

God is not fair, God is Just: Justice, revenge, and moral reasoning among a group of internally displaced Colombian young adults

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This article explores the moral reasoning of people who have been victimized in the context of political violence. Specifically, it describes the notion of justice held by a group of internally displaced individuals in Colombia, and how it is applied in their day-to-day life. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in Colombia. A theoretically informed content analysis was carried out using the big three of morality theory and the theory of social representations. The participants' discourses focused heavily on violence-related moral transgressions and revealed they think of justice primarily in retributive terms. The analysis allowed identifying the criteria used by participants to determine the seriousness of violence-related moral transgressions and the circumstances that make revenge morally justifiable. Lastly, the notion of God the Avenger emerged as a representation that allows to understand in more depth the moral reasoning of this particular population. This research work is an attempt to articulate the analysis of contextual constraints -such as violence or poverty- with the meaning making approach furthered by the framework of cultural psychology.

This article looks at the moral reasoning of people who have been victimized in the context of political violence. Victimized individuals experience violence first-hand and endure life changing events such as the murder of their loved ones, the loss of their home, and other events that harm their physical and psychological integrity. In many ways, the experience of victimhood has profound moral implications pertaining transgressions to the moral order, ethical dilemmas, and unjust situations in need of a fair resolution. Yet, very little is known about how victimized people reason through violence-related moral transgressions and what they consider to be a just outcome. This research work is specifically interested in understanding the lay definitions of justice of people who have been victimized and how these notions are put into practice in day-to-day life. The study focuses on a group of Colombian young adults who were internally displaced as a result of the country's political conflict.

The question of justice and how it is understood by the victims of the conflict is particularly important in the Colombian context as the country gets ready to transition towards peace after sixty years of political violence. At present, a peace agreement is being negotiated between the government and the FARC –the biggest guerrilla group in the country- and a final agreement is expected in the first half of 2016. A peace agreement would end a long conflict that has left 7.7 million victims, including around 5.5 million internally displaced people (ACNUR, 2014; CNMH, 2013). The transition is proving to be a tremendously complex process that entails the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants to the society (i.e.

paramilitaries and guerilla members) and the development of a transitional justice framework in a thin equilibrium between punishment and justice in the one hand and reconciliation and agreed peace on the other. Understandably, this has created shifting discourses of justice, victimhood, peace, and reconciliation, with the likely outcome that more powerful groups in the society will have a better opportunity to shape the official discourses about these issues (Augustinos & Penny, 2001). This is only one of the reasons why more research is needed to understand the victims' own definitions of justice, what they deem the right thing to do about violence-related moral transgressions, and what they consider to be a just solution to these situations. This evidence can inform the peacebuilding process the country will undergo in the years to come; a process that aims to rebuild a safe and just society in the aftermath of the conflict.

Little is known about the lay definitions of justice of people who have been victimized or who have grown up in violent contexts. Psychological research with these populations is typically framed either within the post traumatic morel or within the victim-perpetrator model (Daiute, 2010). The latter emphasizes the developmental challenges and "sub-optimal" levels of moral development resulting from the experience of victimization, including an increased risk of becoming a victimizer. Yet, in the context of social conflict and rampant violence the "deficit" approach is restricted by a narrow view that finds the problem in the individual and his/her moral reasoning, as if this was independent from the broader socio-cultural context. More generally, psychological approaches tend to overlook important aspects of meaning making (Summerfield, 1999) failing to account for the fact that moral choices, while made by individual agents, are also socially and culturally defined (Shweder & Jensen, 1995; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 2003).

