Colombian Lay People's Willingness to Forgive Different Actors of the Armed Conflict: Results from a Pilot Study

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A pilot study examined lay people's willingness to forgive acts that were committed by actors of the armed conflicts in Colombia. The participants (100 persons living in Bogota) were shown vignettes describing cases in which a member of the guerilla or a member of the former paramilitary forces asks for forgiveness to a victim's family, and were instructed to judge of the degree to which they would be willing to forgive if they were a family member. The concrete cases were constructed using a 3 x 3 x 3 orthogonal design: Degree of Responsibility x Severity of the Negative Acts Committed x Apologies. In half of the cases, the actor was a former member of the guerilla, whereas in the other half the actor was a former member of the paramilitary forces. The four factors had an impact on willingness to forgive, and several meaningful interactions were detected. Overall, a former member of the paramilitary forces has a reasonable chance of being forgiven (a) if he did not directly take part to offenses to people (e.g., killings) or offenses to property perpetrated by his companions, and (b) if he has sincerely begged for forgiveness and offered to partly compensate the harm done. A former member of the guerilla has few chance of being forgiven.

Despite a long tradition of constitutional government, Colombia has experienced much violence during most of its recent history. Since the 1960s, a long-running armed conflict has opposed left-wing insurgents (the guerillas), the government army, and right-wing paramilitaries. Since the 1980s, the conflict has significantly escalated owing to the cocaine trade that was partly managed by the insurgents.

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Since the 2000s, however, the violence has decreased. The guerillas have lost the control of most of their former territory and, as a result, most paramilitary unities have demobilized, leaving the government forces the task to control these areas. A peace process has been engaged (González, Bolívar, & Vázquez, 2002; Granada, Restrepo, & Vargas, 2009).

We present the results of a pilot study that was recently conducted in this political context. In this study, we examined lay people's willingness to forgive acts that were committed by some of the actors in the conflict, namely members of the guerilla, and members of the paramilitary forces.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ABOUT FORGIVENESS CONDUCTED IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

The study was inspired by two studies that were conducted in Lebanon at the end of the previous century by Fabiola Azar and her team (Azar, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 1999; Azar & Mullet, 2001), and by one study that was, more recently, conducted in Kuwait by Ramadan Ahmed (Ahmed, Azar, & Mullet, 2007).

In her first study, Azar examined the propensity to forgive a severe offense in a sample of people from three Christian communities in Lebanon. The effects of the (a) offender's intent to harm, (b) cancellation of consequences, (c) religious proximity to the offender (Christian or Muslim), and (d) apologies from the offender on the propensity to forgive, and the variation of these effects as a function of age, gender, and educational level, were considered. The most important findings from this study concern (a) the overall level of propensity to forgive was higher than expected, (b) the impact of the religious proximity factor was very slight, that is, the participants expressed practically equivalent propensity to forgive, whether the offender was a member of their religious group or from another religious group, and (c) the effect of the apologies factor (the "modifiable" factor) was extremely important.

Azar completed the previous study by incorporating three new samples from the Muslim communities. She showed that (a) the Muslims were willing to forgive to the same extent as the Christians (at least with the scenarios used), (b) the circumstances that were important among Christians were of similar importance for Muslims, and more importantly, (c) the religious similarity factor proved equally important among Muslims and Christians. The Muslim participants as well as the Christian participants expressed an almost equivalent willingness to forgive, whether the offender was a member of their own religion or from another religion. Ramadan Ahmed replicated Azar's studies on a sample of Kuwaiti adolescents and adults.

METHOD

Participants. As stated above, the present pilot study was conducted in the recent political context of Colombia. We examined lay people's willingness to forgive acts that were committed by actors of the conflicts. The study was conducted on 100 lay people living in Bogota; male and female, who are between 18 and 55 years old. The sample was taken at random (they were ordinary people, not necessarily victims or offenders), they belong to different socio-economical statuses, (low, middle and high class). Another criterion to select the participants was their willingness to participate in the study.

