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Comparative Study of Paramilitaries and Guerrillas in Colombia

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Abstract

Moral disengagement mechanisms are strategies to make immoral actions appear moral. This study explores their usage by two Colombian illegal armed groups (guerrillas and paramilitaries), as well as differences between the groups. The analysis covered 367 communiqués issued in 55 months. A deductive content analysis revealed that the most used mechanisms were: attribution of blame, euphemistic labeling, moral justification and labeling with undesirable names. Results showed differences between groups only in the number of press releases, but not in frequency or type of the mechanisms used. The findings are analyzed in the discussion section in relation to the theory of dissonance, extreme violence and motives for joining illegal armed groups.

Keywords: moral disengagement, dissonance, violence, ideology, guerrillas.

Los Mecanismos de Desconexión Moral y la Violencia Armada. Un Estudio Comparativo de Paramilitares y Guerrilleros en Colombia

Resumen

Los mecanismos de desconexión moral son estrategias mediante las cuales las acciones inmorales parecen morales. El estudio examina la utilización de dichas estrategias por parte de dos grupos armados ilegales en Colombia (guerrillas y paramilitares), así como las diferencias entre los dos grupos, para lo cual se analizaron 367 comunicados emitidos a lo largo de 55 meses. El análisis deductivo del contenido reveló que los mecanismos más utilizados eran la atribución de culpabilidad, los eufemismos, la justificación moral y la calificación con nombres indeseables. Según los resultados, solo hubo diferencias entre los grupos en cuanto al número de comunicados de prensa, mas no en cuanto a la frecuencia o al tipo de mecanismos utilizados. Los hallazgos del estudio se analizan en la sección de discusión según la teoría de la disonancia, la violencia extrema y las razones para enrolarse en grupos armados ilegales.

Palabras clave: desconexión moral, disonancia, violencia, ideología, guerrillas.

Mecanismos de Desengajamento Moral e a Violência Armada. Um Estudo Comparativo dos Paramilitares e da Guerrilha na Colômbia

Resumo

Os mecanismos de desengajamento moral são estratégias para fazer ações imorais aparentarem ser morais. Este estudo explora seu uso por dois grupos armados ilegais da Colômbia (guerrilhas e paramilitares), assim como as diferenças entre eles. Analisaram-se 367 comunicados emitidos em 55 meses. Uma análise dedutiva do conteúdo revelou que os mecanismos mais usados eram: atribuição de culpa, linguagem eufemística, justificativa moral e rotulação com nomes indesejáveis. Os resultados mostraram diferenças entre os grupos só no número de comunicados à imprensa, mas não na frequência ou tipo de mecanismos usados. Os resultados são analisados na seção de discussão no que se refere à teoria da dissonância, à violência extrema e aos motivos para se unir a grupos armados ilegais.

Palavras-chave: desengajamento moral, dissonância, guerrilhas, ideologia, violência.

WHY DO individuals commit acts of extreme violence or terrorism? According to Bandura, there are cognitive strategies of reality distortion that convert a violent or transgressive behavior into an acceptable one, making violence possible. These strategies, labeled as moral disengagement mechanisms (DMs), allow individuals to maintain their transgressive actions in concordance with morality. Such strategies operate on the cognitive and emotional level and focus on different aspects of moral situations, giving rise to eight disengagement mechanisms. In Bandura's view (1999, 2001, 2016), the disengagement mechanisms are at the root of violence and terrorism because they impede the correct functioning of the moral self-regulatory system, which maintains behavior aligned with moral standards. More precisely, the DMs hinder the startup of self-sanctions (self-condemnation and self-praise), one of the components of the moral self-regulatory system along with moral standards. Arousal of self-condemnation is prevented when agents justify an immoral behavior that clashes with moral standards, turning it into a necessary or valuable action. The incongruence between moral standards and behavior is thus solved using DMs. The operation of these mechanisms may be understood in the framework of dissonance theory, as we will argue later. Knowledge about the DMs, despite their importance in the emergence and maintenance of violence, is limited because there is sparse research on how violent agents justify their acts, which mechanisms they use, and even less, how they use them in their spontaneous language. This knowledge gap exists both in the studies of violence, including political violence, as well as in the studies of religiously motivated terrorism, for example, jihadism. According to Borun (2011), despite the increasing number of publications on terrorism since 2001 and the interest in radicalization, empirical studies are rare.

