

Beyond individual trauma: Relational harm and relational resilience among former political prisoners in Venezuela

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Key points of interest

- An understanding of the relational nature of the impacts of torture, as well as resilience, is discussed based on the analysis of interviews with survivors of torture in Venezuela.

Abstract

Introduction: The interviews from two participatory action research projects are analysed to understand the impacts of torture and the expressions of resilience found in former political prisoners of Venezuela, with an emphasis on the relational aspects of both the impacts of torture and the strategies used for resilience. *Methods:* Thirty interviews from a first project were analysed and coded using reflexive thematic analysis, and eight interviews from a second project were analysed to refine the categories. *Results:* In addition to replicating findings reported elsewhere on individual suffering, these interviews, developed in collaboration with former political prisoners and their families, reveal a less-reported strand concerning the importance of relationships. Being isolated, witnessing the torture of others and suffering from what they imagine their family members to be suffering were considered the most distressing consequences. We also expand on the findings reported in other contexts regarding the importance of resilience in their testimonies. Resilience, interpreted in light of what oppression seeks to achieve, is categorised into strategies to regain agency and strategies to sustain relationships. *Discussion:* The relevance of focusing on the importance of relationships and of resilience when working with survivors of torture as a way to acknowledge their perspectives and empower their resistance is discussed. The use of participatory action research as an ethical approach that seeks to empower survivors throughout the process is also discussed.

Keywords: torture, relationship, resilience, participatory action research.

Introduction

We are interested in understanding the experiences of people who have suffered political imprisonment and torture, in order to help them resist it and to collaborate in their recovery. Numerous testimonies have been accumulated through projects developed by former prisoners themselves and their families. This

study sought to analyse some of the collected material to understand the aftermath of these extreme experiences of terror.

To this end, participatory action research was conducted using reflective thematic analysis to analyse 29 interviews with former political prisoners and 1 family member from a first intervention project, and to contrast preliminary codes with 7 in-

interviews with relatives of political prisoners and an ex-political prisoner from a second project.

Relationships and Resilience

The need to return to analyse these interviews arose from several experiences working with former political prisoners that challenge some of the more conventional views of clinical-psychological care. Research has clearly identified post-traumatic symptomatology in survivors of torture (Allodi, 1994; Bichescu, et al., 2005; Pfeiffer & Elbert, 2011; Suhaiban, Ruvolo & Javanbakht, 2019). Yet other approaches have captured the limitations of the clinical approach (Daiute, 2013; Kagee & Naidoo, 2004).

Identifying the mechanisms of trauma has been prominent in our field and has led to an emphasis of a clinical perspective that has clearly confirmed the traumatic consequences of torture. Yet our clinical work with political dissidents has highlighted the limitations of working only from that perspective. Many former political prisoners have shared their desire to testify not only to the suffering they endured but also to their efforts to resist. Many also emphasised how their suffering is not individual; they are not at peace when they are freed from prison but rather continue to suffer for those left behind and from the effects their persecution has had on their families, as well as the impact of having to witness the torture of others.

Political persecution and torture are dramatic examples of problems that affect processes ranging from the physiology of the individual to the socio-political sphere. This complexity has been a challenge in providing help to those who have suffered (Beristain, 2012). Therefore, an approach has been advocated that addresses trauma in a way that can transcend the individual perspective, or what Martín-Baró (1994) called “psychosocial trauma” and Saul (2022) “collective trauma.” These approaches seek to understand not only individual processes but also the social processes that accompany them within an ecological framework.

As mentioned, interviewees emphasised not only their pain but also the stories of resistance, their convictions, and how they overcame horror. This finding, reported in other parts of the world such as Argentina, Russia, and the Basque Country (Alayarian, 2011; Caro Hollander, 2010; Pérez-Sales, 2023; Rud, Bunina, Vasilevskaia, and Filippova, 2023), invited us to question the categories most frequently used to frame these experiences. Time and again, we have heard discomfort when referring to survivors as victims, arguing that the term reduces their agency, placing them as passive, damaged entities, rather than protagonists of a struggle, which is what defines them in their own view.

Researchers have found that survivors want to share not only their testimony of what they have suffered, but also the actions that reveal their resilience, through which they can show that they were not only victims of the perpetrators’ actions, but also protagonists in a story of resistance (Fondacaro & Mazulla, 2018). Salberg and Grand, who have reviewed literature on trauma stemming from the Holocaust, concluded that “the transmission of strength, resourcefulness and resilience, that operates in tandem with the transmission of wounds” had been missing in the scientific literature (p. 1, 2017).

