Group Conditions and the Perpetrators of Evil: Colombian Armed Groups *

Las condiciones grupales de la violencia extrema: el caso de los grupos armados en Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Violent extremism of groups in armed conflicts is commonly affected by multiple psychological mechanisms and processes: leadership structure, tasks entrusted to each of its members, norms and sanctions, ideological indoctrination, etc. The presence of these components in extremely violent actions in the Colombian conflict was analyzed. All 18 participants (14 males and 4 females) were demobilized members of the Self-defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC) and guerrilla organizations (FARC, ELN, among others) which had participated directly or indirectly in violent actions against people and groups (which include murder, torture, and massacres). A qualitative methodology was used, specifically in-depth interviews and content analysis. This analysis showed that Colombian armed groups are made up of people with different psychological characteristics and social backgrounds (age, sex, place of residence, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.), but their integration into the armed conflict and the violent actions they carried out respond to specific conditions and structure of the group they belong to rather than to personal factors. The components of the group structure, rule compliance, entrusted task performance and obedience to the orders of authority are the main reasons for the violent extremism that has characterized the activities of these people.

Keywords
war; group structure; violent offenders; bureaucratic routine; obedience.

RESUMEN

Las acciones caracterizadas por una violencia extrema perpetrada por grupos armados ahondan sus raíces en mecanismos y procesos psicosociales: estructura de poder, roles y tareas asignadas a sus miembros, normas y sanciones, indoctrinación ideológica, etc. Estos componentes de la estructura del grupo fueron estudiados en 18 personas (14 hombres y 6 mujeres) desmovilizados que habían formado parte de las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) y de organizaciones guerrilleras (FARC y ELN, entre otras), que participaron en asesinatos, torturas, masacres, etc. contra la población y contra miembros de grupos enemigos. En el

estudio se utilizó una metodología cualitativa a través de entrevistas en profundidad y análisis de contenido. Los resultados del estudio muestran que las acciones llevadas a cabo durante su militancia en estos grupos respondieron de manera primordial a las condiciones estructurales del grupo armado. El cumplimiento de las normas, la realización de las tareas encomendadas y la obediencia a las órdenes de la autoridad fueron las principales razones de la violencia extrema que ha caracterizado las acciones de estas personas.

Palabras clave
guerra; violencia extrema; estructura de grupo; obediencia; rutina burocrática.

The mechanisms of moral disengagement observed in the group of perpetrators belonging to the Colombian armed groups that we analyzed in a previous study (Blanco, et al., 2020), deepen their roots in the processes that take place within these groups, in the characteristics and components of their structure: norms and sanctions, tasks and roles to be performed, and, above all, in the power structure.

The violence that we will cover in this article is collective violence understood as a confrontation in which people act identifying themselves as members of a group acting against people belonging to another group (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 215). As a result of this confrontation, in Colombia, according to the data of the "Registro Único de Víctimas" (RUV), as of today, the victims of the conflict amount to 9.106.309 of which 273.759 are people killed by the different armed groups. A total of 81.5% of these fatalities belong to the civilian population, considered, as was convenient, as the social base of the guerrilla (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC], Revolutionary National Liberation Army [ELN]), or as an extension of paramilitary groups (Self-Defense Forces of Colombia [AUC]) (Grupo de Memoria Histórica [GMH], 2013, p. 38). The people who have been part of the present study belong to these groups.

The endemic violence that had taken possession of Colombian social reality is above all the reflection of severe underlying problems in the configuration of the political and social order and of political and military strategies (GMH, 2013, p. 31). Martín-Baró (2003) paid special attention to these external circumstances when analyzing the civil war in El Salvador. He did so in terms that are perfectly applicable to the civil war that has been waged in Colombia for decades: the presence of a culture of violence that permeates interpersonal and intergroup relationships in daily life; an excruciating poverty and social inequality, which is an enduring fuel for violence (see, for example, Wilkinson 2004); extreme social polarization; violent repression of agrarian movements, etc.

But besides these macrosocial framework, collective violence in Colombia has been carried out by persons belonging to one armed groups against persons while they belong to another armed group. Ordinary people performing evil actions against ordinary others perceived as enemies inevitably refers us once again to Milgram's research on obedience to figures holding legitimate authority: "ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents of a terrible destructive process" (Milgram, 1975, p. 6), to the metamorphosis that occurred within the participants, who were above average in both intelligent and emotional stability, in the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo, 1973): the pathological and antisocial behavior of these young students were the result of an intrinsically pathological and abnormal situation "which can distort and rechannel the behavior of essentially normal individuals" (p. 90) as is the case of genocides (Staub, 1989), or mass killing (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989). Following these theoretical points, we are trying to analyze the strength of the group microsystem as a scenario that activates the actions of extreme violence perpetrated by members of Colombian armed groups (AUC and FARC, mainly).

