Social representations of violence among young Chileans involved in violence

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RESUMEN

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study on the social representation of violence among young Chileans who have been involved in violence. Starting from interview-data that show their subjective perspective, a conceptual model of their social representation is constructed that identifies elements that favor or inhibit the violent actions. Results show two types of factors involved in the transgression of the "limit of violence": personal characteristics and contextual elements, making the distinction between the temporal context (the moment of violence) and the spatial context (the place of violence). In addition, the young participants of this study establish a relationship between their violent actions and the perception of threat, especially regarding their social identity. In this relationship, the function of violent actions is the neutralization of this threat. This understanding constitutes the nucleus of their social representation of violence. Implications for preventive strategies and community interventions are discussed.

PALABRAS CLAVE   violence, youth, social representations

Representaciones sociales de la violencia entre jóvenes chilenos involucrados en violencia

ABSTRACT

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio cualitativo sobre las representaciones sociales de la violencia en jóvenes chilenos que han estado involucrados en violencia. A partir del análisis de datos obtenidos de entrevistas que dan cuenta de su experiencia subjetiva, se construyó un modelo conceptual sobre sus representaciones sociales que identifica elementos que favorecen o inhiben las acciones violentas. Los resultados muestran dos tipos de factores involucrados en la transgresión del "límite de la violencia": características personales y elementos de contexto. Respecto de los elementos contextuales, se distingue el contexto temporal (el momento de la violencia) del contexto espacial (el lugar de la violencia). Además, los jóvenes participantes de este estudio establecen una relación entre sus acciones violentas y la percepción de amenaza, especialmente respecto de su identidad social. En esta relación, la función de las acciones de violencia es neutralizar esta amenaza. Esta comprensión constituye el núcleo de su representación social de la violencia. Se discuten las implicancias para estrategias preventivas e intervenciones comunitarias.

KEYWORDS   violencia, juventud, representaciones sociales

General background

Violence, particularly juvenile violence, has achieved a relevant and paramount standing in most societies. However, there is more statistical evidence on the matter than information regarding the subjectivity of the participants. Responding to this lack of information, this article seeks to address the problem of youth violence from the perspective of young people involved in behaviours classified by them as violent.

These actions include mostly aggression between groups in neighborhood contexts, violence in stadiums, and violent acts in criminal contexts. Although, in public opinion there is usually an association of youth violence with crime —and this link also occurs in the behavior of, at least, some of the participants in this study—the focus of our research is not crime, but the violent action itself.

In Chile, situations of violence that involve young people, either as victims or perpetrators, are widely covered by mass media. News about violence in schools, against sexual minorities, or robbery with violence are frequent. Statistics support the communicational relevance of the phenomenon, since around 30% of the youngsters have been victims of these types of situations. Furthermore, half of these have occurred in the context of relations with friends or at least known perpetrators (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud, 2009), being important also the different types of violence exercised by peers in schools (Ministerio del Interior, 2011). Therefore, we are facing a phenomenon which, to an important part, is hosted at the nearby interpersonal or community context of the young person. Victimization surveys show that there are important differences when comparing districts (Blanco, 2010). These data point in the same direction, indicating that youth violence seems to have territorial backgrounds.

The fact that youngster's violent acts occur to an important extend in their immediate social surrounding - and therefore should have its own meanings in this context- motivated the study of juvenile subjectivity around the issue of violence. Additionally, we believe that this knowledge will be useful to inform preventive interventions that could really appeal to the youngsters from the standing of their own meanings, values and codes.

This interest in the subjectivity underlies the decision of studying juvenile violence from the theoretical concept of social representation, in the hope that this framework would allow for both a description and an understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the social actors involved in it.

The concept of social representation makes reference to the images and explanatory models that a given social group has about any phenomenon (Moscovici, 1984). It is a concept that allows to relate the subjective-individual and socio-cultural dimensions (Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Moscovici, 1984).

The social representation can be thought of as a network of meanings with levels of variable complexity. This network is characterised by its capacity to hold the diversity of perspectives likely to be in the social group and, at the same time, to point at those comprehensive elements that behave as nuclei of meanings (Pereira de Sá, 1996).

Violence has been a constant human phenomenon throughout history (Skocpol, 1979). Its expressions are various comprising the political, the economic, the familiar, the sport, the recreational, and the religious worlds (Obershall, 1973). But the upsurge of violence occurs at specific moments and situations of human life and is exercised by some individuals (or groups) and not by others and, amongst the former, by some in a habitual manner and by others in a sporadic manner. Thus, the queries that theories of violence pose are: why is violence carried out by some individuals and not by others? Why at some times and not at others? Why in certain scenarios only?

The previous questions refer to one implicit aspect in the analysis of violence which is its legitimization. On all occasions in which it is possible to identify violence, it is also possible to point at a framework inside which this violence makes sense. For this reason, subjectivity becomes important as object of research.

