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From Ex-Combatants to Citizens: Connecting Everyday Citizenship and Social Reintegration in Colombia

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Abstract

Citizenship can be understood as a form of civic participation and a means of developing social relations with members of the broader community and, therefore, can act as an important means to help reintegrate ex-combatants back into mainstream society. This paper discusses an exploratory research project conducted with a sample of 23 Colombian ex-combatants from non-state armed groups who are current participants of the national programme of reintegration in the city of Bogotá, Colombia. By collecting their views and opinions about what it is like to become reintegrated, we explored the range of social factors that facilitate as well as obstruct practices of citizenship in everyday life and, subsequently, the ways in which this affects their overall experience of reintegration into Colombian society. Drawing on social psychological literature on citizenship and on the theory of social representations, we explored how citizenship is understood and enacted by this group as part of their reintegration process. A thematic analysis of three focus groups highlights an enabling as well as a limiting social context that affects former combatants' ability to participate as citizens. This paper also contributes to the social psychology of citizenship by studying the experience of reintegration in conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, citizenship, social representations, identity, Colombian armed conflict

The Colombian Internal Armed Conflict and its Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) Programme

Societies divided due to violent conflicts are at risk of becoming further segregated by what has come to be called "intractable conflict" (Smithey, 2009). In these societies community identities are often constructed on the basis of conflict. In Colombia, in particular, a long-lasting internal conflict has led to fragmentation and to the construction of social dichotomies such as "victims and victimizers", "subversive and civilians", "displaced and demobilized" and "citizens and non-citizens". Yet, what makes the situation even more complex is the "vicious cycle involving identity and retributive collective action which becomes almost seamless" (Smithey, 2009, p. 87).

The Colombian conflict has been recognised as the lengthiest internal conflict in the western hemisphere (Theidon, 2007, 2009). Its roots date back to the time of 'la violencia' (1948–1958), a chaotic and disturbed time of constant violent clashes between the two traditional liberal and conservative parties and the resistance movements fighting the power of the elite (Theidon, 2009; Ugarriza & Craig, 2013). Guerrilla and paramilitary groups have been particularly prominent actors of the conflict. The first, recognised as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), emerged as a group of communist-resistance peasants fighting against inequity, bureaucracy, isolation and political and economic oppression from the conservative party (Ugarriza & Craig, 2013). The second, wanting to combat guerrilla groups and supported by influential landowners (Guáqueta, 2007; Reyes, 2009; Romero, 2003), was formed in 1997, as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) (Guáqueta, 2007; Nussio, 2011a; Nussio & Oppenheim, 2014). As a consequence of the prosperous cocaine trade of the 1980s and the collapse of international communism during the 1990s, these groups' initial political ideologies started to decline, becoming increasingly associated to drug trafficking and mafia organisations while disputing over territories and resources (Morgenstein, 2008).

The objective of this article is to use the case of reintegration to explore how such a process is lived and experienced by ex-combatants themselves. We study, in other words, practices of everyday citizenship. The paper presents an exploration of the ways in which former Colombian combatants engage in practices of citizenship within the constraints and facilities of their social context, in one of the most violence-affected, segregated and polarised societies of our times, likely to soon be entering into a post-conflict scenario. Despite being one of the most prominent actors in the Colombian conflict, the perspectives of ex-combatants are commonly left unexamined in relevant literature, with the focus being instead on the study of military and security policies (Buxton, 2008; Theidon, 2007, 2009). We argue, however, that in order to fully understand processes of reintegration, we need to have an understanding of how ex-combatants themselves make sense of and experience their move from the margins into the mainstream of Colombian society. The paper contributes to the emerging field of the social and political psychology of citizenship by highlighting the role of the social context in enabling, but also hindering, processes of social inclusion and reintegration, and with this, the construction of new identities.

Within a comprehensive peacekeeping policy operating since 1989, the United Nations have oriented the deployment of most Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes across the globe in an attempt to undermine militant organizations and enable ex-combatants' return to civilian life (de Vries & Wiegink, 2011; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; McMullin, 2013; Morgenstein, 2008; Theidon, 2009). Although DDR projects have been put in practice in countries as diverse as El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Tajikistan and Burundi, among others (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007), they have been met with in-

creasing criticism, among practitioners and academics, on the basis that they have over-emphasized security concerns (Buxton, 2008; Metsola, 2006; Theidon, 2007, 2009) and that they have failed to theorise reintegration in a way that could serve the purpose of facilitating ex-combatants' return to civility (McMullin, 2013) and participation in communal life in accordance with the particularities of different contexts. Therefore, such programmes have been regarded as the "weakest link in the DDR chain" (Theidon, 2007, p. 67).

Despite the fact of continuing conflict with remaining non-state armed groups (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social, 2008; Mejía Gómez, 2014; Morgenstein, 2008; Nussio, 2011b) – what has been defined as a *'pre-postconflict'* context (Theidon, 2007) – Colombia has been leading its own DDR programme since massive collective and individual demobilisations from paramilitary and guerrilla members started to take place from 2003 until the present (Nussio & Oppenheim, 2014; Porch & Rasmussen, 2008; Thorsell, 2013). Being responsible for the management of the Reintegration Policy, the Colombian Agency for reintegration[i] (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración; ACR), founded by the government in 2006, currently supports over 34,000 ex-combatants through an integrated programme consisting of adult education, vocational training, enterprise subsidies, psychosocial support, medical attention and a monthly compensation subject to the ex-combatants' participation in the programme activities (ACR, 2012; Nussio, 2011a). Although some empirical studies (e.g., Bello Montes, 2009; Restrepo & Muggah, 2009) have stressed the positive effects of Colombia's DDR programme on reducing insecurity levels and strengthening the State's capacity to embrace the project, questions have arisen concerning the regrouping of former combatants into newly armed groups and their genuine participation in the reintegration programme, among others (Guáqueta, 2007; Nussio, 2011b; Tubb, 2013). This has in turn raised concerns over the persisting insurgent control, or 'shadow', being exerted on particularly the poorest sectors of society (Tubb, 2013).