Summerfield (1995), who worked with populations that suffered the ravages of war in Nicaragua, concluded that diagnostic assessments did not allow for an understanding of how they managed to continue functioning and move forward, nor were they reliable in regard to the need for psychological treatment. He proposed that research grounded in local perspectives would allow for the active capacity for resilience to be recorded. Finally, he criticised this approach for placing the focus of recovery in the hands of “experts” rather than the affected communities themselves, which is contrary to fostering agency.

Herman, who has been working with victims of violence for years and proposed the diagnosis of complex trauma (1997), concludes that, in order to organise work in this area, we must make listening to victims a priority. She fears, however, that the language of experts often prevents this from happening (2023).

Taking these observations into consideration, this study sought to examine ex-political prisoners’ experiences, ensuring that the methodology was coherent with the need to empower them and actively incorporating their perspectives in the formulation of our objectives, data collection, and interpretation. This is sought by using a participatory action research methodology (Montero, 2004; Llorens, 2020). This has led to, among other things, include the impressions not only of the person who suffered persecution, but also of their family members. On one hand, the study focuses on understanding the importance of relationships in their suffering; on the other, it gives resilience at least equal attention, particularly how relationships are a source of it (Walsh, 2006).

To summarise, we work from a clinical community psychology perspective that seeks to privilege participant engagement through chosen methodologies and theoretical frames that strive to empower their voices, focusing on the relational aspects of torture, as well as on resilience and the role that relationships play in it. Participatory action research is a methodology that prioritises participants’ voices in the formulation of problems, data collection, and the interpretation of results, intertwining the production of knowledge with concrete solu-

tions to practical issues to foster empowerment (Montero, 2006; Swantz, 2008).

Torture in Venezuela

Political repression and crimes against humanity have been systematically denounced and repeatedly confirmed by commissions from international organisations such as the UN. Research confirms the use of torture against political dissidents (Llorens, 2024) and by September 2025, the official report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Republic of Venezuela had confirmed more than 2,400 political arrests between 2024 and 2025, crimes against humanity, the murder of at least thirty people for political reasons, twenty five of them in state custody, the detention of relatives of political actors to coerce them, clandestine detention centers, torture as state policy that includes cruel acts such as electric shocks to the genitals, prolonged suffocation, and other inhumane treatment, as well as systematic sexual violence against women, adolescents, and LGBT people, demonstrating that state terrorism is practiced in Venezuela (UN Human Rights Council, 2025).

State terrorism has been carried out increasingly for more than a decade against the civilian population, subjecting the country to what organisations monitoring the situation describe as a “permanent state of emergency” (WOLA, 2024), which has produced thousands of victims.

It is useful to include the considerations proposed by Pérez-Sales, who invites us to understand the context in which torture occurs as an essential part of what is happening and which helps to understand subsequent reactions. It is not only the specific violent episode of torture that is traumatic. The term “torturing environment” describes how the entire context is designed to dehumanise and subjugate, so that, beyond the torture sessions, the environments in which political dissidents are placed and the subsequent threat that hangs over them are part of the horror and help us understand the levels of hypervigilance that persist long after. These are environments designed to be precarious and inhumane (Efecto Cocuyo, 2025; Pérez Sales, 2020, 2026).

Along the same lines, Rud et al. (2023) argue that torture should be understood as an act within the process of attempting to control power. This understanding helps untangle some of the processes observed. Torture is an act that seeks to repress potential sources of resistance and to appease the power of dissidents. Hence, torture seeks to subdue any sense of agency, while the dissident seeks to defend it.

Along the same lines, the relationships of incarcerated citizens are essential to sustaining the struggle against a system that seeks to impose itself by isolating them. Bonds are an essential

source of resilience and a channel for organising resistance. Therefore, we must include relationships in the final understanding of the impacts of torture and as strategies of resistance.

Methodology

This research stems from projects designed by and developed to support former political prisoners and their families in accordance with the participatory action research perspective (Kagan, Burton, & Siddiquee, 2008; Montero, 2004; 2010). Understanding their experiences has been a fundamental tool for organising these projects. It arises from and maintains a close relationship with organisations of former political prisoners and their families. These relationships have allowed us to immerse ourselves in the context and forge relations of trust that have shaped a shared understanding of what has been experienced, consistent with the spirit of qualitative methodology and the search for knowledge that has psycho-political validity, a key element when working in contexts of state violence (Arnoso & Eiroá-Orosa, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2004) consistent with observations from other projects with political prisoners (Rud, Bunina, Vasilevskaia, & Filippova, 2023). Former political prisoners and family members helped raise the questions proposed in this study, were present in almost all of the interviews, and, finally, two workshops to discuss preliminary findings were held with them to contrast interpretations with their impressions, helping to refine the final analysis. Participatory action research has been described as a way of building complex bridges to witnessing by “doing something” (Gentile, 2017, p. 180). Participatory action research focuses on relations with participants directly affected by the problems being studied and on resolving concrete problems through iterative reflection, which allows for the refinement of our understanding of the problem.

