

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

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### **Abstract**

In the present research we examine the effect of dehumanizing framing of ex-perpetrators of violence on participants' attributions of their agency, punishment deservingness, and suitability for re-socialization in post-conflict. For this purpose, we collected data in the aftermath of a peace agreement between the government and the FARC guerrilla in Colombia. In two studies, using within (Study 1) and between (Study 2) subjects experimental designs (N = 223), participants read manipulated news articles describing the capture of a fictional FARC guerrilla member. They were exposed (Study 1) and randomly assigned (Study 2) to a "humanizing frame" condition, where the ex-perpetrator was described emphasizing human traits (e.g., his identity, affective and mental states), and to a "dehumanizing frame" condition, where these traits were omitted, and the ex-perpetrator was generically nominated with terms such as terrorist or bandit. Across conditions we measured participants' attributions of perpetrators' human agency, blame, punishment deservingness, as well as participants' re-socialization expectations, and social distance towards the character. Results indicate that compared to the humanizing frame condition, in the dehumanizing frame 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. We discuss the implications of these findings for the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process of ex-perpetrators in post-conflict societies.

**Keywords:** framing, dehumanization, agency, retributive justice, resocialization.

### Introduction

Criminals, social norm transgressors, and suspects of terrorism are usual targets of dehumanization, which is the process of regarding others as less than humans (Haslam, 2006). Dehumanized perpetrators are perceived as lacking civility, self-control, cognitive abilities, emotionality, culture, interpersonal warmth, depth and agency, which poses serious implications for the way they are appraised and treated (e.g., Bastian et al., 2013; Khamitov et al., 2016). For example, it is known how dehumanization is employed to justify prejudice, harsh treatment, aggression, and violence towards enemies during war (Tajfel, 1981). However, less is known about the lasting effects of dehumanization in the aftermath of violent conflicts when ex-perpetrators have given up their weapons and are about to be re-incorporated into society in a post-conflict scenario. In this context, the perceptions that civil society holds of the humanity of the ex-perpetrators is key for the success of a peace agreement. For example, intergroup apology research has found that the (re) humanization of former perpetrators (after normative apologies) facilitates the willingness to have contact with them, receive help, and engage in intergroup reconciliation (Borinca et al., 2021). Therefore, it is relevant to ask if their dehumanization poses negative implications for people's attributions of their psychological traits, responsibility, and suitability for being reincorporated into society.

Colombia is currently facing a post-conflict period. The largest guerrilla in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)<sup>1</sup>, signed a peace agreement with the government in 2017, after which approximately 17.500 demobilized FARC members were re-incorporated into civilian life. Despite the historical achievement, roughly 50% of the voters in a referendum did not endorse the agreement expressing their skepticism about the transitional justice system and re-socialization process. Dehumanizing headlines such as "FARC are animals

<sup>1</sup> For its spanish acronym *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*.

and barbarians without humanity” (Gómez, 2008), still resonate in the mainstream news media outlets and the public discourse around the conflict. The aim of the present research is to examine whether this kind of dehumanizing media framing of the ex-perpetrators has an effect on peoples’ attributions of their agency and attitudes towards their punishment and re-socialization. This context provides a unique opportunity for studying such effects. In the following sections we formulate our hypotheses based on literature on framing, dehumanization, and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR).

### **Framing**

Framing theory propose 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 (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). From a sender-level perspective, it has been evidenced that specific groups within society deliberately shape public discourse by establishing predominant frames to the issues being communicated (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). From a receiver-level perspective, it has been found that the repetition of these frames has an impact in less informed individuals, who pay more attention to peripheral cues in the messages to form their opinions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

By setting ideological agendas and cognitively framing the messages they deliver, news media shape people’s representations, beliefs, and meanings around the social order and their participation on it (Sánchez et al., 2013). This idea holds for the media coverage of violent conflicts and peace processes. For instance, research has evidenced that the (biased) news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace agreement promoted a stronger negative response from the public, hindering government efforts to publicly legitimate the agreement (Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010). The contradiction between the inherent outcomes of peace and the

drama/sensation journalistic norm might motivate these biases. Since armed conflicts are often experienced indirectly by the large majority of people through mass media, it is relevant to ask how the actors in the conflict are framed by the news media outlets, and how this framing has an influence in the way they are perceived by the audience.

