



The power of the notion of resistance in the mental health field: a case study on the life of rural communities within the Colombian armed conflict

La potencia de la noción de resistencia para el campo de la salud mental: Un estudio de caso sobre la vida campesina en el conflicto armado colombiano

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ABSTRACT The objective of this study is to identify individual, family and/or community responses of resistance within protracted armed conflict. We conducted a case study with members of rural communities in the municipality of San Francisco, in the eastern area of Antioquia, Colombia, combining biographical and ethnographical approaches. The primary results show that, along with the suffering generated by the experience of armed conflict, rural community members also display a repertoire of multiple and diverse resistance strategies. Resistance is for them an active response and a way to re-weave the fabric torn by the experience. As a type of affirmative opposition, resistance is a powerful category for the entire mental health field, in that it highlights the creativity and capacity for transformation of individuals. In this way, the category allows for overcoming the limits of the conventional biomedical view that tends to pathologize individual and social responses in scenarios of severe distress.

KEY WORDS Mental Health; War; Creativity; Rural Population; Colombia.

RESUMEN El objetivo de este estudio es identificar las respuestas individuales, familiares y/o comunitarias para resistir en un contexto de conflicto armado prolongado. Se realizó un estudio de caso con población campesina de San Francisco, oriente antioqueño colombiano, que combinó los enfoques etnográfico y biográfico. Los principales resultados muestran que, a la par del sufrimiento, los campesinos desplegaron un repertorio de resistencias múltiples y diversas, como expresión de respuesta activa y estrategia para re-tejer los hilos rotos que dejó dicha experiencia. La resistencia, en su carácter de oposición afirmativa, es una categoría potente para el campo de la salud mental, toda vez que resalta la creatividad y la capacidad de transformación de las personas, permitiendo superar los límites de la mirada biomédica convencional que tiende a patologizar las respuestas individuales y sociales en escenarios de sufrimiento intenso.

PALABRAS CLAVES Salud Mental; Guerra; Creatividad; Población Rural; Colombia.

INTRODUCTION

This article stems from the research study entitled *Violencia, Resistencia y Subjetividad: destejer y tejer la salud mental; estudio de caso, municipio de San Francisco, Oriente Antioqueño, Colombia, 2011-2012* [Violence, Resistance and Subjectivity: unravelling and weaving mental health; case study, municipality of San Francisco, Eastern Antioquia, Colombia, 2011-2012]. The main purpose of the study was to explore the effects of political violence and armed conflict (a) on the mental health of the civil population, and to understand how human groups have survived within contexts of sustained violence. Although the scope of this research study was broader, this article shows the findings related to the individual, family and/or community responses developed to resist in such a context on a daily basis. These concerns are particularly relevant in Colombia, whose armed conflict scenario has occupied more than six decades of its recent history and was the only prevailing conflict in the Americas in 2011, among some forty others around the world (1).

Although there has been much research dealing with this problem in the country (2-8), it is a relevant issue in the health field and, more specifically, in the mental health field, not only because of the effects it produces, but also because of persistent and/or emerging questions which remain unresolved. The last three national studies regarding mental health in Colombia, conducted in 1993, 2003 and 2007 by the Ministry of Health (currently the Ministry of Social Protection), focused on morbidity and mortality indicators, risk factors and the offer of institutional services, only marginally considering the armed conflict and its effects on mental health (9). Furthermore, the social science studies conducted have addressed the population and issues related to displacement rather than looking at the populations that stay in highly conflictive areas, thereby generating little knowledge of the ways in which these people mold their lives and insufficiently researching resistance and survival strategies (5). Accordingly, the focus of this study has been directed at the place and effect of the tensions produced between the power(s) and resistance(s) present in these life scenarios.

The notion of resistance incorporated into this study refers to confrontation with power relations, but not necessarily confrontation with the State, which has been the tradition of Western political thought centered on sovereign-subject or State-citizen relationships (10,11). On the contrary, this notion focuses on confrontation with power forces which are multiple and nebulous, which operate daily in articulation with the social world and which are not necessarily in conflict with the State. Rather than exploring extraordinary or unusual acts, this study tries to explore ordinary acts that give rise to brief resistances that are potent enough to create shared ways of viewing the world and acting in it. Nieto asserts that these resistances cast doubt on the power-obedience dyad and install in its place the power-resistance dyad, which constitutes a strategic field of forces that form part of constant, incomplete and fluid processes (11 p.45). This approach is nurtured by the contributions of Michael Foucault, Michel de Certeau and James Scott.

