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A Critical Review of Participatory Action Research with Adolescents in a Mexican Group Home

Rebecca Danielle Strickland - *danielle@iteso.mx*; Ximena De la Mora González - *ri728100@iteso.mx*

Abstract

This article is based on an experience of participatory action research (PAR) with 11 adolescents in a publicly subsidized group home in Mexico. The project focused on the analysis of structural violence through the production of autobiographical narratives, podcasts, poetry, photography, raps, sculptures, and drawings. In dialogue with the pieces produced through the PAR, we explore the multiple forms of violence faced by young people living in group homes, highlighting their constant movement within a system where the interests of adults are prioritized over the needs of the youth. We also analyze the scope of the project from a decolonial perspective, offering insights to improve PAR with young people, a critical analysis of the institutionalization of adolescents, and reflections regarding the intergenerational connections in PAR projects stemming from the theory of loving professionalism.

Keywords: *institutionalized adolescents, violence, participatory action research, loving professionalism, group homes*

Introduction

Seeking to better understand the violences that affect institutionalized adolescents in Mexico, in the second semester of 2023, we conducted a participatory action research (PAR) project with 11 adolescents living in a group home in Guadalajara. In addition to learning more about the diverse forms of violence faced by these young people, the experience also led us to a critical analysis of the scope of PAR with institutionalized adolescents. In this article, we address both these topics.

We begin with an overview of group homes in Mexico, followed by a brief presentation of the two underlying concepts for our analysis in this paper: violence and loving professionalism. We then offer a critical assessment of the project's design and ethical considerations, before delving into the results. The findings and discussion are organized according to the two theories of interest (violence and loving professionalism). In the spirit of participatory action research, we have included photos and textual excerpts from the special issue of the *Rompemuros* journal produced in this project.

Contextualization of Group Homes in Mexico

The main reasons for the institutionalization of children in Mexico include poverty, displacement, abuse, neglect, addictions, imprisonment, and illness (physical and mental) of

parents (Manzo & García, 2018). It is also important to note that the growth of organized crime in Mexico over the past twenty years has increased the population of children and adolescents living in group homes, either because their families engage in criminal activities or because criminal groups have targeted them.

The number of children and adolescents living in institutions in Mexico is unclear. According to the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico, there were 946 group homes in the country in 2020, with an overall population of around 22,000 children and adolescents (REDIM, 2023b). That same year the national census reported 53,862 children and adolescents in "social assistance accommodations", of which two-thirds were between 10 and 17 years old (INEGI, 2020). This number includes not only group homes but also shelters for indigenous people or migrants and rehabilitation centers). Regardless of the numbers, the underfunding of these institutions is a serious concern. In 2015, 58.8% of group homes received no financial support from the government (INEGI, 2015).

In most cases, these young people live with a variable number of peers, in facilities with common spaces (bedrooms, dining room, living area, etc.), educational and medical services. In other words, they rarely leave the institution (Manzo Chávez, Vallejo Castro, & Vázquez García, 2021). Even though group homes represent a protective measure to ensure the comprehensive care of the residents, institutionalized children and adolescents face the challenge of adapting to a context of confinement, generating an accumulation of negative, ambivalent, and generally confusing emotions, which often cannot be controlled (Arias et al., 2021).

Studies have found that the institutionalization of young people can have harmful effects on their physical, cognitive and emotional development, including neurological and psychological damage. According to Ibáñez-Velasco (2014), children and adolescents living in institutions in Mexico tend to lose one month of linear growth for every two or three months of institutionalized life, due to nutritional and healthcare deficiencies in group homes, along with the effects of socio-emotional abandonment.

Group homes can be seen as a product of the chronic violence plaguing Mexico (Jiménez & Briseño, 2021; Moreno, 2020). Since the war on drugs began in 2007, nearly 840,000 children have lost at least one parent to homicides (Jiménez & Briseño, 2021), and an additional 159,000 children and adolescents' parents are among those who have been 'disappeared' by organized crime cartels (*Tejiendo Redes Infancia*, 2023). However, policy makers continue to implement isolated and decontextualized measures, rather than recognizing the need for systemic, collaborative responses, with the participation of children and adolescents and other social actors.

