed to get the false idea of being provided with direct help or financial support by the researcher.

The significant identity difference between the researcher and the research participants raises the debate of whether an 'outsider' should conduct research in a field she is so alien to or whether this task should be left to 'insiders'. Merton defines the insider-outsider position not in terms of nationality or country of origin, but as a matter of being "members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of certain social statuses" or not (Merton 1972: 21). Based on this understanding of the concept, the researcher of this study was separated from the research participants not only in terms of not being a former child soldier herself, but in other aspects as well: social class, nationality, ethnic affiliation, the position of power that being a researcher entails, as well as marital status in a number of cases (see also Smyth 2005: 12). However, Smyth argues that the difference between being an insider or an outsider is less important than it is generally perceived and that regardless of one's identity - whether an insider or an outsider - all researchers are inadvertently influenced by their past experiences and identifications (Smyth

2005: 17). Furthermore, as previously demonstrated, the researcher tried to minimise the impact her outsider identity could potentially have on the conduct of the research in general and of the interviews in particular.

5.4.7 Subjectivity

To some extent, bias and subjectivity are inherent parts of conducting qualitative research. Subjectivity is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the condition of being dominated by or absorbed in one's personal feelings, thoughts, concerns, etc." With regard to the present research, there might be certain aspects which were influenced by some level of bias and subjectivity exercised by the researcher. For instance, pre-formed thoughts and concerns of the researcher have certainly influenced the way the sample population was selected, the locations identified, the interview questions formulated and the data analysed. Nevertheless, the researcher was aware of this bias in both the data collection and analysis process, and tried to keep its impact to a minimum.

5.5 <u>Ethical Assurances</u>

Conducting research is never a neutral exercise but it entails certain ethical dilemmas and problems which need to be addressed by the researcher (Boyden 2000). Furthermore, as Pottier *et al.* argue, in the case of research

conducted on or during conflict, these "ethical issues… get sharpened and become more difficult to resolve" (Pottier *et al.* 2011: 8); while Mazurana *et al.* highlight that ethical issues in a conflict environment might mean that people's lives are at stake (Mazurana *et al.* 2013: 7). Working with conflict-affected and vulnerable groups - as former child soldiers - brings an additional challenge to the research. The primary ethical problems which came up or potentially could have emerged during the conduct of this research and therefore, had to be tackled by the researcher, include confidentiality and informed consent, data security, the basic principle of 'do no harm', and the management of expectations and rewards (see also Ford *et al.* 2009, Wood 2013: 296).

5.5.1 Confidentiality and Informed Consent

In the present research, confidentiality was addressed by offering research participants - prior to the start of the interviews - the freedom to decide if they were willing to give their consent to the interviewer to use the provided information freely. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview (see Appendix 1), and anonymity was guaranteed to all research participants in order to protect their privacy and personal safety (see also Wood 2006: 373). This practice was necessary because of the common acknowledgement that the revelation of one's past deeds and identity could have negative consequences for one's safety and current socio-economic life. This is mainly because the vast majority of former child soldiers, for fearing

stigmatisation and social exclusion, decide to hide their past identity not only from their colleagues and friends, but in some instances even from their partners and spouses. This unexpected finding of the interviews also prevented the researcher from conducting previously planned surveys and interviews with family members and members of the receiving communities. Furthermore, the guarantee of anonymity also positively influenced the respondents' willingness to participate in the research, the development of trust between the interviewees and the interviewer, as well as the depth of information shared with the researcher in the interview.

At the beginning of each interview, the research participant was given an information sheet which included information about the content of the research, its goals, the potential risks and advantages of participation, as well as the structure of the interview process, and what the gathered data would be used for (see Appendix 2). After reading the information sheet, the informants were asked if they required any further clarification or if they had any concern, and they were also given the opportunity to contact the researcher following the interview in case they wanted to add or modify something in what previously had been said. Wood argues that field research in general - and field research conducted in a conflict environment in particular - can only be considered ethical if research participants consent to their participation in full awareness of the potential risks and benefits involved in taking part in the study (Wood 2006: 379). Research participants were also informed at the

beginning of the interview that they were free to withdraw at any time and to refuse to respond to any question that seemed distressing, and could also always opt to stay silent with no explanation required.

5.5.2 Data Security

With regard to the security of data storage, the gathered information, the transcripts and the signed consent forms were always stored in a safe place and were not accessed by anyone else but the researcher. None of the research participants' names were recorded anywhere. Moreover, no other person was present during the interviews but the interviewee and the interviewer since no interpreter was needed to facilitate the communication between them. In this way, the exchanged information remained between the researcher and the research participant. In addition, the audio-recordings of the interviews were only accessed by the researcher since no external assistance was used when doing the transcriptions.

5.5.3 'Do No Harm'

The basic ethical principle of any research, namely 'do no harm', is even more challenging to achieve in conflict-affected areas, because it "is intensified in conflict zones by political polarization, the presence of armed actors, the precarious security of most residents, the general unpredictability of events, and the traumatization through violence of combatants and civilians alike" (Wood 2006: 373). Considering all these different factors the researcher has

no control over, Wessells argues that implying the 'do no harm' principle in this environment is almost impossible: "all research in war zones, no matter how carefully conceived and conducted, has unintended consequences, including negative consequences that violate the humanitarian imperative "Do No Harm"" (Wessells 2013: 82). Nonetheless, the researcher is responsible for taking all necessary measures in order to minimise the risk of doing harm and to protect the physical and emotional wellbeing of the research participants (see also Longman 2013: 270). This can be done through different mechanisms which will be presented below.

During the interviews, research participants were asked to recall and relive past memories which might have been suppressed for some time, and which could be painful and could trigger an emotional response in the interviewees. This could also affect the present life of research participants since, as Roberts claims, "[t]he recollection of past events is inextricably connected with people's current life and its place in the group and wider surroundings" (Roberts 2002: 104). The life history interviews were often disturbing not only for the research participant, but also for the researcher herself. Therefore, a level of sensitivity was required throughout the interview process, including respecting the silence of the interviewees and not digging too deep into a touchy subject unless the research participants wanted to. Brun highlights the importance for the researcher to 'listen' to the silences of the research participants and seek to understand the meaning behind them (Brun 2013:

136). Silences can be interpreted as a protection mechanism, a sign of inability to speak of terror which research subjects have experienced or as a way to take leadership over an interview situation (Brun 2013: 136). In the latter case, Brun argues that "silence does not necessarily represent a lack of voice, but rather a space one creates for oneself, to maintain a sense of self or as a means of protest" (Brun 2013: 136). Despite telling stories about painful memories and regretted actions, in the present study no significant re-traumatization was observed as a result, as some researchers experienced in conflict settings (e.g. Bell 2001).

Regarding the physical wellbeing of research participants, Pottier *et al.* argue that creating a physical safe space for research subjects is almost impossible in a conflict environment due to the unpredictability of events, instability and the researchers' inability to "predict the full array of likely consequences for those who participate in the fieldwork encounter" (Pottier *et al.* 2011: 8). Researchers undertaking research in a conflict setting put their own personal safety at risk; however, such potential risks are even greater for those who provide information (Longman 2013: 256). Therefore, special precautions were taken by the researcher of this study to protect her research participants, such as careful selection of location, the guarantee of anonymity and data protection.

As for the researcher's security and emotional wellbeing, certain actions were taken in order to minimise the risk during the data collection process (see also

Wood 2006: 373). Prior to departure to the field, the researcher familiarised herself with the general safety and security guidelines found on the United Kingdom government information website, in blogs written by people who had previously visited Colombia and in travel books. Moreover, the rural and jungle areas of the country - where the armed conflict had been recently evolving - were avoided by the researcher for security reasons.

5.5.4 Management of Expectations and Rewards

Other ethical concerns entailed in the conduct of this research included managing expectations and the question of rewards (see also Podder 2010: 175, Wessells 2013: 93). False promises were not made to research participants and due to the provision of detailed information and the transparency of the research process, interviewees clearly understood that participation in the research did not lead to any direct benefit for them.[63] This is considered crucial to highlight because falsely raised hopes and unmet expectations might generate frustrations and feelings of abandonment among research participants, and might also damage future research potential (Wessells 2013: 93). Regarding the question of rewards, no financial reimbursement was offered for taking part in the research, but the researcher

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[63] Wessells questions whether people living in a conflict environment - often in desperate circumstances - are in the position to fully understand and accept the limited capacity of researchers to make a difference in the community's living standards and to deliver financial assistance at a later stage (Wessells 2013: 93).

relied on small tokens of appreciation like providing cakes and refreshments to participants during the interview process. The researcher also proposed for the research participants to pay for their bus tickets, but none of them accepted the offer. However, some of the interviewees asked a rather personal favour from the researcher: fight the stereotypes Colombia is associated with - the armed conflict, drugs and arms - and spread the word that the Latin American country is different from the way it is depicted in the West.

Leaving the field does not mean that the researcher's responsibility to her research participants ends.[64] In a conflict environment, research participants make a decision to participate in a study despite the risks involved, in the hope that such a contribution will make a difference in their communities (Longman 2013: 257). Therefore, Longman argues that researchers conducting research in a conflict environment have a moral responsibility to do what they can so that their research has a maximum impact (Longman 2013: 257). The researcher is aware of her duty to reciprocate the time research participants dedicated to this research, their willingness to share painful memories from the past, and talk about their future plans and aspirations. Therefore, the research findings will be fed back to the ACR in order to contribute to the improvement of future reintegration programmes,

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[64] Brun claims that the field cannot be seen only as a "physically designated place where another culture or society lies waiting to be observed and described, like a laboratory", but the researcher is part of that field even when he/she is physically away from the location defined as the 'field' (Brun 2013: 134).

which would be highly valued by participants of the present research as well. Moreover, several research participants expressed their gratefulness to the researcher for providing an opportunity to share their life story and for being an engaged listener. The researcher wants to believe that such a 'service' was a small reward to those who took part in the study.

5.6 <u>Conclusion</u>

This research was conducted using qualitative research methods, relying primarily on life history interviews. The fact that the data collection was carried out in a conflict-affected country added extra methodological and ethical challenges to the conduct of the study, before, during and after the fieldwork. Necessary changes were made throughout the data collection and analysis process to accommodate the needs of the research participants. This demonstrates how the researcher is required to remain highly flexible and adaptable during and after the fieldwork. Even though the implemented changes were sometimes quite major - as the shift from semi-structured to life history interviews - the basic structure of the research methodology remained unaffected. The selected methodology has been shown to be appropriate to address the research questions of this thesis.

The next chapter is the first of the three empirical chapters which contain the presentation and analysis of fieldwork findings. It will focus on the discussion

of the various constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in the context of Colombia, including factors identified in the existing literature and additional elements apparent in the life history interviews conducted with research participants of the present study.

Chapter 6

The Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in the Pre-recruitment Period in Colombia

6.1 Introduction

"in the village there were children who entered voluntarily, but it was because of poverty, lack of education, lack of teaching and of telling them that it is not good" (Interviewee 17)

Even though the present research primarily focuses on the reintegration process, the examination of agency before and during children's involvement in armed conflict is considered important because it has significant implications for the reintegration period. Some constraining factors to children's agency which are present in the pre-recruitment period and in the armed group still prevail in the reintegration phase. Such elements can have a particularly limiting impact on former child soldiers' agency and therefore, might hinder their sustainable reintegration into civilian society. Furthermore, agency exhibited before and during children's participation in armed conflict affects the perception former child soldiers have of their own identity and past experiences, as well as the image Colombian society holds of them. Moreover, the consideration of constraining structural factors to children's

agency might facilitate the receiving community's forgiveness of the atrocities committed by former child soldiers during their involvement in the armed group, and might also help ease the guilt and remorse often felt by children after their return to civilian society.

In the present chapter, the factors in the Colombian case which impede children from fully exhibiting their agency in the pre-recruitment period will be identified and discussed. These are factors that children need to navigate around in order to exhibit some level of agency. The Spanish term *tocar* was commonly used by the interviewees in their storytelling to express something similar to what Honwana calls tactical agency. The concept implies something happening to someone due to external factors or somebody doing something out of obligation or responsibility. This is relevant to the analysis of fieldwork findings since by this - usually subconscious - use of word, the research participants acknowledged that what happened to them or what they did in the past was often perceived as the result of a coming together of different factors over which they had no or little control.[65]

The present and the following chapter apply the conceptual model designed by Kimmel and Roby (2007) - discussed and used in Chapter Four - in the presentation and analysis of constraining factors to children's agency in the

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[65] None of the interviewees used this expression to describe their recruitment into the armed group (except for Interviewee 17 who was taken by the group by force), escape from the group and stay in civilian society in the reintegration period, which shows that these actions were interpreted as manifestations of one's agency.

context of war. This model distinguishes six different dimensions that interact to facilitate the institutionalisation and perpetuation of child soldiering. These include politics, policy, culture and religious beliefs of the larger society on the macro level; and community, family and psychosocial factors on the micro level (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741-743).

Even though the present and the following two chapters primarily have an empirical aim, their underlying objective is also to question, test and challenge the existing literature - presented in Chapters Three and Four - by comparing it with the fieldwork findings of the present research. This will be delivered by prioritising the interviewees' words and ideas in favour of imposing the researcher's pre-formed assumptions on the accounts shared by the research participants (ethnographic approach). It is important to note that each life history is unique and even though there are some recurring trends and patterns, each individual exhibits different amounts of agency with different constraining and enabling factors influencing such agency.

This chapter is the first of the two chapters which address the subject of constraining factors to children's agency in the context of Colombia. Following the chronological order of the child's experience as a soldier, in the present chapter the pre-recruitment period will be addressed, while Chapter Seven will examine the time spent in the armed group and the post-demobilisation period.

6.2 <u>Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in the Pre-recruitment Period in Colombia</u>[66]

Table 4: Self-claimed Reasons to Join the Armed Group Among the Interviewees

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Abduction	■																■		■	
Appeal of lifestyle in the group		■	■			■				■		■				■				■
Financial reasons/lack of opportunities			■		■			■		■		■	■		■			■		■
Domestic abuse/conflicts at home				■				■	■	■	■							■		
Revenge				■																
Wide presence of the group in the area (mentioned)		■				■		■	■	■	■	■		■						■
Family/friend already in the group							■							■						■
Peer influence				■							■		■		■					■
Ideology													■							■
Boredom																		■		

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[66] Table 4 shows the various factors identified by the reserch participants to play an influence on their recruitment into the armed group. The numbers appearing in the top row of the table refer to the chronological number of interviewees.

6.2.1 Politics

As discussed in Chapter Four, the politics-related factors which constrain children's agency in the pre-recruitment period and have been identified in the literature include a general lack of respect for human rights, the presence of an unstable government, and political violence and terror. The first two factors were found relevant to the case of Colombia, while - as previously expected - the latter did not play a significant role as a constrainer to children's agency. Furthermore, two additional constraining factors were discussed by the interviewees that were not covered in the literature. These include the state's poor enforcement of international agreements and national laws on recruitment, as well as the state's hands-off approach.

6.2.1.1   General Lack of Respect for Human Rights

"We were already victims of everything: when my family was over there [his place of origin] we were rather victims of the soldiers than of the guerrilla, because when the soldiers captured my brother, they thought that everyone in the family was a guerrilla. Then they came to the house every eight days, every week; when they came, they wanted to enter the house to see what they could find and if they found something they liked, money, they took it. My mom could never say anything." (Interviewee 12)

The armed conflict that has been dominating Colombia's social, cultural, political and economic landscape for over fifty years is characterised by more

than actual casualties. Forced disappearance, sexual violence, torture, kidnapping, death threats and forced displacement (individual and collective), as well as other human rights abuses are only some of the 'by-products' of the armed conflict. As of December 2017, the Colombian Unique Register of Victims (*Registro Único de Víctimas*) reports 168,581 cases of forced disappearance; 24,284 victims of sexual violence; 10,740 torture victims; 36,443 kidnappings; 374,438 victims of death threats and 7,325,975 displaced persons (Unique Register of Victims 2017). The current total number of victims linked to the armed conflict reaches 8,270,812 (Unique Register of Victims 2017). This figure reflects the widespread lack of respect for human rights in the country, not only by the illegal armed groups, but also by the state. The different manifestations of the state's lack of respect for human rights include false positive killings (Interviewees 14 & 17), impunity offered to criminals (Interviewees 4 & 14) and collaboration with the paramilitaries, discussed in Chapter Two.

In a culture where human rights are not respected in general, children's rights are bound to be overlooked and remain unprotected. Ciurlizza argues that the recruitment of children into illegal armed groups and armed forces is not a separate issue in itself, but has to be seen "as a logical consequence of systematic and generalised patterns of human rights violations" (Ciurlizza 2012: 123). Children's basic rights presented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) - such as the right to education, to protection from

exploitation and to adequate standard of living - have limited importance and applicability in a conflict-affected country like Colombia. In the absence of viable alternatives, children are more inclined to join illegal armed groups.

6.2.1.2   Presence of an Unstable Government

"I gave them [the police] all the information I had, but nothing happened. Those who have a lot of money are safe" (Interviewee 4)

Even though Colombia hosts the longest - since the late nineteenth century - and one of the most stable democracies in Latin America, it is ranked among the politically most unstable states in the world. This can be greatly attributed to the presence of a long-lasting armed conflict in the country. The previous assumption is made based on the index for 'Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism'[67] measured in the Worldwide Governance Indicators by the World Bank (The World Bank 2015).

The Colombian government has been discredited with the parapolitics scandal, the allegations of false positive killings, impunity and political corruption - bribery and electoral fraud -, as discussed in Chapter Two. Moreover, the armed conflict has also had a significant destabilising impact on the state, which supports Schmidt's argument - addressed in Chapter Four

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[67] The index measures "perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically-motivated violence and terrorism" (TheGlobalEconomy.com, The World Bank 2015).

- regarding wars' multiplier effect on children's agency (Schmidt 2007: 52). The state's lack of stability limits the services and human rights guarantees it can offer to its citizens, which then negatively influences children's security and wellbeing, acting as a constrainer to their agency.

6.2.1.3 Poor Enforcement of International Agreements and National Laws on Recruitment

"Why do they [the state] have to wait for a young person to enter the war, become a victim, in order to help him/her?" (Interviewee 12)

Regarding the recruitment and use of minors in armed forces and armed groups, the Colombian government has previously ratified several international agreements and conventions which regulate the involvement of this group in military ranks. In 1991, Colombia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and later also ratified the 'Optional Protocol' which was added to the convention in 2005. Furthermore, in 2005, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999) by the International Labour Organization was ratified by the Colombian state, which document labels the forced and compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour. However, the application of these regulations has been poorly enforced, misguided and has been lacking a proper monitoring mechanism. These factors have led to the failure of international conventions to provide legal protection to Colombian children from recruitment into armed groups and armed forces.

Regarding national laws in Colombia, it was not until December 1999 that the enlistment of children into the national armed forces was regulated and prohibited (Happold 2005: 41). This led to the demobilisation of the final contingent of 950 under-eighteen-year-olds from government forces in the same month, even though Colombia's national security forces once had 15,000 children in their ranks (Happold 2005: 41, Singer 2006: 31). This shows how the view of child soldiers has changed and shifted over time, which can be greatly attributed to Graça Machel's report, published in 1996.

Article 162 of the Colombian Penal Code of 2000 - applicable to both illegal armed groups and national armed forces - states that the "person who recruits minors below the age of 18 years or who forces them to participate directly or indirectly in hostilities or in armed operations, will incur a prison sentence ranging from six to ten years and a fine" (ICRC 2013: 310). The crime described in this provision also includes the use of children for intelligence purposes (ICRC 2013: 310). Besides the Penal Code of 2000, the Law on Judicial Cooperation of 1997 and the Code on Childhood and Adolescence of 2006 also prohibit the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in Colombia (ICRC 2013: 310). Therefore, there are several national laws aimed at protecting children from recruitment into armed groups; however, the Colombian state has so far failed to enforce these laws on non-state actors - illegal armed groups and criminal organisations - which act as primary recruiters of minors (Ernesto Mendez 2014, ICBF 2013a, Springer 2012: 30,

Verdad Abierta 2015b). By increasing the state's presence in the rural areas of the country and in the suburbs of bigger cities, as well as introducing more effective punitive measures, these national laws could better prevent child recruitment. Moreover, impunity for committing such a war crime should not be traded as an incentive to end the conflict - as discussed in Chapter Two - since this significantly undermines the severity of such a punishment. Furthermore, the state itself still uses former child soldiers for intelligence-gathering purposes, which violation of children's rights will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

6.2.1.4   The State's Hands-off Approach

"here in Colombia you have to tie your shoes and go search yourself, because here if you stay still or sitting, no help will get to you" (Interviewee 1)

The hands-off approach adopted by the Colombian government manifests itself in the lack of state presence[68] in the rural areas of the country, an issue which has been addressed in recent years but is still a prevailing problem, and in the absence of an effective support and protection system in place (see also Trejos Rosero 2013: 108). This trend was also apparent in the life history interviews, in which one of the most prominent themes was how Colombians feel abandoned by the state and feel resentment for not being assisted enough

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[68] Trejos Rosero defines 'state presence' as "permanent compliance with the primary obligations of the State, such as: providing justice, providing security and guaranteeing the provision and access to basic public services for all its citizens" (Trejos Rosero 2013: 108).

(Interviewees 1 & 12). Two interviewees (Interviewees 12 & 18) specifically talked about how their families were not given any support by the state when they were forced to leave their homes and became internally displaced people: "[m]y family never received anything from the state" (Interviewee 12). The state's hands-off approach also involves the lack of an effective system of child protection and social services, in which forced recruitment would be prevented by the police or the army, and the push and pull factors of voluntary recruitment would be considered and addressed.

6.2.2 Culture/Beliefs

In Chapter Four, it was discussed how certain social and cultural norms act as constrainers to children's agency and make their recruitment into the armed group more likely. Such structural factors - discussed in the exisiting literature - include child labour and lack of enrolment in education; domestic abuse and sexual violence; a culture of war created by the presence of an armed conflict of long duration; as well as traditional power structures, including gender stereotyping. Martyrdom, for reasons discussed in Chapter Four, was declared irrelevant to the recruitment of children into armed groups in Colombia. Furthermore, besides the abovementioned factors, other cultural elements with a constraining impact were also discussed by the research participants of this study. These include the practice of child marriage, living in the countryside where the rural mentality is dominant, as well as coming from a minority ethnic background.

6.2.2.1　Child Labour and Lack of Enrolment in Education

"From the moment one starts walking, [one] starts working" (Interviewee 3)

Even though based on Article 3 of the Colombian Code on Children and Adolescents (2006) a person is considered a child if he/she is between the ages of zero and twelve, and an adolescent between twelve and eighteen years of age, the characteristics and expectations attributed to people in this stage of life differ from those in the West (ICBF 2006: 10). According to existing cultural and social norms, minors are seen as capable agents and bear significant social and economic responsibilities in the life of their family, such as contributing financially to the expenses of the household and taking care of younger siblings (Muñoz Vila 1996: 104). Such responsibilities are seen as nothing extraordinary and are not considered to be damaging to the child's social development.

In the rural areas of Colombia, children are expected to start working at a very young age - sometimes as young as five - in order to pay for their own education, sustain themselves and contribute to the expenses of the household they live in, especially in single parent households (Interviewees 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19). Based on statistics by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), in 2016, 38.1% of working children engaged in employment because they had to participate in the family's economic activity, while 36.5% were happy to work so that they could have resources of their own (DANE 2017c: 11). 10.6% of working

children considered labour beneficial because it was thought to shape one's personality, make one respected and keep one away from bad habits; 10.6% had to work to contribute to the expenses of the household and to finance their own studies; while 4.3% had other reasons (DANE 2017c: 11). One of the research participants (Interviewee 2) also expressed pride for his ability to pay for his studies and be independent as a child. The type of jobs children fulfil in the Colombian society varies, ranging from working as an assistant in a bakery or a shop, to selling raffles on the street or taking care of younger siblings (Interviewees 9, 11, 14, 19).

Despite the ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999) - in 2005 - and the Minimum Age Convention (1973) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) - in 2001 - by the Colombian state, based on statistics by DANE, in 2016, 7.8% of Colombian children were engaged in employment; 10.2% of the male and 5.1% of the female population of minors (DANE 2017c: 3, 6). According to Springer's report, in 2012, over 1,466,000 children were involved in the informal labour market and around 100,000 minors worked in the illegal economy under the direct control of armed groups and criminal organisations (Springer 2012: 26, 67).

