

Discursive networks and juvenile delinquent identity construction: A study from automated textual analysis

Yuli Andrea Botero Caicedo^I, Jenyfer Jiménez Gómez^{II},
Luisa Fernanda Cuasapud Mora^{III}, Fernando Charria^{IV}

^I Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Colombia.
Universidad Libre de Colombia, Colombia.
Autora correspondiente.
Email: yuli.botero@upb.edu.co
ORCID: 0000-0001-9252-3113

^{II} Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Colombia.

^{III} Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Colombia.

^{IV} Universidad Libre de Colombia, Colombia.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyze the subjective construction of criminal identity in three gang-related adolescents in a preventive detention center in Valle del Cauca, Colombia. A qualitative methodology with a biographical study design was employed, which included in-depth interviews, body mapping, and automated textual analysis using IRaMuTeQ. The study was situated within the broader context of the gang phenomenon in Colombia, with a particular focus on Valle del Cauca, where adolescent criminality was notably prevalent and had been largely overlooked by state policies that prioritized other armed actors. This oversight contributed to the proliferation of these groups and their associated criminal activities. Through the analysis of discursive networks generated from life stories, it was discovered that the identity of adolescents linked to gangs was constructed around their membership in these groups, which gave them recognition and power within their social environment. The study identified significant patterns in this identity construction through family relationships, narrated experiences, and cultural practices that shaped the sense of belonging and self-affirmation within scenarios of exclusion.

Keywords: criminal identity; subjectivity; adolescent criminal responsibility system; juvenile delinquency; discursive networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

GANGS have become a focal point in Colombian society due to the fact that many of the adolescents who are affiliated with these organizations engage in violent acts and criminal activities in various cities throughout the country. This study sought to ascertain information pertaining

to the department of Valle del Cauca, with a particular focus on crimes that exhibited the highest degree of activity. The investigation entailed the collection of data regarding complaints that had been filed, the management of prosecution for the implicated parties, and the assessment of operational outcomes, specifically the arrests facilitated by the Policía Nacional de Colombia.

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Mosquera and Polo (2022) posit that the presence of gangs in Colombia is a contributing factor to the nation's ongoing insecurity. These entities exert a pervasive influence on various sectors, including the social, political, cultural, and economic domains. The state's response to this situation has been deemed inadequate and ineffective, thereby contributing to the proliferation of gangs and their subsequent dispersal to different cities. Colombia has been confronted with different armed actors, so it has downplayed the existence of this phenomenon, "gang activity," and has concentrated on paramilitary groups, guerrillas, drug trafficking, etc., which are directly related to the armed conflict.

The Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF, 2018) made calculations from the Planning Directorate of the Board of the Sistema de Responsabilidad Penal para Adolescentes (SRPA), where it was evidenced that in its last update in 2018, there were 853 cases of adolescents between 14 and 17 years old who committed crimes, mainly exercised by the male gender. The most prevalent crimes were trafficking, manufacture, or carrying of narcotics (27.9%) and theft (22.39 %), or carrying of weapons (17.58 %), homicide (6.68 %), sexual crimes (5.27 %), and personal injury (4.40 %). It is imperative to elucidate that these constitute the most salient or recurrent crimes within the population, in addition to less prevalent crimes.

The Judicial Branch of the Superior Council of the Judiciary of the Republic of Colombia has indicated that, from 2020 to 2022, statistics were presented from the criminal offices with a guarantee control function. These statistics reveal that demands were made against 4,444 adolescents in Valle del Cauca between 2020 and 2022. The most egregious offenses, constituting the highest demand for justice, were homicides, with a total of 1,061 complaints. Subsequently, the most prevalent categories of reported crimes are the manufacture, trafficking, or carrying of firearms (1,059 complaints), theft (824 complaints), sexual crimes (691 complaints), domestic violence (420 complaints), drug trafficking (240 complaints), and personal injury (149 complaints). Of the 4,444 complaints lodged, a mere 492 have led to the most substantial final inventory, which entails the prosecution and subsequent detention of

adolescents in preventive custody centers. Given the intricacy of the process, it is imperative to address and further investigate the manner in which the identity of these adolescents is shaped within the context of gang membership (Sistema de Información Estadística de la Rama Judicial, 2020).

The Policía Nacional de Colombia published the operational results between 2021 and 2023, i.e., the arrests of adolescents during those years. A study of criminal activity among adolescents reveals that the most prevalent offenses include trafficking, manufacture, or carrying of drugs (589 cases), manufacture and carrying of weapons (586), theft (509), personal injury (148 cases), domestic violence (125), homicide (134), and sex crimes (99). In consideration of the aforementioned data, it is noteworthy that the participation of adolescents affiliated with criminal groups is of considerable significance. These data pertain to the criminality of adolescents, as it is challenging to ascertain in the statistics whether those who perpetrated these acts are affiliated with gang groups. The data are calculated based on the nature of the crime committed, with the groups to which the offenders belong being disregarded during the typification process.

Furthermore, the Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (2023) has noted in its annual assessment of security and citizen coexistence between 2021 and 2022 that criminal organizations are present in various regions of the country, including Valle del Cauca, where groups such as the Shottas, Espartanos, Gladiador, Los Nachos, Los Montenegro, La Empresa, Los de la R, Los Marroco, Los de la 8, Los del Pasillo, Los Lleras, La Factory, and Patio Quinto have been identified. According to the provided data, the primary criminal activities of the group in question include the trafficking, manufacture, or carrying of drugs and weapons, extortion, robbery, and homicide. It is noteworthy that these organizations frequently recruit adolescents for their criminal activities. This phenomenon, attributable to their developmental stage, engenders the capacity to adopt a criminal identity associated with their respective groups, such as "gang," "criminal gang," or "armed group." Each group formulates a series of identity components that young people appropriate.

Accordingly, the theory of Hall and Gay (1996) is of great relevance, since it proposes that identity is not something fixed but is formed in relation to the social and cultural environment. Consequently, exploring the environment in which adolescents affiliated with gang groups find themselves is imperative, as their identity is forged in relation to the dynamics established in these groups. Conversely, Tajfel's social theory is considered, which, according to Morales *et al.* (2007), underscores the impact of an individual's relationships with diverse groups on their self-perception and the formation of their identity within a correctional environment. In this context, criminal and institutional groups significantly influence the development of an individual's identity and social standing.