In order to analyze the DMs spontaneously used to justify political violence and terrorism, the periodic reports published by the two most important Colombian illegal armed groups are an invaluable source. These groups are the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, in its Spanish acronym) and the right-wing United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC, in its Spanish acronym), both inactive now. Their communiqués presented the groups' official thinking and contained justifications that presumably accomplished the role of being internalized by the group members, serving as mechanisms for disconnecting self-sanctions and avoiding or reducing social rejection. In this line, the proposed analysis goes further by addressing the operation of a collective moral disengagement within each group, which operates beyond the individual level, on a large scale social system or sub-system (Bandura, 2016). Such collective disengagement has been overlooked in previous research.

The first goal of the present investigation is, then, to explore the DMs embedded in the groups' communiqués to identify which are used and how often. Results will contribute to our understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind extreme violence and to the theory of moral disengagement, and expand the findings concerning politically motivated violence and other forms of terrorism. The frequency in the usage of mechanisms will shed light on their effectiveness to disconnect self-sanctions and reduce dissonance. The second goal is to compare the two groups to establish whether the moral mechanisms are similar in their type and frequency, regardless of differences in the political ideology. Such similarity would support the assumption that the used mechanisms respond to a psychological need of disconnecting self-sanctions and alleviating distress, rather than to political ideology. The proposed study has the advantage of analyzing two violent and contemporary actors from the same country that were enemies to each other.

In the first section, we will present the classification of the DMs, their role as facilitators of immoral behavior and reducers of cognitive dissonance. Next, we will discuss their linkage to ideology and violence. In the second section we will describe the main characteristics of the two Colombian groups.

Moral Disengagement Mechanisms and their Relationship to Other Constructs

Moral Disengagement Mechanisms and Dissonance

Moral disengagement mechanisms are cognitive strategies for distorting reality, turning violent or transgressive behavior into an acceptable conduct (Bandura, 1986, 1990, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2016; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). DMs may focus on: (a) reconstructing the behavior so that it is not viewed as immoral, (b) minimizing the agent's responsibility in causing harm, (c) trivializing the consequences that follow from the action, and (d) devaluing the victims or holding them responsible for their misfortune (Bandura, 2002, 2016). The four possible foci give rise to eight different mechanisms, as shown in Table 1.

Disengagement mechanisms allow people to act immorally without damaging their self-esteem by selectively disconnecting self-sanctions from immoral conduct. Such self-sanctions are part of the moral self-regulatory system that keeps conduct in line with personal standards, the other component of the system. Consistency between acts and the moral standards, internalized and enforced throughout life, produces satisfaction. Inconsistencies, resulting from actions against the moral standards, i.e., immoral actions, produce blame or self-condemnation. The self-regulatory system works both before and after the behavior (Bandura, 1991) and so can DMs (Jackson & Gaertner, 2010). People use DMs because they know the evil of their actions and need, therefore, to alter reality and make immoral actions acceptable, not censurable. In addition to DMs, other cognitive and social influences may also account for immoral actions. As Bandura (2002) signaled: "Moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences" (p. 102).

Table 1
Description of Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

Domain	Mechanism	Description
(a) Reprehensible behavior	Moral justification	Detrimental behavior is portrayed as personally and socially acceptable, serving worthy purposes.
	Euphemistic labeling	Distorted language is used to present reprehensible behavior as respectable.
	Advantageous comparison	Actions are compared to each other, so that they show the advantage or negligible consequences.
(b) Agent's responsibility	Displacement of responsibility	Action is presented as stemming from authorities' dictates.
	Diffusion of responsibility	Reprehensible actions are attributed to group decisions, excluding personal responsibility.
(c) Detrimental effects	Disregard for or distortion of consequences	Evidence about hurting or harmful consequences is denied or minimized.
	Dehumanization	The victims are portrayed as sub-human objects, mindless savages, deprived of human qualities.
(d) Victim	Attribution of blame	The adversary or the circumstances are to blame for the actions. Punitive conduct is a response to a provocation.

Note: Adapted from Bandura (1999, 2002).