### **Media Framing of the Colombian Conflict**

There is qualitative evidence of such framing in the media coverage of the Colombian conflict. For example, demobilized members of the FARC and paramilitary guerrillas are mostly mentioned along with their charges and judicial penalties in a sample of news articles about the conflict, and 47.4% omit perpetrators' individual characteristics (Gutierrez, 2007). Another study reveals how frequently Colombian former president Álvaro Uribe publicly nominates FARC members as “terrorists” or “murderers” and compare them to the Nazis and Al Qaeda (Castellanos, 2014). Moreover, an analysis of more than 500 news about violent events perpetrated by the FARC and the paramilitaries featured in the main Colombian newspapers revealed that the use of passive voice and euphemisms (e.g., dead in combat vs. beheaded) are used differentially to lessen the paramilitary guerrillas' responsibility and highlight FARC's, respectively. Moreover, the research reveals a list of 200 adjectives used to nominate FARC members, including terms such as “savage”, “satanic”, “sanguinary”, or “damned” (García-Marrugo, 2013). Despite the doubtless responsibility of perpetrators from all sides in the conflict, these dehumanizing ways of depicting them pose negative effects on people's perceptions of their psychological traits and their willingness of reincorporating to society after the peace agreement.

### **Dehumanization**

Dehumanization is “the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human” (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016, p. 25). Undermining people's human traits such as

emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, and individuality leads to a mechanistic form of dehumanization, while undermining traits such as moral sensibility, rationality, or maturity, leads to an animalistic form of dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). Relatedly, divesting the out-groups from their human traits in explicit, overt, and hostile ways (such as in intergroup violent conflicts) leads to a blatant form of dehumanization; while divesting the out-groups from some unique human traits (e.g., secondary emotions) but no other more general (e.g., primary emotions), leads to subtle and more day-to-day ways of dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Compared to subtle dehumanization, blatant dehumanization is a stronger and more consistent predictor of intergroup outcomes such as threat perception, violence, or vengeance (Kteily et al., 2015). Moreover, and relevant to post-conflict, blatant dehumanization predicts higher prejudice, lower trust, and less willingness to engage in intergroup contact with dehumanized out-groups (Borinca et al., 2023). Thus, in this research we focus on blatant rather than subtle forms of dehumanization.

The dehumanization of perpetrators poses serious implications for the ways people perceive them and judge how they should be treated. For example, when offenders are dehumanized, people perceive them as less sensible to pain, more dangerous, uncontrollable, as feeling less guilty, less willing to restore the harm they caused, and more easily morally disengaging (Bastian et al., 2013). Importantly, dehumanized offenders are also attributed with a decreased sense of agency <sup>2</sup>(Bastian et al., 2011; Khamitov et al., 2016). Dehumanization also facilitates support for punitive forms of counter-terrorism, unfair and discriminatory treatment towards the targets, insensitivity to their pain and suffering (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016), and the legitimization of harsh and aggressive punishments (Khamitov et al., 2016), such as torture in

<sup>2</sup> Agency refers to the self-reflective capacity of recognizing oneself as a causal being, with an identity, and autonomy over own's desires, intentions, beliefs, emotions, responsibilities, and moral sense (Bandura, 1999; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009).

war contexts (Lindén et al., 2016). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that framing the perpetrators in a dehumanizing way will reduce participants' attributions of their agency and increase their attributions of responsibility and punishment deservingness.

Dehumanization also poses negative consequences for social connectedness with the dehumanized out-groups. It increases social and psychological distance (Haslam, 2006), and decreases understanding and intimacy (Wark & Galliher, 2007). When out-groups are regarded as socially distant, their motivations, beliefs, and intentions are ignored and they are perceived in a simple, abstract, and impoverished way, facilitating in-group members' cold cognition-based judgments (Haslam, 2006). Therefore, we expect that framing the perpetrators in a dehumanizing way will negatively influence participant's attitudes towards their re-socialization and increase their social distance.