Objective and Hypothesis

The broad objective of the present study is to explore the existence and the extent of conditions within the armed group that lead to involvement in acts of extreme violence,

specifically intergroup violence. The present study holds the following hypothesis: The criminal behavior of the individuals who participate in the Colombian armed groups is primarily based on the structural components of the group to which they belong and on the network of relationships inside the group.

Method

Data collection was carried out at the same time as data collection for our previous publication (Blanco et al., 2020). In-depth interviews to collect detailed information from members of Colombian armed groups were held with 18 demobilized members of Colombian armed groups: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and Guerrilla groups (FARC-EP, National Liberation Army [ELN], etc.). This method of data collection is useful in accessing information of the individual's subjective experience, which is difficult to obtain through standardized questionnaires (e.g., Madill, 2012). In-depth interviews are notably suitable when analyzing the behaviors, reality, and motives of perpetrators of violence (e.g., Teymur, 2007. Furthermore, this method has lead to substantial breakthroughs in the knowledge of this phenomenon (Altier, Horgan, y Thoroughgood, 2012). This paper is aimed to study how the group structure (hierarchy, norms, roles, etc.), as a lewinian field of forces, leds the violent actios of his or her members.

Sample and Procedure

Semi-structured interview. The interviews were held in Barranquilla (Colombia). All participating individuals were subject to the Law of Justice and Peace (Law 975, 2005) by which demobilized members of illegal armed groups are included in reintegration programs on the condition that they give up arms. Research objectives were explained to prospective participants. They were then asked to volunteer and they were promised annonymity.

Explicit consent was also requested in order to participate and to record the interview.

Sampling was intentional. Participants who could offer considerable information about the dynamics and structure of armed groups were selected. Participants were added until data saturation was reached, this is, until incorporating new individuals into the study offered no new significant information. A total of 18 individuals (14 male and four female) comprised the final sample. At the time of the interview, seven of them (39% of total participants, all male) were imprisoned in the Justice and Peace Unit of the Model Prison of Barranquilla serving a sentence for crimes against humanity. The remaining 11 participants (seven male and four female) were ascribed to the Reintegration Program of the ACR. Most participants (72.2%) had been members of the Self-Defense Forces (AUC), 11.1% had been members of guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN), and 16.7% had belonged to both groups at different moments in their lives. The age of the participants was between 22 and 67 years. Mean age for females was 45 years, and for males, 41 years. Regarding birth and upbringing, approximately half (55.6%) had grown up in an urban setting. Most of them (77.8%; 11 males and three females) had only reached a secondary schooling level. Only three (16.7%) had further continued their education, and one had completed university-level studies (Blanco et al., 2020). Information regarding their previous occupation was also obtained: most males (57%, which is 44% of the total sample) had previously belonged to the Colombian Armed Forces, whereas females had worked within the informal economy or were homemakers. Moreover, 22.3% (5.6% of the males and 16.7% of the females) worked as part of the underground economy, and 16.7% (all male) were farmers. A total of 72.2% ($n = 13$) were of multiethnic background, 22.2% ($n = 22.2$) were Afro descendants, and 5.6% ($n = 1$) were Caucasian" (Blanco et al., 2020). Three participants were under the age of 18 when recruited into the illegal armed group.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed by three judges, experts on collective violence, from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Each judge analyzed the interviews thoroughly and repeatedly in order to detect meaning units, that is, "passages of text that typically, but not always, contain a single idea" (Dourdouma & Mörtl, 2012, p. 99), and the categories into which these meaning units were included by means of open categorization (Elliott & Timulak, 2005). Following the guidance of McLeod (2011), units and categories that were detected were subsequently contrasted and shared by each of the judges until consensus was reached. Additionally, Atlas.ti v.7. was used. The categories that emerged during this process are presented in the "Results" section.

Results

Interview content analysis: Group processes and structure

The main categories which were identified in the interviews are gathered in table 1.

Entry into the group: First experiences within the group.

Arrival into the group means an adaptation process to difficult circumstances, the creation of new bonds, adopting a new identity, executing roles, armed group duties, etc. All of this takes place within a process of indoctrination which is embedded in a hierarchical structure in which obedience is the nucleus.