Based on the above considerations, an analysis was designed of interviews from two projects that, in the first case, collected the testimonies of 29 former political prisoners and one family member, with one session per participant. Secondly, given the importance that emerged from the interviewees’ relationships, both in understanding their suffering and in understanding how they have resisted, after proposing preliminary themes, we compared them with the interviews of a second project in which we reviewed seven interviews with testimonies from relatives of former political prisoners and one of a former political prisoner. For a total of 38 analysed interviews (see Table 1). The authors of this analysis led the interviews for both projects. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The former political prisoners experienced prison terms ranging from two to forty-eight months, with an average of seventeen months. Four had been incarcerated more than once.

Table 1. *Participants/interviews*

	Former political prisoners	Family members	Totals
First project	29	1	30
Second project	1	7	8
Total interviews	30	8	38

Twenty of the ex-prisoners were male, and ten were female. Five were active politicians; the rest were ordinary citizens involved in protests against the government in one way or another. Some of these citizens had some affiliation with political organisations; some were high school or university students who led parts of the protests; others had held simple protests against the government, such as expressing their views on social media. Three of our interviewees were underage while jailed. Of the eight family members, four were wives, two were mothers, one was a son, and one was a daughter. The participants in our study suffered torture as defined by the United Nations Convention against Torture (United Nations, 1984).

The first project was developed along with the organisation *Voces de la Memoria*. With them, we interviewed twenty-nine former Venezuelan political prisoners and one family member of a political prisoner. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online in 2021 and were guided by one of the authors. The interviews sought to recover the testimony of the persecution suffered and its impacts on participants' lives. This led to psychosocial and psychotherapeutic support for eight of the participants, also carried out by one of the authors, as well as the development of a virtual reality experience to raise awareness towards the situation (Navarro, Martínez, Moriones, Llorens, Trotta, Raurso & Bruni, 2025). The second project, developed by the World Liberty Congress, was a support manual for family members of former political prisoners. Seven semi-structured interviews with relatives of political prisoners and one with a political prisoner were conducted in 2023, also online, and guided by one of the authors. The interviews sought to understand the participants' history and experience of persecution (World Liberty Congress, 2025).

The interviews were conducted by psychologists with expertise in working with trauma and survivors of political violence and who are knowledgeable about the social context in

which the events took place. In the case of the first project, a former political prisoner was always present as a co-researcher and helped to foster a climate of trust. In the case of the eight interviews in the second project, these were also conducted by psychologists under the umbrella of the project led by relatives of former political prisoners who facilitated our contact and introduced us to them.

The reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of a total of 38 direct testimonies was carried out by a team of four analysts who searched for thematic patterns. In a first phase, the four analysts worked separately, following Braun and Clarke's suggestions regarding collaborative coding. Each worked on the same ten interviews, after which impressions were contrasted to generate a preliminary set of codes based on the discussion. Afterwards, the twenty other interviews were split among the analysts, who met every two weeks to discuss code evolution and refine the agreed-upon categories. Atlas.ti was used to organise and follow up on the coding process. The perspectives of the four analysts were considered to develop a preliminary thematic proposal. Finally, the themes were contrasted with the eight interviews from the second project to assess whether the preliminary analysis fit this second set of interviews and to challenge and expand the interpretations. Findings were then presented in a series of workshops with members of both NGOs, and their impressions were incorporated into the final reports to help refine the results.