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Conceptual Framework

Violences

Violence is a complex phenomenon whose typologies, manifestations, causes, and consequences have been studied from various disciplines. One of the most important contributions comes from Galtung (2003), who distinguishes three types of violence: direct, structural, and symbolic. Direct violence is exercised by a specific aggressor; however, when the source is not identifiable, the harm can be categorized as indirect or structural violence. For example, poverty that produces pain and death constitutes structural violence, because it is the result of the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities in a society. Symbolic or cultural violence refers to harm caused by beliefs and values. These ways of thinking can lead to actions and behaviors that invite direct violence and attempt to legitimize structural violence (Prado Pérez, 2018).

Arendt (1970) recognizes an unethical relationship between the concepts of violence and power. Violences increase, for example, when a government loses power and legitimacy, as is happening in Mexico today. In other words, the instability that comes with the loss of a government's power is an invitation to violence, which could result in terror or domination (Arendt, 1970). The discrediting of the Mexican government is directly linked to the growing power of neoliberalism, making "structural inequalities turn into individual problems" (Marcial, 2016, p.137). Most modern violences tend to be related to the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of the lower classes. In other words, the capitalist system that rules the world is based on violent forms of reproduction (Netto, 2007), and those at the bottom of the ladder, such as young people in group homes, tend to be disproportionately affected by the multiple forms of violence.

Feminist theory recognizes violence as a structural and symbolic phenomenon sustained by systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. This makes it possible to identify how certain sectors of the population, in this case institutionalized youth, face differentiated forms of violence (Baca & Thornton, 1998). The contributions of feminist theory enable us to understand the multitude of violences, from invisible oppressions to torturous deaths. Feminisms have shown that direct violence is linked to dispossession, exploitation, and structural violences. It is often used to strategically control communities and the spaces they inhabit. Thus, we must consider the mechanisms of domination, reflecting broader power dynamics to comprehend violence (Arendt, 1970; Segato, 2016).

Loving professionalism

Emotional support from adults involved in group homes for children and adolescents is fundamental to strengthen these young people's confidence and communication abilities. However, there must be clear limits in affection towards the youth, creating a strong identity as a professional caregiver, not to be confused with the love expected from a parent or partner.

Cárdenas (2008) proposes the concept of loving professionalism to explain the importance of the relationship between street educators and children. This involves the implementation of models designed by understanding the instability in these young peoples' lives. Due to the lack of love in their lives, institutionalized children and adolescents can be easily confused by affection received from a staff member, volunteer or other professional. It is not uncommon for children and adolescents to develop fantasies about educators as parents or partners (Strickland, 2015a). This confusion can result in feelings of disappointment and neglect that, contrary to intentions, contribute to issues of insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1999). Therefore, we must emphasize the *professionalism* required in these relationships. Thus, to generate the necessary confidence and bonding, without creating confusion about the relationship, it is critical that the role and limits of each adult in a young person's life are clear.

Educators in group homes often replace the parental role, serving as guides, caregivers and the primary source of emotional support. Loving support from an educator can inspire and motivate a young person to "follow in their footsteps" and take on a professional life project. With clear intentions and good communication, loving professionalism can be the basis of success stories for children and adolescents who grow up in group homes. Such relationships can foster confidence and resilience, enabling institutionalized youth to confront multiple forms of violence in their lives.

Participatory Action Research with Institutionalized Adolescents

Participatory action research (PAR) aims to generate socio-political awareness and transform the social reality of those involved in the project (Balcazar, 2003). This project is based on the three principles proposed by Abello Colak and Pearce (2019) for 'bottom-up' PAR. First, we reject the positivist dichotomies that separate the researcher from the object of study and the 'subjects'. On the contrary, the project is based on the understanding that the research team and the adolescents are part of the same socio-political context and should all contribute to the production of knowledge. This brings us to the second principle, which is the appreciation of the 'diversity of knowledge' in the group, due to our different experiential and academic trajectories. In this sense, the exchange of knowledge facilitates the search for effective solutions based on lived realities (Abello Colak & Pearce, 2019). Thirdly, the purpose of this research project goes beyond contributing to academic discussions on institutionalized youth and violences. We are more concerned with bringing to light the multiple forms of violence faced by adolescents in Mexican group homes and helping them find meaning in their lives.

The interdisciplinary research team for this project was composed of six females: four academics (a social anthropologist, a legal philosopher who specializes in punishment, an educational psychologist, and an international relations scholar who studies violences) and two undergraduate students (one studying education and the other psychology). In August 2023, we met the director of a group home for approximately 40 boys, ranging in age from 8 to 22. With

great enthusiasm, he accepted our proposal to pilot the PAR which we had previously implemented with incarcerated men through the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. We requested participants over the age of 14, as we planned to include academic texts and writing exercises to stimulate reflections. However, in the first session we were surprised by their limited reading and writing skills. Several participants did not attend school, and some were just learning basic literacy or working towards their primary school diploma. We thus exchanged academic readings for bibliotherapy, using literature to encourage reflection, empathy, resilience, and personal growth. As Shrodes and Russel explain, bibliotherapy is "a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature—an interaction which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth" (Silverberg, 2003, p.131). With this approach, the adolescents had the opportunity to explore their own challenges and violent life experiences through the stories.