Welcome. Some participants recount experiencing a warm welcome. Such is the case for newcomers who were recommended by existing highly esteemed members, those who bring valuable knowledge (specifically, of the enemy) or military experience:

1Female (F): It was good because the girls, the partners, were all good; they gave me a good welcome. They were warm to me, and the boys too.

1Man (M): «I am so and so's brother, I know so and so». I said I had been a soldier, (…), so they accepted me with no problem.

Interviewer (I): They gave you a good welcome?

1M: Yes, when a person that had some knowledge of war, such as was my case.

Table 1
Categories for group processes and structure

Processes	General categories	Specific categories and defitions
Entry into the group: First experiences within the group	Welcome	First contact: positive feelings, perception of acceptance as a new member.
	Physical and psychological adversities	Hard life conditions: adverse physical circumstances derived from life in the camp and in the mountain or rainforest.
		Rupture with previous context: perception of drastic change between new reality and previous life, associated feelings of defenselessness and fear.
	Perception of deceit	Feeling deceived: discovering that recruitment promises do not represent the reality of the group.
	Witnessing violence	First episodes of intragroup and intergroup violence: fear and insecurity associated to the violent reality of the groups.
	Adaptation	Accepting new reality: adapting to group circumstances, come to terms with group belonging.
	Alias	Adopting a pseudonym at the moment of entering the group.
	Baptism	Rite of passage that consists of assassination.
Rules, Hierarchy and Obedience	Emphasis on obedience	Ascertainment of the existence of a chain of command that demands obedience as an indispensable condition for group functioning.
	Rules and penalties	Learning rules and penalties; penalties (including death) associated to disobedience or failure to follow rules.
Positions, roles and tasks	Armed roles	Footsoldier: participating in armed tasks, guarding and combat.
		Assassination: participating in assassination in urban contexts.
	Unarmed roles	Intelligence and information: tasks that pave the way for armed attacks.
		Quartermaster: Support tasks
	Physical and psychological training Learning how to kill	Physical training: weapon handling, hardship of training conditions.
		Psychological training: preparing for obedience and violence.
Group ideological indoctrination	Indoctrination	Learning group ideology,
	Defining group goals and objectives	Internalizing group objectives.
	Them/Us definition	Categorization: Definition of ingroup and outgroup, construction of the image of the enemy and polarization.

Physical and psychological adversities. However, the most common experience is not as amicable as 1F y 1M relate above. Entry into the group is in many cases characterized by moving into a new - and frequently unknown- area, away from family and acquantainces. The reason is threefold: a) in most cases, the conflict is fought out in areas that are different to those of recruitment; b) it is a strategy that allows members to protect their identities, and c) it isolates newcomers from what is known to them. This isolation aids in guaranteeing control of the members, as well as

it leads to the appearance of feelings of fear and defenselessness.

Participants refer how joining the group brings about a series of significant changes to their lives. Starting with moving to a remote location (usually the mountains or the rainforest) where life is harsh, training is hostile.

> 2M: My heart stopped. (…) I was sold. I said nothing. So many things went through my mind. Horrible. I wanted to tell my family because we had cell phones; not anymore. It was a complete block from being communicated with the world.

Even in the cases in which a new member joins the group following someone he/she knows, he/she is separated and sent to a different place.

> 1F: We had gone together, and midway they separated us. (…) they took me with another partner to camp (…). (I felt) cornered, it wasn't what they had told me.

Witnessing violence: Their first experience comes as a shock; especially when they realize that violence is not only perpetrated against the enemy, but that it is part of their everyday group dynamic.

> 5M: I saw they killed peers. When they came back from their leave they would order them into formation: "Formation! So and so, step forward. On such and such day you went to the village and broke the rules", and bang! They lost their lives. What you don't obey you pay with your life.

Alias. Alias use is a noteworthy circumstance all participants mention without exception. This contributed to group socialization and adaptation during the first days. Name change reinforces belonging, and exemplifies the fact that the group is a new context in which previous rules and relationships are modified. Furthermore, using an alias leads to somewhat renouncing personal identity as well as fusion with group identity. Alias use always allowed members to hide their true identity and protect the group from the enemy and the government, as well as loved ones outside the group from retaliation.

> 7M: They gave me camuflage and weapons; they said: "For the Self-Defense Forces we are going to call you Empire [i]". That was my name now, my own name was left behind, I was now Empire.
>
> 2F: No one knew other members' names. You had other names there.
>
> 8M: You generally try to hide your true identity, that's why you get an alias.