The mere arising of cognitive inconsistencies between behavior and personal attitudes or beliefs causes an uncomfortable state of "dissonance" (Festinger, 1968) that motivates individuals to seek strategies to reduce or alleviate it. In the moral domain, such dissonance may emerge either as anticipated dissonance, before acting wrong, or as experienced dissonance, after an incorrect action (Barkan, Ayal, & Ariely, 2015). Such uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance may overlap with the anticipation of self-condemnation, increasing the need of reducing or alleviating it. To this purpose, the mechanisms of moral disengagement seem especially appropriate, as they distort reality, thereby reducing the dissonance, and disconnecting self-sanctions from immoral conduct. By the work of these mechanisms, immoral behavior is perceived as moral, given, for example, that it was elicited by the victim, deserved by her/him or less harmful than other behaviors (cf. Table 1).

Festinger (1968) proposed three main modes to reduce dissonance: (1) modification of one or more elements in the dissonance, especially, attitudes or behavior; (2) addition of new consonant elements; (3) trivialization of some of the dissonant elements. A fourth mode of dissonance reduction is a denial of responsibility (Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé, 2006). Accordingly, a strong similarity between these modes of dissonance reduction and DMs exists, with differences only in the mode (2) from Festinger and category (d) from Bandura. Moreover, Ribaud and Eisner (2010) considered that the concepts of moral disengagement, neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957, quoted in Ribaud & Eisner, 2010) and self-serving cognitive distortions answer the same question of what moral individuals do to minimize cognitive dissonance, threats to self-concept, and experiences of moral self-sanction when facing moral transgressions. The finding of a conceptual and empirical overlap between the three concepts led the authors to group them as moral neutralization.

It follows from the discussion above that the theory of dissonance is a comprehensive framework for better understanding the moral disengagement mechanisms. Such theory provides a set of well-defined and experimentally tested propositions that could extend to DMs.

Moral Disengagement Mechanisms, Ideology, and Extreme Violence

Ideology, despite its relevance, has been subject of multiple definitions (Eagleton, 1997; Gerring, 1997). We adopted the definition proposed by Seliger (1976), who considered it as "Set of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action and specifically political action..." (p.11). Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009) included attitudes and values in their notion of ideology, besides ideas or beliefs. Ideology serves both as a description of the world and as a prescription of how the world should be "…specifying acceptable means of attaining social, economic, and political ideals" (p. 309). That set of beliefs, values, and attitudes has cognitive, affective, and motivational properties, so that ideological commitment is a strong predictor of a range of attitudes, preferences, judgments and behaviors. Moreover, the mentioned authors regarded ideology as a system-justifying device for explaining or rationalizing how things are or should be. From the latter, it follows that ideology entails moral beliefs insofar it is a normative system that prescribes how the world should be. Ideology, nevertheless, is a bi-dimensional construct, comprised of social and economic dimensions (Feldman & Johnston, 2014), giving rise to wide individual differences in the combination of the two dimensions but narrow ones between groups. The relationship between ideology and DMs has been investigated, as far as we know, only by Jackson and Gaertner (2010). They tested whether two groups with different ideologies–right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO)–supported war as a political intervention and whether such support was mediated by moral disengagement mechanisms. They assumed a differential use of the mechanisms according to the ideology, an assumption disconfirmed by the data. In fact, both

ideologies used all DMs, mostly minimization of consequences and moral justification. These findings highlight the importance of collecting more empirical evidence and comparing groups differing in ideology, as we will do in this research.

Extreme violence and terrorism may be facilitated by the usage of DMs (Bandura, 1990, 1999, 2001; 2016; Tsang, 2002) or by altering own moral standards (Bersoff, 1999; Moghaddam, 2005; Staub, 1989, 1996, 2000). In turn, Maikovich (2005) considered that terrorists, starting their career as such, experience a high need of reducing their dissonance. To alleviate it, they adopt the strategies of moral disengagement, diffusion of responsibility, just world bias (blaming the victim in Bandura's classification), social support and the preponderance of dream imagery over external reality. With the exception of the latter two, the remaining might be part of DMs. According to Maikovich, such strategies function both to reduce dissonance and gain social support. The process of indoctrination, on the other hand, includes not only a progressive approach to terrorism and to other inhumane actions, but also to moral justifications for them. These justifications, in our view, become internalized by the group members as disengagement mechanisms. Bandura (2016) gives numerous examples of the usage of DMs by terrorists, especially, Al-Qaeda members, jihadists, and former fighters of the IRA in Ireland. For the case of jihadism, Cottee (2010) documented the usage of *moral justification* of war and violence against non-Muslims, *victim blaming and dehumanization*, *disregard of consequences* and *denial of personal responsibility or agency* in the writings and public statements of some of its influential leaders.

