´Not as my Neighbor´: How Misinformed Narratives Surrounding the FARC are Hindering the Social Reintegration of its Demobilizing Combatants

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Abstract
With the current group-demobilization of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-FARC, this study offers a timely exploration on the relationship between how the guerrilla group and its members are viewed and their capacity to return back to society as civilians. Through a Grounded Theory qualitative approach based on interviews and focus-groups with former FARC members, as well as ex-paramilitary and wider civil society, findings show that how the group members are received back into communities hinges on dominant, national-narratives surrounding the FARC which blur the group and its former-members as terrorists and criminals. Therefore, despite a widespread desire for a negotiated end to the conflict, most Colombians are not prepared to accept what this actually entails, i.e. the reintegration of a collectively-demobilizing FARC back into society—showing reluctance towards the social integration of its ex-combatants, whether as co-workers or neighbors, and even less so as citizens or friends. However, the counter-narratives of the ex-combatants, and empirical evidence show great inconsistencies and falsehoods in these narratives. Moreover, the returnees’ reactions to this hostile climate is often to be secretive about their past and keep a low profile with minimal social interaction whilst striving towards what they conceive as being a “normal” citizen—that is studying or working (termed here as the “secret-citizen narrative”). The study demonstrates that the
current model—akin to reinsertion—will not lead to a fuller reintegration unless national-narratives shift significantly, and the FARC and its ex-combatants are at a very minimum accepted as citizens in a post-conflict society.

**Keywords:** DDR, reinsertion, reintegration, Colombia, FARC, ex-combatants, peacebuilding, grounded theory, IDPs.

**Introduction**

If they want a peace process but don’t want to accept us as neighbors, then it isn’t going to work (interview with ex-combatant)

They don’t know any better, some will enter politics, but the rest will do what they do best: extortion, kidnapping...a life of crime (focus-group with public).

Colombia has experienced a protracted civil war since the 1960s, with numerous guerrilla groups on one side advocating land redistribution and greater political inclusion, and anti-communist paramilitary groups on the other, backed by the Colombian State, wealthy landowners, and later the US. With the latter’s technical and financial aid, Álvaro Uribe focused his (2002-2010) presidency on a hardline military confrontation against the remaining rebel groups, particularly the largest—**Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-FARC**. The succeeding president Juan Manuel Santos capitalized on Uribe’s effective reversal of the FARC’s military advantage, and initiated the negotiations of the current process. As part of the ensuing peace agreement, as of the February 20th 2017, the UN has reported that all of the FARC’s 7000 members have arrived at the 26 “demobilization zones” across the country and started handing-in their weapons (UN, 2017).

So, it would appear that Colombia is finally on the road to peace, and a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process in which combatants ‘acquire a citizen status’ has begun (Centro Nacional de Consultoría-CNC, 2011, 5). This objective, however, semantically contains its own challenges. Considering that the demobilizing will spend up to 3 years in reintegration programs in urban centers far from their places of origin, where many will remain due to continued retributive threats from neo-paramilitary groups (UN, 2017; UNHCR, 2015), the term *reintegration* is perhaps inappropriate, as the vast majority (70.7% according to CNC, 2011) of returnees will be IDPs *integrating* into new communities.
This is just a fraction, however, in the country that presently has ‘the world’s largest internally displaced population’ with an estimate of 6.9 million, or 14.1% of the total population (UNHCR, 2015, 30). The FARC’s significant contribution to these forced-displacements (around 28% according to Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2011 in Gibson, 2016)—as underscored by the quotes outlining this article—means that that war-weariness is accompanied by a weariness to the FARC: the transition between “guerrilla” and “citizen” seen in legal terms is not afforded by such a neat social distinction, and how society perceives the demobilizing group has the potential to determine how that group reintegrates socially.

Colombia’s DDR policy—evolved from collective demobilizations of several guerrilla groups in the 1990s (notably the Movimiento 19 de Abril-M-19), and the largest paramilitary group in 2003-6 (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-AUC), as well as the present initiative aimed at individual combatants—recognizes flaws in this reintegration, as ex-combatants continue to ‘face barriers to their social, economic and community reintegration…[as] the great majority of demobilized possess psychosocial attributes and values which limit the possibility of social interaction’ (Departamento Nacional de Planeación-DNP 2008, 18;20). This implication, furthermore, that integration is largely hindered by the returnees themselves, resounds consistently in national attitudes. Despite a general belief in a negotiated solution (67%-Gallup poll, 2017), the country is divided in how, and even if this should be done—often falling back on longstanding narratives of the FARC and its former-members. These divisions were apparent in the (non-binding) October 2016 referendum on the peace deal, which was narrowly rejected, with the “No” campaign—led by Uribe—employing false or exaggerated claims that the deal would ´serve as a thick mantle of impunity…[thus] Narco-terror is being rewarded in Colombia´ (Uribe, 2016).