We further adapted the project design to include logotherapy, a pedagogy that stems from Frankl's work with prisoners in concentration camps, who, like the teenagers who participated in this project, were deprived of their freedom. Logotherapy is based on the premise that the search for meaning and purpose in life is a fundamental motivation for human beings (Frankl, 1979). The initial objective of the project was thus broadened to help the participants find meaning and purpose in their lives, while exploring violence with various dynamics.

The workshop included 13 weekly sessions, in which we sought to create a safe and supportive space for the adolescents. With a variety of group and individual activities, participants shared their stories and reflections on violences through (auto)biographical narratives, raps, podcasts, drawings, poems, and photographs. The project resulted in the publication of a special issue of the journal *Rompemuros* (vol. 7).

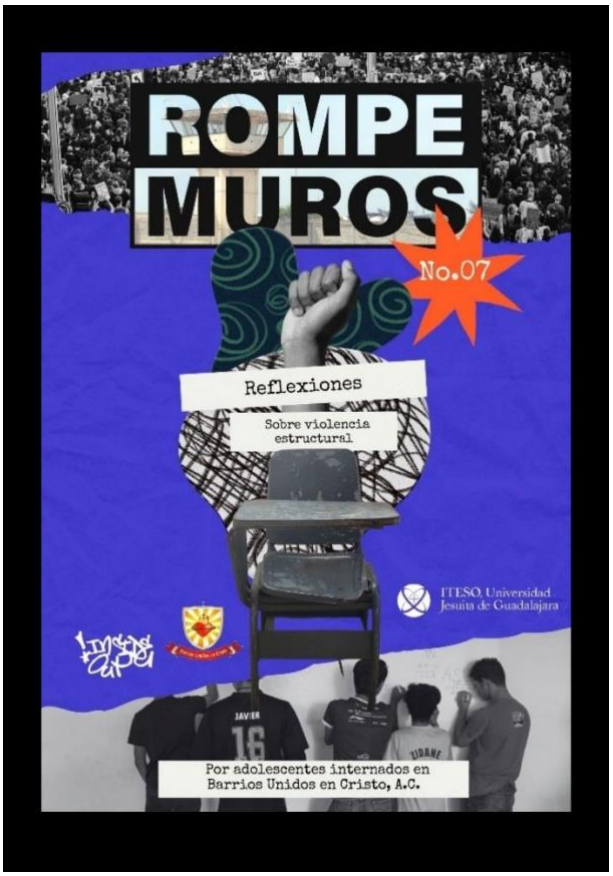
In all, we worked with 11 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17, each of whom chose an ‘artistic name’ to be used in *Rompemuros*. Table 1 presents the participants’ chosen pseudonyms, ages, and something we remember about each one.

Table 1. Project participants

Participants’ artistic names	Ages	Personal traits
Matilda	14	Loved writing poetry for his girlfriend
MACS	14	Never lost hope of being reunited with his mom
Joseph Moes	14	Boasted 5 great escapes from group homes
DEA	14	Went to live with his aunt shortly after the end of the project
RHJS	15	A friend to everyone
Josh	15	Plans to study psychology
Doble FF	16	A great graffiti artist
Valy Trebi	16	A passionate advocate of LGBTQ+ rights

GP	17	An excellent writer who rarely spoke
José Cristo	17	Nicknamed Peter Pan (rumored to be 21 years old)
JF	17	A talented rap artist

Figure 1. Cover of *Rompemuros* (vol. 7)



From the previous PAR project in prison, we conserved the method of Socratic dialogue, asking questions to guide the group in sharing ideas and experiences that often contrasted with others. These dialogues led us to broaden our understanding of the multiple violences in these adolescents' lives. We also continued to use participant observation. At the end of each session, the university research team recorded a 'debrief' where we recounted the activities, mentioned what caught our attention, and shared ideas to improve the process. The recordings were transcribed by one of the research assistants and saved in an electronic file with access limited to the team. When reviewing the transcripts of the debriefs, the researchers added deeper reflections to the initial impressions. Lastly, we used excerpts from the narratives produced for the *Rompemuros* journal and podcasts as data.