### **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration**

The reincorporation of ex-perpetrators in a post-conflict setting is an economic, social, and political matter (Nussio, 2013; Theidon, 2009). Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes around the world pose a great responsibility for governments and societies since they must ensure the guarantees for victims and civilians (e.g., no repetition, no recidivism in crime), as well as the survival of ex-perpetrators and their relatives after their reincorporation to civil life. Very often, communities receive ex-perpetrators with resentment as they have suffered violence without any governmental support (Özerdem et al., 2008). For instance, people usually criticize the unequal benefits for ex-perpetrators and victims, the limitations of transitional justice, and the new outbreaks of violence following the demobilization of violent groups (Nussio, 2013). Thus, any DDR process faces the challenge of balancing the social inclusion of ex-perpetrators with the demands and acceptance of the community (Annan &

Cutter, 2009). In this scenario, the dehumanization of the ex-perpetrators poses an obstacle. If not carried out properly, DDR processes usually backfire intensifying the segregation between civilians and demobilized members (Bøås & Hatløy, 2008; Jennings, 2007), hindering in this way their psychological reintegration (Hangman & Nielsen, 2002).

## **The Current Research**

### ***Colombian Post-conflict Context***

The data for the present research was collected in the aftermath of the peace agreement between the FARC and the government in 2017. Colombian internal conflict is one of the most prolonged and severe in Latin America. From 1958 to 2012, it caused approximately 30.000 kidnappings, 25.000 disappeared people, and 220.000 deaths among civilians and combatants (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). The 6.8 million people forcibly displaced due to violence constitutes the world's second largest internally displaced population after Syria (Human Rights Watch, World Report 2017: Colombia, 2017). The FARC was the largest leftist guerrilla group in the country and shares the responsibility for these crimes along with different paramilitary groups, military forces, other leftist guerrillas, and criminal groups involved in the conflict.

### ***Goals***

The present research aims to examine the effect of a dehumanizing framing of ex-perpetrators on participants' attributions of their agency, punishment deservingness, and attitudes towards their re-socialization. Based on the evidence of the negative effects that dehumanization poses on individuals' attributions towards ex-perpetrators and their reincorporation, we expect that compared to a humanizing framing, a dehumanizing news media framing will elicit a) diminished agency attributions, b) more severe blame attributions and retributive judgments, c) negative attitudes towards their resocialization, and d) higher social distance towards them.



## Study 1

### Methods

#### *Participants*

A total sample of  $n = 93$  participants, 52.7 % woman, 47.3% men, were recruited out of convenience in schools and universities in Bogotá, Colombia, and interviewed by trained research assistants. We collected data within three groups: students from 11<sup>th</sup> grade (32.3%) from a private high school ( $M_{age} \pm SD = 17.6 \pm 0.10$ ); college students (34.4%) from different programs from a private university ( $21.2 \pm 1.52$ ); and adults (33.3%) with different occupations ( $36.4 \pm 6.01$ ). 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 and manipulated based on several real news reports covering this issue. After piloting different versions, one “humanizing” and one “dehumanizing” framing version of the reports describing similar situations were selected. In the *dehumanizing framing* 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 framing* 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, the 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 reads 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 et al., 2015).

We measured *agency attributions* with an adapted version of the cognitive trait scale (Gray et al., 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 ( $\alpha = .95$ ). All the above-described measures were presented to participants in a single questionnaire designed for this project (see Table S2 for the complete list of items).

### ***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” framing 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/dehum-blind>). The study was approved by the committee on research ethics of El Bosque University.

