

Barras Bravas: Youth Violence in Football Crowds at School

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Abstract

This article results from the analysis of the phenomenon of *barras bravas* (violent supporter groups) in football and its influence in school coexistence at three public educational institutions in Bogotá. The methodology of the study was mixed with a concurrent triangulation design (DITRIAC), hence diverse instruments were employed to verify the findings and cross-validate quantitative and qualitative data. The information obtained from a survey applied to 300 students was complemented with life histories, field notes and a document review of the institutional reports on school coexistence. The study revealed that violence emerges as a consequence of the participation in *barras bravas*, whose members attend the institutions where this research was conducted. The discussion reflects how important it is to vindicate the role of the school within the framework of public policies which both integrate youth dynamics and articulate programs and projects suitable for the Colombian context.

Keywords: educational institutions, football, secondary school students, identity, violence

1. Introduction

The social phenomenon known as *barras bravas* (violent supporter groups) permeated Colombian football in the early nineties, particularly groups of young supporters of local teams, with different symbols and from different origins. Their forms of expression are quite similar, recurring mainly to physical and symbolic violence (Villanueva, 2013; Clavijo, 2004).

Admittedly, these supporter groups materialize their actions through physical and verbal aggression, damage to private property, as well as alcohol and drug use as two factors that determine group acceptance or membership. As López-Quintero and Neumark (2012) state, consuming drugs and alcohol is seen as a condition to earn the right to belong to a *barra*. In a quantitative longitudinal carried out by the authors in 23 educational institutions in Bogotá, the results showed that belonging to these groups increases the risk of drug use, especially among female students.

Being part of a *barra brava* [pl. *barras bravas*], as a social phenomenon, is expressed and identifiable not only in stadiums but at educational institutions; therefore, its influence in school life deserves consideration. Accordingly, Cañón and García (2007) carried out a qualitative study, using a participatory action design to involve students in the search for solutions to the problem posed by the violence associated with the *barras*. As part of the study results, the authors state that: “the increasing violence in educational institutions evidences the fact that young people are joining belligerent groups which are now making an impression on school’s everyday life” (Cañón & García, 2007, p. 1).

This is coherent with Kossakowski (2017), who after studying the impact of hooliganism on Polish youth, found that the effects of the phenomenon extend beyond football stadiums, providing thus a basis to consider it a multidimensional subculture. Research in the relationship between culture and football (Adam, 2017; Rossing & Skrubbeltrang, 2017) has revealed the impact of sport on national and regional cultures and its role in shaping a youth subculture.

In Colombia, the phenomenon of the *barras* as a source of violence that affects school coexistence can be observed mostly in educational institutions in the public sector, whose students live in low socio-economic areas. The

characteristics of these schools, as well as the contexts surrounding students and their families at home, just add to the problem. For this reason, Colombia has attempted to consolidate diverse public policies to address the issue (Ministerio del Interior, 2014).

1.1 *Barras Bravas: An Approximation to the Concept*

Educational institutions are the ideal territory for *barras bravas* to recruit members, strengthen their position, maintain dominance and continue their struggle for power while affecting school coexistence, both inside and outside them. Therefore, it is relevant to study this phenomenon in order to analyze its origins, dynamics and possible solutions.

A *barra brava* is a youth subculture whose practices go beyond the concepts of generational gap and resistance (Ocampo, 2007). It is established as an organization with very clear interests, with a series of codes, symbols, and signs to indicate and show territoriality and ownership. Both public and private spaces become platforms for these groups to express their desire to be acknowledged. It is common to see graffiti showing their team's crest or caustic remarks about their rivals, as well as simple marks signaling their territory and their membership to the subculture (Hodges, 2016).

Gómez (2011) explains *barras bravas* as: "associations of individuals defined by their passion and enjoyment of football, which take the form of emotive communities" (p. 57). Along the same line, Cañón and García (2007) introduce more specific elements, defining them as a group of people organized as supporters of a football team, who express themselves through chants and the use of distinctive signs, while surrounded by a festive atmosphere. They are rebellious groups that gather to cheer their team, according to their own set of rules and communicative codes. As these differentiate them from other followers, there are clashes related to the defense of their territory, sometimes leading to violent incidents in the stadium, its surroundings, and nearby streets or parks.

