

# Bogotá-Colombian University Youth' Social Images of the Reintegration Process of ex-FARC-EP Guerrillas into Local Civil Society

Imágenes sociales de jóvenes universitarios de Bogotá, Colombia, sobre el proceso de reincorporación de exguerrilleros de las FARC-EP a la sociedad civil  
 Imagens sociais da juventude da Universidade de Bogotá-Colômbia sobre o processo de reintegração de ex-guerrilheiros das FARC-EP na sociedade civil local



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2023

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**Rip**  
**16<sup>1</sup>**

Volumen 16 #1 ene-abr  
 16 Años

ID: [10.33881/2027-1786.rip.16101](https://doi.org/10.33881/2027-1786.rip.16101)

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**Alt Title / Título alternativo:**

**[en]:** Bogotá-Colombian University Youth' Social Images of the Reintegration Process of ex-FARC-EP Guerrillas into Local Civil Society

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**[pt]:** Imagens sociais da juventude da Universidade de Bogotá-Colômbia sobre o processo de reintegração de ex-guerrilheiros das FARC-EP na sociedade civil local

**Author (s) / Autor (es):**

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**Keywords / Palabras Clave:**

**[en]:** Youth agency, Peacebuilding, FARC-EP, Youth social images, Reintegration process

**[es]:** Agencia de jóvenes, Consolidación de la paz, FARC-EP, Imágenes sociales juveniles, Proceso de reintegración

**[pt]:** Agência de juventude; Construção da paz; FARC-EP; Imagens sociais juvenis; Processo de reintegração

**Submitted:** 2022-07-27

**Accepted:** 2023-02-16

## Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo exploratorio trabajó doce jóvenes que cursaban el primer semestre de programas universitarios en la ciudad de Bogotá, Colombia, para explorar sus imágenes sociales sobre el proceso de reintegración de excombatientes de las FARC-EP, y cómo perciben las posibles interacciones con excombatientes que podrían darse en espacios como la universidad, el barrio y el lugar de trabajo. Expresaron sus temores, rechazo, aceptación y esperanzas en relación con la reinserción de los excombatientes de las FARC-EP a la sociedad civil. Sus narrativas expresaron el conocimiento y las emociones sobre el proceso de construcción de paz que se está llevando a cabo en el país. La metodología de narración de historias se utilizó como estrategia para recopilar datos de jóvenes en conflictos prolongados (ver Senehi, 2019). Este estudio contribuye a la literatura de estudios de paz y conflicto (PACS) y al campo de la psicología de la paz al resaltar el papel crucial de incluir las voces de los jóvenes en los esfuerzos de consolidación de la paz y reconciliación en las sociedades transitando por un post-acuerdo de paz (ver Byrne et al., 2019).

## Abstract

This exploratory qualitative case study recruited twelve youth who were in the first semester of their university programs of study in the city of Bogotá, Colombia. The research explores their social images of the FARC-EP ex-combatants' reintegration process, and how they perceive possible interactions with ex-combatants that could occur in spaces such as the university, the local neighbourhood, and the work place. They expressed their fears, rejection, acceptance, and hopes related to FARC-EP ex-combatants' reintegration into civil society. Their narratives expressed an insider's knowledge and emotions about the peacebuilding process-taking place in the country. The storytelling methodology was used as a strategy to generate data from young people in protracted conflicts (see Senehi, 2019). This study contributes to the Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) and Peace Psychology literature fields by highlighting the crucial role of including youth voices in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in post-peace accord societies (see Byrne et al., 2019).

## Resumo

Este estudo exploratório qualitativo utilizou doze jovens que cursavam o primeiro semestre de programas universitários na cidade de Bogotá, Colômbia, para explorar suas imagens sociais do processo de reintegração de ex-combatentes das FARC-EP e como eles percebem possíveis interações com ex-combatentes que poderiam ocorrer em espaços como a universidade, o bairro e o local de trabalho. Expressaram seus temores, rejeições, aceitação e esperanças em relação à reintegração dos ex-combatentes das FARC-EP na sociedade civil. Suas narrativas expressaram conhecimentos e emoções sobre o processo de construção da paz que está ocorrendo no país. A metodologia de contar histórias foi usada como estratégia para coletar dados de jovens em conflito prolongado (ver Senehi, 2019). Este estudo contribui para a literatura de estudos de paz e conflito (PACS) e para o campo da psicologia da paz, destacando o papel crucial de incluir as vozes dos jovens nos esforços de construção da paz e reconciliação em sociedades transitórias. por um acordo pós-paz (ver Byrne et al., 2019).