There are only a few studies in Colombia focusing on the moral development of victims of the conflict. A study with internally displaced adolescents found that even though youngsters know that stealing and hurting people is morally wrong, they think they and others are likely to commit these moral transgressions. Further, they would take revenge against an aggressor if they were given the opportunity. Because there is a discrepancy between what these youngsters know to be right and wrong, and what they see themselves doing, the study claims this as evidence of *vulnerabilities* in the subjects' moral development (Posada & Wainryb, 2008). The underlying assumption being that fully developed moral agents should be able to reason their way out of revenge by understanding that revenge is morally wrong and that it ought not to be acted out. Once again, the problem is framed as one of the individual. Yet, this kind of approach misses that these youngsters' moral reasoning is entangled with how they make sense of their experience with political violence, the criteria they use to judge that an injustice or a moral transgression has occurred, and the process they undergo to decide what to do about it. This is not a process carried out by individuals in isolation; in the particular case of political violence and its aftermath, the process of meaning making is a social endeavor, one that relies on co-constructed explanations of the reasons why the violence occurred and how it is to be handled (Barber, 2008; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

The Big Three of Morality, Social Representations, and Lay Notions of Justice.

The notions of justice, fairness, and harm are at the core of any societal organization (Hauser, 2006). While abstract moral standards such as justice may have an equal formal definition across cultures (e.g. treat like people alike and different people differently), gaps remain between abstract moral standards and concrete situated action. People in different cultures use “good reasons” and common sense to “fill in” these gaps (Shweder et al., 2003). Such “good reasons” convey valuable information about the shared understanding of reality held by a particular cultural group. Therefore, studying the notion of justice and how it is applied everyday life can shed light into the particular worldview of people in the Colombian socio-cultural context and provide some indications of how it may have been shaped by the political violence. For the sake of clarity, we understand culture to be *“a reality lit up by a morally enforceable conceptual scheme composed of values -desirable goals- and causal beliefs -including ideas about means-ends connections- that is exemplified or instantiated in practice”* (Shweder, 1996; p.20). This definition is especially compelling because it ties individual moral reasoning to the socio-cultural reality, and allows an analysis of how moral development is shaped by the way of life of a community (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001; Shweder et al., 1987). The big three of morality theory is grounded in this definition of culture and provides a template to compare moral systems across cultures (Shweder et al., 2003). The theory of the “big three” identifies three main conceptual starting points shaping three types of moral codes: rights-based moral codes (the ethics of autonomy), duty-based moral codes (or the ethics of community), and moral codes shaped by notions of sanctity and natural order (or the ethics of divinity). In the context of this study, the big three of morality theory is useful because it provides a framework to understand the core assumptions shaping the worldview of the study population. It helps to answer questions such as; what counts as a violence-related moral transgression in the Colombian socio-cultural context? What elements do people account for to decide the seriousness of a violence-related moral transgression? And, how is justice ought to be re-established in the aftermath of a violence-related moral transgression?

While the big three provides a valuable framework to study the interconnected nature of meaning making processes and morality, the theory of social representations is especially suited to complement this approach. A social representation is a knowledge structure with the function of providing collectivities a means of understanding and communicating. Social representations are both symbolic and social, and serve a functional necessity for a particular group (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Jovchelovitch, 2006; Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999). As a result, the social representations theory allows looking at both, the group constructing the representation and the content which is represented, with an eye on the function of the representation. For the particular case of the internally displaced and their notions of justice, this framework is useful because it allows analyzing the positioning of the victims in the broader social structure and the asymmetrical power relationships entailed in the experience of victimhood and marginalization they endure. When combined, the big three of morality and the theory of social representations offer useful analytical tools to carry out a nuanced analysis centered on meaning making and cognitive processes without forgoing an analysis of the function of such meaning in the specific context and its constraints.