All things considered, such groups of people have two basic elements: distinct communicative codes used to face their adversaries, and territoriality as a generator of violence in the stadium. Communicative codes describe group identity and the symbology is regarded as "sacred" by a *barra* (Angelotti, 2010; Montoya, 2008; Ávila, 2008).

Simultaneously, as the number of members grows, territoriality increases. Zambaglione (2008) states that territoriality translates into the group's sense of acknowledgment and ownership. Hierarchy is an essential component of territoriality since in most stadiums in the world there are certain special areas reserved exclusively for *barras bravas*.

In this context, hierarchy makes part of territoriality understood as "the spaces where there is social existence" (Ocampo, 2007, p. 6). The *barras bravas* exist socially as long as the hierarchy is preserved in the different spaces where they operate – hence, the struggle for territoriality is the way to gain power and supremacy. Hierarchy and territory coexist in a relationship that favors and legitimizes these groups' influence and power.

In accordance with Ocampo (2007), a territory that is considered the property of a *barra* operates under an exclusivity rule: the entrance of any other team's fan or supporter is forbidden. These areas grant them a sense of ownership and territorial legitimacy since the group has conquered and defended them. In face of the risk of invasion, the territories are marked with graffiti and by supporters wearing their team's uniform and emblem.

The spaces reserved imply territoriality and their boundaries are clearly outlined. Wearing a jersey is not enough to be acknowledged as a member, but it is necessary to meet a series of requirements established by the leaders. This is how graffiti, symbols and *trapos* [pieces of cloth, rags] are used to set the limits that other teams' supporters must respect.

1.2 *Elements of Barras Bravas*

As the central concept of this study, a *barra brava* is understood as the configuration of sport team supporters under certain linguistic rules and codes, with elements of territoriality that lead to a confrontation with a rival team and usually generate violence. This definition intentionally brings forward some central characteristic elements: identity, violence, symbology and symbolic capital.

Regarding identity, there is a definition of roles related to the construction of group membership, given that the individual is regarded as *us* against an *other* that refers to the supporters of a different football team. This leads to the creation of social, cultural and affective links that determine a type of identity privileged inside the *barra* and that can emerge as a factor of violence towards a rival team. The process of identity construction is complex and challenging for young people (Luyckxa & Robitschek, 2014; Berzonsky, 2008) and entails other diverse underlying processes. Crocettia, Simona, Schwartzd, Serafini, and Meeus (2013) found that the concept of identity requires a multidimensional approach in a study on the identity styles, dimensions, and functions of young Italians.

This result is worth noting since it contributes to the conceptualization of the *barras bravas*, as the phenomenon under study in this article.

The relation between *barras bravas* and violence has been extensively studied (Puerto, 2012; Scandroglio, López & San José, 2008; Cañón & García, 2007; Russell, 2004; Clavijo, 2004; Bayce, 2003; Moffatt, 1998). All studies identify violence as a manifestation inherent to the *barras bravas*, which starts characterizing the development of group activities and may end up in vandalism, causing damage to the property of others; in this sense, violence can be either symbolic or materialize in some form. This aspect provides a framework of analysis to differentiate diverse violence forms in the three participant public schools. The relation between violent behavior and drug and alcohol use by sports spectators has also been broadly analyzed (Ostrowsky, 2014) since both represent a high risk for the students that belong to the *barras*. All things considered, the analysis of violence within this kind of groups demands a multidisciplinary approach, as suggested by Spaaij (2014), given the various forms of violence and personal and institutional (family and school) consequences that the situation entails.

