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Beyond voice and advocacy: Youth participatory action research and the re-imagination of self among former child soldiers in Colombia

Abstract

This study explores how a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) inspired project supported the reintegration of former child soldiers in Colombia through collaborative creative writing. Twenty-two adolescents engaged in narrative re-imagination through self-reflection, mutual recognition, authorship, and dialogue. A **participatory thematic analysis** discerned four identity trajectories—stronger, altruistic, political, and harmonious—corresponding to empowerment, community, peace, and *buen vivir* or good living. These reflected dimensions of positive identity and challenged narratives shaped by violence and exclusion. **The project interprets YPAR as a framework for participatory research to extend beyond a focus on voice and advocacy to support a psychosocial intervention that enabled participants to co-author transformative narratives and reimagine socially embedded and morally viable futures.**

Keywords

Colombia, child soldiers, youth participatory action research, narrative identity, reintegration

Introduction

Despite Colombia's ongoing peace process, the recruitment of children and teenagers by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the country has continued. UNICEF (2023) reports that at least 2,181 under-18s were recruited between 2013 and 2022. The average age of recruitment was 14.2 for boys and 13.8 for girls. Boys spent an average of 632 days inside the ranks of an NSAG, while for girls the average was slightly higher at 642. Rural, Indigenous, and ethnic minority populations were disproportionately affected.

Children and teenagers are used not only as combatants but also as messengers, lookouts, or forced labourers (Wesells, 2006). While the international humanitarian sector often prefers the term 'Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups' (CAAFAG) to reflect this diversity, this study uses 'child soldier' for ease of readability, without reducing participants' experiences to combat roles alone. Regardless of their specific tasks, children involved in NSAGs are routinely exposed to violence, coercion, and significant psychological harm.

Reintegration into civilian life presents a range of challenges. Internationally, it is defined by UNICEF's Paris Principles (2007) as 'the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation'. Yet this transition is often difficult. Former child soldiers may face trauma, mental health challenges (Derluyn et al., 2004; Kohrt, 2007), stigma and rejection (Denov & Marchand, 2014), and limited economic opportunity (Blattman & Annan, 2010). These conditions can entrench negative self-perceptions, limiting

young people's ability to imagine new roles for themselves in society (Charles and Fowler-Watt, 2020a).

Working with two groups of adolescents and young adults through a collaborative creative writing process, the study invited participants to critically reflect on their pasts and imagine future identities rooted in dignity, agency, and belonging. **The project employed Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a framework for participation that extended beyond a focus on voice and advocacy. It supported a narrative-based inquiry and identity reconstruction through a process of re-imagination, defined in detail below.**

A Conceptual Framework: Narrative Identity and Youth in Conflict

Narrative identity refers to the internalised and evolving life story that individuals construct to make sense of who they are, linking their reconstructed past to an imagined future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Coherence, agency, and redemptive meaning-making within personal narratives are associated with well-being and the capacity to navigate adversity (Adler et al., 2016; McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006). Particularly relevant to youth who have experienced conflict or violence is the potential for redemptive narratives: life stories in which suffering becomes a source of insight, strength, or moral purpose (McAdams, 2006).

Identity construction is rarely solitary. Hermans' (2001) theory of the dialogical self describes identity as a negotiation between internal 'I-positions'—such as 'the fighter,' 'the victim,' or 'the peacebuilder. For former child soldiers, such internal dialogues can begin from a place of dislocation. Recruited under conditions of adversity and returning to communities that

may view them with suspicion or fear, young people often internalise ‘negative’ identities—narratives shaped by rejection, stigma and the loss of recognised social roles. Erikson (1968) described negative identity as a self-definition formed in opposition to what is socially expected, particularly when valued pathways are blocked. These identities are often marked by low self-efficacy, alienation, and oppositional behaviour (Hihara et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2017; Charles and Fowler-Watt, 2020a).

In contrast, positive identity is associated with self-worth, agency, and the ability to imagine a valued role within society. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework identifies positive identity as a core developmental asset involving self-esteem, coherence, and future orientation (Catalano et al., 2004; Shek et al., 2019). McAdams (2001) similarly argues that a positive identity is sustained by a life story that affirms one’s purpose and place in the world.

A key mechanism in identity transformation is the development of possible selves—cognitive representations of who one might become in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These representations, whether ‘feared’ or ‘hoped for’, motivate behaviour and orient aspirations (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For youth shaped by violence, stigma may reinforce feared selves, while hoped-for selves are often underdeveloped or socially inaccessible.