### ***Design and analytical strategy***

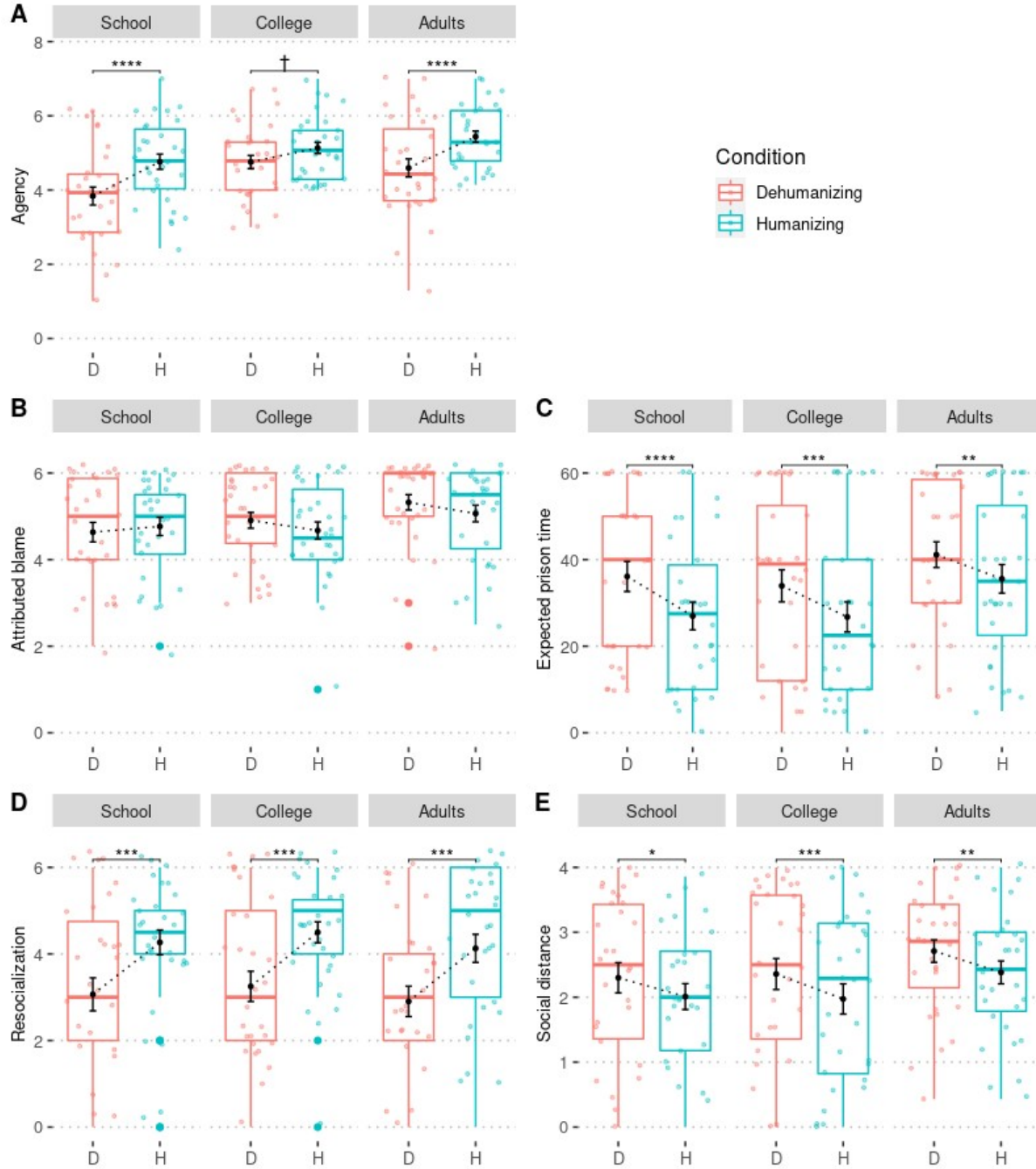
We used a 2 (condition) X 3 (group) mixed experimental design with condition (humanization/dehumanization), as a within-subjects factor, and group (school, college, and adults) as between-subjects factor. In order to test the effects of the condition in our set of dependent variables across groups, we 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.

The group factor was intended as a proxy of age and educational level, and was included in the analyses to explore the generalizability of the expected effects across groups. We do not expect differences by group in the present study as blatant dehumanization and some of its outcomes appear early in development and remain relatively stable until adulthood (Zhou & Hare, 2022). However, there is evidence suggesting age differences in the processing of (fake) news due to digital literacy, reading comprehension, or metacognitive abilities (Gaillard et al., 2021), as well as differences in news processing depending on people's educational level (Grabe et al., 2009), therefore we aimed to control for these variables.

### **Results**

Results are summarized in Table 1 and Fig. 1. *Agency attributions* analyses revealed a main effect of condition and group. 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 humanizing than in the dehumanizing framing condition. However, within the college group the differences in agency attributions across conditions were only marginal and not significant. Against our predictions, results showed that there are no significant effects on *blame attributions* by group nor condition. These results suggest that across groups participants do not change their blame attributions towards the perpetrators depending on the condition (Table 1; Fig. 1B). Regarding *prison sentence attributions*, we found a significant effect by condition. As expected, post-hoc contrasts indicated that across groups participants attribute higher prison sentences to the perpetrators in the dehumanizing as compared to the humanizing framing condition.