As for the usage of the mechanisms by jihadist militants, our review yielded two empirical studies. The first one (Hafez, 2006) was based on a content analysis of the last will and statements made by Palestinian suicide bombers before their attack on civilians. The findings showed that the most commonly used mechanisms were: *moral justification* of violence, *advantageous comparison* among Palestinian and Israeli violence, *attribution*

of blame for the violence, and *euphemistic labeling*. The second study was conducted by Khalil (2017), who analyzed 216 articles published by the ISIS during 2015. Results revealed the usage of all the mechanisms, with the exception of blaming the victim, not mentioned by the author, and a supremacy of moral justification. Contrary to Khalil's findings, Bandura (2016) persuasively argues that some mechanisms are suited for terrorist purposes whereas other are less useful and seldom used.

As for the politically motivated terrorism, Martin-Peña and Opotow (2011) analyzed the statements made by the Spanish terrorist group ETA after its terrorist attacks. They used categories similar to Bandura's and found a prevalence of advantageous comparison and euphemisms, Domain (a) in Table 1, but not of moral justifications. Blaming the victim and displacing responsibility, Domains (b) and (d) in Table 1, were the other two most frequent mechanisms. In contrast, Sabucedo, Blanco, and de la Corte (2003) found–in a newspaper linked to the ETA–a predominance of legitimization of beliefs related to the detrimental effect of the consequences and to the victim, Domains (c) and (d) in Table 1. Thus, the kidnapping and murdering of innocent people were legitimized through attribution of responsibilities to the enemy, the depersonalization of the victims, and an asymmetric evaluation of suffering. These results, although restricted to the ETA and based on small samples, evidence dispersion in the usage of DMs.

Sabucedo et al., (2004) investigated the usage of delegitimization labels, corresponding to the category (d) of devaluing the victim, made by the Colombian groups–FARC and AUC–. They discovered that each group presented the adversary as violator of social norms, whereas depicting the enemy with negative personality traits was uncommon. These groups differed only in the frequency of negative political labels for the opponent, higher for the FARC than for AUC. The mentioned similarities suggest that the justificatory dynamic and categories are the same, despite sociopolitical differences (Borja, Barreto, Sabucedo, &

López, 2008). Bolivar (2006), in turn, analyzed the discourse of the two Colombian groups during peace talks. Based on mass media interviews, she discovered differences in the self-portraits offered by the groups' leaders. Drawing on such differences, she concluded, nevertheless, that the two groups diverged in their emotional repertoires and ideologies, and consequently in the justifications for their action. Apart from the aforementioned studies and, as far as we know, there are no other studies that compare the psychological characteristics of terrorists or violent armed groups.

As yet, it is unknown if all mechanisms are equally effective to avoid self-sanctions and reduce dissonance. Bandura (2002) believes that cognitive restructuring of harmful conduct, Domain (a) in Table 1, is the most effective for disengaging moral control. We assume that the frequency in the usage of each DM is a hint of its perceived effectiveness and it is, therefore, of interest in the present research.

Main Illegal Armed Groups in the Colombian Conflict: the FARC and AUC

Colombia has suffered a long-standing internal armed conflict caused by guerrillas and paramilitaries. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are the oldest and most prominent guerrilla group, which emerged in 1964 as an armed organization with a Marxist-Leninist orientation, mainly composed of young and low educated peasants (Gutiérrez, 2008). Their goal was to take power and change the structure of the state to bring about a fairer income distribution (Ferro & Uribe, 2002). Over the years, the FARC's ideological, political and military position weakened, due to increasing international rejection of violence and terrorism, their engagement in drug-trafficking (Saab & Taylor, 2009), kidnapping and child recruitment, as well as the action of the armed forces and the massive desertion of combatants. This group signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016, after four years of negotiation.