Baptism. A portion of the participants refer to the existence of a rite of passage under the name of baptism. It allows the group to assess the value of the newcomer in terms of their performance in behaviors that are the norm within this context. Within illegal armed groups, it is not unexpected that the rite of passage should also involve violence. Baptism consists of murdering a person who could be a member of the opposing group, a civilian who has been deemed a collaborator of the enemy, or anyone in the general population whom the group considers "disposable" (such as petty thieves, drug addicts, prostitutes, etc.). The proper execution of this task will determine the immediate future of the newcomer. A succesful baptism leads to the approval of the superiors and being given responsibilities that match the demonstrated merit. An unsuccessful baptism will lead to being assigned minor tasks.

> 9M: It was a test to see if one was capable of murdering a person. (…) Many times they apprehended someone who was thought to be a member of the FARC, they tied him and ordered: "kill him". With a rifle or a gun… If you went out and did it correctly you could join the goup. If not, you were excluded. That exclusion meant minor tasks. My first objective was in the market, a person who was thought to be one of the chief thieves in the neighborhood. I was ordered to kill him.
>
> 1M: They wanted to test me (…). They told me to change into civilian clothes and they took me (…) to a town and they told me I had to kill a person who was a member of the Guerrilla who was extorting someone. (…) They helped me find where he lived, they took me. We went by an estate, they said "You see that black guy there? That's him". They took me back (to camp) and they asked me to choose who I wanted to take with me. I said alone. They said, "No, you can't go alone". (…) I went in the morning with him

(my partner). I got to the estate where the guy was. I took out both weapons at the same time and I fired twelve cartridges (sic.). He was left dead; I imagine he died instantly.

Rules, Hierarchy and Obedience

Self-Defense Forces and Guerrilla groups both had written documents that included the rules and values of the group, and specified penalties and rewards for each situation. Once an individual entered the group, he or she would have to adapt to this structure immediately by respecting the hierarchy, obeying orders, fulfilling tasks, participating in the achievement of group objectives, and demonstrating loyalty. Any mistake or violation of the rules, no matter how small, could lead to the immediate death of the transgressor.

Emphasis on obedience. Blind obedience is the rule par excellence within the group. Participants highlight this fact as one the most significant first experiences within the group and thus, sets the tone for future involvement in extreme violence.

10M: (They said) "We are the Self-Defense Forces. You left (the Guerrilla) and you are with us, no problem; but don't deviate, don't betray us. You must know what you are doing. Rules are abided here too, just like in the Guerilla. (…)". In all these groups I realized that disobedence was a problem that lead to death.
5M: I felt defenseless (towards orders), (…) they could kill me.
11M: (I found) the same reality that was in my imagination. That one has to comply with certain orders.
(I): Did you ever want to disobey these orders?
2M: No, no. I mean, I felt powerless.
I: Why?
2M: They could kill me.

Rules and penalties. Participants state that each new member had to be introduced into the procedures and central ideas within the group. The process of adaptation included training and socializing within the group rules. All members had to learn what was expected of them and what penalties existed for disobeying.

2F: When I got there, they read the rules to me. There was a statute that includes all the rules you must follow there. Rules means obeing orders; training. There's a booklet that you have that includes it all.
4M: The rules were that you had to earn your life, that if you obeyed there was no problem, if not, there was punishment.

Participants shared how some behaviors led to minor penalties such as longer watches or heavy tasks. Other behaviors, such as disboeying orders or breaking basic rules led to the death penalty. For instance, all behaviors that commanders believed tarnished the group's image towards society (e.g. drug abuse, attacking or stealing from civilians without explicit permission from the group) led to death.

7M: (If you fell asleep) sometimes they would double your watch, of they would make you do push-ups, or cook…
3M: If you got drunk with your uniform and came back drunk they killed you.
5M: I saw they killed partners for smoking marihuana, for disrespecting civilians.
7M: There were rules in the illegal group. The first rule was that you could not murder someone without an order from them.
9M: The maximum penalty was cancelling [ii] . This was applied when there were rapes, or abuse against civilians without permision from the commander; but mainly rape

Positions, roles and tasks

Information gathered from our interviews points to the existence of a clearly defined structure within Colombian armed groups. Each member carries out very specific tasks. Information offered by our participants teaches us that these illegal armed groups, as any formal group, had a structure that was designed to achieve its objectives; in this case, gaining power and killing the enemy. Part of this design and planification is directed towards task distribution and role definition (behaviors expected from the people who belonged to the group in each position). Although we see in previous statements that the main task of a member was to blindly obey orders,

we do find a difference in status among group members, namely: commanders and foot soldiers. Each of these two statuses holds several roles and tasks (see table 2). The main objective for some roles is the direct perpetration of violence, while other roles hold logistic and social-political support at its base. Participants state that group members could change their role and tasks within the group (and develop a career of sorts) depending on their training and performance. Most of our participants belonged to the foot soldier status, although a minority of interviewees were in the commander status.