Approaches to Reintegration

Consensus that reintegration is the most challenging phase of DDR projects has been reached among academics, practitioners and policy makers (Buxton, 2008; Colletta, Kostner, & Wiederhofer, 1996; McMullin, 2013; Theidon, 2007, 2009). Reintegration has been defined in very broad terms as a 'complex, long-term process through which ex-combatants and their dependants are assisted to (re)settle in post war communities (the social element), become part of the decision making process (the political element), engage in sustainable civilian employment and livelihoods (the economic aspect) as well as adjust to attitudes and expectations and/or deal with their war-related mental trauma' (Buxton, 2008, p. 5). Such definition has been met with criticism for failing to acknowledge the challenges ex-combatants face in embracing broader civilian life (Kingma, 1997), and the lack of meaningful involvement from receptive communities, as well as their understanding of "what constitutes the rehabilitation and re-socialization of ex-combatants" (Theidon, 2007, p. 71).

Reintegration, therefore, has been mainly framed into models of 'assistencialism'[ii] (Freire, 2005) that depict ex-combatants and recipient communities as the beneficiaries of programmes that they receive but do not contribute to. In this framework, ex-combatants are understood as a 'problem in need of reintegration' (Metsola, 2006, p. 119). In order to contain such a 'social problem', paternalistic policies (Metsola, 2006) have been part of reintegration programming. Dating back from the early 19th century, these policies are based on the premise that through employing ex-combatants recidivism would be tackled and, as a consequence, higher levels of security and stability would be achieved (Metsola, 2006). Economic reintegration has thus focused on government employment

and benefits provision as a means for ex-combatants to interact to the state, being included and rewarded for being obedient and conduct as 'good' citizens (Metsola, 2006).

Social and political dimensions of reintegration, having being left behind in reintegration programming, are starting to gain more importance and momentum through the emergence of community, participatory and people-centred approaches, acknowledged by the SIDDR (Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration) and the United Nations IDDRS (Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards) as best practice in reintegration programme design (Buxton, 2008). Aiming to promote ex-combatants', receiving communities' and stakeholders' involvement into the planning process (Kingma, 1997), participatory approaches are thought to provide the space for social and political reintegration. Such approaches promote the ex-combatants' active participation in civic and community life and their engagement in processes of identity transformation that challenge common negative representations based on war and violence and define "new social and cultural identities and interests" (Buxton, 2008, p. 6). Contrary to paternalistic approaches, community-based initiatives intend to promote self-sufficiency, recognising ex-combatants' agency in transforming the conflict and the need to embed reintegration activities to specific contexts.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of paternalistic reintegration programmes, countries such as The Philippines, The Democratic Republic of Congo, and Colombia have shifted the focus of attention towards more participatory approaches that guarantee the involvement of ex-combatants, members of the receptive communities, local and national partners and other stakeholders in dialogue and decision-making processes (Buxton, 2008; Kaplan & Nussio, 2013). In doing so, they highlight the importance of the 'social' in reintegration, the recognition of processes of socialization and re-socialization experienced by ex-combatants and other members of communities (Anaya, 2007) through which political reintegration becomes possible. We would describe this as a more 'bottom-up' approach to reintegration and to citizenship. Recognition of the social and political dimensions of reintegration within this approach appears to be as important and fundamental as its economic component in achieving long term and sustainable peace (Buxton, 2008). Community participation is, in our view, the vertebral column that sustains the economic, social and political aspects of successful reintegration in post-conflict countries. The study reported in this paper offers an exploration of the social factors that enhance as well as inhibit such participation for Colombian ex-combatants.

Everyday Citizenship and Social and Political Reintegration

Despite the lack of consensus among practitioners and academics about what social reintegration is (Kaplan & Nussio, 2013) and the remaining vague definition offered by the United Nations (2006) as a process that takes place mainly in local communities, reintegration has largely been interpreted in terms of former combatants gaining acceptance by their families and local communities (Gomes Porto, Parsons, & Alden, 2007; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007), or in terms of their capacity to participate in civic and community life (Buxton, 2008; Kaplan & Nussio, 2013). For its part, political reintegration is described as the process by which former combatants are allowed to transform previous identities "premised on and shaped by violence and conflict, with new social and cultural identities and interests" (Buxton, 2008, p. 6). In understanding social and political reintegration as intertwined and interactional bottom-up processes that take place in local communities, the present study adopts a social psychological approach to citizenship (Condor, 2011; Barnes, Auburn, & Lea, 2004; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). It aims to explore the social networks, institutions and symbolic representations that both enable and obstruct ex-com-

batants' practice of citizenship and, ultimately, their social experience of reintegration. We argue that social reintegration needs to occur, in the first instance, to facilitate the experience of becoming politically reintegrated.

If the ultimate goal of any peace process and DDR program is to enhance ex-combatants' ability to participate as citizens, then it is important to explore what contributes as well as impedes such a practice within the everyday contexts in which ex-combatants live. This also offers an important contribution to citizenship literature. Current research on citizenship relates to the fields of immigration attitudes, minority identities and nationalism (Condor, 2011). However, it has not explored in depth issues of reintegration in societies largely affected by violent conflict, such as Colombia, where such conflict is ongoing and poses a permanent threat to peace processes. Furthermore, by examining the ways in which Colombian ex-combatants' practice of citizenship is enabled and constrained by their social context, the overall aim of this research is to further our understanding of what it is like to become reintegrated in the aftermath of violent conflict from the perspectives of people at the centre of reintegration programmes – ex-combatants themselves.