It should be pointed out that the symbology - rags, flags, banners, hats, chants, and graffiti - displayed by these supporter groups is common to all its members. The symbols employed and the capacity of each member to delegitimize or offend the rival team translates into credibility from others and the possibility to gain a publicly acknowledged position as a group leader. For Colombian researchers Ávila (2008), Clavijo (2004), Ocampo (2007), Puerto (2012) and Silva (2010), the language and symbology of *barras bravas* goes beyond semantics and interpretation; it is a social construct to identify with other followers and differentiate from rival supporters. Research about the identification with sports teams can be considered in this respect (Wann, Hackathorn, & Sherman, 2017; Chang, Wann, & Inoue, 2018).

The symbolic capital is the spirit of a *barra*, it is acquired over time and represents the respect and prestige gained with the team's victories (Zambaglione, 2008; Gil, 2008; Clavijo, 2004). This symbolic capital provides the *barra* with credibility and cohesion and preserves certain values among its members. The more long-lasting capital there is, the stronger self-esteem and territorial control become.

These four elements result from the revision of background studies and literature, where their conceptualization and theoretical construction is recurrent and permanent. Consequently, they were the linchpin of the data analysis, the development and execution of the intervention plan presented in this article. This way, the terms *identity*, *symbology*, *violence*, and *symbolic capital* become categories of study and analysis, given their relevance and importance.

1.3 Research context

In Colombia, one of the widest gaps in the educational system is that between public and private institutions. The measurement results obtained by the State reveal important differences between the sectors in terms of quality; even if at a national level both sectors share similar challenges, these tend to be more complex in public institutions given that students reside in the country's poorest areas. This study was conducted with three public institutions, which we describe as follows.

The Class School is a public institution where the influence of football's *barras bravas* is evident. It is in the locality of Kennedy in Bogotá, Colombia, which has one of the highest violence rates in Bogotá. According to the report by the Center for Criminal Investigations of the National Police of Colombia (Quilaguy, 2014) and the data it contains regarding insecurity in the area, from 2010 to 2015, Kennedy was the locality with the highest number of homicides in Bogotá, the second highest in the number of personal injuries and the fourth highest in theft cases. It also reported the highest number of fatalities due to personal injuries. The perpetrators were young people of school age, between 16 and 20 years old. Although this data does not explain the specific cause of the events, it does illustrate the violent context of the locality.

One of the youngest populations in Bogotá resides in the locality of Kennedy, which may explain the great number of youth groups, such as the *barras bravas* and urban tribes, which can be found in the area. Twenty of the most representative *barras bravas* in Bogotá come from and gather at this locality (Aponte, Pinzón & Vargas, 2009).

The José Antonio Galán School is located in the neighborhood of the same name in the locality of Bosa, also in Bogotá. With a population of a low socio-economic status, the institution presents diverse problems related to school violence and dropout, among others. Just as the other two participant institutions, it provides Pre-scholar, Elementary, Basic Secondary, and Mid-secondary education.

The third institution is the Diego Montaña Cuellar School, in the locality of Usme, in the south of Bogotá. It also receives a student population belonging to low-income families.

It is important to clarify that the localities of Bosa and Usme share similar problems and their violence rates are

nearly as high as those in the locality of Kennedy, according to the statistical mapping carried out by the Conflict Analysis Resource Center - CERAC (Aponte, Pinzón, & Vargas, 2009). Therefore, this research is both relevant and necessary in the three institutions described.

2. Methodology

This study applied a mixed methodology, which according to Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista (2011), combines the qualitative and quantitative approach to increase the understanding of a complex social phenomenon.

Given the nature of the object of study, this research uses a concurrent triangulation method to validate its findings by combining qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore, besides completing a survey analysis, this study included direct observation of the individuals' daily life and exploration of the meanings that support all actions and interactions that take place in the school context and in the young people's reality, while employing information collection tools as fieldnotes and evidence records, all aimed at interpreting and explaining the social phenomena that influences human behavior.