This phenomenon is also examined within the domain of social psychology, which elucidates how individuals delineate their social identity through group affiliation and the subsequent impact on behavior and social interaction. This theoretical framework posits that individuals and social groups tend to categorize themselves and others based on shared characteristics, such as race, religion, nationality, or age, through a process of identification with a particular group. It has been demonstrated that individuals have the capacity to enhance their self-esteem and establish a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with their peers. However, the study also elucidates the mechanisms through which prejudice and discrimination may emerge when individuals perceive a threat or competitive dynamic between their group and other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Furthermore, the research will be grounded in social constructionism, a theoretical framework that, according to Gergen (2007), encompasses social processes concerning the nature of the real, the rational, and the good. This theoretical framework is comprehensive in its application, extending to all categories of existence, including the physical, mental, and spiritual realms. The field of constructionism has yielded six distinct areas of exploration: critical psychology, discursive psychology, narrative psychology, theoretical psychology, methods of inquiry, and therapy as social construction. In this case, the focus is on discursive psychology that, through narrative elements, enables the recognition of the construction of the subject's identity.

According to Hall and Gay (1996), the theory of identity is currently a subject with other positions; definitions are presented from different perspectives and, in turn, are contradictory to each other. Therefore, the research is carried out from the theory of identity as a social construction. The concept of identity is theorized to be constructed from the recognition of its origin or characteristics in common with others or with ideals. The process of identification can vary and/or be interpreted in different ways. The concept of identity is strategic and positional, which is why it lacks unification; it can be constructed in different ways through practices and discourses, which are generally antagonistic. The argument is posited that identities are inextricably linked to their historical origins and utilization. The influence of language and culture on the formation of individual identities is a pivotal factor in this process, as identities are shaped within the context of a given representation, rather than being independent of it. Consequently, the argument is posited that identity is only constructible through relationships with others, wherein discourse constitutes that identity (Hall and Gay, 1996).

The subcategories of identity are as follows: recognition and power, social interactionism and practices, and rites and customs. In accordance with Althusser (1970), as referenced by Hall (1985), the concept of power and recognition is inherently intertwined with ideology. Ideology, therefore, cannot be regarded as a mere compilation of ideas or beliefs; rather, it is a multifaceted system of social representations that influences our comprehension of the world and our respective positions within it. In this system of social representations, the relations of power and domination are primarily manifested. Hall (1985) posits that power is perpetuated through the generation and perpetuation of societal signification, emphasizing the pivotal role of ideological representations in maintaining the stability and perpetuation of dominant power structures.

Additionally, it underscores the significance of recognition, which pertains to the manner in which individuals perceive themselves and others within a specific social and ideological framework. It is associated with the concept of identity, the process by which individuals

perceive themselves in relation to established social and cultural categories. Consequently, individuals align themselves with ideological representations, enabling them to adopt specific social positions based on these identifications (Hall, 1985). Conversely, Honneth (1997) asserts that recognition is an integral component of social existence and that endeavors to attain recognition have been a significant driving force in the annals of human history. He posits that recognition is not confined to the individual sphere but is pivotal in the formation of collective identity and political life. Honneth identifies three forms of recognition that are essential for the construction of the identity and self-esteem of individuals: interpersonal recognition, legal recognition, and social recognition.

According to Goffman (1997), the manifestation of power is evident in the ability to influence the perception of others and the construction of social reality. This influence is exerted through social interactions. The author posits that social life can be conceptualized as a form of theater, wherein individuals comport themselves in accordance with the expectations they harbor concerning their environment. To refer to how people use different strategies to present themselves in the way they want, he uses the concept of performance. These performances are strategic and are designed to meet certain expectations and social norms. The author further posits that individuals employ various means to manage the impression they project to others, including body language, attire, and cosmetic enhancements, with the objective of elevating their social status and authority within the context of the interaction. Additionally, the concept of “frame” is emphasized, denoting the manner in which individuals interpret and comprehend interactions. These frames exert a significant influence on how individuals represent themselves and how they interpret the actions and intentions of others.

Hall and Gay's (1996) seminal work posited that culture and power are inherently intertwined, a perspective that has since been further elaborated and expanded upon by numerous scholars in the field. In their work, they emphasized how social interactions are scenarios where power relations are manifested and how cultural practices and communication play

a fundamental role in the construction and negotiation of meanings in society. In their analysis of identity and representation, authors explore how individuals construct their identities in relation to cultural discourses and how media and social representations influence the perception of groups and communities. This provides a broad theoretical basis for understanding the complex dynamics of social interactions in the context of culture and power (Hall and Gay, 1996).

Conversely, gangs can be regarded as a response to the lack of adequate spaces in society that cater to the needs and rights of children, adolescents, and young people. These groups assert their rights, which were previously denied to them by their family, the state, or the community. This group organizes itself without supervision and develops its own set of rules within a specific territory and with a symbolism that allows it to give meaning to its group membership. These groups have been found to violate the rights of all citizens and have been linked to violence and crime (Organización de los Estados Americanos, 2007). In this case, the predominant members are male.

In this case, the group dimension in which we wish to approach identity is considered, with particular attention to the participation in gang groups. Ordoñez (2021) posits that gangs are distinguished by a phenomenon he terms “protective magic.” He asserts that the numerous magical rituals performed by gang members are intended to protect them from malevolent spells, witchcraft, imminent dangers, misfortune, and persecution by their rivals. These methods of protection include prayers, amulets, magical acts such as passes and drinking spells, as well as tobacco and tarot readings to ascertain the future and influence destiny. It has been observed that the prayers in question exhibit a repetitive structure and often bear a resemblance to biblical psalms. These prayers function as a form of magical ritual, employed to seek protection and evade responsibility or blame for the perilous circumstances confronting them. This perspective is characterized by an emphasis on self-interest, with a failure to acknowledge personal responsibility for one's actions. This phenomenon can be attributed to the perception of a lack of adequate protection among gang

members, which results in a desire for security. These amulets serve as conduits for the transmission of desires and thoughts, thereby conferring a perceived protective power.

According to the Organización de los Estados Americanos (2007), the classification of gangs is determined by specific structural criteria. Table 1 presents a categorization of these phenomena.