## Citar como:

Ochoa-Jimenez, D. E., & Luna Eslava, L. R. (2023). Imágenes sociales de jóvenes universitarios de Bogotá, Colombia, sobre el proceso de reincorporación de exguerrilleros de las FARC-EP a la sociedad civil. **Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología**, 16 (1), 1-11. Obtenido de: <https://reviberopsicologia.iberu.edu.co/article/view/2484>

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# Bogotá - Colombian University Youth' Social Images of the Reintegration Process of ex-FARC-EP Guerrillas into Local Civil Society

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Colombia was embroiled in a violent protracted conflict for nearly 60 years leaving impoverished, missing, dead, displaced people, fragile government institutions, and a polarized and radicalized country. The 2015 Historical Commission of Conflict and its Victims (**HCCV**) (**Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas**) indicates that the roots of the conflict are over control of land and the lack of deep agricultural reform laws as well as a profound ideological division between conservatives and liberal political parties, the exclusion of other political parties, the Catholic Church's involvement in national political issues, and the state's impossible task to cover the national area with a strong institution to respond to each regional particularity. The 2012 Colombian peace process included negotiation between President Juan Manuel Santos government and FARC-EP guerrillas. The international community including Norway, Cuba, Venezuela, and Chile supported this peace process, and helped facilitate critical points in the negotiation process, such as decommissioning weapons. Added to this international dimension, civil society groups like victim groups and civil society organizations were also invited to contribute to La Habana dialogues (**Luna, 2019**).

In addition, youth social movements have contributed to peacebuilding from formal and informal scenarios. An example is in the information released by the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) that shows the results of a national consultation with 30 young peacebuilding leaders in 15 departments, who contributed to defining the youth peace and security agenda in Colombia (PNUD, 2017). Likewise, in 2017 Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNYP) led a global mapping of youth organizations in peacebuilding, including Colombia, that described the general panorama of activities, achievements, strengths, and needs of youth organizations (SFCG, 2017). Those analytical reports recognize that young people were a significant actor in the Colombian civil war not only as survivors and perpetrators, but also as peacebuilders and constructive social actors.

Recent literature on youth in post-peace agreement societies note the capacity of youth agency and their possibility for transforming negative discourses that prolong conflict (Boyden, 2003, 2007; Alpízar & Bernal, 2003; Alvarado Salgado & Ospina Serna, 2018), their peacebuilding activities and practices (Alvarado, et al., 2012; Özerdem & Podder, 2015), and their ability to absorb and distil nuances from the local culture (Somers, 2012; Brett & Specht, 2004; Wessells, 2006). This article explores the perceptions and experiences of a group of young university students in Bogotá-Colombia concerning living in the same society with ex-FARC-EP combatants. The article describes youth' possible interaction with ex-combatants in social scenarios such as university, the workplace, and local neighborhoods.

## Context

The contextual scenario is framed by the latest peace agreement which was signed in 2016 covering six major items: 1) rural reform; 2) political participation; 3) the conflict's end; 4) a solution to the problem of illicit drugs; 5) the creation of a justice system for truth, reparations and non-repetition of violence; and, 6) the implementation and verification mechanisms to monitor and verify all the party's compliance with their commitments (Presidencia de la República, 2016). Item three includes the reintegration of FARC-EP members into civilian life considering some of the following actions: 1) the creation of rural transient normalization zones, whose main objective is to begin the process of preparing FARC-EP ex-members for reincorporation into civil life; 2) a disarmament process; 3) the reincorporation of former FARC-EP combatants into civilian life; 4) the creation of a social and solidarity economy organization called the Social Economies of the Common (ECOMÚN) to promote a process of collective economic reincorporation for ex-combatants; and 5) actions to guarantee the social and economic reincorporation of former combatants such as providing them with a basic income. Moreover, a subvention will be given to the demobilized once the rural transient normalization zones have ended (Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización, 2018). The rural transient mobilization zones are valid for 180 days and are extendable while the government implements a schedule for the guerrillas to disarm.

The reincorporation and reintegration of former combatants is not new. It has been carried out since 2006, when the government established a reintegration policy that aimed to offer psycho-social services, education, legal assistance, and productive projects to ex-combatants, including paramilitaries and guerrillas (Agencia para la Reintegración y la Normalización, 2016). The Colombian agency for the reintegration of former combatants has noted that since the government formu-

lated this policy, the reintegration process has faced some challenges like many ex-combatants that are experiencing discrimination and are being stigmatized and stereotyped by mainstream society (Agencia para la Reintegración y la Normalización, 2016). In addition, the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2018 report underlines some areas of concern, including the slow long-term political, social, and economic reincorporation of ex-combatants into society and in providing for their security (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2018, p.9).

Now, if we accept the premise that social group's specific ideas about ex-combatants can determine the relationships between them; then, we are able to argue that this negative attitude can hinder the reintegration processes. Related to this phenomenon, Kaplan and Nusio (2018) noted that interactions between community members and ex-combatants "may also encounter stigma, jealousies over demobilization benefits, and animosities between victimizers and victims that further impede reconciliation" (p.133). Therefore, this article seeks to convey a deep analysis of a small group of urban youth' attitudes, perspectives, fears, hopes, and knowledge that are determinant of their desire and will to coexist with ex-combatants that contributes to ongoing peacebuilding research in Colombia. Thus, the research contributes to a better understanding of the existing psychological, social, and cultural dynamics of young people within Colombia's post-peace agreement society.