The research was conducted in five interrelated stages encompassing a deep exploration of the phenomenon and the design of school intervention strategies that allowed the discovery of potential alternatives for change, namely:

- 1) Problematization stage, which allowed observing directly in the schools the problems related to young people participating in *barras bravas* in Bogotá. Besides, a review of literature aimed at determining the current position regarding *barras bravas* around the world, in Latin America, and in Colombia provided the theoretical basis to address the phenomenon. Such basis included the perspective of educational institutions, marking thus a starting point and potential alternatives for the intervention of the problem.
- 2) Diagnostics stage, which included the compilation of information necessary to describe the situation regarding *barras bravas* currently faced by educational institutions. This search of information was aimed at gathering diverse types of evidence to facilitate reflection and analysis from the perspective of the individuals involved.
- 3) Intervention generation stage, during which the information gathered in the former stage, was contrasted with the objectives of this research, to shed light on potential action alternatives in face of the problem, while highlighting aspects such as causes and effects, consequences, possible results, intervention scope and feasibility.
- 4) School intervention stage, which considering scope and limitations, involved the application of the intervention strategy in the selected population, namely, students from the three educational institutions mentioned above -the Diego Montaña Cuéllar School (Locality of Usme), José Antonio Galán School (Locality of Bosa) and Class Technical School (Locality of Kennedy) - in the ninth, tenth and eleven grades, morning schedule, involved with the *barras bravas*.
- 5) Evaluation stage, which included the generation of instruments to assess the scope of the proposal, the possible changes generated, impacts on the school community, and the achievement of the objectives proposed.

The categories or dimensions of analysis were established in accordance with the characteristic elements of the *barras bravas*, namely, identity, violence, symbology, and symbolic capital. These aspects were recurrent during the theoretical construction and constituted the basis for the development of the intervention plan.

3. Findings

Considering the mixed approach of this study, a survey was designed for the students and later applied. Firstly, we present the results of the multiple-choice questions regarding football preference and the activities of students around the sport; secondly, we present the results related exclusively to the members of *barras bravas*; finally, we present the open-ended questions and their analysis.

In total, 300 students -100 from each one of the selected institutions- in the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades answered the 17 questions in the survey. Data were tabulated, graphed and analyzed to gain insight on the individuals' preferences and interests regarding *barras bravas* and their perspective on school co-existence.

Additionally, the school reports on students' co-existence and orientation were reviewed, considering graffiti elaboration, physical and verbal aggression, substance use, and truancy on dates of official football matches.

Subsequently, the researchers approached students who might have been involved with the *barras bravas*. Focal groups were formed to deepen the knowledge of this type of associations in the school context.

Interviews and life histories provided access to information about the students and their surroundings and also facilitated the analysis of their behavior in the school and its incidence in the recurrent violence in the institutions. A 10-question instrument was applied to gather this information, which also facilitated the dialogue and the collection of film records.

In addition, workshops with focus groups led to reflection about *barras bravas* in the school context, while reaching understanding, proposing solutions for healthy coexistence, strengthening and supporting social inclusion behaviors, tolerance agreements and care of public property.

It is worth mentioning that the field notes written by the research team relate diverse events that took place in the schools at the time of the workshops, containing all relevant aspects and photographic records that it was possible to obtain.

3.1 Description of the Population and Interest in Football

Regarding age, 30% of the population sampled for this research was 17 years old; 28%, 16 years old; 15%, 18 years old; 15%, 15 years old; 7%, 19 years old; and 5%, 14 years old. The oldest respondents were 19 years old and the youngest ones were 14, with an average age of 16. Regarding gender, 57% of the students were men and 43% were women.

In response to the question about the most popular activity among young students, 78% mentioned football as a very popular activity, 17% preferred a concert, 3% chose car and motorcycle races, whereas 1% opted for theater or skating. This reflects how important football is for the students surveyed. When asked if they liked football, 84% answered affirmatively. Next, when asked if they identified with any football team, 90% of the students stated so (Figure 1).