Material and Procedure. As in Azar's studies, the participants were shown vignettes describing concrete cases. In our study these vignettes described cases in which a member of the guerilla or a member of the former paramilitary forces asks for forgiveness to a victim's family, and the participants were instructed to judge of the degree to which they would be willing to forgive if they were a family member.

The concrete cases were constructed using a 3 x 3 x 3orthogonal design: Degree of Responsibility x Severity of the Negative Acts Committed x Apologies. In half of the cases, the actor was a former member of the guerilla, and in the remaining half cases, the actor was a former member of the paramilitary forces. The three levels of Responsibility were: Organizer, Executor, and Passive Bystander. The three levels of Severity were: Murder, Kidnapping, and Theft. The three levels of apologies were: No Apology at All, Acknowledgment of Responsibility, and Begging Forgiveness and Offering Reparation.

An example of a scenario is the flowing: "Luis Ramos is a former member of the guerrilla (the actor's identity factor). He has been the author of several violent acts. He has killed a total of five persons, including Enrique García, an ordinary citizen (the severity factor). These violent acts had been planned by Luis' superiors. He only obeyed orders (the responsibility factor). Currently, Luis wished to reintegrate himself to civil society. He, however, never presented himself to the Garcia family in view of begging forgiveness (the apology factor). If you were a member of the Garcia family, to what extent do you be willing to forgive him?" The original version of this scenario is shown in Annex A.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main results are shown in Figure 1 and in Figure 2. In Figure 1, willingness to forgive judgments are on the vertical axis. The three levels of apologies are on the horizontal axis. Each curve corresponds to one level of

responsibility. Each panel corresponds to a different type of actor in the conflict (paramilitary or guerrilla).

Table 1. Main Results of the ANOVA

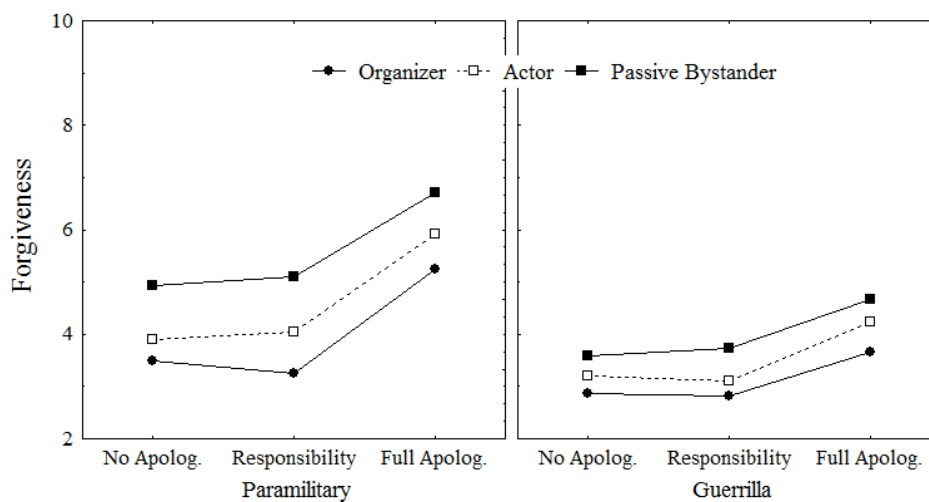| Factor	Effect		Error		
	df	MS	df	F	p
Group (G)	1	956.46	98	5.60	.05
Apology (A)	2	584.75	196	33.00	.01
Responsibility (R)	2	345.70	196	32.41	.01
Severity (S)	2	324.12	196	30.99	.01
G x A	2	54.79	196	3.09	.01
G x R	2	29.58	196	2.77	ns
G x S	2	39.93	196	3.82	.05
A x R	4	2.64	392	0.87	ns
A x S	4	14.69	392	4.50	.01
R x S	4	2.38	392	1.67	ns

Figure 1. Effects of Actors' identity, Apologies, and Level of Responsibility on Willingness to Forgive.

