Dehumanization Effects on Agency, Punishment, and Re-socialization attributions towards Former Perpetrators in Post-conflict

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Abstract

In the present study we examined the effects of a dehumanizing media discourse towards former perpetrators of violence on observers' attributions of their agency, punishment deservingness, and suitableness for re-socialization. In two studies, using within (Study 1) and between (Study 2) subjects designs (n = 223), participants read two manipulated news articles describing the capture of a fictional former perpetrator of violence in the midst of a real post-conflict scenario. In a "humanizing" condition, the perpetrator description was framed in the article making reference to some of his human features (i.e. his identity, affective states, and mental states). In a "dehumanizing" condition, the perpetrator description was framed in a way that obscured its human characteristics (i.e. referring to the character as a terrorist, rebel or soulless bandit, and omitting information about his identity and internal states). Then, we measured participants' attributions of the perpetrators' human agency, blame, punishment deservingness, as well as participants' re-socialization expectations, and social distance towards the character. Results indicated that compared to the humanized condition, in the dehumanized condition participants significantly attribute less agency to the perpetrator, endorse more severe retributive judgments, show more negative attitudes towards his re-socialization, and express greater social distance. The implications of these findings for a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reincorporation (DDR) process of perpetrators in post-conflict scenarios are discussed.

Keywords: framing, dehumanization, agency, retributive justice, resocialization, post-conflict.

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Within the inter-group dehumanization literature, criminals, social norm transgressors, and terrorism suspects have been identified as targets of dehumanization. It has also been evidenced that dehumanization increase observer's attributions of lack of civility, self-control, cognitive abilities, emotionality, culture, interpersonal warmth, depth and agency towards the dehumanized targets (Haslam, 2006). To date, most of the research has focused on the consequences of dehumanization for triggering or facilitating violence, prejudice, and different kinds of intergroup conflicts; however, there is a lack of empirical research testing the effects of dehumanization in the face of the ending rather than the beginning of violent conflicts. Particularly, there are no reported studies on the effects of dehumanization of former perpetrators of violence in people's attitudes towards their human agency, punishment deservingness and suitableness to reincorporate to civil life in post-conflict settings.

The present study is intended to contribute to the general understanding of observers` perceptions of perpetrators in post-conflict settings by means of integrating and extending interdisciplinary knowledge from communication science, cognitive, political and social psychology. The specific aim of our study is to evaluate the effect of former perpetrators` dehumanization (through media discourse) on the attributions of their agency, punishment deservingness, and attitudes towards their resocialization. We predict that in comparison to a humanizing way to refer to perpetrators in news media, their dehumanization will elicit fewer agency attributions, more severe blame attributions and retributive judgments, negative attitudes towards their resocialization and more social distance perceptions. To test our predictions, we use both within and between subjects' designs, and unlike previous research we experimentally manipulate dehumanization.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization is defined as "the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human" (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016, p. 25), and has been widely studied by social psychology (e.g. Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). Two general kinds of dehumanization have been identified in the general model proposed by Haslam (2006): mechanistic (i.e. object-like), and animalistic (i.e. animal-like). According to the model, the undermining of human nature (HN) core traits such as emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, and individuality promotes the mechanistic form of dehumanization. On the other hand, the undermining of unique human (UH) traits such as moral sensibility, rationality, or maturity, give rise to the animalistic for of dehumanization. There is evidence suggesting that both kinds of dehumanization facilitate support for punitive forms of counter-terrorism, unfair and discriminatory treatment toward the targets (e.g. criminals, political opponents, ethnic out-groups, or disabled people), insensibility to targets' pain and suffering (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016), or moral disengagement with the purpose of legitimize harsh punishments or aggressive actions against perpetrators (Khamitov, Rotman, & Piazza, 2016). The influence of dehumanization on interpersonal perceptions has been a classic research topic in warfare contexts (Tajfel, 1981). In a recent study, for example, Lindén, Björklund, & Bäckström showed that dehumanization can increase support for torture as a way to fight terrorism (2016).

Dehumanization also facilitates the elicitation of visceral moral emotions like anger or disgust, increasing the perceived harm caused by perpetrators and consequently the punishment deservingness and the belief that they are incorrigible. For example, it has been evidenced that when offenders are divested of their humanity, observers attribute that they are less sensitive to pain, more dangerous, uncontrollable, feel less guilty, less willing to restore the harm they caused, and that they morally disengage more easily (Bastian, Denson, & Haslam, 2013). Recent

research has also evidenced that dehumanized offenders are granted with a decreased sense of agency (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011; Khamitov et al., 2016), understood as the self-reflective or metacognitive capacity that individuals have for recognizing themselves as causal beings, with an identity, and with autonomy over their own desires, intentions, beliefs, emotions, responsibilities, and moral sense (Bandura, 1999; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009), all of them, essential elements for the rehabilitation and re-socialization of former offenders, criminals or perpetrators of violence (and also for the public trust in these processes). Finally, It has been evidenced that dehumanization has negative effects on social connectedness with the dehumanized out-groups by means of increasing social and psychological distance (Haslam, 2006). Social distance is the reduction of the degree of understanding and intimacy characteristic of social relations between individuals and social groups (Wark & Galliher, 2007). When people are regarded as socially distant, they are perceived in a simple, abstract, and impoverished way by ignoring specific traits like motivations, beliefs, and intentions, and this facilitates observers' cold cognition-based judgments (Haslam, 2006). As with the reduced attributions of warmth, and agency, the reduction of understanding and social connectedness is detrimental for the positive expectations of rehabilitation and re-socialization of former offenders.