Foucault's thought decentralizes power from the State and institutions and associates it with forms of social relations which cause asymmetries and unbalances but also potentialities in areas such as "in the family, in sexual life, in the way mad people are treated, in the exclusion of homosexuals, in the relations between men and women...These are all political relations" (12 p.68). The notion of a power which permeates relationships and social life politicizes such relationships and, subsequently, everyday life, where these relationships are constructed and recreated. Power is organized within society as a kind of mesh, in which the key is to know how it functions – "the localization of each group within the net of power, how each exercises it anew, how each preserves it, how each passes it on" (12 p.254) – and the repertoire of proceedings engaged for this purpose. Although Foucault does not exclude violence from power relations, he clarifies that it is often an instrument of those relations and not their main objective. Moreover, he suggests that "the exercise of power may produce so much acceptance as may be wished for"; the exercise of power is defined as a display of actions in that "it incites, it induces, it seduces... [as much as] it constrains or forbids" (13 p.15). This way of functioning requires free subjects,

faced with a field of possibilities, among which is found the possibility of resistance.

Michel de Certeau (14) connects to this perspective when he asserts the common man's capacity for resistance against power, both in the midst of overwhelming and asymmetric fields of forces as well as in those which are less polarized. The emphasis he places on the *creative capacity of the weak* highlights the subjects' capacity for agency and affirmation, their power to generate ruptures in power relations, and their important effect on the politicization of everyday practices.

James Scott (15) suggests that resistances emerge from cracks in a domination that is never total or complete, thus constructing the notion of *infrapolitics* to refer to the varied and discrete forms of resistance, both material and symbolic, that utilize indirect forms of expression in everyday life, especially in extreme regimes of domination where open political activity is forbidden and criminalized. *Infrapolitics* operates as a battle fought every day by subordinate groups, who deliberately choose invisibility as a tactical strategy against power.

The interest in exploring these types of resistances in the context of a sustained armed conflict is based on the assumption that the response to this type of experience is not exclusively pathological but, on the contrary, it may develop and potentiate people's capacity for agency, as a result of active responses (16,17). Herein lies the connection of resistance with mental health, as the transformative capacity of human beings is at the basis of the discipline's different definitions (18).

METHOD

This case study, framed in the context of qualitative research, combined elements of ethnography and the biographical method, adopting several categories from the social sciences and the psychosocial approach as guidelines. It was oriented by the alternative criteria for scientific rigor proposed by Lincoln and Guba (19 p.289-331) for this type of studies, identified as transferability, dependability, predictability and confirmability, the starting point of which is to ensure the representativity of participants and scenarios. In accordance,

two *veredas* (b) from the municipality of San Francisco in Eastern Antioquia, Colombia, were selected. For the past forty years this region has been characterized by the presence of guerrillas, paramilitary groups (c), family coca cultivation and the development of programs and projects related to the bilateral agreement with the United States, known as Plan Colombia. Like many other areas, this is a territory historically built on the basis of dispossession, exclusion, isolation, precariousness, and marginalization, both in the past and the present times, typical of a model of development that devalues peasants and their traditional lifestyles. The biophysical wealth of the land they inhabit and its geostrategic potential have put peasants at the center of diverse interests, in which guerrilla groups – *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) [National Liberation Army] and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] – as well as self-defense forces – *Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio* (ACMM) [Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Magdalena Medio Antioquia] – have converged. Additionally, in 2003, a military operation known as Operation "Marcial" was carried out by the Colombian army in the municipality of San Francisco in order to recover territorial sovereignty within the framework of the democratic security policies adopted during the government of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez. Within this municipality, the atrocities of the conflict are revealed by the number of victims of anti-personnel mine accidents between 2001 and 2012, for which this municipality ranked second in the country (20): 14 *veredas* out of the 41 that make up its rural areas are uninhabited because they are scattered with mines and traps (21). The population inhabiting this territory reduced by almost half between 2000 and 2005 because of the armed conflict, from 10,000 inhabitants to 5,500 respectively (21).