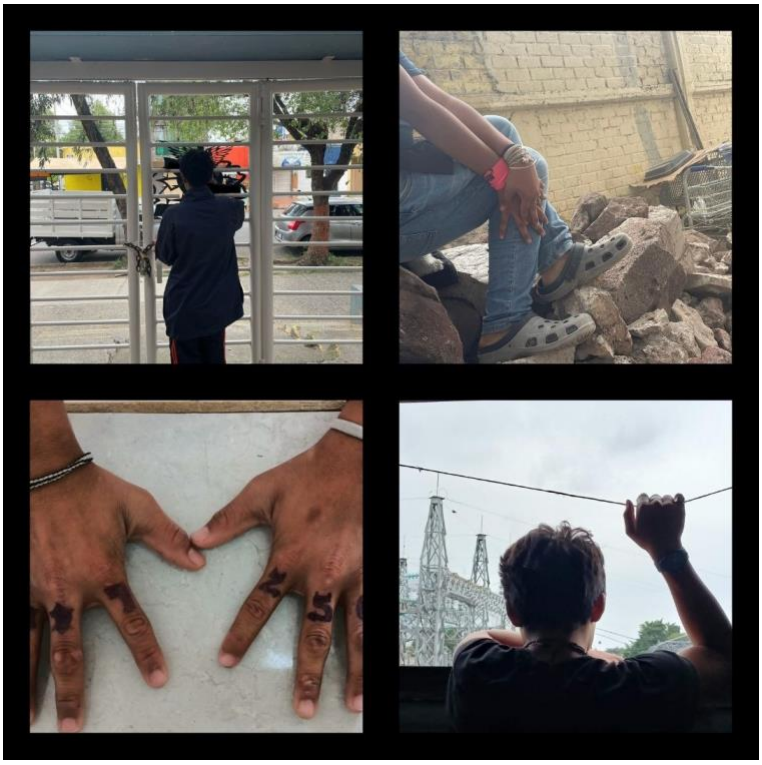
This paper includes data from the debriefs of the workshop sessions, podcasts, and the content of the special edition of *Rompemuros*. The source of each citation can be identified as follows: 1) data from the debrief transcripts are identified with the code D and the date of the session; 2) the podcast excerpts use the code P and the artistic name chosen by the adolescent who made the podcast; 3) citations from the journal are presented with the code RM7 and the page number.[i]

Ethical considerations

Conducting participatory action research with institutionalized adolescents implies a variety of ethical considerations. Beginning with the basics, in the first session of the workshop we explained the project in terms that were comprehensible for adolescents. We respected the decision of those who were not interested in participating and those who chose to enter the project signed a consent form, along with the director of the center who served as their legal guardian.

One of the main ethical considerations was the tension between the rights of the adolescents to receive recognition for their work published in the journal and the need to 'protect' their identity. We used semi-anonymity in the workshop (only first names) and each participant chose an artistic name or pseudonym for the publications. Additionally, each participant chose a unique style for a personal portrait (without showing his face), to be published in the journal. Some chose a photo on their hands, others of their whole body from the backside and others covered their faces.

Figure 2. Portraits



Another ethical concern that emerged in this project stemmed from incompliance with authentic participatory action research. One of the bases for PAR is the co-design of the project and the selection of the topic, based on the interests and needs of the participants (Balcazar, 2003). In this case, the project was designed by the research team, as it had to be authorized by the university's Ethics Commission before initiating the fieldwork. The adolescents were the artists, poets, musicians, photographers and podcasters who produced the content for the journal. However, they did not have the opportunity to design the research project itself. Thus, while the project was largely participatory, we failed to involve the adolescents at all stages of the process.

Accomplishments and Shortcomings

Compared to projects with young people on the streets, it is important to recognize how the institutional setting facilitates participatory action research. While several participants would sleep during the workshop, arrive late or step out of the sessions without explanation, their attendance was regular, since they had nowhere else to go. Also, the fact that they did not have access to drugs increased their participation and the overall level of productivity of the group.

One of the main accomplishments that we noted during this brief experience was an increased interest in higher education. Several participants asked us about different careers, and they all wanted to visit the university. We thus planned an event to present the special issue of the journal at ITESO. The participants arrived early for a pizza party and a tour of the campus. Those who produced podcasts especially enjoyed visiting the recording studios.