This discourse of illegitimate terrorists crafted in-part by Uribe resonates with many Colombians- as seen in various national-level survey findings. Centro de Memoria Histórica-CMH (2012) found that 81% of respondents considered the FARC’s members as “plain delinquents”. Corresponding figures of a negative image (19%) and mistrust (62%) that the group will not fully demobilize (Ipsos, 2016; Gallup, 2017) show a public which is highly skeptical of the intentions of the FARC at group-level. Moreover, little distinction is offered to its ex-combatants at an individual-level, with prevalent views of suspicion (56.8% believing that returnees increase insecurity-Prieto, 2012), and fear (with 33.6% and 16.4% viewing them as dangerous and violent, Latin American Public Opinion Project-LAPOP, 2015). This all points to the assumption that when combatants demobilize they bring criminality and violent traits into receiving
However, the accounts of the demobilizing-fighters themselves, as well as existing data, strongly contest these assumptions and conversely show that challenges to reintegration have more to do with the receiving communities than the returnees themselves. A recent ‘third-generation’ of DDR researchers have explored accounts of former-fighters to identify common and salient problems for returnees, notably; difficulty in attaining further studies and formal employment; insecurity (32% are victims of human rights violations, including homicide (CNC 2011, 50)); and feelings of suspicion and fear from receiving-communities—all amounting to many reporting discrimination and stigmatization from society, and a struggle to adapt to daily life in often alien environments (Prieto, 2012; Nussio, 2011; CMH, 2012). Despite these challenges, most do reintegrate, at least in the narrow sense of rehabilitation and avoiding recidivism—86% according to Kaplan & Nussio (2013, in Gibson 2016).

These studies have demonstrated that how society perceives the demobilizing group has the potential to determine how that group reintegrates socially. Despite this apparent link, however, to the knowledge of this author no research exists which systematically tests the effects of these perceptions against the various components and determinants of reintegration. This article therefore aims to employ a qualitative Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) to examine the relationship between how the group and members are viewed, and how they are received as demobilized ex-combatants—hypothesizing that the correlation between the two, and the capacity of receiving communities to hinder reintegration, is stronger than previously thought.
Methods

Participants

The main data-source consisted of 26 participants of one NGO in Bogotá—all past or present members of the DDR program. These interviews were conducted between February 2015 and August 2016, initially with individually-demobilized FARC members (n=26, age 17-29), but as the research evolved the unit of analysis extended to former-paramilitaries (n=4, age 18-22), as well as members of wider civil society selected from Universities in Bogota (n=20, age 18-24). Alongside this were focus-groups: exclusively amongst members of the first (3), and third categories (3), and combined members of the first and second categories (2).

Design & Procedure

Considering this limited data-set this research does not pretend to be comprehensive nor fully-representative. Indeed, this provided the main rationale for the use of a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis—specifically one following the procedures of GTM developed by Corbin & Strauss, which provides highly valid data in which ‘representativeness of concepts, not of persons, is crucial’ (1990, 9). Following and being reflexive to the data thus allows a theoretical sensitivity as the researcher attempts to uncover often overlooked and salient insights without prejudice, critical in the highly polarized and divisive attitudes seen in countries at civil war.

As stipulated by GTM, initial interviews were open and unstructured and were framed as such to allow for the emergence, development, and testing of codes, concepts, and categories (open, axial, and selective coding), ‘I would like to hear about your experiences as an ex-combatant, and would like you to speak freely’. This first feedback-mechanism (constant comparative analysis) continued until no new categories emerged (conceptual saturation), indicated by a second feedback-mechanism (theoretical sampling), which allowed emerging concepts, categories and core categories to inform and be tested against the selection of the subsequent interviews detailed above.

To minimize the validity drawbacks of relying on using perceptions alone—notably the “social desirability response-bias” and “Hawthorne effect”—neutrally worded and unambiguous questions and assurances of anonymity were used. Additionally, secondary qualitative and quantitative-data were employed to cross-reference the primary-data.
Results

The public on reintegration: reinsertion

Firstly, this study will set out the examination of the public’s attitudes, expectations, and influence over the reintegration of the demobilizing FARC, as well as extrapolation between this and the aforementioned discourses surrounding the group and its former-members.

Following are some excerpts from the focus-groups with the public, which were representative to attitudes on the various components of reintegration: political, social, and economic, as well as programmatic and transitional-justice concerns;
We shouldn’t have these criminals in congress; they’ll only bring more extortion and corruption to politics.

Most of us hate the FARC, so their reintegrating members should expect to be rejected by society...definitely not as my neighbor.

If I worked with an ex-combatant? Well, how can you know if they’d behave?