Classical social, criminological and psychological theories explaining violence show that factors like social status, peer group, expectations and self-control are elements that seem to be underlying violence. Social theories prove useful in elucidating why violence appears in some societies more than others (Merton, 1968; Krohn, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 1992; Shoemaker, 1990). Individual psychological theories and Self-Control Theory are helpful at the moment of understanding why certain individuals show a greater inclination to violence (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The Frustration-Aggression Theory provides an explanation for violence that emerges under specific circumstances (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer & Sears, 1939; Berkowitz, 1964, 1974). Yet other theories, like the Theory of Pressure (Agnew, 1992; Agnew, 1995), the Theory of Social Learning (Bandura, 1973) -especially peer group influence (Akers & Cochran, 1985; Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce & Radosevich, 1979; Mummendey, 1990) -and the influence of television (Montenegro, 1995), constitute attempts to integrate individual and social factors in the explanation of violence.

The different theories and approaches mentioned provide much information about the phenomenon of violence, but they are centred on an "external view" and do not integrate the subjective experience of the individual involved in the violent actions. An exploration of these aspects —as intended in the present study— might probably throw a different light on the elements related to violence, in the sense that understanding how violence is experienced could also explain why people resort to it.

Method

To reveal the social representation that young persons involved in violent actions have about violence, the "Grounded Theory" method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was applied to in-depth interviews. This method permits the construction of theoretical models through systematised sampling techniques, collection and data analysis.

Participants

The participants, who all live in Santiago, Chile, and have been involved in violent actions, were contacted through the "snowball method" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986), which means that the initial interviewees (contacted through psychosocial projects) established the contact with the subsequent interview partners. In order to determine the sequence of interviews and to ensure that the participants belonged to various different groups, the "theoretical sampling" strategy was used (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss &

Corbin, 1990). This procedure links the analysis and generation of preliminary results with the sample selection in such a way that those participants that best allow for a contrast of the resulting hypotheses are chosen deliberately and successively.

Characteristics of participants that were varied along the theoretical sampling process include their social origin, membership in gangs, the possible association of their violent acts with crime (such as robbery, for example), the frequency with which they committed violent acts, and whether they had been in prison.

As shown in Table 1, the study included 24 young people. The majority of the participants were men, although it was possible to include one woman. Their ages varied between 16 and 25 years and they belonged to different socio-economic levels. In terms of their involvement in violent acts —defined from their own perspective— the majority of the young people exercised violence frequently or at least occasionally; only three participants referred to having exercised it in the past, without presenting a current involvement. Approximately one third of the respondents apply violence associated with criminal acts, and for about a quarter of the participants it is associated with gang membership. Almost half of the interviewees participated in acts of violence in stadiums, associated with soccer games and concerts.

Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1
Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Socio-economic level	Period of violence	Type of violence
1	Masculine	19	Low	Past	Delinquent
2	Masculine	22	Low	Past	Delinquent
3	Masculine	17	Low	Present	Gangs
4	Masculine	18	Low	Present	Gangs
5	Masculine	16	High	Present	Ocassional[a]
6	Masculine	20	Middle	Present	Ocassional
7	Masculine	20	Middle	Present	Gangs
8	Masculine	22	Middle	Past	Gangs
9	Femenine	20	Middle	Past	Gangs[b]
10	Masculine	21	Middle	Present	Political
11	Masculine	25	Low	Past	Delinquent
12	Masculine	24	Middle	Prisoner	Delinquent
13	Masculine	19	Low	Prisoner	Delinquent
14	Masculine	21	Middle	Prisoner	Delinquent
15	Masculine	23	Low	Prisoner	Delinquent
16	Masculine	21	High	Present	Ocassional
17-24	Masculine	17-19	High	Present	Ocassional

Notes: [a] Carried out in stadiums and recitals [b] Punk gangs.

Data collection and recording

Sixteen in-depth interviews were carried out (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986), plus one focus group formed by eight members. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors (Pablo Torche) and addressed personal life history, personal experiences with violence and general notions regarding young peoples' violent actions. Most of the participants were interviewed in public places, except four cases that were interviewed in jail. With the exception of those, none of them were involved in rehabilitation programs. In all cases, the information was duly recorded on audio tape, —with authorization of the interviewees— and then transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Grounded Theory establishes the analysis of successive categorizations —more abstract each time—and their interrelations, more complex each time. At the beginning (open coding) a descriptive analysis was carried out, and then relational lines between the generated categories (axial coding) were developed. Finally, a model bearing a central concept and environments of influence specified both at a general and at a situational contextual level (selective coding) was constructed.

Results

Figure 1 organizes the main contents of the social representation of the youngsters involved in violent acts. It also illustrates the structure of the presentation of results.

