Children, Violence, and Social Exclusion: Negotiation of Everyday Insecurity in

a Colombian *Barrio*

Abstract

Discourses on in/security are often concerned with structures and meta-narratives of the state and other institutions; however, such attention misses the complexities of the everyday consequences of insecurity. In Colombia's protracted conflict, children are disproportionately affected yet rarely consulted rendering it difficult to account for their experiences in meaningful ways. This article draws on fieldwork conducted with conflict-affected children in an informal *barrio* community on the periphery of Colombia's capital Bogotá to explore how children articulate experiences of insecurity. It examines how stereotypes of violence and delinquency reinforce insecurity; how multiple violences impact young people's lives; and how children themselves conceive of responses to these negative experiences. These discussions are underpinned by a feminist commitment of attention to the margins and engage with those for whom insecurity is a daily phenomenon. The effects of deeply embedded insecurity, violence, and fear for young people in Colombia requires a more nuanced theoretical engagement with notions of insecurity as well as the complexities of connections and dissonances within everyday life.

Keywords: children, youth, Colombia, insecurity, social exclusion, violence

Introduction

Colombia's current conflict has been ongoing for over half a century, fought between leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary organisations, and the state. Between 3.9 and 5.2 million people have been internally displaced as a result of the long-running violence (UNHCR 2012; Watchlist 2012). Children are particularly affected by the conflict, as approximately 30 percent of the general population is under 18. However, when considering those living below the poverty line (almost 40 percent of the population), this figure increases to more than half (CODHES, 2010). The challenges of navigating the bureaucratic processes associated with being poor, marginal, and often displaced exacerbate these inequalities. Zea (2010, 11) notes that these people "continue to live in social structures that reinforce discrimination and mask their past experiences and histories". While some inequalities and security risks are present as a direct consequence of the conflict itself such as fighting, forced displacement, risk of recruitment, and death threats; others are more the result of under-development perpetuated by the conflict such as the absence of sufficient services, job opportunities, and education provision. These affects of protracted conflict are complex and interrelated. Frequently, however, they are seen as the by-products of conflict and not as conditions of ongoing insecurity that require negotiation by those forced to lived with them. Insecurity becomes a condition of everyday life, reinforced by structural marginalisation and experienced on and through the bodies of those who are social excluded from protection and participation.

For children in these environments the affects of insecurity can be acute. Poverty, lack of access to basic resources, and long-term dislocation from communities of origin

disproportionately affects young people. For children living in situations of displacement and marginalisation there are also risks and insecurities including very high rates of physical violence and sexual assault, risk of recruitment to armed gangs, increased rates of teen pregnancy, limited space to attend school, and the pressures of contributing to household economies. Due to the multiple challenges of displaced communities they are often seen as places of danger and the occupants are often stigmatised by the wider society as dangerous or the agents of broader social problems. Young people form the figurehead for much of these external understandings as these children are seen as a potential threat to the broader society. Such a construction is in contrast to the ideal concept of childhood that sees children as innocent and protected. In response to simple binaries and categorisations this article takes a more complex view of young people. It argues that children competently negotiate and mediate the effects of insecurity and violence day-to-day as part of their everyday lives. Young people are both active and participatory, and are inherently worthy of attention in discussions of the violence and insecurity that characterizes their lived experiences on the margins of conflict and society in places like Colombia.

Concepts of security that focus on institutions cannot account for how people experience insecurity as a pervasive everyday phenomena that contributes to their social exclusion. Luckham argues that discussions of security should be "grounded more firmly in the lived experience of people who are insecure" (2009, 3). In response this article seeks to locate discussions concerning conflict, violence, and insecurity within the Colombian conflict through the narratives and experiences of conflict-affected young people. Such recognition acknowledges the agency of those

who experience insecurity and social exclusion and the ways they engage in and rely on everyday practices to respond to these challenges and contributes to a more thorough understanding of the everyday consequences of conflict.