## Conceptual context: youth, peacebuilding, and violent conflicts

In the past young people affected by violence in civil wars, interstate wars, intrastate wars, and urban wars were made invisible in research (Pruitt, 2017; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2003). Intergroup violence and war are concealed, prolonged, and stressful and often becomes a way of life for young people caught up in the middle of it, as there is an acceptable level of violence in society (Özerdem & Podder, 2015). Youth belong to groups with distinct ethnic identities as they compare, compete, and evaluate their group against other ethnic groups so that the nature of intergroup conflict means that it is difficult for young people to reach across the divide as traitors are targeted, boycotted, and punished (Cairns, 1996). Young people often do not experience war and violence equally as the conditions and contexts often vary even within the same conflict milieu (Cairns, 1996; Straker, 1992). For example, human rights and humanitarian narratives often construct African child soldiers as young vulnerable apolitical actors lacking agency whereas these youth assuage the complexity of pre-war and war milieus to make calculated decisions to engage as active combatants for economic, ideological, and survival reasons carrying out the same military duties as adult combatants (Adesola, 2021). Child soldiers are not innocent helpless survivors needing to be saved by benevolent Global North actors so that their choices and roles in war are complex and are not connected to their age or supposed lost innocence or victimhood (Adesola, 2021).

How will young people behave in post peace accord societies, and how will they comprehend conflict, violence, and imagining a new peaceful society? Will they heal and be productive moral citizens despite their suffering and witnessing of violent events? Young people's lived space is complex and contested. For example, Northern Irish integrated schools expand and broaden ethnic identity while economic deprivation and repression force some young people with no hope for

the future into the arms of paramilitary groups because they are loyal to their ethnic groups, and they want to belong and feel safe (Byrne, 2000). Conflict transformation, inclusive dialogue, and peacebuilding processes create positive cross community contact opportunities around superordinate goals that empirically challenge stereotypes on a day-to-day basis and empower young people to imagine a peaceful future together (Boulding, 2000).

Adults, children, and youth should be immersed in peace education and collaborative peacebuilding activities that meet local needs (Brock-Utne, 1985). The cultural and structural roots of conflict must also be addressed in post peace accord processes to build the peace dividend and a just peace for all so that new governance structures must tackle economic deprivation, inequality, and political exclusion creating leadership opportunities for young people to fully participate in the cultural, political, and socioeconomic realms (Creary & Byrne, 2014). Local people are using peacebuilding practices and healing rituals to reconnect ex-combatants with their communities, and research should focus on these processes (Wessells, 2006).

It is important to understand (1) the impact of violence on young people and their families and communities as they actively participate as combatants, survivors, and peacebuilders interchangeably, and become the next generation of future leaders once the violence ends (McEvoy-Levy, 2006); (2) young people's resiliency as well as the intergenerational transmission of trauma as they experience violence by witnessing or actively participating in violent activities in ethnic wars or in urban wars in the Global North (Cairns, 1996; Fast, 2017; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2003); and (3) the intersection of age, class, gender, religion, and personality when researching young people's socialization process, resiliency, and coping strategies related to trauma as strong families and communities often assist youth in coping with violence better (Cairns, 1996; Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

## Method

The first author used a semi-projective procedure that refers to a particular story completion based on verbal stimuli. Children and young people relate well to stories (Connell, 1971). In addition, the storytelling methodology decenters power and knowledge, situates the researchers in the research, has a deep respect of local people's knowledge, and focuses on stories that make people stronger (Senehi, 2020, 2022). The method replicated Greenstein and Tarrow's (1970) qualitative strategy that was also used in Byrne's (1997) study of Belfast schoolchildren's images of conflict and peace. Greenstein and Tarrow created an instrument with political situational episodes, interviewer instructions, and probing suggestions to explore young people's political images in Britain, France, and the U.S. The research instrument was adapted to create a more suitable research procedure for the Colombian context.

The research instrument is based on a verbal stimulus that poses a problematic dilemma that is more structured and culturally situated differently to the ambiguous stimulus in the traditional projective instruments (Greenstein & Tarrow, 1970; Byrne, 1997, 2000). Therefore, a semi-projective method does not look for a deep psychological analysis, yet it tests "values, cognitions, perceptual sets, characteristic ways of perceiving typical social situations, expectations about actions that will take place under specified circumstances, and so forth" (Greenstein & Tarrow, 1970, p. 502).

## Study type.

This semi-projective storytelling procedure is a method framed in the qualitative research paradigm (see Greenstein & Tarrow, 1970; Byrne, 1997, 2000) inserted in a phenomenological perspective. The hermeneutic perspective helps to reveal the meanings that social actors elaborate on and put into play in their narrations, actions, and interactions (Silva Batatina, 2017).