Context related to violence

Three basic subcultural environments are the context for the experience of the youngsters taking part in this study: home, street, and jail. In these environments, starting from the home, then the street, and then the jail, a progressive detachment from the dominant culture, particularly its norms and values, is evidenced.

Home comprises a number of negative antecedents for the interviewed youngsters since family dysfunctions such as domestic or "intra-family" violence, paternal absenteeism and paternal alcoholism are often mentioned. These dysfunctions can become an incentive for the youngsters to leave home.

Street, in its turn, holds several meanings, comprising all kinds of open public spaces, particularly corners and plazas, plus semi-open or closed public places, such as stadiums and sports halls, bars or fuel stations. The street is represented by the interviewees as a social space whose property is not predetermined. For this reason it is, in essence, a territory to conquer and defend. The manifestation of juvenile street violence is strongly related with the demarcation of territory. The territoriality metaphor is used by the young to refer to their privacy or to their individual freedom ("right to my square meter"), or as a group distinction in which case different juvenile groups put up a fight for the conquest and defence of certain territory, fight that might involve violence.

When the permanence in this micro environment is prolonged, "countercultural" codes begin to appear, holding behaviours that are antagonistic to the current social institutionalization. Some of these new codes are: despise of work, excessive value placed on drug consumption, which, in cases of addiction, can lead to the "addiction-robbery" cycle in which the growing personal demand for the drug legitimizes robbery as a tool to get the money to purchase it.

Jail is the third micro-environment. Naturally, not all youth who predominantly dwell in the street or those who exercise violence in this micro environment go to jail. However, those who went to jail have had previously the street as environment. This allows us to understand the process that leads to jail as a kind of psychosocial drift in which the youngster first migrates from home to street and later is taken to jail in a road that takes him further away from the patterns proposed from the dominant culture.

From the subjective experience of the interviewed young prisoners, their stay in jail is associated with feelings of loneliness and destitution, of being abandoned, far away from friends and relatives. Inside the jail, the young person feels constantly in danger and does not perceive any possibilities to lessen the risk; risk which can be extremely violent like the possibility of rape or death. As one of the interviewees points out: "One can't say: 'we'll go there tomorrow' because sometimes one doesn't know whether one will be alive tomorrow". This feeling of lack of protection is stronger in those jails in which there is no internal differentiation among the recluse according to type of crime committed. The way to adapt to this situation, according to the view of the youngsters, is to resort to violent behaviour that can grant some kind of respectability which might, in the end be translated into tranquillity, as shown in the following excerpt from an interview: P: "I fight"; I: "Every day?"; P: "Not every day; three or four times; after that…things get quiet. So, problems are solved with violence. Now I am at ease".

According to the social representation of the youngsters, having been in prison bears consequences relevant to the problem of violence. In some cases it means a

change, in the sense of a "return" of the youth to the values of the dominant culture and, alongside with it, a stepping aside from violence. In some other cases, it means exactly the opposite: there is a radicalization in the detachment from the dominant culture. Some of the conditions that contribute to this second alternative are social stigmatization and remaining within a delinquent peer group. In this latter cycle street-jail thus becoming practically normal: "And then you go out, spend some time and are sent to jail again", one of the interviewees explains.

