

# Getting ahead: political subjectivities in early childhood and families in exile

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## Abstract (analytical)

This article presents the results of a research study that problematizes the construction of political subjectivities by children from early childhood whose families have lived through the Colombian armed conflict. Political ontological hermeneutics was used, both epistemically and methodologically, emphasizing the collective and generative narratives of 19 girls, 25 boys, 23 mothers, 7 fathers, 15 female teachers and 1 male teacher in two Child Development Centers located in the cities of Bogota and Pereira. It was found that getting ahead – as a metaphor that takes into account children’s subjectivities – is a concept that involves cultivating relationships, challenges homogenization, promotes practices of resistance and re-existence and creates space for the constitution of political subjectivities and identities. The authors conclude that children have relational dispositions as political subjects from their earliest years.

## Key words

Early childhood, family, armed conflict, capacity, identity.

## Thesaurio

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## Article information

This qualitative research article describes the results of the study titled Getting ahead: relational construction of political subjectivities by children from early childhood whose families come from armed conflict contexts, which was carried out between August 2016 and July 2020. **Field:** Social Sciences. **Sub-field:** Other Social Sciences, Interdisciplinary.

## Salir adelante: subjetividades políticas en primera infancia y familias en el destierro

### Resumen (analítico)

Se presentan resultados de una investigación que problematiza el proceso de construcción de subjetividades políticas de niños y niñas de primera infancia cuyas familias han vivido el conflicto armado colombiano. Epistémica y metodológicamente se empleó la hermenéutica ontológica política, enfatizando las narrativas colectivas y generativas de 19 niñas, 25 niños, 23 madres, 7 padres, 15 maestras y 1 maestro, en dos Centros de Desarrollo Infantil en Bogotá y Pereira. Se encontró que salir adelante —como metáfora que da cuenta de las subjetividades de los niños y las niñas— involucra una opción por las relaciones, romper la homogeneización, prácticas de resistencia y re-existencia y constitución de subjetividades e identidades políticas. Se concluye que los niños y las niñas tienen disposiciones relacionales como sujetos políticos desde sus primeros años.

### Keywords

Primera infancia, familia, conflicto armado, capacidad, identidad.

## Seguindo em frente: subjetividades políticas na primeira infância e famílias em situação de desterro


### Resumo (analítico)

São apresentados resultados de uma investigação orientada para entender e fortalecer subjetividades políticas em meninos e meninas da primeira infância cujas famílias são originárias do conflito armado. Utilizou-se a hermenêutica ontológica política ou performativa, epistemológica e metodológica, com ênfase nas narrativas coletivas e generativas de 19 meninas, 25 meninos, 23 mães, 7 pais, 15 professores e uma professora, em dois centros de desenvolvimento infantil em Bogotá e Pereira. Verificou-se que avançar como uma metáfora responsável pelas subjetividades de meninos e meninas envolve uma opção de relacionamento, rompendo com a homogeneização, práticas de resistência e reexistência e constituição de subjetividades e identidades políticas. Conclui-se que a vida de meninos e meninas merece ser vivida em virtude de sua condição humana.


### Palavras-chave

Primeira infância, família, conflito armado, capacidade, identidade.

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## Introduction

As indicated in the *Report by the Historical Commission on the Armed Conflict and its Victims* (2015), the Colombian armed conflict has had both structural and subjective implications in its consolidation and permanence. It is one of the most complex conflicts in terms of the actors, sectors and interests involved, a complexity that has contributed to its duration and scope with differential expressions in the affected territories and communities. Its structural and subjective implications have been widely accepted in a number of studies and historical accounts (Alvarado *et al.*, 2012; Castellanos & Torres, 2008; Contreras, 2003; González *et al.*, 2002). Uribe (1999) notes that the emergence and continuity of the conflict directly corresponds to the precariousness experienced in the Colombian territory,<sup>1</sup> as well as the weakness of the country's institutions, what the author calls "sovereignty in suspense":

The state of quasi-permanent war and its correlate, sovereignty in suspense, are also expressed in the weakness of institutions, a recurring theme in studies on violence in Colombia, what is generally considered as an absence of the State (...). Even though public institutions could have an omnipresence across the nation, they have not been omnipotent and do not constitute a reasonably compliant or violently imposed authority, despite the government's efforts in both directions. Without institutional omnipotence, that is, without a single, supreme and universal authority within the territory, there is no sovereignty in the absolute sense. Moreover, public institutions face serious problems in the dimension of represented sovereignty. (p. 30)