According to OMS (2019), adolescence is defined as a period of growth that occurs after childhood and before adulthood, ranging from 10 to 19 years of age. Determining an exact age range is challenging because it is important to consider the adaptive, functional, and decisive values that occur at this stage. According to UNICEF (2020), the stages of adolescence are as follows:

- *Early adolescence*: It occurs between the ages of 10 and 13 and is characterized by the beginning of physical development.
- *Middle adolescence*: It occurs between 14 and 16 years of age and shows psychological changes and changes in the construction of identity.
- *Late adolescence*: It occurs between 17 and 21 years of age, when they develop acceptance, feel comfortable with their bodies, and seek to define their identity.

According to the Código de la Infancia y la Adolescencia of Colombia, an adolescent is defined as an individual between the ages of 12 and 18 years. According to Book II of the aforementioned code, criminal liability for the deprivation of liberty can only be applied to adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18.

In order to understand how the identity of an adolescent who belongs or was linked to a gang is constructed, a search was conducted for research articles in Spanish and English that address both topics. The searches were conducted in databases such as Google Scholar, Redalyc, SAGE Journals, Scielo, Scopus, and repositories of various universities, with a chronological range between 2018 and 2023. To achieve a delimited search on the subject, the categories of gangs, identity construction and criminal identity, and adolescents were addressed.

First, it is imperative to underscore the significance of interactional relationships. As

demonstrated in the works of Martínez *et al.* (2019), Affuso *et al.* (2020), Cocuñame (2020), Davis and Silveira (2020), Hernández *et al.* (2020), Rosas and Salguero (2020), Ordoñez (2021), Luco *et al.* (2022), and Mosquera and Polo (2022), the development of identity is influenced by factors such as family, upbringing, and context. For instance, an individual's propensity to join a gang is positively correlated with their perceived vulnerability. The present authors concur with the position that adolescents and young people construct their identities through a search for recognition, power, and protection. Consequently, they opt to affiliate with gangs due to a multitude of risk factors, including but not limited to close and protective environments associated with criminal groups, low socioeconomic status, dysfunctional family relationships, parental absence, and the formation of new emotional bonds.

Conversely, gangs are known to maintain a distinct identity. According to the works of Baird (2018), Botero *et al.* (2018), Byröd and Ferati (2018), Cohen (2018), Jiménez (2019), Fernández (2020), and Caicedo *et al.* (2022), gangs exhibit a distinctive form of communication, both internally and in relation to their external environment. This unique form of communication is characterized by the use of specific codes that serve to maintain the group's internal cohesion and external reputation. These authors emphasize that the construction of identity is discursive and that individuals maintain both a collective and an individual identity. Furthermore, it has been indicated that individuals' decision to join gangs is driven, at least in part, by the pursuit of status. Specifically, the act of belonging to these groups is believed to enhance feelings of masculinity, thereby providing a sense of power and respect. However, this social acceptance may be accompanied by a sense of rejection and social exclusion outside the confines of the criminal milieu. This dynamic hinders the capacity of its members to transition between different identities, thereby impeding their ability to adapt to alternative lifestyles. Consequently, the group's cohesion is maintained through the cultivation of a sense of belonging and protection, fostering a perception of fraternity among its members.

Gang type	Organization	Number of participants	Main composition	Ages	Territory	Main activities	Features
Irregular gangs	Poorly organized	15-40	Mainly adolescent males	13-18	Rivalries between schools in your area	Extortion, intimidation, and other acts of vandalism	They are respected but without an organized structure in the performance of activities
Transgressor gangs	Organized	40-80	Mostly men, allow women	10-18	Neighborhood of residence, violent territorial control	Planned crime and use of drugs and weapons	It arises from exclusion and poverty and has its own rules
Violent gangs	For violent purposes	100-500	Mainly men, homogeneous composition	15-30 (or more)	Neighborhood under the domain of clicas	Homicidal criminality and intense violent acts, similar to juvenile gangs	Explicit violence oriented
Criminal gangs	For criminal purposes	50-200	Mainly men, homogeneous composition	18-30	Territorial identification, operating in different locations	Complex criminal activities, use of sophisticated weapons, drug and, arms trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and murder	They seek money, power, and reputation and are disciplined
Women's gangs	Organized by gender without violent purpose	15-40	Women	15-25	Small cities and rural areas	Extortion, intimidation, and other petty criminal activities	It arises from imitation, escape from abuse, desire for protection, and power

Table 1. Gang categorization. Note. The table illustrates the categorization of the gangs, which was prepared based on information provided by the General Secretariat of the Organización de los Estados Americanos.

Other research, such as that of Peña (2019) and Chévez and Melenge (2023), primarily cites the involvement of women in gang groups as a result of adverse childhood experiences. These experiences, according to the aforementioned research, are accompanied by the need to establish an identity and to be regarded with respect within their group. The objective of this need is to achieve social acceptance. Despite the evident similarities, notable distinctions emerge when comparing gangs in El Salvador and Colombia. In El Salvador, women are inherently unable to ascend in status within their respective organizations. Instead, they are susceptible to mistreatment and exploitation by their peers. In Colombia, women have been shown to have a more straightforward path to leadership positions within criminal organizations, such as gangs. Women have the capacity to establish emotional connections with other members of the group, concurrently wielding influence over them.

In light of the aforementioned points, scholars such as Frisby and Wood (2020) and Hsu (2022) have noted that individuals, in their efforts to alleviate mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, exhibit a propensity to forge stronger connections within their respective groups. These connections serve a dual purpose: they facilitate an enhancement in self-esteem, thereby fostering a sense of belonging that reinforces their membership in the group. This, in turn, serves as a form of self-protective behavior, as it provides a sense of security and support within the organizational structure. Furthermore, it is evident that adolescents who predominantly join these criminal groups are those who are marginalized.

In conclusion, an initial review of extant literature reveals that the majority of research on the subject of identity has been approached from a psychoanalytic perspective. These have been excluded from the scope of this exercise. Given the objective of this study, which is to attain an understanding of the subject from a psychosocial perspective, the analysis was centered on this objective. The research studies selected for review were found to be related to social theories, including identity theory, social identity, social structures, symbolic interactionism, identity construction, and identity as a social construction.