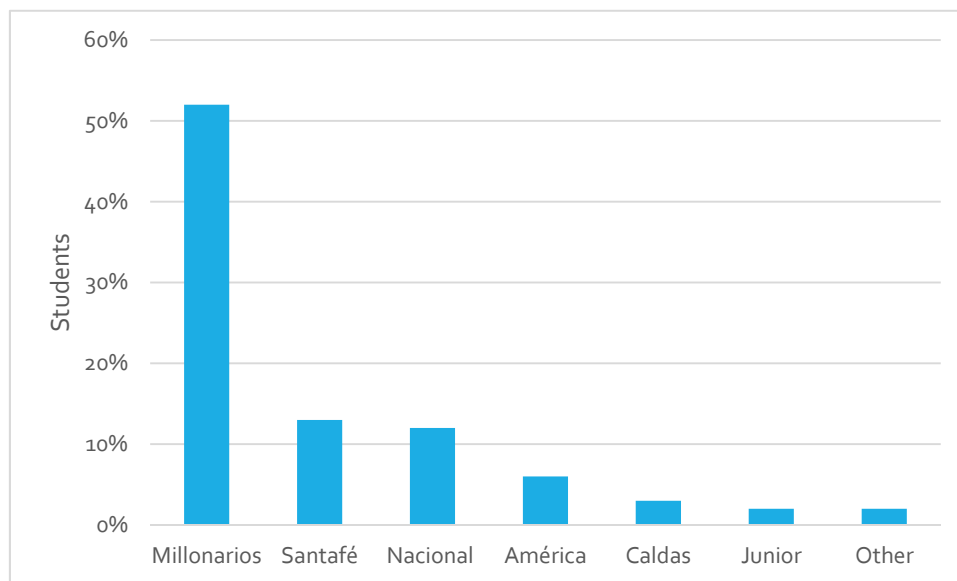


Figure 1. Interest in certain professional Colombian football team (Source: Own elaboration)

When asked if they would attend a meeting organized by a *barra* with a friend, 45% (135 students) answered affirmatively, while 40% (120 students) said they would not attend (Figure 2). This figure shows the interest of students in making part of a *barra brava*.

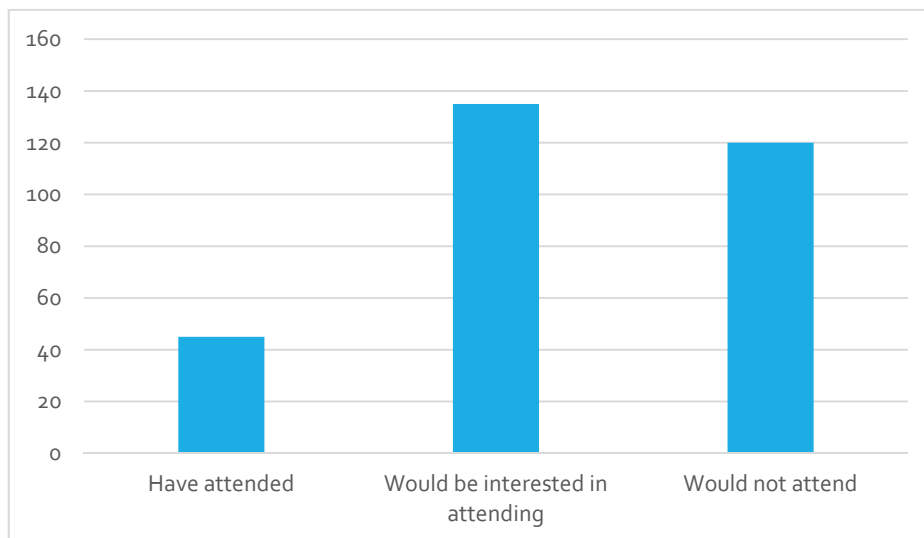


Figure 2. Interest in attending a meeting organized by 'barras bravas' (Source: Own elaboration)

3.2 Belonging to a Barra Brava

In the Diego Montaña Cuéllar School, 18% of students were in a *barra brava*; in the Class School, 16%; and in the José Antonio Galán School, 14%. This corresponds to 16% of the total in the three educational institutions (300 students), which indicates that a significant percentage of the students belong to a *barra brava*.

The following questions were answered only by students belonging to a *barra*. When asked about the number of football stadiums they have visited to encourage their team, 65% of the students have visited 3 or more football stadiums, 12%, 2 stadiums, and 23%, 1 stadium.