The FARC’s been here for more than 50 years and they’ll have to pay for all those bad things that they did. To further expound upon these attitudes on reintegration, prior cross-national quantitative data was used, following the same categories. Research by Polimétrica (2016) polled over 60% of respondents being against demobilized having political participation, or being in a relationship with their children; and between 30-40% unwilling to provide employment to, or knowingly work or live alongside ex-combatants. In terms of programmatic aspects, we also see significant opposition—with 49% disagreeing to former-fighters receiving support through the DDR program (CMH, 2012). These data imply deep societal divisions on whether reintegration should occur, and what it should involve. Refining these views on reintegration shows us that this opposition to reintegration is not only theoretical, but demonstrates a capacity of civil society to hinder reintegration at both community and individual levels.

Much of this rejection appears in many ways to echo the (however misguided) dominant-discourses surrounding the FARC and its members. Striking similarities between the levels of trust, fear, and suspicion of the group, its members, and former-members, highlights not only the pervasiveness of the narratives in the face of empirical data, but also offers evidence that the narratives are being taken at face value—suggesting causality to how the ex-combatants are received into society.

**Ex-combatants on reintegration: the “invisible-citizen”**

Often described as “getting along with each other”, the lived experiences of many former-fighters generally conforms to the minimalist-approach of reintegration stipulated by the public's expectations. Typical accounts of returnees involved: stigmatization (‘You’re a demobilized, a murderer’), discrimination in employment and education (‘When they found out that I’d been part of an armed-group they fired me’), and security threats (‘I don’t know how, but when they [the local community] found out my past identity, I panicked because maybe the paramilitaries would find out’). These varied, yet common experiences led many to adopt what is termed here the “invisible-
citizen” narrative. That is, the belief that through being secretive about their past and keeping a low profile with minimal social-interaction, and “fitting in” with what they conceive as a being a “normal” citizen—that is studying or working—they could coexist with relative safety within society. As one noted, “I think that if we study and work, we can be a good citizen[…] But even with this we can’t be citizens if we’re not accepted…reintegration means giving us the opportunity to be here and to be involved with our neighbors’.

As this respondent’s frustrations show—typical of many—the public’s minimalist notion of reintegration contrasts with how they consider reintegration should be—involving reciprocal reconciliatory aspects such as trust and acceptance, and overall that the receiving-communities also have a role to play within this broader notion of reintegration.

Problems with the invisible-citizen narrative

This study found that the contradictions between the expectations,
lived experiences, and ideals of reintegration appear to be hindering the current reintegration process in two salient ways.

Firstly, the inferred stigmas of “ex-combatant” are often self-fulfilling as the stigmatization and rejection, and the insecurity and discrimination they affect, are responded to through relatively secret lives—in many cases limiting inter-personal and inter-group participation within their host communities. As one respondent noted, when they began trying to participate in the local community committee “the president told me “you don’t get to have a say around here because you were a murdering guerrilla””, to which she lamented, [previously] ‘When everything was clandestine nobody hated me.’ Tellingly, CNC (2011) surveyed that 14.3% of receiving communities believe that ex-combatants participate in community meetings, yet that the same number reported being scared of them in those meetings.

Conversely, however, sometimes when they had been open about their past, they reported positive experiences of acceptance, even embracement through their participation as citizens. The same respondent, despite this initial rejection reported that ’I’m a member of the committee board now and I like it because I feel like a citizen and I can contribute too.’ Another noted ‘In my job [as a nurse] I tell bits of my difficult past to patients who are very sick...which motivates them to get through their difficult situations...I feel like a useful instrument in society’.

Secondly, this secrecy inherent in the narrative resulted in many returnees having few, if any, friendships with civilians, and interestingly, those who did generally did so ‘without telling my history’. Indeed—particularly amongst younger members—many only felt safe enough to have relationships, intimate or otherwise, with other returnees, including between former “enemies”, i.e. between ex-guerrilla and ex-paramilitaries. Frequent explanations for this were, ‘you can feel safer’, ‘be more accepted’, and ‘speak freely about the past’ (focus-group of ex-paramilitary and ex-FARC members). However, these intra-group relations contrasted with the reintegration ideals of those same ex-combatants. In the same focus-group, for instance, one respondent contended that ‘Having a partner that's not necessarily a demobilized, that's part of reintegration into society’.