The paramilitaries conformed the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which emerged toward the end of the 80's with the support of rural elites, politicians and some members of the Colombian Armed Forces to confront the guerrillas and to defend the State and its institutions. AUC was comprised of ex-members of the Armed Forces, former common delinquents (Gutiérrez, 2008), security personnel of extinct drug cartels, small or medium sized drug barons and some regional elites of landowners (Saab & Taylor, 2009). AUC adopted a national political discourse of counterinsurgency and protection of the status quo (Duncan, 2006; Pizarro, 2004), but in fact, they were "local responses to the guerrillas" (PNUD, 2003. p. 29). This grouping of local armies made it difficult for them to achieve unified political goals and sometimes led to actions and decisions that were not consulted with the central leaders. Over time, AUC merged with drug traffickers and emerald smugglers (Romero, 2003), and an initial social tolerance to that group turned into rejection. In 2006, AUC negotiated a peace process with the Colombian government; as a result, most of their members laid down their arms and rejoined civilian life. This process has been difficult because many former paramilitaries have regrouped as armed criminal groups.

Both the paramilitaries and the FARC were involved in terrorist acts (Feldmannn & Hinojosa, 2009; Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de la Vicepresidencia de la República, 2005; Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, OHCHR, 2010); hence their justifications shed light on terrorism. To reach our goals, we examined the mechanisms that these groups spontaneously used in their press releases, their frequency, and possible differences in preference and frequency between both groups.

Method

Sample

367 press releases published by the two groups on their respective websites during 55 months: 216 by the FARC and 151 by AUC. The months for both groups were counted backward from the date of

the successful or failed peace agreement. In the selected time span, about two thirds (37 months) were devoted to peace talks with the government, while the remaining time was in conflict. The time-frame for AUC (2006-2002) started with the date of the latest massive laying down of arms, while for the FARC (2003-1999) it began with the rupture of the peace negotiations in December 2003. The data included all statements issued during the selected time and although it was representative of the dynamic of the war–conflict and negotiation–it implied asynchrony between the groups. This fact, notwithstanding, seems irrelevant concerning the type or frequency of DMs, our inquiry targets.

Procedure

We conducted a deductive content analysis (Mayring, 2000), taking the paragraph as the unit of analysis of each communiqué. The two latter authors identified and categorized the disengagement mechanisms embedded in the paragraph, counting each one only once per press release. Initially, the content of the paragraph was classified into one of the four domains labeled (a) to (d) in Table 1, and then into the corresponding category within the domain. For example, if the topic of the paragraph was a defense of an action, say a guerrilla incursion in a small village, and was justified as necessary to promote the interests of villagers, the underlying mechanism was of Domain (a) and belonged to the category of moral justification. In addition, if the murder of police during the assault was termed as leaving aside the enemy, the expression was coded as euphemistic labeling.

To the eight categories of mechanisms proposed by Bandura we added a new category of labeling with undesirable names. In fact, an initial whole reading of the material evidenced a recurrence in labeling the victim with undesirable names, a non-existent category in Bandura's classification, but similar to one of Bar-Tal's (1990) categories. Underlying this labeling is the intention of devaluing the victim (Bar-Tal, 1990), not of dehumanizing or blaming, whereby we added such labeling as a

third sub-category of the mechanisms related to the victim (Domain d). Table 1 in Appendix A shows examples of the most used mechanisms.

To establish the percentage of agreement in the identification and categorization of the DMs, the two coders analyzed a random sample of 10% of the press releases, working independently. They obtained an agreement in their classification task of 91%, for an estimated Kappa index of .90, and 100% in their identification of paragraphs containing a DM. Differences between the coders were solved through discussion with the first author. Next, each coder analyzed half of the remaining press releases. Overall, 78% of the communiqués revealed the usage of DMs.

Results

During the 55 month period, the FARC published 216 press releases, about one per week, and AUC 115[1], two per month. As for the mechanisms, their frequency was 749, for a ratio of 2.08 per press release. The average of mechanisms used by the FARC (M= 1.92; SD= 1.52) and AUC (M= 2.08; SD= 1.88) was similar, with $z(329)$= .08, p=.93.