Identity formation is further shaped by dominant social narratives—or ‘master narratives’ that define which kinds of identities are considered acceptable or possible (Hammack, 2010; McLean & Syed, 2015). These narratives are often internalised and can limit the range of stories youth can tell about themselves. In the case of former child soldiers, master narratives frequently cast them as damaged, dangerous, or irredeemable—reinforcing stigma and foreclosing possibilities for social reintegration.

Method

Central to the YPAR approach is the recognition of participants as knowledge producers and co-creators, challenging the notion of research as objective or neutral and instead embracing its situated and perspectival nature. Through participatory and collaborative inquiry, YPAR seeks to foster youth engagement and activism, enabling young people to develop structural understandings of the injustices they face and to exercise greater agency over their own lives (Liebenberg et al., 2020; Karsten, 2021).

Critiques of YPAR often focus on the tension between its emancipatory ideals and its practical implementation. Scholars such as Cammarota and Fine (2008) and Torre and Fine (2011) argue that while YPAR aspires to redistribute power in the research process, many projects reproduce adult-centric control when youth participation is limited to consultation rather than co-leadership. Ozer (2017) similarly highlights that short-term or school-based interventions sometimes use the YPAR label without allowing iterative cycles of reflection, action, and change—reducing it to a pedagogical exercise rather than a transformative methodology.

Lindquist-Grantz and Abraczinskas (2020) note that YPAR has predominantly been applied to emphasise democratic values such as voice, agency, and collective action. However, a growing body of scholarship positions YPAR not only as a vehicle for public advocacy, but also as a deeply reflexive and potentially therapeutic process. Studies have shown that the dialogic and narrative-based practices embedded within YPAR can facilitate critical self-exploration, emotional healing,

and identity formation (Cahill, 2007; Mirra et al., 2016; Tuck, 2009). González (2020) proposes a 'healing-centered' model of YPAR that explicitly positions participatory narrative inquiry as a therapeutic tool (see also Lindquist-Grantz and Abraczinskas, 2020).

While traditional YPAR projects often unfold over several weeks or months to allow for iterative cycles of action and reflection, our design condensed these principles into a shorter process interpreting YPAR as a framework rather than a prescriptive method. Participants contributed to shaping the questions explored, engaged in collective analysis of their experiences, and co-constructed outputs intended for wider social and academic audiences. Although the limited timeframe constrained the iterative dimension typical of longer YPAR projects, the workshop retained the method's central ethos of youth voice, collaboration, and action orientation. We therefore understand this as a YPAR-inspired approach that translates the core participatory commitments of the method into a contextually appropriate form.

Despite concerns from critics such as Ozer (2017) that claims of transformation can sometimes be exaggerated within YPAR, it is important to note how short intensive workshops like the one we designed may spark immediate emotional gains that participants continue to develop beyond the workshop itself. The nature of narrative inquiry means processes of reinterpretation and identity reconstruction continue beyond the original encounter (McAdams, 2013). Short narrative based workshops should therefore be understood as catalysts for potential transformation rather than an endpoint.

The participants

The participants were two groups of former child soldiers aged between 14 and 21 (Table 1). The first group included 11 adolescents resident in a Bogotá refuge and the second, 11 Indigenous young people from the Nasa community of Cauca in the southwest of Colombia. The first group was selected as they belonged to a creative writing class and the second constituted young filmmakers, who had participated in a previous animation project and had travelled to Bogotá to screen their work.

[Insert Table 1: Participant Overview].

The participants from Bogotá were living in a refuge, apart from their family and friends, while the Cauca participants continued to live in their community. Indigenous former child soldiers often complete their formal reintegration under the care and control of Indigenous authorities, rather than the Colombian state (Charles, 2021).

The Nasa people are known for their storytelling traditions (Rappaport, 1990) and for their political resilience (Chaves et al., 2018). They maintain a deep connection to their ancestral lands and lead spiritual lives focused on nature and their sacred sites. They place a strong emphasis on community and collective decision-making. The Nasa people are also recognised for their active political engagement and efforts to defend their territorial rights and autonomy, often in the face of significant external pressures including violence and conflict (Acosta, 2023).