The culture of child labour is not a recent phenomenon in Colombia, but - as various documents suggest - it existed even before the country gained its independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century (Muñoz Vila 1996: 93). The nature of jobs children took on in this period was very diverse,

ranging from being a fisherman, working in mining, farming or domestic work to being employed in a butcher shop, construction site or even in prostitution (Muñoz Vila 1996: 102, 104). Furthermore, in the War of Independence (1810-1822) - after which conflict Colombia ceased to exist as a Spanish colony - many soldiers were children fighting alongside their adult counterparts on the battlefield (Muñoz Vila 1996: 93). Colombian children were active participants in other armed conflicts as well, including the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902) and the ten-year long civil war in the mid-twentieth century, also known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958) (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 128). This demonstrates that - similar to other countries around the world - child soldiering is not a recent phenomenon in Colombia either. After the urbanisation process in the 1960s, children became more engaged in the informal sector, with this trend becoming even more significant ever since, as discussed above (Muñoz Vila 1996: 97). Therefore, child labour as it is experienced today is not new, but rather should be seen in a historical perspective, according to which working children are part of the employment landscape.

The jobs available to Colombian children today do not pay very well or do not pay at all, and minors are often exploited for their labour. Based on official numbers provided by DANE, in 2016, 47.2% of the jobs taken by children had no remuneration, 26.1% were independent and only 26.7% of them were paid (DANE 2017c: 16). Therefore, children often feel deceived and

discriminated against, which can push them to look for job opportunities in the armed group that allegedly pays well and seems to be the easy option at first glance. In this way, a lot of children first start working for the armed group by doing them favours, such as delivering items from one place to another or keeping an eye out for the national army and reporting their arrival to the group (*campanero*) (Interviewees 3, 5, 12, 14). This initial collaboration often further develops into a more intimate and confidential relationship between the child and the armed group, in which the former becomes a militia man or woman (*milician@*) in the group while still remaining in the civilian population, and later joins the armed group stationed in the mountains (*monte*). Contrary to popular belief among children and to the empty promises made by those trying to recruit minors into the armed group, members of the guerrilla group receive no salary (Gutiérrez Sanín 2004: 268, Springer 2012: 35). Nonetheless, the group is still capable of offering more to the children than the majority of families living in the rural areas of the country can. In the group, at least the basic needs of the children are met: there is food to eat, clothes to wear and shelter to protect them. In the paramilitary units, child recruits are even given financial remuneration for their services, the same amount as their adult counterparts (Interviewee 15). In this way, children gradually develop trust in the armed group, which they come to see as their provider.

In the face of financial hardship and in the midst of trying to find employment, children are deprived of their right to education. According to data by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the number of out-of-school adolescents (10-19 years of age) in Colombia was 235,335 in 2010 and was 294,147 in 2013 (UNESCO 2015). The number for out-of-school children was even higher - 391,648 in 2010 - showing an increasing trend since the beginning of the decade (UNESCO 2015). Due to lack of attendance in school, children are not taught about the social norms and principles based on which they could live a civilian life, and do not learn about the dangers of participation in armed conflict (Kirk 2011: 21). Furthermore, since primary school is often the first setting where socialisation of the child takes place, exclusion from such a social environment means that children often look for friends and substitutes for classmates somewhere else, commonly among the guerrillas (Interviewee 20). In addition, by not attending classes, children are left with a lot of free time on their hands, and often fall into idleness and boredom as a result. This lifestyle might encourage them to join the armed group that seems like an exciting and adventurous thing to do (Interviewee 18; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 23). Moreover, enlistment in the armed group may offer an alternative opportunity to enrol in education and capacity training which might be considered invaluable by children with no other real options (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 23). Consequently, in Colombia, child labour and lack of enrolment in education have a long-term constraining impact on children's

agency and increase the likelihood of the child's recruitment into the armed group.

6.2.2.2 Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence and Mistreatment

"He [his father] treated us as if we were animals. For whatever reason he beat us" (Interviewee 10)

According to UNICEF estimates, in Colombia, there are two million children being abused every year in their homes and almost half of them are exposed to extreme abuse (Alvis Palma 2008: 236). Data gathered by UNICEF and the Colombian Ombudsman (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) shows that eighty-three percent of demobilised child soldiers were victims of domestic violence and thirty-six percent experienced abandonment, negligence and physical or psychological abuse before their recruitment into the armed group (Verdad Abierta 2015a). The lack of a stable family background, as well as domestic violence, abuse and neglect gravitate children - especially girls - toward illegal armed groups, which can seemingly offer them protection, acceptance and the feeling of belonging to a family (Interviewees 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18).

The long-lasting effect of being a victim of such violence at a very young age - addressed in Chapter Four - was also apparent in the life history interviews. One of the research participants (Interviewee 19) who was sexually abused by a family friend from the age of five till she turned thirteen shared her current life experience of how her past comes back to her "like a TV set in

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the mind" whenever her opponent holds her on the floor in a mixed martial arts class or when her boyfriend playfully restrains her on the bed: "I am there again". The same interviewee (Interviewee 19) also recounted her initial determination not to get involved with men ever again after her abuse, because she believed that they only caused damage. Another research participant (Interviewee 4) with a similar past experience explained her reluctance to have children by saying: "[t]here is a cycle that has not closed yet... it scares me". Besides being sexually abused, being mistreated also leaves its mark on one's psyche. An interviewee (Interviewee 18) - mother of two children - talked about her difficulties in providing proper parental care to her children despite all her efforts: "when one has been mistreated, there are times when she has odd things in her head". Considering the aforementioned arguments, one can see how being a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse and mistreatment in childhood can act as a push factor for children to join illegal armed groups, and have a negative long-term impact on their agency.

6.2.2.3 Culture of War and the Normalisation of the Presence of the Guerrillas

"For me it was very normal to see these people [the guerrillas]" (Interviewee 1)

Growing up in an environment where the use of violence is accepted and internalised, and there is a lack of experience of what the culture of peace

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means, the culture of war becomes the norm. Children in Colombia often fall victim to different conflict-related crimes and atrocities. An ICBF report - published in 2013 - reported 2,209 children whose parents were victims of forced disappearance (1985-2013); 2,107 were victims of kidnapping (1990-2013); 1,003 were killed or injured by landmines (1985-2013); 469 were murdered (1980-2013); 147 were victims of sexual violence; and 1,709,925 were forcedly displaced (1985-2013) (ICBF 2013b).

Because of the long duration and the wide presence of the armed conflict, the practice of violence moves in to ordinary people's home - the extraordinary becomes ordinary - and often manifests itself in high rates of parental and spousal violence.[69] In 2014, the Colombian National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INMLCF) identified spousal violence as the most common form of violence committed in Colombia (64.33% of the cases), while parental violence was ranked third (13.7% of the cases) (INMLCF 2015: 187, 203). Since the majority of cases remain unreported, the real figures are likely to be even higher. The primary causes reported to trigger the violence between partners or spouses were intolerance, jealousy and alcoholism/drug addiction; while parents used aggression against their children predominantly because of intolerance (INMLCF 2015: 181, 203). Alvis Palma - Colombian psychiatrist and systemic family therapist - calls the

[69] It is not possible to compare the numbers regarding domestic violence before and after the start of the conflict due to lack of data on the subject before the 1960s.

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interrelatedness between family, social and political violence palpable and in a way inevitable (Alvis Palma 2008: 236).

Besides the normalisation of violence, another way the culture of war has a constraining impact on children's agency ("my mind was not clear") (Interviewee 16) is through the spread of the ideology advocated by the armed groups, particularly in the rural areas of the country: "I partially did it [recruitment] because I shared the thoughts of the guerrilla" (Interviewee 14), "I also liked it [the armed group] because they were fighting for a better quality of life" (Interviewee 20) (see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 24). This shows that the guerrillas are not merely present in the rural areas of Colombia, but are also the ones who set the rules and norms to follow (normative hegemony), or as an interviewee put it "the region danced to their tune" (Interviewee 12). Due to the lack of presence of state authorities in these parts of the country, it is the guerrillas who fulfil the role of the police and army, and who offer other services that are usually provided by the state. In this way, they represent both a legal and a moral authority in the area that one can turn to when in need of help. One of the research participants (Interviewee 10) shared a story from his childhood about his father acting in a violent way with him, his mother and his siblings. As a consequence, his mother reached out to the commander of the FARC unit stationed in that region, in order to ask him to have a word with her husband about his aggressive behaviour, and to convince him to stop abusing his wife and his children (Interviewee 10).

Another interviewee (Interviewee 11) recounted how, after her father had died and her mother had left her and her younger siblings all alone for months to go and look for employment opportunities somewhere else, she asked for the guerrillas' help to find her mother and convince her to come back to them.

Therefore, as it is also apparent in the narratives of former child soldiers in Colombia, the guerrillas are not perceived as outsiders, but as an integral part of the everyday life of civilians living in the rural areas of the country with whom they have close linkages as business partners and a security authority. The guerrillas purchase food from local shops and households, and poppy from local peasants (Interviewees 1 & 12). In this way, the presence of the armed group also guarantees financial income for local villagers who would be otherwise left without employment due to the scarcity of job opportunities in the countryside. Moreover, there can be tight familial links between the civilian population and people in the armed group. It is quite common to have one's siblings, uncles, aunts or cousins in the group: "[m]y family was there" (Interviewee 14). Two other interviewees (Interviewees 7 & 20) shared similar experiences. Such factor significantly increases the likelihood of the child's recruitment into the armed group. In addition, there is a great number of militia men and women (milician@s) living among the civilian population, frequently composed of minors who easily manage to remain 'invisible' among local villagers. In this way, the guerrillas form part of the local social and economic dynamics, they interact with civilians - often there is a blurry

line between being a civilian and a guerrilla soldier because of the wide presence of the militia population - and seeing them on a daily basis is considered normal and ordinary (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20).

Therefore, children inadvertently develop trust in the guerrillas that can be later abused by the group through empty promises and deception. Due to their power and authority, the public image of the guerrilla is very appealing: they are not only respected but often feared, they never lack food or financial resources, and they are considered to be very popular among women. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the primary reasons for voluntary recruitment to the guerrilla group - discussed by the interviewees - is the appeal of the lifestyle of group members: holding gun[70], wearing uniform, always having money in one's pockets and being surrounded by beautiful women (see Table 4 above) (Interviewees 2, 3, 6, 10, 12, 16, 20). Ernesto Mendez - a professional working in the ACR office in Bogotá - argued regarding this issue that "[a]ccording to several studies that have been done in Colombia, the first risk factor for a girl, a boy or an adolescent to join an illegal group is the like for the guns and military elements" (Mendez 2014;

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[70] Gutiérrez Sanín argues that arms are not only a symbol and a source of status, but they also provide social and political relevance to their carrier, and offer a subjective sense of security (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 22).

see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 21, 22). The guerrillas are often seen as local superheroes by children in an environment that lacks alternatives.

In this way, the presence of an armed conflict of long duration and the resultant emergence of the culture of war, the normalisation of violence and the spread of the ideology advocated by the guerrillas all increase the likelihood of the child's recruitment into the armed group.

6.2.2.4 Gender Stereotyping and Machismo

"I had to [look after her younger siblings]. I have an older brother… but, being a woman, I had to take responsibility for them [her siblings], such as make them food, send them off to school" (Interviewee 9)

In a country which is ruled by the principle of machismo to such a great extent as the Colombian society is, being a member of the sex which is considered to be the less capable and the weaker one, gender can act as a significant constrainer to the individual's agency. Girls and women are the number one victims of spousal and parental violence, the majority of which cases remain unreported to the authorities and perpetrators of gender-based violence are rarely brought to justice (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 23; INMLCF 2015: 187, 209). Furthermore, besides being primary victims in the sphere of home, the conflict environment also provides a dangerous setting for girls. According to a study focusing on sexual violence against minors in the Colombian conflict, in the period between 2008 and 2012, 48,915 children below fifteen fell

victim to sexual violence committed by members of the armed groups, and the vast majority of them were girls (Verdad Abierta 2014).[71]

Besides being primary victims of spousal and parental violence, as well as being the main targets of sexual violence used as a weapon of war, females are also socially marginalised and are expected to fulfil certain roles, such as establishing a family at a young age, staying at home and looking after the children. The expectation to fulfil traditional gender roles has a significant constraining impact on children's agency and can act as a push factor for them to join the armed group (Interviewees 9 & 11). Participation in the conflict provides a platform for these individuals: girls are provided with a chance to break out from their social role characterised by passiveness and subordination, while boys have the opportunity to show their strength and dominance in the machista society they live in (Mapp 2011: 75).

6.2.2.5   Child Marriage

"I was twelve years old, then my mom wanted to get me a husband"
(Interviewee 11)

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[71] It is important to highlight that it is not only girls who might become victims of this kind of violence, but also boys, even though to a lesser extent: in 2012, out of the 13,230 minors who were reported to be victims of sexual violence, 2,412 were boys (Verdad Abierta 2014). These cases are even more likely to remain unreported because of the stigmas attached to sexual violence in general, and that committed against boys in a machista culture in particular.

Besides finding a job, an alternative way out of poverty is considered to be getting married at a young age. According to UNICEF estimates, in Colombia, 5.6% of girls are forced into marriage before they turn fifteen and 23% of them are married by the time they reach the age of majority (UNICEF 2013). Child marriage does not only violate children's rights, but it also deprives the child of the opportunity to engage in education and forces her into a life where she is at an increased risk of abuse. The child who is forced into marriage often feels betrayed by her family willing to sacrifice her for money or to have less mouth to feed at home. One of the research participants (Interviewee 11) talked about how her mother wanted to find her a husband when she was only twelve years old, which she equated to being sold. The motivation to escape the fate of being forced to marry at such a young age and of having to constrain one's future to fulfilling traditional social roles - such as taking care of the children and doing housework - is a common push factor among girls to join the armed group.

6.2.2.6   The Countryside and the Rural Mentality

"Life in the countryside was very difficult" (Interviewee 4)

As discussed in ChapterTwo, an estimated ninety percent of minors fighting in the ranks of Colombian armed groups are from the rural areas of the country (Alvis Palma 2008: 233). Such a prevalence of recruitment in the countryside is to be attributed to a number of different factors. Families living in these areas of the country often have little resources and experience severe

economic difficulties. Most of them make their living from growing vegetables, keeping animals or cultivating crops; in this way, the vast majority of them are peasants working in the field of agriculture and animal husbandry. Being brought up in these circumstances, children see the inequality, extreme poverty and hardship their families and other peasant families living in the countryside have to struggle with in order to survive. Children also notice that these families are self-reliant and are not supported by the state in any way: "[t]he peasants have been abandoned by the state" (Interviewee 12). The feeling of powerlessness and resentment toward the state might draw these children closer to guerrilla groups, whose main ideology includes fighting for social equality and more significant representation for the rural peasant population (Interviewees 14 & 20).

Living in the countryside does not only mean a limited set of job opportunities, pool of social networks and possibility to receive education, but it also entails following the social norms and mentality dominant in these areas of the country. The rural mentality acts as a constrainer to one's ability to freely exhibit his/her agency because of the limited models in the way of thinking. For instance, several research participants mentioned narrow-mindedness as an explanation for the domestic violence practised by their father: "he did not know any other way" (Interviewee 8), "he grew up with this mentality" (Interviewee 10). Moreover, one of the interviewees (Interviewee 8) shared a story about his sister who at the age of fourteen

started having a romantic relationship with their fifty-year-old stepfather and the two had two children together by the time she turned fifteen. He justified his sister's behaviour with using the 'rural mentality' explanation by saying that "she did not go to the city, did not study, does not know anything" (Interviewee 8).

Besides narrow-mindedness associated with the rural mentality, one of the research participants (Interviewee 17) also mentioned witchcraft - which practice forms part of people's belief system in the countryside - as a factor which influences one's actions and one has no control over: "this woman had my dad stoned… These are things of witchcraft… I do not even blame him [for his father's behaviour]". In this way, living in the countryside entails having limited job opportunities, poor economic resources, a lower prospect to enrol in education and the obligation to conform to the rural mentality, which factors all have a constraining impact on children's agency.

6.2.2.7 Ethnicity

"The majority of the guerrillas are composed of peasant, indigenous students; the poorest" (Interviewee 12, of indigenous origins)

Colombia is the third most populous country in Latin America - after Brazil and Mexico - with a growing population of over 49.5 million people (DANE 2017e). Even though eighty-four percent of the population is composed of mestizos and whites, Colombia is considered ethnically diverse (CIA

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Factbook 2017). Based on the most recent census of 2005, Afro-Colombians are the greatest minority (10.4%), while the indigenous population makes up a smaller part of society (3.4%), together with the Roma population (0.01%) (CIA Factbook 2017).

Due to the high levels of forced displacement, the threats and killings targeting indigenous leaders, the extensive recruitment of indigenous children into illegal armed groups, and the great number of landmine victims; indigenous communities are now in a serious danger of cultural and physical extinction (Human Rights Watch 2017: 201, 205; Verdad Abierta 2010). Once they leave their land, they are deprived of their spiritual, productive and symbolic existence, as well as their collective identity (Wirpsa *et al.* 2009: 226). According to the Unique Register of Victims - as of December 2017 - there are 754,409 registered victims of black or Afro-Colombian origins, 198,470 victims of indigenous origins and 29,577 victims of Roma origins (Unique Register of Victims 2017). However, it is important to note that a great number of victims from minority ethnic groups never officially register in order to avoid further social stigmatisation and retaliation from illegal armed groups and criminal organisations, and because the registration centres are located in bigger cities, far away from their homeland. This means that the real figures are expected to be even higher.

Children and adolescents make up forty percent of the indigenous population, seventy percent of which suffer from chronic malnutrition (Agencia de

Comunicaciones PANDI 2013, Human Rights Watch 2017: 206).[72]

Moreover, the agency of children of indigenous origins is further constrained by them being socially and economically excluded, and being exposed to a high mortality rate (Agencia de Comunicaciones PANDI 2013, Human Rights Watch 2017: 206). One fourth of indigenous children die before the age of six due to malnutrition and a lack of adequate health services (Agencia de Comunicaciones PANDI 2013). They also face discrimination and racism, and receive no support from the state (Agencia de Comunicaciones PANDI 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that - according to Springer's report - an indigenous child is 674 times more likely to be recruited into illegal armed groups than any other child in the entire country (Springer 2012: 23). Afro-Colombian children have to face similar hardships - such as exposure to forced recruitment, poverty and low level of enrolment in education - which factors significantly constrain their agency in the pre-recruitment period.

6.2.3 Policy

In Chapter Four, it was discussed how certain factors which can be linked to the absence of policies, poor enforcement and misguided policy application might increase the likelihood of children's recruitment into the armed group. In the literature, poverty and lack of opportunities, as well as forced

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[72] By contrast, the proportion of children suffering from chronic malnutrition among the entire children population in Colombia is twelve percent (Agencia de Comunicaciones PANDI 2013).

recruitment are discussed as constrainers to children's agency. Both determinants have been shown to be relevant to the Colombian case.

6.2.3.1 Poverty, Lack of Opportunities and Social Inequality

"We [his family] always had few resources for everything. We lived in houses that we were lent on the estates" (Interviewee 8)

"The motivation from which I entered the group was the lack of opportunities" (Interviewee 12)

The state's failure to implement effective economic policies to sustainably tackle poverty and social inequality, and the lack of opportunities, prevent children from freely exhibiting their agency. Financial reasons and lack of opportunities were the most commonly emerging triggers for one's determination to join the armed group among the interviewees, together with the wide presence of the group in the area (see Table 4 above; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 23).

In 2016, 28% of the Colombian population - over 13.8 million people - lived below the national poverty line and 8.5% percent - over 4.2 million people - lived in extreme poverty, on less than US $1.25 per day (DANE 2017a: 5, 9). The rural areas of the country are the most affected. According to data by the World Bank, eighty percent of rural Colombians live in poverty, while forty-

two percent fall under the category of extreme poverty (Bouvier 2009: 8).[73] The IDP population in general, and the Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations in particular, are the most likely to fall below the poverty line (IDMC & NRC 2017: 29, Stirk 2013: 1).[74]

Social inequality - which was one of the root causes that led to the emergence of the armed conflict in the 1960s - remains a significant problem in Colombia today. Based on the GINI Index of the World Bank, in 2013, Colombia was reported to be the most unequal country in South America (The World Bank 2013). As of 2015, Colombia was ranked among the top ten most unequal countries in the world (Colombia Reports 2015).

Living in poverty and social inequality entails lack of access to quality health services, education and opportunities. The variety of options children can select from the 'menu' is highly limited, or as one of the interviewees phrased it: "[i]t [joining the armed group] was not one of the options but it was the only option" (Interviewee 12). Oto Romero - a professional working in the ACR office in Bogotá - called the situation when a child has no other option in life but to join the war, a great paradox (2014).

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[73] This further demonstrates how coming from the countryside might act as a constrainer to children's agency, as discussed above.

[74] This further demonstrates how having a minority ethnic background might act as a constrainer to children's agency, as discussed above.

6.2.3.2   Forced Recruitment

"And he [the guerrilla fighter] said to me 'it is not that I am saying if you want to, but that you have to come with us'" (Interviewee 19)

As discussed in Chapter One, the majority of armed groups and a great number of state armed forces around the world impose a forced recruitment policy on children, families and communities. Such a practice is manifested in the use of physical brutality, psychological terror or a quota system.

In Colombia, even though the vast majority of children join illegal armed groups voluntarily, forced recruitment is a commonly applied recruitment method, mostly by guerrilla forces. An estimated eighteen percent of children are recruited into the group with the use of force or coercion (Interviewees 1, 17, 19; see also Springer 2012: 30). In this way - even though not to the same extent as in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Northern Uganda - forced recruitment does have a significant constraining impact on children's agency in Colombia as well.

6.2.4   Community

There are three factors identified in the literature which can be linked to the community and which act as constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period. These include a lack of community protection net; marginalisation and exclusion from the community; as well as peer pressure. All three factors have been shown to be relevant to the Colombian case.

6.2.4.1 'Failed Adults' in 'Failed Communities'

As discussed in Chapter Four, the community's inability to provide a protection net for the child in order to prevent his/her recruitment is an often discussed reason for children's recruitment into the armed group (Boyden 2006: 8, Huynh 2015: 132). However, it is important to acknowledge that war-affected communities live in poverty and are marginalised themselves, without any support from the state. Therefore, their ability to look after their members is highly limited. Furthermore, community members and leaders might also fear that the armed group will impose some kind of punishment on the community in case it resists children's recruitment into the group. Moreover, in Colombia, considering the great number of militants living in the civilian population and the group's physical proximity, communities do not stand completely separate from the armed group. Therefore, even though the 'failed community' does make children's recruitment into the armed group more likely, since it is also in a vulnerable position, it cannot be held entirely accountable for what happens to its members.

6.2.4.2 Marginalisation and Exclusion

"A kid feels big, powerful, prestigious [in the armed group]. In this way, one feels respected by those around him" (Interviewee 6)

Apart from the jobs children take on to sustain themselves and to support their families, they are excluded from the other spheres of social, political and

economic life of the community and the society at large. Moreover, their psychological and physical incompleteness is abused by their employers, who refuse to pay a fair salary for their work because they are seen as 'only children'. Children's marginalisation and lack of voice in the life of the community and in the political and economic spheres of society has a constraining impact on their agency. They are degraded as passive citizens and are disempowered from influencing the events happening around them that have a direct effect on their life. Being in such a powerless position, violence and participation in armed conflict might seem appealing to the child because of the power and responsibility it entails: "[being a soldier] gives the person respect, power, authority" (Interviewee 1). Two other research participants (Interviewees 6 & 13) also highlighted the prestige aspect of soldiering. Marginalisation is further intensified when the child has indigenous or Afro-Colombian origins (Human Rights Watch 2017: 206).

6.2.4.3 Peer Pressure

Peer influence makes children's recruitment into the armed group more likely, mostly if the friend is already involved in the group (Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 140). In an environment with such a limited scope of social networks, friendships have a great influence on one's actions and decisions. Among the research participants, five of them (Interviewees 4, 11, 13, 15, 20) mentioned how their recruitment into the group could be partly attributed to the persuasion by their peers to join the group (see Table 4 above).

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6.2.5 Families

In Chapter Four, various family-related factors were identified in the literature which are considered to increase the likelihood of the child getting recruited into the armed group. These include the bad financial situation of the family; separation from the family; the family's practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs; as well as the child's desire to avenge a family member's death, protect his/her family and/or provide financial support to the family. All these factors have been shown to be relevant to the Colombian case. The family's bad financial situation as a constrainer to the child's agency in the pre-recruitment period was discussed above under the 'Poverty, Lack of Opportunities and Social Inequality' section. The family's practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs as a factor which increases the likelihood of children's recruitment into the armed group was addressed above when discussing the various social and cultural traditions with a constraining impact on children's agency. Besides the aforementioned factors that have been identified in the literature, in the life history interviews an additional family-related constrainer was also discussed, namely the feeling of one's freedom being repressed by the family.