There isn't much research on lay definitions of justice among victims of political conflicts. A study about lay understandings of justice among adults in the US, found that people tend to think in terms of retributive justice when asked to assign criminal punishment (Carlsmith, 2006). In a retributive justice framework, transgressors ought to be punished in accordance to the severity of their moral transgression. This is in opposition to the alternative possibility, an utilitarian definition of justice focused on deterring future behavior rather than administering a "just deserts" (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). To the best of our knowledge, there is no study in the Colombian context assessing how internally displaced people judge what a "just punishment" would entail for a wrongdoer. One of the few existing studies on common sense ideas of justice in Colombia focuses on the social representations of transitional justice as portrayed in the media (Jimenez & Jimenez, 2012). Transitional justice is portrayed by the Colombian press as unfair and dismissive of the victims' rights. It is associated with impunity despite the crimes committed by the actors of the conflict. Unfortunately, the study does not shed light on the issue of what a "fair" justice framework would entail and what counts as a "good enough" punishment to the transgressors.

The present study engages with individuals who have been displaced in the context of the internal conflict in Colombia with the aim to describe how they define and apply the notion of justice in their everyday life. We start from the assumption that the understanding of justice is shaped by the particular socio-cultural context where individuals are situated. In the case of the target population of this study, a meaningful analysis of the notion of justice requires looking at meaning making processes as much as a proximal examination of the violent context in relation to the experience of vulnerability.

METHODS

The study used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore the notion of justice among internally displaced individuals in Colombia. Fourteen participants were recruited through a non-profit organization that works with refugees and internally displaced populations across the world. The interviews were conducted in March of 2013, at the NGO's offices in two locations in Colombia; Soacha (n=5) and Barrancabermeja (n=9). Both localities have high criminality rates, widespread poverty, and remain main resettling places for people fleeing the internal conflict (CID, 2010). Participants were contacted by the NGO staff using a brief recruitment script developed for the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their first hand and chronic exposure to violence, as targets of displacement and later as vulnerable populations and in need of humanitarian help as determined by the recruiting NGO. The study protocol and all instruments were approved by the University of Chicago internal review board.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to query participant's moral intuitions and reflective understandings of justice, harm, and retaliation in day-to-day situations. Participants were asked to describe a real situation in which someone had done something bad to them. This allowed identifying what is perceived as a violence-related moral transgression in this context and what counts as a just outcome. In addition, participants were asked whether or not they considered retaliation to be right or wrong in that situation

and the reasons why. The interview included a vignette designed to inquire about the concepts of justice, retaliation and harm given a hypothetical situation of forced displacement. In the vignette, a character called Pedro had the opportunity to retaliate against the person who displaced him and his family. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview. All data collection was done in Spanish by the author of the study who is a native speaker. Face to face interviews were conducted at the organization's office in each location. Participation in the study was voluntary and lasted approximately 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Study participants were between 18 and 25 years of age. Eight were female and six were male. All participants had been displaced by the guerrilla or by the organized crime within the past 3 years, but none had been displaced in the past six months. Seven participants had completed 1-5 years of education and the other seven had completed between 6-11 years of education. Seven participants were unemployed. In total, ten participants reported a household income of less than US\$270 per month.

The basis for the data analysis was the three moral themes proposed by the big three theory of morality theory (Shweder et al., 2003). The rationale provided by each participant to the interview questions were pooled together. A content analysis was then carried out to determine the type(s) of moral discourse (ethics of Autonomy, Community or Divinity) that was used for each of the topics covered. A second stage in the analysis entailed the exploration of the emergent category labeled "God the Avenger". The analysis treated the category as a social representation and focused on looking at the category through the prism of its function for the group and within the broader socio-cultural system.

RESULTS

The justice discourse: Lay understandings of justice in the aftermath of violence

Because the interviews were focused on the participants' moral intuitions and reflective understandings of the notion of justice, it came to no surprise that they brought up discourses about the ethics of autonomy, with issues of fairness and harm at the core of the discussions. When asked about unjust situations and what should happen when an injustice has occurred, all participants said that the transgressor should be punished. Everyone brought up violence-related moral transgressions and said that a just outcome is defined as one where the transgressor gets a "just deserts". In doing so, participants described an idea of justice that is primarily retributive. Generally speaking, there are two basic motives for punishment; behavior control and retribution (Carlsmith, 2006). The motive of behavior control –a utilitarian definition of justice- differs from the retributive motive in that it dictates that punishments ought to be deterrents, without considering the issue of proportionality. On the contrary, retributive justice is "*a system by which offenders are punished in proportion to the moral magnitude of their intentionally committed harms*" (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008, p. 194). One important aspect of this finding is that the interviewees' notion of justice is congruent with that of people in general. When put in a position of assigning criminal justice, people would commonly reason in terms of retributive