I ANTECEDENTS OF CONTEXT
A progressive detachment from the dominant culture

II. ANTECEDENTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY
Violence as a reaffirmation of social identity

REGULATORS

III. INHIBITORS
Self control, consequences, values and life events

IV. FACILITATORS
Euphoria, omnipotence, belittling, dispersion of responsibility, violent models.

V. MOTIVATORS
Hatred and vengeance, catharsis, to attain respect, the need to set up hierarchies, physical defence.

VI. TRIGGERS
Insidious, aggressive, or disqualifying stimuli.

VII. VIOLENT ACT
New codes and new rules

VII. CONSEQUENCES
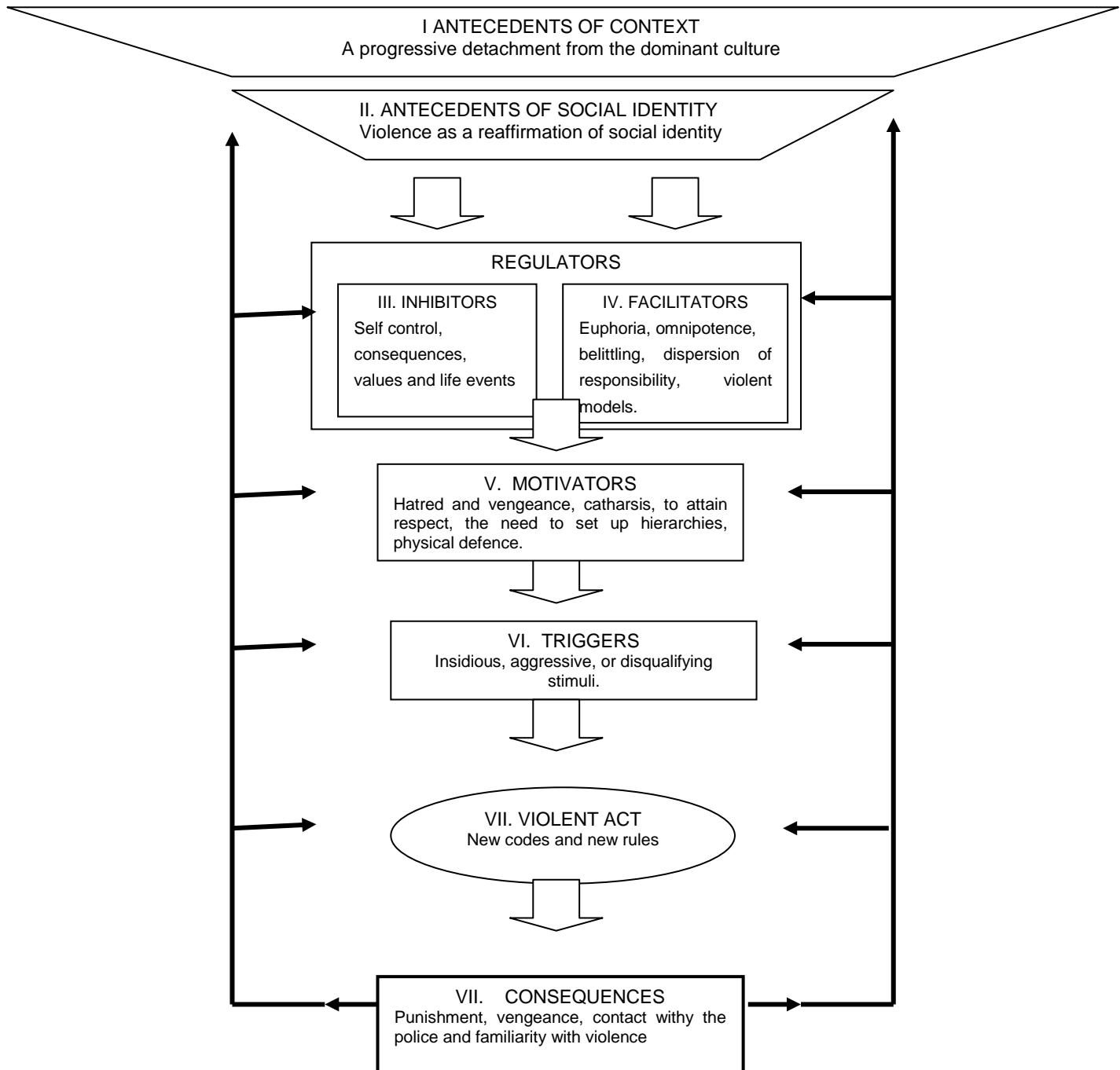Punishment, vengeance, contact withy the police and familiarity with violence

Figure 1: General model of the social representation of juvenile violence

Summing up, home, street and jail express different subcultural patterns through which the youngster passes –or drifts– in his or her way towards an increasingly more distant "dominant culture" until he finally antagonizes it. However, the environment where the youngster is likely to find a greater stability is that of the home, and the alternative to return to it is present in all cases, at least potentially.

Violence related to social identity

Several aspects related to the youth's social identity and which act as antecedents of violence have been identified. From the youngsters' perspective, a social identity is not kept stable in time but it ought to consolidate and reinforce itself permanently through actions that reaffirm it. Some social identity reaffirming mechanisms are: confrontational relationship (sometimes violent) with groups that represent other identities and the demand of consistency between attitude and behaviour. In this latter case violent behaviour can be fostered from the peer group, when the youngster has verbally expressed some attitude of rejection towards another group, for instance.

Violence, as a reaffirmation of social identity, is also associated to the expression of "manhood", or is experienced as source of security. Thus, youngsters say that a reputation of being violent is guarantee of greater respect (and fewer threats).

Finally, youngsters also underline, as an antecedent of the bond between social identity and violence, the discriminating relationship between the social world and themselves and the stigmatization they feel to be victims of. In front of this, violence is experienced as "a discharge", a youth points out.

Summing up, it is in the dynamics of this relationship between the young individual and the global social world where those aspects of the social identity that propitiate violence are to be found. First, results indicate that the youngsters do not have enough communication tools to reaffirm their identity and reach a state of psychosocial balance without lapsing into episodes of violence. Secondly, in relation with communication with society as a whole, all the comments of those interviewed describe a feeling of belittling and discrimination.

Violence inhibitors

Violence inhibitors are those specific aspects in the experience of the youngster that have a dissuasive effect with respect of violent behaviour. It is possible to distinguish self inhibitors and environment inhibitors.