In what follows, we first outline our theoretical framework and methodology and then proceed to present our findings with particular focus on the possibilities and constraints of the social context for successful reintegration and thereby inclusive forms of citizenship, from the perspectives of ex-combatants.

A Social Representations Approach to Citizenship and Reintegration

The literature of citizenship is ample and emphatic in highlighting the complexity and contested nature of the term (Condor, 2011). Several aspects of citizenship have been studied in relevant literature. Marshall (1950) discussed citizenship in terms of political citizenship (i.e., the capacity of individuals to be members of political entities with the aim of exercising their right to participate in governance), civil citizenship (i.e., the right to enjoy equality under the law), and social citizenship (i.e., an individuals' entitlement to economic welfare and security). Other categories of citizenship have been included by subsequent theorists such as economic citizenship, to denote benefits and responsibilities to employment, investment and taxation (White, 2003); cultural citizenship, as rights to adopt a language and perform the cultural norms of a community (Stevenson, 2003); and environmental or ecological citizenship, to define rights in relation to the management of the natural environment (Bell, 2005). Citizenship, nonetheless, is not only a status of rights and duties. It is also an identity and a form of participation, as a result of belonging to a political community (Kymlicka & Norman, 1996). More importantly for this study, citizenship is also about being seen to belong (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011).

In this paper we adopt a social psychological perspective to the study of citizenship. Given the persistent and complex nature of the Colombian conflict, such an approach is a valuable tool as it acknowledges the complexities of social relations and the broader social context for processes of participation in the public sphere (see Jovchelovitch, 2007). Furthermore, a social psychological perspective on citizenship allows for the recognition of "complexity, contradiction and contestability as inherent, and often productive, features of the everyday construction and performance of citizenship" (Condor, 2011, p. 193). Under this perspective, citizenship is not conceived as a passive status conferred upon individuals but, rather, as an active practice for the pursuit of recognition and belonging as well as for renegotiating disadvantaged positions in order to participate more fully into the society (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013; Barnes et al., 2004; Haste, 2004; Jones & Gaventa, 2002). Theorising citizenship as a practice (Barnes et al., 2004; Lister, 1997; Turner, 1993) highlights the significance of the social context, societal diversity (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011) and the intergroup dynamics that are involved in processes of socialization and integration.

Specifically, we draw upon social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984). Because of its relational nature (Kaplan & Nussio, 2013), social and political reintegration of Colombian ex-combatants serves as a good example through which to illustrate the fundamental role that the theory of social representations can play in the study of everyday citizenship. Within a social representations approach, we can understand participation "as the power to convey particular representations over others" (Howarth, Andreouli, & Kessi, 2014, p. 20). Struggles over participation are an essential part of processes of citizenship from the perspectives of lay actors. Different actors, with different positions and social power, are involved in the politics of participation in the case of ex-combatants' reintegration: ex-combatants from distinct non-state groups, general victims of the conflict, members of the broader civilian population, official authorities, among others. Although ex-combatants may be met with discrimination, distrust, stigma and rejection, as a result of stigmatising social representations, this also has the potential to create resistance and efforts to construct new positive representations and identities for ex-combatants.

Because agency and resistance from minority groups are contingent upon dynamics of recognition and non-recognition, social representations constitute the frame through which the everyday practice of citizenship is played out and contested. Social representations, therefore, determine the extent to which former combatants would feel capable of participating in society (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Here, recognition refers to the individuals' identity being asserted whilst non-recognition implies individuals resorting to practices that are incongruent with their own self-definition or identity (Howarth, 2006). Understanding social representations as "systems of values, ideas and practices" (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii) that provide a framework for thinking about and acting in the social world, the theory of social representations allows us to understand not only people's common values, ideas and practices from the perspectives of 'ex-combatants' but, more importantly, how such representations inform processes whereby ex-combatants are excluded and marginalised from mainstream society (Howarth, Foster, & Dorrer, 2004).

As a consequence, marginalised social groups, as in the case of Colombian ex-combatants, will engage in efforts of re-signification or re-identification (Tajfel, 1978), in order to overcome dominant stigmatising representations held by others and to be re-positioned in alternative and positive terms (Howarth, 2004, 2006; Howarth et al., 2014) that facilitate their process of reintegration into the broader society. For instance, the representation of the 'ex-combatant' has been shown to be re-appropriated by 'ex-combatants' themselves, in accordance with the demands of the social context, in order to perform activities such as interacting with others, lobbying, protesting, applying for benefits, gaining acceptance and assimilating past and present life experiences (McMullin, 2013). Hence, from a social-psychological perspective on citizenship, the theory of social representations proves to be a useful tool through which to understand not only how disadvantaged social groupings are positioned in both lay and reified representations (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013) but, moreover, to understand patterns of agency and resistance that bring about possibilities for social change (Howarth, 2004; Howarth et al., 2014).

From a critical social representations perspective (Howarth et al., 2014), the social context is fundamental for the construction, transformation and contestation of stigmatised representations (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013; Jovchelovitch, 2007) and, therefore, the (re)negotiation of identities (Howarth, 2002). The interactional dynamics occurring between different social actors in everyday life constitute the context in which citizenship is enacted as well as inhibited (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). For instance, the shared experience of many ex-combatants of feeling discriminated against may lead them to understand this as a limitation inherent to their social realities and may, therefore, encourage practices of resistance, such as distancing themselves or concealing their stigmatised identities. Indeed, the DDR rhetoric plays its part in influencing the ways in which the society bestows or hinders

recognition towards ex-combatants' through distinguishing between two antagonistic social groupings in the Colombian society – victims and perpetrators – which, as McMullin (2013) states, "is a form of ultimate othering" (p. 413).