Although the absence of the State is one of the most widely accepted conclusions when questioning the role of public institutions in the continuity of the armed conflict in Colombia, other studies (such as that of Garay *et al.*, 2008) reveal that, rather than an absence, there has been a co-optation of the State by interests that benefit from maintaining

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<sup>1</sup> Precariousness demonstrated by Colombia having the fourth highest level of inequality in the world (World Bank, 2019).

hegemonic and traditional power structures, such as paramilitary / armed right-wing forces that rely on the complicity of these institutions for their existence.

In this paradoxical context, the State should act as a guarantor for human rights and the well-being of communities, particularly for children, who in general have been forgotten (as identified in the review of previous reports and studies in this article and Alvarado *et al.*, 2012), positioned as victims (Niño, 2012), considered participants in the armed conflict and collaborators with armed actors (Coalico, 2019; Sierra *et al.*, 2009) and subject to the normalization of violence as an everyday part of socialization in their families and communities (Ceballos & Bello, 2001; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2002; Lugo, 2017; Niño, 2012; Torrado *et al.*, 2002; Torrado *et al.*, 2009; Villanueva O'Driscoll, 2013; Villanueva *et al.*, 2017).

This situation has occurred in other armed conflicts and wars around the world. Previous studies on children and armed conflict that were consulted in the Embase and PubMed databases,<sup>2</sup> evidence the violation of children's rights (Boothby *et al.*, 2006; Bradley, 2018; Catani *et al.*, 2010; Cummings *et al.*, 2017; Cummings *et al.*, 2017; Feldman *et al.*, 2010; Jordans *et al.*, 2016; Peltonen & Punamäki, 2010; Richter *et al.*, 2018; Shenoda *et al.*, 2018; Slone & Mann, 2016; Sommer *et al.*, 2018; Yurtbay *et al.*, 2003), as well as the effects on early childhood as a result of the violence committed against members of their families (Andersson, 2015; Bradley, 2018; Catani *et al.*, 2010; Cummings *et al.*, 2017; Demause, 2008; Feldman *et al.*, 2010; Fossion *et al.*, 2013; Jordans *et al.*, 2016; Llabre & Hadi, 2009; Llabre *et al.*, 2015; Nagata, 1991; Panter-Brick *et al.*, 2015; Peltonen & Punamäki, 2010; Pye & Simpson, 2017; Richter *et al.*, 2018; Shenoda *et al.*, 2018; Slone & Mann, 2016; Sommer *et al.*, 2018; Yurtbay *et al.*, 2003).

Only a few of the studies consulted as part of this research specifically focus on early childhood in armed conflict contexts in Colombia (Ila *et al.*, 2009; Romero & Castañeda, 2009; Torrado *et al.*, 2009). However, a number of authors agree that the greatest violations of rights, as well as the most significant period of learning, occur in the first years of life (Alvarado *et al.*, 2012; Ceballos & Bello, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Sierra *et al.*, 2009; Torrado *et al.*, 2002). It should be noted that some of these studies have analyzed contributions from the children themselves, as well as from their relational agents. Statistics evidence the impact of events during this stage of the life cycle. As of February 2020, the number of children aged 0 to 5 years old who were registered as victims of the armed con-

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<sup>2</sup> Review conducted on research published between 2000 and 2019 that identified 28 studies with the following search terms: armed conflict, war and psychology in relation to children in early childhood, children under six years of age and children between six and twelve years of age (Ospina-Alvarado, 2020b, p. 24).

flict was estimated at 335,999, according to the Single Victims Registry (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2020). The most common form of violence experienced by children in these age ranges is the forced displacement of their families, which occurred in 96.33% of cases according to data from the National Information Network (Save the Children, 2018). Forced displacement does not just involve material losses, but also consists of a symbolic loss, understood as exile, similar to that referred to by Gaviria (2012). This situation has contributed to the configuration of these children and the relational practices in which they participate.