Overall, willingness to forgive was low (*M*=3.13, on a 0-12 scale). This low value contrasts with the higher value that was observed among the Lebanese participants in Azar's study. This difference in value may be due to the fact that, when Azar conducted her studies, the civil war between Lebanese factions had ended since twenty years whereas in present day Colombia the civil war has not completely ceased. Also, the low willingness to forgive observed among the participants can be related to Colombian people's perception of impunity for crime along history: Participants possibly believed that the offenders who asked for forgiveness were not really repented (Dussich, 2008). Other studies on forgiveness or reconciliation in post-conflict settings, using generic questions, have also shown that, overall, the level of willingness to forgive or to reconcile was low (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Mukashema & Mullet, 2010; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Noor et al., 2008).
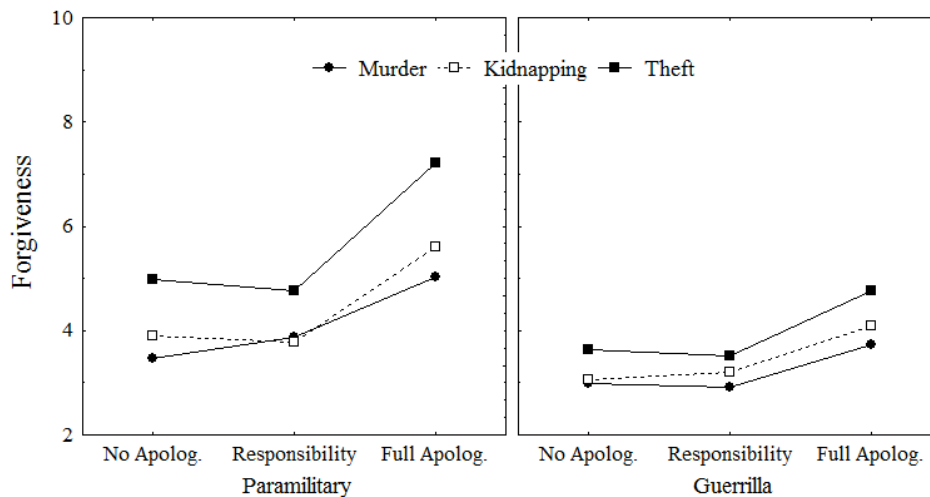

Figure 2: Effects of Actors' identity, Apologies, and Level of Severity on Willingness to Forgive.

The set of curves in the left panel was higher than the set of curves in the right panel. In other words, willingness to forgive was higher when the actor was a former member of the paramilitary (*M*=3.73) than when the actor was a former member of the guerilla (*M*=2.54). This can be explained by the fact that the violent acts were initiated by the guerillas. The paramilitary's official role was to counteract the guerillas' military actions. Also, until recently, the official politics of the government towards the guerillas was a "no

forgiveness" politics (see Borja-Orozco, Barreto, Sabucedo, & López-López, 2008).

In both panels the set of curves was ascending. In other words, the apology factor had an effect. In both panels, the curves were clearly separated; that is, the responsibility factor had an effect. There were, however, two strong interactions involving the actor's identity. When the actor was a former member of the paramilitary, the actor's apologizing behavior and the actor's level of responsibility was more strongly taken into account for judging than when the actor was a former member of the guerilla.