Framing Effects

Framing theory predicts that the form in which an issue is characterized or presented has an influence in the way it is understood by an audience through their cognitive schemas for information processing (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing process has two levels: a sender-level focused on the construction and presentation of messages, and a receiver-level focused on impression formation in the receptor. Regarding the former, some research has explored how specific forces or groups within society deliberately shape public discourse by

establishing predominant labels to the issues being communicated (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Concerning the latter, it has been found that repetition of frames has an impact in less informed individuals, whom at the same time pay more attention to peripheral cues in the messages to form their opinions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Previous theorizing suggest that media directly influence the process of construction and diffusion of reality, and shape the ideological consumption through which individuals acquire representations, beliefs, and meanings around the social order and their participation in it, through mechanisms such as the deliberate setting of political agendas in news media, or the cognitive framing of the messages delivered (Sánchez, López, & Barreto, 2013). Importantly, and related to media framing of peace processes, previous research has evidenced that a media negative bias in the news coverage about the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace process promoted a stronger public negative response hindering government efforts to publicly legitimate the peace agreement (Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010). This research suggests that the role of news media in providing citizens with important clues to form a public opinion around the peace process, is biased due to the contradiction between the inherent outcomes of peace and the drama/sensation journalistic norm. Considering that armed conflicts are often experienced directly by certain portion of the population but also indirectly through mass media by most of the people, it is pertinent to address how media framing of the actors in the conflict influence observers´ perceptions of them.

Some studies in the field of linguistics and discourse analysis have evidenced such biases in the framing of news, and more specifically in news depicting formed perpetrators of violence in armed conflicts. For example, a study analyzing news reports about the Colombian internal conflict revealed that when demobilized members from the FARC guerrilla and paramilitary groups were mentioned, they were mainly associated with crime and judicial penalties, and

47.4% of the journalistic notes in the sample, framed them exclusively as guilty perpetrators of crimes, omitting individual characteristics (Gutierrez, 2007). Another discourse analysis study in the same context evidenced how Colombian former-president Álvaro Uribe built an "us versus them" warlike rhetoric against FARC guerrilla by means of using specific linguistic formulas such as publicly nominating FARC members as "terrorists" or "murderers", or comparing them to the Nazis and Al Qaeda (Castellanos, 2014). In the same line, an analysis of more than 500 news articles from the principal Colombian journals about violent events perpetrated by the FARC and the paramilitaries between 1998 and 2006 revealed that the mainstream press uses differential linguistic strategies such as the passive voice, or euphemisms (e.g. dead in combat vs. beheaded) to lessen the perception of responsibility of paramilitary groups and highlight FARC responsibilities via dehumanization and demonization. The results also revealed a list of 200 adjectives used in the news to denominate FARC members, including terms such as "savage", "satanic", "sanguinary", or "damned" (García-Marrugo, 2013). Despite the doubtless responsibility of former perpetrators in past violent events, these forms of dehumanization pose negative effects on observers' attitudes and perceptions towards their agency, responsibility, and acceptance as future members of society in the face of a peace process.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

Protocols for peace negotiations define reincorporation of former perpetrators in post-conflict as an economic, social, and political issue (Nussio, 2013; Theidon, 2009). A disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process is a huge responsibility for governments and societies around the world since it directly implies the safety guarantees for victims and civilians (e.g. no repetition, no recidivism in crime), as well as the survival of ex-combatants and their relatives after their reincorporation to civil life. One of the primary factors for a successful DDR

process is citizens' attitudes and perceptions towards the transgressors who are being reincorporated to society. Most of the times, communities receive ex-perpetrators with resentment as they have suffered violence without any governmental support (Özerdem, Podder, O'Callaghan, & Pantuliano, 2008). For instance, people often criticize the unequal benefits for ex-combatants and victims, the limitations of transitional justice, and the new outbreaks of violence following demobilization of violent groups (Nussio, 2013). Therefore, any DDR process has the difficult task of balancing the social inclusion of ex-combatants with the demands and acceptance of the community (Annan & Cutter, 2009). If not carried out properly, DDR processes could intensify prejudice, facilitating the segregation between civilians and demobilized members (Bøås & Hatløy, 2008; Jennings, 2007), and hindering their psychological reintegration (Hangman & Nielsen, 2002). Thus, studying the effects of news media dehumanization on people's attributions of former perpetrators in post-conflict scenarios is particularly relevant. Here, we aim to make a contribution highlighting these effects.

The Current Research

Colombian Post-conflict Context

In the present research we collected our data from samples of Colombian citizens facing a post-conflict stage. Colombian armed conflict is recognized as one of the most prolonged and severe in Latin America's contemporary history. It is calculated that from 1958 to 2012, the internal conflict caused approximately 30.000 kidnappings, 25.000 disappeared individuals, and 220.000 deaths between civilians and combatants (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). 6.8 million people have been forcibly displaced due to violence, generating the world's second largest internally displaced population after Syria ("Human Rights Watch, World Report 2017: Colombia," 2017). The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP for its acronym in

Spanish) is the largest guerrilla group in the country. After the peace agreement between the government and this guerrilla in 2017, it was estimated that approximately 17.500 demobilized members of FARC would be incorporated into civilian life (El Tiempo, 2016). Despite the historic achievement, approximately half of the population remains skeptic about the transitional justice and re-socialization process through which former perpetrators are being reincorporated to civic society. This scenario provides a unique opportunity to test the effects of inter-group dehumanization on our set of dependent variables.