Taking into account the effects of the armed conflict during the first years of life, which have been referred to in previous studies, the significant potential of this life cycle and the relevance of the relationships and conversations established in the social construction of subjectivities, the research described by this article sought to understand the ways in which children in early childhood whose families have experienced the Colombian armed conflict construct their subjectivities. This process is based on dialogue and the reconstruction of memories in their relationships, while also positioning these children as political subjects for peace. This article focuses on two of the study's research questions: what is the process for the relational and social construction of subjectivities in early childhood in armed conflict contexts?; and how are processes involving political socialization and the construction of political subjectivities consolidated in *getting ahead* as a practice of reconciliation that is used by families and present in the shared agency of early childhood?

The relevance of understanding the relational and social construction of children's subjectivities lies in the possibility of deconstructing the hegemonic narratives of violence and vulnerability. It is also evident that early childhood and their families co-construct alternative narratives and relational practices through which they actively position themselves as political subjects, allowing them to move away from the reproduction of violence experienced in the context of armed conflict.

This article emphasizes the results of research studies that articulate the voices of early childhood, their families and teachers in armed conflict contexts. For this purpose, a number of conceptual references are used: social constructionism (Anderson, 2012; Davies & Harré, 1999; Gergen, 1996, 2006, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012; Gergen & Gergen, 2012; McNamee, 2015; Ospina-Alvarado, 2018, 2020a; Shotter, 2008) as a way of understanding the relational and social construction of their subjectivities; narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1993), which produces alternative narratives to the violence that dominates their life stories; and

political socialization (Alvarado *et al.*, 2012; Alvarado & Ospina-Alvarado, 2009; Luna, 2018) as a conceptual horizon that facilitates the agency of children during their first years of life. These concepts were reviewed in dialogue with other critical approaches (Agamben, 1998; Arendt, 2009; Camps, 2011; Levinas, 2006; Mèlich, 2000; Pedraza, 1999; Santos, 2011; Segato, 2016; Sosenski & Jackson, 2012) along with different classical thinkers (Derrida, 1998; Foucault, 2009; Gadamer, 1993; Heidegger, 1951), connections that will be expounded on in the Results and Discussion sections of this article.

## Method

The epistemic and methodological approach used for this study was political ontological hermeneutics or performative ontological hermeneutics, which facilitates the understanding, interpreting, uncovering and promotion of agency-oriented transformations (Alvarado *et al.*, 2014; Luna *et al.*, 2008). This approach was applied in the collection of collective and generative narratives that act as depictions of life experiences, while also acting as a research method that provides the possibility of creation. Collective narratives focus on the relational, social and cultural characteristics present in the recounting of biographical events. Generative narratives link relational and dialogical practices with actions and draw on the potential of language to construct realities, as proposed by Gergen (2007, 2012).

The group of participants consisted of children of both sexes between 3 and 6 years of age and their families. In Bogota, a total of 16 boys, 8 girls, 8 mothers, 7 fathers, 10 teachers and 1 teacher from the Casita de los Rincones Children's Development Center (CDI) participated in the study. In Pereira there were 11 girls, 9 boys, 15 mothers, 4 female teachers and the Director of the Re+Creo CDI, which is operated by the Crisol Corporation, who formed part of the study. The children had a range of experiences related to the armed conflict: some were victims of forced displacement with their families at an early age; others had experienced the armed conflict while in the womb; and some children had been conceived after their families had been displaced to Bogotá or Pereira. Their families were originally from different Colombian departments including Caldas, Huila, Nariño, Cauca, Magdalena, Córdoba and Chocó. Family members who participated in the study were aged between 22 and 50 years old at the time of the fieldwork and reported different experiences of the armed conflict: 66.6% of participating families were victims of forced displacement; 33.3% experienced massacres, terrorist acts or attacks; 33.3% had been victims of threats; 33.3% had a family member who was the victim of for-

ced disappearance; 16.66% were subject to recruitment by an armed group; and 16.66% had demobilized as a member of an armed group.<sup>3</sup> The educational agents and teachers who participated in the research had different levels of education: some had vocational training qualifications, others had either begun or completed university studies, and the Director of one of the Centers has a master's degree.