This article is an attempt to centre the margins and ground a discussion of the experience of insecurity within the everyday. I argue that a theorisation of insecurity must move beyond privileged actors. Children—marginalized and affected by protracted conflict—not only face the challenges of being young, but the difficulties of negotiating violence and insecurity in their everyday lives. I first articulate an agential conception of childhood, locating it within the existing literature before exploring understandings of everyday insecurity and ways of conceptualizing children in these explorations. In doing this I draw on arguments made by feminist security studies for attending to the margins and argue for the need for more grounded discussions of the causes and experiences of insecurity. Then I apply this theoretical discussion to fieldwork conducted with young people living in los Altos de Cazucá to ask how insecurity is understood by the children themselves who are often left out of discourses about security. The deeply embedded nature of insecurity, violence, and fear in many urban environments in Colombia have required residents to find new ways of coping with violence and insecurity in everyday life. Young people are aware of the complexities of such issues and articulate the connections and dissonances of an absent or harmful state, violence of local gangs, and ongoing consequences of stereotyping. These will be explored before finally looking at ways children seek security within their everyday life. In these situations, more complex notions of insecurity and *processes of securing* are rendered visible to inform explorations of insecurity and young people.

Theorizing Everyday Insecurity through Children's Lives

Koonings and Kruijt note that the "syndrome of insecurity, violence and fear" has, within the urban Latin American context, caused "a new brand of survival 'know-how': coping with insecurity and violence in everyday life" (2007, 4). Globally, the population living in urban areas is increasing. In Colombia the urban/rural ration is 70:30. For many of these people, experiences of urban life are experiences of poverty and exclusion, violence and insecurity. In 2012 UNICEF's annual report focused on "Children in an Urban World". It recognized the growing significance of negative indicators of rights including lack of secure tenure, lack of legal rights, lack of health provision, and inability to contribute to public debate as key challenges (UNICEF 2012, 3-6). The displaced and socially excluded communities on the edges of major cities in Colombia are exemplary of the myriad security challenges that children face in an increasingly urban world.

The focus of this article on the everyday insecurity of the lives of young people living in the urban periphery is underpinned by an understanding of children as competent actors in their own lives and is also informed by gendered critiques of security studies by feminist scholars, which highlight the absence of everyday concerns and individual experiences of insecurities in dominant discourses. These two foci are discussed and drawn together here.

What Kind of Childhood?

Skelton and Gough note that young people are "part of the urban fabric" (2013, 463) yet they are discussed in ways that regularly re-inscribe understandings of them as

"hoodlums and heroes, aggressors and achievers, wasters and workers" (2013, 459).
In conflict-affected regions similar dichotomies proliferate; McEvoy-Levy refers to
this dominating view as reducing children to "troublemakers or peacemakers" (2006),
and Denov highlights the reliance on "dangerous and disorderly" versus "hapless
victim" rhetoric when speaking about child soldiers specifically and conflict-affected
children more broadly, also noting the propensity to render particular children
'heroes' (2010, 6-9). This dichotomization reflects the broader understanding of
childhood across societies and situations, which sees children ideally as innocent and
in need of protection. Children are universally conceived as incomplete, irrational,
passive 'becomings' (Qvortrup 1994, 94) progressing towards a normative adulthood.
If they fall outside this behaviour they can otherwise only be conceived of as
transgressive and thus potentially dangerous and delinquent (see James and Prout
1990 for foundational discussion and critique of these ideas). In contrast to such
reductive notions of childhood, academics within childhood studies and across
disciplines have demonstrated that children are in fact competent actors and
influencers of their everyday lives (see [Jenks 2005; Wyness 2006; Boyden 2004]
amongst many others).

Dichotomies and stereotypes speak before young people themselves can offer
alternatives. As a result, narratives of conflict and insecurity are largely articulated by
adults and, consequentially, often perpetuate stereotypes about youth. Boyden notes
this presupposes that children's insights "have no relevance," are "unreliable"
testimony, and that they "lack the maturity to hold and articulate valid views" (2004,
248). While work is increasingly been conducted within international relations (IR)
broadly that takes a complex engagement with the notion of childhood seriously

(Boyden 2004; McEvoy-Levy 2006; Denov 2010; Beier 2012; Watson 2006; Lee-Koo 2011 Pruitt 2013), children's participation and inclusion is not the norm. This article situates itself alongside these growing efforts to think about young people complexly as a way of accounting for and recognizing children's experiences of insecurity.