6.2.5.1 Separation from the Family

"I ended up working on the estate on my own" (Interviewee 8)

Children are thought to be more vulnerable and therefore, more easily recruited when there is no family looking after them. This is true for both voluntary and forced recruitment.

In Colombia, according to a 2006 study conducted by UNICEF and the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia, the percentage of former child soldiers who lived separately from their family before recruitment (25.5%) was significantly higher than the national average (8%) (Thomas 2008: 22). Nonetheless, it is important to note that, in Colombia, it is a fairly common practice for children to live apart from their families. This separation can be attributed to two different factors: the child's abandonment by his/her parent(s) - of which long-term constraining effect will be discussed in Chapter Seven - and/or the child's relocation in search for employment (Interviewees 8, 9, 11, 15, 17, 19). Therefore, in a great number of cases, the family does not immediately learn about the child's recruitment into the armed group: "My family found out about it once I was already there. They did not know; they thought that I was working on a farm in Santander" (Interviewee 15). Three other research participants (Interviewees 8, 11, 19) also pointed out their family's initial lack of knowledge of their recruitment into the armed group.

Besides voluntary recruitment, separation from the family also increases the likelihood of forced recruitment, as noted in Chapter Four. Two out of the three research participants who were recruited by the armed group through

the use of force or coercion were not living with their parents (Interviewees 17 & 19). Therefore, separation from the family has a significant constraining impact on children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia.

6.2.5.2 Revenge, Concern for the Family's Safety and Well-being

According to Springer's report, eight percent of Colombian child soldiers join the armed group out of a desire for revenge (Springer 2012: 38; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 25). In the literature - presented in Chapter Four - this is discussed as taking revenge on a family member's death. Nonetheless, this motivational factor was not mentioned by any of the research participants. Among the interviewees, only one of them (Interviewee 4) included her desire to take revenge as part of the reason why she wanted to join the armed group, but it was discussed in a different context (see Table 4 above). She wanted to avenge her uncle's abusive behaviour toward her (Interviewee 4).

As for the child's motivation to guarantee the family's safety and financial well-being, only one of the research participants (Interviewee 15) talked about his motivation to earn money in order to support his family as one of the factors which made him enlist in the paramilitary unit. Therefore, the factors of revenge, concern for the family's safety and financial well-being have been found to increase the likelihood of the child getting recruited into the armed group. Nonetheless, their role was less significant in the pre-

recruitment period than during the child's involvement in the armed group that will be discussed in the next chapter.

6.2.5.3   Repressed Freedom by the Family

Besides the abovementioned factors, the importance of the direct constraint on one's agency was also apparent in the life history interviews. The desire to seek independence and resist the parents' constraining power on their agency - free movement or emotional freedom - contributed significantly to children's determination to join the armed group (Interviewees 3 & 13). Such repression on agency was manifested in different ways: parental prohibition to go out (Interviewee 9); the parent's authoritarian and aggressive behaviour toward his/her children (Interviewees 10 & 18); the mother's insistence to find a husband for her daughter at a young age (Interviewee 11); and the stepmother or another relative treating the child as a 'slave' (Interviewees 11 & 17). Such repressed agency in the private sphere of home and the illusion of greater independence and freedom in military life appeared to play an important role in the recruitment process in Colombia.

6.2.6 Psychosocial

The existing literature - examined in Chapter Four - discusses how the inherent psychosocial characteristics of children constrain their agency and prevent them from being regarded as making a rational choice when joining the armed group. Such elements appeared to have little relevance to the

Colombian case, not because the research participants demonstrated that the traits associated with childhood in the West did not apply to them, but because they did not perceive themselves in these terms, neither did their communities. This can be attributed to the particular interpretation of childhood in the rural areas of Colombia which differs from the one dominant in the West. In contrast to these characteristics, fear appeared as a psychosocial constrainer to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia.

6.2.6.1 Inherent Characteristics of Childhood and Adolescence

The image of childhood as a period associated with weakness, vulnerability and irrationality, does not match the accounts given by former child soldiers in Colombia. The majority of interviewees took responsibility for their enlistment and the actions taken while in the armed group that will be further discussed in Chapter Eight. Moreover, according to the research participants' accounts, their decision to participate in armed conflict reflected resilience and a rational response to the circumstances they lived in: "I saw this option [recruitment into the illegal armed group] as the best that I had because the situation at home was terrible. Dad was sick and the kids [her siblings] were enduring starvation" (Interviewee 18). Therefore, even though the inherent characteristics of childhood and adolescence might increase the likelihood of the child being recruited into the armed group, it is considered to have limited

relevance to Colombia due to the particular understanding of childhood in the rural areas of the country where recruitment predominantly takes place.

6.2.6.2 Fear

Fear can be a significant constrainer to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period: fear of having their family members and friends killed, being beaten up by someone from their family, being brutally forced into joining the armed group and being uncertain about what will happen in the future (see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 25). In the life history interviews, the only types of fear that were mentioned by the research participants were the fear of the violence practised by the father (Interviewees 8 & 10), as well as the fear felt just before getting abducted by the armed group (Interviewee 17). Fear is part of the everyday life of those living in conflict-affected areas; therefore, such a feeling is often normalised and internalised as a coping mechanism. Fear continues to have a significant constraining impact on children's agency both during the child's involvement in the armed group, as well as in the reintegration period, discussed in Chapter Seven.

6.3 Conclusion

The examination of the constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period is crucial in order to understand the environment in which children operate. The presence of such structural factors explains why some

children are more likely to join armed groups than others, but fails to clarify why not *all* children living in the same or very similar social and economic circumstances or maybe even in the same family[75] join these groups. As discussed in Chapter Three, ninety percent of children living in war zones do not enter armed groups, even if they are impoverished, have broken families, do not attend school and are unemployed (Brett & Specht 2004: 65, Peters 2004: 7, Wessells 2009: 43). In a similar way, María José Torres - from the ACR office in Bogotá - stated in the interview that "[t]here are people who by culture and knowledge, discernment of what is right and what is wrong, even though they might be in the worst places, will not do it [join the armed group]" (2014). Therefore, there must be some level of agency involved in their decisions and actions, which distinguish those children who join armed groups from those who resist recruitment. Such agency is recognised by the former child soldiers themselves and the communities they (re)integrate into after demobilisation; therefore, it needs to be acknowledged by, and incorporated into, prevention and reintegration programmes as well.

As discussed before and shown in Table 5 (in Chapter Seven), certain factors that were identified in the life history interviews are not discussed in the

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[75] It is usually only one child from the family who 'chooses' life in the ranks of an armed group. When it is more than one child, it is not uncommon to have siblings fighting in opposing groups of the armed conflict, whether in the national army, a guerrilla group or the paramilitary unit: "I have a brother who is doing military service; he is the blood brother of my brother who is there on the other side [in the FARC]" (Interviewee 2). Three other research participants (Interviewees 7, 12, 16) shared similar experiences.

existing literature. These include the Colombian state's poor enforcement of international agreements and national laws on recruitment, as well as hands-off approach, child marriage, ethnicity, countryside and rural mentality on the macro level; and repressed freedom by the family and fear on the micro level. This gap can be partly attributed to the literature's predominant focus on the African context when examining children's agency in the context of war. The lack of consideration of the newly identified factors is significant since it hinders the acquisition of a holistic understanding of the recruitment process of children into illegal armed groups in Colombia.

It is also important to highlight that several factors that constrain children's agency and influence children's decision to join armed groups are the same or are very similar to those which act as catalysts for children to join criminal gangs (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 20). The breakdown or absence of support systems; escape from poverty; revenge for the death of a family member or a friend; the lack of legitimate opportunities; desire for power, acknowledged social identity and control; peer pressure; demonstration of masculinity; as well as sense of belonging may act as push and pull factors in the recruitment of both child soldiers and gang members (Doyle 2016: 2, 11; Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 16-21; Salazar 1992: 38, 117, 123; Strocka 2006: 139). Furthermore, Strocka argues that the youth are also driven to join gangs to obtain quick money and to achieve a high standard of living with parties, drugs and luxurious consumer products (Strocka 2006: 139; see also

Salazar 1992: 101). Rodgers discusses that youth gangs are often perceived - according to advocates of the social ecology theory - as a collective response to social disorganization and insecurity in the poor urban areas and are seen as the substitute for absent or dysfunctional crucial institutions in young people's life, such as the family, school or labour market (Rodgers 1999: 43; see also Salazar 1992: 119, Strocka 2006: 139). One of the research participants from Alonso Salazar's book, *Born to Die in Medellín*, expressed such a crucial role of social groups by saying that "[w]henever a group that young people can join closes or is not formed, that means those youngsters are left with only the world of gangs" (Salazar 1992: 108).

The enlistment process for gang members is also similar to that of child soldiers. The recruitment is often gradual and spontaneous: children start off fulfilling petty jobs and favours, and get slowly absorbed into the group (Salazar 1992: 57). Forced recruitment is less common among gangs than it is among armed groups, and the recruitment process is generally less brutal and violent (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 21, Salazar 1992: 14).

The next chapter will continue with the examination of constrainers to children's agency in the context of Colombia and will focus on the time spent in the armed group and the post-demobilisation period.

Chapter 7

The Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in the Armed Group and in the Reintegration Period in Colombia

7.1 Introduction

As a continuation of Chapter Six, Chapter Seven will identify and examine the constraining factors to children's agency in the armed group and in the post-demobilisation period. Just like in the discussion of constrainers to children's agency identified in the literature - in Chapter Four - as well as the analysis of 'thinners' to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Colombia - in Chapter Six - Kimmel and Roby's (2007) model will be applied in the present chapter as well. In this way, the constraining factors to children's agency will be examined in six different dimensions in both stages of children's involvement in armed conflict. Such dimensions include politics, policy, culture and religious beliefs of the larger society, community, families and psychosocial factors (Kimmel & Roby 2007: 741-743).

7.2 Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in the Armed Group in Colombia

7.2.1 Politics and Policy

Due to the armed group's conscious decision to keep its members in complete isolation from the outside world, and the lack of interaction between the state and child soldiers - except for the military confrontations between the group and the national armed forces - no constraining factors to children's agency were identified in this phase in regard to politics and policy.

7.2.2 Culture/Beliefs

Regarding culture-related constraining factors to children's agency in the armed group, two elements were discussed in the literature, namely enforced drug ingestion and alcohol intake, and gender. For reasons discussed in Chapter Four, the first factor was expected to have little relevance to the Colombian case. This limited significance was also demonstrated in the life history interviews. Only three research participants (Interviewees 2, 5, 9) mentioned that they took drugs or alcohol while in the armed group, but no coercion or manipulation was involved in these acts. Furthermore, another interviewee (Interviewee 3) even highlighted that taking drugs was not allowed by the group leadership because it was considered to have a damaging impact on one's ability to kill. Gender was indeed found to have an

important constraining impact on children's agency in the armed group, as will be shown below.

7.2.2.1 Gender

"For a woman it is very difficult because they [the armed group] violate all your rights" (Interviewee 4)

The interviewed female former child soldiers recounted fairly similar experiences to their male counterparts' in the armed group. Besides the regular tasks - discussed in Chapter Two - they also fulfilled administrative jobs (Interviewee 1), functioned as nurses (Interviewees 1, 9, 19), economists (Interviewee 19) or seducers of the enemy (Interviewee 4), and were often in charge of the radio communication in between different units of the armed group (Interviewees 18 & 19). They also talked about how one needs to ask for the commander's approval before starting a romantic relationship with a fellow comrade, and how those girls who become pregnant are obliged to have an abortion and also have to face sanctions (Interviewees 1 & 18; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2004: 268, Singer 2006: 34, Wessells 2009: 64). One of the research participants (Interviewee 4) discussed how she was forced to have an abortion at the age of fourteen even though she was already at an advanced stage of pregnancy, and how girls are commanded to use contraception and have an intrauterine device fitted to prevent pregnancy (see also Human Rights Watch 2003, Singer 2006: 34, Wessells 2009: 100). In this way, gender does have a constraining impact on girl soldiers' agency

while in the armed group in Colombia, even though this may be to a lesser extent than in other countries where female child soldiers are raped on a regular basis and are treated as inferior to boys.

7.2.3 Community[76]

There is a high number of community-related factors which are considered to constrain children's agency in the armed group. As discussed in Chapter Four, such elements include isolation, obligation and the creation of collective fear, as well as the presence of 'perverse social capital' and herd mentality. All these factors were found relevant to the experience of Colombian child soldiers. Moreover, an additional constrainer was identified in the life history interviews, namely deception and the use of lies by the group leadership.

7.2.3.1 Isolation

"We [him and his fellow minor comrades] knew nothing about our parents, only heard the birds, the leaves, the animals" (Interviewee 17)

In compliance with Point 20 of The Internal Rules of Command of FARC, civilians under no circumstances are allowed to enter the armed group's camp, and even those group members who form part of the militia population living among civilians are discouraged from interacting with them in order to

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[76] Community here refers to the armed group and not the civilian community children used to be part of prior to their recruitment.

avoid their identity being revealed (*quemarse*) (FARC Statute; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 133). The armed group is an environment where one has no knowledge about his/her birth family, is severely punished if he/she listens to the radio, is separated and allocated to a different sub-group from his/her sibling if they are both in the group, and only hears "the politics that they put into one's head" (Interviewee 10). One of the research participants (Interviewee 2) expressed the lack of freedom felt in the armed group by comparing the mountains (*monte*) to a prison from where there is no way out and where "one is being watched, imprisoned and hiding all the time". In this way, isolation has a physical and mental constraining impact on Colombian child soldiers' agency during their involvement in the armed group.

7.2.3.2   Obligation and the Creation of Collective Fear

"There [in the armed group] it is very straightforward: whoever does not obey the rules dies" (Interviewee 8)

Gutiérrez Sanín argues that FARC is an army-like group with a clear line of command, a tough discipline and very tight financial controls (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 7, 13, 17). The order of the armed group is strictly based on a reward (non-pecuniary) and punishment system. Those who do their job according to the rules and regulations of the group, gain trust and can move up to a higher position as a reward for their loyalty and obedience (incentivised compliance). However, those who do not comply with the laws of the Statute need to face serious retaliation and sanctions, even death

(incentivised non-compliance). Due to its effectiveness this is a popular strategy widely used by armed groups. Article 7 of Chapter IV in the FARC's Statute states that one of the obligations soldiers need to meet is "strictly comply with the determinations and orders with the spirit of initiative" (FARC Statute). Therefore, saying 'no' to a command is out of the question because "due to work, it is mandatory" (Interviewee 6), "whichever mission one is mandated, one has to do it" (Interviewee 8) and "it is compulsory to fulfil the things one is told, one is mandated" (Interviewee 20). Two other research participants (Interviewees 1 & 16) pointed out the same aspect of being in the ranks of the armed group.

Those who fail to comply with the rules or commit a mistake ("you lose a code [in radio communication], you get shot") have to face a court martial (*consejo de guerra*) (Interviewee 19). Such a practice consists of the person accused of treason or non-compliance being tied to a tree for days or even weeks, while his/her comrades decide if they are willing to give him/her a second chance and let him/her live. One's life is only spared if he/she has a very good relationship with the commander (importance of networks), has a relative in a highly ranked position in the group or if he/she is an excellent soldier (Interviewees 1, 2, 8, 10, 13). The severe retaliation used against non-compliers is aimed at generating and manipulating collective fear among group members, in this way further constraining child soldiers' agency. Gutiérrez Sanín argues that the harsh disciplinary effort of the FARC

functions well because besides punishment it is also "supported on norms, routines, drilling, discourse, combat" (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 27).

7.2.3.3 The Presence of 'Perverse Social Capital' and Herd Mentality

"Always everything in favour of the group, nothing in one's own favour" (Interviewee 2)

One of the most important mottos of the FARC is "*vencer o morir, morir en cualquier momento o ganar la pelea*" which means "win or die, die at any moment or win the fight" (Interviewees 4, 9, 13). Based on the FARC Statute, two of the key obligations group members need to fulfil are to "be honest and truthful with the movement, selfless in the fight and modest" and also "work for unity and harmony, fraternity and solidarity within the movement" (FARC Statute; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 18). Article 1 of Chapter I in the FARC's Regulations of the Disciplinary Regime considers "the lack of spirit of companionship and solidarity" as a serious offence of first instance (FARC Statute). In this way, in the armed group one is expected to lose his/her own individual identity and adopt the 'herd mentality'. Gutiérrez Sanín expresses this by saying that "becoming a soldier entails a process of embracing - learning - new preferences" (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 26). This means that the interest of the group should be prioritised over one's own interest under all circumstances: "I felt like my life did not matter anymore" (Interviewee 9).

The herd mentality is created and manipulated by the group leadership through different channels. These include (1) compulsory political training, (2) generation of a common enemy, (3) use of a group anthem and emblem, as well as (4) obligatory adoption of a new name by the recruit. These methods will be presented below.

The herd mentality is reinforced through the compulsory political training given to members of the armed group right after they join or are recruited into the group. In this teaching new members are told about the ideology of the group, the norms and principles they are required to adopt and follow, the history of how the group was formed and the objectives it is fighting for (Interviewee 3; see also Human Rights Watch 2003: 37). This can be considered as the first step toward the child's indoctrination.

Moreover, the existence of a common enemy is also emphasised in these training sessions. The two main enemies - named in the introductory part of the FARC's Regulation of the Disciplinary Regime - are "the oligarchic regime and the Yankee imperialist domination" (FARC Statute). Besides the state and the West, the paramilitaries (*paras/paracos*) - who are considered as collaborators of the state - are also believed to be the ones to blame for the social, economic and political problems Colombia has been struggling with: "…it was the paramilitary that was working with the government. This was something crucial" (Interviewee 20). This is an example of how the

Schmittean (Carl Schmitt) idea of friend/enemy antithesis, 'us against them', is implemented in practice in order to create unity in the group (1976).

Regarding the creation of a strong sense of group identity, Article 17 of Chapter IX in the FARC's Statute mentions the use of an emblem and an anthem as main symbols of the group (see Picture 6 below) (FARC Statute). The group's emblem illustrates the Colombian national flag situated in a shield with the country's map in the middle, with two assault rifles crossed and an open book in the centre. The flag and the map symbolise the national nature of the armed group, the crossed riffles are believed to represent the armed struggle, while the open book refers to the importance of culture. The official anthem of the FARC contains a strong revolutionary language. Some of the key words that are repeated throughout the hymn include freedom (*libertad*), unity (*unidad*), people (*pueblo*), peace (*paz*) and homeland (*patria*). Besides the official emblem and anthem, the FARC leadership also uses cell meetings and conferences to sing hymns and celebrate key battles and leaders from the past, in this way strengthening the group's unity and glorifying the violence committed for the 'cause' (Micolta 2009: 81).

Furthermore, new recruits to the armed group are required to adopt a name to be used in the group as a symbol of their newly found identity and also to strengthen their affiliation to the group (Interviewee 19).

Picture 6: The official emblem and the text of the anthem used by the FARC

Those who make the decision to join the armed group to escape from the horrors of everyday civilan life - such as domestic violence or sexual abuse - often find themselves developing a genuine strong attachment to, and tight relationship with, other members of the group. The armed group gets to be seen by these children as the family they never had: "I did not care in what position we were, nor where we were going, or what the purpose was why they were fighting. Practically, it was my second family. They all loved me; they all took care of me" (Interviewee 8). This shows the importance of having a family and belonging somewhere in the child's life. When real bonds are formed among comrades - friendships or romantic relationships - these

can be long-lasting and considered very significant. One of the research participants (Interviewee 17) recounted what a difficult time he had when six months after his recruitment he was separated from the friends he had made during the initial training. Furthermore, several interviewees mentioned how they were missing their former comrades after they escaped from the group and some even gave this as a reason why they felt some inclination to return to the armed group in the early phase of their rehabilitation process (Interviewees 6, 10, 17, 18). In this way, the presence of 'perverse social capital' and herd mentality imposed on child soldiers by the group leadership appeared as significant constrainers to children's agency in the armed group in Colombia.

7.2.3.4 Deception and the Use of Lies

"There were many lies" (Interviewee 12)

Feeding members of the armed group with lies starts even before their recruitment: one is promised financial reward for his/her services and is told that he/she is allowed to leave the group whenever he/she wants to, visit family and stay in touch with them (Interviewees 10, 12, 13; see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2010: 133). Therefore, when child soldiers are denied the opportunity to see or make contact with their family, they feel disappointed and deceived, and become distrustful toward the group. Nonetheless, they often feel that they no longer have the choice to leave because "if I try it, they will kill me" (Interviewee 10).

Even after the initial promises made to potential recruits noticeably fall short, deception remains a key strategic element used by the group leadership to keep people in the group. First, if a child soldier is sent letters by his/her parents, only those letters "which suit them [the armed group] to deliver" - in terms of not being against the group's interest - are handed over to him/her (Interviewee 2). Moreover, when one's parents approach the group and ask to talk with their children, their request is often denied and they are told that the searched person is not in that sub-group (Interviewee 1) or that he/she is dead (Interviewee 9).

Secondly, the state is presented to the soldiers as the main enemy and it is highly discouraged to make any contact with state authorities in one's own interest (constraint on social networks). It is said that if guerrilla soldiers turn themselves in, the authorities will declare them war criminals, kill them, put their family in jail and torture them to obtain intelligence (Interviewees 2, 10, 13). This false image of the state created by the group leadership is one of the primary reasons why demobilised former child soldiers feel reluctant to approach state authorities and participate in the state-led rehabilitation and reintegration programmes: "if one turns him/herself in, one can bury him/herself" (Interviewee 19).

Furthermore, since trust and loyalty created by the armed group are often superficial and fragile, they are tested and challenged by the group leadership on a regular basis. It is a common practice to be approached by a comrade

and asked to join the person in his/her attempt to escape from the armed group, just to later find out that this was all staged, a trap to test one's loyalty to the armed group, which if failed results in being taken to a court martial (Interviewee 10). Therefore, child soldiers become very careful when forming friendships with their comrades and it is considered as a better survival strategy not to trust anyone in the group. Such an attitude can have a negative impact on children's perception of trust later in their life (Interviewees 12 & 17). In this way, the use of deception and lies by the group leadership has both short- and long-term constraining implications for children's agency, not only while in the group but also in the post-demobilisation period.

7.2.4 Families

Even though no family-related constraining factor in the armed group was identified in the existing literature, in the life history interviews concern for the family was discussed by research participants as a constrainer to their agency.

7.2.4.1 Concern for the Family

"if one turns him/herself in... they [the armed group] will take revenge on the family" (Interviewee 8)

In a number of cases it was protection of the family that held child soldiers back from deserting the group and turning themselves in to state authorities

once they escaped, further discussed later in the chapter.[77] One is told that if he/she tries to leave, the group is aware of the location of his/her family and the deserter - for violating Article 7 of Chapter IV in the FARC's Statute - would be punished by having his/her family members killed (Interviewees 4, 8, 9, 13; see also FARC Statute, Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 13). Therefore, concern for the family has a constraining impact on children's agency during their involvement in the armed group in Colombia, just like it does in the pre-recruitment period, discussed in the previous chapter.

7.2.5 Psychosocial

The inherent characteristics associated with childhood and adolescence - discussed in Chapter Four - were found to have limited relevance to the Colombian case. This is due to the different understanding of childhood in the rural areas of the country from the one dominant in the West. However, individual fear, wipe-out of imagination and sense of alternatives, as well as human adaptiveness to change and desensitisation to violence were identified as constrainers to children's agency. These factors are not covered in the existing literature but were discussed in the life history interviews.

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[77] However, the example used by Schmidt - discussed in Chapter Four - about the boy who gave the group leaders a false name to prevent his family from getting identified, shows how concern for the family can also enable children's agency while in the armed group (Schmidt 2007: 61).

7.2.5.1 Individual Fear

"my little siblings, I remembered them a lot, I cried because of this when I was in the group because I was scared that they [the armed group] could do the same [recruitment to the group] to them" (Interviewee 17)

Besides the collective fear generated by the group leadership - discussed above - fear formulised on the level of the individual also accompanies the child's experience in the armed group. The reason for this might vary: child soldiers might be scared of death (Interviewees 1 & 4); being captured, imprisoned and tortured by the enemy (Interviewees 9, 13, 15); or being betrayed by a comrade (Interviewee 17). They might also feel terrified of the brutality of the armed group (Interviewees 1, 2, 9), the atrocities they were capable of committing themselves (Interviewees 4, 6, 15) or the possibility of their younger siblings being recruited into the armed group (Interviewee 17). Once fear is shaped in one's mind - whether real or imaginary - it highly constrains one's agency to show any kind of resistance in the armed group.