Discussion: identity, citizenship, and narratives
This study found its hypothesis to be valid: that much of society’s rejection of FARC ex-combatants appears to hinge on how the group and its present and former-members are perceived. A widespread desire for peace paradoxically lies alongside the fact that many Colombians are not inclined to accept what
this actually involves, i.e. a collectively-demobilizing guerrilla group returning back into society—showing reluctance towards the social reintegration of its ex-combatants—whether as co-workers or neighbors, and even less so as citizens or friends. The returnees reactions to this (invisible-citizenship) are secondary findings, and have been touched upon in prior research: Prieto (2012) noted a tendency by demobilizing-guerrillas to minimize social interaction with civilians, whilst Nussio (2011) reported a tendency by some ex-paramilitaries to ‘dedicating oneself to family, education and work’ (p590).

Although being previously examined as distinct phenomena, this study contends that these two components of the narrative should be analyzed conjointly to pinpoint and engage with the emotional-identity contradictions of the secret-citizen that have been documented here. Past identities are rejected (yet unresolved) whilst they assimilate those of “normal” citizens—which does not allow for the long-term multiple-transitions and multiple-identities involved in the shift from combatant to citizen, showing that for most returnees this short-term reinsertion is not a ´route to reintegration´ as contended by the government (DNP 2008, 3);

How do we integrate into society? Where does this label change? How can we be accepted as citizens? I’ve already earned a place in society, working, studying, raising a child.

Therefore, this paper recommends a shift in how citizenship is considered in DDR to allow both an acceptance of the past, and the endeavor to be a “good citizen” to take place simultaneously, and concludes by considering how entrenched dominant-narratives can be aligned more closely to a historical truth, which is more conducive to reintegration—particularly in post-conflict settings.

**Narratives and counter-narratives**

Parts of the narratives surrounding the FARC are indeed merited considering their departure from their original ideals since the 1970s—with increasing attacks against civilians, extortion, narco-trafficking and illegal mineral extraction (Prieto, 2012). However, misrepresentations and mistruths can be used by the state to exclude and delegitimize out-groups (Foucault, 1972, in Gibson 2016), therefore allowing the FARC’s traits and actions at an organizational-level to become exaggerated and attributed to, firstly its individual-members, and secondly its ex-members—from a figure of the FARC being responsible for far less violence in the country than paramilitary groups (23% in aggregate, and around 14% in recent years), 62% of Colombians surveyed believe otherwise (Gibson, 2016). Moreover, despite the great
majority of ex-combatants staying away from criminality, we see trust in returnees at less than 19% (CNC, 2011).

Looking at the collective-demobilization of the M-19 guerrilla group, Flórez (1997) contends that the group’s actions during and after the peace deal shifted the notion of ‘enemy’, ‘bandits’, and ‘narcos’ to one of gradual acceptance as both political actors and community members (p146). Similarly, the aforementioned Gallup and Ipsos surveys report a rise of around 10% in trust in the FARC over the last 2 years, which suggests that the top-down governments “peace discourse” and the FARC’s role towards implementing the peace deal is slowly tackling dominant images and truths. Moreover, if the M-19 experience is indicative, their actions as post-conflict (political and civilian) actors will clearly affect their acceptance at both group and individual levels.

It remains to be seen if the planned truth commission will contribute to this process by adding this critical bottom-up aspect. Accordingly, it would be wise if it sought to follow the South African model’s attempt to establish a historical truth by discerning between emotionally-driven collective-narratives and the factual through discussion, interaction and debate at community-level, which served to re-examine the totalizing social categories that existed surrounding the demobilizing group (Buikema, 2012).

At present however, the crucial out-group perspectives are not serving the critical function of dialogically engaging with the unfamiliar communities who will be determining whether they integrate, or segregate. Moreover, considering that returnees are currently living in constant risks (Prieto 2012), evidenced here with intra-ex-combatant relationships, the government’s Security Sector Reform to accompany the returning FARC needs to be scaled up, which thus far is lacking (UNHCR, 2015).

These elements are all interrelated; as the national top-down narratives gradually shift to one more aligned with accuracy, helped potentially by FARC actions, this will increasingly allow the critical bottom-up shift through community-level dialogue. Although rare, when these above-detailed everyday interactions of social and civic participation do occur, they often allow for the inclusion, acceptance, and the enabling of the community-level dialogical shifting of inaccurate stereotypes that Buikema advocates. Indeed, as indicated here, when community and security factors allow, returnees often want to participate and contribute to a post-conflict Colombia and tackle these misguided assumptions, which have until now been silenced in the dehumanizing discourse of war;
Why do they just ask about how many people I’ve killed? Why not recognize us as people who have left the armed conflict...and ask us why we started fighting in the first place, and how can we work together as civilians again?

With further investigation needed, this also offers tentative lessons for other political situations of integration where inaccurate national narratives negatively shape national and community-level acceptance: both in Colombia, where only 59% polled by CNC (2011) of (non-ex-combatants) IDPs are trusted, and elsewhere, for instance the effect of misleading immigrant narratives on the outcomes of both Britain's Brexit referendum and the recent US presidential elections.

References