Insecurity in the Everyday

Situating this exploration within the tensions caused by the "syndrome of insecurity, violence and fear" described by Koonings and Kruijt in the Latin American context necessitates a questioning of how theoretical understandings of security and experiences of insecurity can locate and interrogate the lived experiences of children in these environments. A fruitful place to commence is within more critical engagements with the notion of security that move the focuses away from states, weapons, and the macro-processes of conflict to the everyday lives of people themselves. In attending to the people usually rendered invisible in discussions of security, this article finds resonance with feminist explorations which take as their task a denaturalization of the inherent passivity and depoliticisation of women and, by extension, children. Analyses and research by feminist IR scholars begin at the margins of political and social life but that interrogate those who occupy the 'centres' and the exercise of power that perpetuates such inequalities and exclusions (Ackerley, Stern and True 2006; see also Sylvester 1994). Feminist security studies draws attention to the bottom-up approaches, which as Tickner points out, are vital to understand issues of in/security and in helping "emancipatory visions of security…[move] beyond statist frameworks" (2001, 48). In particular d'Costa's call to attend to the insights of those marginalized in geopolitically marginal conflicts, and

in spaces IR frequently tends to ignore (2006, 130-131). Tickner (2006, 29) argues that feminist scholarship, because of its situated awareness, necessarily focuses on the "'practical knowledge' from people's everyday lives".

The spaces that children occupy are often similarly marginal to those occupied by women (although the oppression and frameworks of exclusion may operate in different registers); as a result a framework that starts with feminist curiosity and attention can provide an important entry to considerations of security at an everyday level. There is an assumption made that those who occupy the margins are so far from the exercise of power that their opinions and voices could have little relevance (Enloe 1996, 186). Moreover, as Enloe notes, margins, silences, and bottom rungs cannot exist without someone occupying the centre and that these processes are not inherent but are the product of an exercise of power (1996, 186-189). Recognition that the margins are created and maintained through active processes of marginalization draws attention to the fact that the state is often complicit in perpetuating the exclusions and violences through systems of power and control that render the lives of individuals at the margins insecure in multiple, interconnected ways (see [Shepherd 2008; Wibben 2010, 85] amongst others). Marginalisation is associated with "economic and political weakness or powerlessness" and the resultant exclusion "is the most dominant form of exclusionary practice by states or social groups over which marginalized groups have little or no control" (d'Costa 2006, 130). Considering young people who are marginalized, stigmatized and excluded bring into sharp relief how insecurity functions as a collection of violences and exclusions.

Located within more critical engagements with notions of human security practices,

Roberts posits a notion of the everyday in conflict-affected spaces as a "reaction to chronic personal insecurity, as well as to a range of other contingencies" (2011, 412). He argues that this refocusing of the "concept of security to concern people's everyday existences" may have profound implications for those most vulnerable people who live daily with significant insecurity (2008, 14). This requires a move away from a preoccupation with institutions and 'best suited' actors, to focus on those actors who are marginalized. It also requires recognition that formal political processes and intimate, mundane everyday life are not distinct but inform each other. As De Certeau (1984, 14) argues, everyday life consists of repetitive and distinctive practices that push back against structural attempts at organizing life. People can, through everyday practices take ownership over structures and use them to their advantage. Applying the idea of the everyday to security practice refocuses the way people use structures as well as relationships to recognise and respond to those things which make individuals feel insecure. The potential of considering these ideas on an everyday level is the ability to explore how individuals "negotiate around violence, structural and overt, around material issues, or indeed deploys or co-opts these" (Richmond 2009, 331). Duffield (2007) recognizes that productive peacebuilding might stem from the idea of "self-securing" which is contrasted against a notion of the state as the provider of security. While personal spaces might sometimes be "partly secured" from violence by security sector reform, the most pervasive threats to everyday life are the effects of poverty; ill health; displacement from familiar surroundings; and lack of sufficient food, water, and sanitation. Such people, in attempting to secure their everyday lives will prioritize solutions to these everyday threats, rather than be concerned about institutions of a distant, uncaring state.

In these contexts, which are *rendered insecure* by structural forces and the disregard of elites, it is the interrelationships between people that hold communities together. Accordingly, to speak of security—or insecurity—is to speak to structures of violence and of power, to discuss vulnerability, deliberate exclusion, and the interconnected nature of structural and direct violences. All these come together and are encountered within and on the bodies of those who are most affected, in particular children who are already structurally marginalised. While there is significant and important literature on repopulating the structures of violence and insecurity, there is a need to also (re)populate the discourse with an engagement with those for whom insecurity is a daily phenomenon.