## Research design.

The research project was organized into two general stages. For the first stage, a pre-test of the semi-projective instrument was field-tested and adapted to the Colombian context. We worked collaboratively with a randomly selected group of twenty Colombian youth between 18 and 20 years of age in Bogotá to produce and test a group of situational episodes to be implemented in the second stage. The field test included several situational episodes related to the Colombian ex-combatant reintegration process to elicit students' perspectives. The literature was reviewed to find some relevant situational episodes, and a hypothetical situation was discussed with the participants. Then, the situational episodes were adjusted to ensure their clarity so that young people could understand all the storytelling episodes.

The second stage relates to the data collection process. It was carried out in May 2019, two and a half years after the senate endorsement of the peace accord and almost a year after the major key opponent of the peace agreement won Colombia's presidential election. Once the instrument was adapted to the Colombian context, the second stage of the research involved applying the adapted instrument one-on-one with 12 students attending a university in Bogotá to elicit their stories. The selection of the institution responds to the diverse young population that it admits as students. Each participant was explained the objective of the research and were asked to sign an ethics-informed consent form in order to be interviewed. The first author recorded the interviews to demonstrate the authenticity of the data and to ensure not losing any nuance from the interviews.

## Participants and the Research Site

Even though many ex-combatants decided to stay in rural zones, cities have an important responsibility in receiving and housing demobilized combatants. Data from the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (2018) illustrates that since 2012 Bogotá has received around six thousand demobilized combatants. Most of the ex-combatants living in Bogotá are in vulnerable neighborhoods such as Ciudad Bolívar, Kennedy, Bosa, Usme, San Cristóbal, Rafael Uribe, Suba, and Fontibón (Romero, 2017) and data shows that the bogotanos have prejudices about ex-combatants (Bogotá Cómo Vamos, 2015).

A 2017 Bogotá Cómo Vamos survey (see Romero, 2017) noted that 51 percent of respondents would be willing to have a demobilized worker as a coworker, and only 46 percent would accept that person as their neighbor. The survey also drew attention to the fact that young people are those that are more open to this experience. For example, people between the ages of 18 and 25 were the most willing (61 percent) to have a demobilized comrade as a co-worker or in having them live in their neighborhood (52 percent) (Romero, 2017). This data sug-

gests that Bogotá is a major recipient city for ex-combatants and that its citizens' perceptions about ex-combatants are in flux.

Therefore, Bogotá is a good location to go deeper in detail about what young people think about ex-combatants and the possibility of coexisting with them peacefully. The research took place at the Congregation of Jesus and Mary's Catholic university called La Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios (**UNIMINUTO**). This university is a private Catholic institution that is accessible to students from different cities and from different social backgrounds. UNIMINUTO is grounded in the principles of inclusion and social impact in the community, and its main location is in the Minuto de Dios neighborhood in Bogotá.

This article doesn't include the Catholic university's ideological position as a variable of analysis as participants are from the first year of their undergraduate program and they are not long exposed to the institution's moral principles. Also, many of the students who hail from impoverished inner-city barrios are studying in this institution for economic reasons rather than for ideological affinity. However, it is important to acknowledge that the religious ethos of the institution could be an important variable that determines people's perceptions. Most of its student population live in neighborhoods such as Bosa, Ciudad Bolívar, Fontibón, San Cristóbal, and Usme where ex-combatants are already settled. These areas are among the poorest neighborhoods in Bogotá and most of the population belong to the lower social class and working social class (**Secretaría Distrital de Planeación, 2016**). Twelve students who lived in those neighborhoods were interviewed via a convenience sampling technique (**Haer & Becher, 2012**). The inclusion criteria also comprised youth not affected directly by the Colombian conflict, as researchers wanted to inquire about the host communities' experiences of and perceptions of ex-combatants. Participants live in neighborhoods with diverse socioeconomic characteristics such as Fontibón, Suba, Usme, Minuto de Dios, and the neighboring populations of Bogotá, Soacha and Facatativa.

## Data Analysis Procedure.

The stories and interviews transcripts were analysed using the categories that emerged from the definition of each situation, the image of character(s), and the outcome of the episode (**Greenstein and Tarrow, 1970**). We used the two analysis and interpretation phases pointed out by Stringer (**2014**) namely, categorizing and coding, and the analysis of key experiences. In the first phase, we reviewed, unitized, categorized, and coded the data. Themes emerged inductively from the data. In the second phase, we analysed the interviewee's significant experiences such as feelings, moment of crisis or incidents that were revealed during the research process.

## Human Ethics.

The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Manitoba Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (**JFREB**). We ensure participants' privacy and anonymity by using pseudonyms. We informed participants of their voluntary role in the study, and explained that they may decide to withdraw from the study at any stage. We provided clarity about the purpose and aims of the study, the use of the results, and the likely consequences of the study. In case any participant became anxious or distressed during the interview or expressed any psychological or emotional discomfort, we offered them free counselling services.