**Figure 1.** Within-subject dehumanizing framing 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 framing, D = Dehumanizing framing). Black bars represent means  $\pm$  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 asterisks:  $\dagger p < 0.10$ ,  $* p < 0.05$ ,  $** p < 0.01$ ,  $*** p < 0.001$ ,  $**** p < 0.0001$ .

**Table 1.**  
*Summary of Study 1 main effects and interactions*

	Agency			Blame			Prison			Re socialization			Social Distance		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$n_p^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$n_p^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$n_p^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$n_p^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$n_p^2$
Group	5.27	<b>0.007</b>	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	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.31	0.85	0.36	0.01	41.16	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.31	42.11	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.32	28.10	<b>&lt;.001</b>	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
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Conditional	0.58			0.39			0.84			0.55			0.87		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> Marginal	0.17			0.05			0.07			0.11			0.04		

*Note.* Nakagawa's *R*<sup>2</sup> 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.

Finally, we found significant effects by condition on *resocialization attitudes*, and *social distance*. 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 as compared to the perpetrator in the humanizing framing condition.

## Study 2

Within-subjects designs pose inherent limitations related to carry-over and demand effects (Charness et al., 2012). Although we strived to control for these effects statistically testing for random effects by participant, and methodologically introducing contextual variations in the stimuli in Study 1, the news articles across conditions were not completely identical due to these latter variations. In order to circumvent these potential limitations and get complementary and more robust evidence of the predicted effects, we employ a between-subjects design in Study 2 in which we manipulate the dehumanizing/humanizing language as in Study 1, but using the exact same news articles without changing any other contextual information.

## 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 ( $M_{age} \pm SD = 26.9 \pm 8.76$ ), 34.6 % men ( $30.5 \pm 11.8$ ). The link to the instrument was distributed through social media, and in public and private universities in Bogota, Colombia. Undergraduate college students, mostly from political science and psychology programs, 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 had 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 Study 1. The news reports were identical, except for the manipulations. As in Study 1, 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 humanizing or dehumanizing framing conditions. Then, participants read the corresponding news report, and answered the agency, blame attributions, sentence attribution, resocialization attitudes, and social distance measures regarding the ex-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/dehum-blind>). The study was approved by the committee on research ethics of El Bosque University.