If the social reintegration of ex-combatants is fostered by their ability to participate in community life, and their participation is enhanced by recognition from other sectors of society, then it is important to understand ex-combatants' own views of what helps as well as obstructs their everyday practise of citizenship and, therefore, their overall experience of reintegration into Colombian society. This, ultimately, should provide useful insights into how to better support reintegration programmes and re-connect fragmented societies by long lasting violent conflict. This exploratory study reflects on the importance of recognising opportunities and limitations of social contexts in boosting former combatants' involvement in civil society along with the ex-combatants enactment of citizenship in the everyday.

Method

Participants

A total of 23 ex-combatants, took part in the present research[iii]: seven female and 16 male. Their age varied between 25 and 55 years. It is important to note that regardless of the armed group the participants were involved in, they all shared common socio-demographic characteristics that place them in a very vulnerable situation. According to published statistics (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración [ACR], 2011; Anaya, 2007; Thorsell, 2013), the majority of this population come from highly deprived rural and, sometimes, urban areas across the country; approximately half of them are recruited into an armed group as children; they possess low levels of education (primary and first years of secondary school); they have experienced varied forms of abuse and torture within the armed group and have been forced to perpetrate serious human rights infringements. Within the female population, a large proportion are single mothers who do not receive any financial support. Mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, are also prevalent in this population (Thorsell, 2013).

With regards to the reasons that they entered non-state armed groups, the literature points out a multiplicity of factors that, to some extent, depend on the characteristics and dynamics typical of the places they were living before (Anaya, 2007). Although some of them were forcibly recruited, some others decided to join such groups voluntarily; a decision which may have been influenced by the strong presence of militants in their towns or cities, the persuasion of friends, promises of a better life within an armed group and their poor economic conditions and unstable sources of income (Anaya, 2007). Likewise, the motivations that prompted them to leave these militant organizations and join the DDR programme are said to be mainly financial (i.e., very poor living conditions within the groups), political/ideological (i.e., disillusionment with the ideology of these groups and their pursuit of economic gain through connections with the drug-trafficking business) (Anaya, 2007; Theidon, 2007), and personal (e.g., being separated from loved ones) (Theidon, 2007).

Procedure

For this study, we conducted focus groups with former combatants from non-state armed groups. We chose focus groups as the method for data collection due to their appropriateness for delving into the participants' opinions, beliefs, representations and ways of socially constructing and sharing knowledge (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999;

Berg & Lune, 2004; Krueger, 2009; Marková, 2007). All participants of this study were, at the time of data collection, involved in the reintegration programme implemented by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR). Our chosen sampling strategy corresponds to purposive sampling (Krueger, 1998, 2009), as is appropriate for such a hard-to-reach population. Membership to the Colombian Agency for Reintegration was established as the only criterion for the selection of participants following the researchers' interest in conducting the research project with Colombian ex-combatants from non-state armed groups, who, in this case, are the only part of the population possessing knowledge and experiences that are relevant to the present research (Flick, 2007). Participants were recruited through coordination with one of the Services Centre in Bogotá (Centro de Servicios Simón Bolivar), after the research project was approved by the ACR planning office. Twenty-four participants were voluntarily recruited through coordination with the Simon Bolivar Services Centre after the research project and activity was disclosed to the participants. The 24 volunteers were subsequently enlisted in three groups of 8 each.

Preceding the start of each of the focus groups, the participants were fully informed regarding the research's purpose and scope, the voluntary character of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time. They were also given information about the recording devices used and the management of confidentiality of the information shared, making explicit that their identities would not be revealed but kept anonymous. Alongside the verbal explanation they were provided with a sheet of information containing details about the study and its ethics. Following that, participants who voluntarily agreed to take part, signed a consent form.

Three focus groups were conducted by the first author. Based on the research objectives of exploring the Colombian ex-combatants everyday practice of citizenship as well as the enabling and obstructing characteristics of the social context for their own process of reintegration, the focus group topic guide sought to collect the participants' views on *social context, citizenship and reintegration.* Prompts were included in the topic guide in order to facilitate the flow of the discussion and contribution from all participants. Although the activity was conducted in ACR premises, there was no accompaniment of any ACR member of staff during the group discussions, and the participants were reassured that the focus groups served a strictly academic purpose and were independent from the ACR programme.

The raw data were initially transcribed and translated from Spanish to English by the first author. The data were then thematically analysed (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The development of the coding framework was devised using a hybrid approach, which consisted of both theoretical assumptions and salient issues emerging from the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). We relied on inductive coding particularly for the construction of the more basic and descriptive themes or categories of analysis. Research objectives mainly informed the elaboration of broader themes, which are: social determinants of reintegration (support mechanisms and obstacles), representations of citizenship and representations of reintegration. While the first author carried out all the analysis, the other two authors regulated the process and checked for consistency and attention to detail.

In what follows, we present the overall themes that emerged from the thematic analysis carried out in four main parts: 1) support mechanisms within the social context, 2) obstacles within the social context, 3) representations of citizenship and 4) representations of reintegration.