Aims

To test our predictions, we conducted two empirical studies. In Study 1, we employed a full within-subjects design in which participants read two manipulated news reports narrating the capture of a FARC member, one framed in humanizing language and the other framed in dehumanizing language. Then, we measured participants' attributions of human agency, blame, punishment deservingness, re-socialization expectations, and social distance towards the former perpetrator of the stories after each news report reading. To circumvent the limitations of the within-subjects design, in which the news reports were not exactly the same in order to avoid testing effects, we conducted Study 2 using a full between-subjects design and randomly assigning participants to either the humanization or the dehumanization condition. In Study 2 we employed the exact same news report in both conditions exclusively manipulating the dehumanization/humanization features related to the main character in the news, and we aimed to replicate Study 1 findings.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

A total sample of n = 93 participants, 52.7 % woman, 47.3% men, were recruited out of convenience at schools and universities in Bogotá, Colombia, and interviewed by trained research assistants. Of these, 32.3% were students from 11th grade from a private high school (M_{age} ± SD = 17.6 ± 0.10), 34.4% were college students from different careers from a private university (21.2 ±1.52), and 33.3% were adults with different occupations (36.4 ± 6.01). All of them participated voluntarily and were Colombian citizens. No participant reported being a direct victim of the armed conflict.

Instruments

Two fictional web news articles about the capture of a FARC member were designed based on several real news reports covering this issue and then manipulated. After piloting different versions, one "humanizing" and one "dehumanizing" version of the reports narrating similar situations were selected. In the *dehumanizing* condition, the report was framed using dehumanizing language towards the ex-perpetrator in two ways: (a) the main character was nominated by his alias, and with qualifiers such as 'terrorist', 'soulless bandit', 'misfit' and 'criminal', and (b) references to any main character's emotional or mental states were omitted. In the *humanizing* condition, the news report was framed in a way that preserved main character's humanness by (a) nominating him with qualifiers such as 'person', 'man', 'individual' or 'citizen´, and (b) including personal information (e.g. name, age, and origin) and references to his emotional and mental states (i.e. describing his current feelings and quoting him) (See news report in Appendix S1).

The news articles were designed with the layout of real news websites and featured references to real geographical places and army and police units in Colombia, but all the names and the stories depicted in the reports were fictional. Apart from the manipulations, news articles had approximately the same content and extension and, in both scenarios, characters were captured due to the same misdeeds (i.e. criminal conspiracy, rebellion, and illegal possession of weapons). In order to keep a within-subjects design in which each participant read the two versions of the news, minor variations in paragraph structure and story details such as location, characters or contextual information were made to avoid reactivity and testing effects from the first reading (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2015).

We measured *agency attributions* with an adapted version of the cognitive trait scale (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Khamitov et al., 2016), in which participants rate their agreement with 7 items scored on seven-point scales (1 = *totally disagree,* 7 = *totally agree*) regarding the main character of the news reports. We included two additional items about self-recognition (*'this person appears to be capable of recognizing himself as a subject'*), and responsibility ('*this person appears to be capable of taking responsibility for their actions*'), for a total of 9 items. The scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .81$).

To measure *retributive justice judgments,* blame attributions and punishment severity measures were adapted from Bastian et al., (2013). *Attributed blame,* was measured by asking participants "to what extent do you think the main character in the news report (i.e. FARC member) should be blamed for their actions?" Then, they rated their answer on a seven-point scale (0= *not at all*, 6= *totally*). *Punishment severity* was measured by asking participants: "if the penalty were imprisonment, how many years in prison should receive the main character in the news report?" and then they were asked to enter a value from 0 to 60 which is the maximum prison sentence in Colombia.

To measure *attitudes towards resocialization,* participants rated how suitable they considered the FARC member for a resocialization program on a seven-point scale (0 = *not suitable at all,* 6= *very suitable*). Additionally, a social distance scale (Wark & Galliher, 2007) was designed and adapted for the context of this study. Participants rated on a five-point scale (0 = *nothing at all, 4 = very much*), their agreement with an ascendant list of seven items which increase in the level of social closeness with FARC members (α = .95). (See Table S2 for the complete list of items).

All the above-described measures were presented to participants in a single questionnaire designed for this project.

Procedure

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant (or their legal guardians in case of minors). Before the application, every participant verbally agreed to participate. Stimuli and questionnaires were administered individually, in quiet settings away from distractions. Participants read the "humanizing" and "dehumanizing" versions of the news articles, one after the other on laptop computers, and answered paper and pencil questionnaires including the whole set of dependent measures aimed towards the main character of the news report after reading each one. The order of presentation of the article versions was counterbalanced, and the application took 25 minutes on average to be completed. After both questionnaires were completed, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Participants did not receive any economical compensation for their participation. Materials, data sets and reproducible analyses are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/jc6te/). The study was approved by the committee on research ethics of the Faculty of Psychology, Universidad El Bosque.