The selection of participants was based on the identification of cities in locations where a significant percentage of the local population previously lived in armed conflict contexts. In Bogotá, contact was made with the District Secretariat of Social Integration, which stated that the CDI selected for the study (located in the district of San Cristóbal Sur) had one of the highest concentration of children whose families had been forcibly displaced. In Pereira, the Crisol Corporation was contacted, as this entity has significant experience working with this population. The goal of this research was that the knowledge and transformations generated by this process would have a lasting impact on those involved in the study. At the two CDIs, the research team invited all families who had previously lived in armed conflict contexts to participate in the study, along with their children and the teachers. After presenting the design of the research study to the CDIs and the group of participants, informed consent was personally obtained from the teachers and families, as well as authorization for their children's participation. A puppet show was used to share information about the study with the children. In addition to verbally informing the research team of their interest in participating, the children also either made a sign, drew a picture or wrote their name on the informed consent form.

The collection of information occurred during the implementation of 15 workshops in each CDI, 12 of which were held with each group of participants separately; four with the children; four with family members; and four with teachers. Three more workshops were held with a combined group (children, family members and teachers) in the same space.

The topics covered in the workshops included: presentation of the research; building trust; relational subjectivities; externalization of violence; exceptions for violence; memory; strategies for maintaining changes; and ritual closure. In the workshop for socializing the research study, each participant explicitly stated that they wished to be involved in the study. The adults did this through informed consent while the children ex-

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<sup>3</sup> The information presented here shares the data collected in the characterization survey of families that was conducted as part of the research study. The percentages exceed the total (100%) in some cases because a number of families experienced several of the described situations.

pressed their agreement with participating in the study and their relatives gave informed consent on their behalf.

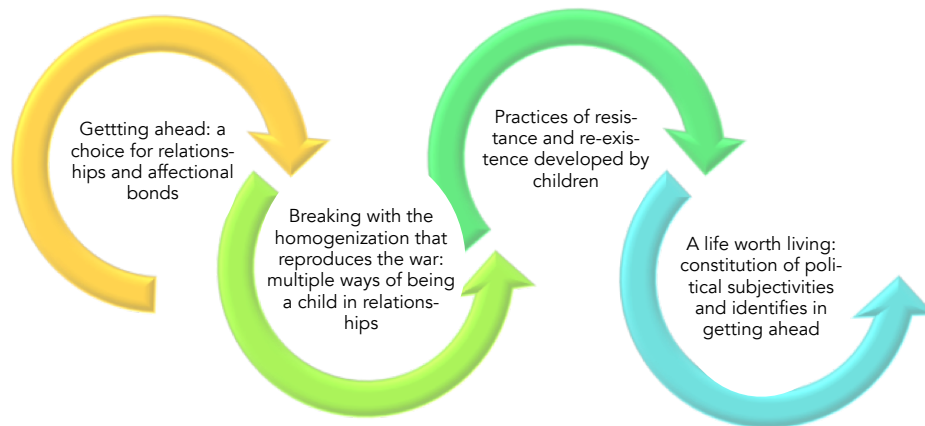
Ethical considerations included seeking not to re-victimize participants and guaranteeing their confidentiality and anonymity. The workshops with the children used ludic and artistic approaches and featured puppets, plasticine dolls, music, stories and collective games. The workshops with the families and teachers focused on storytelling and involved the creation of collective books, weaving a woolen net and roleplays, among other components. All of the workshops were audio-recorded and the emerging narratives were transcribed for subsequent analysis.

As part of the methodology, the researchers analyzed secondary narratives contained in the doctoral thesis titled *Children in contexts of armed conflict: from victimization to narratives that contribute to peacebuilding*, which was produced by one of the authors of this article (Ospina-Alvarado, 2020a) with support from Kenneth Gergen, Gerrit Loots and Julia Villanueva. This research was carried out as part of a program focused on the foundations of social constructionism offered by the Taos Institute and the Free University of Brussels.

Using the narratives collected in the workshops and the PhD thesis mentioned above, the authors conducted a thematization exercise based on the premise that the thematic analysis of narratives requires a double interpretation: the meaning derived by the social actors in relation to their life experiences and the interpretation created by the researcher(s) (Riessman, 2008).

As stated by Loots *et al.* (2013) and Tamboukou (2013), thematization implies weaving meanings together and not fragmenting them. In this research, the weaving of meanings—taken from the results—brought together the direct testimonies from the group of participants, their descriptions and the interpretations of the researcher(s), which were placed in dialogue with conceptual references. Three themes emerged as primary findings, each with its own emerging sub-themes: 1) violence as a biographical event in family life; 2) potential and possibilities for re-signifying: reconciliation with life events as a way to continue living; and 3) the life that deserves to be lived: getting ahead. This article focuses on the third of the findings and its sub-themes: 3.1) getting ahead: a choice for relationships and affectional bonds; 3.2) breaking with the homogenization that produces war: multiple ways of being a child in relationships; 3.3) practices of resistance and re-existence developed by children; and 3.4) a life worth living: constitution of subjectivities and political identities in the process of *getting ahead* (Figure 1).