Los Altos de Cazucá, Colombia

To explore these notions further, this article now turns to the fieldwork site of los Altos de Cazucá[i], one of many informal communities that exist on the outskirts of Colombia's cities. Driven by high levels of displacement and overwhelmingly rural-to-urban migration patterns, since the 1970s communities of displaced and otherwise excluded people have been established around major cities in Colombia by those fleeing the conflict. These *barrio* communities occupy land illegally, constructing dwellings with whatever materials are available. The poverty and exclusion of such communities is immediately visible in the lack of paved roads, poorly constructed houses, presence of refuse, tangles of electricity lines and general absence of curated public space. Cazucá in Comuna 4 of the city of Soacha, is one such community, and exists precariously on the steep hillside next to the highway south out of the capital Bogota. Comuna 4 is one of the highest recipient-communities in Colombia of internally displaced people (MSF, 2005). The Municipality of Soacha recognises that

almost half the population of the city is classified as 'vulnerable' and in poverty conditions with the largest concentration of these people in Comuna 4. In these communities there is high levels of poverty, low job opportunities, lack of access to services, and gangs associated with the broader armed conflict control much of the space. Families and individuals at times have to leave the community because their names are placed by the armed gangs on '*listas negras*' (black lists), which mark people for death. Employment is either low-end service industries such as cleaning and labouring, or on the informal market selling goods on the roadside. Many parents struggle to earn enough to provide for their families.

This article is informed by four months of fieldwork carried out from September to December 2010 with children from Cazucá. I gained access to the community through an organization that works with marginalized children around Colombia supporting education provision, nutrition programs, and community engagement. Working through a school supported by the organization my fieldwork took the form of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with children aged between ten and seventeen. Additional information was gained through interviews with adults from the community as well as with other organizations working on similar issues in other parts of the country. Names of all participants are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and safety. All interviews were conducted in Spanish by the author.

Ethical considerations of working with children who are often categorized as 'vulnerable' or 'marginal' were taken very seriously throughout the research. As discussed in detail above, this work is underpinned by a feminist ethic of attention to the margins and a commitment to validate and respect the experiences and voices of

young people themselves. This meant that at times the process was fraught with both practical and ethical questions. Entering into this space in a position of privilege both as an adult and an outsider required ongoing reflexivity about my presence and also limited what I could claim as knowledge from the conversations with young people (for related discussion on reflexivity and power relationships see Ackerley, Stern and True 2006, 5; Punch 2002). Particularly in conducting research with conflict affected children ethical questions of safety, participation and power relations are particularly acute (Morrow and Richards 1996; Hart and Tyrer 2006; and Freeman and Mathison 2009). Security concerns also meant I was unable to speak to children in the community who were not in school or were involved in the armed gangs; this necessarily limits the perspective that is engaged with here. However, any account is partial, and in recognizing the partiality this article respects the voices of those young people who did participate.

This article now turns to a consideration of young people's experiences and accounts of everyday insecurity to explore structural exclusion and violence, before discussing young people's experiences of direct violence, fear and insecurity. It then concludes with reflections by young people on ways of mitigating or responding to these structural and direct violences and insecurities.

Flattened Narratives of Childhood and Structural Violences

For the young people of Cazucá, overcoming the stigmatization of the community is an immense challenge. Of course, the young people of Cazucá are a distinctly heterogeneous collective of age, background, sexuality, employment situation, educational achievement, ethnicity, family position, personal desires, and aspirations.