Regarding the use of violence to demonstrate love for their team, 77% of students said they resorted to violence, while 23% stated they did not. This is a clear indicator of the difficulties in coexistence arising from the involvement of students with a *barra brava*.

When asked about the kind of representative symbols they use in reference to their team, 33.3% of the students indicated that they wear jerseys or sweaters; 27% said that they wear scarves, caps, bracelets, necklaces, rags, and flags; 20,8% of the students indicated that they have tattoos; 16,66% said they wear accessories with their team's crest; 12,5% said that they use drums and badges; and 10,41% wear team jackets (Figure 3).

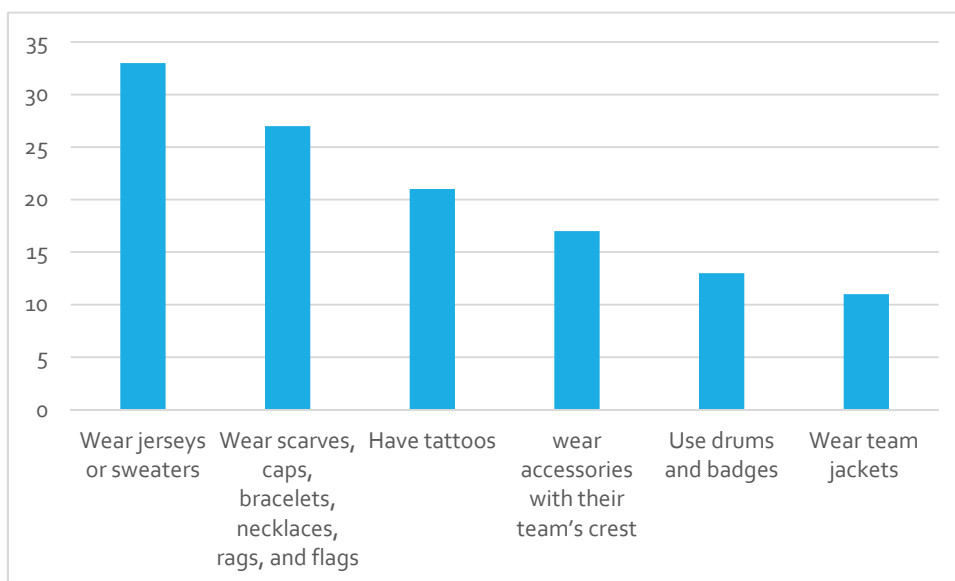


Figure 3. Symbols that represent their team (Source: Own elaboration)

When inquiring about the problems related to *barras bravas*, 29% of the students indicated that they associate *barras bravas* with graffiti; 27.1%, with violence; 25%, with drugs; 22.9%, with vandalism; 20.83%, with death and theft; and 18.8%, with alcoholism.

Regarding the students' concept of *barra brava*, with the help of the specialized software for Social Sciences Atlas.ti (version 7.0), recurrent words were identified and a selective coding was performed, which according to Glaser (1985, p.2) has the function of delimiting the coding "only to those variables that are related to the central one in sufficiently enough ways to be used in a parsimonious theory". For this reason, the focus was on the variables that had a direct relationship with the main variable (*barras bravas*), to conclude then with the conceptual coding. With this in mind, the categories that emerged from the theoretical framework were conceptualized, to be further developed during the stages of planning, development and results analysis of the intervention plan. The following emerging categories were defined after the word count (Figure 4).