7.2.5.2 Wipe-out of Imagination and Sense of Alternatives

"One gets used to being there [in the armed group], since one knows that he/she cannot get out of there" (Interviewee 10)

Once children become members of the armed group, because of the harsh retaliation imposed on those who attempt to escape from the group, they lose the sense of having alternatives and see returning to their families and civilian

society as an impossible goal to achieve: "you get there and you have sold yourself" (Interviewee 4), "when one gets in there, he/she cannot get out" (Interviewees 18). In addition, since most child soldiers become members of the armed group at a very young age, they only have limited life experience from prior to their recruitment. Furthermore, such an experience is usually characterised by war and violence being ordinary and part of everyday life, which prevents children from imagining a future in a different environment other than conflict. In this way, the child's scope of imagination becomes limited to military life in the armed group and he/she starts to picture the future within the scarce options that seem realistic within the culture of war.

7.2.5.3 Human Adaptiveness to Change and Desensitisation to Violence

"one no longer has fear of anything, one is a living being with no emotions" (Interviewee 2)

The rules of the game and the norms on which the guerrillas function are very harsh, and leave no space for individual thinking and emotions. One is not allowed to show any sign of exhaustion, fear, boredom or compassion for others (Interviewee 10). Moreover, child soldiers are commanded to commit atrocities out of obligation, which contradict the norms that they might have adopted before joining the armed group. These include killing their own friends who are not members of the group (Interviewee 6), seducing civilians and killing them in bed (Interviewee 4), witnessing a pregnant hostage being

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shot (Interviewee 2) and forcing other children to join the armed group by threatening to kill their family (Interviewee 6). Maclure and Denov argue that in the armed group violence becomes a norm and often gets to be seen by the children not only as normal, moral, justified and a means of survival, but also as synonymous with excitement (Maclure & Denov 2006: 126).

Constant control over the child's behaviour and emotions by the group leadership "leaves one demoralised", as one of the interviewees put it (Interviewee 10). One's sense of morality is completely turned upside down and things that would have been unthinkable and morally considered wrong by the child in the pre-recruitment life, are now seen as normal and are widely practised. One of the research participants (Interviewee 9) shared the story about how she started heavily drinking and smoking in the armed group. Another interviewee (Interviewee 13) recounted how he felt ashamed for having asked the commander of his unit at one point to carry out a *'plan pistola'* against his father if he ever tried to look for him in the group, which means his father should be shot by the group right away. This shows how easily the child's previously learnt norms can be extinguished by the introduction and imposition of a new set of norms in the child's life, which has a significant constraining impact on their agency.

7.3 <u>Constraining Factors to Former Child Soldiers' Agency in the Reintegration Period in Colombia[78]</u>

7.3.1 Politics

The general literature argues that the three politics-related constrainers to children's agency present in the pre-recruitment period - general lack of respect for human rights, presence of an unstable government, political violence and terror - often continue having a constraining impact in the reintegration period as well, especially in countries characterised by an ongoing conflict like Colombia. Out of these three elements, the first two resulted to be relevant to the case of Colombia, discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, it was found in the life history interviews that national laws focusing on the initial phase of former child soldiers' rehabilitation process are often poorly applied, which is a factor that constrains their agency.

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[78] See Table 5 at the end of the present section which contains the various constraining factors to children's agency in all three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia. The listed elements have been covered by the literature and/or newly identified in the life history interviews (in purple). The table is also used to illustrate the recurring structural factors to children's agency in the different stages of their involvement (in bold). Table 5 is a contextualised version of Table 1.

7.3.1.1 Poor Application of National Laws on the Rehabilitation of Former Child Soldiers

"they [the army] tried to ask me things, then my defensora [legal adviser] told them that they cannot ask me anything" (Interviewee 9)

According to Article 3 of Chapter I of the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011, former child soldiers must be considered victims of violence under all circumstances, and are entitled to receive special care and assistance from the state (Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras 2011: 10). After their capture by, or surrender to, one of the military, civil or judicial authorities children have to be handed over to the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) within thirty-six hours - in accordance with the Code on Children and Adolescents (2006) - so that they can immediately start their rehabilitation process in the 'Programme of Care for Boys, Girls and Adolescents Demobilised from Irregular Armed Groups'.

However, despite the strict national legal regulation, there have been a great number of instances reported by the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and human rights NGOs; claiming that the State Security Forces continue to use minors for intelligence-gathering purposes and do not release former child soldiers within the mandated time period (Bartolomei 2012: 506, COALICO 2009: 32, Springer 2012: 57). One of the research participants (Interviewee 2) was

imprisoned for a month because he could not prove that he was underage and was mistaken for an adult, while others (Interviewees 8, 13, 17, 18) talked about how they were kept on a military base for weeks - in some cases even months - before being transferred to the ICBF. Moreover, the army tried to get hold of information about the armed group from two of the interviewees (Interviewees 9 & 17), even though it was aware of them being minors. In this way, although there are a number of legal regulations in place with regard to the appropriate treatment of demobilised child soldiers in Colombia, these policies are not always respected by official authorities. Such disregard causes resentment and frustration among former child soldiers, which increase the likelihood of their return to one of the illegal armed groups or criminal organisations.

7.3.2 Culture/Beliefs

In the reintegration period, the only constrainer discussed in the literature regarding the culture and beliefs of the larger society is gender. The life history interviews suggest that gender is indeed a significant constraining factor in the Colombian case too. Furthermore, various other elements were identified by the research participants as 'thinners' to former child soldiers' agency in the post-demobilisation period. These factors include coming from the countryside and facing the difficulty of blending in, as well as coming from a particular ethnic background.

7.3.2.1 Gender

According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index of 2016 - based on the assessment of three factors, namely empowerment, reproductive health and labour market participation - Colombia ranks ninety-fifth out of the listed 188 countries (UNDP 2016: 215). This means that the Latin American country has a lower rate of gender equity than countries such as Iran, Jordan, Oman, Sri Lanka or Saudi Arabia (UNDP 2016: 214, 215). Even though demographically speaking the size of the female population in Colombia is greater than the male population, and women have a higher literacy rate and a higher percentage of enrolment in secondary and tertiary education than men (enrolment in primary education is equal between the two sexes); women's participation in the job market, the parliament and ministerial positions is much lower compared to men (DANE 2017d, World Economic Forum 2017: 122-123). In 2017, the unemployment rate among women was 12.3%, while for men it was only 7.1%; and their estimated earned income was almost half of the amount gained by men (DANE 2017d: 3). Such a gender-based differentiation in the employment sector reflects a wider trend of gender-based discrimination present in the Colombian society at large.

Besides the difficulty of finding employment in a culture dominated by machismo and gender stereotyping, former girl soldiers also often consider it extremely problematic to adapt to their culturally accepted role in civilian

society (Interviewee 4). Readjustment to the civilian idea of femininity proves to be challenging for girls after leaving the ranks of the armed group where they were treated as equals and were in charge of the same tasks as boys. The fact that skills trainings offered to former female soldiers by the ICBF and ACR focus on them acquiring skills in hairdressing, dressmaking, catering and motherhood, shows how these trainings also reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes (Thomas 2008: 24). Girls also often feel reluctant to participate in the reintegration programme out of shame and stigma, which is reflected in the low number of girls enrolled in the rehabilitation programme run by the ICBF. Even though girls and women are believed to make up half of the total number of FARC and ELN forces, less than thirty percent of ICBF programme participants are female (Bartolomei 2012: 508, ICBF 2013a). In this way, gender continues to act as a significant constrainer to children's agency in the reintegration period, just like it does in the pre-recruitment period and in the armed group.

7.3.2.2 Coming from the Countryside and the Difficulty of Blending In

"this jungle that was the city" (Interviewee 8)

Being from the countryside (*campo*) and having spent several years in the mountains (*monte*) - in complete isolation from the outside world - finding themselves in the midst of the noises and hectic world of the city can be a challenging experience for former child soldiers. Several research

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participants (Interviewees 11, 13, 17) mentioned how in the mountains one can only hear the sound of birds, animals, leaves and maybe the chainsaw, but nothing else; while the city is full of noises. Furthermore, one also needs to learn to live according to certain rules alien for those who previously lived their life in the countryside and in the *monte*, where a different set of norms was in force.

Besides the noises and the norms of the city, the population that lives there also differs from the one living in the rural areas: people speak with a different accent, use a different vocabulary and have a different way of dressing (Interviewees 1 & 8). In this way, one can be easily spotted and bullied for being an outsider, for being different (Interviewee 8). One of the research participants (Interviewee 3) talked about how his colleagues had been calling him 'guerrilla' (*'guerrillo'*) - without knowing that they were telling the truth - because of the hard tone in his voice and the piercing look in his eyes. Moreover, city dwellers are often considered superior to those from the countryside (Interviewee 8), and are regarded differently also because they are less affected by the armed conflict that is happening primarily on the *campo* and "because they are wealthy, because they have money, because they have power. They are indifferent to what the country is going through" (Interviewee 12).

The difficulty of adjusting to life in the city and becoming civilised (*'civilizarse'*) - as former child soldiers call it - was mentioned by several

research participants (Interviewees 8, 11, 13, 16, 20) as one of the greatest challenges to face in their reintegration process and as a push factor to consider returning to the armed group by one of them (Interviewee 20).[79] On the other hand, one of the interviewees (Interviewee 17) referred to learning to live in the city as the most important factor in his reintegration process.

Therefore, coming from the countryside constrains former child soldiers' agency when they decide to move to a big city to start a new life there. This is a recurring constrainer to children's agency since it was also apparent in the pre-recruitment period, discussed in Chapter Six. Nonetheless, while in the pre-recruitment period the countryside restricted children's agency by offering limited job opportunities, poor economic resources, lower prospect to enrol in education and the obligation to conform to the rural mentality; in the reintegration period such a constraining impact lies mainly in the child being different from those living in the city.

7.3.2.3 Ethnicity

Even though indigenous and Afro-Colombian children are considered to make up the majority of child soldiers participating in the Colombian armed conflict, most of them do not take part in the state-led rehabilitation and

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[79] The challenge of getting used to living in the city has also been recognised by the ACR, which - as part of the reintegration programme - is running courses on how to live together with people in the city, and which parts of the city are safe and which ones are better to avoid, among other things (Interviewees 11 & 17).

reintegration programme in the post-demobilisation period. According to official numbers, only 14.5 percent of ICBF programme participants are indigenous, while 12.6 percent have Afro-Colombian origins (Verdad Abierta 2015b).

Such a low level of engagement can be partly attributed to the fact that the centres where these programmes are run are located in the urban areas, far from the homeland of these children, in alien and often hostile environments. Furthermore, lack of trust in state authorities - which is a general characteristic of the relationship between the state and the broader population of former child soldiers (synergy) - makes children of ethnic origins reluctant to participate in a state-led programme. Moreover, some collectivities - like the indigenous communities - have their own community-based reintegration initiatives which focus on restoring collective thinking and sense of belonging to the land where former soldiers reside (Verdad Abierta 2015c). Traditional healing ceremonies often form an important part of these reintegration 'programmes', and are aimed at "re-harmonis[ing] the heart and the thinking" and recovering the indigenous memory of former soldiers (Verdad Abierta 2015c). In the Colombian Nasa indigenous community, for instance, traditional cleansing and healing rituals consist of going to a 'sacred' place - a river, a forest or a moor - where the traditional healer cleanses the former soldier's body, takes the bad energies away and gives him/her treatment to be

cured from the 'illnesses' he/she was infected with in the war (Verdad Abierta 2015c).

However, it is important to note that returning to the home community is not always a feasible or desirable option for former child soldiers due to the great risk of re-recruitment and forced displacement, as well as high levels of poverty and limited opportunities present in indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, discussed in Chapter Six. In this way, former child soldiers of ethnic origins often have no other choice left but to abandon the land that defines their identity and move to bigger cities, where they have to face unemployment, marginalisation and discrimination. Therefore, considering the factors discussed above, being a former child soldier of particular ethnic origins appears to limit one's options and agency in the post-demobilisation period in Colombia, similar to the pre-recruitment period.

7.3.3 Policy

In the literature, there are two factors identified as constrainers to children's agency on the policy level in the reintegration period, namely (1) poverty, unemployment and economic marginalisation; as well as (2) institutionalisation. Both elements appeared to be relevant to the Colombian case. Furthermore, additional 'thinners' were identified in the life history interviews. These factors include physical isolation, obligation, and the paternalistic structure embedded in the state-led rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

7.3.3.1　Poverty, Unemployment and Economic Marginalisation

"the [financial] situation is very tough… my husband has no stable job, works on the street; it is very hard to pay the rent (Interviewee 18)

The current unemployment rate is relatively low in Colombia. Based on the statistics by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) and the Colombian Bank of the Republic, the current unemployment rate is below nine percent, equal to the average unemployment rate in member states of the European Union (DANE 2017b: 3, Eurostat 2017, Banco de la República 2017). In recent years, Colombia has shown an improving pattern in the employment sector, considering that the country's unemployment rate was as high as eighteen percent in 2002 (Banco de la República 2017). Such a decreasing trend in the numbers can be partly attributed to the fact that many people have started employment in the informal sector[80] - neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government - instead of continuing looking for jobs in the formal labour market. According to official data, close to forty-eight percent of the Colombian population is currently employed in the informal sector (DANE 2017d: 5). The high number of people selling fruits and

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[80] The International Labour Organization (ILO) associates informal economy with "lack of protection in the event of non-payment of wages, compulsory overtime or extra shifts, lay-offs without notice or compensation, unsafe working conditions and the absence of social benefits such as pensions, sick pay and health insurance" (International Labour Organization).

gadgets on the street and at traffic lights (*vendedor ambulante*) - mostly in the bigger cities of Colombia - is very striking.

Besides the scarcity of jobs, other factors which restrict former child soldiers' attempt to find sustainable employment in the post-demobilisation period include their lack of education and lack of skills. The vast majority of research participants barely finished fifth grade, which is equivalent to the final grade of primary school. Such a low level of involvement in education can be attributed to several factors. First of all, the quality of education offered in the rural areas of the country is rather poor: classes are often cancelled because teachers refuse to turn up as an act of protest for not receiving their salary or because the security situation is not stable enough to give classes (Interviewee 1). Secondly, schools are often located far away from one's home and the family is not always able to financially afford to send their children to school; therefore, a lot of times education is not an option (Interviewees 9, 17, 18). One of the research participants (Interviewee 17) stated as a reason for his and his siblings' lack of enrolment in education that "he [his father] did not send us to study because when my dad had money for food, he did not have [money] to buy the things for us to study". Thirdly, enrolment in education is not seen as a good and viable investment for the future due to the lack of opportunities in the countryside. Therefore, children and parents often consider education to be a waste of time and money, which mentality makes children easily lose interest in studying (Interviewees 15 & 20).

Because of the bad quality of teaching and the infrequency of classes in the rural areas of the country, the majority of former child soldiers who went to school before joining the armed group also need to repeat the courses. Furthermore, they might face learning difficulties and often show reluctance to engage in education after the experiences they have been through in the armed conflict (Interviewee 8). Moreover, the catch-up education programme provided to former soldiers is often accelerated and "mediocre", as one of the interviewees put it (Interviewee 8). In addition, schools attended by former child soldiers and institutions where they receive skills training are often not safe because armed groups and criminal organisations use these venues to recruit new members on a regular basis (Interviewee 19).

Besides lacking education, former child soldiers also often lack skills to find employment in civilian society. Their lack of skills is addressed in the reintegration programme by providing them skills training and the possibility to start their own microenterprises (*proyecto productivo*), which might be a beauty salon or a coffee shop among other possibilities (Interviewees 1, 2, 4, 20). However, these projects rarely succeed due to the participants' lack of administrative knowledge and experience with handling money (Interviewee 2). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that former child soldiers do possess skills that they acquired during their participation in armed conflict. However, these skills are often belittled and ignored due to the adoption of the humanitarian narrative, which rejects the idea of associating any

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beneficial outcome to armed conflict. For instance, one of the research participants (Interviewee 19) talked about how she felt fully qualified as a nurse for having obtained all the necessary skills while taking care of the wounded during her time as a child soldier: "the thing is I do have experience, what I do not have is a title, because there [in the armed group] they do not give titles". In this way, some of the acquired skills are transferable to civilian life, and could be improved and built upon after demobilisation.

Former child soldiers - with their limited skills and low education levels - face severe difficulties in finding employment in an environment characterised by unemployment and a significant level of involvement in the informal sector and the illegal economy. However, it is important to note that lack of employment and a steady income increases the likelihood of former child soldiers' re-recruitment into the armed group or involvement in criminal activities. One of the research participants (Interviewee 18), for instance, talked about how having financial difficulties made her have second thoughts about choosing to stay in civilian society instead of returning to military life. In this way, similar to the pre-recruitment period, former child soldiers' agency continues to be constrained by poverty, unemployment and economic marginalisation following their demobilisation from the armed group.

7.3.3.2   Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes

- Physical Isolation / Institutionalisation

"I was free, but not so free" (Interviewee 19)

As discussed in Chapter Two, after being handed over to the ICBF children are transferred to special homes designed for former child soldiers - called *hogar transitorio* (transition home) - where they usually spend the first month or two before moving to a Specialised Care Centre (*Centro de Atención Especializada*) (Mariño Rojas 2005: 164). Nine out of the twenty interviewees mentioned what a negative experience they had when staying in the transition home and how they were 'locked up' (*encerrado*) all the time without being allowed to visit their family, leave the building or even move around in the house. The physical isolation of former child soldiers is a strategic measure taken by the ICBF to protect the safety of its programme participants and also to "change one's chip, change the way of thinking" (Interviewee 10). Nonetheless, since child soldiers spend years 'imprisoned' in the mountains with the armed group and escape in the hope of finding freedom in civilian life, being kept within four walls triggers feelings of fear of, and disillusion with, state authorities and civilian society at large (Interviewees 1, 5, 10, 13, 19). Therefore, physical isolation used as a protection mechanism by state authorities severely constrains the agency of former child soldiers. This factor can be considered a recurring element, since in the armed group isolation also had a significant constraining impact on children's agency - as discussed above - even though it was used for different purposes by the group leadership.

- Obligation

"I did not like to be ordered around. It caused me a lot of stress" (Interviewee 5)

Participation in the rehabilitation programme run by the ICBF provides the first instance for former child soldiers to face the difficulty of adjusting to civilian norms. After leaving the highly controlled military life behind, programme participants (Interviewees 5 & 9) often find it challenging to arrive in an environment where they are kept under strict vigilance, in a similar way they were in the armed group: "[t]he hardest was having to comply with the rules [of civilian society], even though one lives with rules there [in the armed group] too" (Interviewee 9). Participants are also required to fulfil certain duties and take part in workshops and skills trainings while in the ACR, which often clash with their working hours and were described as "useless" and "crazy and insignificant" by several interviewees (Interviewees 1, 4, 14). Moreover, they are expected to attend regular meetings and psychosocial sessions with the social worker assigned to their case. Partly due to such duties and obligations, a great number of participants leave the programme to get rid of these strings and become independent (Interviewee 16). Therefore, the exit of these former child soldiers can be attributed to them feeling that their agency is constrained by the responsibilities linked to their participation in the programme. Obligation is a recurring constrainer to

children's agency, since it is also used by the group leadership to keep members of the armed group under control.

- Paternalistic Structure

"There were very abrupt changes [in the reintegration programme], changes which had something to do with the continuation of [the participants'] dependency on the programme" (Interviewee 1)

The structure of the rehabilitation programme offered to former child soldiers by the ICBF is designed in a way that the programme fulfils the role of family. Karla Samira Cardona - a professional working in the ACR service centre in Medellín - also talked about the paternalistic approach adopted by the ICBF toward its programme participants, and how the government agency is considered as one's father and mother till one reaches the age of majority (2014). In this way, a parallel can be drawn between the structure of the armed group and the rehabilitation programme, since both intend to replicate a family-like unit. Nonetheless, by doing so, the government agency creates a relationship of dependency between programme participants and the state, which hinders the identity transformation of a former child soldier to a civilian. Moreover, since the state intends to keep the post-demobilisation life of former soldiers under control - in terms of keeping a close eye on how they organise their life, money, relationships and plans for the future - it adopts the role of an authoritarian entity (Interviewee 9; see also Rethmann 2010: 6).

Since programme participants are seen as 'only' children who require protection within this paternalistic system, they are generally given no say in the planning, implementation, evaluation and advocacy of peace-building initiatives and reintegration programmes, except for the limited number of *promotores* working in the ACR service centres. In this way, former child soldiers in Colombia have no opportunity to become stakeholders in such important processes and to feel empowered by using their expertise and resilience to help future generations avoid going through the same experience they had to.

7.3.4   Community

Stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion were identified in the literature as community-level 'thinners' to former child soldiers' agency in the post-demobilisation period and hindrance to their social reintegration. Such factors appeared to have a significant constraining impact on the life of Colombian former child soldiers as well.

7.3.4.1   Stigmatisation, Marginalisation and Social Exclusion

"one gets rejected right away because of the prejudices they [the Colombian society] have [against former child soldiers]" (Interviewee 3)

Even though according to the Colombian legal system former child soldiers must be considered victims under all circumstances, they are often seen by members of the society at large as victimisers who killed their family

members, friends and neighbours, or contributed to their displacement, even if they committed these crimes before reaching the age of majority. The image of perpetrator is also reinforced by former child soldiers' representation in the media, as pointed out by several research participants (Interviewees 12 & 14). Due to such a negative public image among Colombians - as that of a terrorist, kidnapper, murderer and thief - former child soldiers often report struggles for being stigmatised by other community members, whether it be their neighbours, friends, teachers or employers (Interviewees 3, 10, 12). Heidi - from World Vision Colombia - argued that Colombian society was not ready to receive the demobilised child soldiers, because it was only the law that considered them victims, not society (2014).

An ACR-funded study in 2001 - which focused primarily on the social reintegration of former soldiers into their receiving communities in Colombia - found that forty-one percent of community members viewed demobilised soldiers from illegal armed groups with fear and distrusted them more than other residents (Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 11, Prieto 2012: 15). A survey conducted in 2011 in different conflict-stricken regions of the country found similar results: the majority of respondents expressed reluctance to 'accept' former soldiers as neighbours or colleagues (Prieto 2012: 9). Ernesto Mendez - a professional working in the ACR office in Bogotá - also discussed the issue of marginalisation and social exclusion of former soldiers: "[o]rdinary people reject the demobilised a lot; this is also a barrier to the process [of

reintegration]" (2014). Acknowledging the severity of this problem, a great number of initiatives have been launched by the ACR in order to bring former soldiers and local communities together, and increase the level of confidence between them (Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 11). Furthermore, partnerships have been established by the ACR with a number of companies and firms to employ former soldiers in return for subsidies from the state. Various companies - such as *Panaca* in the Coffee Triangle and *Emab* in Santander Department - have showed their willingness and commitment to the idea of employing former soldiers in order to facilitate their socio-economic reintegration into civilian society: "It is great that they demobilised, but which one of us will mobilise?" (Verdad Abierta 2015d)

It is important to note that the lack of trust and anger directed at former child soldiers by the larger society does not necessarily translate into direct antipathy toward former child soldiers themselves. Such distrust and enmity should rather be seen as the projection of people's helplessness and frustration about the suffering inflicted upon the Colombian population by the armed conflict. There is only a limited number of families in the country which have not been affected by the direct or indirect consequences of the conflict by losing family members and friends, being displaced or being victims of increasing social violence (Heidi 2014). Moreover, the resentment shown toward former child soldiers can also be attributed to them being seen as a prioritised group over other victims (Prieto 2012: 14). Such perception causes

considerable social tension in a country where the number of registered conflict-related victims is over 8.2 million (Unique Register of Victims 2017). Furthermore, the general Colombian public is not fully aware of the real nature of the recruitment process and the treatment of child soldiers in the ranks of illegal armed groups. This lack of knowledge calls for awareness-raising campaigns and sensitisation initiatives (Williamson 2006: 190). Stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion of former child soldiers by the Colombian society at large are the primary reasons why they choose to keep their past military identity hidden. This choice will be further discussed in the next chapter.

7.3.5 Families

The impossibility of family reunification and lingering attachment to the 'war family' (Hazen 2005: 4) were identified in the literature as the two family-related constrainers to children's agency in the reintegration period, as discussed in Chapter Four.