Although several sources and techniques were used in this study, the concrete research on peasant resistances was carried out through interviews oriented to the creation of life stories, complemented with participant observation. Interviews were arranged with men and women selected according to the criteria of being of adult age, having availability to tell their life stories, and holding long-term residence in the municipality.

Moreover, the study sought multiplicity in the age variable and proportionality in the sex variable. An intentional sampling was carried out and the snowball or chain strategy (22) was followed, which allowed for 56 in-depth interviews resulting in 20 interrelated life stories (23). All the interviews were carried out in the participants' natural life scenarios with their prior agreement. The interviews were recorded under pseudonyms, transcribed with the criteria of narrative literalness, returned to the participants in order to obtain their consent and approval, and identified with an alphanumeric code to preserve participant anonymity.

Fieldwork and participant observation of household, agricultural and community activities in a family context were carried out for 18 months in order to guarantee both persistence and continuity (24). Access to the fieldwork through the *Asociación Campesina de Antioquia* [Peasant Association of Antioquia], a civil organization with constant presence in the area and active work with peasant communities for the last six years, led to the creation of bonds of trust and empathy as well as the articulation between the research process and the activities carried out by this organization with the families and peasant community organizations. The participant observation aimed at complementing and triangulating the information collected through the interviews, making use of field notes and other types of note-taking. The saturation criterion (25) was used to conclude the fieldwork. The analysis was conducted simultaneously with the gathering of information, using computer tools (Atlas Ti) and following a comprehensive logic (26). The theoretical review was performed throughout the process, based on the emerging findings. In order to comply with ethical aspects, the project was submitted for approval to the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing of the Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia. It was approved through Act No. CEI-FE 2011-2. Informed consent was obtained for all participants, methods to preserve anonymity and protect confidentiality were guaranteed, and feedback on the partial and final results was provided to the participants and their communities.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to the logic that emerged in the comprehensive analysis, which enables the identification of key moments in the participants' lives that mark a dilemma or a turning point in their biographical itineraries (26 p.23). These milestones or key moments were organized following a comparative process and establishing scenarios found both in the shared public life and in the private or intimate life of the participants, in which a diverse repertoire of resistances unfolded, that is, diverse acts of confrontation against the forces that were present in an everyday life immersed in political violence and armed conflict. The metaphors of "enacting" and "stages" or "scenarios" used in the classification of the results express the way in which many of these acts incorporated a need for concealment and "theatricality" in everyday life, thus becoming an important resource for resistance among peasants (15 p.41-53).

The public stage: "he who owes nothing, fears nothing" or "he who fears everything, risks everything"

A response to the imposition of fear as a strategy of political violence was active and direct resistance, where the domination and pressure from armed groups was openly contested: peasants acted on their own behalf with their own presence, questioning the source of power and demanding a space of autonomy for themselves and their families, even in moments in which the threat of death was imminent. They put into play the last of their dignity, fighting and expressing their ideals directly: [I told them] *"If you are killing people, then kill me. Why don't you kill me if you've already killed my children? So kill me as well. Anyway, we are all born to die"* (GF1). This straightforward answer was grounded in a moral conviction collectively constructed in the frequently used phrase *"he who owes nothing, fears nothing,"* which reinforced their own affirmations:

I told them, respect my life because I am a peasant, I owe nothing to anyone. If I owed

something to someone, I wouldn't be here [...] and I told them: do me a favor and respect my husband's life because we have two daughters, we owe nothing to anyone... that's why "he who owes nothing fears nothing." (GF1)

These ways of acting were also common when peasants were continuously "invited" by the armed groups to join their forces, to the extent that such action became an organized collective response with important effects in the survival of some young people and an expression of a potential space for freedom and the will to make one's own decisions:

We all came to an agreement and we'd get together and talk to the young people. Saying that we wanted to resist being carried away by those people, those groups like that, and that we wanted to always say no to them. That if someone was taken away by force, there was nothing left to do, but otherwise we wouldn't join them. This vereda has been very united, very hardworking, fighters as a unified group. Only a few have left, but most of us have not, and we are still here. (E20Wh)

When faced with changes in the rules and social order that were familiar to them – the appearance of other armed groups in conflict in their territory and the intensification of practices such as population recruitment, disappearances and other human rights violations – complaints were made directly to local commanders of both the guerrilla and the paramilitary forces, voiced mostly by women seeking justice for their children. These public resistances of women were largely connected to the transformation processes they experienced in their own lives, processes paradoxically triggered by the suffering provoked by the armed conflict. The enactment of their resistance is, at the same time, an act to alleviate their suffering.

It was like I was burning inside and with this it felt like cool water had fallen on me. I externalized my suffering, because I knew that group was the one that had killed my children; not only did it help me but also many others (E12Sm).

In these stories, initiatives that attempted to express the people's discontent were identified: the sending of anonymous letters to high commanders of the armed groups to protest the abuses committed by the local commanders and to repudiate the anti-personnel mines, the unexpected appearance of community members in private meetings held by the armed groups, and direct complaints demanding that the school be respected; in summary, the communities' demand to not be involved in the armed conflict. These initiatives, some of which were formulated collectively and others individually, strengthened in these communities the value of acting together, as well as the conviction that well-stated words work as an effective weapon to fight against the imposition of certain orders and forms of relating. Many actions also worked as an explicit refusal, such as the obligation to stand guard, a rule that was openly rebuked.

They told those of us from the vereda that we had to work with them. I told them, as a leader of the community: No sir, we are not going to work with you [...] I told them: No sir, we are peasants; we don't have weapons, only our arms and machetes for working. (E17Rh)

The practices of resistance that were performed openly, as well as the historical learning process undertaken through experiences of collaborative work and social mobilization, set a precedent which today allows peasants to demand the enforcement of their right to live in their territory, to grow crops and to work the land that they know, that they feel to be their own, and that gives meaning to their lives. This resistance became actively evident in their return to the land, which, even under dangerous conditions, affords them a quotient of dignity in materially and symbolically recovering what belongs to them. Dignity is restored to life with the acts of returning to the land, clearing it, sowing it and persisting. Resistance is about wanting to be in a place, to come back to it and to stay in it. "One as a peasant who likes the countryside and likes to work does not choose any other place but the countryside" (E17Rh).

The family stage: advice-giving, requesting, ordering, and even pleading

Family dynamics are permeated by a multiplicity of actions, which include child rearing practices, cultural patterns of what is masculine and feminine, attitudes towards armed groups and weapons, and ways of handling family disputes. A common aspect of the stories was to assign a protective role to the father, the reference for authority and norms and the guarantor of the unity of the family group; the mother acts in persuasive ways linked to advice-giving or affective exchanges. These notions of masculine and feminine roles reinforce a patriarchal logic of operation and, at the same time, contradict and ignore the role that women play in the processes of everyday recovery. Themes highlighted by the youngest interviewees included: their father as a role model; the advice, requests, and even illnesses of their mothers, as the somatic manifestation of disagreement; the self-imposed exile of families; and, in some cases, even physical punishment as acts of family resistance to oppose the forces of domination imposed by the armed actors:

My mother and father knew what was going on, and they wouldn't let us get close; they'd never refuse to give them [the members of the armed groups] a bite of food or a glass of water or whatever. They would do it respectfully, but they wouldn't let us get close to them and listen to their conversations [...] Dad would always ask mom to take us some place where we couldn't hear. (E19Am)

The neighborhood stage: do and say what they want to hear

Life in the neighborhood changed as a result of adapting habits and routines in ways apparently insignificant, but decisive in everyday life, such as a voluntary curfew starting at 6 PM as well as the end of nighttime meetings at the school and visits to neighbors. People stopped going out alone on the roads and pathways and refused to wear black or green clothes.