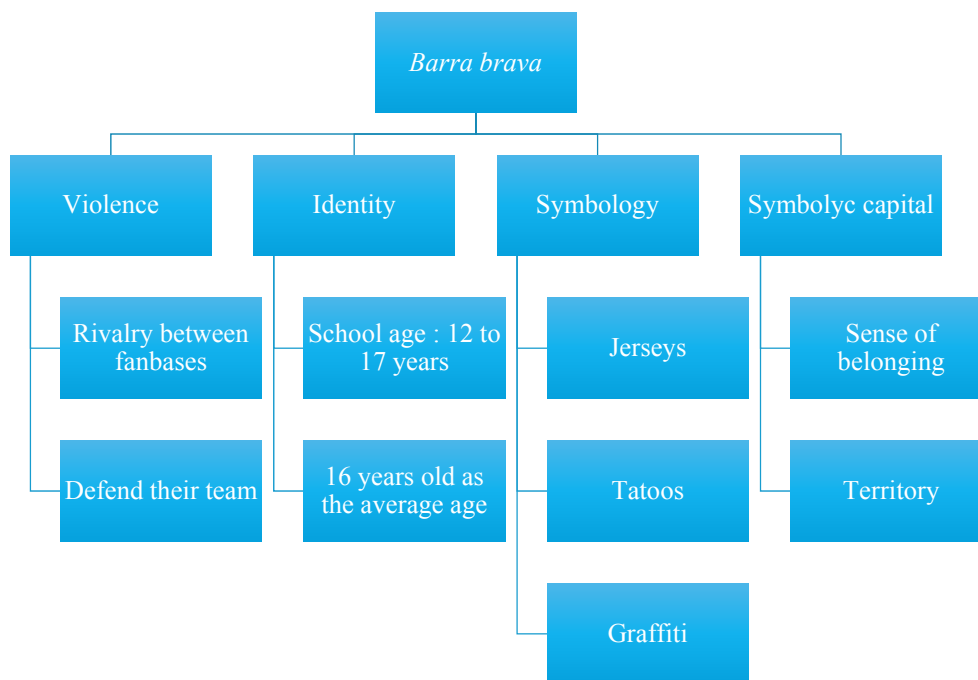


Figure 4. Categories of the '*barras bravas*' phenomenon in the school (Source: Own elaboration.)

During the same process, based on the number of words found, identity, violence, symbolism and symbolic capital emerged as the categories that it was possible to establish after analyzing the relationships students made when conceptualizing the term *barra brava* and that we will address more fully below.

When asked: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Do you consider that the *barra brava* is fueled by the euphoric passion produced by football matches? Explain your answer in detail", 97% of students agreed with the statement and 3% disagreed. Likewise, the relationship that students establish between the *barra brava* and the passion for their football refers to their sense of belonging, and a match as the occasion to show how much they can do for it.

When asking "Do you believe that the *barra brava* should manifest itself in violence and damage to the city? Explain your answer", 100% of the students believe that the *barra brava* should not show violence and cause damage in the city. However, they associate the *barra brava* with the passion for their team and affirm that: "they are capable of doing anything in order to make sure their team is respected" (taken from the focus group), so it can be inferred that they do not associate the violence of the *barras bravas* to the concept of vandalism.

The perception of the students that participated in the focus group is that some of the problems in their educational institution are related with the presence of *barras bravas*, without overlooking conflicts that arise from micro-trafficking, drug abuse, alcoholism, and family violence.

The significance and relevance of this research are thus evident since it shows the current need to understand this

problem from the perspective of the actors involved. That is, it provides insight on the thoughts of students who are in the middle of a conflict now present in educational institutions.

This analysis was triangulated with the data registered in the field notes, the document review of the observer's reports and the life histories. This way, belonging to the city's *barras bravas* was identified as a phenomenon that affects school coexistence, associated with the consumption of various substances, vandalism, and brawls, among other aspects.

4. Data Analysis

These findings confirm how important belonging to a *barra* actually is for young people, since regardless of the consequences of their actions against other supporter groups, being acknowledged as active members is significant and gives them a certain status in and out of the school. It was also found that there are several symbols unnoticeable for people outside the group, but deeply significant for the members as they provide a sense of membership and participation. Such symbols constitute major elements of group identity.

The influence of the *barras* in the educational institutions and in the localities studied was also perceived since specific locations are acknowledged as a team territory and cannot be visited by supporters of rival teams. The study could establish the role of certain students as recruiters of future members, who engage individuals through narrations, anecdotes, stories and other elements aimed at motivating the youngest people to join the group as proud participants.