From a methodological perspective, the majority of research was of a qualitative nature, though ethnographic and mixed research methods were also employed, utilizing instruments such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and sets of scales and inventories. The analyses conducted were predominantly narrative and/or discursive in nature. Conversely, an analysis of the subject matter's characteristics revealed that the majority of research is grounded in qualitative approaches. It is recommended that these studies be expanded to encompass mixed or quantitative methodologies. Conversely, research in this domain is regarded as intricate due to the inaccessibility of the subjects involved in these studies, which impedes the advancement of research from a qualitative standpoint.

The findings of the research indicate the necessity of implementing a variety of public policies, allowing investigators access to the population in order to implement intervention plans with the community under examination. Conversely, they underscore the state's responsibility to allocate resources, provide support, and facilitate opportunities for vulnerable sectors, which are disproportionately susceptible to involvement with criminal groups in pursuit of basic necessities. Furthermore, the importance of fortifying family bonds to establish a robust support network is underscored, with the objective of averting instances wherein minors seek external sources of protection, affection, and acknowledgment, thereby compromising the integrity of their primary familial unit.

The aforementioned points give rise to the following research question: The objective of this study is to examine the criminal identity of three adolescents associated with gangs who are currently detained in the Centro de Internamiento Preventivo in Valle del Cauca. The objective of this study is to understand how adolescent members' belonging to these groups impacts their identity construction in the Colombian context. In order to achieve the aforementioned purpose, the following specific objectives have been established: first, to identify the importance for gang-related adolescents of obtaining recognition and power in the social and family context; and second, to describe the most common practices, rituals, and customs among adolescents who belong to gangs.

The involvement of adolescents in gangs and the commission of various crimes in Colombia pose a major social and public safety problem. Despite the efforts that have been made thus far, the criminal identity of these adolescents remains under-explored, impeding the potential for efficacious interventions to combat juvenile delinquency. The contribution of psychology is essential, as it can shed light on the subjects' self-perception, self-esteem, and the influence of their environment on their participation in gangs. This research endeavor aims to address existing lacunae in the literature and offer a more expansive perspective on the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency in Colombia. The relevance of the aforementioned point is twofold: first, it provides information for the development of psychosocial intervention programs, and second, it demonstrates feasibility based on access to the population through institutional links and the absence of monetary resources. The results promise not only a deeper understanding of the problem but also the possible formulation of more effective public policies to address the roots and consequences of gang involvement. These policies would contribute to the construction of safer and healthier communities.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research approach was grounded in a qualitative design, employing the biographical model. According to Sanz (2005), this model entails the examination of individuals' life narratives to achieve a profound and contextualized comprehension of their personal experiences. In this model, life narratives are collected through in-depth interviews, diaries, letters, or other personal documents. These narratives serve as the primary focus of the research, enabling a comprehensive examination of the individual's life, along with the events, decisions, and experiences that have contributed to their identity formation. A fundamental aspect of the biographical method entails the contextualization of life narratives. This process entails the contextualization of the individual's experiences within their social, cultural, and historical milieu to elucidate the impact of external factors on their life trajectory. Given the research's focus on identity construction, the

biographical method was deemed the most suitable approach. This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the process by identifying and examining the various factors and events that have influenced its formation. This entailed an exhaustive examination of the traceability of their life history and narrative.

Conversely, in-depth interviews were utilized, a qualitative technique aimed at acquiring comprehensive information regarding participants' perspectives, concepts, sentiments, and encounters (Arias, 2020). During the interview, the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee is characterized by its flexibility, resembling a friendly conversation more than an interrogation. This technique can be used in various contexts, such as ethnographic, phenomenological, or case studies, among others. The study population can be individual or group, depending on the research approach. This technique facilitates the collection of information that is otherwise challenging to observe and provides insight into the perceptions and experiences of participants. The interview's structure and content can be adapted to align with the specific context and interviewee responses. Given that the objective of the exercise is to emphasize a narrative perspective, it is imperative for the subject to engage in self-disclosure. Therefore, a biographical exercise is proposed, in which the interview is fundamental for opening up dialogue and enabling the individual to tell their story in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, body mapping was utilized as an ancillary instrument. The authors introduced a novel methodological approach to investigating the body in biographical contexts. The instrument under consideration comprises three distinct stages: exploration, interpretation, and reflection. These stages facilitate a connection with bodily sensations and promote an understanding of the relationships between the body, emotions, and experiences. This model proved instrumental in elucidating the intricacies of bodily experience within the context of biographical research, as it facilitated direct access to the lived experiences of participants and yielded insights into the dynamic interplay between the body, identity, and culture in domains such as health, sexuality, gender identity, and migration (Silva *et al.*, 2013). The concept of body mapping emerged as a method

to link the subject's narrative to their bodily experience, thereby demonstrating how historical influences shape their perspective and criminal identity in relation to their body and body structure. This approach also offers empirical evidence of how the body becomes a representation of their criminal identity.

For this study, we collaborated with three adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 who were detained at the Centro de Internamiento Preventivo of Colombia in the city of Palmira for criminal activity. The primary characteristic of the subjects was their affiliation with gangs, a finding that aligns with the significance of social group identity in the context of criminal involvement. The willingness of the participants and their families to engage in the study was also a salient factor, and they were duly informed and requested to provide their consent.

The analysis employed was of a narrative nature, with a focus on the examination of narratives or stories that individuals present. The objective of this study was to identify patterns, themes, structures, and meanings within the stories to understand how the subjects of the study construct and express their experiences. Life story analysis, a specific form of narrative analysis, focuses on exploring people's life trajectories over time. This process entailed the identification of significant events, transitions, changes, and factors that have influenced an individual's development, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their life and experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). Consequently, narrative analysis facilitated the utilization of the life story that the subject wished to construct, the identification of the moments that constituted their life narrative, the recognition of significant moments in their history, the establishment of individuals with whom they shared their life story, and, in this manner, the exploration of how the criminal component was integrated into their life story.

This research is in accordance with the ethical and confidentiality principles established in Law 1090 of 2006, as well as the applicable regulations. In each setting, the privacy and protection of the personal and emotional information of the participating adolescents is guaranteed, as well as respect for their rights and dignity. To this end, consent was obtained from the adolescents and their families through the

Centro de Internamiento Preventivo, as all adolescents admitted must sign a consent form for the performance of various activities. The information obtained during the interviews was to be kept strictly confidential. The researchers stipulated that they would not disclose or share the information except in cases where there was an imminent risk to the adolescents. In such cases, they would act in accordance with the law.