**Figure 1***Emerging sub-themes vs. The life worth living: getting ahead*

## Results

Children's subjectivities, understood as "own meanings that each individual constructs about their way of being in the world (...) what makes one person different from another" (Alvarado *et al.*, 2012, pp. 69-70), appeared in the present research as lives that deserve to be lived due to their humanity. These were reflected in the metaphor shared by the actors participating in the research: *getting ahead*. This metaphor implies a choice for relationships and affectional bonds, breaks with the homogenization produced by the violence associated with the armed conflict, involves practices of resistance and re-existence and contributes to the constitution of subjectivities and political identities.

### *Getting ahead: a choice for relationships and bonds*

For children in early childhood whose families come from contexts of armed conflict, getting ahead means moving away from the reproduction of violence and the rupture of the social fabric experienced by their families. This is expressed in the importance they give to relationships and being with others, a dimension that at times generates tension due to the abandonment of some children by their fathers. This concept is also evident in the relational practices of families that include dialogue, interaction and the importance of the extended family, as well as pedagogical relationships based on *relying on*, enjoyment, affection and recognition of the humanity of children. Finally, this is also manifested in learning, which is mutual and does not just occur unidirectionally with adults teaching children by example.

When children were asked about what they most enjoy about their families, they referred to the importance of *being with*. This is a position that opposes the passive reproduction of violence and the rupture of relationships in an armed conflict context. Relational practices — or *being with* — are present on a daily basis in children's lives, specifically in settings such as the family home:

**Researcher:** And what is your favorite thing to do with your family at home?

**Girl 2b:** Being with my mom and dad.

As Uribe (1999) has shown, a child's commitment to relationships is relevant because in territories affected by the armed conflict, certain social patterns are generated in which violence is normalized. In this sense, *being with* in early childhood accounts for the transforming potential that is present in relationships, as proposed by Gergen (2012). *Being with* is framed in the responsibility for the life of another person that Melich (2000) has identified in contexts like the Holocaust.

In tension with the value placed on relationships is the fact that some children have been abandoned by their fathers. This combines with the abandonment felt by their mothers and the emptiness generated when the father does not allow for his child to be legally registered with his surname:

**Mother 2:** Well, I became pregnant and the father did not help me with anything. When I was pregnant with the eldest he was fine, but after I gave birth I got nothing, and then with my second child he denied that he was the father.

This mother highlights a relational value with her expression "he denied that he was the father". In this case, the absence of the relationship significantly contributes to the constitution of children as subjects. The experience of being abandoned, denied or being a single mother has a strong influence on subjective constitution in a country like Colombia, where those who do not have their parents' surname are not recognized as being, but instead, as Davies and Harré (1999) would say, positioned as *bastard children*. The way in which boys and girls are named and how they name themselves is important, because we exist in language (Shotter, 2008) and create our existence from shared meanings (Gergen, 2012). Abandonment positions these children in the experience of precariousness, in the sense that their lives do not deserve to be recognized, as conceived by Agamben (1998) with his idea of *nuda vida*.

*Being with* as an option for relationships and bonds is expressed through dialogue that children participate in as valid interlocutors, the examples they witness from their families and teachers and the importance that the presence of the extended family has for these families. The following excerpt addresses some of these elements, highlighting the relevance of dialogue as a relational practice and an example that teaches ethical positioning in both the nuclear family and the extended family:

**Mother 2:** We talk to each other a lot. At least when they are around we try to say good words so that they understand us and we set an example (...). With the physical contact, sometimes we show them what is good, what is bad, what is a loving caress and what is an abusive caress. I teach them about that a lot and so does my family.