Regarding ethical considerations, all interviews were conducted with the interviewee's safety as the priority. For that reason, a manual was developed prior to both projects for all interviewers, and a workshop on trauma-informed practice was conducted with each team (Llorens, 2021). The interviews were scheduled by a team member who was either a former political prisoner or a family member of a political prisoner. Instructions were given regarding the purpose of the interviews and who would be present, helping to choose a location where the person felt safe. In the introduction to the interviews, the person was invited to share whatever they felt comfortable sharing and to stop the exchange at any point if they desired. The emotional regulation expressed during the conversation was monitored by the clinical psychologists conducting the interviews, stopping to check at moments when the exchange might be disturbing. Finally, at the end of the interview, we checked how the person was feeling and whether there were any signs of significant disturbance. Interviews were followed up with short calls to see how they were feeling the following day. Psychotherapy was offered to all of the participants, and eight of them decided to begin psychotherapeutic processes that were offered free of charge. Participants signed consent forms to use

the information for the various aspects that evolved from the projects. Not only did they sign the consents, but all of them also asked for their names to appear in the acknowledgements of the virtual museum and the manuals for family members that were produced by both projects, confirming their alliance with the process as well as their desire for their testimonies to publicly appear with their identification. The discussion of results with the participants, the sharing of the different materials that have evolved through the analysis of their testimonies and their feedback is also considered to be a central ethical consideration, aligned with a participatory action research approach that emphasises giving back voice and power to those that were oppressed.

Findings

Through our analysis, we developed four large themes to organise the data that include: the survivors/family members (regarding different categories of survivors or family members), the system (that described key characteristics of the strategies used to subjugate them), the impacts of torture and, finally, resilience, which we divided into two large sub-themes that refer to either regaining agency or relational resilience. These four themes are relevant patterns that appear in all of our interviews. This is to emphasise that expressions of suffering for others and of resilience were not exceptional but rather a very significant aspect of our interviewees' experiences. They represent a pattern that runs through all of the interviews. Finally, considerations regarding post-traumatic growth are shared, which appeared only in a few interviews, but are related to resilience and point to a strand of issues to continue to be explored.

These interviews confirm findings that have been widely reported both in scientific literature and in human rights reports in regard to the terrible consequences of political persecution and torture. But beyond discussing findings that align with previous literature on trauma, the focus is on those that broaden understanding and open up options for better support. So, for this paper, the discussion will centre on findings regarding the relational dimension of the sufferings reported as well as resilience, which relate to the aforementioned third and fourth themes.

Impacts: Relational impacts

One of the interviewees shared: "After two and a half years in captivity, you can imagine that I came out a little burnt out and crying. I cried compulsively because many of my friends were still in prison, others dead."

It is a painful testimony that reflects enduring sadness, which suggests depression. But if we look beyond the individ-

ual categories that have dominated the interpretation of the phenomenon, it is striking that, beyond this first impression, he highlights his being affected by the suffering of the friends he left behind in prison.

There was not a single interview in which the suffering of another person, either a family member or a fellow activist or prisoner, was not reported as part of the emotionally painful experiences of prison. Even more so, time and again, there were reports of people who suffered inhuman torture and yet felt that the *most* painful thing was knowing that their family or friends were also suffering. A young woman who was imprisoned as a minor and suffered various forms of torture, including rape, said that she sought psychological therapy when she was released, both because of the recurring nightmares and because of the persistent pain of having seen her family suffer for her. Another young man commented: "I always say that what hurts a prisoner the most is not necessarily their conditions, but what their family is going through."

In the same vein, isolation and the thought of having been forgotten by those outside are repeatedly reported as among the most painful experiences. This invites us to think about the phenomenon of political persecution and torture, and the impacts on survivors, not only in individual terms, but also in a relational one.

The effects of political imprisonment are not limited to the person who suffers it physically but also extend to their social bonds. In this sense, interviews with family members often reflected acute expressions of pain, even more significant than those reported by those who suffered torture on their bodies. One mother told us: "It was five months of imagining things, imagining things, imagining things, and it was the worst thing that ever happened to me, because I didn't know what was true."

This observation helps us understand how a significant portion of the cruelty exercised by the system is directed not only at the incarcerated persons, but against family and close friends, through threats, persecution and psychological torture.

Time and again, interviewees reported that one of the worst punishments was having to witness the torture of a third person. One young man described the beating of three minors by guards as "very difficult for me... it was heartbreaking." Another young man reported with pain how, during his stay in a regular prison, he had to witness different forms of torture, listen to the screams, and be present during some sessions. "It's hard," he told us. Another young man who was subjected to a long period of psychological torture emphasised how terrible it was to be in a place where he had to listen to the torture of others:

“It’s crazy, you go mad... we didn’t stop being human rights activists. Even though we were prisoners. So what happens? If you’re an activist, you have to do something, even if it’s just telling other prisoners what you’re going through. When we heard those things, the electricity or when we heard how they were beating people, we went crazy. We banged on the bars. We tried to figure out what to do, we annoyed the other prisoners so they wouldn’t sleep either. We tried to cause as much trouble as possible.”