justice, seeking out information that helps them determine what would be a “just deserts” for the wrongdoer (Carlsmith, 2006; Carlsmith & Darley, 2008). The interviewees used the severity of the moral transgression as the main criterion to determine the severity of the earned punishment. Participants also considered the transgressor’s intention (or lack thereof) to determine the severity of a just punishment. The capacity to consider the intention to do harm was of particular importance in this context. Despite having been victimized by paramilitaries and guerrilla members, participants made a clear distinction between combatants who are intrinsically motivated to do harm and the ones that have to follow “orders from above or be murdered otherwise”. This, along with the convergence between the participants’ notion of justice and that of the general population point to more convergences than divergences between the two populations, and warn against preconceived ideas about the relationship between victimhood and moral reasoning.

Applying the notion of justice in everyday life

Because people defined justice in a retributive way, the next step consisted in understanding the criteria participants use to judge the severity of a violence-related moral transgression. Participants explained that things like robberies and fights are considered minor violence-related moral transgressions. While they consider these things are wrong and deserve to be punished, they didn’t feel morally compelled to do anything about them. They explained that there is little hope that the transgressor will get an actual punishment and therefore they preferred to “leave things quiet” (*deje asi*). Serious violence-related moral transgressions on the other hand, were defined as those involving harm to the psychological or psychical integrity of the person. The damage or illegal appropriation of the others’ land was also considered a serious transgression. Serious offences clearly deserved to be punished, yet participants made a qualitative distinction between transgressions involving physical harm and those involving psychological harm. The latter offences didn’t compel participants to act upon them.

I think that leaving things quiet was the right thing to do because they didn’t harm us physically, it was more like psychological harm, I mean, we will remember that night for the rest of our lives, but they didn’t beat us or anything, it could have been worse. So, when there is physical harm, like when there is a beating or they kill someone, that is a different story and you have to do something about it. But in our situation [they had to flee but were able to escape alive] it is better to leave things the way they are. What happened is in the past now.

Woman, 24 years of age.

It was in the context of serious moral transgressions that participants brought up harm concerns and described how they manage the tradeoff between achieving a just outcome and being safe. Serious transgressions involving psychological harm or property loss are best “left alone”. Reporting or reacting in any way to these transgressions exposes them to being harmed by the offender. On the other hand, transgressions involving physical harm can’t be left alone, and people feel morally compelled to do something about them (i.e. reporting the event to the police or to any other available institution). Therefore, participants made evident their evaluation regarding what is and what is not worth an actual reaction that would be consequent with their moral judgment about something being wrong. This

evaluation is evidently tied to the violent context they inhabit, one where concerns for safety and harm avoidance often take precedence over concerns for justice. Nonetheless, the difference between the two kinds of offences made evident where is the moral boundary of the self established in this socio-cultural context. It is a “physical boundary” rather and a “psychological” one. This is the reason why, a transgression of the *limit of the body* propels a reaction. Failing to act upon it prescribes an injustice and is morally wrong. It is this boundary what defines the breaking point in the tradeoff between safety and justice.

Lastly, the interviewees described a type of violence-related transgression that is considered the most serious one. This is the murder, rape, mutilation, and other types of radical physical harm inflicted against vulnerable individuals (i.e. a child, a girl, and in some circumstances, a woman). Quite importantly, this is the kind of transgression that makes retaliation (i.e. making justice with your own hands) *morally justifiable* in the eyes of the participants.