## Results

The situational episodes or social situations used to stimulate participants' stories elicited from the participants' three areas which can be understood as (1) knowledge of FARC-EP, (2) perception of ex-combatants within the reintegration process, and (3) discrimination and stereotyping directed toward ex-combatants.

### Participant's Knowledge of FARC-EP.

During the 1980s and 1990s, FARC-EP escalated its involvement with the drug trafficking economy and population extortion via kidnapping. Colombians began to relate guerrillas with those activities and associate them with displacement and attacks against the population (**Mojica, 2011**). In addition, since the end of the nineties, the media discourse removed the idea that the conflict is a political struggle, and that FARC-EP is a terrorist group (**Mojica, 2011**). After the failure of El Caguán peace process, the people's distrust of FARC-EP increased. The selection of information promoted by various Colombian governments and the media focused on the guerrillas' terrorist attacks in the past that also influenced people's perceptions. The rejection of FARC-EP by a significant portion of the Colombian population was symbolized by the massive social mobilizations in 2008 and 2011, where thousands of Colombians marched in the streets pleading with FARC-EP to disarm, demobilize, and free kidnapped people (**Marcha contra las Farc, 2008**). In part, most of the participants' knowledge is related to this general social framing of the conflict.

The participants had to complete a story to explain to an international student what FARC-EP is and what will happen to ex-combatants from this group after the peace agreement was signed with the Colombian government. In general, there is a negative image of FARC-EP guerrilla. Some youth refers to FARC-EP as a terrorist group or a group that extorts money and is composed of bad people. For some participants, FARC-EP is a group that commits violent actions such as kidnapping and displacing people from their land to then take it over. Related to this viewpoint, Tom commented on the issue in the following manner:

*TOM: They are a terrorist group that has done a lot of damage to the Colombian people for all the years that they have existed. Not only to Colombia, but it has also affected other countries, because they are trafficking drugs. They commit crimes against humanity, they have displaced people from their homes. They are not guerrillas. We know it as something bad. They there [international community] know it as a guerrilla group, but here we do not know it as something revolutionary.*

Tom not only used the word terrorist to refer to FARC-EP, but he also stated that it is not a guerrilla group making it very clear that in his opinion FARC-EP is not a revolutionary organization. Tom also makes a distinction about how Colombians see FARC-EP and how people from other countries identify them. Likewise, Tom's idea is also reflected in Mary's narrative. This is what she had to say on the issue:

*MARY: I would tell other people that it is a group [FARC-EP] that attack cultures and territories to then invade them. Their purpose is to get people out of their territories; so, they can take them over.*

Mary emphasizes the group's objective. She asserts that FARC-EP's only purpose was to displace people in order to control their territories. Mary's opinion is illustrative of how FARC-EP has become bereft from its political or revolutionary ideology. Those youth's opinions are like those that circulate in the Colombian media about FARC-EP. The mainstream media's ideas are that FARC-EP traffics drugs, kidnap civilians, and displace people.

On the other hand, some participants recognize the guerrilla's political past and how they emerged as rural peasant social movements' that pursued the transformation of the political order. Some participants consider the emergence of FARC-EP, and other subversive groups to be linked to the Colombian government's lack of management and control over some of the national territories. However, most of the participants agree that FARC-EP's ideology was diverted due to acts of kidnapping and drug trafficking. Colombia's communist revolutionary groups emerged in the sixties with the aim of changing the country's political, economic, and social structures. The emergency of communist guerrillas occurred in an economic and social context where the inequitable concentration of rural property was the main characteristic in Colombian society. George reported on this issue in the following way:

**GEORGE:** *It is a subversive group that defended the values, laws, and rights that in some regions were lost and where the state omitted and lost control. They [the government] did not take them into account and that's why this group [FARC-EP] got into these places and started doing other things, supposedly they did it for the ideals and to survive.*

In contrast to Tom and Mary's stories, George underlines the subversive characteristic of FARC-EP. He acknowledges to some degree that he is caught up in a political struggle with this group. On the other hand, Lucia has a similar point of view to George. She noted that FARC-EP emerged from among impoverished rural peasants that embraced Marxism. However, she also mentions the shift undergone by ex-FARC-EP as it moved from being a political alternative organization to becoming a group that promotes illegal industries. This is what she had to say on the issue:

**LUCIA:** *I know that the guerrilla of FARC was born from peasants, and they wanted to go to socialism. But then, kidnappings entered to be used for political exchange. What they want is socialism first, but then drug trafficking and kidnapping were used, and they stopped being a political fight to be a criminal group.*

Cleo recognized FARC-EP in relation to the most recent peace agreement and she also mentions that FARC-EP has a double contradictory characteristic of protecting people's interests yet at the same time harming ordinary citizens using violence:

**CLEO:** *I would say that it is a group that demobilized thanks to the peace agreement that was carried out. That is why all the weapons and lands they had occupied were handed over by them. It was a group that sought to defend the people but went to the extreme of hurting people and causing harm.*