In terms of pedagogical relationships, *being with* takes the form of relying on the other person. This refers to the availability of teachers to engage with children in relational practices mediated by enjoyment, affection, recognition and listening to them, going beyond the experiences of their families in armed conflict contexts and focusing on the children's humanity:

**Teacher 1:** I think it is willingness [what I need to make the Dream Garden a reality]. I will use all of my energies and all of my skills to benefit the children and the community. That's kind of the minimum, to always be available for any concern, available for the children themselves. They need to laugh, jump, play and not be inhibited in a different context where they don't just learn about letters and numbers, but also about relationships. A place where they receive love, affection and understanding. The children are taken to a point where limits are eliminated and we think about how high we need to set the bar (...). It's also so important to listen, because they have many things to tell you. They not only tell you about what they want but also what they imagine and then you can help them in some way.

The recognition of children, their voices, their knowledge, their imagination and their creativity is evident in this teacher's account. That their existences are not confined to the context of the armed conflict is a key element in the development of children's own lives. This reflects what White and Epston (1993) call *naming people at the margins of the problem*. Manrique-Palacio *et al.* (2018) propose that affection is an alternative for peacebuilding.

The research identified the importance given to relationships — or *being with* — through the learning that happens with others. What is interesting is that this learning, as observed by mothers, parents and teachers, is mutual and not just the adults teaching

the children. Learning emerges in the relational process through a bidirectional way and an example set by different people: children, families, teachers and community:

**Mother 4:** At least in the kindergarten, the teachers teach the children good things. Sometimes the children come and tell you what they have seen or sometimes they even teach you. With the neighbors, the children have told me that they spend more time with their families than we do.

*Being with*, as a mode of resistance for the reproduction of violence and an alternative for the construction of the relational world, is expressed in the different relational environments in which children participate. This mode of resistance occurs with multiple nuances and as a preferred option for the construction of their life story and openness to the world, enabling them to move away from a single form of individuality and open themselves up to the multiplicity of ways of being that emerge in the relational framework.

### **Breaking with the reproductive homogenization of war: multiple ways of being boys and girls in relationships**

The results of this study demonstrate that for children in early childhood whose families come from armed conflict contexts, there is not a single subjectivity or identity that is linked to the reproduction of violence. Instead, there are multiple ways of being in their relationships with others. This is due to characteristics such as gender and age, as well as their family's experiences of both the armed conflict and everyday life.

In terms of gender particularities, the research evidences subjective configurations that reproduce cultural and historical patterns of the heteronormative model in gender relations, similar to the coloniality questioned by Segato (2016). As a result of these patterns, boys play with Transformers and girls play *kitchen*.

The teachers participating in the study recognize that fathers teach their sons about reproducing violence and mothers teach their daughters about values. The teachers noted that there was a higher level of participation of mothers compared to fathers in the CDIs, even though there are some counter-practices that evidence certain ruptures with this structure. The teachers mentioned that both mothers and fathers are involved in their children's educational process, the mothers also have paid employment and subsequently fathers sometimes participate in activities in the CDIs and that gender relations vary and there is no homogeneous pattern:

**Teacher 1:** Well, it's all very different... I have a family that is displaced, they are a beautiful family in my opinion, even though the child has a lot of problems. They are a very united family and they want to cooperate and help when I tell them something about the child. The other displaced ones, I see them as families in which there are many conflicts between the parents. The most active and participative parents in our center are the mothers. The fathers are very passive and almost absent from this kindergarten. That is how I would describe these families.

**Teacher 5:** In mine it is... it also varies a lot. Let's say in specific cases, almost all families have both parents looking after their children. Most of them work, I think, casual work or something like that. So sometimes we change the schedule for parents' activities in the CDI so that they can participate. They take turns for the different activities here, sometimes the dads come and sometimes the moms come.

In addition to gender, some specific aspects emerged based on children's ages. This implies that these children can be understood in terms of the experiences of their families in the context of the armed conflict, as well as through their stage in the life cycle. However, these types of stories are also located in what Foucault (2009) and Gergen (2006, 2007) have denounced as normative frameworks and hegemonic discourses of normality. The following excerpt refers to certain particularities in each child whose families come from armed conflict contexts, as well as the *normality* of their behavior for their age:

**Teacher 5:** Here in the kindergarten some are aggressive, others have trouble concentrating and others are normal, that is (...), they show normal behavior: (...) there are some who are aggressive, others are passive, others are aggressive-distracted and others demonstrate normal behavior, which corresponds more to their age.