Ethical considerations

We discerned – and designed mitigations for - three key challenges: (1) Building direct relationships, trust and empathy between researchers and the participants, whilst seeking to avoid invoking shame or guilt (mitigation = constant and iterative reflection); (2) the potential for re-traumatisation through taking the participants back into memories of traumatic events (mitigation = trauma-informed research design and trauma training for researchers); (3) the researchers' duty of care, both to the participants and themselves (mitigation = clear safeguarding and protection protocols); as well as the need to mitigate risk (mitigation = locating the workshop in a safe space, the Bogotá refuge).

The research team was aware of the inherent challenges presented by relying on the participants' memories; the possibility of participant bias and, in particular, social desirability bias. We were also cognisant of the peacebuilding discourse prevalent in the space of the Bogotá refuge, but the creative design of the study provides mitigation for these issues. It allows for the vagaries of the participants' power of recall and its specific interactive nature means participants' discourse can be challenged and deconstructed.

Data collection

*I cry.
I cry in this valley of tears.
I think of you all the time because you took away the most beautiful of my life.
My childhood and my adolescence.
I couldn't play with dolls. Instead my toy was a rifle.
I didn't have friends because you scared them.
Because of you, because of you, I haven't been able to get over it.
My life is a disaster.
I cry.
I cry in this valley of tears that runs down my face full of hope.
But I'll tell you what... Thinking about such hurt...
You taught me to respect.*

*I won't suffer because of you.
I live an honest life.
But I want to tell you that my hatred is bigger than the solar system.
And today, it's transforming into happiness.*

This poem was written by Jazmin, a 16-year-old former child soldier resident in the Bogotá refuge for young survivors of conflict. Jazmin's poem sparked the creative process, which resulted in the production of a short, animated film, *El árbol del amor* (The Tree of Love), by the Nasa participants. They wrote a response to this poem, which then became the basis of their script for their film. This participatory project has been explored in detail elsewhere (Jukes et al., 2021; Charles and Fowler-Watt, 2020a, 2020b), but as part of the dissemination of the animation, 11 of the young filmmakers travelled to a refuge in Bogotá to visit the former child soldiers resident there (including Jazmin) to show them their film and to participate in a creative writing workshop, which is the focus of the current study.

The one-day workshop was held on 17 September 2019, and was led by members of the research team: a Colombian scriptwriter, animator, psychologist and two UK academics (the authors). It began with ice-breaking exercises to put the young participants at ease and build trust. This was followed by a screening of the animated film, which presents the stories of three child soldiers: Sek, A'te and Dariel. Immediately after the screening, the participants were invited to close their eyes and envisage the character they related to most. They were then asked to select important words to justify their selection of character, which were subsequently shared and discussed among the group.

The aim was to forge initial connections between the participants' personal experiences, those represented in the film and those of their peers. Then the 22 research participants were

put into pairs. These pairs were organised by the research team. This ensured that each pair consisted of participants from the Bogotá refuge and Cauca. The participants were invited to discuss and share their thoughts and reactions, a process, which also encouraged them to recall their own personal experiences. Each pair was then tasked with writing a letter to one of the film's main characters, which they were again free to select. The basic prompt was to provide advice based on their own stories, experiences and learning. Each letter was then read aloud to the whole group and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and offer feedback, which inspired further discussion and the sharing of individual experiences. As part of these collective discussions, researchers also asked questions and shared their observations, providing an opportunity to evaluate their initial reflections.

At the end of the workshop, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the other workshop facilitators. Additionally, a virtual focus group was conducted with participants a month after the workshop, which provided further opportunities to explore their thoughts and perspectives on the project. The research design placed the participants at the centre of the research process.

Data analysis

The research produced 11 pieces of creative writing, as well separate transcripts of the workshop and the virtual focus group/three semi-structured interviews. These texts were analysed according to the six stages of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008): (1) familiarisation of data; (2) generation of codes; (3) combining codes into themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) determine significance of themes; and (6) report findings. A participatory approach

to thematic analysis guaranteed the inclusion of research participants in this process (Liebenberg et al, 2020).