Conversely, Law 1581 of 2012, in Article 6, stipulates that the processing of personal data is prohibited in the absence of its public nature. Consequently, researchers were obligated to maintain the confidentiality of this information and to employ alternative names when necessary. Furthermore, this study adhered to the general provisions established in Resolución 8430 de 1993, which categorizes it as "no risk." This term applies to studies that use documentary research techniques and methods, as well as those in which there is no intentional intervention or modification of the biological, physiological, psychological, and social aspects of the participants. In accordance with the resolution, the justification of this research's utilization of interviews as the primary technique was detailed, with no mention of sensitive aspects of the participants' behavior. This ensured the ethics and integrity of the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained and analyzed using narrative graphs and body mapping, based on information obtained from the discourses of the three research subjects, are presented below. The graphs facilitate the identification of significant moments in the narrative, relevant events in their life experiences, and the various actors who form part of those experiences.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the life history of Subject 1 is divided into four significant moments. Among these, three events stand out: his entry into the world of crime, his betrayal by his gang, and the moment when his grandmother handed him over to the authorities. Furthermore, a relational plane of analysis illuminates pivotal figures, including his father, mother, and grandmother, as well as more distant figures such as his role model, "Willi," and his victims.

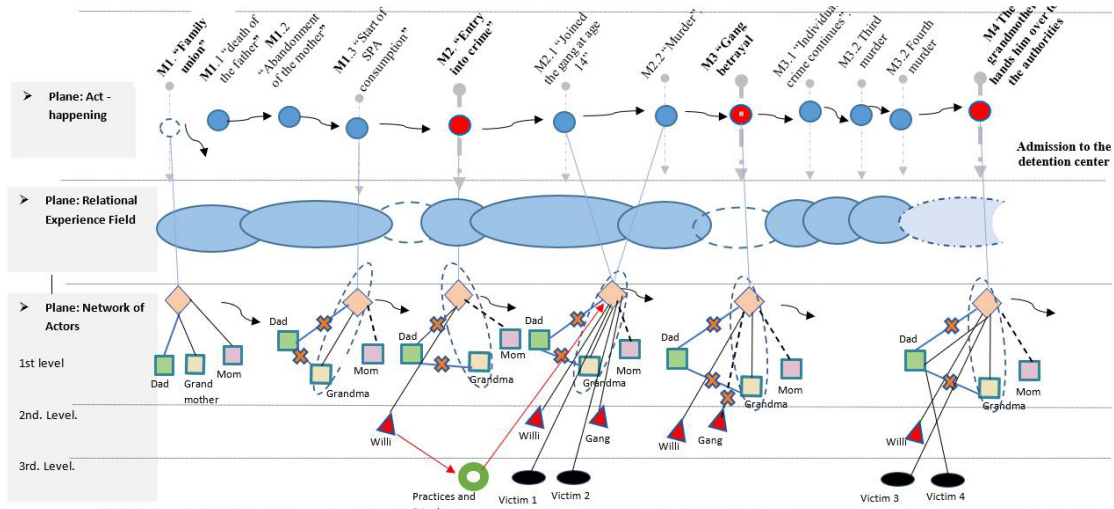


Figure 1. Narrative graph of Subject 1. **Note.** Prepared by the author.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the life history of Subject 2 has been divided into four significant moments. Among the aforementioned events, two stand out as particularly significant: initiation into the gang and subsequent arrest.

Furthermore, a relational plane of analysis illuminates pivotal figures, including the father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, and sister, as well as other more distant figures, such as the gang and its victims.

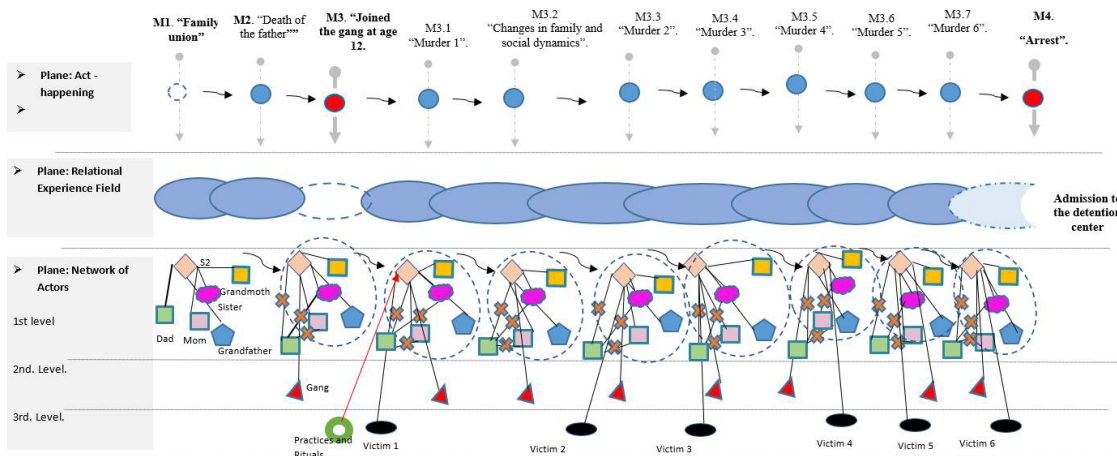


Figure 2. Narrative graph of Subject 2. **Note.** Prepared by the author.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the life history of Subject 3 has been segmented into five notable periods. Among these, three events stand out: first, the subject's induction into the criminal group; second, the subsequent shift in group dynamics; and finally, his capture. Furthermore, a relational plane can be observed that highlights key figures such as his father, mother, grandfather, sisters, and partner, as well as other more distant figures such as his cousin and his victims.