Jennifer also underlines that the media influences the community's general ideas about FARC-EP. This is an interesting part of her story because there is an invitation to gather different information in order to understand how the guerrillas emerged in Colombia. Also, she analyses different distinguished members of FARC-EP considering their role in the peace process to implement a just society. Jennifer does not

perceive FARC-EP to be a uniform group. This is what she had to say on the issue:

**JENNIFER:** *FARC is an armed group that has been in Colombia for long time, but it is known, or the news shows it as something bad, that only kidnaps people, displaces peasants, and harms the country. But it would be good to investigate why that armed group was created because it was created by bad acts of the government, and they decided to do a revolution. But they also did not look for a good deal and started doing bad things like recruiting people. I think this might damage people recruited lives.*

Most participants recognize that Colombia's revolutionary groups started from peasant social movements justified in addressing social issues; yet after a while, they diverted their objectives and replaced them by trafficking drugs and taking control of land from others. However, the respondents did not mention the international influence on the protracted Colombia conflict. For example, the U.S.'s "preventive" strategy to prevent communism's expansion in the region forced marginalized groups to respond with armed insurgency (Giraldo Ramírez, 2015). The emergence of armed communist groups such as FARC, ELN, and EPL was also influenced by the Cold War and the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 (Giraldo Ramírez, 2015, p. 7), the military coup that overthrew Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua (Pizarro Leongómez, 2015).

## Participants' Perceptions of Ex-Combatants Within the Reintegration Process.

Participants expressed some knowledge and images of what is happening to ex-combatants since the emergence of the peace process with the government. Even when some of their details are not accurate, the general idea concerning the reintegration process is linked to what they see that was established in the peace agreement. In Colombia, the institution that oversees the reintegration process is the Colombian Agency for Reintegration and Normalization (CARN). Reintegration is defined by CARN as the process "to develop skills and civic competences among demobilized people and their environments." It creates spaces for "coexistence and reconciliation actions and encourage co-responsibility of external actors." Demobilized people are provided with assistance to boost their access to education, training for work and psychosocial support, and their productive projects (Agencia para la Reincorporación y Normalización, 2019). Some young people recognize the importance of providing ex-combatants the opportunity to reintegrate into civil society even if it is not easy, and there may even be a significant amount of discrimination levelled against the former combatants. Luke recognized that the reintegration process has created some positive achievements:

**LUKE:** *The peace agreement was made in the [Juan Manuel] Santos government. Santos said that those who demobilize would have access to education and the right to have a normal life. There was a vote [peace referendum] where it was decided whether or not people agreed to the peace process, and the peace process won. However, many Colombians said no because they thought they were going to steal that money. But lately it has been seen that several ex-combatants have graduated from high school that means that the peace process is working.*

Data obtained from CARN in Colombia before June 2019 points out that 13,190 ex-combatants were recognized as FARC-EP members (**Agencia para la Reincorporación y Normalización, 2019**). From this number, 94 percent of ex-combatants are already affiliated to the public health system, 79 percent are members of the pension system, and 1,773 former FARC-EP combatants are enrolled in academic institutions (**Agencia para la Reincorporación y Normalización, 2019**). In addition, the economic reintegration program is oriented towards the generation of productive alternatives, both collective and individual. The program aims to consolidate income in the medium and long term, within the framework of legality. People in the process of reintegration are entitled to a one-time financial support package to undertake a socioeconomic project.

Lucia recognized that the government has set aside political positions in the senate for former combatants that clearly indicates that the peacebuilding process appears to be working:

*LUCIA: I know that the reintegrated people are being subsidized by the government in order to return to society. They have the right to have 12 seats in the senate, a political party, and access to the JEP [Peace Special Jurisdiction] to be judged for the crimes done in the past.*

On the other hand, Aura also recognized that the ex-combatants would initially be discriminated against as they try to reintegrate themselves within the society. She noted that this process would not be easy for them:

*AURA: It is assumed that the state will involve them [ex-combatants] with us and we have to be integrated with them. At the beginning they will be discriminated against and there will be open discussions about them, but then we will have to accept them.*

Some of the narratives also show that there is realistic analysis surrounding the achievements of the reintegration process. Some respondents recognize that the process is somewhat difficult, and that some of the ex-combatants will actively return to the guerrilla groups. Margaret recognized that the issue is complex as some people will successfully reintegrate into society while others who find the process more difficult will be drawn back into the guerrilla groups:

*MARGARET: Some combatants are aware of the peace process. Others are not happy with the guerrillas because they got involved against their will. They can demobilize and with the peace agreement may go easily, the rest of them may enjoy it and stay in their guerrilla group, so they say they are going to seek an agreement, but they will not leave.*

Brian mentions that the reintegration process depends on society's response. He thinks that Colombian society is not ready to receive ex-combatants, especially because it doesn't have many opportunities for its people:

*BRIAN: They would be dispersing, there would be a lot of unemployed people without much to do, and there would be a lot of free space in the lives of these people. My belief is that by demobilizing them, there would be a society that is a little heavier [more difficult]. They have already been bad. How they will be incorporated into the community if they do not have opportunities from benefactors.*

Connected to Brian's reflection, some peace organizations analyzed the challenges within Colombian society as ex-combatants embed themselves within the reintegration process. They argue that the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (**DDR**) policy has the challenge of promoting conditions in the local and regional societies. It includes active participation of the whole society that integrates community grassroots movements, survivors, ex-combatants, public institutions, scholars, and socioeconomic groups for the construction of peace and in providing an important strategy to avoid the repetition of new armed uprisings (**Castellanos, 2016**).