Findings

Theme 1: Support Mechanisms Within the Social Context

Social networks and institutional support were commonly discussed by the participants as the two most important mechanisms for their reintegration back into society. In relation to social networks, participants highlighted the value of being surrounded by family, friends, teachers, neighbours, professionals and some of their peers from the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) as well as entrepreneurs and employers who were generally seen as providers of new opportunities and encouragement for their reintegration process. Similarly, participants identified institutions, such as schools and employment organizations, as providing supportive spaces for participation and exchange of points of view, which reinforce their identity as citizens. The following extracts demonstrate the participants' desire and ongoing motivation to, primarily, create relationships with people other than ex-combatants. This is perceived as a powerful means through which to be positioned, but also to identify as, ordinary citizens, as 'workers', and an important way in which to open new doors:

Extract 1

"The people who surround us have been one of the essential parts of our reintegration process because they have offered us good opportunities to find jobs, to socialize with them and get rid of that anxiety…These people are the entrepreneurs that offer us jobs, the opportunity to change our routine…to formalise ourselves as workers". (Angel[iv], 45 years old)

Being seen as 'workers' rather than 'ex-combatants' offers participants a very different social identity, possibilities for social relationships and integration into 'normal' society. As suggested by Hopkins and Blackwood (2011), the dynamics of recognition come into play in the enactment of citizenship, and such dynamics are evident in everyday interactions. For our participants, interacting with others brings the possibility of challenging stigmatising social representations and rejecting their usually marginalised social position. The ex-combatants' participation in informal groups of friends, sports, work, volunteering and associations are experienced as valuable networks that serve the purposes of reintegration, (re-)identification with non-violent groups (or 'normal people') and so facilitate spaces for civic participation:

Extract 2

"I think that the family too because they are a positive support…the teachers, people in the street, neighbours. One perhaps at the beginning thinks that one would be rejected but as soon as you start making new friends you see that one can, that we are 'normal people' that can socialize and are not different just because we were there". (Yadira, 29 years old)

Furthermore, volunteering appeared as one of the most meaningful initiatives providing new ways of relating, connecting and engaging with others, and so new forms of reconstructing a positive social identity, in contrast to violent past activities:

Extract 3

"Well, I am a volunteer in an organization that works with children with Down's syndrome and cognitive disability, so I have been there for nearly 4 years. [ ] Well, for me it has been very positive because it changes the way of acting and expressing love, comprehension, sympathy, humility, which are very im-

portant values and through that I have met very kind people, very positive people…" (Juan Pablo, 51 years old)

Equally, the participants frequently mentioned that their participation in neighbourhood assemblies was an important opportunity to become at ease with their neighbours and participate in community life. Assuming roles within the assemblies, making decisions and making contacts enabled them to feel integrated and valued in their communities. Likewise, the formation of associations with some of their most trusted peers, with the purpose of contributing to social causes and establishing sustainable means for their economic independence, was regarded as a valuable form of participating and demonstrating to others their civic commitment and broader identities as citizens:

Extract 4

"I belong to the neighbourhood assembly…It is very important for jobs because they can provide the references and, also, in the social aspect, one starts to become familiar with neighbours because we bought our house there…so one starts to relate more with the neighbours". (Patricia, 32 years old)

It is important to note that all these forms of civic participation appear to be very important spaces for fostering reintegration as they facilitate the development of social networks, provide the means for building new identities and, also, reinforce the ex-combatants' agency to mobilize resources and act collectively for the wider community: obtaining jobs, socialising with peers and new people, learning skills and being valued. These can be considered important forms of psycho-social scaffolding (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernandez, 2013); that is, widening their net of social and institutional support and thus providing important pathways for successful reintegration.

Equally important, the different forms of institutional support evident in the participants' social context were highlighted as a valuable contributing factor for successful reintegration. Participants stressed how through their engagement with formal institutions, such as schools, they were recognised and treated as "normal citizens" (Pedro, 32 years old). For instance, ACR along with public schools and other official institutions were seen as highly supportive:

Extract 5

"Among the most positive things I could identify around me are, for example, the school, some people and many other things such as the ACR (Colombian Agency for Reintegration), which offers us psychosocial and economic support, the possibility to finish our studies and help our families…because one can get education, principles and many other things that before we didn't have that can reinforce our self-esteem and that we can transmit to our children, wife and to the society around us. Also it teaches us to be tolerant with the people to avoid problems with other people". (Aurelio, 39 years old)

Schools, emerging in every group discussion, were stressed as important spaces for reconciliation with members of their local communities. More than receiving information and learning academic knowledge, these institutions provided a space in which they were not seen as ex-combatants but as adult citizens and fostered the creation of valuable social relationships. In general, the institutional support perceived by being socially engaged as members of families, students, workers, participants of a programme, volunteers, active neighbours, etc., not only contributes to the formation of a safety net of relationships from which the participants can seek and also offer support, but also facilitates the reaffirmation of their civilian identity and the opportunities for recognition as citizens, rather than ex-combatants, by diverse sectors of society.

Theme 2: Obstacles Within the Social Context

Fear of rejection and discrimination was identified by the participants of this study as one of the most important obstacles to reintegration within their social context. As such, many participants deliberately disconnected or distanced themselves from some of their ACR peers – or other demobilised persons – fearing being judged and sanctioned by the broad community as these groups are commonly represented in negative terms.

Extract 6

"I think fear is such a thing. Doors are closed not because the people don't give us opportunities but for ourselves because we fear that people discover that we are demobilized people. We fear the rejection of others". (Carmen, 26 years old)

Extract 7

"There are many places that discriminate demobilized people and we still fear to let us know to the people because we generate mistrust and insecurity. There are some companies that have given opportunities to demobilized people but they are still scarce". (Alberto, 35 years old)

Alongside fears of rejection and stigma, the participants discussed the barrier of feeling pressured to re-offend from other ex-combatants. This was framed within the context of a highly unequal society, impeding their overall experience of reintegration:

Extract 8

"Many times you avoid hanging out with some people because they still have relations with the past, and you avoid that for not falling into the risk of having problems. It is better to avoid relating to them". (Pedro, 44 years old)

Extract 9

"Just with one demobilized person that makes a mistake is enough to make generalizations to all of us. So, the society doesn't differentiate that, they apply the negative things to all of us. So, what happens? The ones that struggle to live honestly see their image affected by that situation". (Gineth, 25 years old)

Also, during the group discussions, the participants recurrently highlighted the fact of having fewer opportunities to find stable jobs than other members of society, as they often lose their jobs as a result of revealing their past. This not only limits ex-combatants' participation in society but also makes re-integration very difficult, if not impossible.