Table 2 presents the emotional bonds of each subject. A notable aspect of the study's findings is the observation that the relationship with the father figure undergoes a disruption due to the absence of the father figure, whether due to death or geographical separation resulting from conflict, in all three cases. The dynamics between mother figures and their offspring exhibit a greater degree of variability, encompassing a range of behaviors from the absence of emotional

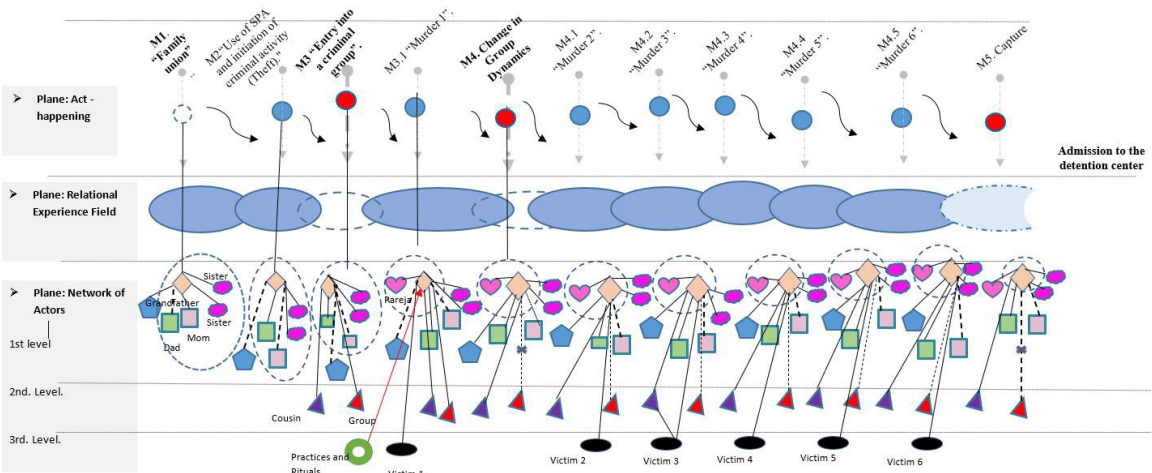


Figure 3. Narrative graph Subject 3. **Note.** Own elaboration.

or physical connection to behaviors that are oriented towards protection and nurturance. Grandmothers have been shown to play a significant role in relationships and are often characterized as emotional figures. In two cases, there is evidence of a role model in relation to delinquency in the form of a subject who is followed as an example.

Relationships of Subject 1	
Breakdown in relationship with father	“My father was murdered when I was 8 years old”
Conflictual relationship with mother	“I don’t want to know anything about her. She abandoned me when I was just a child”
Close relationship with grandmother	“My grandmother is the only woman I trust”
Relationships of Subject 2	
Breakdown in relationship with father	“My father died two years ago; it was murder”
Close relationship with all members of your family	“I live with my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, and my little sister. They have always supported me, and we have a good relationship”
Relationships of Subject 3	
Conflictual relationship with father	“When I was a child, my dad almost always hit me for being out on the street, getting into trouble, and every day was a fight and a complaint”
Relationship with mother: good but distant	“My mom did start to distance herself from me when I joined the group”
Close relationship with cousin	“I have a cousin who belongs to the same group, and that influenced me a lot because I used to hang out with him”

Table 2. Relationships between subjects. **Note.** Prepared by the author.

An analysis of the subjects’ statements has been developed, revealing a common crisis between childhood and adolescence (Figure 4). This critical period is precipitated by the absence or conflict with the father figure, which results in a stage characterized by delinquency and a series of experiences that generate transitions toward criminal behavior. In this stage, individuals actively pursue power and recognition, engaging in various criminal activities. Furthermore, they assume the role of provider within their family environment, a role associated with the concept of power and acknowledgment that the father figure represented. This role becomes a substitute for the absent figure within their family environment,

albeit in a negative capacity. Despite the ongoing challenges with maternal figures, a degree of relationship with the subjects is maintained. Furthermore, an individual who is involved in

criminal activity may reach a point where they are confronted with two possible outcomes: the possibility of reintegration into society or the likelihood of recidivism.

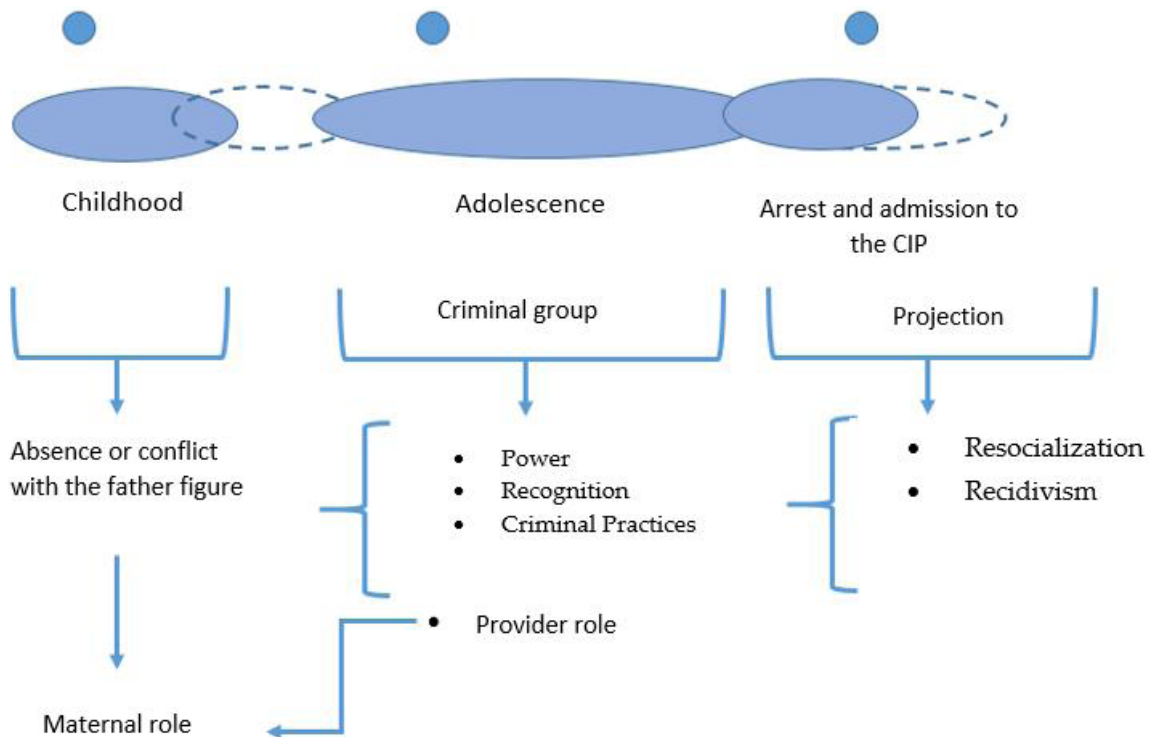


Figure 4. Relational deployment in the study subjects. **Note.** Prepared by the author.