Amongst the first ones, youngsters distinguish certain personal characteristics. One of these is their capacity to exercise self control. Self control refers to the possibility to handle or stop certain impulses that are common to all people and that could, eventually, lead to violence. The youngsters interviewed perceive this characteristic as belonging to adults rather than to youths; however, in those cases in which it appears, it would be a violence inhibitor. Another personal characteristic mentioned as an inhibitor is the capacity to foresee the consequences of their actions, for example, on the interpersonal relations, personal safety or legal problems. The youngster's values can also dissuade him or her from exerting violence, particularly, values such as respect for the other (which would be the opposing end of belittling) and the rejection of abuse, that is, rejection of exercising violence in situations of extreme inequality between the participants. Also, some life events that foster an evaluation of violence as inadequate are being in jail (in some cases), traumatic violent experiences, or stable partner relations.

Among the inhibitors corresponding to the environment, the effective presence of authority is distinguished. Youngsters point out that the presence of a figure of authority facilitates their staying within the non violence framework. However, it should be not a violent or abusive figure of authority, but fundamentally a respected one.

Another environmental inhibitor would be the availability of alternative satisfiers for the very same needs that give rise to violence. One such alternative is dialogue, which achieves particular relevance in those instances when violence is an interpersonal and inter group conflict resolution manner. Another alternative is provided by forms of creative expression which oppose the use of violence as an instrument of communication. One final violence inhibitor is represented by alternative manners to get rid of energy in those cases in which violence is seen as an escape valve, like study and sport.

On a more abstract level of analysis, it could be said that all the inhibitors mentioned share a certain "scrupulous conscience". This represents the internalization of value codes that emerge from the dominant culture and would be geared towards modes of action that depart from violence. The influence of inhibitors would, therefore, be exercised through an unveiling of this scrupulous conscience which would ultimately be the one that represses or discourages the violent act. For example, the capacity to foresee consequences would act an inhibitor as long as some consequences that are truly bad produce regret and guilt.

Violence facilitators

Facilitators increase the probability that, in front of certain circumstances, the youngster reacts violently, but are not capable by themselves of providing an explanation for such a reaction. However, facilitators have a cumulative power: the larger the number converging in a given situation, the stronger the incentive for violence will be.

A distinction can be made between mediate and immediate facilitators. The mediate ones do not necessarily need to be present during the episode of violence in order to be effective. Their action, of a delayed character, is mediated by structures that the youngster has incorporated in a more permanent manner. The immediate ones, on the contrary, are those that are present at the very moment when the episode of violence takes place.

Another relevant difference is the one between individual, group and social facilitators. As individual facilitators, youngsters mention personal characteristics such as being "altered", hyperactive, prone to lose control and rebellious. Moods, which presence would be limited to specific moments, are also mentioned. Of these moods, the ones mostly associated to violence are euphoria and omnipotence. As one of the interviewed youngsters says: "It's simply that you are little tipsy, euphoric, you feel great because you are hanging out with your friends. You feel powerful". Being in a state of altered conscience on account of alcohol consumption, or being under the effect of some drug is another facilitator repeatedly mentioned by youngsters to explain their violent behaviour.

Among the group facilitators, outstand, in the first place, those related to social identity. Through social identity a group exerts its influence even in absentia. This level of influence depends, on one hand, on the degree of group cohesion that exists and, on the other, on the degree of belittling the youngster feels himself subjected to. If it is greater, his bond with his peer group becomes closer and their influence, thus, greater. In this way, groups that practically replace family relations appear, as vividly depicted in the following quote: "Because you are protecting your friend. It's as if you were protecting your son, your family". Other group facilitators of violence, closely related to the already mentioned ones, are the recognition that violence grants the youngster within his group (given that in this, violence is positively valued) and the feelings of loyalty towards the group.

Finally, in all kinds of group dispersion of responsibility occurs. This means that, the violent act implies a certain degree of anonymity that lightens the burden of responsibility for the fact.

The last group of facilitators is the social ones. Especially relevant here are the violent models and the transmission of violence through the mass media. It is frequently noticed that young people admire violent models as figures than inspire respect and value. Furthermore, the violent contents in the media contribute to the perception of violence as something normal.

Another social facilitator of violence is the behaviour of police when they are abusive or negligent. As a consequence of this exercise of violence, considered illegitimate, the interviewed youngsters make no radical distinctions between that violence exerted by the police and the one exerted by them; they rather look like two equally legitimate parties in the context of war. As far as negligence is concerned, there are certain spaces and contexts in which the presence of the police is knowingly perceived as weak or as non participant. This, consequently, turns these spaces in places where violence runs rampant.

Summing up, facilitators provide a basic platform that encourages the youngster to behave violently. Since they have a cumulative character, the more facilitators there are acting at the same time, the greater their capacity to elicit a violent behaviour.