### ***Design and analytical strategy***

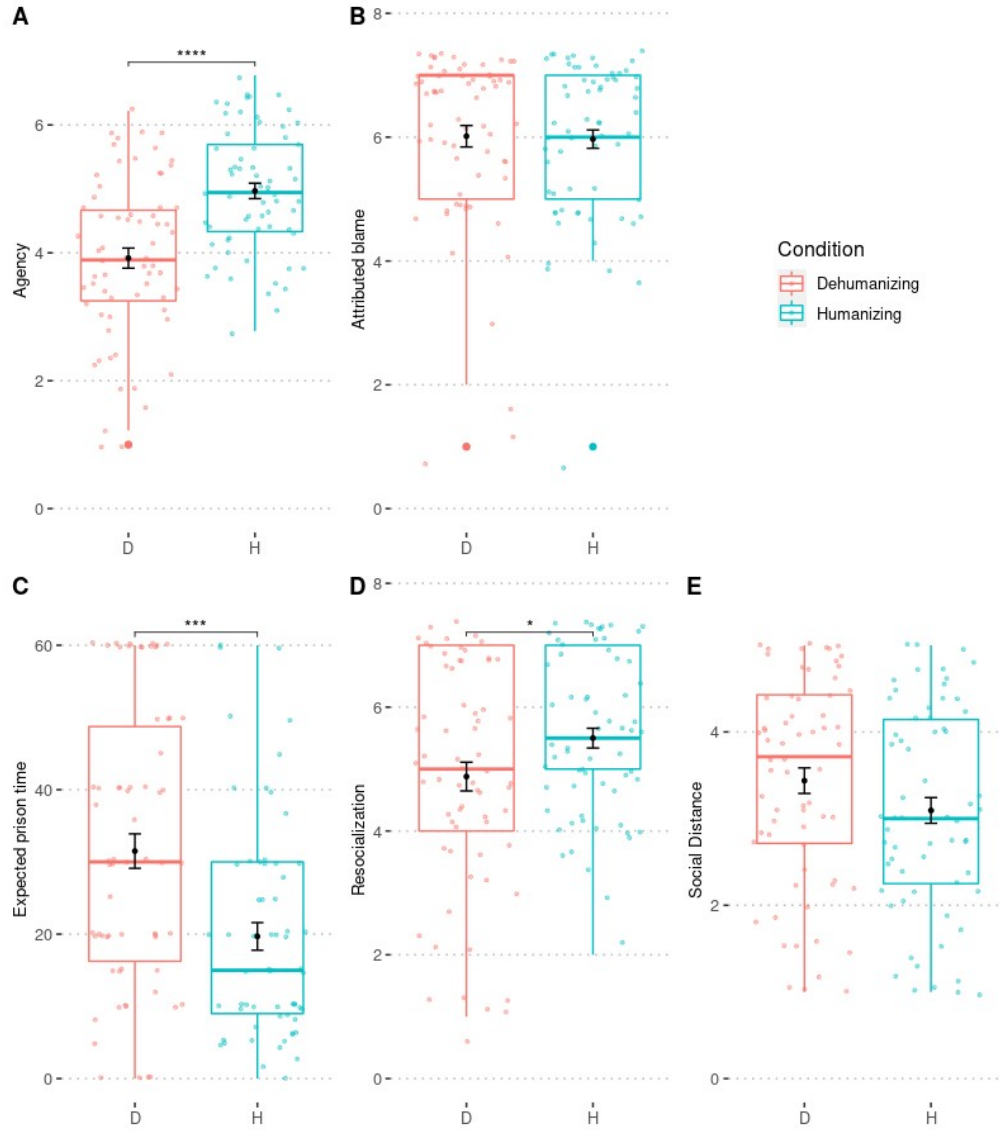
We used a between-subjects experimental design with condition x 2 (humanizing framing/dehumanizing framing), as a between-subjects factor. In order to test the effects of the condition in our set of dependent variables, we fitted five separate Linear Models (LM), one for each dependent variable (i.e., agency attributions, attributed blame, attributed sentence, resocialization attributions, and social distance). Except in the case of attributed blame, all models were fitted using the base *lm* function (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017) 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,  $F(1,128) = 27.81, p < .001, n_p^2 = .18, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.3]$ , indicating that participants in the dehumanizing framing condition attributed less agency to the ex-perpetrator ( $M \pm SD = 3.92 \pm 0.14$ ) than participants in the humanizing framing condition ( $4.97 \pm 0.14$ ). Moreover, against our expectations, but in line with Study 1 results, *blame attributions* were not significantly different between conditions,  $F(1,128) = 0.04, p = .84, n_p^2 = 0.0, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.0, 0.3]$ , suggesting that blame attributions towards ex-perpetrators remain relatively stable regardless the humanizing ( $5.97 \pm 0.16$ ), or the dehumanizing ( $6.02 \pm 0.16$ ), framing (Fig. 2).

Consistent with our predictions, results yielded a significant main effect of condition on the *attributed punishment*,  $F(1,128) = 14.85, p < .001, n_p^2 = 0.1, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.03, 0.21]$ , indicating

that participants in the dehumanizing framing condition attribute longer prison sentences to the ex-perpetrator ( $M \pm SD = 31.5 \pm 2.15$  years), as compared to participants in the humanizing framing condition ( $19.69 \pm 2.18$ ). 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 dehumanizing framing condition ( $M \pm SD = 4.88 \pm 0.20$ ) than in the humanizing framing condition ( $5.50 \pm 0.20$ ). Finally, although in the expected direction but contrary to our predictions and Study 1 results, *social distance* scores were not significantly different between the dehumanizing ( $3.44 \pm 0.15$ ) and the humanizing framing condition ( $3.09 \pm 0.15$ ),  $F(1,128) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $n_p^2 = 0.02$ , 95% CI [0.0, 0.09] (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Between-subject dehumanizing framing 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 framing, D = Dehumanizing framing). Black bars represent means  $\pm$  SEM. Significant effects of condition (contrasts using emmeans with Holm-Bonferroni correction for multiple tests), are represented with lines and asterisks: †  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$ .

## Discussion

In the present research we tested the effect of media dehumanizing framing of ex - perpetrators of violence in a post-conflict setting on participants' attributions of their agency,

blame, deserved punishment, attitudes towards their resocialization, and social distance. Results suggest that when ex-perpetrators are depicted in the news using dehumanizing language (i.e., using their alias, nominating them as “terrorists” or “criminals”, 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 a condition where ex-perpetrators were depicted using a humanizing framing (i.e., including information about their identity, emotions, and mental states).