Reunification with the birth family was indeed considered to be very important by a great number of research participants, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Nonetheless, since in the majority of cases such a process is not feasible - for reasons examined below - and children are institutionalised and allocated to foster families, such a constraining factor needs to be addressed and overcome. The institution of family is recreated in other ways

- as discussed in Chapter Eight - which makes the impact of this constrainer to children's agency less severe and long-lasting.

Even though in the early phase of the post-demobilisation period children often have second thoughts about having made the right decision to leave the armed group or might miss their peers and the familiarity of the environment, in a more advanced stage of the reintegration period research participants showed no lingering attachment to the 'war family'. As discussed in the next chapter, most of them decided not to maintain any contact with the armed group and are not in touch with their former comrades. Therefore, such a constrainer does not have a great relevance to the life of former child soldiers in Colombia.

7.3.6 Psychosocial

The psychosocial and physical impact of participation in armed conflict, as well as hybrid identity are identified in the literature as hindrances to former child soldiers' reintegration into civilian society. Apart from a few scars on their leg and upper body (Interviewees 3, 17, 19), no interviewee had a permanent physical impairment left behind from their participation in armed conflict. Therefore, among the research participants of the present study, the physical consequences of participation in war had little relevance as a constrainer to children's agency. However, such a finding does not deny the fact that the physical factor has a significant constraining impact on a great number of former child soldiers' life in Colombia. Besides the psychosocial

impact of participation in armed conflict and hybrid identity, additional 'thinners' were identified in the life history interviews. Such factors include the psychosocial impact of having had a difficult childhood, as well as fear and lack of trust.

7.3.6.1 Psychosocial Impact of a Difficult Childhood and Participation in Armed Conflict

"This [participation in armed conflict] is something very big, something that keeps you marked for life" (Interviewee 13)

Even though in the majority of cases former child soldiers manifest outstanding resilience regarding the psychological impact of having had a difficult childhood - before they were recruited into the armed group or during their involvement in the group - that does not mean that they are left unaffected by their past. Abandonment by one or both parents in early childhood brings not only economic difficulties on the family, but also has a negative impact on one's belief in certain norms, as well as on one's emotional and psychosocial development: "[t]hen my life got damaged, it already started there" (Interviewee 17). Moreover, it is important to note that in the majority of cases, children who joined the armed group came from a broken family. They were raised by only one of their parents or in some instances by their grandparents, either because their parents got divorced, one of them died or abandoned the family. One of the research participants (Interviewee 19) talked about how she had been brought up by her

grandmother because her father had left, her mother had a mental illness that made her incapable of raising a child, and when she turned eight she was abandoned again, this time by her grandmother: "I was left like a little bird, all alone in the world".

Besides having a difficult childhood before joining the armed group, the time spent in the group also leaves its mark on the child's psyche. Several research participants (Interviewees 5, 8, 18, 19) shared how years after their demobilisation from the armed group, they still find themselves in situations when their reaction is rather aggressive, and they feel that they have limited control over such a behaviour: "I am very aggressive… I tried to overcome this but even though I try it, I cannot control myself" (Interviewee 18), "[m]y body reacts aggressively with the person" (Interviewee 19). They often interpret their temper management issue as something that was left over from their past and something they still have to work on in order for it to pass. Furthermore, the war-related nightmares that the majority of former child soldiers struggle with on a regular basis also constrain their agency to start a new life in civilian society and leave the past behind, which a number of research participants (Interviewees 7, 9, 10, 11, 17, 20) expressed their desire for. Therefore, having had a difficult childhood and participation in armed conflict both have a long-term constraining impact on former child soldiers' agency in Colombia.

7.3.6.2 Hybrid Identity

Interviewer: "Is she [his partner] not a demobilised child soldier?"

Interviewee: "No, she is normal." (Interviewee 17)

Regarding the self-image of former child soldiers, in the initial stage of the reintegration period they often see their own social identity as somewhere inbetween that of a soldier and a civilian. In the armed group, child soldiers have highly limited interaction with the civilian population due to the group's strategy to isolate its members. Therefore, once they find themselves in civilian society, it is a rather bumpy and challenging process for them to fully adapt to this new environment. The less time one spent as part of the militia population that has more interaction with civilians, the more difficulties one might encounter in the adjustment process. In the early stage of the post-demobilisation period, any kind of negative encounter with the civilian world can be a push factor for former child soldiers to consider re-joining the armed group. One of the research participants (Interviewee 8), for instance, talked about his contemplation to return to military life in the early phase of rehabilitation period, when he was given very little food and had to live under very strict rules in the shelter he was staying in: "I started to see civilians, people, as enemies; if they are all like this I did not want to live in this [civilian life]".

This differentiation between being a 'normal' civilian and a former child soldier stays with them even in a more advanced stage of their post-demobilisation life. The interviewees often experienced difficulty in 'becoming civilised' (*civilizarse*), which means to become a civilian and learn to live together with other people under certain norms and rules (Interviewees 9 & 17). One of the research participants (Interviewee 20) mentioned the difficulty of adapting to live in the civilian world as one of the greatest challenges he encountered in the reintegration process, which is often paired with the difficulty of adjusting to live in the city, discussed above (Interviewees 8, 11, 13, 16). Moreover, several professionals mentioned reluctance to comply with the civilian norms as one of the primary reasons for former soldiers to consider return to the armed group (Karen Johana Corpues, Karla Samira Cardona 2014).

Therefore, it is not surprising that former child soldiers often look back with nostalgia to the time when they were provided with food to eat and something to cover themselves with by the armed group, while in civilian life they might feel left alone to get by and have to face severe financial difficulties: "…civilian life is very difficult. My civilian life has always been a disaster" (Interviewee 18). One of the research participants (Interviewee 18) also talked about how - six years after her demobilisation from the armed group - she still sees civilians different from herself and feels like she does not have anything in common with them. Therefore, she prefers being friends with other former

soldiers, who are aware of what she is going through and encounter similar difficulties to hers (Interviewee 18). Furthermore, five interviewees were married or in a relationship with other former child soldiers, whom they had usually met in the reintegration programme. This also demonstrates that former child soldiers often pair up with those with a similar life experience.

The blending in process of former child soldiers into civilian society might also be hindered by some of the practices and policies embedded in the reintegration programme. In the past, for instance, former soldiers had their status indicated on their ID card. Therefore, wherever they went to - to get an appointment at the doctor or register their children at the nursery - their identity was always revealed, which could lead to further stigmatisation: "[y]ou carried your story everywhere" (Interviewee 1). Such a practice is not in effect anymore, however, a research participant (Interviewee 14) expressed his discontent with the ACR's inability to handle the identity issue delicately enough. He shared a story of an outing when he was planting trees as part of the mandatory social work of the ACR reintegration programme and was required to wear a vest that had the ACR logo written on it, in this way revealing it to all passers-by that he was a former soldier (Interviewee 14). To sum up, even though civilian society might see them as 'former child soldiers', most former child soldiers want to peel off their past skin and live a full life as 'normal' civilians, even if they often find themselves confused

about their identity and feel tempted to return to the 'easy life' (*'vida fácil'*) (Interviewee 13).

Besides the hybrid identity of being a former soldier and a civilian, the dual identity of demobilised child soldiers as former perpetrators and perceived victims also constrain their agency, a factor which will be discussed in the next chapter.

7.3.6.3   Fear and Lack of Trust

"When one lives this experience [of being a child soldier], [one] is scared that one day his children will go through the same" (Interviewee 17)

Individual fear forms part of former child soldiers' civilian life and acts as a constrainer to their agency, similarly to the pre-recruitment period and the time spent in the armed group. They might feel scared of the group's revenge on their family, and also of being recognised and 'outed' by former comrades or someone from the enemy group (Interviewees 7, 9, 19). Such distrust is also reinforced by the nature of the ongoing armed conflict: there are children who are participants in the rehabilitation/reintegration programme but, in fact, are still active members of the armed group, who will "sell you" (Interviewee 4). Moreover, there is a great militia population that lives infiltrated into civilian society: "[a]nd you do not know if there is someone from the group there" (Interviewee 16).

Former child soldiers might also fear the authorities' legal punishment for their past participation in the armed group, unpredictability caused by the fluid nature of armed conflict, and uncertainty due to the great number of changes implemented in the reintegration programme (Interviewees 1, 2, 10, 13). Furthermore, they might feel worried about being rejected, marginalised and stigmatised; and about having their children go through the same experience they had to in their own childhood (Interviewees 1, 5, 17). They are also often scared of themselves and what they were capable of doing in the past (Interviewees 4, 18, 19). Therefore, living with fear constrains the agency of former child soldiers even after their demobilisation from the armed group.

Table 5: Constraining Factors to Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict in Colombia

	Pre-recruitment period	**In the armed group**	**Reintegration period**
Politics	• **General lack of respect for human rights** • **Presence of an unstable government** • **Poor enforcement of international agreements and national laws on recruitment** • The state's hands-off approach	-	• **General lack of respect for human rights** • **Presence of an unstable government** • **Poor application of national laws on the rehabilitation of former child soldiers**
Culture/Beliefs	• Child labour and lack of enrolment in education • Domestic abuse and sexual violence and mistreatment • Culture of war due to the presence of an armed conflict of long duration and the normalisation of the presence of the guerrillas	• **Gender**	• **Gender** • **Coming from the countryside and the difficulty of blending in** • **Ethnicity**

	• **Traditional power structures (e.g. gender stereotyping and machismo)** • Child marriage • **The countryside and the rural mentality** • **Ethnicity**		

Policy	• **Poverty and lack of opportunities and social inequality**
	• Forced recruitment
		-	• **Poverty, unemployment and economic marginalisation**
			• Rehabilitation and reintegration programmes
			   o **Physical isolation / Institutionalisation**
			   o **Obligation**
			   o **Paternalistic structure**

Community	• 'Failed adults' in 'failed communities' • **Marginalisation and exclusion from the community** • Peer pressure	• **Isolation** • **Obligation** and the creation of collective fear • **The presence of 'perverse social capital'** and herd mentality • Deception and the use of lies	• **Stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion**

Families	• Family's bad financial situation • **Separation from the family** • Practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs by the family • **Child's desire to protect family**, avenge a family member's death, provide financial support for the family • Repressed freedom by the family	• **Concern for the family**	• **Impossibility of family reunification**
Psychosocial	• **Inherent characteristics of childhood and adolescence (questioned relevance)** • **Fear**	• **Inherent characteristics of childhood and adolescence (questioned relevance)** • **Individual fear** • Wipe-out of imagination and sense of alternatives • Human adaptiveness to change and desensitisation to violence	• Psychosocial impact of a difficult childhood and participation in armed conflict • Physical impact of participation in armed conflict (not in the case of the research participants of the present study) • Hybrid identity • **Fear and lack of trust**

7.4 <u>Conclusion</u>

After having discussed the structural constrainers to children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in Chapter Six, the present chapter continued with the examination of such factors in the armed group and in the post-demobilisation period in the context of Colombia. The presence and interplay of such constraining factors contextualize why children might opt to stay in the armed group and return to the group or join criminal organisations instead of choosing the path of reintegration to civilian society.

Some of the constrainers that were analysed in the present chapter are also discussed in the existing literature - presented in Chapter Four - while others were identified in the life history interviews. As shown in Table 5 above, some of these factors are recurring - such as gender, poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion - which require special attention due to their particularly constraining nature on children's agency. Furthermore, some constrainers apparent in the pre-recruitment period or in the armed group have a long-lasting impact which might only unfold in the reintegration period, such as being engaged in child labour and therefore, not being enrolled in education as a child or being victim of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence in childhood. The present analysis of constraining factors does not only contribute to the existing agency and child soldier literatures by providing additional examples of 'thinners' to children's agency - focusing on Colombia - but is also original in its approach to focus on the continuities between the various stages of children's involvement in armed conflict. Furthermore, although the reintegration process has been attributed great importance in the

DDR literature, no study has previously focused on the agency debate in the post-demobilisation period.

Similar to the pre-recruitment period, there are a number of commonalities and differences between armed groups and criminal gangs - regarding the constraints to children's agency during and after their involvement - that are worth discussing. Gangs are usually less institutionalised and more informal than armed groups, and are engaged in a low-intensity conflict mostly unfolding on the street for local territorial control, while armed groups are involved in constant violence with heavier casualties and weaponry (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 3, 14, 23; Salazar 1992: 124). In both the gang and the armed group, girls have a similar experience: their involvement is often limited to gendered roles and they are frequently exploited for sexual purposes by male members of the group (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 39). Depending on the profile of the group, gangs are generally socially embedded in their environment, build a strong and organized relationship with their host community, and enjoy social support due to their role as protectors and vigilantes of the community against other gangs and professional criminals, as well as mediators in conflict resolution in households, neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools (Doyle 2016: 3, 12; Rodgers & Jones 2009: 7; Salazar 1992: 54, 64; Strocka 2006: 139). Therefore, these groups are often viewed as legitimate authorities - just like some armed groups are - because of their function as governing bodies in the neighbourhood where they operate and the close ties they maintain with the host community (Doyle 2016: 6, 12). Nonetheless, some gangs maintain a weaker and more hostile relationship with the local community: they can be heavily involved in armed robbery,

assaults, homicides, as well as indiscriminate crimes targeting community members (Salazar 1992: 125, Strocka 2006: 135). As for the discipline within the gangs, there is a vertical line of command intertwined with ideas of loyalty and friendship; gang leaders are highly respected and their orders are strictly obeyed (Salazar 1992: 100, 125). The set of norms and rules according to which gangs operate are usually created by the members themselves, unlike in the armed group where child soldiers are commanded to obey norms and rules in the making of which they had no say (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 25). There is a strong sense of solidarity and group identity ('all for one and one for all') present in gangs, which develops in a more organic manner than in the armed group due to the smaller size of the group and is strengthened by conflict with the authorities, other gangs and the local community (Salazar 1992: 11, 124). Even though the individual's intention to leave the gang might be retaliated in some way and the deserter might be threatened to be killed, joining the gang is not expected to be a life-time commitment. Gang members have more flexibility to leave the group than child soldiers do, and as they get older, their group membership also 'expires' (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 30, Salazar 1992: 62).

After leaving the armed group and the criminal gang, both former child soldiers and gang members are left with no social status and power (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 34). Nonetheless, because of the higher integration of gangs into the host community, gang members are more likely to find it easier to become part of civilian society than former child soldiers do (Quénivet & Shah-Davis 2013: 30). While policies targeting former child soldiers focus on rehabilitation and the re-building of social capital in the life of the individual,

in the case of former gang members, punishment and incarceration is the most often used approach adopted by states due to the criminalised nature of gang membership (Strocka 2006: 141). It is the continuing lack of opportunities and legitimate alternatives which means the major constraint to the agency of former child soldiers and gang members in their successful reintegration process.

The next chapter will continue with the presentation and analysis of fieldwork findings, and will focus on the manifestations of children's agency in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia, as well as the role of social capital as a crucial structural factor - both constrainer and enabler - to children's agency to consider.

Chapter 8

Manifestations of Children's Agency in the Context of War and Social Capital as a Structural Factor to Human Agency in Colombia

8.1 Introduction

As shown in Chapters Six and Seven, the list of constraining factors to children's agency before, during and after their involvement in armed conflict - in the context of Colombia - is rather extensive, which explains why they cannot be considered rational agents exercising unconstrained agency. Nonetheless, as will be demonstrated in the present chapter, even in the highly constraining environment of war children do find ways to exhibit some level of agency, which explains why they cannot be considered solely victims of unfavourable circumstances either. The first part of the present chapter will explore the various practices through which children's tactical and strategic agency is manifested before, during and after their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia.

The second part of the chapter will investigate the central role of social relations as both constrainers and enablers to children's agency - depending on the environment, other structural factors and the function of social capital

(bonding social capital, bridging social capital, synergy) - in all three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia. Moreover, besides the discussion of the various social capital-related enabling and constraining factors, other structural elements to children's agency will also be presented in order to better understand and test the role of social capital. Since the presence of these factors has a great influence on the impact of social capital on human agency, they are crucial to consider and explore. Such analysis will be based on the life history interviews conducted with Colombian former child soldiers for the present study and will extract elements from the discussion of constraining structural factors to children's agency in Colombia - primarily under the 'community' and 'families' dimensions in Kimmel and Roby's model (2007) - presented in Chapters Six and Seven.

8.2 Manifestations of Children's Agency in the Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict in Colombia[81]

8.2.1 Pre-recruitment Period

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[81] See Table 6 at the end of the present section which contains the various practices through which children's tactical and strategic agency is manifested in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the context of Colombia. The table is a contextualised version of Table 2. The additional factors identified in the life history interviews are indicated in purple, and the factors discussed in the literature but not addressed by the research participants are crossed out.

The two main conflict-related manifestations of children's agency in the pre-recruitment period are voluntary recruitment and resistance to recruitment. These practices will be examined below.

8.2.1.1 Voluntary Recruitment

"I decided to enter the group" (Interviewee 10)

There is reluctance by the international community and the Colombian state to consider that children may voluntarily enter illegal armed groups. However, out of the twenty interviewees, only three were abducted by the armed group, while seventeen claimed their enlistment to be voluntary. This forced vs. voluntary recruitment ratio is in line with Springer's report findings from 2012, presented in Chapter Two. The report shows that in Colombia, eighty-one percent of former child soldiers consider their enlistment voluntary, while only eighteen percent claim their recruitment to be forced or coerced (Springer 2012: 30).

The research participants described their entry into the armed group as a conscious decision. They did not blame other factors or people for their choice. In their narratives, they presented their own role as active participants, not as victims of external circumstances. This is reflected in their choice of verbs when recounting the recruitment experience: 'enter', 'go', 'infiltrate', 'decide to enter', 'have the intention to go', 'get into', 'want to go' and 'no obligation to enter'. This finding is in line with the observation made by Heidi - from World Vision Colombia - who argued that former child soldiers consider their entry into the armed group as a voluntary act ("I joined because

I wanted to") (2014). They see themselves as people with agency, not as victims (Heidi 2014).

However, it is important to emphasise that self-claimed voluntary recruitment does not equate to unlimited free choice. Even though no force or coercion is used in the recruitment process of the majority of Colombian child soldiers, due to the great number of constraining factors to children's agency - discussed in Chapter Six - their recruitment cannot be seen as a result of "untrammelled free-will", as Drumbl calls it (2010: 223). Nonetheless, the agency exhibited in the enlistment process needs to be acknowledged because that is how former child soldiers interpret their own identity and past experience, and that is how receiving communities see them too.

8.2.1.2 Resistance to Recruitment

"A man [from the armed group] approached me and said to me… 'Why do not you collaborate with us?' And I said to him 'no, I do not like this'" *(Interviewee 19)*

Children's resistance to recruitment is an example of outstanding agency. Children's enterprise to minimise the risk of being abducted could only be identified in the accounts of two research participants. Such intention was manifested in hiding from the guerrilla (passive form of resistance) (Interviewee 1) and engaging in verbal argument with members of the armed group to avoid recruitment (active form of resistance) (Interviewee 19). A third interviewee, who was also abducted by the armed group, expressed his powerlessness and inability to avoid or stop his abduction: "I was filled with fear and looked at my dad [his grandfather], but my dad could not do

anything, because if my dad did something, they [the armed group] would kill him" (Interviewee 17).

In these three cases the resistance to recruitment was unsuccessful. However, while each illustrates the power imbalance between those in the armed group and the child, the intention to resist forced recruitment highlights the presence of agency, even when the likelihood of success is low or non-existent. Some of the reasons mentioned in the interviews for one's decision not to join the armed group include being aware of the consequences, disliking the groups for the atrocities they have committed and having a different perspective for one's future: "I did not like it [the armed group], did not see a future in this… from a very young age I knew that the group was illegal" (Interviewee 17). Nonetheless, it is important to point out that since the present research focuses on the life history of those who joined the armed group, it does not address the experience of those who successfully resisted recruitment.

8.2.2 In the Armed Group

There are many different ways through which children's agency is manifested in the armed group. Some manifestations of agency identified in the literature - discussed in Chapter Four - were not apparent in the life history interviews. These include sly evasion of enforced drug ingestion, provision of assistance to 'enemy' civilians, the practice of pairing up with high-ranking soldiers to get some level of protection and of becoming wives of commanders to live a relatively stable life in the context of war. On the other hand, children's intention to seize the opportunity of the moment and make the most of the

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situation they find themselves in was addressed by several research participants, but is not listed in the existing literature.

8.2.2.1 'Refusal to Kill and Fight' vs. 'Exceptional Obedience'

Refusing to kill and/or fight is against the regulations of the armed group and is considered as a serious offence of first instance by the group leadership. Nonetheless, child soldiers often exhibit their agency through such acts. One of the research participants (Interviewee 15) recounted how he was ordered to kill a person, but was unable to do so. His exercise of agency included the use of deception when he later told the commander that the targeted person had already left (Interviewee 15). Another interviewee (Interviewee 14) talked about his determination not to kill anyone and "be good" while in the group. However, it is important to note the pragmatically indirect nature of these acts, since a direct non-compliance of orders would put one's life at risk of being killed in a court martial: "[o]ne cannot live against something that can cause one's death" (Interviewee 13).

Nonetheless, considering the draconian sanctions for non-compliance and the rewards for compliance, obedience appears to be a more rational choice. Such obedience can also be attributed to social and cultural factors: the submissive mentality taught to girls from their early childhood living in a machista society like Colombia; the paternalistic structure of the armed group in which the commander is seen as the head of the family while the soldiers are seen as children who are obliged to do whatever their 'father' asks them; or social norms according to which children are expected to respect adults and follow their instructions.

On the other hand, some research participants talked about the benefits of doing more than the bare minimum. One of them (Interviewee 12) shared the story about how he and his brother had earned the trust of the group by doing them extra favours, beyond what they were asked to do. Those who build trust among the group leadership are rewarded with more serious and highly appreciated tasks. Such responsibilities include, among others, maintaining radio communication between the different sub-groups (Interviewee 10) and being sent to transport large amounts of money or drugs (Interviewee 3). This finding is in line with the literature arguing that child soldiers might consciously show exceptional obedience and excellent performance in combat in order to have increased access to food and health care, and to enrol in more specialised training with less exposure to warfare (Bjørkhaug 2010: 18, Wessells 2009: 70).

8.2.2.2 Use of Deception

"they [the armed group] were talking and I was doing as if I was looking, paying attention, but my mind was somewhere else" (Interviewee 17)

The use of deception is another form in which children's agency is exhibited during their involvement in the armed group. These are often opportunities taken on the spur of the moment, seizing the upcoming chances on the go. One of the research participants (Interviewee 17) recounted how he had to look as if he was paying attention in the training sessions provided to new recruits, but in fact he was not listening and his thoughts were somewhere else. Moreover, as discussed above, one of the interviewees (Interviewee 15) lied about the whereabouts of the targeted person he was ordered to kill by

his commander. Escape from the armed group - besides prior planning and strategic thinking - also often involves deception. A research participant (Interviewee 12), for instance, managed to exit the armed group by giving false information about where he was going: he said he would go and visit his imprisoned brother, but in fact he knew that his brother was not in jail but was enrolled in the ICBF's rehabilitation programme.

In this way, while deception used by the group leadership constrains children's agency - as discussed in Chapter Seven - the use of lies and pretense is one of the practices in which children exhibit their tactical agency in the highly controlling environment of the armed group.

8.2.2.3 Psychological Distancing and Change of Identity

"Physically speaking I was a guerrilla, but mentally I was nothing" (Interviewee 8)

The creation of a 'false' or 'suspended identity' (Schmid & Jones 1991), or the adoption of the compartmentalisation strategy (Wessells 2009) by children involved in armed conflict, was also apparent in Colombia. It acted as a coping mechanism for child soldiers to rationalise their behaviour and detach their real life identity from their wartime identity: "When you are in the armed group, you do not have a family. If you have to go and take from your dad's livestock, you have to do it" (Interviewee 4).

However, in spite of adopting this new identity and being exposed to the processes of desensitisation and demoralisation, not all emotions and norms are 'successfully' wiped out of the child's conscious. Among the research participants, some of the manifestations which showed that one managed to

maintain his/her individuality and humanity in the armed group include developing tiredness of seeing violence and death (Interviewees 1, 13, 15), helping one's sister who was sent to court martial (Interviewee 10) and feeling concerned about the family (Interviewee 10). All of these factors were mentioned by the interviewees as reasons which enforced their determination to desert the armed group despite the great risk such an act entailed.