Motivators of violence

Motivators are those concrete reasons that lead the youngster to violence. They can be affective, psychosocial or practical. Furthermore, motivators can be distinguished in the type of message youngsters seek to transmit through violence: general messages of inconformity and rebelliousness, on one hand, and specific messages, which are expected to have a given effect on the environment, on the other.

Amongst the affective motivators, some feelings, like hatred and vengeance, are likely to find their course in a violent act. A heavy dose of hatred can be enough to elicit a violent behaviour, though hatred is often mediated by anger. Other affective motivators are of a cathartic type. One of the characteristics of the episodes of violence derived from this type of motivator is the legitimacy attained within the juvenile segment. The situation is such that in many cases these motivators are not even represented as violence.

The psychosocial motivators are the most relevant; however, for them to effectively cause the violent behaviour, the youngster needs to be in a context that does not provide him with other mechanisms to solve his inter personal problems and that validates, albeit implicitly, the use of violence. One such motivator is "to attain respect", which is related to events the youngster perceives as potentially or effectively disqualifying. Another psychosocial motivator is the pursuit of recognition. Recognition can be a reparation of the

belittling or, more vaguely, a way to "attract attention", as they themselves explain. Violent behaviour can also be motivated by the need to set up inter group as well as intra group hierarchies. In the case of the inter group, this motivator gives way to more massive episodes of violence.

A different type of motivators are the practical ones such as physical defence in front of threatening situations or those related with the need to get money which end up in situations of violent robbery.

Finally, in some cases violence can become by itself as a form of entertainment. "These guys that (…) are there, desperate, bored, they have nothing to entertain themselves with. There is like a space and anyway violence is highly seductive".

In summary, motivators account for the deliberate purpose that originated the violent act and which the youngster is capable to recognise after the event itself. In their view, motivators have to do with expressing themselves, get rid of energy and even have fun. Also, they are related to "attain respect" and "to get recognition or hierarchy".

Violence triggers

There are specific stimuli that trigger the violent act. Triggers are immediately next to violence not only for the external observer, but also for the youngster's own subjectivity from which they spring as the last and most direct forerunner of his violence.

Three types of stimuli can perform the function of triggers of violent behaviour: the insidious, the aggressive and the disqualifying stimuli.

Insidious stimuli are those that imply an annoying or unpleasant perturbation for the youngster, without being overtly violent. They are usually manifested verbally and their prototype is mockery. Though apparently innocuous, youngsters find it hard to overlook them, particularly when their identity or their image in front of the group is at stake. The second type of trigger is the aggressive stimuli that are already endowed with some degree of violence, like threats, robbery attempts and abuse by figures of authority (particularly the police). In the third place, are disqualifiers that imply a threat to the position or the status of the youngster. These are particularly relevant when the youngster is in his group or with his partner.

Summing up, triggers constitute the last link in the chain of influences that precede a violent act. It has been observed that their importance is relative and that in many cases they are nothing more than an excuse to give way to the addition of conflicting forces that have

been readying themselves from the level of the contextual precursors of violence.

The violent act

An attempt will be made here to describe and understand the mechanisms of action intrinsic to the violent act, once it takes place. In the first place, the violent act expresses a discontinuity with respect of the rest of the juvenile experience in which it happens. This discontinuity means, fundamentally, that once the violent act has been unleashed, what happens inside it is not regulated by the same canon that rules the rest of the youngster's experience. In this way, the violent act emerges as a relatively autonomous phenomenon which is determined, once it has been produced, by new codes and new rules. This discontinuity is often mentioned by youngsters when they refer to episodes of violence in which they have had some participation either as actors or as mere spectators of the act.

One of the most noticeable effects of this discontinuity is produced in relation to those aspects pertaining the dominant culture that, directly or indirectly, inhibit violence. They end up being virtually "deactivated" once the youngster gets involved in a violent act, and it gets extremely difficult for him or her to stop or respect limits. In this way, the discontinuity is a more acute manifestation of what, in relation with the context of violence, has been called "sub-cultural detachment". With respect to this it holds, however, an important difference. The discontinuity of the violent act operates swiftly and momentarily: its emergence is reduced to specific and delimited episodes that usually last five or ten minutes and which never –at least in the case of the situations found in this research– last longer than a couple of hours. The sub-cultural detachment, on the contrary, expresses the youngster's life style which can last for months.

Beyond the motivators that provide a rationally elaborated support for the episodes of violence, the violent act is regulated by an autonomous logic, different from the one that traditionally rules the youngster and which, contrary to the latter, empowers and encourages the exercise of violence taking him even to extreme limits. The main characteristic of this new logic of action, according to what youngsters themselves say, is its alienating, unconscious, mainly irrational character. For many youngsters, this is a phenomenon they refer to as "animal".