Some of the intrusive traumatic memories later reported by this man have nothing to do with things suffered personally, but rather with episodes in which he witnessed the suffering of others. Other research has corroborated how witnessing torture has as much of an impact as experiencing it firsthand (Basoğlu, Livanou, & Cronbarić, 2007).

After one of the episodes described above, involving the beating of three minors, our interviewee said that he took in the three youths and tried to care for them: “cleaning their wounds and giving them a little water.” He gave them the mattress from the cell where he had been sleeping and slept on the floor. This episode is similar to many others reported in the interviews. It is revealing because it speaks to the filial tendency of many former political prisoners, to how empathy generates a degree of suffering, and, above all, to how it constitutes a bastion of their resilience, as we will explain.

Resilience

Interviews are full of accounts of the strategies people used to cope with horror. Again, expressions of resilience were present in every interview. Initially, strategies were grouped as those that involve more individual expressions of coping and those that were built through relationships. However, in refining the categories, we concluded that this division is best understood by examining how each strategy seeks to resist the power it faces.

Resilience is as problematic a term as victimhood, as it highlights strengths and the capacity to overcome adversity, which can be used to minimise the atrocity committed by political persecution, seemingly leaving the responsibility on the victim’s lap. Those who are left devastated, therefore, can be judged less worthy, for they have not proven resilient enough (Pérez-Sales, 2023). Taking this into account, we believe that a viable option is to understand trauma and resilience as processes embedded in interactions with power, rather than as either-or outcomes, but as ongoing and dynamic.

This is where an understanding of the torturing environment and the functioning of the authoritarian system is useful. In other words, when analysing the different actions of the pris-

on guards and the functioning of the arbitrary justice system, it becomes clear that torture is one of many strategies used to try to subdue the will of dissidents, as well as to isolate them and diminish their influence on the population. The threats, the arbitrariness of the system, its falseness, and even the small comments made by the prison guards show how the system seeks to break the will of citizens by intimidating them, exhibiting its arbitrary power, hurting those who resist in order to break and exhibit them as examples to the rest of the population.

Resilience: Regaining agency in the face of imposition

It is in this context that resilience strategies take on meaning. Consequently, the first major category of resilience consists of strategies that individuals use to regain a degree of personal agency in the face of arbitrary and brutal power that seeks their submission. These are strategies in which the individual retains some possibility of responding to arbitrariness, of asserting his or her power, of gaining breathing space, however little.

A young activist and student leader described the police as having: “an attitude of showing that ‘I’m the boss, you’re the idiot here’. It’s like their way of making you understand that they are in control and that you have to learn that you can’t rebel.”

Once they understood this dynamic, the many ways in which the interviewees challenged their jailers, even though they knew their actions could lead to further punishment, began to make sense. These are small symbolic power struggles that serve to preserve a minimal sense of agency.

A young politician, in the midst of a beating, took the hand of one of his guards, brought it to his face, and challenged him by saying: “Go ahead, you bastard, hit me.” This is one of many reported gestures of defiance and self-assertion. Although more direct defiance is an extreme example, because in the face of terror, most of the time, as expected, political prisoners submit, there are a huge number of subtler versions of self-assertion.

Subjected to enormous deprivation, the interviewees describe how they sought to remain active, some by exercising, studying, tidying their cells, engaging prison guards and negotiating small privileges, or inventing ways to communicate through the prisoners’ network. A young politician described how he cleaned his small cell space to resist: “You know you’re screwed, you know you don’t know when you’re going to get out, visits may or may not be limited, but at least you control your space and that gives you some peace.” One young activist had access to books and devoted himself to reading. Speaking about his time in prison, he commented, almost disconcertingly: “Having time to read as I pleased was something I enjoyed immensely. It sounds paradoxical, but it’s true. In the midst of misfortune, that was something super positive.”

Another young man commented on how, upon learning that one of the prisoners was American, he decided to try to learn English. Every time he had the opportunity to leave his cell, to go to the bathroom or throw out the trash, he would pass by the cell and ask him to give him a new English word, which he would then memorise. Another told us how he discovered a way to smuggle letters to his family, establishing a channel between his cell and the outside world.

Several changed their sleep schedules to sleep during the day, when the guards were most intrusive, and to stay awake at night. One interviewee told us how she slept during the day and woke up at midnight: "It was like my moment of peace, and what I did was read at that hour with a flashlight I had."

In some cases, where restrictions prevented almost any action of resistance, thinking became a strategy to preserve some control, such as a young man who, faced with extreme sensory deprivation, devoted himself to meditation.