Regarding the nine different mechanisms, results in Table 2 indicate that the most used were: attribution of blame (21%), euphemistic labeling (20%), moral justification (17%) and labeling with undesirable names (16%). Dehumanization represented only 4% of the total, while displacement and diffusion of responsibility, both belonging to the domain of agent's responsibility, exhibited a percentage even lower than dehumanization. Of the most used mechanisms, the first and fourth corresponded to the Domain of victim (d), while the remaining two belonged to the Domain of reconstruction of behavior (a). Overall, 74% of the used DMs corresponded to the Domains (d) and (a), each one with exactly the same proportion, whereas the remaining 26% belonged to the Domains of the agent's responsibility (b) and detrimental effects (c).

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1   This difference was statistically significant for χ^2=11.51, p<.001.

Table 2
Frequency and Percentage of the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement and Differences by Group

Domain	Mechanisms	FARC		AUC		Total			
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*z*	*p*
(a)	Moral justification	63	15.18	68	20.36	131	17.49	-1.85	.06
	Advantageous comparison	37	8.92	39	11.68	76	10.15	-1.24	.21
	Euphemistic labelling	92	22.17	56	16.77	148	19.76	1.85	.06
(b)	Displacement of responsibility	2	0.48	4	1.20	6	0.80		
	Diffusion of responsibility	0	0.00	16	4.79	16	2.14		
(c)	Distortion of consequences	34	8.19	28	8.38	62	8.28	-0.09	.92
(d)	Dehumanization	21	5.06	11	3.29	32	4.27	1.19	.23
(e)	Attribution of blame	91	21.93	67	20.06	158	21.09	0.62	.53
(f)	Labeling with undesirable names	75	18.07	45	13.47	120	16.02	1.71	.08
	Total	415	100	334	100	749	100		

To test differences between the groups in their use of each mechanism, and to avoid Type I errors, we adjusted the required *p* level. Thus, after excluding the two most infrequently used mechanisms, whose percentages were too low for a *z* test, seven mechanisms remained to be compared. Following the Bonferroni procedure, for 7 univariate comparisons (*k*=7) we obtained a required *p* level of .007, when dividing .05 by 7. Results in Table 2 show that any comparison reached the needed significance level and consequently, the groups do not differ significantly in the use of DMs in spite of their differences in ideology. Diffusion of responsibility, although used exclusively by AUC members, represents only a negligible percentage (2%) of the total of mechanisms.

Discussion

The FARC and AUC needed to justify their morally questionable actions, as the presence of justificatory mechanisms in 78% of their communiqués indicates. According to some authors (Borja et al., 2008; Martín-Peña & Opotow, 2011), the discourse of insurgent or terrorist groups serves primarily to justify or legitimize their violence. Justifications operate to avoid self-condemnation, reduce dissonance and alleviate the state of discomfort associated with it. Such functions are required when violent or immoral agents are aware of their wrongdoing. In this case, the DMs reaffirm the morality of the agent's behavior, making the continuation of violence possible. Sabucedo, Blanco, and de la Corte (2003) signaled that violence, in its extreme form, means physically eliminating the adversary, an innocent victim in terrorist actions, raising widespread social rejection. To avoid such rejection, violent agents try to legitimize their violence, which once legitimated enables them to maintain a favorable public opinion, a positive self-image and a belief in the morality of their actions.

Differences in the Frequency of Press Releases and Mechanisms

The FARC issued a higher number of press releases, and therefore of justifications, compared to AUC, although the average of mechanisms did not differ between the two groups. Drawing on