The present findings are in line with previous research showing that dehumanization undermines agency attributions towards different kinds of offenders (Khamitov et al., 2016), and provide support to a *dehumanizing account* of perpetrators over a moral typecasting perspective that suggests that offenders are attributed with more agency. Our findings extend this effect to a specific kind of offender not addressed in previous research, namely, ex-perpetrators of violence in post-conflict contexts. The undermining effect of a dehumanizing framing on people’s attributions of ex-perpetrators’ agency poses some implications for their successful re-socialization. First, when perpetrators are attributed with reduced agency they are divested of basic rights and protection generally granted to all humans (Khamitov et al., 2016), since ensuring rights and safety to ex-perpetrators is a core principle of the transitional justice system usually implemented after a peace agreement, undermining the perceptions of perpetrators’ agency might jeopardize the achievement of these guarantees. Second, a diminished attribution of agency (via dehumanization) reduces empathy and perspective taking (Park et al., 2016). Empathy has been identified as a strong positive predictor of intergroup forgiveness in post-conflict societies such as Chile, Northern Ireland (Noor et al., 2008; Tam et al., 2008), or Kosovo (Borinca, McAuliffe, et al., 2023). Therefore, attributing ex-perpetrators with a sense of agency

increases empathy and facilitates intergroup forgiveness in the midst of their reincorporation into society.

Results also support the idea that dehumanizing framing increases punishment deservingness attributions. These findings are in line with previous evidence suggesting that dehumanization predicts harsher punishment allocation to perpetrators across different transgressions such as child molestation, violent crimes, and white-collar crimes (Bastian et al., 2013). Moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002), might be a potential mechanism explaining the positive association between dehumanization and harsh punishment, as people tend to inhumanize out-groups in order to justify violent behavior towards them and disengage from self-sanctions (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). However, in the present research we did not test moral disengagement directly nor addressed other relevant factors that could potentially mediate this association, notably, negative emotions, feelings of revenge, and justice seeking motivations. Future research should examine the mediating role of these factors in the associations between dehumanizing framing, moral disengagement, and punishment attributions.

Against our expectations, results did not corroborate previous positive associations between perpetrator's dehumanization and higher blame attributions (e.g., Bastian et al., 2013; Tsukamoto & Karasawa, 2015), even though these studies also report significant effects of dehumanization on punishment allocation as we found. It seems that even within the humanizing framing conditions across our studies, participants' blame attributions towards ex-perpetrators remain high. This could be partially explained by the characteristics of the post-conflict context in our research. First, the public trust and support to FARC has been typically very low (e.g., less than 4% between 2005 and 2014), and Colombians widely acknowledge their responsibility in a variety of crimes (García-Sánchez & Carlin, 2020). And second, in transitional justice systems like the Colombian one, ex-perpetrators' responsibility is always assumed and even highlighted,

since truth, restoration, and the public acknowledgment of the crimes are essential pillars of the peace agreement. Therefore, the setting of a “forgive but not forget” mindset could explain the undifferentiated blame attributions in our results.

In line with our predictions, participants attributed ex-perpetrators to be less suitable for resocialization in the dehumanizing frame condition. In line with a self-regulatory moral perspective (Bandura, 2002; Hoffman, 1998), when perpetrators are regarded as lacking civility, refinement, or rationality, people also attribute them less inhibitive moral agency (i.e., the capacity of moral restraint and self-control). Considering their past transgressions, viewing ex-perpetrators as capable of moral self-control is crucial for regarding them as suitable for resocialization. Moreover, perceiving perpetrators as possessing warmth and emotionality facilitates people’s positive appraisals of their moral worthiness and suitability for rehabilitation (Bastian et al., 2011). Thus, our results illuminate how dehumanizing media framing can undermine people’s perceptions of ex-perpetrators capabilities for rehabilitation and resocialization.

Finally, Study 1 results are in line with previous research suggesting that dehumanization predicts social distance across multiple out-groups including immigrants, lesbians and gay men, disabled people, and other sexual, religious, ethnic, national, and occupational groups (Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2008; Ouellette-Kuntz et al., 2010; Wark & Galliher, 2007). The link between dehumanization and social distance might be mediated by moral disgust which according to evolutionary accounts plays a role in negative intergroup attitudes (Hodson & Costello, 2007) like xenophobia (Faulkner et al., 2004) or ethnocentrism (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006), and is associated with purity and social order protection motivations (Rozin et al., 1999). Thus, when ex-perpetrators are dehumanized, they might be perceived as a threat to the social order, in-group values, or as carriers of ‘vices’, triggering moral disgust and therefore increasing social distance.