The creative freedom encouraged in the workshop resulted in a variety of pieces through which the adolescents communicated, without necessarily using writing skills. They used drawings, sculptures, songs, podcasts, and dictated stories and other texts for the research assistants to transcribe. Although the PAR focused on the exploration of violences, the special issue also includes love letters, drawings with dedications, and plans for dream homes.

Figure 3. Artwork produced during the workshop

The generational gap between the researchers and the adolescents represented a significant obstacle for this PAR. Shortly before the project began, a famous rap artist from Guadalajara, Lefty, was murdered. Many of the participants were still in mourning, and his music regularly came up in class discussions. While the researchers knew nothing about this cultural icon, the undergraduate assistants helped bridge the generational gap. They would tell us about him as we commuted to and from the group home and used his lyrics to spark discussions about violence.

Along this same line, it is important to consider that the project was originally designed for adults incarcerated in prison. We knew we would need to adapt the workshop to successfully engage the adolescents, so we selected shorter, less complex readings. However, as mentioned above, once we met the participants, we realized that we needed to look for other resources. "Several of them don't know how to read. We tried to guide them in the reflections, but our plan to include independent reading won't work" (D-20230922).

In addition to the low reading level, we had limited success with the initial writing activities. "The idea of producing a journal like the ones we shared with them [previous volumes of *Rompemuros*] doesn't excite them. There's no interest" (D-20230908).

We understood that the low participation level was not simply a matter of apathy. The circumstances the youth faced made it difficult for them to focus during the workshop:

> It's not so much that they're not interested…those who leave the room, for example, talking to JF, he said, 'It's just that I have very serious family problems right now.' They are not in a position to be able to participate in a workshop... It is a challenge for us to pull them in. We can try to engage them in the activities, but we also need to remember that we don't know what is happening in their lives, the struggles they are facing outside of this safe space. (D-230915)

Lastly, we were subject to institutional restrictions that contrasted with the spirit of participatory action research. The project was part of the semester workload for the researchers and their assistants, and the sessions were planned as part of the adolescents' weekly schedule at the group home. Deadlines were set for reports and publications with authorities from both institutions. Thus, a brooding sense of academic extraction overshadowed the organic participatory process that we originally imagined for the project. The sense of guilt worsened when we realized that the adolescents rightfully saw us as just another set of 'do-gooders' who would come and go, leaving them to face the multiple violences in their lives alone.

Findings and Discussion

As mentioned above, our analysis is based on the concepts of violence and loving professionalism. The category of violence is broken down into structural violence, where adultcentrism is largely relevant, and direct violence, setting a complex scenario for efforts stemming from loving professionalism.

Violences

Structural violence and adultcentrism.

The project revealed evidence of diverse structural violences faced by adolescents living in group homes. As we gained a deeper understanding of the adverse effects of institutionalization by listening to the participants' stories, we identified common issues that hinder the adolescents' development. Their trajectories could all be analyzed as 'circuits of displacements' (Strickland, 2015b), having lived in multiple homes and institutions before this one. They shared the common characteristic of instability, due to constant changes and separations. The uncertainty about their future caused a general sense of anxiety in the group. "They do not know if they will leave tomorrow or be here until they turn 18" (D-20230908).

The autobiography of 15-year-old 'Josh', *Yo comparto esto…* (I share this…), includes periods with extended family members as well as experiences in various institutions, after being taken from his parents and separated from his siblings:

> Once I turned five, I passed through several group homes. I didn't feel comfortable, I felt insecure, and I thought they were going to do the same thing to me. I thought a lot about my siblings, were they okay? I cried at night, but we were never reunited. I'd always get in trouble with the staff and with the other kids and they had to take me to another home. (RM7-p.6)

It is also important to note that the best interest of the child is rarely prioritized when they are relocated. Thus, these changes tend to foster deep-rooted feelings of abandonment. As a result, several of the life stories include escaping from the institutions and preferring to spend the night on the streets. This is exemplified by 'Joseph Moe' in his autobiography 'Mi nombre es…' (My name is…):

> When my mom died, my grandma took care of me and my siblings. I spent a year with my grandparents, but then they sent me to a group home called *Los Pinos*. I spent a year there and finished elementary school…Then my godmother from my first communion took me to another place called *Mairos Don Bosco*, which is another group home. I was going to stay only one year, but then a letter arrived from the Department of Family Services saying that I was going to stay a few more years. I didn't like that, so the next day I ran away [...] I went with some friends who care a lot about me. We got some beans and eggs for breakfast and then I went to my house, to get some things that I needed and to visit my grandmother and my siblings […] they took me back to *Mairos Don Bosco*, and I escaped again.
>
> I went to look for my father at his house in Tlajomulco. I knocked on his door and one of my aunts came out and told me he wasn't there. So, I went to look for a friend at her house […] She invited me to stay a few days. I called my family and told them I was ok and hung up. On June 4th of last year, I got picked up at 11:30 p.m. and they brought me [here]. (RM7-pp.10-11)