Cognitive reframing was prominent. The use of dark humour to minimise their conditions is revealing. One of the young men who was in a cell with several minors recounted how they competed, imagining tortures much crueller than those they suffered, and then laughed, saying, "Those bastards are just lazy; they don't know how to torture!" In the same vein, several recounted unusual expressions of humour that mocked the conditions in which they found themselves. During an interrogation, when asked for his address, he replied defiantly, "If you don't know, how should I? You're the SEBIN (the Bolivarian Intelligence Service)!"

These stories, which might at first seem baffling, make sense in the context of the cognitive strategies used to regain control, minimising the power of their captors. Many shared how they adjusted their expectations to come to terms with their situation, so as not to despair in the face of justice that never came. One of the small acts of cruelty repeated in the stories was to prepare the prisoners for hearings in the trials in which the charges against them were being processed, only to leave them waiting and finally inform them that the trial had been suspended. This happened over and over again. The small hopes of some kind of access to justice were continually frustrated.

For many, it was important to make sense of this arbitrariness. Understanding that power was the only logic, knowing that they were being falsely accused and that appealing to truth was practically useless. That degree of painful realism allowed them to regain some control over their expectations.

Finding a watch was useful for one of the cells. It allowed them to organise themselves and anticipate the guards' movements. Protest actions were also attempts to resist, despite the risks involved. Given the arbitrariness, some of the protests had

to be extreme. Numerous hunger strikes were described, and one spoke of a blood strike, in which he cut himself until he received the attention he demanded.

One young man, arrested for four years in a prison called "La Tumba" (The Tomb), where prisoners are subjected to white torture involving sensory deprivation, lived in a white cell, cold, without visits, without access to lawyers, without stimulation, with the same light 24 hours a day. After a long period there, he decided to go on a hunger strike that lasted 18 days, demanding access to books and crayons. Thanks to that protest, he was given access to a National Geographic magazine, a book on drawing, and paints and colours. There, he began to develop a career as a painter, which he continues now in liberty.

Without a doubt, the most dramatic example of this was a protest that began in one of the cells, where several minors were held, and turned into a riot throughout El Helicoide. The protesters managed to break some locks and take some of the guards hostage. That riot, which made international headlines, led to the release of several of the interviewees (Wilkinson, Pozzebon & Gallon, 2018).

To summarise, these seemingly different acts may be understood as expressions of resilience aimed at regaining a sense of agency, thereby illuminating a series of subtle yet significant dynamics of survival.

Making Sense: The value of political preparation

Following this line of thought, it seems useful to attend to the fact that the ability to quickly and accurately interpret the reasons for the abuses significantly distinguished the experience of politicians and activists who entered the situation with more awareness, from that of those citizens less involved in politics who spent much more time bewildered, disoriented, and, consequently, devastated by what they endured. This last group sought to clarify their innocence, to try to appeal to the justice system to recognise the arbitrariness of their suffering, surprised to be subjected to horror. Basoğlu and colleagues (1997), discussing the importance of being able to make sense of torture, have demonstrated how the unpredictability of the experience influences the degree of its traumatic impact.

The politicians and activists quickly understood that they were subject to arbitrary power, where laws were a facade, and that the real possibilities for liberation depended on political circumstances. All of which allowed them to cope better. One of them, who said he faced his incarceration with a feeling of peace, said he accepted that he would be there indefinitely and that the best thing he could do was use the time to exercise, read, and reflect on his life. Another activist, a journalist

by profession, told himself that his work during his imprisonment would be to document what was happening. A young student leader commented that his brother and some friends had been imprisoned in 2014, so that in 2017 he was “mentally prepared” for the ordeal. He understood from the outset that it was a game of intimidation to subdue him. Many turned to reading about similar circumstances to understand their situation. These frames of reference helped contextualise their experiences and give them meaning. Resilience research considers giving meaning to suffering to be key (Frankl, 2004; Walsh, 2006). Researchers working with political prisoners have reported similar findings (Hernández, 2002).

Relational Resilience: “an emotional tattoo of empathy”

While part of this effort to preserve some agency involves asserting autonomy and, in that sense, speaks of a process that emphasises individual will, it is also true that a profoundly relational aspect of resistance is already present in many of these same gestures.

Protest and the riot, for example, link efforts of personal rebellion against power to the importance of relationships. Just as many of the most painful reports of suffering were related, not to what they themselves experienced, but to what they saw their loved ones suffer or thought they suffered, the most compelling reports of resilience also referred to their relationships.