When is it ok to take revenge against someone? I mean [silence, takes a big breath out] wow, there are some cases when you start thinking that you can't leave things in the hands of God. When they rape a boy or a girl or when they kill a baby, when they beat a woman to dead. That's when I would like to (...) when you really think you should take revenge against that aggressor. I don't have kids, but imagine that I had kids and that they rape my daughter, that is bad in God's eyes but us, human beings, we will get enraged and at that moment we won't think. You can report them to the police, but they never do things right, they don't care. That is when you can take revenge and disappear that person; to make them feel what that boy or girl felt. I know that attempting against people's life is a sin, but revenge is also good because you are not supposed to do such bad things to any human being, even less so to an innocent child.

Men, 28 years old, displaced by paramilitaries

We know that human beings react with anger, indignation, and compassion when they see others suffering, especially when these others are young ones. This corresponds to the moral intuition described by Haidt and Joseph (2004) proposed as a human universal. It triggers feelings of indignation and anger, and among the different possible emotions elicited by these transgressions, these may be the ones that are more readily acted upon in this particular context (Rosaldo, 2004). When combined, these elements transform the idea of punishment from proportional to “equivalent”, an eye for an eye, “a murder for a murder”. While the link to actual revengeful behavior cannot be established using the kind of data collected in this study, understanding what makes revenge morally justifiable shows the type of moral transgression that is not to be tolerated in this local context, despite the ubiquitous violence in day-to-day life.

God the Avenger

The notion of *God the avenger* emerged in the initial analysis and quickly proved to be relevant to how participants apply the notion of justice in their day to day live. *God the avenger* was portrayed by participants as an agent of justice who makes sure people pay for their wrong actions with equal suffering. While the core idea is retributive justice, it only applies to serious violence-related moral transgressions.

What did I decide to do? I decided to do nothing about it. I didn't forgive [my brother in law], but I wouldn't do anything against him either. No, I just left things the way they were. Just leave it like that, because God is the only one who can judge people. Yeah, just leave it like that (waves hand signaling disdain). Because God always makes sure that you pay for your bad actions. My bother in law got two of his brothers killed. The same armed group he wanted us to join killed his brothers. So, that's what I'm saying, leave things the way they are (deje así).

Woman, 24 years old, escaped forced recruitment by the guerrilla.

The notion of *God the Avenger* in this particular context is grounded in shared knowledge that helps people make sense of a particular aspect of the world. It is an idea that is accessible to everyone and is relevant to immediate concerns. In this sense, the notion realizes the key functions of a social representation (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Jovchelovitch, 2006). The representation of *God the avenger* is a way to think through the notion of justice in a context where people are displaced from their homes by means of violence, where other violence-related moral transgressions are pervasive and where the possibility of achieving a just outcome often seems out of reach. It is particularly important to note that the idea of *God the Avenger* involves that wrongdoers get their just deserts during their lifetime rather than in the afterlife, as is commonly portrayed in the Catholic and Christian traditions which are the religions the study participants adhere to. A second important aspect of the idea of *God the avenger* is the participants' certainty about God's punishment being always just. If the punishment seems unfair, this is so because people's evaluation of justice is biased when compared with that of God. Therefore, participants explained that God's judgement is always above and beyond human comprehension, and that *while God may not be fair, he is always just*. This aspect is of uttermost important to understand one of the functions of the representation in this particular context. The notion of *God the Avenger* overpowers the moral justification for taking revenge when the most serious type of moral transgression has happened (i.e. when a vulnerable individual's "physical boundary" has been violated). This raises the possibility of the notion of *God the Avenger* acting as a buffer against feelings of indignation and rage, and perhaps preventing acts of revenge. While the self-report data collected in this study does not allow us to test this hypothesis, further studies should investigate the relationship between the notion of *God the Avenger* and acts of revenge in the face of serious violence-related moral transgressions. Understanding the relationship between this representation and revengeful behavior could help predict and prevent having wronged people engaging and increasing the cycle of violence.