The constant movement of adolescents from one institution to another was reiterated shortly after we concluded the workshop when the group home was shut down for not complying with government regulations. The boys were distributed to various group homes, but due to a lack of available spaces, some were sent to drug rehabilitation centers for adults. When we contacted the director to organize the presentation of the special issue of the journal at the university, he was only able to track down four of the eleven participants from the project. According to the four who came, most of the others had escaped from the institutions to which they were sent.

Another form of structural violence was the instability we witnessed in the institution during the workshop. For example, on several occasions the workshop was interrupted or delayed when the center received donations, or authorities visited, and the participants were needed for

photos. It is important to recognize the adultcentrism in these situations, as participation of the adolescents in these events was obligatory. They also had other responsibilities that interfered with the workshop. For example, occasionally they would also arrive late because they had to clean other areas of the institution. No one could explain to us why these activities were not scheduled at other times.

Adultcentrism is also largely responsible for the bureaucratic processes that often keep adolescents from living with extended family. Such was the case with 'DEA'. It was not until the group home was shut down that the petition of his aunt and uncle was expedited so he could move in with them. Similarly, only 22% of applications from perspective parents in Mexico between 2014 and 2022 resulted in adoptions (REDIM, 2023a).

Furthermore, the adolescents did not have access to their case files. As explained in the following extract from a debrief session, this structural violence from the State exacerbates worries and feelings of abandonment.

> 'MASC' is the boy who they were making fun of last week, because he says that he is going to get out, that he's only waiting for it to be decided who he's going to live with. We asked him, 'And how long have you been waiting for that?' and the other kids laughed saying, 'Since the day he arrived.'
> His grandmother comes to visit every weekend, but he told me he wants to live with his mom. When I asked where his mother was, he said, 'I don't know, I haven't seen her since I've been here. She does drugs.' There's that dream of living with a loving mother… (D-230915)

Abandonment by family members is another form of violence that profoundly affects institutionalized adolescents' self-esteem. "[José Cristo] spoke a lot about the abandonment of his family. He doesn't understand why they do not love him and have not accepted him" (D-20230922). It is important to recognize that these dynamics of violence are often passed down from one generation to the next. As Leonel explained in his podcast:

> Violence can affect children because they cannot defend themselves [...] they are weak compared to adults. Some adults, well they use it […] psychologically, or to make kids do something they don't want. It's a chain of violence [...] their parents or aunts and uncles lived in violence, and they transmit it to the child. (P-Leonel, 2023)

Finally, it's important to note that this project, despite our intentions, was not exempt from replicating the structural violence embedded in the norms of academic research and its agenda. As mentioned above, the workshop was subject to the semester calendar and governed by productive interests. The research team proposed the dates and times for the sessions with little flexibility. At the end of the semester, we hosted a pizza party and gave the participants diplomas and copies of the journal to ease of guilt for being yet another group of adults to pass through their lives. However, we supplied no resources or proposals for them to continue what we started.

Direct violence

In the sessions, especially at the beginning of the workshop, the interactions between the participants reaffirmed the chronic violence in their lives. Their exchanges were generally rude, and offensive mockery revealed itself as a cultural norm. "They use their words to hurt each other, but it's a defense mechanism, a way to survive [...] they talked about how when they fight, they go to blows" (D-20230922).

From the first session of the workshop, we noted how dynamics were based on bullying and harassment, creating a hierarchy in the group. "There was a moment, well, worrying let's say, where one said, I'm not as beat down as the others" (D-20230908). This behavior represented a barrier for the group to form a supportive community among themselves. [Josh] commented, "I have classmates, but they're not friends. I don't trust them. I don't miss them. He has only been here for a little over a month. He's just focused on survival" (D-20230922).

The bullying we observed was particularly harsh towards homosexuals. "I'm a little worried about the teasing. [Valy Trevi] holds up well, but I don't have the group management skills to set limits with teenagers" (D-20230908). In his podcast, Valy Trevi explained that he has suffered more for being part of the LGBTQ+ community. "They've told me that I'm not normal, they make fun of me, they call me names, they stick gum on me. Homosexual people receive more bullying" (P-Valy Trevi, 2023).