Extract 10

"One is always scared that people realize that we are demobilized, because it has happened to me, for example one day I took my cv to a job and as soon as they realized that I was demobilized they didn't employ me anymore. They asked why I didn't mention that before. How can we tell others that we are demobilized if we know that there are people that reject us for the fact that we are demobilized, for have taken part in an armed group?" (Alberto, 27).

Overall, these findings are in line with those of Hopkins and Blackwood (2011) that point out identity misrecognition as limiting people's ability to participate. Our data indicates that the majority of our participants choose to keep their condition hidden, or conceal their stigma (Pachankis, 2007) in order to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963) and so accomplish a certain level of integration and acceptance. Such findings have also been reported in previous studies in

Colombia (see Massé, Nussio, Negrete, & Ugarriza, 2011). This strategy is adopted because of the difficulties associated with being recognised as demobilized, such as, denial of "employment, housing, medical care, and education" (Pachankis, 2007, p. 328). Linking these results back to the theory of social representations, we can see, in this case, how stigmatising representations are a potent source of devalued identities, marginalisation and social exclusion (Howarth, 2006). However, this approach also acknowledges agentic and resilient individuals who, even in such contexts of stigma, can convert marginalisation and exclusion into possibilities for recognition, empowerment and acceptance (Howarth, 2007). As showed in the previous section, by trying to forge close memberships with different institutions that afford positive recognition, participants try to reinforce their civic status and leave aside their condition of ex-combatants.

In sum, we have presented some of the social, psychological and political obstacles in the ex-combatants' social context that undermines their ability to participate in the society and, consequently, to successfully reintegrate. In what follows, we focus on how participants represent citizenship and reintegration, in order to explore the meanings of these forms of participation from the perspectives of ex-combatants themselves.

Theme 3: What Does it Mean to be a Citizen?

So far, it has been shown that the ex-combatants' attempts to reintegrate into their community are about seeking spaces to participate as 'normal' citizens. Family, schools, neighbourhood assemblies, groups of friends and sport, and local institutions are generally perceived as facilitators of reintegration as they foster the establishment of new social relations with people other than ex-combatants. Such places thus provide the opportunity to be positively recognised as 'ordinary' citizens. In addition, when scrutinising further the meanings assigned to the idea of being a citizen and becoming reintegrated, we found that acquiring official legal documentation was also seen as a way of overcoming the stigma of a combatant identity, gaining recognition within their communities and also a way to become citizens. In other words, obtaining official documentation as part of the process of reintegration emerged as an important factor aiding the construction of their civilian identity.

Extract 11

"Citizenship for me, for example, is that…when one was in the forest, in the mountains, and comes to the city one acquires one's citizenship, one's documentation, because before you were without documentation, a subversive without documents. Today one has its documents and of course becomes part of the society, you relate to the society, it is a total change; you become a member of the society". (Aurelio, 39 years old)

We see that recognition, for the ex-combatants in this study, is not only about being recognised in everyday interactions with others, but also about gaining formal recognition from the State (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013). Indeed, the extent to which one is able to participate in society depends on the extent in which one is recognised as a citizen (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). In this regard, official documents play a key role not only in constructing a new civilian identity but also in enabling ex-combatants to participate in different spaces, as students, employees and legal claimants of state benefits such as health, financial assistance and so on. Having official documentation enhances both their status as rights-holders as well as their capacity to make claims (Fox, 2005).

Therefore, having official documentation is not seen by the participants as a passive entitlement to the benefits of citizenship. Rather, it is seen as a consequence of a conscious decision to give up arms, in contrast to the automatic citizenship status of non-combatant members of society. In our participants' view, this is something

gained, as part of their efforts to become 'ordinary' citizens. As a consequence, and in parallel to the different mechanisms of civic engagement analysed in the previous section, obtaining official documents can be seen as a defining element of citizenship as well as a way of practising it:

Extract 12

"Of course, citizenship is very important to live within a community…without that…how can we keep hiding from others, as we were when living in the forest? We were hidden from the civil society. Nowadays, we are in a community, we are relating with different kind of people, one relates and that is very important… Not everyone knows that one is demobilized but the few that know will account that demobilized people can change. It takes time but with goods acts it is possible". (Luis, 41 years old)

Such mechanisms of participation are highlighted as the vehicles to accomplishing reintegration. They are the means for feeling part of a society, demonstrating change, giving back to society, and altering people's representations of ex-combatants. It is a way of exchanging views and solving problems by peaceful ways such as dialogue. Participants construct and negotiate their civilian status through interactions in their social context (cf. Haste, 2004):

Extract 13

"People that participate are more recognised. Through participation one acquires recognition… We can make use of committees to dialogue and sort problems out. That is why it is important to get access to neighbourhood assemblies because after deliberating there we can present our proposals to the major office. We expose the cases that need to be sorted and we establish agreements". (Amelia, 36 years old)

Theme 4: What Does it Means to be Reintegrated?

When exploring the various meanings assigned to the experience of reintegration, we found that the idea of 'breaking with the past' was associated with reintegration. Having no relationship with the past is perceived as a way of solidifying their commitment to the goal of reintegration into wider society. Concealing their stigma along with other psycho-social mechanisms, such as avoiding contact with other ex-combatants, demonstrate the significance of having "a mentality of what one wants for the future that does not have to do with the past" (Clara, 31 years old).