Consequently, the components that make up the scaffolding of this new logic are preferably impulsive. Youngsters identify a violent impulse, describing it as successive waves that exert a strong pressure so that they can liberate their flow of contained violence. Notice

the sudden character of violence, which appears abruptly, not mediated by considerations of any kind. In this moment, the goals youngsters pursue when getting involved in a violent act, experience a distortion: old motivators are modified once violence has started, sometimes even to the point of being replaced by new ones. One interviewee says: "you find yourself in a situation, in which you are fighting, but you don't know why you are fighting, but I am fighting! understand?". Thus the action of motivators lasts until the violent act begins. From this moment, the goal of the aggressive behaviour is traced on the grounds of new coordinates.

The new coordinates include performance and results. The main objective is to be the winner in the confrontation, causing the opponent as much damage as possible. One new element, of a more symbolic kind, is that within the violent act the youngster resorts to certain figures he identifies with. From this identification, he is capable of carrying out actions that he would not attempt in normal circumstances: "You've got to invent your story, then for a little while you feel like you are Che Guevara, the hero, and the rest of the world doesn't matter and you know the truth".

Finally, the discontinuity of the violent act in relation to the youngster's habitual experience also has an effect on the temporal dimension. The youngster finds himself locked in the most immediate present, unable to foresee the consequences his acts can cause. This phenomenon is vital to understand the excesses some youngsters reach when participating in some violent acts: "You run too much risk, you don't fully realise what you are doing".

Summing up, discontinuity, apart from directly delimiting the episode of violence, exerts an important alienating effect on the youngster. This effect implies a fleeting detachment from the cues of the dominant culture.

Consequences of violence

Consequences are the results, both individual and social, generated by the violent act after it has occurred. The violent act is a kind of event that can be unleashed several times in a youngster's lifetime and even throughout one single day. Thus, what constitutes a consequence of a violent act can, later; perform the function of motivator or trigger of another. This is shown in Figure 1 whith arrows that link the consequences to the four levels previous to the violent act.

In the analysis of the consequences, however, only those aspects mentioned by youngsters as a result of their active or passive participation in violent acts are included. In their representation there are transitory and permanent consequences.

Transitory consequences are directly related to the violent episode that originated them and are

meaningless beyond this relationship. Among them are punishment in school and vengeance on the part of those who were victims of violence and contact with the police, the latter being the most important consequence of juvenile delinquency.

On its turn, permanent consequences are those effects of the violent act that form a stable structure, be this psychological or social, and acquire, therefore, autonomy in relation to the act that originated them. One of such consequences is the familiarity with violence which implies a loss of fear or rejection of it and, definitely, an attenuation of the discontinuity signalled for the violent event. Another consequence is the violent social identity. Close to this is the formation of violent groups which is an explicit purpose for some youngsters, particularly for those victimised by violence. The groups in question have as their role to defend them in case they are attacked again and to take revenge on those that victimised them.

From the confrontation with the police, other permanent consequences are produced. In some cases, police abuse triggers feelings of impotence and hatred in the youngsters which can result in generalised resentment towards any social institution. In this way, authority abuse can be transformed in an incentive for the formation of counter-cultures opposed to the established order. Finally, confronting the police can also end up in prison, experience whose characteristics have already been described.

To sum up, here we have shown the consequences that the youngsters themselves attribute to their violent actions. However, it becomes clear that each one of the aspects already mentioned could be placed in any of the categories that precede the violent act. In fact, the many times undesired participation in episodes of violence happens, shapes up a peculiar social schema inside which the recurrence of this behaviour becomes more probable with time. Special relevance attains, in this sense, the transformation of transitory consequences of violence into permanent ones. While the first ones exclusively address one specific episode, the second ones originate more stable structures that subsist and influence various violent acts.

Discussion

The main findings of this study can be organised in two. The first describes those factors or elements that allow us to understand the upsurge of juvenile violence, answering the question: Which are the intervening elements that make youths transgress the limit of violence, according to their own social representation? The second level of analysis organises the various factors mentioned around a central theme answering the

question: What concepts stand in the nucleus of the social representation these young people have about violence?

According to the social representation of the youngsters involved in violent actions, there are individual and contextual factors that have an incidence on juvenile violence. Individual characteristics are organised around the "impulse control" axis, with "successful control" and "loss of control" in opposite extremes. In this manner, being immature, irresponsible and irritable facilitate the emergence of violence. In this aspect of their representation, it is possible to recognize some similarity with the construct of self control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

The eventual "loss of control" is influenced by other individual elements that are transitional affective configurations like, for example, "moods" (feelings of euphoria and omnipotence). Another individual element, strongly linked to "moods" is the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, an element that is well known by many studies as a "risk factor" for violence (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002).