In terms of the experiences of the children and their families in armed conflict contexts, Uribe (1999) states that there are certain common events that mark people's identity and others that are unique. The study found that children's own experiences and those of their families go beyond the armed conflict, as they can also include other contexts involving violence and vulnerability. As shown in the following excerpt, these unique experiences are a result of the forced displacement lived by each child:

**Teacher 2:** You can't generalize and define one characteristic for all children who have been displaced because it is very difficult. Each one has a different experience of displacement. Often you don't even know what it is.

The accounts of the teachers and, in some cases, directly from the children, evidence their multiple subjectivities and identities. This shows that they have not been constituted as a homogeneous mass that reproduces violence.

## Resistance and re-existence practices in boys and girls

Among the practices of resistance to the reproduction of violence and re-existences as an alternative way of existing in the face of violence, the study identified the care that children take of themselves and their bodies, their ethical relational practices and their creative enjoyment.

Self-care and body care appeared as part of their daily lives in practices such as eating, actions related to their health and body and valuing the food and care they receive from their families or teachers:

**Researcher:** What do you like about the kindergarten?

**Girl 4:** Eating.

The stories of children and families showed life and health as central elements in getting ahead as a practice of re-existence. At the same time, the discourse on health (Pedraza, 1999) and care of the body appeared as a possibility of opening up to the world and meeting with others.

An important finding was the identification of ethical expressions by the children of through relational practices such as empathy, respect, collaboration and generosity: "He likes to be very (...) helpful, share with others" (Mother 18). In this type of practice, the children take responsibility for the lives of others (Levinas, 2006; Mèlich, 2000) and show the potential that is present in relationships (Gergen, 2007, 2009, 2012) by framing themselves in a relational ethic (McNamee, 2015) and collaborative processes (Anderson, 2012).

However, in some accounts from families and teachers regarding how children should behave, there are also expressions such as "they should be good children" (Mother 1), a normative framework that reflects *angelic* readings of children, as proposed by Sosenski and Jackson (2012).

Another example of children's re-existence was their creative enjoyment. Most of the children's narratives stated that what they like most is to play and what they like most about their friends is playing with them, descriptions of the other children that

include both themselves and the relational framework. Play appears as an enabler of friendship and, at the same time, generates relational practices that are marked by laughter and enjoying the encounter with others:

**Researcher:** Why do you like to play with [child 5]?

**Child 9:** Because he is my friend.

**Researcher:** And why is he your friend?

**Child 9:** Because we play.

The enjoyment and laughter that arise in friendship evoke Derrida's (1998) mention of laughter among friends, which implies an order different to that of conversation and is similar to the order of imagination described by Camps (2011). Through everyday life and the relationships in which they participate, children resist the reproduction of circles of violence and build dispositions for re-existence.

### **A life worth living: constitution of subjectivities and political identities in getting ahead**

This research shows that the lives of children deserve to be lived: the experiences of their families in contexts of armed conflict do not take away their condition of humanity. Their success in getting ahead shows the constitution of subjectivities and political identities from the earliest years. They build lives in which they do not repeat the violence that was present in the lives of their parents and are oriented towards exploration, questions, creativity and the possibilities offered by the future.

The topic of children not repeating the lives of their parents emerged in the stories told by families and teachers. Not because these lives were not worth living, but because they did not want the children to be victims of violations of their rights and violence. Families and teachers contribute to the strengthening of children's relational autonomy, their agency and their coping capacity through the metaphor of getting ahead:

**Mother 4:** Well, if you have experienced violence, how are you not going to reflect that in your children?

**Mother 8:** Help them get ahead, right? Get ahead so they don't go through what we had to go through. Help them get ahead every day in this big city.

This shows the possibility of breaking with tradition without forgetting the lessons learned from past experiences (Gadamer, 1993) and achieving a balance between the ma-

teriality of the world and the human condition (Arendt, 2009) while focusing on individual and relational resources and potencies that are also present in contexts of violence (Barudy & Marquebreucq, 2006; Pérez-Sales, 2004).

Children's dispositions for their constitution as political subjects were identified through their exploration, being active and requesting new experiences. This is a correlate of the critical thinking present in dialogue and creativity, expressed in the constitution of subjectivities and identities in early childhood:

**Teacher 1:** Creativity strategies. We always think about the child exploring, their ways of asking questions, that critical thinking of saying: 'I want to ask why does the sun rise? Why are children born? What is this or that for?'. That will help us to become calmer through dialogue.

The questions that children have in their early years regarding the 'why' of things as a disposition and interest in the world around them refer to the permanent question of meaning posed by Heidegger (1951).