Extract 14:

"[Reintegration is] to forget the past, going away from the past. I don't like to watch any violent TV programme or film because I have a child and I don't want that for him. I like sport, football. I don't want to listen to negative comments from my fellows". (Aurelio, 39 years old)

Additionally, reintegration was also conceived "as a positive drastic change connected with a flourishing life and freedom" (Helena, 29 years old) that was not possible to have before. Participants, wanting to be recognised as 'ordinary' social actors, tried to reintegrate by leaving their past behind and being open to new experiences. On this basis, citizenship could be understood as the vehicle linking the experience of reintegration with the construction of a better life:

Extract 15

"It is a change. It is something new. It is to start doing things that you have never done before". (Yadira, 29 years old)

For the ex-combatants that took part in this study, the idea of 'normal' citizenship was constructed around the idea of embracing what was 'different' for them, but 'normal' for society. The new practices we outlined earlier, such as volunteering, participating in assemblies and forming new networks of social relations, are evidence of these efforts to become a 'normal citizen' by changing and adapting to a new way of life that is starkly different from their previous lives.

Agency is crucial in this process of reintegration. The possibility of becoming independent individuals, able to make decisions and lead a life of their own choices and interests, were important for all participants. While individual decision-making and individual agency were forbidden in the military structure of an armed group, they were seen as crucial for the construction of civilian identities, within the process of reintegration:

Extract 16

"For me it means reintegrated first to yourself, that is my concept, I do not know, because you were a person before you entered the group and once you are there you forget who you were, you do not have the right to think, to give an opinion, you lose as a person, you just become an ant that just follow others, your development ceases. Reintegration is asking yourself what you are going to do, how are you going to do so, what am I capable of? And what do I want?" (Carlos, 55 years old)

In sum, these findings show how the participants attempt to become 'normal' citizens by participating in civil society, constructing new kinds of social relations, and creating new identities. Indeed, they have embarked upon the challenge to construct an identity that is disconnected from their previous lives as fighters and is, instead, based on new experiences, agency and positive engagement with their communities. Reintegration can be seen, in this case, as a process of constructing positive identities and achieving recognition as 'normal' citizens.

Discussion

Colombian society has since 2003 undergone a project of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of paramilitaries and guerrilla ex-combatants (Thorsell, 2013). Such programmes are considered an important part of a country's peace-building strategy and are linked with the overall development of a country (Buxton, 2008). In this context, the Colombian government and guerrilla leaders have recently agreed to carry out peace dialogues with the prospect of signing peace (Gomez-Suarez & Newman, 2013). Reintegration programmes involve economic, psychosocial, educational and vocational assistance to help former combatants and their dependants to become socially and economically engaged (Berdal, 1996; Nussio, 2011a). Criticisms, however, have been raised about reintegration programmes being under-theorised (McMullin, 2013), particularly with regards to the social aspects of reintegration. Reintegration programmes generally fail to define context-specific objectives, with the literature showing just very few empirical attempts to examine its social determinants (Kaplan & Nussio, 2013). Colombia's reintegration programme is no exception. Although it has advanced much in consolidating a policy of reintegration that brings together multiple sectors of society, it presents various deficiencies in addressing the local needs of its recipients (Morgenstein, 2008).

In this context, the social and political side of reintegration has begun to be acknowledged in relevant literature as preventative mechanisms to recidivism and the (re-)emergence of violent conflicts, as well as a form of enhancing the ex-combatants' participation and acceptance by local communities (Kaplan & Nussio, 2013). Attempts to enhance social reintegration are evidenced in the increasing adoption of community-based approaches (Buxton,

2008; Kaplan & Nussio, 2013) focused on communities' capabilities to lead their own processes of reintegration as opposed to traditional paternalistic frameworks based on employment provision and assistencialism (Freire, 2005; Metsola, 2006). We suggest here that social and political reintegration, given its focus on social relations, can be described as processes of 'citizen-making'; in other words, reintegration seeks to turn previous combatants into citizens. This provides an ideal empirical context for the study of citizenship.

Drawing on social psychological literature on citizenship, in this paper we sought to explore: i) the support mechanisms and obstacles within the ex-combatants' social context, for their process of reintegration and ii) the meanings of citizenship and reintegration for ex-combatants themselves in order to complement existing quantitative research in the field. Towards this aim, we adopted a conceptualization of citizenship that recognises the importance of context in shaping the ways in which individuals engage in civilian activities, challenge misrecognition and claim acceptance and inclusion through everyday interactions (Barnes et al., 2004; Condor, 2011; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Clearly, successful reintegration programmes need a detailed knowledge of the various aspects of the social context in which they are located (Howarth et al., 2014).

In this paper, we have followed this idea and have adopted a social representations theory approach to understanding everyday citizenship as a key part of processes of reintegration. The theory offers insights about the impact of positive recognition and misrecognition (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011) in participating in civilian life. We have shown that achieving a positive regard within the wider community and attempting to alter negative representations of ex-combatants are important ways for achieving successful reintegration from the perspectives of our participants. They, despite being faced with a great deal of discrimination, product of stigmatising dominant representations, can act as active social actors through resisting stigma, seeking acceptance and positioning themselves as normal citizens (Howarth et al., 2014) to, eventually, reintegrate.

This study shows that, overall, Colombian ex-combatants continuously struggle to position themselves in their own terms vis-à-vis the communities in which they live (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). According to traditional accounts of active citizenship, "individual social actors are essentially constituted through the communities in which they live" (Condor & Gibson, 2007, p. 118), therefore, participation in local community organizations, as the participants of this study have manifested to do, would empower ordinary social actors to influence new dynamics of social relations. In turn, we argue that this consolidates a civilian identity based on agency, social responsibility and mutual recognition.