Armed roles. Among members that used weapons with a foot soldier status, our participants differentiated between "patrolmen" (who participated in attacks which were carried out in rural contexts or in the so-called "mountain" as well as registering homes, and watching or guarding the zone, among other tasks) and "urbans" (who executed armed tasks in cities or towns).

Our participants describe the role of patrolman in the following excerpts:

> 7M: Registering was when you arrived to a house and you registered it to see what you would find there. Sometimes the Guerrilla was closeby. (…) you take an amount of people out (of the house or building) and you register, you see who are the people who live there, in order to make a tranquility report. When the Guerrilla was found, there was a clash between Guerrilla and paramilitary.

> 12M: I belonged to the mobile unit. When there was a job to be done they informed the commander who was with us and we would start to be deployed in the zone where we had to do it. Securing the perimeter, securing the zone, so that the Guerrilla wouldn't catch us by surprise.

Table 2
Positions, roles, and tasks within the armed groups

Status	Role	Main tasks
Commander Chief	Commander of mountain patrolmen	Receiving and transmitting orders
		Planning battles and attrition strategies
		Applying penalties and rewards
		Meeting with leaders, politicians, and representatives
		Managing finances
	Commander of "urbans" (civilian area assassins)	Receiving and transmitting orders
		Gathering intelligence from spies
		Making assassination decisions ("social cleansing")
		Organizing and managing assassins
Foot soldier	"Patrolman"	Battles
		Menial and quartermaster tasks (chopping wood, cooking, etc.)
		Recruiting volunteers and forcefully recruiting minors
	"Urban" (civilian area assassin)	Carrying out selective assassinations
		Receiving and transmitting information
	"Militia"/ Collaborator	Spying on civilians
		Notifying changes about the inhabitants in the area
		Creating lists of enemies among the civilian population
		Detecting enemy infiltrators
		Logistics (acquiring and delivering supplies and provisions)
	Bodyguard	Commander security detail
	Nurse	Medical dispensary management
		Caring for the wounded
		Medical attention during battles
	"Politician"	Giving speeches to peasants and other civilians (indoctrination)
		Organizing civilian political groups

In urban contexts, urban assassins assimilated into the neighborhood, as they had to be inconspicuous while waiting for a call from the commander who would give them the order to kill a specific person who had been identified as an objective by members of the intelligence unit, and sometimes allegedly by the police, who, as our participants informed us, reportedly often collaborated with the paramilitary groups. Objectives (i.e. victims) included individuals who were identified as members of the opposing group, as well as people who belonged to categories believed to be socially dangerous (members of the LGBTQ + community, drug addicted individuals, small drug dealers, prostitutes, rapists, thieves, etc.), and therefore deserving of an extrem punishment (social cleansing). Furthermore, this role within the group (the "urban") was assigned to members

who had demonstrated their loyalty and efficacy during their time as patrolmen.

> 6M: I was an urban, as a foot soldier, for about six months. The commander found the objective and informed of how the person was dressed and where he/she was, and one went with the motorbike, one shot him/her, and done.
>
> 5M: I was an urban, I didn't wear a uniform. Being a hitman, that's an urban. How does it work? You have your salary, they give you a house, they call you and they send you the character. In order to get a salary you have to kill, if not, you don't get a salary.
>
> 11M: (Within the Guerrilla) I was a clandestine person in the organization and we worked on delinquency. (…) I was an urban. I went to the city, I went there to work with the Guerrilla, and my first job was to work on that (delinquency). We didn't agree with delinquency or drug addiction; we wanted to erradicate them.

In spite of the risks of being an urban assassin, some members of the group considered this role to be preferable to others because it allowed them to live in the city, away from the hostile conditions of the rainforest and mountain areas, close to their families.