However, many authors note that adults generally tend to perceive young people reductively as either 'transgressors' or as a 'problem' (Duque 2009; Villamizar and Zamora 2005, 74; Pinzon Ochoa 2007, 288) and several teachers in the school in Cazucá echoed this sentiment, saying they felt that the challenges that exist for children generally are amplified in communities such as Cazucá because of the children's "social status and geographic location" (teacher, in interview, November 2010). One teacher noted that while children's decision making capacities are rarely recognized, in Cazucá "they are often seen as delinquents and drug addicts" (in interview, November 2010) compounding opinions of children as incapable. Pinzon Ochoa (2007, 288) argues that the state is often criticized for "interpreting the realities of young people as problems" particularly in sectors like Cazucá. More than this the government "underline their [young people's] relationships with violence, insecurity and drug addiction, cataloguing the population as 'high risk'" (Pinzon Ochoa 2007, 288). Hence, while the state has not been entirely absent in formulating responses and assistance, it has been carried out in the 'best interests' of an envisioned, imagined child. As a result, this idealized young person becomes "representative, and thus [all] young people are represented" (Valderrama 2004, 166). Consequently the actual realities and multiplicities of experience are erased. Not only this but in flattening experiences young people are both written out of the conversation and responses to the structures of violence which perpetuate insecurity for young people. For young people, faced with the consequences and experiences of both structural and direct violences and insecurities, it is the small practices within their everyday lives that are significant to them and which contribute to understanding local responses to insecurity. As Koonings and Kruijt note, coping with insecurity and violence in everyday life has prompted a new form of survival "know-how", in which everyday

threats are prioritised over the grand securitising narratives of the state.

Multiple armed groups and criminal organizations characterize Colombia's conflict with presences in both rural and urban environments. The long running conflict has been fueled by illegal trades such as drug and arms trafficking and complicated by the existence of multiple armed groups and the emergence of new urban criminal gangs particularly in poor neighborhoods. The presence of such illegal armed groups in communities such as Cazucá is well known. Such communities provide pathways in and out of major cities for such groups to traffic drugs and arms to and from the wider conflict. Because of the utility of these spaces they are fiercely held and contested by different groups. Often children are caught in the middle as they are particularly vulnerable to recruitment as well as exposed to surrounding violences. The presence of these illegal groups necessitates the involvement of the state, which occurs largely through the bodies of police and soldiers. Law enforcement often enters the community in highly securitized ways, conducting raids on suspected gang members, seeking drugs and engaging in violent confrontations with illegal armed groups. This limited 'engagement' by the police or military reinforces external notions of inherent violence, and perpetuates potentially violent interactions with the occupants. *All* members of the community become read as potentially violent, delinquent, and dangerous.

The consequences of such labeling are visible in accounts given by children themselves. For many Colombians beyond Cazucá the images of raids and gang activity dominate their understanding of the community via television and newspapers. Andrea (11) explained how when her father went looking for work he

was rejected when he told the potential employer where he was living (in interview, November 2010). Similarly, another student linked the difficulty of finding employment directly to the interventions of the government in the community and associated media coverage in a conversation during a lunch break at school with several students. One student told me of an incident a few weeks earlier where one of his older brothers was refused a job because he came from the neighborhood that had been on the news the previous day and thus was seen as potentially connected to the drug violence (field notes, 16 November 2010).

More than just stigmatization and its consequences, the security ostensibly provided by the state to its citizens is denied. Laura succinctly highlighted this in our conversation:

> Laura (17): the police are useless here on the hill (*la loma*). Their only use is as decoration. That's the truth.
> *Researcher: So the police are part of the problem*?
> Laura: Sometimes, yes.

The ongoing exposure to police, military, and gang violence renders people's lives fundamentally insecure. There is a profound structural violence at play also, visible in the disjuncture between the demands *on* the state by those living in marginalized and poverty-affected conditions, and the reluctance or inability *of* the state to provide adequate and necessary services.

While a majority of the occupants of the *barrio* are not involved in illegal activity and would prefer it not to occur, the violent interventions by the state security forces in which all occupants are seen as potentially violent and potentially involved only increased distrust of state forces. Such distrust increases the space in which the gangs can operate and decreases security for all members of the community. Violence and

poverty become associated with particular neighborhoods or communities, marking
them as *other*, and stigmatizing all those within them as violent or deviant. The
effects of such configurations are processes of social exclusion that inscribe insecurity
as a permanent fact of life. Pinzon Ochoa notes that in different *barrios* the threat
varies—sometimes occupants are more affected by the local gangs, sometimes by
targeted assassination and 'black listing', sometimes by paramilitary organizations or
guerillas—however, the security of the population depends on their ability to exist in
a state of "generalized prevention" with people they do not know because they might
be informants (2007, 284). In such an environment contradictions, tensions, and
insecurity contribute negatively to social cohesion and can result in increased levels
of violence, both actualized and anticipated.