Analysis of the participants' statements reveals a significant relationship between paternal absence and delinquency. In both the first and second cases, the absence of a father figure, whether due to death or abandonment, is linked to the emergence of negative feelings such as revenge and resentment, as well as the need to assume provider roles within the family. Subject 1 mentions the following: "No, my childhood wasn't so good because my dad died when I was 8 and my mom abandoned me." When contrasting this with the body map, the word "abandonment" is written by the subject, reflecting how his life changed after his mother's departure, marking the beginning of his involvement in criminal activities. Subject 2 states: "My family consists of my mother and my father, who died two years ago; it was murder. Since then, to be honest, I changed and became full of resentment; my personality changed." According to body mapping, the subject expresses through the word "death of my dad" the importance

that this event has for him. It is clear that this significant event marked a turning point in the adolescent's life, as he subsequently became involved in crime, driven by a desire for revenge and justice, in the hope that his participation in these groups would enable him to find his father's killer. On the other hand, Subject 3 shows a conflictive and distant relationship with his father figure, which contributes to the absence of adequate family role models. "When I was a kid, my dad almost always hit me, so I hung out on the streets getting into trouble, and every day was a fight and a complaint." He has had the support of some family members, such as his grandfather and aunts. Although his relationship with his parents is distant, especially with his mother, he maintains respect for her.

In addition, each subject highlights the perceived benefits of participating in criminal activities, such as power, recognition, authority, and respect within their social environment.

This recognition reinforces their identity and position in the group, generating a sense of belonging and social validation. Therefore, the accounts underscore the crucial role of the father figure in the formation of identity and criminal behavior, as well as the search for recognition and power through participation in criminal activities. Subject 1 mentions: “I felt like a beast, a minor who didn’t copy anyone and did what I wanted; that’s how I felt recognized.” Considering what the subject expressed in the body map, the phrase “rebellion” reveals a sense of revolution and autonomy on the part of the subject (see Figure 5), who perceives himself as someone strong and determined, unaffected by the influences of others and capable of acting according to his own desires.

Subject 2 states: “They see you as a different person because they find out that you’re in the film, and they start to take you more seriously and treat you with more respect.” When comparing his discourse during the interview with what was recorded in the mapping, the word “bullying” emerges (see Figure 5), which suggests the environment in which he lives and how his participation has led him to position himself in his

community as an intimidating figure, deserving of respect from those around him. This respect may stem both from the fear he instills and his influence within the community.

Subject 3 states: “When you belong to the group, they have to respect you. I felt good within the group because the old man told the others that they had to respect me. I saw the others as part of the group, but they knew they had to respect me more because they hadn’t killed anyone, they were just standing guard.” He also said, “People respect you.” Considering the above, it is important to note that in the body mapping exercise, the subject also included the word “intimidating” (see Figure 5). This relates to the way in which he and his group intimidate those around them, thereby gaining respect through the fear they instill in people in their environment. In addition, this behavior allows them to obtain economic benefits through activities such as extortion and kidnapping and also highlights the fact that they have an authority figure, “the old man,” who protects them. In this sense, one can consider the relationship between this figure and the lack or latent conflict with the father figure.

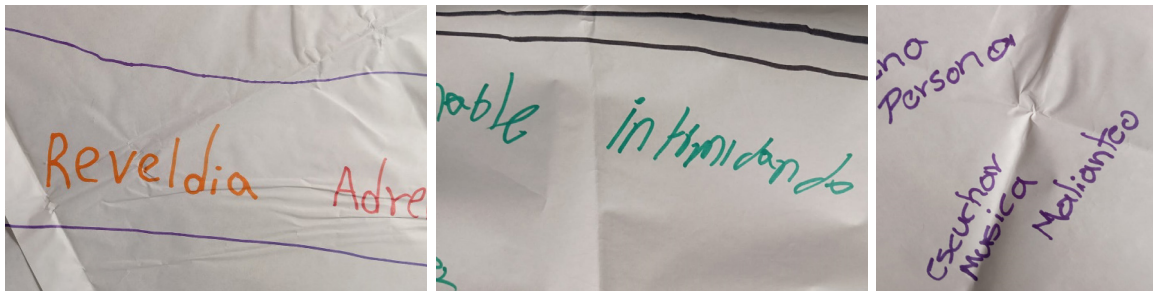


Figure 5. Body mapping elements of Subjects 1, 2, and 3.
Note. The figure was kept in the original language, Spanish.

On the other hand, it was observed that the subjects maintain a significant relationship with the practices, rituals, and customs of their respective communities. For example, in the case of Subjects 1 and 2, these practices are related, as both perform the same action after committing a murder. Subject 1 mentions: “Another thing is to urinate on the hand I used to kill him,” while Subject 2 states: “The only thing I did was urinate on my hand, but that’s to remove the gunpowder.” Subject 3 mentions: “I had bracelets on my waist, foot, and hand. They protect you. The one on your waist tightens when something bad is

about to happen, so I would hide. The ones on my foot and hand would get hot. They are strange things that you don’t even understand. The lady tells you when she is doing it. When something bad is going to happen, the cuff gets hot and the one on your waist gets tight. When this happened, I would hide.” According to the above, it is clear that each individual approaches these elements differently, giving them a particular meaning according to their personal and social context. However, it is crucial to note that all of them are influenced by these practices in various aspects of their lives.

From this perspective, it can be inferred that practices, rituals, and customs are rooted in each individual's cultural identity and act as fundamental pillars that shape their perception of the world and their social interactions. Despite the potential for divergent interpretations, a consensus emerges among individuals who have been immersed in these cultural milieus, underscoring the significance of traditions that serve a distinct purpose. These traditions, in essence, foster social cohesion and facilitate the transmission of values that are intrinsic to the criminal group. An exhaustive compendium of the discourses that drive the development of practices, customs, and rituals can be found in the table in Annex 6.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the analysis of the subjects' accounts, family relationships, and cultural practices, significant patterns are identified that contribute to the formation of criminal identities in the context of gangs. The findings of this study align with the theoretical framework proposed by Hall and Gay (1996), who contend that the formation of identity is predicated on the recognition of shared characteristics with others or with ideals. The extant research indicates that fractured relationships with authority figures, such as deceased or conflictive parents, contribute to the formation of criminal identities. Subjects seek to compensate for these traumatic experiences through recognition and power within gangs. It has been demonstrated that individuals have the capacity to enhance their self-esteem and establish a sense of belonging and connection with others. However, the emergence of prejudice and discrimination can also be precipitated when individuals perceive a threat or competition between their group and other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It also elucidates the mechanisms through which prejudice and discrimination may emerge when individuals perceive a threat or competition between their group and other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Another salient dimension is the experience of feeling isolated or unrecognized in one's immediate environment, such as the family. This dynamic can result in the pursuit of alternative reference groups, such as criminal organizations or

gangs, in an attempt to foster a sense of belonging and connection.