groups' composition and the reasons for joining them, it is plausible to assume that the FARC needed to persuade both the public opinion as well as their own members about the morality of its acting and entitle the latter with means to reduce their dissonance. This task probably required more communiqués than for AUC, whose members probably were not in need of being convinced about the morality of their actions, and whose actions were more tolerated by wide social sectors. Regarding composition, AUC had mostly members with criminal antecedents (Gutiérrez, 2008), who received payment for their activities and perceived them as a job. They were, then, a sort of mercenaries. The FARC, meanwhile, had been mainly composed of young farmers, 20% of them victims of forced recruitment, according to data collected by Pinto, Vergara, and Lahuerta (2002). Concerning the motives for enlistment, they appear similar in both groups: Seeking of fun and adventure, followed by economic security for AUC members and promises of remuneration and good treatment for FARC's (Villegas de Posada, 2009). Nevertheless, AUC fighters achieved satisfaction of their economic security motive, insofar as they received payment, and were so motivated to stay in the group. By contrast, guerrilla members did not receive payment, contrary to the promises made to them as a recruitment incentive. People enrolled into the FARC due to economic opportunities, or forced to join them, had to remain in the group because defection was severely punished, even with their lives. They needed, therefore, strategies to reduce the dissonance, strategies that were transmitted to them through frequent communiqués issued by the FARC command.

Ideology and DMs

Disengagement mechanisms were used regardless of group ideology as evidenced by the lack of differences in the frequency or type of justifications. Ideology serves to justify ends and means of political action and political ideals (Jost et al., 2009; Seliger, 1976). Although the FARC and AUC

originally differed regarding their political ends, the former progressively lost much of its primitive Marxist-Leninist ideology, becoming more pragmatic and less idealistic than in the past. The means, on the other hand, were the same for both groups, requiring, therefore, similar justifications. As both groups participated in drug trafficking and terrorism (Feldmann & Hinojosa, 2009; Saab & Taylor, 2009), their similar actions required similar justifications. According to Borja et al. (2008) the justificatory dynamics and categories are the same for both groups, in spite of sociopolitical differences. Furthermore, the coincidence in the moral principle being violated—the principle of not harming—may explain the lack of differences in the justificatory categories used by the FARC and AUC, also found by Sabucedo et al. (2004). Furthermore, if the DMs are cognitive strategies used to disconnect self-sanctions and reduce dissonance, it is not surprising that ideology does not affect them.

Considering that the communiqués express the leaders' thinking, our findings reflect the mechanisms of a collective disengagement, an aspect disregarded in research. Thus, according to Bandura (2016):

> With collective moral disengagement, members do not have to concoct their own individual exonerations. Instead, the different players in the system have to neutralize the moral implications of their role in the organizational activities. In doing so, they provide exoneration for each other. Therefore, collective moral disengagement is […] an emergent group level property, arising from coordinative, interactive, and synergistic group dynamics. (p. 100)

Order and Frequency of DMs

Both groups appealed to the same DMs and the frequency for each one was similar between the groups. The most used mechanisms were: attribution of blame, euphemistic labeling, moral justification and labeling with undesirable names.

From these, the first and fourth belong to the domain of victim (d), while the second and third correspond to the domain of reconstruction of behavior (a). Thus, the two groups presented their actions as non-reprehensible and deserved by the victims. Overall, three-quarters of the used mechanisms correspond to a distortion of either the victim or the behavior. It is noteworthy that the prevalent domains (a) and (d) are used exactly in the same proportion, a fact that we will discuss later.

The most used mechanisms are probably the most effective to reduce dissonance, disconnect self-sanctions and maintain a favorable public opinion. Bandura (2002) believes that the mechanisms belonging to the domain (a) of reconstruction of behavior are the strongest to disconnect self-sanctions. To achieve terrorists' goals, the most effective mechanisms are moral and social justification, use of euphemisms, attribution of blame and dehumanization (Bandura, 2016), i.e., mechanisms of the categories (a) and (d). Our findings confirm such assumption, with the exception of dehumanization, which was not frequent in our data, while labeling with undesirable names had high frequencies. It is noteworthy this low frequency of dehumanization—a mechanism underlying theories of moral delegitimization (Bar-Tal, 1990) and moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990)—, as well as the high frequency of labeling with undesirable names, a category not considered by Bandura.

The mechanisms focused on the victim are of utmost importance to reduce dissonance in terrorists, according to Maikovich (2005). He referred to these mechanisms as just world bias, i.e., the assumption that victims of terrorism deserve their fates, which are fair, as well as the punishment inflicted. Linked to this bias is a process of devaluing victims and their suffering by believing that their suffering is deserved. He supported his assertion with excerpts from terrorists' justifications, which also exemplify the use of reconstruction of behavior through euphemistic labeling.