In Cazucá paramilitaries associated with the broader conflict control the community
through targeted threats and assassinations (Duque 2009; field notes, October 2010).
Often this is done through the use of 'black lists' (*listas negras*), which serve as
public notice of threat of death and generally result in the named party (and often their
family) leaving the community. Several young women described this happening to a
friend of theirs whose family was given twenty-four hours to leave:

> Camila Andrea (14): Yes, you have to go with your family, if you
>   don't they kill them. This happened to one of our classmates.
> Laura (17): Yes.
> Camila Andrea: It's that you have to go, you don't even know why.
>   There is only one option: leave or get killed.

Rosa (15) also argued that this violence, which results in such precarious and insecure
lived experience for many young people, is carried out without consideration of or
care for the consequences:

> Rosa (15): There is a saying that they 'kill without knowing'. For
>   example they kill someone and they don't know the pain that their

mother feels, or they break windows in a poor family's house. It is
all with impunity.

In children's lives, these acts manifest as profoundly destabilizing and insecure practices. Structures that should be secure such as family and the home are made into sites of potential danger. Evident in this situation is the precariousness and insecurity of life for young people, compounded by violence and death, which frustrates efforts to build more secure communities and lives (see also Riaño-Alcalá 2010 for detailed ethnographic work with young people in Medellin's *barrios*).

The presence of gangs and actors associated with the broader armed conflict in the community dramatically increases the sense of insecurity experienced by young people. The threat of violence is compounded by the stigma many children feel in response to narratives that characterize all young people as potentially involved in such groups. The public spaces of the community are circumscribed by both the threat and presence of armed actors (both illegal and state sanctioned), but more than this, the domination of these actors occurs through acts of violence against the bodies of those who pass through these spaces; such acts include assassinations, robbery, sexual assault, extortion, and bribery. The consequences of these direct violences are discussed in the following section.

Fear, Violences and Insecurity as a Lived Condition

As noted, exclusion and the specific forms of engagement by the state in the community permit the structures that impose multiple violences on the everyday lives of young people and render their daily existence insecure. Such experiences are not unique to Cazucá, but symptomatic of life in urban poor settlements across Latin America. McIllwaine and Moser, in conducting a large systematic survey of

occupants of urban poor settlements in Colombia and Guatemala, found that violence of all types constituted between 40 and 50 percent of the concerns raised by respondents (2007, 118-119). These forms of violence and their associated fear and insecurity are articulated as relating to structural causes such as poverty and inequality; these people are also aware of how their marginalized position exacerbates violences (Moser and McIllwaine 2000). Arriagada and Godoy (2000) argue that within the context of Latin American cities, widespread insecurity manifests as a result of the intersections of political violence with social and economic violence. In Moser and McIllwaine's (2000) study, young people were especially concerned with the drug problem in their communities, particularly the government's perceived lack of response, as well as generalized insecurity outside of the home. Young men mentioned gang violence while young women discussed these themes as well as the risks of sexual assault on the street (2000, 25). Younger children identified violence outside the home, particularly men holding weapons as a reoccurring theme in discussions (2000, 26). Such findings demonstrate the way in which specific instances of violence are embedded in a framework of insecurity that shapes everyday life and preoccupies the young occupants of these marginalized communities.

Fear of violence has "gradually come to curtail, fragment and annul" (Restrepo 2004, 179) many of the crucial social spaces of the city, resulting in a weakening of social capital and the interactions between citizens that strengthen ties and sense of community. Daniela (16), when asked about the most difficult things about being young in Cazucá replied without hesitation: "insecurity…more than anything. Seriously. To be young." In addition to this understanding of age as a risk factor, experiences of living in Cazucá are regularly described by the young people as

specific experiences of insecurities. For example:

> Yamila (11): where I live, next to where I live there almost always are
>   thieves

> Javier (11): Well, here it is bad because there are many robbers and
>   there are many people who kill lots of people.

In response to being asked what they dislike about living in Cazucá, or what is

difficult about living here, these three young people had immediate examples:

> Paola (15): Well, what I don't like is the insecurity. You have to be
>   very aware. Of everything and…
> Alejandro (17): For me, well, no, it is that there are many thieves, and
>   yes, the insecurity. That you can't even go to the corner sometimes.
> Juliana (17): Yes, for me the insecurity also, more than anything; and
>   the houses where no one lives.