In sum, these findings provide evidence to the idea that dehumanizing media framing of the ex-perpetrators might negatively influence people's willingness to accept them as members of their social group.

This poses implications for the positive association between intergroup contact and reconciliation. Recent experimental research has evidenced that the humanization of out-group members decreases anxiety, increases empathy, and leads to more positive behavioral intentions even for people reporting high levels of negative direct contact with out-group members (Borinca, McAuliffe, et al., 2023). Moreover, positive direct contact with out-group members predicts lower blatant dehumanization, and reciprocally, humanizing out-group members increases the willingness to have contact with them (Borinca, Van Assche, et al., 2023). Thus, the dehumanization of former perpetrators might hinder contact (promoting further dehumanization), empathy, positive behavioral intentions, and therefore intergroup reconciliation.

However, our results regarding social distance should be taken with caution as they did not reach statistical significance in Study 2, despite going in the expected direction. One possible explanation might be related to the between-subjects design. In repeated measures within-subjects design (as Study 1), when testing a real effect, the probability of finding a significant result (statistical power) is higher than between-subject designs (e.g., Goulet & Cousineau, 2019), and the first condition serves participants as a “natural anchor” or point of reference for contrasting their answers in the subsequent conditions (Charness et al., 2012). Participants in Study 2 were randomly assigned to only one condition and did not have the chance to contrast (or re-calibrate) their attributed social distance based on any previous answer, and our social distance measure is particularly prone to this contrasting effect (e.g., it would bother you to have [the character] as a coworker or study mate?). Thus, the results regarding social distance might not be conclusive and more research is needed.



### **Strengths and Limitations**

The present study has several strengths. First, 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 (Henrich et al., 2010), which enhances external validity. Second, compared to previous correlational research we took the challenge of experimentally manipulating dehumanization via framing. Third, we used mixed models in Study 1 to control for individual variability, account for the dependency of the measures, and circumvent in this way the limitations of within-subjects designs, and we complemented this utilizing a between-subjects design in Study 2. Finally, the present research is timely, grounded in ongoing relevant socio-political issues, and likely to be extended to other post-conflict societies where media dehumanizing framing may be present. We not only collected our data in a real post-conflict setting, but also within a civil war context with the particularity that in-group and out-group members share other group memberships such as their ethnicity and nationality.

The current research also has some limitations. First, we collected data in a specific post-conflict society with particular historical, cultural, and socio-political characteristics. Therefore, further cross-cultural research in other post-conflict contexts should be conducted to generalize our findings. Second, our participants were not direct victims of the conflict. Although we focused on broad non-victim audiences and this was a requirement to participate in both studies, we acknowledge that the perception and evaluation of perpetrators might be qualitatively different from the victim perspective. Future research should certainly test these effects among victim (vs. non-victim) samples. Third, we did not include a control condition with neutral language in our designs which may have added further support to the differences between the framing conditions that we found. Relatedly, although our results evidenced that the experimental manipulations worked as expected, we did not include manipulation checks which may limit the

cross-validation of our experimental conditions. Finally, political ideology was an under-explored variable in the present research, and it is important to include it as a relevant mediator in future studies, especially in instances where out-group dehumanization is motivated by differences in political views. Other mediators that are promising for further explaining the effects we found in the present research are for example participant's moral disgust sensitivity, just-world beliefs, system justification tendencies, and social dominance orientation, all relevant predictors of dehumanization.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite the undeniable responsibility of former violent groups in war-related crimes, the dehumanization of its former members poses more obstacles than advantages for their reincorporation to society in post-conflict contexts. As evidenced in the present research, just the use of humanizing language in the news to refer to the ex-perpetrators can have a significant impact in fostering social closeness, forgiveness, and positive attitudes towards their reincorporation among the general population. The present research highlights the subtle ways in which public discourse in the media can shape people's attitudes and perceptions towards the actors in the midst of a post-conflict setting, revealing its potential impact for the success of any peace process.

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