> 5M: You get bored of the mountain, and you meet a high ranking superior, and you tell them, well… I'm going to make it so that they send me to the city. (…) I was with my family, in the city, Christmas, festivities… I'm close to my children. I saw that point (benefit). But it's riskier.

Another role that our participants informed of was that of being a bodyguard for the commanders. This role, which was calmed and well paid, was given only to members who had an excellent performance and who were very highly trusted.

> 9M: They chose me because I was one of the best, to be the bodyguard of the bosses. In order to reach that point, you need to have spent time (in the organization), have given good results in the world of delinquency, and then you get placed in a calmer position, where you will earn more money, but that requires a very good reaction when needed.

Commander status. There are different types of commanders that can be in charge of up to thousands of people. Their tasks included transmiting orders received from above, making decisions on the actions of their subordinates, giving rewards and applying punishments, designing harrying strategies against the enemy, and even, at the highest level of command, managing the finances of the block. Our participants state that the role of commander carries a great deal of responsibility, which is the reason why many of the commanders who were promoted to higher positions had received prior training in the Army, or had stood out for their exceptional leadership talent.

> 15M: I think my degree in finance helped a lot to manage in that moment, and afterwards, when I got to the Self-Defense Forces, it helped me manage because I had very large responsibilities and my commander gave me a very large responsibility (…).One goes up: area commander, group commander, company commander, front commander, and then commander of the block, which is the highest.
>
> 1M: The commander saw me (...). One day he told me I had the capability to be a commander. (…) He gave me a squad: "You are going to receive this squad because it cannot be that a person with less capability is commanding someone with more capability". I said: "Alright, no problem". And then they sent me to take some courses, because there were courses to become a commander.

Physical and psychological training: Learning how to kill. Some members, especially of the AUC, had already received training in the Army (Blanco et al., 2020). However, members had to succesfully go through harsh military training, as well as ideological traninig.

> 9M: They brought a military instructor and he prepared us. (…) They give you anti-guerrilla training which is divided in three parts: captured man, weapon handling, and combat tactics.
>
> 2F: Training, running, push ups… A lot of exercise with weapons, without weapons. They blindfold you to handle a weapon so that when you're in the dark you know that if a part of your

riffle falls, you can piece it back together, walk at night, everything. Training like the Army does.

Some of our participants refer how they were aware of the psychological aspect to training - especially commander training- aluding to how the group turned you into a "killing machine". This is a concept that was repeated by several other interviewees and is evidence of how the individual feels he or she is becoming something different to what he or she was before joining the group.

> 1M: (The commander course) was only psychology, learning about psychological war, always. It was all psychological. (…) I learnt what I didn't learn in the Army. (…) Being there in those positions, one feels lonely, that's what they taught. I saw cases of humilliation, to test one's capacity until breaking. They humilliated you completely. Psychology, only psychology. Psychologically they turned one into what they wanted, whomever withstood the course.

The ultimate objective of training was to introduce members to violent situations that would soon become common in the intergroup conflict setting, thus guaranteeing the proper execution of violent tasks and objectives.

> 5M: They give you training on how to kill, how to kill someone.
>
> 3M: Once they killed a boy. We were gathered in the school. Since commanders are psychopathic killers they would tell you, they told you: "Take a machete, cut an arm off; you, cut a leg off" (…). They kill people in front of one so that one begins to build up rage… When you see violence, it makes it easier. It permeates your heart more. Yes, they are preparing you for war, and maybe even for more.

Ideological indoctrionation

Indoctrination. Most of the interviewees do not allude to reasons of political ideology when defining group objectives and beliefs, nor when referring to the indoctrination they receive within the group. In four of the cases, this indoctrination was received before joining the armed group; two of them, in school, and two

others, in the Army. In general, ideological training was a preferential part of the actions of the guerrillas (FARC) rather than the AUC:

> I: So the guerrillas had a political wing?
>
> 14M: Yes, an ideology, which did not exist anywhere else.

The following testimony summarizes in a simple and direct way the ideological reality of the Self-Defense groups.

> 11M: The Self-Defense Forces do not handle much ideology, what they are interested in is taking care of the people who offer them money.

However, on both sides there is ideological indoctrination surrounding two main criteria: defining the goals and objectives of the group, and strengthening the definition of us / them, the in-group-out-group dynamic.

Defining group goals and objectives. The group's goals and objectives, in the case of the AUC, include achieving peace, and ending subversion; while the guerrillas (FARC, ELN) seek to fight poverty, inequality and social injustice. For both the guerrillas and the Self-Defense Forces, their actions have the purpose of safeguarding the well-being and life of the Colombian people, threatened by the enemy group.