Initial codes were co-identified by the researchers and the research participants through deliberation and analysis of the texts produced in an inductive approach that highlighted key words or ideas that were repeated (stages 1 and 2). **The immersive group discussion following the reading of all narratives enabled participants and the research team to jointly identify and co-create initial codes in a fluid, interactive, and constructivist manner. Working first in smaller groups and then collectively, participants compared interpretations, clustered similar ideas, and negotiated shared meanings, grouping the codes into broader themes (stage 3).** These themes were then reviewed through open dialogue, where the larger group collectively examined and refined them, allowing underlying assumptions to be questioned and clarified (stage 4). The themes were then reviewed as part of semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the research team and workshop facilitators, and within the virtual post-workshop focus group conducted with participants (stage 5). **This meeting provided an opportunity to validate and deepen the earlier analysis, as participants reflected on the themes' relevance, clarified meanings, and proposed refinements based on their collective experience of the workshop.** The findings were further analysed within the context of literature in the field (stage 6). The codes and themes identified were therefore tested for rigour and resonance, and refined in discussion, interview and literature review. The inclusion of research participants in the analysis of data guaranteed the co-creation of knowledge through the production, discussion and analysis of the texts, embedding the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome (Charmaz, 2017).

Results

The participatory thematic analysis discerned four elements of positive identity: knowing who I am and feeling in control (self awareness and self-control), better relationships with others, a sense of purpose, and a sense of belonging. These elements were derived from four alternative versions of 'self' constructed in the participants' writing: the stronger self, the altruistic self, the political self, and the harmonious self. Each of these identities was associated with a specific alternative social imaginary that challenged the dominant narratives of violence and failure. These alternative imaginaries included the imaginary of empowerment, the imaginary of community, the imaginary of peace, and the imaginary of 'good living' or *buen vivir* (Table 2).

[Table 2: The participatory thematic analysis].

These four reimagined identities should be understood not as discrete psychological categories, but as interrelated narrative constructions. Each identity is anchored in a specific social imaginary, which acts as the broader cultural and symbolic framework through which the self is understood, positioned, and reoriented. These imaginaries reflect participants' evolving sense of purpose, belonging, and moral agency, and are best viewed as contextual landscapes that give meaning and coherence to identity reconstruction.

The texts/transcripts included below have been translated from their original Spanish by the corresponding author.

'Knowing who I am and feeling in control': The stronger self and the imaginary of empowerment

Participants redefined their stronger self as an individual with greater self-awareness and personal agency. They viewed themselves as resilient and capable of overcoming adversity. They developed a sense of control over their futures. This empowerment was generated internally, linked to greater self-confidence and self-efficacy, and the realisation of increased agency within challenging contexts: 'I used to think I had no control of my life. Now I realise the only person who can help me most is myself' (P4).

The participants depicted a desire to progress and find a route out of the violence and the negative impact it might have had on their lives. They embarked upon 'a journey of discovery' (P22) and sense-making, and relied on 'tenacity' (P16), 'thick skin' (P2) and 'determination' (P5) to help them.

The participant's experiences of war prompted a reassessment of priorities and engendered a desire for positive change. Participants felt more competent and confident to overcome the challenges they faced. They wanted to learn from their experiences and not be debilitated by them. They exhibited a heightened sense of perseverance and drive. Future success was presented as a choice, dependent on the participants' own actions to rebuild their lives in the present.

The participants not only felt stronger, but were also able to 'love myself' (P11/P18). The stronger self was manifested as 'flourishing' and 'growing' as participants felt free to live a 'new and better life' (P11/P18). To flourish is to thrive and prosper, and to be in one's prime. To

flourish where there has been 'so much violence' is therefore to change, to adapt and innovate (P6/P22). The stronger self is not only one that is better equipped to live with the present, but one that is also ready and planning for the future, in ways that were previously thought impossible.

Better relations with others: The altruistic self and the imaginary of community

The altruistic self highlighted the importance of relationships and community. Participants experienced a profound sense of connection and empathy through their interactions with one another. This collective engagement enabled them to build a positive identity grounded in supportive relationships and a commitment to helping others, fostering a mutual respect that redefined the self in terms of shared healing and support. There was a realisation among the young participants that their personal stories were being listened to and learned from by their peers. This acknowledgement of their suffering promoted a sense of common healing and created a more positive orientation towards the other participants, as well as to the world more generally: 'Knowing that people care about my story makes me see society better. I realise that it's important to help those in the same situation' (P9).

The pain of the past created bonds among the participants, who were able to help each other regulate their emotions of guilt, anger and shame. Empathy emanated from their shared personal experiences, that 'with pain, we learn and reach our goals' (P5/P20). As another young female participant articulated, 'It [sharing her story] really helps to see other people in the same situation or worse. It helps you move on' (P7). Encouraging others to heal helped the participants

derive meaning from their own stories. It allowed individuals to reflect on and share their own story in a new light 'to rediscover the same world and story that destroyed me' (P11/P18).