To sum up, some participants' demonstrated knowledge around the reintegration process. They know that FARC-EP ex-combatants have the right to receive economic and social support from the Colombian government. Also, they discussed the political participation of ex-combatants in the democratic process as something negotiated in the peace agreement.

## Discrimination and Stereotyping of Ex-combatants

This area was analyzed with regards to two possible social situations. The first simulates the possibility of a famous ex-combatant becoming involved in an episode with a police officer, who is monitoring those persons' that drive too fast in a city. The second relates to the possibility of people from civil society working with an ex-combatant. Some of the participants point out that the treatment offered to ex-combatants depends on whether the person supported the peace process or not. Numerous stories underline the fact that being an ex-combatant may make people pay more attention to the person. Cleo notes in the episode with the police officer that the policeman would scrutinize the ex-combatant's documents very carefully:

*CLEO: The policeman stops him for speeding and asks him why he is going so fast, and then asks for his documents. If the policeman does not see anything suspicious, he will let him go, despite being a former combatant. But the policeman would have doubts surrounding his judicial past. So, he would review everything and question him a lot, but if he does not find anything, he would have to let him go.*

Louis also believes that the police officer would treat the former combatant harshly. He reported on this issue in the following manner:

*LOUIS: The policeman would treat the ex-combatant harsher, and demand more from him because he is an ex-combatant. He [the policeman] would think that he is taking part in some illegal business. The ex-combatant would hand over his things and documents. The ex-combatant would say that he is doing nothing that he is just doing what he does in his daily life.*

Similar examples of discrimination are found in a work scenario where an ex-combatant is employed. Louis also highlighted in his narrative about the work scenario that there will be friction between the ex-FARC guerrilla and the boss. He also mentions that whether ex-combatants' are accepted by their colleagues or not depends on whether the ex-combatants change their ideology. He reported on this issue in the following way:

*LOUIS: Distrust begins. The first thing that will emerge is distrust. If he [the boss] is very rational, at once he will dis-*



*miss him, he [ex-combatant] will see a rejection, or simply if he [the boss] is an intelligent person he will put him to a test to see how his behaviour is like, if he continues with the guerrilla thinking*

Moreover, Aura illustrated in her story that the ex-combatant would have a difficult time in the organization as the employer would have very negative stereotypes about that person. What is interesting about Aura's narrative is that she states that people will always have a negative perception of FARC-EP. This statement can play out as an obstacle for the reintegration of former FARC guerrillas into society:

*AURA: He may be fired. They [the company] may think that he [ex-combatant] could kill them, or create conflicts at work, and problems. It would be very difficult for them to accept him; it could happen only if they get used to him. I think they can fire him because he is from FARC, and we will always have a bad perception of them.*

On the other hand, Bety mentioned that the police officer's discriminatory action depends on the community, which is integrating the ex-combatants and people's individual characteristics, as well as the role that the ex-combatants played in war.

*BETY: If he [boss] is a good person, he would call him and ask him why he did not tell him before that he used to be a combatant and let him continue working, but if he is a bad person, he would be fired just for being an ex-combatant.*

The ideas of possible discrimination and the use of stereotypes are like what was underlined by CARN's 2016 report about the evolution of Colombia's reintegration process. In this report, CARN argued that Colombia is institutionally prepared for the post-peace accord milieu, yet Colombian society is not yet ready. The protracted conflict, the attacks against society, and the low intensity conflict that takes place in the peripheral areas of the country have resulted in the people's lack of confidence and the use of stereotypes of ex-combatants (Agencia para la Reincorporación y Normalización, 2016).