The mechanisms of the Domains (b) and (c) that deny the agents' responsibility or the detrimental effects of actions were very infrequently used, an outcome in agreement with Bandura's (2016) assumption, but contrary to Gosling, Denizeau, and Oberlé's (2006) view. For these authors, denial of the agent's responsibility (c) is the mechanism for actions that elicit guilt and shame, namely, for immoral actions. Nevertheless, the low frequency of those categories is explainable by the lack of credibility that denial could have, being, therefore, less effective than other strategies. As a rule, extremely violent agents cannot persuasively argue to negate their participation in atrocities or the severity of their actions, turning instead to other more credible justifications, as blaming the victim or reconstructing behavior. According to Bandura (2016), terrorists do not minimize the damage they cause, because, on the contrary, they are interested in magnifying it. Indeed, they pursue acknowledgement of their attacks, hence diffusion or denial of responsibility, the mechanisms of the domain (b), are not common. Overall, our results support Bandura's (2016) contentions on the frequent and infrequent DMs and show a high coincidence with Hafez's (2006) conclusions for Palestinian suicide bombers. In addition, some results on political violence (Martin-Peña & Opotow, 2011; Sabucedo et al., 2004) partially overlap with ours, although that are based on small samples and slightly different categories.

The low probability of using mechanisms of the categories (b) and (c), due to the reasons discussed above, restricts their selection to domains (a) and (d). The choice between them appears random, as indicated by the exact same ratio for each domain. Future research should test this pattern, as well as our assumption about the effectiveness of some mechanisms and the inefficacy of others to reduce dissonance.

The similarity in results with other researchers and with Bandura's (2016) assumptions, added to the independence found between ideology and justificatory mechanisms, leads us to suppose that

our findings are not limited to armed actors or to the Colombian groups. The lack of differences between the groups in the type and frequency of DMs, our target, does not preclude differences in the expression or content of the mechanisms, an analysis outside the scope of the present research. Such speech analysis was partially undertaken by Sabucedo et al. (2003) in their comparison of the FARC and AUC.

A limitation of our research is, however, that the results do not allow disentangling what actions are justified by the DMs. Thus, the mechanisms employed to justify massacres and attacks against civilians might be different from those used for attacks against the military forces or ambushes. Such analysis would enrich the theories of DMs and dissonance. Future research should address this point as well as the spontaneous use of moral disengagement mechanisms by perpetrators of other immoral actions in addition to extreme violence.

Conclusion

Mechanisms of moral disengagement are powerful strategies to distort reality, converting immoral actions into justifiable ones, devoid of negative connotations. Such transformation prevents experiencing cognitive dissonance and the arousal of negative self-sanctions associated with actions against the moral standards, allowing then the emergence and perpetuation of violence and terrorism. The two Colombian groups appealed to these mechanisms to avoid social rejection and reduce dissonance, thus maintaining their violence, and used them in a similar way, regardless of their differences in political ideology. The most widely used mechanisms distort the features of the victim or the behavior. In terms of practical implications, informing the public opinion how the DMs operate could reduce their efficacy to gain social support. Additionally and as noted above, people in the path of becoming terrorists are actively seeking ways to reduce their dissonance. Such reduction could be impaired by presenting the mechanisms as a trick to justify unjustifiable

actions. The lack of social support and effective ways to reduce dissonance may undermine the courage of these agents and their beliefs in the morality of their behavior, leading some of them to cease their violent acting.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Examples of the Prevalent Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

Moral justification:
- Our armed insurrection is part of the *universal right that assists people to rise against oppression and unjust regimes* (FARC).
- The legitimacy of *our, patriotic, nationalistic, anti-Marxist and democratic fight against subversion* … (AUC) (in reference to AUC's fight).

Euphemistic labeling:
- Our units *executed* a soldier when he was about to finish off a lady (FARC).
- *Operations with multiple targets* (AUC; instead of massacres).

Attribution of blame:
- The State and its leaders are the primary culprits of the national tragedy of which we are victims (AUC).
- The routes that we take to do it (to fight for people) have been imposed to us by the State (FARC).

Labeling with undesirable names:
- A *genocidal* but constitutional army (FARC) (in reference to the Armed forces).
- Now, our troops fight frontally in the holes and trenches of the *terrorist enemy* that we face (AUC).