A sense of insecurity, for these three, is not an abstract concept, but bound up in

practices and places which they inhabit. Empty houses are seen by the community as

potential sites of danger because they are not 'claimed' or sanctioned and so can be

occupied by "less friendly neighbors" as one teacher commented, referring to the

criminal gangs, and the smaller scale drug vendors in the neighborhood. These varied

violent actions circumscribe the space in which children can act, and cuts threads of

social cohesion and community. The consequence, beyond immediate risk of violence

is a precariousness and insecurity that becomes pervasive in young people's everyday

lives.

**Challenging Flattened Readings of Insecure Young People: Responses to
Everyday Insecurity**

Amidst the insecure environments of their everyday lives, children find spaces and

ways of being which actively resist the violence. These spaces include the school,

spaces provided by NGOs, and at times collective community celebrations.

Villamizar and Zamora (2005, 70-71) point out that "new forms of expression" arise in places of encounter that are often quite public. They point to the street or shops in which young people gather to claim particular ways of being and being recognised. These spaces, along with institutional spaces such as schools, also allow the establishment of normal routines. Collective engagements and routine form securing practices for children that are crucial in responding to persistent, daily insecurity. For children living amongst ongoing violence, maintaining routines increases a sense of autonomy and reinscribes the normalcy of everyday life and such practices are often linked to sites such as the home, the mall, or school and underscore coping mechanisms in young people (Pat-Horenczyk, Schiff, Doppelt 2006).

In responding to insecurity, many children recognised the school as a site that offers potential, a space where young people could pursue individual goals and also work collaboratively with others. Schools provide a sense of predictability and can foster "enriched social networks" (Bentancourt and Khan 2008, 323). Such findings echo those of Villamizar and Zamora (2005) as well as Burgess (2008, 273-284) to reinforce the ways in which sites such as the school can respond on a local, everyday level to ameliorate the sense of insecurity for young people. One of the teachers described the school as a space of "refuge, where there is less violence" and argued this space allows children to form resilience and actively respond to difficult everyday environments. More than this, the actions of young people in this space are recognized and validated, and this creates a positive and collaborative environment:

> *Researcher: And why do you like school?*
> Susana (15): Because you are treated well. There are many good teachers, well not all, but most, and for example I have an attachment to almost all the teachers because they treat you well and are really lovely with us. They never raise their voice at me and treat

you well and I understand the classes. And well, many places you
don't have this. So that is why I like school.

Researcher: Do you like going to school?
Johan David (11): Yes! Because they teach well and all my friends are
here and it is a good place to be for a child.

As well as teachers, strong friendship groups can be seen as a strength of the space of

school also. It is worth noting that in making use of the institution of the school,

young people are not simply perpetuating learned understandings of children as

passive or innocent. Rather these articulations demonstrate that many children are

aware of the spaces available to them and make conscious choices to use them and

access the support they offer. The space of the school can be conceptualized as a *site*

of opportunity amongst everyday violence and insecurity ([reference redacted for

blind review])[ii].

Violence and insecurity limits young people's ability to move through the community

and so young people modify their travels through the community to avoid these

dangers, creating particular pathways in their everyday lives that are more secure.

This involves walking to school past friends' houses and avoiding areas that are

caliente ('hot', or dangerous) even if it means a longer walk. They speak with one

another as well as adults to find the most recent information on potential insecurities

in the community and will quickly act to respond either by stopping at a friend's

house rather than continuing their walk home, altering their route, or passing on

information to others who might be more affected (field notes, October 2010). These

practices are fundamentally everyday actions on a mundane level where young people

actively respond to the insecurity that manifests in their lives.

Children in Cazucá recognize both the complexity of the issues facing their lives and

argue for their inclusion in solutions. In these discussions it was not local community but politicians or others in positions of power and privilege that were identified as having some culpability for the issues facing Cazucá but also some ability to affect change.

> *Researcher: What do you have to contribute to these conversations [with adults, if they listened]?*
> Paola (15): Well, about the insecurity and everything, to try and fix this a little because this area [Cazucá] is often of very little concern to the politicians. It is like a tiny black dot on a sheet of paper… and so, to listen about how they can help the people who need it, because really now we see politicians that are worthless.
> Alejandro (15): Yes.
> Juliana (17): Yes, things are getting worse, well. [It would be better] that they pay attention to us, that older adults pay attention to the young people.