After 6 in the evening, whoever fell [was killed]...would have to be picked up the next day or the black vultures would eat [the person who went to help]. You would go early to bed, lock the doors tightly and if someone knocked at the door, you would cover yourself with a blanket, waiting to be killed. (E1Ah)

Whenever they would hear a helicopter or first shots, they would gather together in a house, hug each other, cry and pray together. In those moments, resistance was about feeling how other people were going through the same experience of fear and helplessness, and that it was precisely the strength of the group that was the key to overcome the experience and strengthen their own condition as subjects:

Since we all get along so well in the community, we'd all get together. You know that you are happier when you travel in a group than when you are on your own; you worry way too much. You believe that, when you're surrounded by people, with all your neighbors, you won't die. You are happy when you are with your neighbors, with your own people. (E6Lm)

When interacting with the armed actors, peasant resistance combined cleverness and wit. A woman recounts that when her displacement was immanent, after she had been forcefully detained and her husband murdered, she gathered her belongings and gave them out to her neighbors, exercising a certain "sovereignty" over her modest possessions which otherwise would have been taken away by the armed actors. Likewise, another woman decided to sell her furniture and belongings: "any time now it'll be my turn to be displaced; it took me great effort to achieve what I have just to leave it and then find it in the worst of ways later." These apparently simple decisions mean to these women a chance to decide things on their own terms and recognize their own dignity, silently defying the established norms under the guise of false submissiveness. These strategies were repeated when faced with questioning by paramilitaries in the army posts located at the municipal entrance or

in other meeting or checkpoints. The shared and silently concerted answer was to say *what they wanted to hear*. The only way to pass through the checkpoint as quickly as possible was to affirm that the guerrilla forces were in the *veredas*. Lying as a strategy, though it would protect the person telling the lie, could also compromise a neighbor that passed through the post later on if they denied having seen the guerrilla forces. The strategy of saying what they wanted to hear was applied on many occasions:

Sometimes, you would have to tell them that the guerrilla forces had already been there, without having seen them, to make them let you pass [...] There were people who had to lie to the paramilitaries so they would leave them alone and let them return home. If they told them that they had not seen anybody, the peasants knew they would be tied up, detained, and beaten. (E1Ah)

As the armed conflict continued to erode neighborhood and community relations, distrust and fragmentation set in. The rupture of neighborhood bonds brought about several forms of evasive behaviors that meant, to some people, keeping a distance from any armed group and refusing any kind of help, support or offer, which in the everyday context of an armed conflict was not a very viable option. In contrast, other people chose to act in the same way with everyone by opening the doors to their home, responding equally to any one and making special concessions to no one:

Whoever greeted us, we would greet back; whoever asked for water, we'd give them water; whoever asked for food, we'd give them food, whether they were soldiers, paramilitary, or anyone who'd come around. We were asked for favors and we'd do them; it was the same for anyone, that's why we were not afraid. (E1Ah)

A third position was aimed at keeping friendly but distant relations, characterized as avoidance: greeting others but avoiding conversations, meetings or common spaces, not asking questions, never speaking about politics, especially

not the conflict. These practices, initially directed towards the members of the armed groups, were extended to neighbors, with whom relationships came to be imbued with uncertainty and distrust.

A fourth position consisted of obeying the new social order imposed by the armed groups, as in the case of the paramilitaries. It was common that during this period those who had been part of the guerrilla deserted and joined the self-defense forces which were growing in the area: *"they were militiamen and, from one minute to the next, they became paracos [paramilitary forces]" (E2Am)*. A person who had recruited someone to join the guerrilla would later, as a paramilitary, kill them for being collaborators of that insurgent group or would recruit them to join the self-defense forces. Neighbor and family relationships were made more complex by such intermingling. This way of acting merits close attention because, rather than portraying an action of affirmative resistance, it seems to respond to a survival instinct, in which the range of choices is minimal and freedom nonexistent. It also demonstrates the intertwining of family networks with members of the armed groups in conflict. Within large families it was habitual to find different family members taking part in the guerrilla, the self-defense forces, and the state army.