8.2.2.4 'Escape/Surrender' vs. 'Stay in the Armed Group'

"Even though I was a small kid, I made the right decision to leave the armed group" (Interviewee 13)

"There is a lot more of those who stay there [in the armed group] than those who leave" (Interviewee 12)

Considering the high risk involved, deserting the armed group or surrendering oneself to the enemy forces during a fight can be considered to be the most active and extreme form of agency during one's involvement in the group. Most of those children who join an armed group are unaware of what they have signed up for and what a difficult life is ahead of them, not only in the physical sense of the word but also emotionally. Participation in the armed group is a physically consuming experience for children because they often have to endure starvation (Interviewees 11, 12, 13), injury caused by bombs (Interviewee 3) or grenades (Interviewee 17), as well as tiredness due to long and exhausting walks in extreme weather conditions (Interviewees 12 & 17). One of the interviewees described his life in the group by saying that "[i]t feels like hell and the bullets keep coming" (Interviewee 17). Two research participants characterised those fighting in the ranks of the armed group as

being simple chess pieces or pawns "who have no authority at all" (Interviewee 2) and "who are clearing the way so that those in control can pass; they are cannon fodders" (Interviewee 13). Despite the initial enjoyment of the military lifestyle ("[t]hey [the armed group] already gave me a gun, I had money in my pocket, I was like a king"), over time a lot of child soldiers get disillusioned and start thinking about leaving the group (Interviewee 2).

Escape requires elaborate planning and preparation using one's familiarity with the terrain, as well as deception when tricking the military structure and keeping silent about one's intentions (Interviewees 3, 4, 10, 13, 16, 17). Out of the twenty interviewees seventeen deserted the group; two of them were caught by either the army or the police; while one of them surrendered to the national army in a military operation. The choice to leave the group was presented as a courageous act by the interviewees and was often described as one of the best decisions ever made in their life (Interviewees 10, 13, 17). In the same manner, the research participant who surrendered to the national army in a military operation showed outstanding agency in his action (Interviewee 13). He explained his decision by saying that he preferred being caught rather than dying in a fight that his group had already lost, referring to the armed conflict (Interviewee 13).

Nonetheless, the majority of those involved in the armed group opt to stay (Interviewees 12 & 15). Three research participants (Interviewees 3, 6, 13) recounted how, at some point in their involvement in the group, they were offered the opportunity by the group leadership to freely leave, but chose to stay. The Colombian child soldiers' reasons to stay vs. desert the armed group will be analysed later in the present chapter.

8.2.2.5 Seizing Opportunities

"it [involvement in the armed group] was something I did not want but since I was already there, I could not do anything. So I tried to make the most of the time that I was there" (Interviewee 19)

Children's aspiration to carve out opportunities available to them in an environment that seemingly lacks any room for free choice was apparent in the life history interviews. Opportunities took different forms, and emerged at different stages of children's involvement in the armed group. Such opportunities include developing nursing skills (Interviewees 1, 9, 19), administrative skills (Interviewees 1 & 19), radio-communication skills and experience (Interviewees 10, 18, 19), or refining business skills to earn money on the side (Interviewee 9). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that often there is a blurry line between the child's agency to make the most of his/her time in the armed group and the act of compliance.

The seized opportunities presented in the interviews were interpreted by the research participants as their determination to make the most of the situation they found themselves in and had little power to change (Interviewees 10 & 19). Because of the professional and life skills learnt in the group, as well as the gained experience, some former child soldiers expressed no regret for joining the armed group (Interviewees 2 & 14). However, the fact that these skills are not acknowledged and are not considered transferable to post-demobilisation civilian life by official authorities causes frustration and a feeling of injustice among former child soldiers.

8.2.3 Reintegration Period

After their demobilisation from the armed group, children's agency is considered to shift from being tactical to strategic - based on de Certeau's definition of strategies and tactics (1984: 36-38) - because they are more likely to project plans and goals into the future; due to their older age and past experience, are better equipped to anticipate long-term gains and benefits; and exercise more power than before (see also Berents 2009: 18, Honwana 2007: 51). Apart from the act of staying silent, all manifestations of agency identified in the literature - discussed in Chapter Four - were apparent in the life history interviews which also pointed to additional examples.

8.2.3.1 'Re-engagement in Criminal Activity' vs. 'Resistance to Re-engagement in Criminal Activity'

"I know a lot of those [demobilised child soldiers] who came and when they faced reality, they joined Los Urabeños, Los Rastrojos [criminal organisations in Colombia]" (Interviewee 18)

"If they make me choose between a bullet and an armed group, I say to here, in the head" (Interviewee 13)

Engagement in criminal activities and re-recruitment into an illegal armed group is a common phenomenon among former child soldiers in Colombia (Thomas 2008: 35, Verdad Abierta 2015a). The majority of them have to face severe social, economic and psychological difficulties after their demobilisation from the group. It was a striking trend among research participants to describe their life in civilian society as an everyday fight and

struggle (Interviewees 1, 2, 11, 13, 18, 20). Furthermore, due the ongoing nature of armed conflict, the wide presence of drug cartels and the emergence of new criminal organisations (BACRIMs), engagement in criminal activities and re-recruitment into the armed group is an easily accessible option. Former child soldiers are often approached by these actors, who try to recruit them because of their past experience and skills gained during their participation in armed conflict (Interviewees 9, 17, 18; Ernesto Mendez 2014). Therefore, demobilised child soldiers are in a vulnerable position with a seemingly easy way out.

Six out of the twenty research participants admitted that they contemplated returning to the armed group at some stage in their rehabilitation or reintegration process, while others had a clear idea that they did not want anything to do with that lifestyle and the armed group anymore. The various reasons for demobilised child soldiers not to return to the armed group or engage in criminal activities will be discussed later in the chapter.

8.2.3.2 'Stakeholders of Peace and Social Obligation' vs. 'Staying Away'

"We [former child soldiers] apologised to them [victims of the armed conflict] in the name of FARC, because even though we did not do direct harm [to them], we did do harm because we belonged to the group" (Interviewee 12)

As discussed in Chapter Four, one of the primary means through which the strategic agency of former child soldiers can be empowered is by making them active contributors to the planning, implementation, evaluation and

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advocacy of peace-building initiatives and reintegration programmes (Denov 2010: 198). In this way, former child soldiers' past experience is given meaning, and is used as a tool to prevent future recruitment of children into illegal armed groups and to build a more effective reintegration programme. Therefore, as discussed in the literature, former child soldiers have the potential to become significant stakeholders as peace-builders, peer educators, positive leaders and advocates (Denov 2010: 198, Nilsson 2005: 49, Özerdem 2009: 50). Such a factor was also apparent in the Colombian case. Some research participants were involved in initiatives for the prevention of recruitment of children (Interviewee 1) and the facilitation of reintegration of demobilised soldiers (Interviewees 4 & 12), as well as in reconciliation processes (Interviewee 12). As one of the interviewees (Interviewee 12) put it "[t]hose who lived through all this process there, the war, we know what we need and know more or less where it is necessary to work harder". The feelings of empowerment and personal self-worth by former child soldiers also lower the likelihood of their re-recruitment into the armed group or involvement in illegal activities (Berents 2009: 20).

Besides being direct stakeholders in peace-building initiatives, another way former child soldiers' sense of social obligation is manifested is through the careers they choose. Several research participants (Interviewees 12 & 13) expressed their desire to prove (*demostrar*) that they have made good use of the second chance they were given when they demobilised, have changed for the better, and their country can benefit from their skills and work: "…show it to the country and to the world that a demobilised soldier can succeed. That a demobilised soldier has hope, has goals, has achievements and has

objectives" (Interviewee 13). In this way, former child soldiers often choose careers through which they can be altruist and contribute to the society, such as being a teacher in a public school to educate needy children (Interviewee 14) or becoming a nurse to save people's lives (Interviewee 19). There was a similar pattern among other research participants: one of them worked as a maintenance person at a transportation company "fixing, washing, cleaning, getting the vehicles ready so that my city can use them" (Interviewee 17), while someone else was a *promotor* in the ACR in order to "make a difference" (Interviewee 12). The abovementioned examples show how former child soldiers in Colombia often exhibit their strategic agency in the reintegration period by committing their life to the social good of civilian society.

8.2.3.3 'Exiting Reintegration Programme' vs. 'Making Benefit from Participation'

"There are people who packed their bag and left [the programme]" (Interviewee 18)

"I think I have made good use of things" (Interviewee 10)

Participation in the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes offers a great number of benefits and opportunities to former child soldiers. However, it also entails duties and responsibilities to fulfil, such as attending classes, therapy sessions, meetings with the social worker and carrying out community work (Interviewee 16). Since involvement in these programmes is entirely voluntary, it is up to the participant to decide if he/she wants to continue in the programme or not (Interviewee 9). Among the research

participants, those who left the programme did so because they either wanted to go and live with their boyfriend (Interviewees 9, 18, 19) or because they felt that their safety would have been in danger if they had stayed (Interviewee 19). Other reasons for leaving the programme might include a lack of interest in studying and participating in skills training, unmet expectations, and objection to conform to the norms and regulations dictated by the programme, among others (Karen Johana Corpues, Karla Samira Cardona 2014). Nonetheless, the majority of former child soldiers who exit the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes do so to become independent, or to return to the armed group or join a criminal organisation.

Those who stay enrolled in the programme often see it as making the most of the opportunity offered to them (Interviewees 4, 9, 10, 13, 17, 19). The rehabilitation and reintegration programmes of the ICBF and the ACR are built on a reward and punishment system, just like the armed group was. In this way, those who behave appropriately are rewarded with trips abroad or within the country, while those who fail to comply with the rules get punished (Interviewees 1, 2, 19). For instance, one of the research participants (Interviewee 8) recounted how he was transferred from the ICBF transition home to a shelter for homeless people as a sanction imposed due to his bad behaviour. Some of those who stay in the programme try to trick it in a way that they make more benefit from it. One of the interviewees (Interviewee 12) talked about how some programme participants intentionally fail their exams, so that they can stay in school for a longer period of time to keep receiving financial support from the state provided for those enrolled in education. Therefore, in the context of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes,

strategic agency might be manifested in different ways: one might either exit, or stay and trick the system or make benefit from his/her participation.

8.2.3.4 'Opposing the Role of Victim' vs. 'Victimcy'

"I took my decisions, good or bad, and I am responsible for them" (Interviewee 9)

"the first thing they [the state] should provide to the demobilised is a house and a project to start working" (Interviewee 18)

According to the Colombian legal system those who demobilise as minors from one of the illegal armed groups recognised by the national government have to be considered victims. Moreover, they are entitled to receive special care and assistance from the state, and participate in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

Since the passage of the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011, the discourse of victimhood has been highly politicised and used by the state to justify its political agenda. By adopting the image of the child as a victim of illegal armed groups and the state as a provider of assistance to this vulnerable population, the Colombian government delegitimizes illegal armed groups operating in the country and legitimizes its own role as protector (Rethmann 2010: 5). Such an approach of the Colombian state can be paralleled to the discourse of childhood used by states and the international community as a tactical tool, discussed in Chapter Three.

Despite the 'victim discourse' adopted by the international community and the Colombian state, former child soldiers do not always see themselves as

innocent. As discussed above, the majority of them consider their recruitment into the armed group voluntary, just as well their desertion from the group: "[n]obody forced me to enter, nor forced me to leave" (Interviewee 3). Therefore, the 'victim discourse' - which blames external circumstances for the child's recruitment into the armed group and the group leadership for the atrocities committed by child soldiers - is not always welcomed by the former child soldiers themselves: "[t]hey [her work colleagues] do not call me 'poor thing' but give me good tools to move forward" (Interviewee 4).

Former child soldiers in Colombia often rather consider themselves having the dual identity of a victim and a perpetrator at the same time; and believe that they have to take responsibility for their past decisions and actions (Interviewees 4, 12, 13). This finding is in line with Frank Furedi's argument that the 'victim' is a social construct, and those who have experienced traumatic events in the past do not see themselves as victims "unless society defines them in that way" (Furedi 2006: 104). Former child soldiers are often hunted by their past and the guilt they feel for the horrors they committed in the armed conflict: "[t]hey did a lot of damage to me but when you grow up you think of the damage you did yourself" (Interviewee 4), "[t]hey [the national army] would kill me because they knew that I was bad" (Interviewee 19), "I remembered the people I killed... I felt very guilty" (Interviewee 20). Nonetheless, such feelings of remorse and shame are often silenced and left unaddressed in the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes due to the adoption of the 'victim discourse'.

If opposing the role of victim is considered to be one of the 'faces' of agency exhibited by former child soldiers in this context, the other 'face' would be

the phenomenon of 'victimcy'. As discussed in Chapter Four, 'victimcy' is regarded as the most limited form of agency which involves the individuals emphasising their passive victim status and downplaying responsibility for past actions in order to rely on the benefits that the victim status entails (Furedi 2006: 106, Utas 2005a: 57). One of the research participants (Interviewee 4) also criticised the 'victim card' used by former child soldiers whenever it suited them. Some interviewees (Interviewees 1, 2, 12, 14, 18) mentioned their dissatisfaction with not receiving enough support from the state in tackling current life problems - such as finding employment, child rearing, attending university, being offered special training on how to manage money and being provided with a house to live in - but none of them downplayed their responsibility for past decisions and actions, nor did they emphasise their victim status.

8.2.3.5 'Turning Oneself In' vs. 'Staying Away'

"These [demobilisation from the armed group] are personal decisions on one's part and no one else has to know why" (Interviewee 2)

"She [the mother of his child] never turned herself in, but never had problems" (Interviewee 12)

After escaping from the armed group, child soldiers have the option to turn themselves in to one of the state authorities including the police, national army, Ombudsman's Office of Colombia and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF). They can also surrender to the Church, the Red Cross or the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation (*Fundación Paz y Reconciliación*), among other agencies. However, according to official

numbers - presented in Chapter Five - only fifteen percent of those who desert the armed group turn themselves in to one of these authorities (Mapp 2011: 81, Thomas 2008: 20). Among the interviewees, three of them were captured by the army or the police and were, therefore, automatically enrolled in the ICBF's rehabilitation programme; while the rest turned themselves in voluntarily (see Diagram 1 below).

Diagram 1: Authorities research participants (19 out of 20) turned themselves in after demobilisation
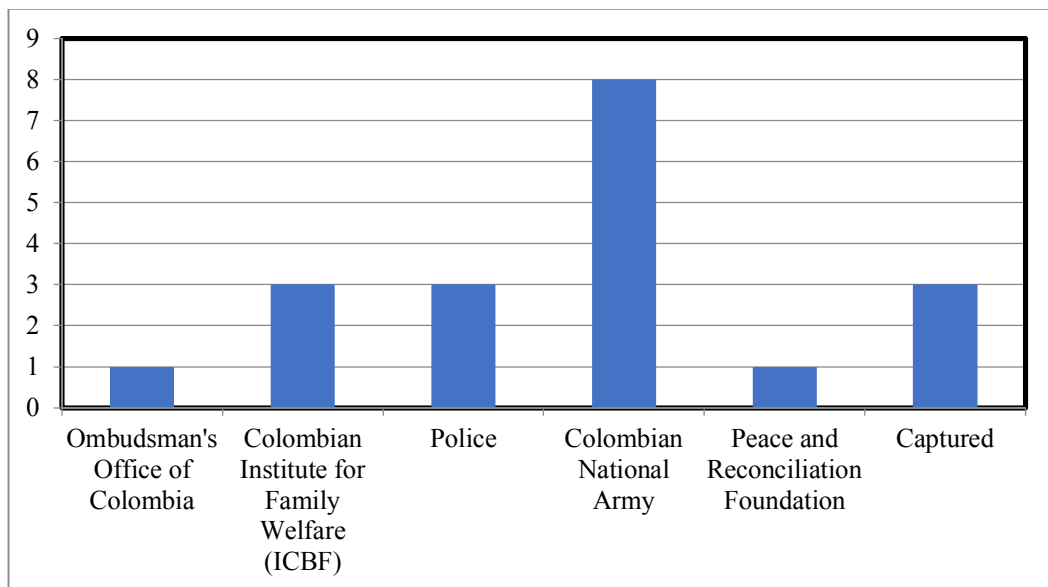
However, some research participants (Interviewees 3, 4, 7, 9, 19) expressed their initial reluctance to surrender because of lack of trust in the state and fear of consequences: "they [state authorities] send me to a strange place, lock me up there like a crazy person" (Interviewee 19). In the armed group, child soldiers are told that state authorities will declare them war criminals and will torture, imprison and kill them and their family members because of what

they have done (Interviewees 2, 10, 13). They are also threatened by the armed group with having their loved ones attacked and even murdered by the group if they turn themselves in (Interviewees 4, 8, 9, 13). Besides lack of trust in the state and fear of consequences, some other reasons why a former child soldier might decide not to turn him/herself in include the desire to move on without any affiliation with the past and the fear of stigmatisation, primarily in the case of girls.

8.2.3.6 'Refusal to Give Away Information' vs. 'Confession'

"They [the national army] wanted to get information out of me, but they could not" (Interviewee 6)

"The guy I deserted [the armed group] with started to give them [the national army] information" (Interviewee 9)

After turning themselves in to one of the civil, military or judicial authorities, former child soldiers have to be handed over to the ICBF within thirty-six hours, as discussed before. However, they are often used for intelligence-gathering purposes by the state and are held at police stations or military bases for a longer period of time to be questioned about the location, movements and structure of the armed group they were affiliated with (Interviewees 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18; see also Bartolomei 2012: 506, COALICO 2009: 32, Springer 2012: 57). Several research participants (Interviewees 6, 8, 9, 16) recounted how they were interrogated by an official authority, but refused to give away information, primarily in order to protect their family.

On the other hand, those former child soldiers who provide information and intelligence to official authorities might do so out of fear or coercion; or they

might act on a voluntary basis, maybe in the hope of some reward for their collaboration. One of the interviewees (Interviewee 4) talked about how she voluntarily shared valuable information with an official authority, but nothing was done by either the police or the army regarding the case. Another research participant (Interviewee 19) recounted the story of her adult friend with whom she escaped from the armed group, who gave the police information about the location of a drug stash. Her friend was later found dead in his home, together with his mother and his aunt, probably killed by the guerrillas (Interviewee 19). The question of whether former child soldiers should provide intelligence to official authorities should only be considered if the state is willing to guarantee, and is capable of guaranteeing, the safety of the informant and his/her family. Moreover, the shared information should be used to prosecute those who bear responsibility for the committed atrocities and high-ranking officials should not enjoy impunity. As long as these requirements are not met, most former child soldiers will deservedly use their right to remain silent.

8.2.3.7 'Staying in the Closet' vs. 'Coming Out'

"Under no circumstances do I want them [people in his surroundings] to know it [his past involvement in the armed group]" (Interviewee 14)

"Yes, some of them [his colleagues and friends] are in the know [about his life in the armed group]. They like hearing about it; one tells them certain things" (Interviewee 20)

Fourteen out of seventeen research participants admitted in the interview that they had not told their friends, colleagues or people in their surroundings - sometimes not even their partners - about their past in the armed group and

they would not want them to find out about it under any circumstances. Three of them shared the gist of their story with some people close to them, but avoided giving too many details. This finding is in line with the data presented in Springer's report, which shows that eighty percent of those interviewed decided not to tell other community members about their past experiences, primarily due to fear of stigmatisation and rejection (Springer 2012: 48).

Similar to 'coming out', 'staying in the closet' is a manifestation of former child soldiers' strategic agency. There is a great number of arguments supporting such an action/inaction. First, due to the ongoing conflict and the fact that once one leaves the armed group becomes a target the group will want to hunt down, one needs to be very cautious about his/her security situation and try to remain as invisible as possible (Interviewee 4). Secondly, several interviewees (Interviewees 3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15) were scared of being rejected by their friends and employers in case they had found out about their past identity due to the widespread stigmatisation and prejudice against this population in Colombian society, discussed in the previous chapter. Thirdly, several research participants (Interviewees 7, 8, 9, 13) claimed that they did not tell their friends and acquaintances about them being former child soldiers simply because they did not consider it as an important topic to share; and also because they did not want to live in the past, but look forward and live an ordinary life: "I am normal like everyone else" (Interviewee 8). When asked about how they responded to questions about their childhood, the interviewees (Interviewees 6, 8, 9, 10, 15, 17, 20) said that they tried to divert the subject or consciously selected parts they were willing to share: "I never let them [her friends] get to the bottom [of the story]" (Interviewee 9),

"[s]incerity bothers me" (Interviewee 10). One of the research participants (Interviewee 10) discussed how he had to do extra research and preparation on how normal childhood looked like in order to be able to respond to questions about his own childhood in the English language classes he was attending. Another interviewee (Interviewee 17) talked about how he sometimes had to come up with excuses at his workplace when he was required to attend ACR sessions.

Social reintegration is defined by the United Nations, the international community and the Colombian government as a process through which former soldiers "acquire civilian status" leaving their military identity behind, and "feel part of and are accepted by the community" (CONPES 3554 2008: 7, IDDRS: 2006: 4.30: 2, Kingma 1997: 5, The Paris Principles 2007: 7).[82] This definition is problematic, not only because the term 'civilian status' is very unclear, but also because reintegration as described above is highly unfeasible in a conflict environment. Based on this interpretation, in the case of the majority of former child soldiers in Colombia social reintegration is not attainable since they opt to conceal their past identity, which makes their acceptance by the family and community questionable. Heidi - from World Vision Colombia - addressed this constraint by arguing that in Colombia "[t]here is no social reintegration… Here there is invention of new human beings, invention of new life stories, invention of new realities" (2014).

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[82] In the studies carried out by Humphreys and Weinstein in Sierra Leone, and by Pugel in Liberia - discussed in Chapter One - acceptance by the family and the community is one of the factors used to measure the sustainability of the reintegration of former soldiers (Humphreys & Weinstein 2007: 541, Pugel 2007: 5).

Therefore, the term social integration more accurately reflects the reality of the majority of Colombian former child soldiers.

8.2.3.8 'Keeping in Touch with the Armed Group' vs. 'Cutting Off All Contact'

"The last contact I had [with the armed group], but it was not a contact like that, was when I went to greet my aunt, who is my dad's sister, [who has spent] nineteen years in the guerrilla [group]" (Interviewee 14)

"This [staying in touch with the armed group] is like putting a rope around my neck and obviously this is what I would want the least, mostly now that I am a mom" (Interviewee 9)

As discussed above, in order for social reintegration to be successful and sustainable, former child soldiers need to adopt a civilian identity, which is more easily achieved if all contact is cut off with the armed group. Kaplan and Nussio reported that in the case of demobilised former soldiers in Colombia continuing contact with the armed group showed negative correlation with the individuals' participation in social organisations and contributed to social segregation (Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 18). Moreover, it is also in the child's best interest not to stay in touch with his/her former comrades for safety reasons: if his/her whereabouts are identified by the armed group, the group might track him/her down to take revenge for his/her treason. Most research participants (Interviewees 1, 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 16, 18, 19) recognised the danger of maintaining contact with the armed group and denied having any lingering attachment to their 'war family' (Hazen 2005: 4).

The only kind of link former child soldiers seemed to keep with the armed group was through their relationship with other demobilised soldiers or relatives who were still active members of the group (Interviewees 3, 14, 15, 18). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that those who decide to stay in touch with the armed group - maybe so that they do not burn bridges - also manifest strategic agency through such an act.

Table 6: Manifestations of Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict in Colombia

Pre-recruitment period	In the armed group	Reintegration period
Voluntary recruitment	'Refusal to kill and fight' vs. 'Exceptional obedience'	'Re-engagement in criminal activity' vs. 'Resistance to re-engagement in criminal activity'
Resistance to recruitment	Use of deception	'Stakeholders of post-conflict peace-building initiatives and social obligation' vs. 'Staying away'
	Psychological distancing and change of identity	'Exiting reintegration programme' vs. 'Making benefit from participation'
	~~Sly evasion of enforced drug ingestion~~	'Opposing the role of victim' vs. 'Victimcy'
	~~Provision of assistance to 'enemy' civilians~~	~~Staying silent~~
	~~Pairing up with high-ranking soldiers and becoming the wives of commanders~~	'Turning oneself in' vs. 'Staying away'
	'Escape/surrender' vs. 'Stay in the armed group'	'Refusal to give away information' vs. 'Confession'
	Seizing opportunities	'Staying in the closet' vs. 'Coming out'
		'Keeping in Touch with the Armed Group' vs. 'Cutting Off All Contact'

8.3 Social Capital as a Structural Factor to Children's Agency in Colombia[83]

8.3.1 Pre-recruitment Period

8.3.1.1 Bonding Social Capital

Social capital has shown to have a significant constraining impact on children's agency in the pre-recruitment period in the Colombian case. Out of the three functions of social capital, bonding social capital appeared to be the most influential one. Having damaged or dysfunctional relations with the birth family - manifested in the child living separately from his/her parents or being sexually and/or domestically abused by a family member - has turned out to significantly increase the likelihood of the child being recruited into the armed group, both voluntarily and forcedly. Moreover, having close family members in the armed group - including siblings, uncles and cousins - also make children's enlistment more likely.