Although the participants identified supporting mechanisms for their process of reintegration, namely, positive networks of social relations and institutional support, they have also pointed out important limitations, correspondingly, a general feeling of fear in being discovered as ex-combatants and, therefore, subjected to rejection and discrimination. Equally, a pressure to re-offend coming from some of their ACR peers and the inevitable fact of living in a highly unequal society in much need of greater institutional support are conditions that obstruct the participants' civic engagement with society and therefore hinder processes of reintegration.

Despite such limitations, the majority of the participants in this study appear as active agents in trying to invest the psycho-social resources they have in constructing a positive identity that does not define them as ex-combatants but as citizens, who are able to carry a 'normal life' – this in contrast to life as a member of non-state armed groups. For this, they resort to a number of strategies in order to alter, negotiate and position themselves in such terms (Howarth, 2007; Tajfel, 1978). Such strategies include, for example, participating in alternative social spheres as volunteers, members of associations, neighbourhood assemblies and informal groups of friends and sport, where

they can gain positive visibility and acceptance from the community and, therefore, do not feel their identity threatened (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011).

In relation to the ex-combatants representations of citizenship and reintegration, this exploratory study found that the everyday practice of citizenship while is influenced by the extent to which recognition is bestowed from lay social groupings of the Colombian society, it is also largely affected by the State's acknowledgment of ex-combatants as ordinary citizens of the nation, afforded in the form of granting official documentation. For the participants of this research, being holders of such documentation is perceived as a way to reinforce their civilian identity and practice. For its part, reintegration is understood as a drastic life change as it demands agency, independence and freedom to perform as citizens; again, conditions that were not part of their life as militants of non-state groups.

It must be stressed that we cannot take the positive aspiration of the ex-combatants and the positive views they have about the reintegration programme at face value. This is largely a methodological limitation of the study. In the focus group discussions, it is very likely that participants were motivated to stress the ways in which the programme 'worked' and they themselves had resisted a life of violence and criminality – and were indeed 'good citizens'. In spite of this potential limitation, this study is a useful starting point for the exploration of ex-combatants views about what is enabling and disabling their experience of reintegration. This research can be complemented with more detailed ethnographic research that can provide further insights into how ex-combatants engage with their social contexts and participate in society. Furthermore, the theoretical approach we developed here emphasises the bottom-up ways in which citizenship is defined, claimed and practiced, from the experiences and perspectives of research participants themselves. Hence we do not argue that such reintegration programme simply 'work' – what we have illustrated are the elements of social context that they identify as positive or negative in their own trajectory towards reintegration. Thus, we also hope to have shown that giving voice to ex-combatants is a necessary step to enhancing reintegration programmes.

Some analysts have pointed toward the contradictions in reintegration programmes. These programmes may coexist with oppressive control exerted by ex-combatants at the bottom of society (Amnesty International, 2005; Tubb, 2013) and the dangers of new armed groups being formed within a peace-construction environment (Morgenstein, 2008; Nussio, 2011b), which can erode public confidence in the legitimacy of the process. While we do not deny the damaging effects of such practices, we advocate for further examination of the potentialities and limitations of any particular context in any effort to design, implement and evaluate reintegration programmes. This is arguably even more important in contexts where conflict has yet to cease. People's opinions, views, fears, daily experiences and understandings, should be placed at the centre of such initiatives. A context-focused approach should serve to identify the differences in social dynamics, particular of every locale where these programmes are implemented. Possibly, in other parts of the country such dynamics are sustained by processes different from discrimination and rejection as appears to be the case in, at least, some parts of Bogotá. Correspondingly, the institutional capacity to react towards such dynamics should also be thought to tackle localized needs, rather than advancing in a uniformed response that ignores what happens at the local level.

Although we do not pretend to be able to assess the effectiveness of Colombia's reintegration programme, this study has provided some useful insights into how to better support the experience of ex-combatants through considering factors that can improve the design of such programmes. This research may serve as a basis for future studies that intend to analyse processes of reintegration in societies affected by war from a grassroots perspective and, thus, might aid to re-asses and re-design reintegration programmes.

Substantive progress has been achieved through the ex-combatants' involvement in different kinds of groupings that allow for their engagement with different parts of society and, with this, the start of an identity re-construction process. However, patterns of discrimination, stigmatisation and segregation continue to be important obstacles for ex-combatants in the road to successful reintegration. This indicates that much remains to be done in order to attain a reconciled Colombian society in which different sectors play their role accordingly. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants and, therefore, there are no claims of generalisation, the findings suggest that in addition to acquiring a formal status, reintegration of former combatants is an everyday interactional process mediated by the possibilities to participate in full in society. In this regard, maximising contextual supportive mechanisms as well as addressing major obstacles would have strong positive implications for enhancing processes of reintegration.

Notes

i) The Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR, for its acronym in Spanish) is the State's agency responsible of coordinating, assessing and implementing the reintegration policy, along with other public and private entities. The Agency is a special unit with legal status, ascribed to the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic. For more information see http://www.reintegracion.gov.co/en/agency/Pages/historical.aspx

ii) 'Assistencialism' is the term coined by Paulo Freire to denote the process of extending knowledge from expert to ordinary people, rather than constructing this jointly.

iii) The research reported in this article was initially conducted as part of the first author dissertation project for the MSc in Health, Community and Development at the London School of Economics. Dr Andreouli and Dr Howarth took part as academic supervisors.

iv) All the data presented in this paper are anonymised for confidentiality purposes. The names selected here are only pseudonyms.

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Competing Interests

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