The private stage: silencing the senses and placing oneself in God's hands

Most peasants adopted silent and subtle resistances related to the most private sphere, not only by limiting themselves to private and reduced environments, but also by operating as a whisper imperceptible to those not part of their everyday lives. These actions become resistances to the extent that they were neither naïve responses nor random changes, but voluntary modifications to daily routines which operated as a form of evasion in the midst of violence and terror. Unlike the choices involving an open resistance – carried out on the public stage – these behaviors were seen in conditions of extreme fear and helplessness. As threats became more intense and fear settled in, silence became a strategy and attentive listening an alternative. This strategic silence continues until the present day, therefore it is not unusual to

encounter an evasive or even a negative response when people are asked about their experiences of suffering and the armed conflict.

When the world that one inhabits is so chaotic and unforeseeable that the possibilities of construction with other people become impossible, there is only one alternative: through religion and animism, seeking fortitude and resistance against the intensity of violence and threats. Some people went to priests, witch doctors or fortune tellers to seek protection coming from another world or dimension, given the dangers of the present world they were inhabiting. They also looked in these places for answers when faced with the uncertainty of the disappearance or death of a family member, in locating the corpse or the detention center. To understand the role that religion played within the context of peasant resistance in the municipality of San Francisco, the reflections of Venna Das can be useful. Das states that social institutions are involved in social suffering in two opposing ways: on the one hand, they produce that suffering but, on the other hand, they have the chance to create a moral community that allows people to cope, if they manage to give a meaning and a useful place to that suffering (27 p.437-458).

Religious practices prevail in these narratives: "religious exercises," "faith-spreading groups," saying the rosary with family members or neighbors, processions to honor the Virgin, pilgrimages to other municipalities, among others. Part of the explanations regarding their experience in the armed conflict are related to a divine decision that, though incomprehensible, is assumed to be a test of kindness. Suffering is then part of a divine plan impossible to avoid, and the only possible response is prayer. Prayer was the equivalent and effective weapon with which to protect family members when they were out at work or in town during conflicts. When the paramilitaries came onto the scene, collective prayer was the resistance enacted:

So when they said that the paracos [paramilitaries] were coming, we gathered together and began to pray, because the priest told us: say the rosary, it is a very powerful weapon, and if possible, go in procession and say it around all the entrances to the vereda. We

made some big hachones [torches] and went in procession praying at every entrance. [...] Praying to God works; faith protects you and many times, it saves you. (E10Rm)

DISCUSSION

Living through the extended armed conflict that installed itself in the lives of the peasant communities brought about processes that led to resignifying and transforming suffering, through multiple strategies of opposition and rejection, modifying power relations and inventing new schemes of politicization, giving birth to the creation of a *resistance of everyday life*. These men and women transformed power relations through a wide range of activities that differentiated, re-created, and innovated their ways of living and relating, all of which shaped an ethical project and, in this way, a political project or "*other manners of politics*" (28 p.33). Scott (15) and De Certeau (14) emphatically stress the esthetic, expressive and creative potential of resistances and the way in which they reinforce people's capacities, abilities and talents, leading to powerful creative acts that express the human capacity to act individually, but also concertedly with others, in ways as mobile and productive as those of power relations themselves (29,30).

In the variable appropriation of social times and spaces related to the experiences of suffering, resistance played a creative and transformative role, even in those cases in which it was expressed as private and silent refusal. As Foucault posits, "to say *no* is the minimum form of resistance. But, of course, at times that is very important. You have to say *no* as a decisive form of resistance" (12 p. 423). During the experience of the armed conflict up to the present day, the enactment of peasant resistance shows that these men and women did not remain passive and receptive subjects but took an active and transformative role in their micro-social settings at all times. Both in situations where there was only one armed actor coexisting in the same territory and in those moments where people experienced the presence up to four armed actors in conflict, the resistance(s) always had a stage, in