The notion of *God the Avenger* fits into the broader morality discourse discussed before. We know that participants draw heavily from the ethics of autonomy, and we argue that *God the Avenger* is yet another example of this. From the framework of the big three of morality theory, it would seem reasonable to classify the notion of *God the Avenger* as ethics of divinity discourse. It is undeniable that religion plays an important role in how participants think about issues of justice and violence-related moral transgressions. Indeed, some participants articulate discourses that are coherent with the ethics of divinity in that their justifications and understandings of moral transgressions suggest that the moral domain is not conceptually distinct from religion (Kohlberg & Power, 1981; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987). Further, participants' discourses show that the notions of harm and justice were linked

through social meaning to religion and the concept of natural order (Shweder et al., 1987). Nevertheless, it is necessary to differentiate this set of responses from the representation of *God the Avenger*, characterized by metaphysical beliefs of a slightly different order. At the core of the concept is a belief in a metaphysical person-like agent capable of taking revenge against moral transgressors. The key issue is that there is a qualitative difference between the ethics of divinity, and portraying God mostly (or only) as an agent of justice who avenges moral transgressions. The latter evokes contents that seem to fit better within the ethics of autonomy, because of the emphasis on an autonomous entity concerned with issues of justice that has little to do with the central concepts of the ethics of divinity; a conception of the self as a spiritual entity concerned with sanctity or purity through one's actions, or a lifestyle that reflects a constant effort to achieve a connection to some sacred order.

CONCLUSION

By studying the notion of justice of a group of internally displaced individuals in Colombia, and how it is applied in day-to-day life, this study provides a glimpse into how contextual constraints -in this case, a highly violent environment- unfold in interaction and get assimilated into the moral reasoning of individuals living in a particular local world. The task is not small, as it entails the articulation of different, and sometimes opposing, research traditions in the social sciences. The article used the big three of morality theory and the social representations approach to look at meaning making processes, but the analysis strived to always retain a connection with the materiality of the world (Jovchelovitch, 2006) and with the disruptive power of violence in this context. In line with the proposal of this special issue, this research work contributes to the discussion on how to further integrate the context and the contextual constraints into the framework of cultural psychology.

The study findings raise a few important potential lines of inquiry for the future. The notion of *God the Avenger* is a local and highly significant representation that reveals how people navigate the moral conundrums inherent to the experiences of violence and vulnerability. In fact, the notion of *God the Avenger* emerges from a position of vulnerability. In the case of the internally displaced, it is highly likely that the actual displacement was one more indication of their vulnerable position in society. Most of them were already at the margins before being displaced. For this reason, it seems worth asking if the notion of *God the Avenger* is an expression of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) that is more about surviving in a violent context than about justice. We would argue that this is not the case, and that the notion of *God the Avenger* makes sense in an intentional world (Shweder, 1996) that sees justice being realized through God's actions in the world. This is so because social representations are also a way of world making (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990).

Colombia is undergoing an important social transition in the context of the peace negotiations. The ideas of victimhood, reparation and justice are being shaped and reshaped by the society. It is likely that the context and its constraints will shift in the near future for the internally displaced. A safer, less violent context may impact the victims understandings of justice, how they manage the tradeoff between harm avoidance and justice, and their possibilities to achieve just outcomes for their situation. It seems to be that at least for now, safety is their priority, but once the country transitions to the peace, other material and

symbolic reparations will become necessary. More broadly, a better understanding of the moral worlds of this particular group of people is important not only because it allows to grasp what they deem wrong, but that what they deem good. The process of pacification will require every Colombian to appeal to the good as something that goes beyond the given, surpassing the world where social life -and social struggle- unfolds (Robbins, 2013). The space created between the good as perceived and the good as imagined is the space where individuals and societies define its proper pursuit and struggle to achieve it. This is the space where the peace process is taking place, and few things will play a more relevant role in this process than the values, beliefs and moral views of all the members of the Colombian society.

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