This is not surprising, since the literature has highlighted that bonds and relations are among the key elements of resilience (Daiute, 2013; Landau & Saul, 2004; Ungar, 2021; Werner, 1992). Our observations in practice had alerted us to the importance of connections, and analysis has confirmed this. One of the interviewees summarised it by saying that the prison experience left him “an emotional tattoo of empathy.”

It is striking to hear the quantity and quality of acts of care that former political prisoners described. A congressman who was imprisoned recounted how he assembled “reception kits” for new inmates, with soap and toothpaste donated by supporters on the outside. He would welcome fellow prisoners who arrived beaten into the cell next to his as a small gesture of humanity. Another young lawyer recounted how, in several places where he was imprisoned with common criminals, he offered legal advice to gain their sympathy. He also gave English lessons.

These displays of mutual support for enduring their ordeal are a recurring theme. When asked, “What do you think helped you stay afloat in prison?” One participant responded: “I think being in a place with people who shared the same convictions was important.”

Several made it their mission to be kind to the guards, to try to win them over as allies. Several spoke of being especially respectful, even in the face of abuse, until they managed to lower the defensiveness of those who considered themselves their enemies.

The families recounted similar experiences; the support processes were made possible by the solidarity of other families and friends. The wife of a former prisoner told how her friends prepared five lunches every day to take to the prisoner, but also to the police officers guarding him.

In the interviews, the ex-prisoners spoke of laughing together, of singing together. In a military prison, one interviewee and her friends listened to a prominent political prisoner in another cell sing the Venezuelan national anthem every morning. They were forbidden to sing along, but they made sure to whistle softly to accompany him. These are gestures of emotional connection and meaning that helped them endure. Letters as a means of maintaining connection are very important in this sense. Letters to family members abroad, letters between prisoners, clandestine methods for smuggling letters out, letters to prison officials requesting privileges —these are all examples of agency and connection.

This resilience, built through relationships, served to address immediate needs, but also to cope with emotional distress, sustain hope, and recover a sense of humanity. Among those interviewed, three couples were formed while imprisoned in El Helicoide. In a BBC report, a former prisoner of that prison, who was one of our interviewees, recounted how she fell in love with another political prisoner, now her husband, and how that was “a ray of light. It was so nice that amidst so much garbage, someone made you feel like a person” (D Olmo, 2019). Many interviewees spoke about the significance of visits during their time in prison.

Research in other contexts, such as Iran, has also focused on relational strategies, such as humour, as a protective factor (Feinstein, 2008; Ghahary, 2003; Spring, 2012). Daiute, in her work on the effects of political violence, has also stated that resilience in general can be understood as a relational process (2013).

Post-traumatic growth

Some reports go beyond describing how they managed to adapt and survive. They speak of significant processes of transformation and growth stemming from the prison, suggesting post-traumatic growth (Shiro, 2023).

As the authors who developed the term point out, some people who have experienced trauma can achieve highly positive transformations. Although, in contrast to expressions of

resilience that appear in all of the interviews, post-traumatic growth appears clearly in only a handful, and it is not generalizable, it is worth noting. This, of course, does not imply that torture is beneficial, as has been critically pointed out, but rather that the processing of experience is complex and can lead to unexpected transformations.

One of the most startling testimonies, for example, was that of a young man who was not involved in politics and had led a criminal life until being falsely accused of murdering a government political figure. He was subjected to terrible torture and ended up being sent to a political prison, finding support among the inmates: "I arrived in a completely emaciated state, beaten all over. And there, at that moment, I met many, many students who were there and who are now my friends."

One of those friends encouraged him to study and began teaching him about the National Constitution and his rights. Despite initially reporting disinterest, in a public interview he stated,

"It awakened in me, through these people who showed me a completely different world, a hunger for knowledge. I began to read the Constitution and learned that education is a universal right, and that idea penetrated my soul. I wanted to study." (CESCOS, 2024)

After repeatedly appealing to prison authorities for permission to apply for distance learning, he was finally granted the opportunity and managed to earn his high school diploma while behind bars. Upon his release, he studied law and is currently a human rights activist. In the interview for this project, he described his transformation upon leaving prison, saying: "I was a completely changed man."