A striking result is that all participants have been somehow involved in violent events, in and out of the school. Two groups that generate violence were identified: on the one hand, those individuals who exert violence physically, psychologically, verbally, etc.: on the other, those who observe, shout, run or cheer, but do not intervene directly. Despite their involvement in violent acts, there is a consensus on the objectionable character of this type of actions.

Moreover, violence and the use of hallucinogenic substances and drugs are closely related. Due to the sense of empowerment young people feel under the influence of any substance (alcohol or drugs), they behave aggressively while becoming capable of actions unusual for them.

The analysis of the field notes revealed that besides being a place for aggression to take place, the school is a setting for conflicts to start. A series of communication channels, aimed at involving others in disputes, either as supporters of a certain team or as regular spectators and unrecognizable for adults, are formed at break times and during pauses between classes. Such channels transcend the schools and can even mean complications for other educational entities.

Symbols mean power and status inside each *barra* and are thus exhibited as trophies and used as weapons to attack opponents. Such is the ground for any transgression to be considered offensive and cause for serious conflict.

5. Conclusions

According to the previous analysis, regarding the comprehension of the influence of the *barras bravas* in school coexistence in the three institutions selected, it can be concluded that the participation of students in the activities of these groups does constitute a source of violence that is transferred into the educational institution. That is to say, this study is coherent with others that address similar issues (Cañón & García, 2007; López-Quintero & Neumark, 2012; Kossakowski, 2017) and, simultaneously, provides a comprehension framework for the challenges that schools need to face.

Beyond taking disciplinary action, it is the key to understand young people's need of being heard and belonging to a group. This would lead to readdressing identity as a concept that revolves around the sense of belonging, companionship, and interaction, based on respect and tolerance rather than a factor that generates violence. The risk of young people becoming members of a *barra* may decrease if the school is involved as a setting to provide alternatives towards a new view of identity.

It is worth noting that this study found that students are aware of how intolerance may lead to inadequate decision-making, affecting negatively their project of life. Therefore, they see the need for environments that facilitate different perspectives to meet assertively and respectfully. This supports the conclusion above and invites us to reflect upon the possibilities that school offers for young people to join artistic, sport, or social groups that allow them to experience a feeling of belonging, in accordance with Cope et al. (2017), whose research has shown that sport favors the development of life skills.

This is especially significant when considering that violence has emerged as a severe problematic consequence of the activity of the *barras bravas* in educational institutions. Drugs, bullying, discrimination, territory marking,

damage to school facilities, physical and verbal aggression, etc. make active part of the present situation and were revealed as aspects that affect school coexistence in the institutions observed. However, the vindication of the school as a place where problems detected can be contrasted with their potential solution must become a priority, so that teachers and students can engage in discussions in the classroom, supported by solid public policies that address the current concerns.

Likewise, the importance of symbols in students' life must also be taken into account, since a crest, a bracelet or a notebook depicting their favorite team represent feelings and passions that may end up in unthinkable aggressiveness and conflict levels. Every corner of the school may show how students follow their feelings not only to establish boundaries but to cause their presence and interests to be noticed. Nevertheless, the school is in danger of remaining inflexible if it keeps within the bounds of judgment and discipline, rather than attempting to comprehend and understand the causes of the problem. Such considerations on the role of the school are one of the main contributions of this study.

In the light of the results, it is necessary to move beyond evaluative judgments, based on principles that promote measures merely punitive as the only course of action, to gain an integral and educational perspective of the *barras* (Gómez, 2011).

It is worth noting that these conclusions generate some new questions regarding the importance of studying the topic with a longitudinal approach. This would provide insight into the effect of pedagogical strategies that institutions may start to devise to generate positive group identity construction, focused on young people's interests: sport, music, and arts.

Finally, evaluative studies on the impact of public policies designed to resolve the problem of violence linked to the action of *barras bravas*, in and out of the school, would provide insight on the advances and the challenges, even more, when football is a passion that can lead to personal development.

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