The young participants realised that their stories contained a level of significance beyond the self. Some participants recognised the significance of their stories and success for the 'healing of the nation' (P10). As another female participant explained, 'Once you write it [one's story], it no longer belongs to you, it belongs to the country' (P4).

A sense of purpose: The political self and the imaginary of peace

The political self was shaped by a collaborative commitment to advocacy and societal change. Participants worked together to articulate their visions for a peaceful future, thereby cultivating a sense of purpose and political agency. This collective effort allowed them to transform their past experiences into a powerful drive for social justice and peace, reinforcing their identity as active agents of change with a clear and meaningful purpose.

The political self prioritised action as a solution to suffering and made a commitment to end conflict and child soldiering. This activism forged the imaginary of peace and articulated a call for change (P6/P22). Upholding peace was perceived as a 'responsibility' (P10) and advocacy was conceived as the route to achieve it. Peace was depicted as a way of compensating for the violence and hurt they themselves may have perpetrated.

Participants wrote short and heartfelt pleas that displayed a political awareness in their powerful simplicity: 'Never again should another child or teenager be sent to war!' (P7/P14). Specifically, 'The Tree of Love' that featured in the animation was referred to as symbolic of the participants' hopes for peace to 'blossom' and for their stories to spread beyond the boundaries

of their local, regional and national contexts (P6/P22). The imaginary of peace carried within it the importance of being heard, not just by their peers and by their communities, but also within the corridors of power. With a direct appeal to the President, the political self became evident in a manifesto for change and peace (P3/P21).

The participants described their ambitions to study and 'become someone' in the future (P19). Their career designs to study medicine, psychology or law were intrinsically linked with the altruistic desire to help others, outlined above. The participants linked their chances of individual success in life with the chances for peace to prosper. Their life plans were directly associated with the political context.

A sense of belonging: The harmonious self and the imaginary of good living

The harmonious self was developed through a collaborative engagement with cultural values and traditions. Indigenous participants collectively reconnected with concepts like *Wët wët fxi`zenxi* or 'good living' (*buen vivir*) which emphasises a harmonious relationship with their cultural heritage and environment. This shared process of cultural reaffirmation provided them with a renewed sense of belonging and integration, transforming their identities to align with their cultural roots and fostering a sense of unity and peace within themselves and their communities.

Participation in conflict disrupts this sense of harmony. It causes 'ruptures' from nature, land and community (Charles, 2021). It destroys the foundations of peace upon which the Nasa culture is built. The Indigenous participants therefore described their experiences of conflict as being in a state of 'disharmony'. For them disharmony is tantamount to a crisis of identity that

generates alienation from themselves and their surroundings: 'You become lost. You lose connections to the world around you, but also within you. It creates unbalance' (P16).

Disharmony constitutes a lack of cohesion as they became 'lost physically and spiritually' in the world (P20). The Nasa relationship to their land is so significant that when children and teenagers are removed from it by armed groups, they are not only exposed to the violence of conflict, but they are also forced to forsake and forget their language and customs. It is a form of cultural estrangement.

Indigenous teenagers often navigate the complex interplay between their traditional cultural practices and the influence of Western modernity. It has created cultural erosion and a conflict of identity as Indigenous teenagers often lack a sense of belonging to either (Garcés-Perés and Alarcón-Muñoz, 2022). Having lived through violence, however, the Indigenous participants of this study experienced a renewed commitment to their Indigenous values. Good living was not only a way to make amends, but it was also the way to progress and exist in the world. It provided meaning and purpose for them after the horrors of war: 'It is more than being able to say sorry for me. It is a way to absorb what has happened to me and understand it so I can move on and be at one with the world' (P20).

Re-imagination

The four identity trajectories outlined above do not represent static psychological traits, but dynamic and relational self-understandings rooted in alternative social imaginaries. Importantly, these identities were shaped not only by internal reflection but through the

collective process of re-imagination: a dialogic, symbolic, and future-facing reconstruction of the self.

Re-imagination, as defined in this study, consisted of four interdependent elements, as depicted in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3].