Design and analytical strategy

We used a 2 (condition) X 3 (group) mixed experimental design with condition (humanization/dehumanization), as a within-subjects factor, and group (school, college, and adults) as between-subjects factor. In order to test the effects of the condition in our set of dependent variables across groups, we fitted five separate Multilevel Models (MLM), one for each dependent variable (i.e. agency attributions, attributed blame, attributed sentence, resocialization attributions, and social distance), entering subject as a random factor with random intercepts, using the *lmerTest* package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017), for the R environment (R Core Team, 2018). Afterwards, we conducted post-hoc pairwise comparisons on the estimated marginal means using the *emmeans* package (Lenth, 2020), for computing the specific differences between conditions.

Results

Agency attributions results revealed a main effect of condition, F (1,90) = 39.66, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .31$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.23], and group, F (2,90) = 5.27, $p < .01$, $n_p^2 = .10$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.23]. In line with our predictions, post-hoc contrasts indicated that within the school and adult groups, participants attributed significantly more agency to the perpetrator in the humanization condition, than in the dehumanization condition. However, within the college group the differences in agency attributions across conditions were only marginal (results are summarized in Table 1 and Fig. 1A). Results showed that there are no significant effects on *blame attributions* by group, F (2,90) = 2.58, $p = .08$, $n_p^2 = .05$, 95% CI [0, 0.16], nor condition, F (1,90) = 0.85, $p = .36$, $n_p^2 = .01$, 95% CI [0, 0.08]. Against our predictions, these results suggest that across groups participants do not change their blame attributions towards the perpetrators depending on the condition (Table 1; Fig. 1).

Regarding *prison sentence attributions*, we found a significant effect by condition, F (1,90) = 41.16, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .31$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.45]. As expected, post-hoc contrasts indicated that across groups, participants attribute higher prison sentences to the perpetrators in the dehumanization condition as compared to the humanized condition. Finally, we found significant effects by condition on *resocialization attitudes*, F (1,90) = 42.11, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .32$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.45], and *social distance*, F (1,90) = 28.10, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .24$, 95% CI [0.1, 0.38]. In line with our predictions, post-hoc comparisons indicated that participants across all groups show significantly more negative resocialization attitudes and more social distance towards the perpetrator depicted in the dehumanizing condition as compared to the perpetrator in the humanizing condition.

Table 1.
Summary of Study 1 main effects and interactions

	Agency			Blame			Prison			Re socialization			Social Distance		
	F	*p*	n_p^2	*F*	*p*	n_p^2	*F*	*p*	n_p^2	*F*	*p*	n_p^2	*F*	*p*	n_p^2
Group	5.27	**0.007**	0.1	2.58	0.08	0.05	1.80	0.17	0.04	0.42	0.66	0.01	1.19	0.31	0.03
Condition	39.66	**<.001**	0.31	0.85	0.36	0.01	41.16	**<.001**	0.31	42.11	**<.001**	0.32	28.10	**<.001**	0.24
Group x Condition	2.25	0.11	0.05	0.94	0.40	0.02	0.8	0.45	0.02	0.01	0.99	0.19	0.19	0.83	0
R^2 Conditional		0.58			0.39			0.84			0.55			0.87	
R^2 Marginal		0.17			0.05			0.07			0.11			0.04	

Note. Nakagawa's R^2 values for Mixed Models (Nakagawa et al., 2017) were calculated for each model. In all cases, df = 1, 90 (or 2, 90 for effects and interactions including Group). For full results, including df, Sums of Squares, and 95 % CI for effect sizes, see Tables S1, S4, S7, S10 and S13 in the Supplementary Material. Significant effects are in bold.