The findings of this study are consistent with those reported by Martínez *et al.* (2019), Affuso *et al.* (2020), Cocuñame (2020), Davis and Silveira (2020), Hernández *et al.* (2020), Rosas and Salguero (2020), Ordóñez (2021), Luco *et al.* (2022), and Mosquera and Polo (2022) concerning the impact of family and context on identity construction. The presence of dysfunctional family environments, the absence of parental figures, and a lack of protection have been identified as risk factors that increase the likelihood of gang involvement. This finding aligns with the observed outcomes, as subjects, following the dissolution of their relationship with a father figure, whether through death or conflict, engage in criminal activities to attain recognition. This phenomenon underscores the role of power dynamics in shaping criminal identities. Conflicts with other figures, such as the mother, are identified, and in some cases, these conflicts contribute to emotional tension due to abandonment or tension due to estrangement caused by the subject's criminal actions.

A multitude of studies have emerged that underscore the significance of gang identity and belonging. These studies, including those by Baird (2018), Belalcázar *et al.* (2018), Byröd and Ferati (2018), Cohen (2018), Jiménez (2019), Fernández (2020), and Caicedo *et al.* (2022), have revealed that individuals who affiliate with gangs often perceive gang identity as a means of acquiring recognition, authority, and protection. The necessity for acknowledgment is further emphasized in the oeuvre of Honneth (1997), who asserts that it constitutes an indispensable element of social existence and that endeavors to attain recognition have proven to be a significant catalyst in the annals of human history. Furthermore, the studies by Frisby and Wood (2020) and Hsu (2022) are related to the research in terms of the construction of a collective identity, as the subjects express feelings of isolation from other environments, and their gang offers them alternative ways of life through criminal activity, which reduces their mental health symptoms. The group assumes a pivotal role, becoming the focal point of the criminal subject's life, thereby elevating their self-esteem and offering a supportive network.

Althusser (1970) and Hall (1985) posit that power and social interactions are intrinsically linked to ideology and power relations in society, as they are understood from the perspective of social identity. Within the context of gangs, social interactions are characterized by the presence of specific roles and expectations. In this environment, violence and coercion serve as instruments for the establishment of status and power among gang members. Tajfel and Turner (1986), as cited in Morales *et al.* (2007), underscore the impact of an individual's relationships with diverse groups on their self-perception, emphasizing the pivotal role these interactions play in the formation of identity. This study explores how interaction dynamics influence adherence to norms and the formation of identities among adolescent gang members. This research is particularly relevant in contexts where parental authority models are absent or in need of replacement, such as within the context of gangs. The study posits that the absence of a parental authority figure may be compensated for by the group as a whole or by its leadership figures, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of specific interaction dynamics that shape the development of adolescent gang members' identities.

In conclusion, the practices, rituals, and customs within gangs function as symbolic elements that serve to reinforce the criminal identity of adolescents. These elements include rituals intended to protect members from the influence of witchcraft, as well as practices involving ritualized violence. These actions are indicative of the internalization of criminal norms and values within the subjects' identity. This notion aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Ordoñez (2021), who asserts that the rituals engaged in by gang members are intended to safeguard them from potential threats and adversaries. This assertion underscores the necessity for security and protection in a hostile environment. The extant research aligns with the author's assertion that these symbolic practices serve to reinforce the criminal identity of gang members and function as mechanisms to ensure their safety. These practices also reveal a different scale of values, which is not related to social morality but rather to a system of values of their own. In this system, other aspects such as respect

for criminal authority and loyalty to the group are emphasized. This phenomenon is also related to Hall's (1985) perspective, which underscores the significance of recognition. This concept pertains to the manner in which individuals perceive themselves and others within the context of a specific social and ideological framework. It is associated with identity, the process by which individuals define themselves in relation to prevailing social and cultural categories. In light of this, individuals align themselves with ideological representations, enabling them to adopt specific social roles based on these affiliations.

When considered as a whole, these findings elucidate the intricate nature of the identity-formation process among adolescents involved in gangs. They also underscore the dynamic interplay among individual experiences, social relationships, and cultural practices. These results underscore the importance of addressing this issue from a multidimensional perspective that considers both psychological and contextual factors in the formation of criminal identity. They emphasize the importance of the role of the father, which implies the need to heal the relationship built in this area at the level of psychosocial intervention.

In conclusion, it is imperative to address the limitations encountered during the research process and to propose potential avenues for future studies. With regard to the study's limitations, it was observed that there was a low level of participation from the subjects during the body mapping exercise. This was attributed to the subjects' difficulty in articulating their emotions through written expression. Furthermore, one participant exhibited caution when responding to interview questions. Consequently, we developed several strategies to facilitate the process.

To further investigate this topic, it is recommended that future research focus on designing and evaluating family interventions that aim to strengthen bonds between parents and children, particularly in cases of absence or conflict with the father figure. This measure aims to prevent delinquency and promote the proper development of adolescents by fostering healthy family relationships. It is also suggested that the impact of public policies related to crime prevention and the strengthening of

support networks be evaluated to identify effective intervention strategies at the community and government levels. In a similar vein, a comparative analysis of the construction of criminal identity among adolescents belonging to gangs and those from other contexts or groups is proposed. This methodological approach will facilitate the identification of both similarities and differences in the processes of identity formation, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Contribution statement

Conceptualization, methodology, research, original draft writing, data curation, project management: Yuli Andrea Botero Caicedo.
Conceptualization, methodology, research, original draft: Jenyfer Jiménez Gómez.
Conceptualization, methodology, research, original draft: Luisa Fernanda Cuasapud Mora.
Formal analysis, fundraising, project management, resources: Fernando Charria.

Statement of data consent

The data generated during the research have been presented in the article.

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