> 2M: The ideals of the Self-Defense Forces … They believed that they were an Army that existed to cleanse the country of the corruption of the guerrillas. That was what was said, they wanted to be like a state of their own.
>
> 11M: The objective (of the AUC) was to somehow safeguard capitalism. Yes, people who handle money. In other words, they have always been taking care of, they were created for that, to take care of farmers, multinational companies. That is what it was created for.
>
> 14M: The ideology when I joined the guerrillas was to seek the common good for the Colombian people (…). I really liked that ideology.
>
> 4M: The ideals here were was that one was with the people, not against the people like them (the enemy). In other words, if they came here, it was to leave the town a ghost town, do you understand me? On the other hand, here in our it wasn't so (…).

Them/Us definition. The second component of ideological indoctrination, much more present than the first, was the consolidation of intergroup divisions, which translated into the most powerful source of indoctrination starting at the construction of the enemy's image. Reinforcing the difference between them and us is one of the essential elements of the ideological training process. Enemies belong to the world of the strange, the illicit, the immoral, and therefore are objects of rejection, hatred and annihilation. The division is strengthened to such an extent that the definition of enemy ends up including all those who are not from the group itself, so that even when initially both the guerrillas and the members of the Self-Defense Forces declare themselves defenders of the civilian population, they end up including to the civilian population that does not show loyalty to the group among their enemies.

> 8M: The ideology of the paramilitaries as far as I came to understand it was to end the guerrillas. (They were the enemies) because I belonged to a different force.
>
> 9M: Everything that was not in line with us had to be eradicated. The commanders considered that if they (the civilian population) were not with them, they were enemies, that was the way.
>
> 7M: I don't know, we were an Army, as I said, outlaws, but... it was just for that, our enemy at that time was the guerrilla... The methods were to end subversion here, in Colombia.
>
> 3M: The difference in harming a partner was that you lived with your partner, you saw your partner, you knew that that man was on your side. On the other hand, the guerrilla fighter was not. The guerrilla fighter was from the opposite side and we classified them as the enemy, the main enemy. So that's the difference that I saw.

Discussion and conclusions

The overall objective of the present study was to determine if criminal actions of members belonging to Colombian armed groups who have perpetrated or collaborated in actions of extreme violence causing severe harm to other people, could be understood by the conditions and circumstances of group membership.

The results show that Colombian armed groups are made up of people with different personal and social backgrounds, but their integration into the armed struggle and the violent actions they have carried out respond to specific conditions and structure of group they belong. Among the components of the group structure, rule compliance, entrusted task performance and obedience to the orders of authority are the main reasons for the violent extremism that has characterized the activities of these people.

All of these are components of any formal group, such as the AUC and FARC or the special groups that took the first steps to respond to the Final Solution. Christopher Browning has thoroughly investigated the steps carried out by Reserve Police Battalion 101 between July 1942 and November 1943, concluding that those ordinary men who participated in their execution: a) became insensitive to executing innocent people following known and proven mechanisms of moral disconnection, such as those observed in the people who participated in this study (Blanco, et. al, 2020); b) the bureaucratic structure of the destruction process of which they are part, the execution of the assigned tasks, compliance with the rules and obedience to authority figures; c) group pressure, and d) indoctrination (Browning, 1992). The final reflection deserves to be remembered in its literal terms: "if the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become murders under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (p. 189). Their actions cannot be fully understood outside the system and the situation that defines and characterizes these groups: tasks, mandatory rules, sanctions, orders from authority figures, goals to be achieved, etc.

The line of duty was the main argument used by Adolph Eichmann. He was a law and authority-abiding citizen, who "had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty" (Arendt, 1964, p. 136). Obedience to authority and fulfillment of duty are part of

the group system and situation within which, for several years, the lives of the people who have participated in this study have occurred. The actions they carried out are not trivial. What appears through the detailed account Arendt articulates of the character is that Adolph Eichmann was not a sadist or a psychopath, and that the motives behind his conduct were not primarily criminal in nature, but primarily bureaucratic: obedience to the orders received, the correct and strict fulfillment of duty, the approval of part of his environment, especially of the military commanders, etc. That was enough to argue his innocence. Testimonies in this regard are numerous:

> F1: The reality was that it was not what they said, but it was being in the rain. In the rain and under orders.
>
> M5: When I get to the town where they take me, shortly after, one of them tells me: "you have to go to the mountains". While you are there you see the reality of things: if you turn around, they kill you, and you go against your will.
>
> F2: It is a rough thing for a woman who lives that life, but hey, one gives one's life because one follows orders.