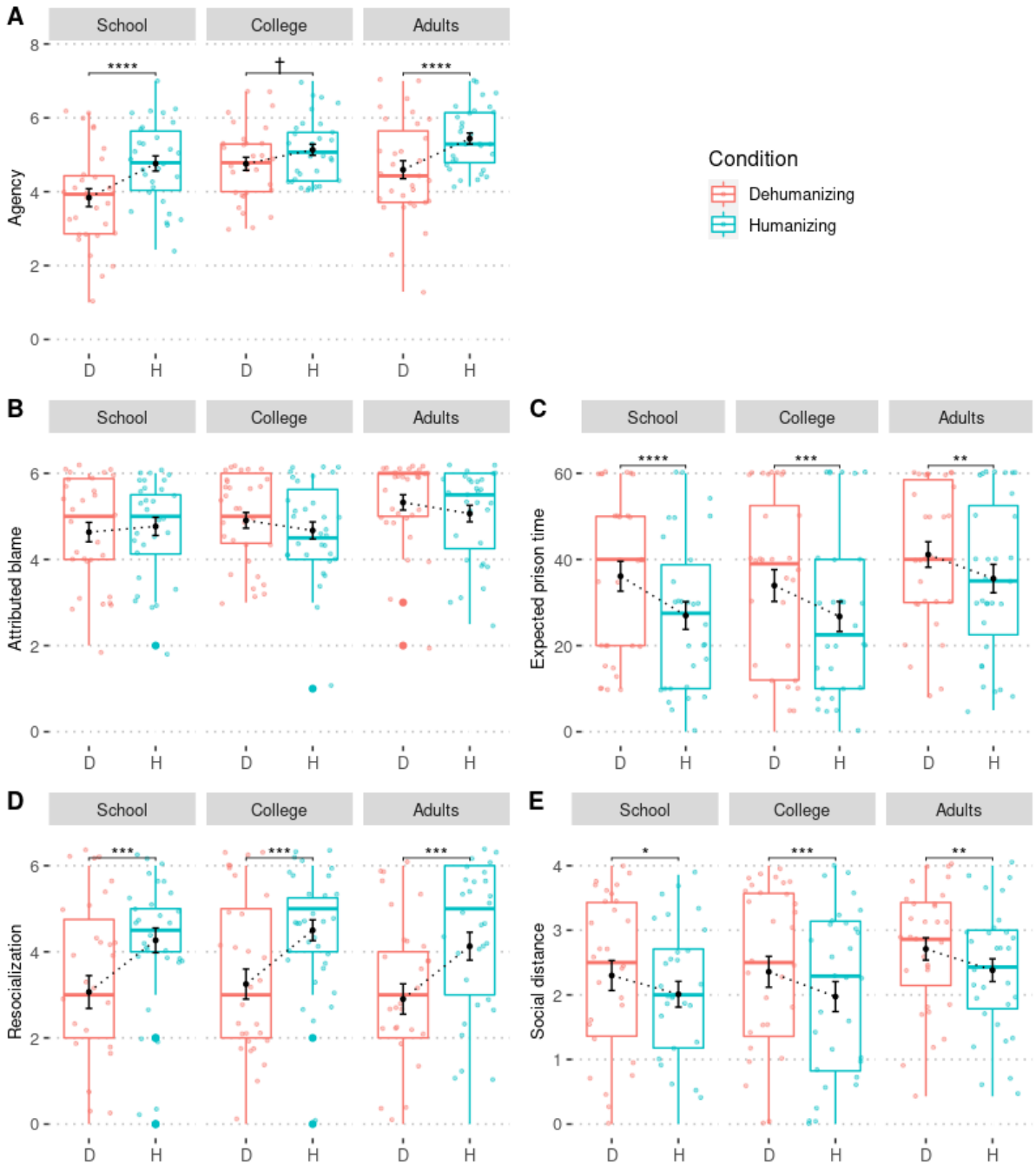

Figure 1. *Within-subject dehumanization effects on Agency attributions (A), Blame attributions (B), Punishment attributions (C), Resocialization Attitudes (D), and Social Distance (E), ments, and attitudes towards resocialization.* Results are split by condition (H = Humanizing, D = Dehumanizing). Black bars represent means ± SEM. Black, dashed lines represent the within-subject change between conditions. For pairwise contrasts estimates comparing the effect of condition by group using emmeans with Holm-Bonferroni correction for multiple tests, see Tables S3, S6, S9, S12 and S15 in the Supplementary Material. Significant within-subject effects of condition for each group are represented with lines and stars: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$,**** $p < 0.0001$.

Study 2

Methods

Participants

We recruited online a sample of n = 130 adults with different occupations, with ages ranging between 18 to 65 years, 65.4 % woman (M_{age} ± SD = 26.9 ± 8.76), 34.6 % men (30.5 ± 11.8). The link to the instrument was distributed through social media, and in public and private universities in Bogotá Colombia. Undergraduate college students, mostly from political science and psychology faculties participated in exchange of course credits. All of them participated voluntarily, were Colombian citizens above 18 years old, and none of them was a direct victim of the armed conflict nor have participated in Study 1. The link to the instrument was launched in two waves and we stopped data collection after the response rate dropped to zero the second time. Participants did not receive any economical compensation for their participation.

Instruments

We designed two fictional web news articles about the capture of a FARC member based on one of the news reports from Study1. The news reports were identical, except for the manipulations. As in Study 1, in the dehumanization and humanization conditions, the report was framed using dehumanizing/humanizing language towards the ex-perpetrator in the same ways previously described (See news report in Appendix S2). We measured our set of dependent variables (agency attributions, blame attributions, attributed punishment, resocialization attitudes and social distance), with the exact same instruments used in Study 1.

Procedure

We designed a Qualtrics survey containing the complete set of stimuli and measures and the instrument was administered online. First, participants consented to participate in the study

and were randomly and evenly assigned to either the humanization or dehumanization conditions. Then, participants read the corresponding news report, and answered the agency, blame attributions, sentence attribution, resocialization attitudes, and social distance measures regarding the former perpetrator depicted in the news reports. After completing the measures, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Materials, data sets and reproducible analyses are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/jc6te/). The study was approved by the committee on research ethics of the Faculty of Psychology, Universidad El Bosque.

Design and analytical strategy

We used a simple between-subjects experimental design with condition x 2 (humanization/dehumanization), as a between-subjects factor. In order to test the effects of the condition in our set of dependent variables, we fitted five separate Linear Models (LM), one for each dependent variable (i.e. agency attributions, attributed blame, attributed sentence, resocialization attributions, and social distance). Except in the case of attributed blame, all models wer fitted using the base *lm* function for the R environment (R Core Team, 2018). Because the residual distribution in the attributed blame model significantly deviated from a normal distribution, we fitted a Generalized Linear Model with a quasi-Poisson distribution for analyzing this variable using the *glm* base function. Afterwards, we computed the estimated marginal means across conditions using the *emmeans* package (Lenth, 2020).