The challenges of the environment of Cazucá form the context in which both individual and collective efforts are located. Acute consciousness of the way Cazucá and the young people who occupy it are seen 'outside', coupled with the daily experiences of violence and conflict, make young people both highly motivated and defensive of their ability to achieve things in the future. This comment by Felipe (16) is indicative of these tensions and challenges:

> Felipe: [after describing different forms of violence that "never leave"] in part it is bad because it affects us and it does damage to us… but it is in part good, I guess, because it has taught us to support each other, to pull yourself forward and don't give up…

The efforts to affect change, located in everyday practices, and supported through physical sites such as educational institutions that assist in the amelioration of the insecurity of daily life allows the potential for young people's daily routines to contribute to a sense of potential in the future. This is one, compelling, reading of Koonings and Kruijt's "new brand of survival 'know-how'" to negotiate violence in everyday life (2007, 4). It is the challenges of environments that are violent and insecure as well as attitudes that are dismissive of the capacity of young people that

have the potential to annul these efforts.

Conclusion

This exploration of insecurity, through structural exclusion and stigmatisation as well as direct violences, is not meant as a totalising account of the lives of young people of the community. Rather, paying attention to how these encounters are experienced reframes how insecurity must be conceived through the lives and bodies of those living among conflict in their everyday lives. Responding to a feminist commitment of paying attention to the margins, this article has sought to contextualise discussions of the insecurity of Colombia's conflict-affected urban youth that tend to speak *for* young people through accounts of their own experiences. Emergent from these discussions of stigma, violence, and the resultant everyday fear and challenges is a more complex terrain of violence and insecurity. While children are not generally in a position to challenge the structures that actively marginalise them and their communities on a structural level, they constantly and actively seek ways of ameliorating the risks and violences to their lives. The act of belonging to the community is not straightforward; a sense of insecurity for many young people is not abstract but bound up in complex practices and places in young people's everyday lives[—practices and places that are not accounted for by dominant security discourses.

Enloe noted that those who occupy the margins and 'bottom rungs' are assumed to have nothing relevant to contribute, an assumption that erases their agency and reinscribes presumed hierarchies of power. Understandings of security, or the insecurity of people's lives, that do not interrogate such assumptions are weakened. A

critical feminist perspective that takes as central the importance and validity of the margins challenges narratives that disregard these sites as unimportant in theorising security. Confronted with stigmatization and social exclusion as well as the direct and indirect violences of daily life, children negotiate their insecurity in multiple, active, and fluid ways. Riaño-Alcalá, in writing on children and youth in similar communities in Medellin, Colombia makes explicit the "shifting positions of youth", recognising that they at different times

> [serve] as sufferers of the loss of their loved ones or close friends, as perpetrators of violence, as carriers of hate and feelings of revenge, as active participants in democratic proposals, as witnesses to violence, or as participants in social movements and counter-cultural expressions (2010, 13).

Paying attention to the lives of those who are insecure demonstrates that young people experience insecurity in specific ways. Because of their often-dichotomous characterisation as innocent *or* delinquent, they are at the juncture of different securing practices yet the lived complexity of their lives, not accounted for in simplistic formulations, renders them particularly exposed to pervasive insecurities.

 This article does not attempt to imply that children's experiences and views provide a complete response to multiple understandings of insecurity. Rather it argues that the ways in which insecurity pervades the daily lives of those who are made insecure is invisible in dominant discourses that attempt to diagnose these insecurities. Exploring how young people experience insecurities in their daily lives contributes to a fuller picture of what insecurity means in spaces made marginal and insecure by conflict. Understandings of insecurity cannot be flattened or read as straightforward but require—or even demand—closer engagement with the conditions and interrelations between processes and structures that render people insecure. Similarly children's lives and engagements with their insecure lives must be read as complex, adaptive,

and variable.

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[i] Inhabitants referred to the community simply as Cazucá and this shortened form is used throughout this article.

[ii] As noted, this article focuses on those young people who are in school. It cannot speak for those who are unable or have opted out of education. It is important to note that other research highlights the self-securing role gangs can play in young people's lives, providing security, social cohesion and belonging (Duque 2009: 29-31; Pinzon Ochoa 2007: 283; Sabogal Ruiz 2005: 70). This exploration is beyond the scope of this article, but draws attention to the fact that young people respond to everyday insecurity in a variety of ways and such activities merit further exploration.