8.3.1.2 Bridging Social Capital

With regard to the child's bridging social capital, peer pressure, the absence of a community protection net and the child's limited social networks outside of his/her family relations - due to marginalisation and exclusion - appeared

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[83] See Table 7 at the end of the section exploring the different functions of social capital in the various stages of children's involvement in armed conflict in Colombia. The table is a contextualised version of Table 3. The additional factors identified in the life history interviews are indicated in purple, while the ones that were not discussed by the research participants are crossed out.

to play important roles in the child's recruitment into the armed group, although to a lesser extent than bonding social capital. Children's bridging social capital is significantly influenced by the wide presence of the guerrillas in the rural areas of the country, where recruitment predominantly takes place.

8.3.1.3 Synergy

The damaged bonding social capital and scarce bridging social capital on the micro level are embedded in an environment which is characterised by lack of synergy between the child and the state due to the state's absence in the rural areas of Colombia.

8.3.1.4 Other Factors

Therefore, the restricting impact of social capital on children's agency in the pre-recruitment period is undeniable. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in Table 4 in Chapter Six, damaged social capital is often not considered by former child soldiers to be the number one driver for their recruitment into the armed group. Among research participants, financial reasons and lack of opportunities were the most commonly emerging triggers for recruitment, alongside the wide presence of the armed group in the area. These factors were followed by the appeal of lifestyle in the group and only after these reasons came the determinants related to the presence of the wrong kind of social 'capital' or the lack of social capital. Such a finding supports the hypothesis that broken social capital does not in itself cause children's recruitment only when paired with other constraining structural factors, including socio-economic (poverty) and cultural elements (damaging cultural and social norms such as child marriage and child labour).

8.3.2 In the Armed Group

8.3.2.1 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

In the armed group, there is a fine line between bonding and bridging social capital due to the child's limited contact and interaction with the outside world caused by isolation, the presence of 'perverse social capital' and the enforcement of herd mentality on group members by the group leadership. As discussed in Chapter Seven, such military network-related factors have a significant constraining impact on children's agency. In the literature - presented in Chapter Four - loyalty to the fighting unit is highlighted as one of the main factors which increases the likelihood of the child's stay in the group. On the other hand, friendships established in the armed group have the potential to enable children's agency. Despite the risk of exposing oneself to betrayal and even death, some comrades develop genuine trust for each other. Half of the interviewees recounted how they had escaped from the group accompanied by their friends or *'socio'* - a comrade with whom one has a romantic relationship - or had got convinced by them to leave the group: "the friends from there [the armed group] also helped me; they also came" (Interviewee 16).

Elements related to one's civilian social networks - such as homesickness and missing the family - were discussed by research participants (Interviewees 2, 9, 10) as pull factors to leave the armed group (see also Bjørkhaug 2010: 20, Mago 2011: 12). A great number of interviewees (Interviewees 1, 2, 5, 9, 15, 17, 20) recounted how they had their family constantly on their mind, felt worried about how they were doing, imagined what kind of a life they were

living and wondered whether their younger siblings had also got recruited into an armed group. As one of the research participants (Interviewee 9) put it "[in the armed group] I was thinking of my mom, my family; that all these years my mom was thinking where her daughter could be".

8.3.2.2 Synergy

Synergy - the relationship between the state and the child involved in the armed group - is limited due to military confrontations being the only encounters between them. Moreover, since the state is depicted by the group leadership as the enemy and as a revengeful authority which imprisons and tortures members of the armed group, child soldiers usually hold a negative association with the state.

8.3.2.3 Other Factors

In this way, military social networks might act as either constrainers or enablers to children's agency in the armed group, while the civilian network has been shown to serve predominantly as a pull factor to leave the group. Nonetheless, it is important to note that besides social capital-related factors, research participants discussed other reasons as well when asked about their primary motivation to desert the armed group (see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 25). Some of them mentioned being driven by fear (Interviewees 1 & 15); disappointment (Interviewee 7); tiredness to see death, blood and violence (Interviewees 1, 13, 15); as well as boredom (Interviewees 1, 15, 17). Others provided different explanations for their escape, such as having enough of the suffering caused by the bad economic situation of the armed group (Interviewee 13) or finding out about the state-led rehabilitation and

reintegration programme offered to former child soldiers (Interviewee 12). In addition, more regular attacks on the armed group by the national armed forces (Interviewee 9) and the realisation that military lifestyle was not for them (Interviewees 3 & 14) were both mentioned by the interviewees as push factors to desert the group.

8.3.3 Reintegration Period

8.3.3.1 Bonding Social Capital

Bonding social capital was attributed special importance by research participants when asked about the primary reasons to stay in civilian society instead of re-engaging in military or criminal activities. Nonetheless, as discussed below, family is defined in a somewhat unconventional and broad way.

- Birth Family

"One's motivation after all is the family" (Interviewee 12)

The birth family often acts as an enabler for former child soldiers to exhibit their agency and choose to stay in civilian society. Several interviewees (Interviewees 4 & 18) named their birth family as the main reason why they decided not to re-join the armed group despite the socio-economic difficulties faced in the post-demobilisation period, and the temptation they felt because of it: "I get bored, but again I think of my family, my mom and dad and how much they had to suffer when I was there [in the armed group]" (Interviewee 18). Several research participants (Interviewees 4, 9, 14) mentioned the tight relationship they maintained with their family - mostly their mothers - and

how they considered this bond as the most important factor in their reintegration process: "[t]he most important thing for me has always, always been my family" (Interviewee 9).

Some interviewees (Interviewees 14, 15, 19) were still living with their birth family, even though not in the same place where they used to before joining the armed group. When asked about their greatest difficulties in the post-demobilisation period, not seeing their family was an often mentioned challenge (Interviewees 15 & 16) that former child soldiers had to face: "I cried so much [in the care home] because I was told that I could not go and live with my family" (Interviewee 15). Furthermore, it was also a widespread trend among the interviewees (Interviewees 10, 12, 13, 18) to feel concerned about their family's economic well-being and try to support them as much as they could despite their own financial difficulties. Helping the family and making them happy were also commonly mentioned factors by research participants (Interviewees 4, 7, 18) when asked about their main plans for the future: "[t]he other dream that I have is for my family to be happy" (Interviewee 4).

- Other Kind of Family

"The birth family has nothing to do with this [reintegration] process" (Interviewee 13)

It is important to keep in mind that in the armed group child soldiers spend long years in a strange environment without any contact with their families. They are left on their own to deal with all the hardship of being a child soldier without having their family on their side. Furthermore, after they desert the

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group the vast majority of children are institutionalised and - because of their families' limited financial resources - barely ever get visited by their family members: "the [ICBF] programme gave me a lot but I became very detached from my family" (Interviewee 20). Once they turn eighteen and leave the ICBF programme - maybe transfer to the ACR - former child soldiers usually settle down in the city that they have become familiar with while being institutionalised. Most of them have no desire to return to the place where they used to live before joining the armed group and where their families usually still reside.

Therefore, it is not surprising that various interviewees talked about a physical and emotional distance they had with their birth family, how they were no longer in touch with each other and how difficult it was for them to take up where they had left off: "the family sees you as the black sheep" (Interviewee 13), "[w]hen I go home I do not feel like I am from there anymore; I feel as if I were no longer from the family, as much as my mom tries, it is not the same" (Interviewee 18). One of the research participants (Interviewee 1) reflected on her relationship with her birth family by saying that "we were away [from each other] for so long, it taught me to be more independent"; while another interviewee (Interviewee 10) shared a similar experience: "[a]s my family was very far away, more distant is my relationship with them". Due to this gap created between the former child soldier and his/her birth family, children often recreate such a special personal relationship in a different form. Tight bonds may be established with the foster family (*hogar tutor*) they stay with while participating in the rehabilitation programme, with the people working in the government agencies and organisations from which

they receive support, or with the family they establish themselves: "emotionally my body rejects my family more than other people... I was raised all this time by people outside of my family, that is why I prefer to talk to these people, as they understand me better" (Interviewee 8). It is important to note that the institution of family - even if not in the traditional definition of the word - remains a very important factor in former child soldiers' life and acts as an important enabler to their agency.

o Foster Family

"She [her foster mother] was what my grandmother, my mother was not; she was everything to me" (Interviewee 19)

After leaving the transition home of the ICBF - where they spend the first stage of their rehabilitation process - a large number of former child soldiers are allocated to foster families (*hogar tutor*). This is a necessary measure because children often have no possibility to move back together with their birth family either due to the bad security situation in the region where the family lives, or because the family is not willing or able to provide them with the basic necessities they would require. In a great number of cases, a special link is formed between members of the foster family and the child, and these bonds are often seen by former child soldiers as the family they never had. One of the interviewees (Interviewee 5) discussed how he perceived his last foster family as his real family: "I share more with my last [foster] family than with my [birth] family... I introduce them as my father and mother", while someone else (Interviewee 8) mentioned how he considered his foster mother as his best friend. Another research participant (Interviewee 19) talked about the special attachment she had toward her foster mother, whom she

called *'mama'* (mother): "she [her foster mother] will give me away when I get married... I shared, cried, laughed, played, enjoyed everything with her". She also named her as one of the most significant factors in her reintegration process: "she [her foster mother] was my right hand, my support" (Interviewee 19).

o Programme Family

"This programme was my family, everyone from the programme" (Interviewee 8)

Regardless if they voluntarily sought help from one of the official authorities or were captured in a military operation, all former child soldiers are transferred to the ICBF. As explained in Chapter Two, this government agency is responsible for the rehabilitation of children until they reach the age of majority and become entitled to transfer to the reintegration programme run by the ACR. Some stay with the ICBF even after they turn eighteen due to them being in the process of completing a course or because of the delayed arrival of the necessary documents to transfer. Some research participants spent as long as four years in the ICBF, although the average time period was two point two years among them. It is also important to bear in mind that this is a time for former child soldiers when they find themselves in a very vulnerable position: they feel uncertain about what will happen to them, have to live 'locked up' in an institution in the midst of a hectic city after having spent long years in the quietness of the mountains and are also separated from their birth family and friends.

Therefore, it is not surprising that children often develop a strong attachment toward the people who take care of them while in the programme, mostly psychologists. Looking back on their reintegration process, several research participants (Interviewees 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19) expressed their gratitude to their psychologists in the ICBF for the help and advice they were given, and even mentioned them among the most significant factors in their reintegration process: "I have already overcome this [having nightmares] because the psychologists help you a lot. They give you good advice" (Interviewee 12).

Nonetheless, it is not only the psychologists who are perceived as fulfilling a special and crucial role in one's rehabilitation and reintegration process, but the entire team working in the programme run by the ICBF, the ACR and other organisations that have a special partnership with these two government agencies, such as *Hogar Don Bosco* and *Benposta Colombia* among others. A great number of research participants (Interviewees 3, 8, 9, 10, 15, 20) talked about to what a great extent these institutions shaped the person they are today and how such organisations provided them with a place to make friends: "…the person I am today, the way I am, the way I live is thanks to *Benposta*. It changed my world" (Interviewee 3). Moreover, they were also assisted by these institutes in their studies, finding jobs, getting to know foreign countries and organising their life (Interviewees 1, 3, 10, 11, 12, 16, 19, 20). In this way, by participating in the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes former child soldiers can feel part of a family - "they are like your parents" (Interviewee 8), "the *defensora* [legal adviser in the ICBF]… is like a mom to us" (Interviewee 9) – and can also have a home: "*Benposta*

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is like my second home" (Interviewee 3), "it [*Hogar Don Bosco*] is like my home there" (Interviewee 12).

      o   Newly Established Family

"He [her son] is my engine, my Achilles heel" (Interviewee 1)

One of the most striking findings of the life history interviews was the importance research participants attributed to the family they established after their demobilisation from the armed group - in particular their children - in the successful reintegration they had.[84] The newly established family and one's children were repeatedly brought up as enablers to one's agency in various parts of the interviews.

First, they were mentioned as the reason for one not to return to the armed group despite the constant opportunity offered to the person and the financial difficulties one had been encountering: "…they [her children] are the engine of my life. I think of them and they are the ones who do not let me do bad things" (Interviewee 18). Secondly, children were the most commonly named motivations (Interviewees 1, 12, 18, 20) for one's determination to keep going (*salir adelante*) and fighting (*luchar*) in civilian life: "[t]he little girl was who motivated me, when she says "my daddy"" (Interviewee 12). Thirdly, not being able to spend enough time with one's children was considered a great difficulty by several research participants (Interviewees 9 & 12): "I suffered

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[84] Four of the interviewees were married - two of them were married to each other - while most of them either lived in a free union (*unión libre*) with their partner, were in a relationship or were single. Thirteen out of the twenty research participants had children - either one or two - and six of them were as young as eighteen or nineteen when they had their first child. One of the potential explanations for this phenomenon is that former child soldiers often intend to recreate the family they never had and give their children a childhood they would have wished for themselves.

a lot, a lot, because I was institutionalised, I could not leave, go visit her [his daughter] when I wanted to" (Interviewee 12). Moreover, the family and children were also discussed when asked about plans for the future: "I want to continue studying to be able to give her [his daughter] everything I could not have" (Interviewee 15), "That my husband should study and get a more decent, normal job and should spend more time with the family… Sometimes the kids do not even meet him. This destroys the family very easily" (Interviewee 18). Others expressed similar aspirations for their future (Interviewees 1 & 13).

Furthermore, it was a widespread trend among the interviewees to draw comparison between their own childhood and the childhood they wanted to offer to their children. A large number of research participants (Interviewees 8, 13, 16, 17, 18) mentioned how they learnt from all the mistakes their parents made when they were children and how all these bad experiences taught them how not to behave with their own children: "I know I want to have a home, get married, have a family and do the exact opposite of what happened to mine [his birth family]" (Interviewee 8), "if one day I have a kid, a family, I will know how not to do it [behave in a family]" (Interviewee 16). The narration about how one wanted to give his/her own children everything he/she could not have in his/her childhood were often accompanied by feelings of sorrow and painful nostalgia: "[t]hese are things that I never shared with my mom… I never had a doll but she [her daughter] has a lot of dolls in her room. It is very rewarding for me; it is priceless to see your children happy" (Interviewee 1).

Furthermore, it turned out to be a widespread trend among the interviewees to compare their own childhood to that of those who are considered to be more fortunate and have a chance to grow up in favourable circumstances. This often triggered envy and sadness in research participants for the childhood they never truly had: "[w]hen I see children, I remember because I did not live such a good childhood, playing, I never really lived this… sometimes I cry because these are things of life" (Interviewee 17), "[w]hen I see a happy family on television or in real life… I envy this very much" (Interviewee 8). Moreover, the interviewees often shared their concern about their children having to go through the same bad experience they had to in their own childhood: "[i]f you live this experience, you are afraid that one day your children will go through it" (Interviewee 17), "I do not want this to happen to my family, that my kids would have to go through the same that I did" (Interviewee 1).

8.3.3.2   Bridging Social Capital

- Friends

Interviewer: "Which factors played the most significant role in your reintegration process?"

Interviewee: "…I also think that friends [did]" (Interviewee 10)

Even though to a lesser extent than birth family, foster family, programme family and newly established family, friendships do play an important role in the reintegration process of former child soldiers. Most interviewees only had a small number of friends, but with those had a very good relationship and often shared a flat together (Interviewees 3, 5, 6, 10, 14). Friends also turned

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out to be valuable contacts for several research participants, which shows the significance of having bridging social capital: "you know a lot of people and they are contacts that you can benefit from" (Interviewee 4). Friendships matter when it comes to finding a job and entering civilian life, and - based on the interviewees' personal experience - friends can also act as potential gatekeepers to a new foster family or to the reintegration programme (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 12, 14). In addition, one of the research participants (Interviewee 19) recounted how she was financially supported by her friends who lived in the same neighbourhood and with whom she went to school together: "they bought me bus tickets, clothes, kept buying [her] things".

The importance of friendships is acknowledged by the state authorities as well. In order to make sure that one is not involved with friends who might have a bad influence on one's reintegration process, the agencies intend to maintain control over the programme participants' networks and contacts (Interviewee 9). In order to provide a relationship model for former child soldiers to follow, the Specialised Care Centres - institutions where most programme participants stay in the second phase of their rehabilitation process - have a system in place where each recently admitted child is allocated a 'foster brother/sister' (*herman@ tutor*). The 'foster brother/sister' is a more experienced and older child also living in the care home, who acts as a role model and a mentor for the 'younger brother/sister' (*herman@ menor*) (Interviewee 8).[85]

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[85] This system can be paralleled to the practice of peer mentoring often used in armed groups, discussed in Chapter Four.

Despite attributing special importance to personal relationships and friendships, authorities often temporarily - while waiting for a space to become available in one of the ICBF transition homes - allocate former child soldiers into homes and shelters targeted for people struggling with drug addiction, street children and victims of abuse (Interviewees 2, 8, 9, 18). Being transferred to a home like this can be a traumatic experience for the child, who already feels burdened with all the novelties of civilian life: "I felt like a weirdo there" (Interviewee 18). Furthermore, it can also hinder the child from developing healthy friendships, because he/she might feel like he/she has nothing in common with the other people staying in the same institute: "In this home [for drug addicts and victims of abuse] I had no friends. When they came to talk or make friends with me, I walked away from them" (Interviewee 8). Once they are transferred to specialised homes, most children start developing friendships with their fellow programme participants who are former child soldiers themselves. Based on the accounts of research participants (Interviewees 8 & 17), in these relationships it does not matter who used to belong to which armed group because "this is already a different life" (Interviewee 17).

- Community

The research participants did not attribute great importance to the receiving community in their reintegration process. Former child soldiers tend to be less active participants in the life of the community than others with a non-military background (Kaplan & Nussio 2012: 16, 18). Moreover, due to fear of stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion the vast majority of

demobilised child soldiers keep their past identity hidden from other community members and try to keep a low profile for security reasons.

8.3.3.3 Synergy

In the initial phase of the post-demobilisation period, the relationship between former child soldiers and the Colombian state is still characterised by distrust and fear. However, since it is state agencies which provide the package of benefits to the demobilised and due to the close relationship between former child soldiers and the professionals affiliated with these organisations, such a relation usually changes for the better over time. Nevertheless, former child soldiers often remain critical toward the state, but are willing to express such discontent through democratic channels.

8.3.3.4 Other Factors

In the Colombian case, social capital appeared to be the most important enabler to former child soldiers' agency in terms of encouraging them to resist re-recruitment into the armed group and engagement in criminal activities. Nonetheless, it is important to note that other factors which are not related to social relations were also attributed great significance by the research participants. Several interviewees (Interviewees 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15) explicitly mentioned education as one of the key factors which had facilitated their post-demobilisation life. Karla Samira Cardona - a professional working in the ACR office, in Medellín - when asked about which factors she considers to be the most important in the reintegration process of programme participants, argued that family, work and education were all equally important (2014). She also claimed that "[t]he most successful reintegration processes are

usually of those who manage to stabilise themselves workwise" (Karla Samira Cardona 2014).

Self-determination and the strength to move on were also mentioned by research participants (Interviewees 1, 9, 10, 12) as crucial factors in the reintegration process: "I feel that there is no hard thing in the world, everything is a matter of who the person wants to become, where he wants to get to" (Interviewee 9). This perspective was also reaffirmed by several government officials working in the ACR, who mentioned the individual's commitment and will to change and to stay in the civilian life as some of the most important factors for a successful reintegration process (Karen Johana Corpues, Karla Samira Cardona, Oto Romero 2014).

Besides education and strong commitment to stay in civilian society, religion was also discussed as an enabling factor in the post-demobilisation period: "I started [the habit] that every day when I wake up I think of God; it really did help me quite a lot" (Interviewee 10). In addition, human adaptiveness was also important to help demobilised child soldiers get adjusted to their new civilian life and face the challenges that being a former child soldier entails. Such plasticity was manifested in the former child soldiers' readiness to move houses for security reasons (Interviewee 20), determination not to let themselves get attached to people (Interviewee 5) or intention to stay calm in a heated situation (Interviewees 4 & 19). Furthermore, additional factors were identified by the research participants as enablers for their determination to stay in civilian society. These include listening to motivational conference recordings (Interviewee 5), as well as going to karate classes (Interviewee 8) and mixed martial arts classes (Interviewees 5 & 19). Moreover, one of the

interviewees (Interviewee 19) recounted how her involvement in the Colombian Civil Defence Forces and doing social work had a positive influence on her reintegration process: "…this also helped me a lot… I felt like maybe I was making up for something I had done".

Table 7: Social Capital and Children's Agency in All Three Stages of Their Involvement in Armed Conflict in Colombia

	Pre-recruitment Period	In the Armed Group	Reintegration Period
Bonding Social Capital	presence of damaged, broken, disrupted bonding social capital (-): • dysfunctional family (domestic abuse, sexual violence) • ~~killing of a family member~~ • practice of certain cultural norms and beliefs by the family • concern for family's survival and wellbeing • family members' previous recruitment • separation from the family • repressed freedom by the family	presence of constraining bonding/bridging social capital in the military network (-): • herd mentality and loyalty presence of facilitating bridging social capital in the military network (+):	presence of facilitating bonding/bridging social capital in the civilian network (+): • social relations with family (birth family, foster family, programme family, newly established family), friends ~~and community members~~

Bridging Social Capital	absence of bridging social capital (-): • marginalisation and social exclusion • lack of community protection net ('failed adults' in 'failed communities') peer pressure (-) wide presence of the guerrilla (-)	• friends presence of facilitating bonding social capital in the civilian network (+): • missing the family and homesickness	presence of constraining bonding social capital in the military network (-): • ~~lingering attachment to the war family~~ absence of bonding/bridging social capital (-): • stigmatisation, marginalisation and social exclusion • difficulty with family reunification
Synergy	absence of synergy (-): • state's hands-off approach	negative synergy (-): • feelings of hatred and hostility	improved synergy (+): • reintegration assistance and provision of benefits

8.4 <u>Conclusion</u>

As demonstrated by the analysis of the great number of different practices - discussed in the life history interviews - through which children's agency is exhibited in the three stages of their involvement in armed conflict, children have a great ability to carve out opportunities for themselves despite the highly constraining environment they operate in.

Social capital appeared to be a central structural factor to children's agency in all three stages of their involvement in armed conflict in the Colombian case. As hypothesized in Chapter Four, the impact social capital has on agency depends on the context in which the action is taken, the influence of other structural factors and the character/function of social capital. For instance, if the war environment was not present, children would not have the option to join armed groups, nonetheless, they could still join gangs or criminal organisations. Therefore, for children's voluntary recruitment into the armed group to happen, the combination of several constraining factors, the war environment, the lack of social capital or the presence of the 'wrong' kind of social capital are necessary to interplay.

This thesis in general and the present chapter in particular provides a significant contribution to the agency debate and child soldier literature partly due to the elaborate discussion about social capital-related constraining and enabling factors to children's agency in the context of war. Since such elements appeared as important (recurring) 'thinners' and 'thickeners' to children's agency, they need to be given special attention. However, as discussed earlier, neither the agency nor the DDR/reintegration literature

offers an in-depth examination of social capital and therefore, its dangers and potentials remain unexplored.

In Chapter Nine, concluding remarks regarding the broader agency debate will be presented, together with conclusions drawn in relation to the case study of the present research. Furthermore, recommendations will be offered to future researchers about potential research areas.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 General Concluding Remarks

The question of how much agency people exhibit in their actions and decisions can be approached from different perspectives: political, economic, social, religious, legal and psychological. Even though these various approaches focus on a different aspect of agency, they all seem to agree on two things: agency which would be completely unaffected by structural factors does not exist, nor does totally constrained agency. The degree of importance attributed to structural elements might depend on the context in which the agency debate is discussed and the purpose of the analysis.

Within the agency debate, the question of children's agency is particularly sensitive and controversial. In Western societies, where children are seen as vulnerable and irrational, dependant on adult care and guidance, they are considered to have no agency. However, children are certainly capable of committing atrocities, such as when in 2007, a twelve-year-old girl in Canada killed her entire family - both of her parents and younger brother - with the help of her boyfriend (BBC 2007). A child capable of committing a crime of this kind does not fit the image of the innocent and weak child, which dominates the mainstream narrative on childhood in the West. When children perpetrate terrible atrocities, the Western public tries to find a reasonable explanation for these shocking and unthinkable acts of horror, mostly holding

difficult childhood and bad parental influence responsible for the child's behaviour.