Results

In line with our predictions, results revealed a significant effect of condition on *agency* attributions, F (1,128) = 27.81, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .18$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.3], indicating that participants in the dehumanization condition attributed less agency to the former perpetrator (M ± SD = 3.92 ± 0.14) than participants in the humanization condition (4.97 ± 0.14). Moreover,

against our expectations, but in line with Study 1 results, *blame attributions* were not significantly different between conditions, F (1,128) = 0.04, p = .84, n_p^2 = 0.0, 95% CI [0.0, 0.3], suggesting that blame attributions towards former perpetrators remain relatively stable regardless the humanizing (5.97 ± 0.16), or the dehumanizing (6.02 ± 0.16), framing (Fig. 2).

Consistent with our predictions, results yielded a significant main effect of condition on the *attributed punishment, F* (1,128) = 14.85 p <.001, n_p^2 = 0.1, 95% CI [0.03, 0.21], indicating that participants in the dehumanization condition attribute longer prison sentences to the former perpetrator (M ± SD = 31.5 ± 2.15 years), as compared to participants in the humanization condition (19.69 ± 2.18). Furthermore, we found a significant effect of condition on *resocialization attitudes*, F (1,128) = 4.82 p =.03, n_p^2 = 0.04, 95% CI [0.0, 0.12], indicating that participants hold more negative attitudes towards the perpetrator in the dehumanization condition (M ± SD = 4.88. ± 0.20) than in the humanization condition (5.50 ± 0.20). Finally, although in the expected direction but contrary to our predictions and Study 1 results, *social distance* scores were not significantly different between the dehumanization (3.44 ± 0.15) and the humanization condition (3.09 ± 0.15), F (1,128) = 2.70, p = .10, n_p^2 = 0.02, 95% CI [0.0, 0.09] (Fig. 2).