Getting beat up and other forms of physical abuse were the primary expressions of direct violence cited by the participants. In a session where we analyzed the relations between emotions and violence, "they identified two primary emotions, sadness and anger, and above all anger leads them to physical violence" (D-0230922). The outcome of fights defined the hierarchy in the group; the biggest, strongest boys were at the top. It was easy for us to identify those who were most feared, as the moment some of them entered the classroom, the atmosphere changed. We noticed how the younger boys would look down, and showed other signs of discomfort, revealing the impact of these violent dynamics on their daily lives within the institution's walls.

Through the adolescents' stories, we also noted how drug use directly relates to the chronic violence in their lives. Some told stories of how drugs helped them avoid their emotions, especially when instability reappeared in their lives. This is illustrated by the experience of 'José Cristo':

> I don't know how many days it was, but living on the street was hell. I was cold, hungry, and I used drugs. I left my house when my mother died. My dad beat me and didn't treat me well and I thought that on the street I would be better. Those who I thought were my friends offered me drugs, and I fell. They relaxed me and helped me forget everything, but then when the effect wore off, I felt alone. (RM7, p.36)

This contrasts with experiences inside the group homes, associated with detox and rehabilitation from drug addictions. 'GP' narrated:

> Drug addiction makes you feel worthless. It hurts you physically and mentally. You think that you are worthless, that everyone rejects you. But it is not like that, you harm yourself. You're the one who hurts yourself. Look for a job and you will have everything you want [...] There will be some people who reject you, but not all. If you have a job and a place to live, you'll be happy. (RM7-p.29)

We were overwhelmed by the multiple violences in these adolescents' lives. To counteract them, at least during the workshop sessions, we turned to practices of loving professionalism.

Loving professionalism

Before attempting to frame this PAR in the field of loving professionalism, it is important to recognize how time limitations affected the project. After 13 sessions together, the bonding process was just beginning, and trusting relationships were not fully formed. Likewise, we were only able to delve so far into our collective analysis of the implications of structural violence in the participants' lives. Considering this, we emphasize the importance of long-term commitments for PAR projects (Balcazar, 2003).

We were shocked by the number of students from other universities covering their social service requirement in the institution. On several occasions a staff member would bring some of them to the workshop and ask us to include them in the activities, because they had nothing to do. The oversupply of volunteers generated an attitude of indifference from the adolescents towards them (and initially towards us).

In the early sessions, we were disturbed by the fact that several of the adolescents didn't remember our names, even though we always used nametags. However, considering how many different people came through their lives for a few hours each week, it was understandable. It may even be a defense mechanism to avoid the pain of abandonment, considering that most of us would never see them again after we completed whatever project we had agreed to carry out with the institution.

> I noticed that they began to fall asleep […] We will have to rethink some strategies and activities that are more dynamic for adolescents, competitions, challenges, sweets. (D-20230908).

> In the first session their faces were like 'more folks who came to work with us, now what are they going to make us do?' (D-20231026)

Even though we were only going to be with the group for a few months, loving professionalism made sense when we recognized the various forms of chronic violences in the participants' lives and their need for support. Thus, our interactions with the adolescents took on caring and inspiring nuances, founded in logotherapy. This represented a significant change from the original design of the project with men in prison.

> The difference between adult and child participants is very apparent. The pedagogy of *Inside-Out* [designed for incarcerated adults] is more horizontal. The idea is that we are going to create together, we're facilitators, we bring them the opportunity if they want to publish their life stories, if they want to share their work. But here we were saved by the fact that [the psychologist on the research team] played a very maternal role: 'you, my love', 'well done, my dear'... (D-231026)

We first saw a transformation in the group when we exchanged the readings for storytelling. By receiving what they likely never experienced during early childhood, the 'rough teenagers' seemed to turn into 'innocent children', eager to comply with our instructions.

> The magic of storytelling is being able to mirror oneself with the story of others [...] Today we saw the importance of ensuring a safe space for the workshop, where they can express themselves and interact, and then begin the process of self-recognition and self-validation. (D-230915)

In addition to this approach, the members of the research team shared their own stories and regularly asked the adolescents about their plans for the future. Here we noticed significant changes as the semester progressed.

> I was struck by the fact that today the topic of education and vocation came up. [Josh] said that he wants to be a psychologist or a nutritionist [...] It was something that we had planned since the first sessions, with the theme of logotherapy and the opportunity to project oneself, to serve the world, and I think that today we really saw it in this question of 'my vocation' and 'I want to be something different in the future'. (D-231019)

Another evidence of the growing connection between the participants and the research team was how they began to include the name of the university in their artwork.