order to reinvent ways of living in a community and facing the groups who tried to – and are still trying to – capture and control those ways of living. The cartography of the previously outlined resistances is a subtle, changing and multi-shaped tracing that twists and turns in its effort to test alternative practices to avoid such controls.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The acts of resistance, which go hand in hand with power relations, suggest that these relations are potentially modifiable and therefore the processes of subjection and stereotyping can also be questioned and challenged by such oppositions. These demands do not follow a sole and linear path, they can also appear as public acts of explicit affirmation or silent acts occurring in privacy and anonymity. Between these two stances the possibilities are infinite, as shown in the experience described above. Lazzarato suggests that resistance does not lead to escape or flight, but rather to the acknowledgement of being part of a shared world while at the same time advancing towards an affirmation of difference (31 p.179-181). Thus, peasants cease to be a collective and uniform subject and are acknowledged as a collection of multiple subjectivities produced through complex tensions between suffering and everyday resistance. It is possible for these resistances to be affirmatively incorporated into such subjectivities, but they may also be exhausted over time or be incorporated into the new forces of power that occupy the local scene, given that the results of these acts of resistance can be unpredictable and conservative (10). However, in a more optimistic perspective, according to Foucault, resistances bring about a more affirmative state rather than a defensive one, in the sense that they create new ways of living and connecting with oneself and with others within the asymmetrical power relations and, in this respect, their role is the alteration and transformation of these asymmetries (12). Without exaggerating their scope, the affirmative

aspect of the enactment of peasant resistances is undoubtedly their power to set up scenarios that are far removed from submission and passivity, which undermines the pathologization and medicalization of suffering as the only ways of approaching these issues in the mental health field. The stories of false submission that are frequent among these peasants are masterpieces of skillful “theatrics” and undoubtedly of creative potential; although they do not lead to a definitive breaking free of domination, they do affirm the ability of these men and women to subvert the established order, which is certainly crucial to their dignity. This subversive possibility rejects the passive character of those who suffer and ascribes to them the possibility to challenge the powers responsible for their suffering. Resistance is a powerful notion for innovative proposals that include in their practical and discursive bodies the potential role of people as producers of their own history and unfolding, overcoming the practices centered on control and technical success, expanding the creative possibility of therapeutic relationships (32). Treating those who are suffering by using more active categories for the subjects and their dignity, thus rejecting the use of a language of trauma, does not mean minimizing suffering but, on the contrary, appreciating and giving credit to the subject’s own resources and support networks (33). This does not imply ignoring the fact that there are people who could need specialized technical support, but, rather, avoiding the stigmatization that tends to consider all those who have experienced suffering caused by political violence as ill, in such a way that all their responses are pathologized, the processes dealing with their suffering are made into technical problems, and a complex political, historical and cultural situation is reduced to medical terms (34,35). If we agree that mental health is closely related to the ability to deal with the conflicts derived from social life, it is unquestionable that the exploration of everyday resistance(s) is a productive source for understanding such dynamics and creating more comprehensive support strategies, especially in contexts of intense suffering, such as those caused by political violence.

END NOTES

a. Although the notions of political violence and armed conflict each have their particularities, both terms are used interchangeably in this text, on the basis that the context of analysis is one of political conflict which uses armed forces.

b. In Colombia, the term “*vereda*” is a type of administrative subdivision of municipalities, mainly

circumscribed to rural areas, of varied sizes, depending on their location and the concentration or dispersion of the population, with a population that may fluctuate between 50 and 1,200 inhabitants.

c. In this text the terms “paramilitaries” and “self-defense forces” are used interchangeably.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The doctoral thesis from which this article stems was carried out in consultation with Elsa Blair T. and Duncan Pedersen. No other funding or subsidy was received apart from the study commission granted by the Universidad de Antioquia from 2009 to 2013 and the logistical support of the Peasant’s Association of Antioquia (ACA) [*Asociación Campesina de Antioquia*] during the fieldwork.

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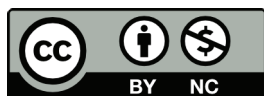
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CITATION

Arias López BE. The power of the notion of resistance in the mental health field: a case study on the life of rural communities within the Colombian armed conflict. *Salud Colectiva*. 2014;10(2):201-211.

Received: 8 November 2013 | Revised: 24 March 2014 | Accepted: 5 May 2014



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The translation of this article is part of an interdepartmental collaboration between the Undergraduate Program in Sworn Translation Studies (English <> Spanish) and the Institute of Collective Health at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús. This article was translated by Candelaria Alonso and Daniel Alejandro Pequeño, reviewed by María Victoria Illas and modified for publication by Vanessa Di Cecco.