Similarly, the wife of a former prisoner explained that their relationship had been shaky before his imprisonment, but that their shared experience had deeply strengthened their convictions. Another couple expressed that, despite the lasting trauma on their relationships, mutual admiration emerged, leading to family readjustments that have strengthened their dynamics and fostered joint projects, such as a testimonial book authored collaboratively based on their shared experiences. Time and again, interviewees told us that they emerged with even stronger political convictions. One interviewee expressed it this way,

"Prison didn't diminish my desire or my spirit to search, to fight against the dictatorship. Rather, it deepened it to almost pathological levels, where now I have an obsession with not letting go, not letting go, not letting go, and it's all I think about."

Many have become human rights activists. In fact, the two projects from which these interviews originate are a testament

to that, as they have been developed by former prisoners and relatives of former political prisoners who, after surviving prison, have dedicated themselves to advocating for those who remain incarcerated. It suggests that transforming those experiences into activism is sometimes a pathway to recovery.

Reflexivity/positionality statement

The testimonies analysed in this study emerged, as described, from projects that sought to empower political dissidents in various ways. So, we have explicitly worked from a positioned stance that condemns the abuses they were subjected to, seeks to forge alliances with and actively include survivors' perspectives in our interpretation of these experiences. We are all Venezuelan and actively engaged with these issues.

Our participatory approach leads us to build relations with participants. We consider that building a space for trust allowed us to have access to very personal experiences, as is the case with the extreme vulnerability of torture. Our position is interwoven with an ethical approach that prioritises safety, with a trusting relationship as an integral part. We actively sought to underscore the interviewees' agency in our exchanges, inviting them to express any discomfort and share only what they felt comfortable sharing. Our conclusions undoubtedly are influenced by these positions.

Conclusions

In that sense, the findings provide feedback regarding the methodology and offer suggestions for future work with political prisoners and their families, consistent with the proposal to examine the phenomenon through the lens of psychosocial trauma (Martín-Baró, 1994) and relationality.

The richness of the interviews stems largely from the fact that they were conducted either with a former political prisoner as a co-interviewer or as part of projects developed by the community of former prisoners and their families. Thus, a bond of solidarity permeates the entire record. It is striking how the conversations reveal profound emotional exchanges stemming from shared experiences. "I want to give you a hug," or "I love you, brother," were recurring expressions. The vast majority of the interviews concluded with gratitude for the opportunity to share their experiences and a desire to collaborate further, in contrast to the re-traumatising experiences reported from human rights data-gathering interviews. All of those interviewed chose to appear with their names in the acknowledgements of both projects' credits.

With participatory action research (Montero, 2004; 2006), the search for knowledge goes hand in hand with transformation and is consistent with the logic of relationality. We be-

lieve that the research process itself reflects the notion that the participation of survivors, the solidarity among them, and the development of record-keeping processes are, in themselves, forms of empowerment and individual and social healing. Furthermore, this project proposes that the bond between researchers and the community of former political prisoners enabled an approach that addresses the criticisms of traditional methodologies, whose conventional frameworks tend to produce results that emphasise individuality and psychopathology (Kagee & Naidoo, 2004).

Pérez-Sales (2023) has written a comprehensive reflection on the importance of resilience among torture survivors, considering crucial debates and describing many ways it has been reported. Rud et al. (2023) have also recently produced an extensive description of acts of resilience of torture survivors. Many of the strategies described resemble those lists. Resilience, understood as a way to counter what power seeks to impose on the subject, can be thought of in two distinct forms: that which seeks to regain agency and that which seeks to sustain connection.

Affective bonds have been widely considered a central resource for resilience since its original formulation (Kan & Lejano, 2023; Werner, 1993). It is also central to fully understanding the suffering derived from torture. Findings point to relationships as a central aspect of the suffering inflicted through isolation, subjecting dissidents to having to witness torture sessions of others and enduring their family members' ordeal.

It is fruitful to examine experiences of torture through a relational lens to fully understand the magnitude and nuances of the suffering, and to grasp the mechanisms for overcoming and recovering from it, helping to direct our psychosocial support towards the whole network of relationships, as well as emphasising the strengths and empowerment of that network.

This suggests that we should attend to the importance of collective processes of struggling for justice and restoring community as central aspects of recovery (Herman, 2023; Saul, 2022), thereby allowing the formulation of a more community-based approach to treatment. This also suggests looking more deeply into the influence of gender as a mediator of resilience based on connection (Özbay & Bülbül, 2024).

Perhaps the restorative potential of these horrific experiences does not come only from the sources that tend to be emphasised, be they international courts that take many years to process few cases or individual psychotherapy. Perhaps the inspiration conveyed by these testimonies themselves and the processes developed by survivors have, more than any other

tool, the power to heal pain and repair some of our wounded social fabric.

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