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The first was *self-reflection* (on past trauma and stigma), in which participants critically re-examined the labels imposed on them. **They were able to shape the imaginary of empowerment through the realisation of their agency and critical evaluation of their context to reject stigma and look forward to a positive future.** This process of reframing past experience was a foundational step in reconfiguring identity.

The second element was *mutual recognition*, whereby participants affirmed and humanised one another’s narratives through peer listening and shared vulnerability. **They were able to shape the imaginary of community through engaging with shared experiences to build empathy and courage.** This relational dynamic allowed for the externalisation of shame and the recovery of narrative voice.

Third, *creative authorship* emerged as a tool for symbolic re-authoring. Through metaphor, future projection, and storytelling, participants imagined alternative self-constructions. **They were able to shape the imaginary of peace through reframing their lived experience beyond one of trauma to establish meaning in their lives and inspires them to**

contribute to a peaceful society. This act of narrative reconstruction enabled participants to test out possible selves and move beyond imposed identities.

Finally, *dialogue* served as a space for ethical reflection and communal negotiation of justice, responsibility, and healing. **Indigenous participants were able to shape the imaginary of good living through a re-engagement with their cultural and spiritual values that emanated from discussing the impact of rupture.** Such conversations allowed participants to move beyond silence or polarisation, and towards a more nuanced engagement with their past and future roles. Together, these four interwoven practices—self-reflection, mutual recognition, creative authorship, and dialogue—formed the scaffolding for identity transformation.

Discussion

Through dialogic and reflective practices embedded in the workshops, participants engaged in a process of narrative identity construction that brought coherence, agency, and moral orientation to their life stories. This process aligns with McAdams' (2001) concept of narrative identity work—the reinterpretation of life events to construct meaning and continuity over time. The four thematic identities discerned represent distinct but interconnected dimensions of a reimagined self.

The stronger self reflected growing personal agency and self-efficacy. Participants described a shift from powerlessness to control, echoing Markus and Nurius's (1986) 'possible selves'. These narratives followed a redemptive arc (McAdams, 2006), reframing suffering as a

catalyst for growth and countering dominant imaginaries of failure imposed on demobilised youth.

The altruistic self was marked by a turn toward others—helping peers, building community, and preventing future violence. This moral repositioning aligns with Erikson's (1968) concept of 'generativity' and Cahill's (2007) notion of 'shared reflexivity' in YPAR, whereby lived experience becomes a driver for civic engagement. Through mutual recognition, participants reframed personal harm as a basis for social contribution and found belonging in solidarity and care.

The political self emerged through narratives of critical consciousness and civic purpose. Participants envisioned roles as peacebuilders or political actors, challenging the 'master narratives' that define former child soldiers as either victims or threats (Hammack, 2010). Their imagined futures were animated by an ethic of justice and reconciliation, resonating with Freire's (1970) *conscientização*. This finding echoes Blattman and Annan (2010), who observed high levels of political participation among former child soldiers in Uganda—suggesting that violent experiences can catalyse civic action.

The harmonious self, particularly present among Indigenous participants, reflected a reorientation toward cultural identity, ancestral values, and spiritual balance. This identity, rooted in the imaginary of *buen vivir*, functioned as epistemic resistance (Fricker, 2007), asserting Indigenous frameworks of healing over Western psychological models. Hermans' (2001) dialogical self is visible here in the integration of positions—victim, survivor, cultural steward—into a spiritually coherent narrative.

These four identities were not static categories but symbolic constructions embedded in social imaginaries—of empowerment, community, peace, and *buen vivir*—that shaped participants’ sense of self across temporal, moral, and relational dimensions. Identity work unfolded across three planes: making sense of the past, navigating exclusion in the present, and constructing ethically meaningful futures.

The four interrelated dimensions of positive identity outlined by the study (self-awareness and control, improved relationships, renewed purpose, and a sense of belonging) echo the PYD model (Catalano et al., 2004). Within the study, they emerged as outcomes of relational and symbolic re-imagination rather than as developmental prerequisites.

Participants crafted positive identities through storytelling, metaphor, recognition, and ethical dialogue. This process of re-imagination enabled them not only to reinterpret traumatic experiences but to project futures rooted in social inclusion and moral viability. Their imagined selves—as helpers, peacebuilders, or cultural mediators—stood in contrast to dominant narratives of deviance or irreparability.