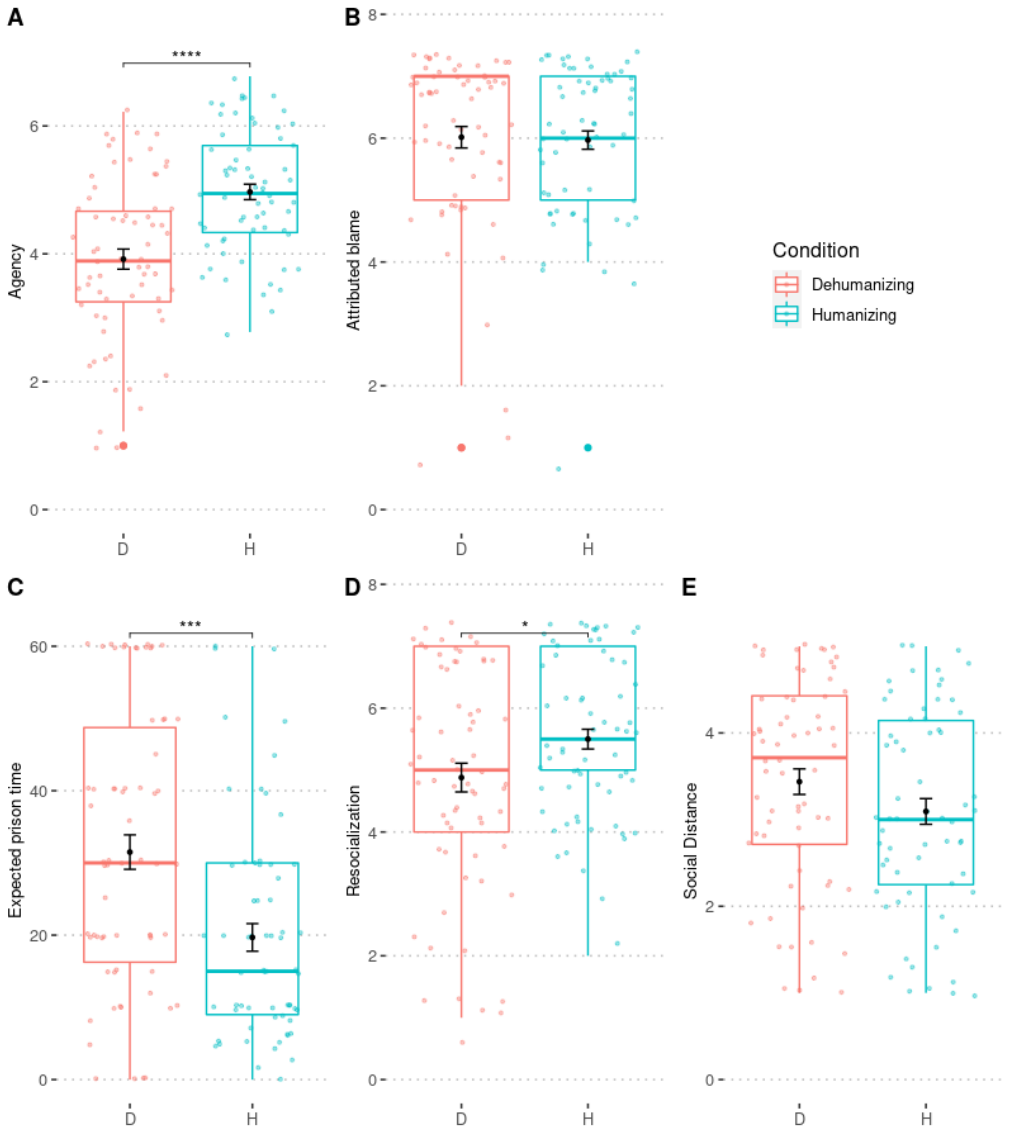

Figure 2. *Between-subject dehumanization effects on Agency attributions (A), Blame attributions (B), Punishment attributions (C), Resocialization attitudes (D), and Social distance (E).* Results are split by condition (H = Humanizing, D = Dehumanizing). Black bars represent means ± SEM. Significant effects of condition (contrasts using emmeans with Holm-Bonferroni correction for multiple tests), are represented with lines and stars: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$,**** $p < 0.0001$.

Discussion

The aim of the present research was to test the effect of dehumanizing language in news reports towards former perpetrators of violence during post-conflict on participants' attributions of their agency, blame, deserved punishment, attitudes towards their resocialization, and social distance. Results indicated that when former perpetrators are depicted in the news reports through dehumanizing language (e.g. using their alias, referring to them with qualifiers like "terrorist", "rebel", or "criminal", and omitting information about their identity, emotional and mental states), participants significantly attribute them less agency, more severe punishment, deemed them as less suitable for resocialization, and perceive them as more socially distant, compared to former perpetrators who are depicted in the news in a way in which their identity and psychological traits (e.g. emotions and mental states) are referred to.

Our manipulations were based on the dehumanization theory proposed by Haslam (2006). Omitting references to ex-perpetrators name, age, origin, and mental and emotional states facilitates the denial of *human nature traits*, leading to the mechanistic type of dehumanization by which targets are perceived as inert, cold, and passive. Moreover, nominating ex-perpetrators as 'terrorist', 'soulless bandits', 'criminal' or by his alias (e.g. 'scorpion') facilitates the denial of their *unique human traits*, leading to the animalistic kind of dehumanization by which targets are perceived as instinctual and irrational. It is not uncommon to find both kinds of dehumanization towards perpetrators in armed conflict contexts in press and public discourse (e.g. García-Marrugo, 2013), sometimes even blatantly explicit (such as in headlines like 'FARC are animals and barbarians without humanity' (Gómez, 2008)). These perceptions of ex-perpetrators in post-conflict stages among lay people could seriously challenge their resocialization.

Our findings support previous research evidencing that dehumanization undermine agency attributions towards different kinds of offenders (Khamitov et al., 2016), giving support

to a dehumanizing account of perpetrators over a moral typecasting perspective (proposing that offenders are attributed with more agency), and extending this effect to ex-perpetrators of violence in post-war conflicts. An important consequence of a reduced perception of human agency via dehumanization, is that perpetrators are divested of basic rights and protection generally granted to all humans (Khamitov et al., 2016), A practical implication of this finding is related to the guarantees in the transitional justice mechanisms that former perpetrators in process of being reintegrated to society often access, since ensuring rights and protection are principles at the core of the proper functioning of these justice mechanisms.

Another implication of a diminished attribution of human agency to ex-perpetrators (due to dehumanization) is the subsequent reduced empathy. Mechanistic dehumanization leads to perceiving others as shallow and emotionally impoverished, which in turn undermines empathy (Haslam, 2006). Previous evidence suggests that people tend to attribute more humanness to themselves than to others (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005), and this self-humanizing bias is associated with a reduced perspective taking and empathy (Park, Haslam, Kashima, & Norasakkunkit, 2016). Perceiving perpetrators as lacking traits typically granted to oneself like self-recognition, meta-cognition, or a sense of responsibility, derives on a lack of empathy. Since empathy has been identified as a strong positive predictor of intergroup forgiveness in post-conflict societies such as Chile (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008) and Northern Ireland (Tam et al., 2008), the humanization of ex-perpetrators becomes of particular relevance for solving intractable conflicts, overcoming hate (Staub, 2005), and facilitating their reincorporation to society. Accordingly, our results provide empirical evidence of the effects of (de)humanization on agency attributions towards ex-perpetrators, and therefore may illuminate ways to promote empathy in post-conflict settings.

Results also supported our prediction that dehumanization increases punishment deservingness attributions. These findings are in line with previous evidence suggesting that dehumanization predicts harsher punishment allocation across different crimes such as child molestation, violent crimes, and white collar crimes (Bastian et al., 2013). The relation between dehumanization and punishment could be explained from a moral disengagement perspective. Previous research suggests that people tend to infra-humanize out-groups in order to justify violent behavior towards them and disengage from self-sanctions (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006), and this effect could also hold at the moment of assigning harsh punishments to members of dehumanized out-groups. Negative emotions, feelings of revenge, and justice seeking motivations are factors that we did not address here and that could also explain or mediate this association between dehumanization and punishment. On the contrary, our results regarding blame attributions did not corroborate previous positive associations between perpetrator's dehumanization and higher blame attributions (e.g. Bastian et al., 2013), or previous evidence suggesting that animalistic dehumanization led to harsher blame attributions via internal causal attributions of the crime and perceptions of perpetrator's lack of control (Tsukamoto & Karasawa, 2015). Interestingly, both Bastian et al (2013) and Tsukamoto and Karsawa (2015) report significant effects of dehumanization on sentence decisions as we found, along with effects on higher blame attributions towards dehumanized targets, which was not the case in our results. Within the humanization conditions in our studies, participants' blame attributions towards ex-perpetrators seem to be "nonnegotiable". This could be explained by the particular post-conflict context of the perpetrators in our research. In transitional justice systems as the one facing the ex-perpetrators in Colombia, their responsibility is never questioned, and is even highlighted, as truth, restoration, and the public acknowledgment of the crimes are essential pillars of the peace

agreement. This in theory sets a “forgive but not forget” mindset that could explain the undifferentiated blame attributions in our results.