Finally, as a political disposition expressed in getting ahead and as a connection between the past and the future through present actions and relationships, the children's orientation to future possibilities emerged in their desire for professionalization: "[When I grow up I want to be] a doctor" (Child 9). This connects with Santos' (2011) reference to orientation, potentialities and possibilities in what has not yet happened.

The motivation of children to succeed, as well as the interest of their families in their success, create the basis and dispositions from the earliest years for meeting with others, opening up to the world and seeking to bring about small transformations.

## Discussion

The main contribution of this study, which examines the relational and social construction of political subjectivities of children in early childhood whose families have experienced exile, is the emergence of these children as lives that deserve to be lived because of their condition of humanity. These are singular lives, which means that it is not possible to talk about them or their families as a case that responds to a unique normative pattern. Lives whose political subjectivities emerge in the way they get ahead, which accounts for the transformative potential of relationships with their families, teachers, friends. This is achieved through relational and ethical practices that include respect,



collaboration, empathy, care for oneself and others, trust and friendship. Through inter-generational encounters and with their peers, they build shared conditions for life through their creativity, their exploration of the world and reflective inquiry.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the subjectivities of children whose families come from armed conflict contexts are not homogeneous. They have relational and contextual experiences with markedly different characteristics, even when they might be the same form of violence, such as forced displacement. As stated by Gergen (2012), it is their relationships that have the greatest potential for transformation and, as observed in this study, these relationships contribute to their constitution as political subjects capable of learning from the experiences and memories of their families but not reproducing the practices of violence from the armed conflict.

The above contributions deviate from the trend that is present in previous research reviewed in Colombia (Bello & Ruiz, 2002; Ceballos & Bello, 2001; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Lozano, 2005; Niño, 2012; Sierra *et al.*, 2009; Torrado *et al.*, 2002; Torrado *et al.*, 2009; Universidad Nacional de Colombia & Observatorio sobre Infancia, 2002) and in other countries (Andersson, 2015; Bradley, 2018; Catani *et al.*, 2010; Cummings *et al.*, 2017; Demause, 2008; Feldman *et al.*, 2010; Fossion *et al.*, 2013; Haapanen *et al.*, 2018; Jordans *et al.*, 2016; Llabre & Hadi, 2009; Llabre *et al.*, 2015; Nagata, 1991; Peltonen & Punamäki, 2010; Pye & Simpson, 2017; Shenoda *et al.*, 2018; Slone & Mann, 2016; Sommer *et al.*, 2018; Yurtbay *et al.*, 2003; Šhang *et al.*, 2018), which have primarily focused on violence and its reproduction, as well as the violation of children's rights in the contexts of armed conflict and war.

The centrality of the relationships in which children participate and have a transformative potential in relation to violence, reflects the findings of previous studies with older children (Alvarado *et al.*, 2012; Ospina-Alvarado *et al.*, 2018) and young people (Lugo, 2017), but not with children in early childhood whose families have experienced exile. It should be noted that, as identified in the present study, this transformative potential requires decision making and creative and active participation. This evokes Camps' (2011) statement that it is necessary to transform affects in order to be master of oneself and empower action, as well as Derrida's (1998) declaration regarding the action required to detach oneself from destiny or build it.

The main strength of this study is the emergence of a metaphor like getting ahead, which in the view of Arendt (2009) accounts for the emergence of thought and, as seen in this research, enables the empowerment of subjects and the strengthening of their

relationships. This also contributes to progress in the field of political socialization and social constructionism, specifically the relational and dialogical construction of political subjectivities in the first years of life.

The main limitations of the study consisted in the exclusion of some actors who would be important to consider in future research (such as the peer group), as well as other children in the CDIs and the non-teaching staff at the kindergarten, going beyond the teachers and educational agents. More research should be carried out to increase knowledge about the political subjectivities of early childhood as a relational and dialogical practice in other contexts.

It is crucial to transcend the current view of comprehensive protection in early childhood education programs and public policy. This should recognize the importance of children's voices from their earliest years and their place as legitimate social subjects who should not be represented by the adult world but listened to. There is also a need to acknowledge the centrality of relationships in early childhood and their dispositions for the constitution of political subjectivities, a way of building the future through present actions that provide new meanings for the past experiences of their families and expressed in the metaphor of getting ahead.

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