These shifts illustrate movement away from negative identities marked by alienation (Erikson, 1968; Hihara et al., 2019) toward coherent and socially valued selves. Identity transformation was neither linear nor complete but involved negotiating multiple internal positions through peer dialogue and creative authorship. Many narratives followed a redemptive arc (Pals, 2006), converting suffering into insight and social commitment.

Crucially, these projected identities were not abstract ideals but grounded in collective practices of witnessing and solidarity. This symbolic labour enabled participants to redefine themselves in relation to violence, belonging, and the future.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual healing. They support recent scholarship that suggests identity reconstruction is central to post-conflict reintegration (Gluecker et al., 2022). Reintegration is not simply about leaving armed groups or accessing services—it requires a moral and symbolic repositioning of the self in relation to society (McMullin, 2022; Wessells, 2006). When this identity work is neglected, reintegration often falters (Denov & Marchand, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2021).

For former child soldiers, this challenge is acute. Their identities are shaped by overlapping experiences of coercion, harm, and agency. As Ladisch (2019) and Worthen et al. (2019) argue, reintegration frameworks often reduce them to binary roles—victim or threat—without attending to the complexity of their lived experience. Without space for reflection, accountability, and imagination, reintegration can remain superficial and the risk of recidivism increases (Sharif, 2013).

YPAR offers a generative alternative. By engaging youth in participatory storytelling and collective inquiry, it creates the symbolic and social conditions for identity transformation. In our study, it allowed participants to move from being objects of reintegration to agents of narrative reconstruction—redefining both who they are and how they relate to the society around them.

This shift from externally imposed scripts to self-authored narratives is not only transformative, but also fundamentally decolonial. It aligns with approaches that reject universalising narratives of trauma and recovery in favour of epistemologies rooted in local meaning-making and collective experience (Smith, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). By centering youth voices, privileging Indigenous knowledge, and embracing relational forms of inquiry, YPAR challenges extractive models of research and reframes the reintegration of former child soldiers

as a culturally embedded, symbolic process. Rather than imposing prescriptive identities, it facilitates co-authorship and community-rooted imaginaries of healing—constituting not only a methodological choice, but an ethical and political stance against colonial legacies in peacebuilding.

Limitations and directions for further research

This study, while providing valuable insights into the re-imagination of positive identity among former child soldiers through a YPAR approach, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this article was not co-authored with the research participants and may therefore limit the depth of their perspectives reflected in the analysis. Although the participants contributed significantly through their narratives and involvement in the analysis of the data, this limitation might affect the authenticity and comprehensiveness of the findings, as the participants' voices are filtered through the researchers' interpretations rather than being presented through a collaborative authorship.

Second, while the study highlights the development of positive identities among participants, it does not address the broader applicability of these findings across different contexts or populations. The specific experiences and outcomes of the former child soldiers involved in this research may not be representative of all individuals in similar situations. Factors such as regional differences, varying levels of trauma, and individual personal histories may influence the generalisability of the results.

Another limitation concerns the potential for selection bias, as the participants involved were already engaged in creative or media-based projects. This may indicate a higher level of support, openness to reflection, or readiness for transformation compared to other former child soldiers who have not had access to such opportunities. As such, the findings may reflect the experiences of a relatively empowered subgroup, and caution should be taken when generalising these identity transformations across all disengaged youth from armed groups.

Finally, while this study demonstrates powerful narrative and psychosocial shifts in the short term, it does not attempt to measure behavioural change or longer-term reintegration outcomes. Narrative transformation may not always translate directly into structural change or social inclusion. Future research might explore how identity reconstruction through YPAR relates to changes in life trajectories over time.

Conclusion

This article advances an original reading of YPAR as re-imagination—a psychosocial, narrative process that moves beyond a narrow emphasis on voice and advocacy. Through an intensive, participatory writing workshop, former child soldiers engaged in self-reflection, mutual recognition, creative authorship, and ethical dialogue that catalysed identity reconstruction across four trajectories (stronger, altruistic, political, harmonious). We argue that such short, intensive encounters function as catalysts rather than endpoints of transformation: they initiate durable meaning-making that participants may continue to elaborate in their lives and communities. Framing YPAR as a narrative, healing-centred practice foregrounds agency,

belonging, and moral purpose. Although our design limited iterative action cycles, it demonstrates how YPAR-inspired methods can enact reintegration as symbolic and social repositioning, not merely service access. Future work should connect these narrative gains to longitudinal outcomes and programme design, integrating youth co-research more fully across extended cycles of inquiry, action, and reflection.

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