The testimony of F2 places us in one of the decisive coordinates of the lives of these people and of the reality of these groups: obedience to orders from an authority which is perceived as legitimate. The experimental results of Milgram (1975) suggest that, indeed, obedience could be an explanatory factor of evil behavior, because it allows the subject –whether Eichmann, a US Army soldier, a FARC guerrilla fighter or a member of some of the Central American gangs– to develop the perception that they are not morally responsible for their actions, but only an agent or instrument of authority. "Men are not solitary but function within hierarchical structures" (Milgram, 1975, p. 123). It is the ideological submission to authority that can be considered as the key stone of the perpetrator's behavior; he or she does not obey for emotional reasons (anger, hatred, resentment), or for personal interests, but because he or she subordinates his or her judgement to that of an institutional structure that perceived to be more competent.

Routinization and the division of tasks are also part of the structure of any formal group, such as those whose objective is the extermination of the enemy. Routinization means broking the final objective "into a series of discrete steps, most of them carried out in authomatic, regularized fashion" (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 18). In the case of those who are on the ground, as is the case with the people who have participated in this study, the key lies, as we have had the opportunity to see in the results, in obeying the orders of the legitimate authority, in the division of tasks, in compliance with the rules. All of this fulfills a double role: it facilitates the actor's decision-making and, most importantly, distances him or her from the moral responsibility which is inherent in the result of the act (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

It seems difficult to invoke routine when we are talking about acts of extreme violence, but the testimony of some of the people who participated in our study and who acted as hitmen, a particularly cruel action because it threatens the life of a defenseless person, leaves the door open to the possibility of a habituation which is capable of converting this type of behavior into mere habit.

> M11: I felt quite scared because it was my first time and when we saw that the person did not move, we left. They picked us up in a car and we got to the neighborhood, and I had a few beers. And at night I went home. So, at night, when I went to sleep, I couldn't sleep thinking about how the person died and what he was telling me.
>
> I: And did that happen to you the following times you had to kill?
>
> M11: No, not afterwards, because it had become a habit for me (…). Nothing. You don't feel anything anymore because, as I said, it becomes a habit.
>
> I: Do you remember the first time?
>
> M8: Yes. I can't forget. I will never forget it because it is something that is shocking. The first time one sleeps and dreams and all that, with the first time (…). That night was when I didn't sleep well, no… I felt bad. (…): [Afterwards] it

was already normal. One started feeling that it was work.

When causing harm to others is subdivided and reorganized into small activities, the probability of moral questioning regarding its consequences decreases. If each participant performs a small action that by itself does not entail serious damage (even when it is essential for the result), the execution of extermination behaviors becomes more feasible, especially when the focus of attention is focused on performance and effectiveness (Bandura, 1999) demanded by authority and not in the conduct itself.

In conclusion, the membership to some of the illegal armed groups that have acted in Colombia's civil war for decades (FARC-EP, ELN, AUC) of the people participating in this study has left a mark in their lives and their vision of the world in a definitive manner. The story of these 18 people, and probably that of thousands of others who have been part of these armed groups in Colombia, conforms to the two basic assumptions of a very useful theoretical framework in the study of intergroup relations: that "relations between human groups of various kind is one of the fundamental problems of our times", and that in many situations along his or her life, persons feel, think and act in terms of their group belonging and of their group identity (Tajfel, 1981, p. 31. See also Lewin, 1948, p. 146). Of the members of the Colombian armed groups that have participated in this investigation it can be said without much margin for error, that "just as bed of a stream shapes the direction and tempo of the flow of water, so does the group determine the current of an individual's life" (Allport, 1948, p. vii-viii). It is worth remembering, as a final conclusion, the reflection of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who lived the rigors of one of the bloodiest regimes in history in the first person:

> If everything were so simple! If it were simply some sinister men in a particular place perfidiously perpetrating their evil deeds! If it were enough to separate them from the rest and destroy them! But the line that separates good from evil crosses the heart of each person (…). Socrates has already told us: Know yourself!

And we stop in amazement before the moat into which we were preparing to push our pursuers, because in reality, if they were the executioners and not us, it is only due to circumstances. Solzhenitsyn (2002, pp. 87-88).

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Notes

* Research article.

i Alias has been changed to protect the identity of the participant.

ii Euphemism for death.