On the other hand, McMullin (2012) noted that ex-combatants are believed to be "dangerous, apolitical, and resented" people. These ideas are the outcome of broader assumptions that are incubated, reinforced, and sustained through economic, social, cultural, and ideological structures that are asserted to be natural (p. 390). In this research, some of the participants' narratives illustrate how anomie and violent behaviour are attributed to ex-combatants. Former combatants can be perceived as a threat to society because they could be thought of as possessing weapons or committing infractions to maintain their power status after the peace agreement. Tom also thinks that ex-combatants do not have the right to complain about any abuse of power because of their past behaviour during the war:

*TOM: They [ex-combatants] are supposed to have combat training and that could be dangerous. I do not think he [referring to the situation of a police officer asking him to stop] stops easily when he sees the policeman, there could be a persecution. If the policeman identifies him, he could be in danger because the ex-combatant could be armed.*

Even though the interviewees highlighted in their stories that the ex-combatant is a threat to society, they still articulated that the person should be given the chance to change and be fully integrated into civil society in order to fully resolve the Colombian conflict. For example, Jennifer is of the opinion that the employer must forget about the past

and treat the employee with respect otherwise the peace process will not succeed:

*JENNIFER: In Colombia, people who do not have a high social status are discriminated against. When they see that he is a former combatant, they could judge him and not give him the job. A social agreement must be made and the bad things that FARC did in the past has to be left in the past. There may be rejection from some colleagues, there will always be prejudices, and the boss could even fire him.*

Similarly, Peter strongly felt that the employer should give the former combatant a fair chance. He reported that the person decommissioned his/her weapons and wants to work and to have a good future:

*PETER: If he is working, it is because he handed over the weapons. He is looking to change and to not have conflicts with the state. It may be that the boss calls him and talks with him to reach an agreement and realizes that he [ex-combatant] really changed and wants to work.*

In conclusion, many participants think that ex-combatants will be discriminated against because of their past. This data confirms previous analysis circulated by CARN related to former combatants' reintegration into civil society. Ex-combatants can be stigmatized for being aggressive, having anomic behaviour, or for being criminals. However, these youth also think that ex-combatants deserve an opportunity to be accepted into Colombian society. Some narratives illustrate that the reintegration process is a step forward in Colombian peacebuilding. It means that the people's perception of ex-combatants is not a uniform category.

## Discussion

This study does not claim that its findings are emblematic of all youth living in Colombia. The findings are representative of the twelve study participants. Nonetheless, the participants' voices in this study must be viewed as a window into the soul of Bogotá's urban youth. The participant's narratives are complex, varied, and contrasting. However, what the participants have in common is their experience of living in a country that has been in a civil war for more than sixty years and this context is influencing their hopes, fears, understandings, and perceptions about coexisting with people who were directly involved in the conflict.

The empirical data indicates that some participants have dichotomous experiences and perceptions around the Colombian conflict. This can also be found in the media, social networks, and everyday Colombians debates over the peace agreement. In this case, the participants locate themselves as a "normal" and a "good" society that has been victimized by guerrilla groups, while ex-combatants play the role of being the "evil" other who did great damage through drug trafficking and taking over lands that belong to "poor" people. Ex-combatants are described in some stories as dangerous criminals, with anomic behaviour that are incapable of reintegrating back into civil society. Those participants whose narratives show more salient dichotomous viewpoints of the conflict tend to create stories that allot discrimination, stereotypes, and more extreme behaviours to their counterpart.

However, youth also think that ex-combatants deserve an opportunity to be accepted into Colombian society. Some narrative shows the reintegration process as a step forward in Colombian peacebuilding.

ding. It means that people's perception of ex-combatants is not a uniform category. Also, some stories describe how the reintegration process depends on individual characteristics and one's personal political position. Some dichotomous perceptions of the conflict were blurred due to the heterogeneous characteristics of the youth and their diverse forms of understanding their realities, especially in those stories where the participants used critical thinking. It means that when narratives include the analysis of different discourses, evaluate the pros and cons, and describe historical process there is a tendency for these young students to locate themselves within a "neutral" place that suggests that ex-combatants do not have to be discriminated against and should be given a second chance. These participants demonstrate a low level of collective generality (Rothbart & Korostelina, 2009, p. 89). It means that the perception of the Other as a differentiated group whose behaviors is heterogeneous doesn't simplify the characteristics of the outgroup. The findings indicate the importance of the youth's use of analytical thinking to support local peacebuilding efforts in Bogotá.

## Conclusions

Young people play a significant role in favor of or against peacebuilding processes. They can be involved in grassroots movements that strengthen and transform peaceful communities, yet they can also be involved in disruptive groups that cause more violence (McEvoy-Levy, 2006, p. 7). On the other hand, peacebuilding is a long-term process that will also impact future generations. Young people's perceptions of conflict and the peacebuilding system that helps to resolve it are serious elements of success or failure within peace processes. Creating peaceful relationships in post-peace agreement societies depends on how individuals, including youth are socialized, and what kind of perceptions and experiences they acquire in relation to the other, and what kind of leaders they are and will become (McEvoy-Levy, 2006, p. 7).

This indicates that youth are a significant subject of analysis to evaluate positive intergroup relationship dynamics, the setting up of peaceful communities, and the efforts to find new creative ways of resolving conflicts. On the other hand, the story completion procedure used to inquire about young Bogotá university student participants' social images about the reintegration process of ex-FARC members is a method that suits the characteristics of the participants. Communication with youth must be adjusted to their characteristics allowing them to transmit their thoughts and feelings in their own way.

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