Such depiction of a child is used when discussing the child soldier phenomenon that is considered an oxymoron in itself. However, it is crucial to interpret child soldiers' experiences in the local context, in which children's involvement in armed conflict is not a contradiction, but is rather reasonable (Rosen 2007: 297). Rationalising child soldiering does not mean approving it, but it means making sense of it within local norms and values, and therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of its reality. Lederach argues that in order to build peace, it is crucial to comprehend the system of war: the people who operate it, the root causes of its outbreak and the context in which it takes place (Lederach 1997: 18). The same could be said about child soldiering. In order to address former child soldiers' reintegration into civilian society in a sustainable and effective manner, it is vital to understand child recruitment, as well as children's use and participation in armed conflict: the people who are involved in it, either directly or indirectly; the reasons that drive the actions of these individuals on both demand and supply side; and the context in which it takes place.

The currently dominant humanitarian narrative - used in both academic and grey literature (reports, policy papers, working papers, etc.) - fails to reflect the child soldiers' personal experiences and the receiving communities' understanding of childhood and child soldiering. Children themselves often perceive their own identity and interpret past events through their agency, while the receiving community and society at large also see children through this lens. Due to its inability to provide an authentic presentation of children's

agency, the humanitarian narrative is unsuitable to be used in the design and implementation of prevention and reintegration programmes. The opposing approach to the humanitarian narrative - the conscious actor narrative - is similarly considered to misinterpret the reality of child soldiering. In contrast to the humanitarian narrative, it overemphasises human agency and underemphasises the importance of structural factors which have a significant constraining impact on children's agency in the context of war. Therefore, a third narrative needs to be introduced, namely the tactical agency approach. Advocates of such an approach manage to give a more balanced and holistic presentation of the complex relationship between human agency and structural factors influencing such agency. Consequently, the tactical agency approach can contribute the most effectively to the planning and sustainable implementation of prevention and reintegration programmes.

The present research provided a significant contribution to the existing literature on DDR (reintegration in particular), child soldiering and the agency debate. The Colombian case study showed the inadequacy of the humanitarian approach and supported the hypothesis that the tactical ageny approach is the most suitable one to be used in prevention and reintegration programmes. The reintegration process of former child soldiers was the primary focus of the thesis which no previous study has examined in detail within the agency debate. It was found that the agency exhibited by children in the pre-recruitment period and during their involvement in the armed group has significant implications for their reintegration process. The study is also original in its attempt to look at the continuities and differences regarding the constraining factors to children's agency in the various stages of their

involvement in armed conflict. Recurring factors were identified, which are considered to have a particularly limiting impact on children's agency, and which therefore, need to be given special attention by scholars and policy-makers. Among these 'thinners' social capital was found to be one of the most important in all three stages of children's involvement in armed conflict. However, the study also highlighted the enabling impact of social capital on children's agency. For instance, bonding social capital - the family - facilitated children's determination to escape from the armed group or choose civilian life over re-recruitment into the group. It was argued that the importance of social capital can only be understood and appreciated if combined with other structural factors, examined as part of the context in which it functions and if its various characters are distinguished. As a contribution to the DDR/reintegration, child soldier and agency literatures, the present study offers an elaborate discussion about the complex relationship between children' agency, reintegration and social capital in the context of war.

Having discussed the significance of considering children and child soldiers' agency, it is important to note that the subject needs to be handled delicately since it can be easily misused. The discussion and acknowledgement of children's agency in the pre-recruitment period, during their engagement in the armed group and in the reintegration period is not intended to put the blame on the child for making wrong decisions or to imply that everyone else has clean hands. Rather it is meant to raise awareness about the necessity to adopt a more complex and integrative approach in order to address the problem of voluntary recruitment and the question of reintegration more

sustainably. Heidi - from World Vision Colombia - highlighted in the interview that "they [former child soldiers] need to recognise their responsibility as agents but not culpability, which is something different" (2014). Furthermore, the images of resilience and agency exhibited by children in the context of war should not be used by governments and international agencies to downplay the significance of providing needed services to this population (Wessells 2009: 30). Moreover, it is important to highlight that the discussion about agency and voluntary recruitment does not intend to diminish the reality of those children who are brutally abducted into the armed group and separated from their parents, such as in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, Sri Lanka or Northern Uganda (Schmidt 2007: 53). In addition, the present study's focus on the experience of those children who exhibit their agency in a way that seems positive for an outsider - such as using deception, refusing to fight or escaping from the group - is not meant to impose a negative value judgment on the action of those who act differently.

9.2 <u>Case Study Concluding Remarks</u>

In Colombia, the question of how to improve the already existing reintegration programme designed for former child soldiers has never been more relevant considering the recently concluded peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the country's main guerrilla group, the FARC, as well as the recently started peace talks with the ELN. The subject of agency has been previously left out of such programmes, even though in

Colombia the vast majority of children join illegal armed groups without the use of force and coercion, in the armed group are not under the influence of any substance which would constrain their ability to make rational decisions, and their escape from the armed group is preceded by elaborate and strategic planning and preparation.

There are various ways in which children's agency can be recognised and incorporated into reintegration programmes. Children can be made - subject to their willingness - more central figures in the designing and structuring of such programmes by asking them about their own personal experiences as programme participants. Similar positions to that of the previously mentioned *promotores* need to be created, in which former child soldiers are offered the opportunity to assist other more recently demobilised soldiers in their reintegration process. Moreover, the personal and professional skills and achievements acquired by children during their involvement in the armed group - such as nursing and accountancy - need to be acknowledged and built upon in the skills training and education former child soldiers are provided with. Furthermore, besides recognising their status as victims of armed conflict, their resilience and identity as survivors of difficult circumstances also need to be highlighted. Child soldiers need to be seen both as victims and as agents. Former child soldiers' past experiences can be used to teach children about the reality of child soldiering, and in this way prevent children's recruitment into illegal armed groups and criminal organisations, while also strengthen former child soldiers' self-worth and sense of participation.

As discussed in previous chapters, children demonstrate outstanding agency even in extremely difficult circumstances regardless of the country they live in. Colombia can be considered a typical case study in the sense that - as in Colombia - in the majority of armed conflicts around the world children's recruitment into armed groups is predominantly voluntary (Human Rights Watch 1994: 25, Schmidt 2007: 54). Even though there might be a difference in the constraining factors to, and manifestations of, children's agency in Colombia and other countries where children are involved in armed conflict, the agency debate is relevant in all parts of the world and the conclusions drawn in the present thesis can be transferable to other case studies as well. Nonetheless, within the agency debate, it is important to apply a context-specific approach and acknowledge the particularities of social, economic and political environments which influence children's agency, in the design and implementation of prevention and reintegration programmes.

Some factors that were identified in the life history interviews as constrainers to one's agency - and therefore are considered relevant to the Colombian case study - but are not discussed in the literature (indicated in purple in Table 5 in Chapter Seven) include the state's hands-off approach, child marriage, the countryside and the rural mentality, ethnicity, deception and the use of lies by the group leadership, wipe-out of imagination and sense of alternatives, as well as elements embedded in the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes offered to former child soldiers, to mention a few. This gap between the literature and the fieldwork findings can be partly attributed to the predominant focus on the African context when discussing the agency debate in the context of war. Similarly, some practices that were discussed by

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the research participants as manifestations of their tactical or strategic agency in different stages of their involvement in armed conflict were additional examples to the ones included in the agency literature (indicated in purple in Table 6 in Chapter Eight). These practices include - among others - hiding one's identity as a former child soldier vs. being open about one's military past, keeping in touch with the armed group after demobilisation vs. cutting off all contacts with former comrades, and sharing information about the armed group with state authorities vs. keeping silent for security reasons. The different examples demonstrate the diversity of ways children exhibit their agency even in highly constraining environments and they also show how the particular structural elements influence the degree and kind of agency that is manifested.

Colombia can be considered different from other case studies in the sense that the reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian society takes place in a conflict environment - in contrast to a post-conflict setting - lacking a peace agreement between the conflicting parties. These factors have significant implications for the reintegration process. For instance, in the majority of cases it is not possible to talk about 're'integration *per se* because most demobilised child soldiers cannot return to their home communities for security reasons, and in their new communities have to hide their past military identity in order to avoid stigmatisation and exclusion. However, the atypical nature of the case study examined in the present research enabled the researcher to demonstrate that even in the highly challenging nature of a conflict environment reintegration is possible and former child soldiers manifest their agency in many different ways.

9.3 <u>Recommendations for Future Research</u>

The present thesis managed to cover a significant area within the field of children's agency and the reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian society. However, during the conduct of the research, the researcher identified certain topics which are considered to deserve further attention by future scholars, researchers and policy-makers, but were beyond the scope of the present study.

Besides the interlinked structural factors and the personal characteristics and histories of the individual, Brett and Specht (2004) add a third factor to explain how actions are taken by children in the context of war. They call this trigger event(s). Such events can be described as "a specific moment in a chain of interrelated factors that have cumulatively put the young person at risk" or as an occurrence which tips the balance from consideration to action (Brett & Specht 2004: 73; see also Schmidt 2007: 52). In future research, it would be interesting to test if Brett and Specht's argument is valid and if it is, what trigger events might be, and if they can be prevented or tackled.

Moreover, researchers conducting studies on Colombian child soldiers are recommended to interview children who meet all the 'criteria' to become a child soldier - they live in the rural areas of the country, are not enrolled in education and come from a broken family - and investigate why they decided *not* to join illegal armed groups. Based on the same idea, it is also suggested that interviews are conducted with children who opted to stay in the armed group and those who re-joined armed groups or criminal organisations after their demobilisation. The recently signed peace agreement between the

Colombian government and the FARC and the soon-to-be-started demobilisation of the thousands of child soldiers currently involved in the guerrilla group will facilitate future researchers' access to the aforementioned populations of children. Moreover, in order to recognise and respond to the shifting nature of child recruitment in Colombia - referring to the increasing trend of recruitment of minors into BACRIMs in urban areas of the country - more research needs to be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of this new type of participation.

Roméo Dallaire in his famous book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, claims that "[m]an has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated human weapon, at the expense of humanity's own future: its children" (Dallaire 2011: 3). If this is the case, it is also humanity's responsibility to help those children who fall victim of war to get a second opportunity to live a relatively normal life. Reintegration programmes are intended to help children on this bumpy journey of readjustment. The present research was intended to contribute to make these programmes more effective and sustainable. For the children, for a better world.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Form 1: Informed Consent Form Used in the Conduct of Life History Interviews

Título del proyecto de investigación:

'Estudio de la reintegración de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de grupos armados organisados al margen de la ley en Colombia'

Formulario de consentimiento para los participantes:

Este formulario es para que Usted indique si se consiente a participar en el estudio. Por favor, lea y conteste todas las preguntas. Si hay algo que no entiende o si desea obtener más información sobre la investigación, por favor pregunte a la investigadora.

¿Ha leído y comprendido la hoja de información sobre el estudio? Sí □ No □

¿Ha tenido la oportunidad de hacer preguntas sobre el estudio?

Sí □ No □

¿Entiende Usted que la información que proporcione estará mantenida en confianza por la investigadora?

Sí □ No □

¿Entiende Usted que puede retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier motivo, sin afectar a los servicios que recibe?

Sí □ No □

¿Entiende Usted que la información que proporcione puede ser utilizada en futuras investigaciones?

Sí □ No □

¿Se consiente a participar en el estudio?

 Sí □ No □

En caso afirmativo, ¿se consiente a que sus entrevistas estén grabadas? (Puede participar en el estudio sin consentirse a esto.)

Sí □ No □

¿Se consiente a que la información que Usted proporcione sea utilizada en forma de citas directas? (Puede participar en el estudio sin consentirse a esto.)

Sí □ No □

_____

Su firma:

_____

Nombre de la entrevistadora:

_____

Fecha:

_____

Appendix 2: Form 2: Information Sheet Used in the Conduct of Life History Interviews

Título del proyecto de investigación

'Estudio de la reintegración de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de grupos armados organisados al margen de la ley en Colombia'

Párrafo de invitación

Usted está invitado/a a participar en un estudio de investigación que investiga sobre los factores más importantes de la reintegración de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados en el contexto colombiano. Lamentablemente en Colombia el tema de los niños combatientes es muy relevante, ya que actualmente hay aproximadamente 11,000-14,000 niños y adolescentes que participan en conflictos armados a pesar de la desmovilización de miles de personas. Varios grupos armados, incluidos los paramilitares (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)), la guerrilla (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) y el Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)) y carteles de la droga, reclutan a niños para hacer "el trabajo sucio", como la instalación de las minas terrestres, el transporte de explosivos, así como llevar a cabo secuestros y asesinatos, y otros servicios relacionados con la guerra. Una vez que los niños combatientes se desvinculan, necesitan volverse a la sociedad civil, que es una tarea muy difícil debido a los obstáculos psicológicos, sociales y económicos que se enfrentan en el período de transición. La superación de estos problemas es el objetivo principal de esta investigación, en base a lo que voy a ser capaz de hacer recomendaciones para futuros proyectos de reintegración.

¿Cuál es el propósito del estudio?

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo llamar la atención sobre la importancia de la reintegración en general y de los niños desvinculados, en particular, que es una área a menudo descuidada por los responsables políticos, profesionales e investigadores. Por otra parte, se trata de investigar sobre los desafíos más difíciles del proceso de reintegración de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados y sus factores atenuantes. La investigación se lleva a cabo con la esperanza de contribuir al mejoramiento de programas de reintegración futuros de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados, y servirá como una buena base de debate para responsables políticos, así como profesionales.

¿Es obligatorio participar?

Su participación es completamente voluntaria y opcional. Me gustaría que se consienta a participar en este estudio, ya que creo que Usted puede hacer una importante contribución a la investigación. Si no desea participar, no tiene que hacer nada en respuesta a esta petición. Le pido a participar en la investigación porque creo que Usted puede proporcionar información

importante para mí que pueda ser relevante para la evaluación que estoy llevando a cabo.

¿Qué voy a hacer si participo?

Si Usted está dispuesto/a a participar en la investigación le pido que lea esta hoja de información, firme el formulario de consentimiento y devuélvamelo. En caso de que Usted prefiere dar su consentimiento por vía oral, voy a grabarlo en mi grabadora. Entonces podemos empezar la entrevista o agendarla para otra fecha que más le convenga mejor.

¿Cuáles son las posibles desventajas y riesgos de participar?

Puede ser doloroso e incómodo hablar de experiencias pasadas que ha tenido que pasar en el grupo armado. En caso de que esto ocurra en cualquier momento durante la entrevista, no dude pedir un descanso o reagendar la cita.

También quiero asegurarle que toda la información proporcionada por Usted durante la entrevista se mantendrá confidencial. Todas las respuestas a mis preguntas y la información proporcionada por Usted serán anónimos, es decir ni sus datos personales, ni su dirección, ni el lugar donde trabaja se registrarán en cualquier lugar. Sólo los miembros del equipo de investigación (mis dos supervisores, la Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración y yo) tendrán acceso a la información que Usted proporcione.

¿Cuáles son los posibles beneficios de participar?

Al tomar parte en la investigación, Usted puede contribuir a la mejora de los programas de reintegración futuros diseñados para facilitar el proceso para los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados.

¿Qué pasará con los resultados de la investigación?

Toda la información proporcionada por Usted será almacenada de manera anónima en un ordenador portátil. Los resultados del análisis de los datos estarán disponibles en una o más de las siguientes formas: artículos científicos en revistas académicas, presentaciones en varias conferencias, así como seminarios locales. Si Usted quiere, le mantendré informado/a y actualizado/a con respecto a los resultados de la investigación.

¿Quién organiza la investigación?

La evaluación se lleva a cabo por Alexandra Mária Kiss, estudiante de doctorado en *Estudios de Recuperación en la Posguerra* en la Unidad de Reconstrucción y Desarrollo Posguerra (Universidad de York, Inglaterra).

¿Qué hago si necesito más información?

Si quiere discutir cualquier aspecto de este estudio por favor no dude en ponerse en contacto conmigo en la dirección de correo electrónico amk516@york.ac.uk o en el número de celular 3138856943. Yo estaría encantada de hablar de cualquier aspecto de la investigación con Usted.

¿Qué pasa si tengo una queja o preocupación?

Este estudio ha sido aprobado por el Comité de Ética de la Universidad de York. Si tiene alguna inquietud o queja sobre la realización de este estudio, por favor póngase en contacto con Dr. Stephen Holland, el Presidente de la Comité (stephen.holland@york.ac.uk).

Gracias por tomarse el tiempo para considerar su participación en este estudio.

Si desea participar en ello, por favor firme el formulario de consentimiento adjunto o dé su consentimiento por vía oral.

Esta hoja de información es para que Usted la mantenga.

Appendix 3: Form 3: Preliminary List of Questions Used in the Conduct of Life History Interviews

Vida antes de ingresar al grupo armado:

1) ¿Podría decir algunas cosas de su vida antes de ingresar al grupo?
   - ¿Cómo fue su vida en la familia?
   - ¿Fue a alguna escuela? ¿Qué grado alcanzó?
   - ¿Cómo llegó a ser miembro en el grupo?

Vida en el grupo armado:

1) ¿Podría decir algunas cosas de su experiencia en el grupo?
   - ¿A cuál grupo armado perteneció?
   - ¿Cuánto tiempo pasó con el grupo?
   - ¿Cómo veía el conflicto, a sus compañeros de grupo y a los enemigos cuando estaba en el grupo?
   - ¿Qué tipo de actividades tenía que realizar?

Vida después de la desvinculación:

1) ¿A qué edad dejó el grupo?
2) ¿Se desvinculó voluntariamente e individualmente?
3) ¿Cuáles fueron sus experiencias en el período de transición entre la vida militar y civil?

Vida en el período de reintegración:

1) ¿Cuáles fueron sus major dificultades después de desvincularse en el período de transición?
2) ¿Se ha participado/se participa en el programa de reintegración de ICBF/ACR? ¿A qué edad entró? ¿En qué etapa de reintegración está Usted? ¿Cómo es su experiencia en el programa? ¿Qué piensa Usted que es lo que falta de los programas?
3) ¿Qué beneficios y servicios ha recibidio de ICBF/ACR hasta ahora?
4) ¿Quiénes y qué organizaciones le han acompañado en la ruta de reintegración?
5) ¿En cuál parte del país participa en la ruta de reintegración?¿Éste es el departamento de done Usted es?

6) ¿Qué piensa cuáles son los factores más importantes en su reintegración?

7) ¿Cómo define la palabra 'reintegración'?

8) **FAMILIA**: ¿Tiene una familia/una relación estable? ¿Se siente aceptado por ellos?

9) **COMUNIDAD**: ¿Se siente aceptado por su comunidad? ¿Por qué siente así? ¿Cómo le ha ido en las relaciones interpersonales (con amigos y compañeros de trabajo)? ¿Se ha quedado en contacto con otros desvinculados o los que se quedaron en el grupo?

10) **EDUCACIÓN**: ¿Se participa/ha participado en educación escolar/de paz y convivencia o en alguna formación? ¿Ha encontrado ya un proyecto de vida?

11) **EMPLEO**: ¿Está empleado actualmente? ¿Cuándo estaba buscando trabajo sintió la necesidad de ocultar su pasado de su potencial empleador?

12) **ASISTENCIA PSICOSOCIAL**: ¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia con la asistencia psicosocial?

13) **SEGURIDAD**: ¿Desde hace su desvinculación se ha encontrado con alguna situación en la que su seguridad estaba en grave peligro?

14) **RELIGIÓN**: ¿Qué rol ha tenido la religión y la iglesia en su reintegración?

15) ¿Alguna vez ha reconsiderado volverse al grupo? ¿Qué le hizo tener dudas en el proceso? ¿Qué le motivó a quedarse?

16) ¿Hay cosas que Usted haría diferentemente si fuera recién desvinculado y pueda empezar la ruta de reintegración de nuevo desde cero?

17) ¿Conoce a alguien quien decidió no atender a los programas de reintegración después de desvincularse o alguien quien dejó el programa por alguna razón? ¿Cómo es su situación ahora?

18) Ahora le voy a decir algunas palabras y quiero pedirle que me diga las tres primeras palabras que le vienen a la mente o sea las palabras con las que asocia las expresiones que le voy a decir:

    a) yo en el pasado

    b) niñez

c) yo en el presente

d) comunidad

e) familia

f) conflicto

g) paz

h) yo en el futuro.

Appendix 4: Form 4: Preliminary List of Questions Used in the Conduct of Elite Interviews

1) ¿Puede decir algunas cosas del conflicto armado en Colombia y su implicación al reclutamiento de niños, niñas y adolescentes (NNAs) a grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley?

2) ¿Tiene un número exacto o estimado cuántos NNAs estarán actualmente reclutados en estos grupos armados?

3) ¿Cuáles son los factores más importantes que hacen a uno considerar a ingresar a uno de los grupos armados como menor de edad?

4) ¿Podría decir algunas cosas de la estructura de los programas de reintegración ofrecidos para los desvinculados?

5) ¿Tiene datos exactos del número de los participantes actuales en el programa, cuántos han dejado el programa y cuántos decidieron a no continuar en el programa de reintegración de la ACR después de haber participado en el programa de rehabilitación del ICBF?

6) ¿Usted cómo define una reintegración exitosa/sostenible?

7) ¿Cuáles son los factores que Usted considera lo más importante en el proceso de reintegración (familia, educación, talleres, asistencia psicosocial, etc.)?

8) ¿Qué beneficios reciben las comunidades receptoras?

9) ¿Cuáles son las dificultades/obstáculos principales en la ruta de reintegración?

10) ¿Hay un seguimiento para los participantes que dejan el programa de reintegración por alguna razón?

11) En cuanto a los culminados, ¿existe un sistema de seguimiento para supervisar su vida después de volverse completamente independiente?

12) ¿Se pregunta a los participantes si ellos cambiaran algo en los programas de reintegración después de culminarse?

13) En el pasado ya hubo diferentes oleadas de desmovilización colectivas e individuales, lo más reciente e importante terminó en 2006 que contribuyó significativamente a la formación de lo BACRIMs. ¿Usted qué piensa, qué falló allí?

14) ¿Si las negociaciones de paz salen exitosas, se firma un tratado de paz y hay que desmovilizar a miles de combatientes, qué implicaciones esto tendrá para el programa de reintegración de la ACR? ¿Qué hay que hacer para que los desmovilizados de las FARC no se conviertan en los nuevos BACRIMs?

15) Una vez un analista dijo que realizar reintegración de ex-combatientes en un entorno de conflicto armado es imposible. ¿Qué piensa Usted de esto?

Appendix 5: Table 8: Schedule for the Elite Interviews with Government Officials and NGO Personnel

Name	Organisation	Location	Date
Ernesto Mendez Martán	Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)	ACR Office, Bogotá	21/01/2014
María José Torres	Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)	ACR Office, Bogotá	22/01/2014
Oto Romero	Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)	Luis Ángel Arango Library, Bogotá	28/01/2014
Felix	Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris	Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris Office, Bogotá	30/01/2014
Santiago Sánchez Jiménez	Red Nacional de Programas Regionales de Desarrollo y Paz (Redprodepaz)	Redprodepaz Office, Bogotá	31/01/2014
Heidi	World Vision Colombia	World Vision Office, Bogotá	14/02/2014
Daniel Campo	Benposta Colombia	Luis Ángel Arango Library, Bogotá	24/02/2014
Sinthya Rubio	Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims	'La Chocolatera' Café, Bogotá	06/03/2014
Lleyson Casas	Don Bosco House	Don Bosco House, Armenia	18/03/2014
Karen Johana Corpues	Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)	ACR Office, Medellín	25/03/2014
Karla Samira Cardona	Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR)	ACR Office, Medellín	26/03/2014

Appendix 6: Table 9: Schedule for the Life History Interviews with Former Child Soldiers

Location of the Interviews	Bogotá (Cundinamarca)	Armenia (Quindío)	Cali (Valle del Cauca)	Medellín (Antioquia)	Pereira (Risaralda)
Total Number of Interviewees	4	4	5	5	2
Number of Male Interviewees	2	3	3	4	1
Number of Female Interviewees	2	1	2	1	1
Number of Former FARC Members	3	4	5	3	2
Number of Former ELN Members	1	0	0	1	0
Number of Former AUC Members	0	0	0	1	0

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