Figure 2 was constructed in the same way as Figure 1, except that, in Figure 2, each curve corresponds to one level of severity of the acts. In both panels, the curves were separated; that is, the level of severity factor had an effect. An interaction involving the actor's identity was also present. When the actor was a former member of the paramilitary, the severity of the acts that were committed was more strongly taken into account for judging than when the actor was a former member of the guerilla. An ANOVA performed on the whole set of data with an Actor's identity x Severity x Responsibility x Apology, 2 x 3 x 3 x 3 design was conducted, and its main results are shown in Table 2.
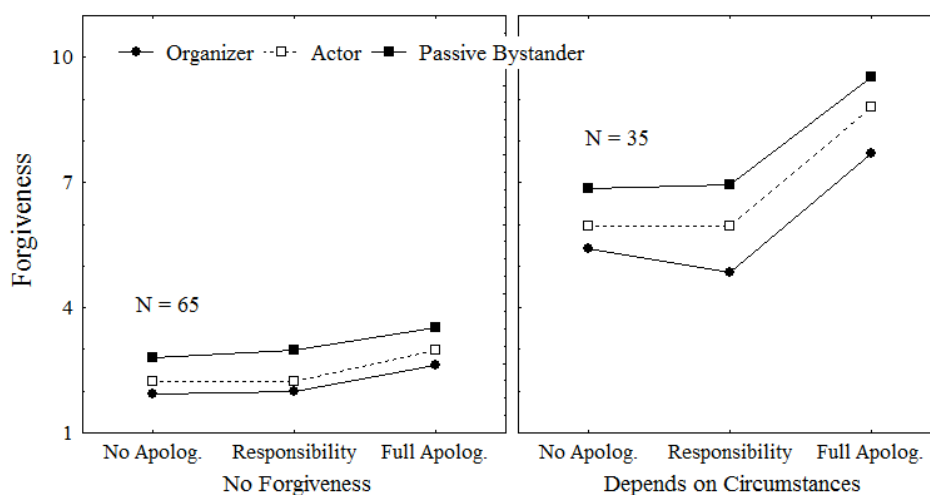

Figure 3: Effects of Apologies, and Level of responsibility on Willingness to forgive in each cluster.

A cluster analysis was performed on the whole set of data, using the technique that has been suggested by Hofmans and Mullet (in press). Two clusters were identified, which are shown in Figure 3. Participants in majority cluster (*N*=65, 36 members of the guerilla and 29 members of the paramilitary) were unwilling to forgive whatever the circumstances. Participants in the minority cluster (*N*=35, 14 guerillas and 21 paramilitary) were willing to forgive each time the offender had properly apologized, even if the offender was an organizer of the troubles.

Overall, a former member of the paramilitary forces has a reasonable chance of being forgiven (*M*=6.72) (a) if he did not directly take part (passive bystander) to offenses to persons (killings) or to offenses to property (thefts) perpetrated by his companions, and (b) if he has sincerely begged for forgiveness and offered to partly compensate the harm done. In contrast, a former member of the guerilla has much less chance of being forgiven (*M*=4.20), even (a) if he did not directly take part (passive bystander) to offenses to property (thefts) perpetrated by the other guerillas, and (b) if he has sincerely begged for forgiveness and offered to partly compensate the harm done. The following equation synthesizes these findings:

Willingness to Forgive = Group x (Severity + Apology + Responsibility).

As stated above, our results are different from Azar's findings but they can be viewed as consistent with recent findings by Kpanake and Mullet (2011). These authors examined the way in which people living under a transitional political regime, that is, the post-Eyadema era inTogo, judge the acceptability of political amnesties. More specifically, they examined the relationships between the many circumstances under which amnesties are usually granted (e.g., revelation of important truth from the applicant's part) and acceptability of amnesty judgments. They found that political amnesties were judged acceptable only in a very limited set of (interacting) circumstances, which required the simultaneous presence of (a) revelation of important truth without any suspicion of treachery, (b) presence of explicit apologies to the victims and demonstration of true remorse, and (c) reasonable compensation of the victims. In all other cases, amnesties were considered as non-acceptable (see also Mullet & Neto, 2009).

Our pilot study has demonstrated that examining Colombians' willingness to forgive ex-members of the guerila or ex-members of the paramilitary forces is feasible. The participants strongly involved themselves in the study. On the basis of these findings, a study involving more complex scenarios, more contexts (e.g., ex members of the military forces), more questions (e.g., being allowed to work in factory or farms, being protected by law, being allowed to vote) and more participants will now be launched.

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ANNEX A

Luis Ramos es un antiguo miembro de la guerrilla (the actor's group factor). Ha cometido varios actos violentos. Ha dado muerte a cinco personas en total, incluyendo a Enrique García, un hombre común (the severity factor). Estos actos violentos fueron planeados por sus superiores; él solo ejecutaba órdenes (the responsibility factor). Ahora Luis desea reintegrarse a la sociedad civil. Pero nunca se ha presentado a la familia García para pedirle perdón (the apology factor). Si Usted fuera un miembro de la familia García.
¿En qué medida estaría dispuesto a perdonar?"