Figure 4. Artwork with the university's name

Finally, loving professionalism favored the construction of a safe environment, in which listening and understanding from modeling and practice were the elements that little by little allowed us to know more about the adolescents. "[Matilda] made a significant qualitative leap. Before he didn't speak, and now he shared his love poems with us and even laughed." (D-20230929). The positive effects of loving professionalism were also reflecting in the groups' appropriation of the physical space. After the first month, we noticed that they tried to keep the classroom clean, arrive on time, and even invited their caregivers to the workshop. We also noted a genuine interest in the project, and they no longer fell asleep during the sessions.

Figure 5. A safe space

Final Reflections

Group homes for children and adolescents in Mexico should be recognized as part of the patriarchal structures that dominate the western world. Thus, many adolescents are locked up in institutions under the false pretense of protectionism. Without clearly recognizing the roots of the violence leading to the abandonment of these young people, the problems they face are only superficially addressed.

The underfinancing of group homes results in precarious conditions and the regular turnover of personnel, further contributing to the instability in the lives of these children and adolescents and ultimately generating an environment that does not favor their integral development or their emotional well-being. The conflicting data and opacity of the overall context of group homes in Mexico reflect the lack of interest by society and the State. The invisibilization of these young people translates into lengthy bureaucratic processes and a variety of rights violations.

Participatory action research with institutionalized adolescents not only helps to visibilize them; it invites these young people to personally contribute to the construction of society's perception of them. This is especially important in a world where technology, misinformation, and fear increase generational gaps, and adolescents are especially prone to diverse structural violences.

However, research with participatory lines of action does not guarantee the results will truly reflect the perceptions of young people. Reflection and constructive criticism should be constant throughout the process. In this sense, we must not forget that we are all part of a patriarchal, adultcentric society. The structural violence in this system perpetuates largely because of our lack of self-criticism.

It is probably unrealistic to aspire to perfection in participatory action research with institutionalized adolescents, but this should not deter us from the road of continuous improvement. From this project we came to understand time restriction as an ethical consideration in projects with young people, especially those in unstable conditions. Support and understanding are key to avoid being just another group of adults who enter and leave their lives without looking back. The goal is to carry out supportive, professional practices in such a way that the adolescents feel loved, without feeling abandoned when the project ends.

Although participatory action research is based on horizontal interactions between the parties involved, the social hierarchies and power structures should not be ignored. Adolescents are often excluded from the recognition and remuneration that adults receive, such as the publication of this paper. This is especially relevant when it comes to collaborating with young people whose identity must be protected. Thus, it is crucial to weigh the balance between costs and benefits. Furthermore, the benefits should consider the intentions and motivations of the adolescents who choose to participate in the project.

Exploring this experience and recognizing the shortcomings of this so-called PAR project is essential to improve our practice. It is necessary to negotiate with institutions to limit time constraints and confront other Eurocentric university norms that require structured planning from the beginning. This would allow projects to be more aligned with the real needs and interests of young people. In this sense, successful PAR with institutionalized adolescents depends more on understanding of their specific context, by spending time together and sharing experiences, than the theories and data in this research field.

As researchers we need to come up with creative strategies to carry out these projects and still meet the hegemonic academic requirements of our universities. These approaches may include involving students in the projects, proposing events with the participation of adolescents for the dissemination of the results, and seeking opportunities to publish in “decolonial” journals and present findings through artistic exhibitions that are not aimed at a single sector.

Figure 6. Flyer for the event with adolescents from the PAR at the university

PAR projects carried out in group homes have a limited scope in terms of transforming the violent living conditions in this context. The power structures that sustain the violence will not be taken down by critiques or publications. However, as researchers, rather than joining the hierarchical norms focused on protectionism of children and adolescents, we should take advantage of academia to help young people raise awareness about the multiple forms of violence they face. With a critical analysis of our work that seeks to decolonize these practices and overcome the norm of speaking for children and adolescents and other marginalized groups, we can continue to chip away the patriarchal power structures that sustain so much of the violence that disproportionately affects young people around the world.

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Notes

[i] For example: **D-231026** comes from the *debrief* after the session on October 26, 2023; **RM7-p.24**, means that the excerpt comes from page 24 of the journal; **P-Lefty** means that the quote comes from the podcast created by 'Lefty'.