The factors pointed above are those youngsters rapidly mention to explain their violent behaviour. However, there are other elements –settled also in an individual level– which keeps a less visible relationship with the violent act but are, nevertheless, equally important. Amongst them, the family and the peer group dynamics can be included. In this part of their social representation, a psychosocial perspective is recognizable, since the individual in his or her violent action is also influenced by his or her immediate social context –family, and peer group– (Mummendey, 1990).

In the broader contextual dimension, the aspect most widely described by the young interviewees is the spatial contextualization of violence. Some of the places that can be mentioned as encouragers of violence are: stadiums, gymnasiums or theatres where recitals and massive acts can take place; some corners and public squares; and jail, amongst others. Naturally, the inclination to violence which is manifested in such places does not emerge from the physical site itself but from the significance that it may hold for the youngster or group of youngsters.

Another element that has an incidence on the significance placed upon one given physical space –that is more in the line of Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969)– is the presence and attitude of the authority, represented by the police. In a place where the presence of police is nil or scarce there can be an upsurge of violence. In the same manner, in those places where the police tend to act abusively, the prevailing attitude of the youngsters will be confrontational and the episodes of violence becoming more frequent.

Most of the aspects that are relevant in the social representations of why the violent act is performed are related to social belittling and social identity. These concepts constitute the nucleus of the Social Representation (Pereira de Sá, 1996). In fact, the reaffirmation of an identity appears to be strongly linked to the loss of control, and also to conquest and appropriation of a physical territory.

It is well known that the juvenile stage is characterized by a strong feeling of uncertainty. This is due to the fact that during this age the relations between the youngster and society change. If before they were established by the mediation of the family instance, now the youngster himself must conquer a space within the social structure (Weinstein, 1990). Furthermore, the motivations and behaviour of the youngster are no longer regulated by external dispositions, but they start to be regulated in an autonomous manner (Papalia & Wenkos, 1987). These two changes place the youngster in a new psychosocial context. Freedom and independence, which constitute much valued acquisitions, also provoke insecurity and fear. The youngster finds him or herself in a situation of psychosocial fragility.

The threat, in this sense, is social belittling. With this concept –which is considered the nucleus of these youngsters' social representation of their violent actions– we are referring to what the young call "disrespect" or "sabbotage," terms that are frequently repeated throughout the interviews. Social belittling constitutes a rejection of the youngster as a person and a sign of the environment's reluctance to recognise a legitimate space for him/her. This social belittling can appear at different levels: family, school, peer group and society in general.

In relation to him or herself, the youngster attains a feeble balance through the definition of a "life style" which is very variable and which is not enough to materialize in a stable "life project." In this way, the "life style" is threatened by the eventual dissolution of the values and motivations that guide the youngster and a subsequent lack of authorization for his behaviour. This point relates to the previous one as long as the definition of a life style goes hand in hand with the conquest of space within a social terrain, and belittling, on its turn, with a delegitimization of the life style favoured by the youngster.

It is in this situation that the youngster develops his or her social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It could be said that social identity provides the youngster with a visible face to show to his entourage and, at the same time, it prescribes a determined life style with his own

motivations and interests. In the way, it contributes, importantly, in the attaining of a place in the social space and facilitates the definition of a project of life he can call his own. In consequence, through social identity the youngster tries to overcome the situation of fragility in which he gets involved.

The characterization of the juvenile stage from the starting point of a "psychosocial fragility" situation and of the concept of "social identity", establishes the bases for a more thorough understanding of the meaning that violence has for youngsters.

Particularly relevant to understand juvenile violence is its relation to what youngsters classify as threatening and disqualifying. From their own point of view the environment that surrounds them is eminently threatening, encompassing a constant potential for belittling. A privileged mechanism through which the young interviewees neutralize belittling and threats is, precisely, violence. The youngsters' behaviour –and their violence– come as an answer to their own understanding of their environment and not that of the others.

From this perspective, juvenile violence could be understood as a reactive rather than a proactive phenomenon. In certain circumstances, however, violence can be incorporated in a much more structured manner to the social identity of the youngster thus becoming a more recurrent behaviour.

On the grounds of what has been said so far, some alternatives oriented towards interventions for preventing juvenile violence can be forwarded. In the first place, a modification of those aspects in the environment that result threatening for the youngster should be attained. These interventions, carried out at a community level, would be geared towards the configuration of a social environment that generates less violence. The intervention strategies could be focussed on interpersonal and social relations, with the aim of developing more inclusive communities, with permeable boundaries (Montero, 2007), in which internal diversity is permitted and the problems of segregation and intolerance are avoided (Sawaia, 1999; Wiesenfeld, 1996).

In the second place, it would be necessary to delegitimise violence as a valid mechanism to react in front of this threat. This would mean to direct the intervention to social representations that legitimize violence, not only in young people, but of society in general.

Finally, and very much related to the previous point, it would also be necessary to provide youngsters with alternative mechanisms that allow them to react in a pacific manner to the threat. This would, then, constitute an intervention geared towards strengthening their resources.

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