In line with our predictions, participants attributed less suitableness for a resocialization program to the ex-perpetrator in the dehumanization condition. These findings could be interpreted from a self-regulatory moral perspective (Bandura, 2002; Hoffman, 1998). When perpetrators are not attributed with qualities such as civility, refinement, or rationality, due to dehumanization, they are also not attributed with inhibitive moral agency (i.e. the capacity of moral restraint and self-control), and therefore are not perceived as suitable for being reintroduced in society, especially after having transgressed before. Moreover, when individuals are perceived as possessing warmth and emotionality, they are viewed as more morally worthy, and suitable for rehabilitation (Bastian et al., 2011). Positive perceptions of inhibitive moral agency and moral worthiness (via humanization) are therefore central for a DDR process. Our results illuminate these effects of dehumanization on rehabilitation perceptions and contribute as an input for promoting nonbiased perceptions of the suitability of ex-perpetrators for resocialization. Further studies should explore in depth this effect of dehumanization on inhibitive moral agency attributions, especially in rehabilitation or resocialization contexts.

Finally, Study 1 results provided support to previous findings suggesting a relationship between dehumanization and social distance (Haslam, 2006). Typically, the perception of out-group members (e.g. immigrants, homosexuals, disabled and ill people, and specific racial, religious, ethnic, nationality and occupational groups) as abstract beings lacking psychological richness, is related to grater social distance and undermines social inclusion (Wark & Galliher, 2007; Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2008; Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, & Arsenault, 2010). The social distance towards the ex-perpetrators product of their dehumanization could be explained by evolutionary accounts linking basic emotions like disgust with intergroup attitudes (Hodson &

Costello, 2007), like xenophobia (Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan, 2004) or ethnocentrism (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). The disgust reactions product of dehumanization, and in particular the animalistic kind of dehumanization, can also be associated to purity and social order protection (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Ex-perpetrators on the verge of reincorporation could be perceived as a threat to social order, values, and carriers of 'vices', thus triggering moral disgust and hence fostering social distance, and their dehumanization certainly amplify these perceptions. Although in the expected direction, the effect of condition on social distance in Study 2 did not reach statistical significance. A possible explanation could be that the social distance measure was particularly sensitive to the between-subjects design. Typically, between-subjects designs have no natural anchor (Charness et al., 2012), and participants in Study 2 did not have an available point of reference for judging how open were they to accept the ex-perpetrator in their social circle, as participants from Study 1 did across conditions.

Strengths and limitations

The present study has several strengths. Our sample is balanced in terms of sex, age and occupation and was not taken from a western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) society (CITA), which enhances external validity. We also experimentally manipulated dehumanization unlike previous research which only measured it as a dependent variable or a covariate. In addition, we used mixed models in Study 1 to control for individual variability, account for the dependency of the measures, and therefore reduce Type-I errors. Our study is also timely and grounded in relevant socio-political issues currently happening, and applicable to similar dehumanizing language used in other post-conflict societies facing similar challenges. Finally, the results of our study are of interest for diverse disciplines including communication sciences, criminology, justice research, psychology, and political science.

However, there are also some limitations. First, we collected our data in a specific post-conflict context which has its own historical, cultural, and social characteristics, so results may not be fully generalizable to other conflicts. Future research should test these effects in other post-war contexts to generalize the present findings. Second, we recruited participants out of convenience and on a voluntary basis, so the sample sizes were not as larger as desired. Finally, we did not include a control condition with neutral language in our designs. Future research should include a baseline condition to have a better picture of the effects and could control for possible confounding variables such as political views and disgust.

Concluding remarks

Despite the undeniable responsibility of former violent groups in war-related crimes, the dehumanization of its members could pose more obstacles than advantages to overcome war in a post-conflict society. As evidenced in this research, just the use of a humanizing language in the news for referring to ex-perpetrators, such as mentioning their name, age, origin, emotional or mental states, is enough for eliciting more agency attributions, social closeness, and positive attitudes towards their reincorporation to civil society. It is natural for civilians to condemn and judge the perpetrators of violence in the aftermath of an armed conflict, but it is also important to recognize the subtle ways in which public discourse in the media could shape people's attributions, judgments, and attitudes towards perpetrators, which are paramount elements for the success of a DDR process. The present study contributes to the understanding of the effects of dehumanizing language in the media on people's judgments and attitudes towards ex-perpetrators in post-conflict societies, and could be useful for raising awareness among journalists, editors, and policymakers in order to promote peace and reconciliation after conflict.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Isabella Lopez, Karen Casas, and Leandra Cuestas for their assistance in the literature review and data collection. We are also grateful to Jan-Willem van Prooijen for their valuable suggestions and useful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript and to all our participants.