Emotional Legacies of War Among Former Colombian Paramilitaries

Enzo Nussio
Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá)

Drawing on 62 interviews with former members of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), a right-wing paramilitary umbrella organization that fought against guerrilla groups and was involved in drug trafficking, I develop a model of the emotional legacies of war. The proposed model is critical to the understanding of ex-combatants’ behavior in the context of postwar disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. This study connects three related elements: ex-combatants’ recollection of their initial reason for joining the war and their war experiences, their present perception of those reasons and experiences, and an emotional legacy tied to their perceptions. I have designated the emotional residue that emerges from the remembered past, including regret, pride, resentment, nostalgia, and tiredness of being at war, an emotional legacy. These emotional legacies connect ex-combatants’ perception of their past with the present.

Keywords: ex-combatants, Colombia, emotional legacies, peacebuilding, grounded theory

There were people that demobilized, they have taken the weapons from their hands but not from their heads. And this is very difficult, this compels the person to go back again, to the same life as before. (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed March 18, 2009)

In the aftermath of conflict, the human resources of war—the ex-combatants—are crucial for a peaceful society. In many war-to-peace transitions, both with and without international oversight, combatants are returned to civilian society through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). More than 60 such processes have taken place since 1989 (CCDDDR, 2009), mostly under the auspices of international organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank, and thousands of former combatants have participated in DDR programs with the goal of economic and social reintegration into society.

In the past decade, various efforts have been made to strengthen the practical guidelines for these processes (European Union, 2006; Stockholm Initiative, 2006; United Nations, 2006). However, scholars have questioned the effectiveness of DDR. The Escola de Cultura de Pau in Barcelona in Spain, for example, asserted in its 2008 DDR yearbook that “no DDR process in the last few years has produced optimal results” (Caramés & Sanz, 2008, p. 10). In a study in Sierra Leone, Humphreys and Weinstein (2007) found little evidence that internationally funded DDR programs improved the lot of demobilized individuals.

A vibrant literature has developed in parallel to the increasing number of DDR programs

ENZO NUSSIO holds a doctoral degree in International Affairs and Governance from the University of St. Gallen. He is currently working as a Swiss National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellow at the Political Science Department of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia on a project entitled “Fear, Distrust and Protection in Violent Societies.”

I AM VERY GRATEFUL FOR the generous support to this research offered by Avina Stiftung and the Centro Latinoamericano-Suizo (CLS) at the University of St.Gallen. Also, I thank Ben Oppenheim, Johanna Söderström, Juan Esteban Ugarriza, Kimberly Howe, the participants of the Uppsala Forum on Peace, Democracy and Justice guest lecture “Inside the ex-combatant’s mind: findings from fieldwork in Colombia,” the participants of a presentation of this paper at the Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) in Bogotá, the collaborators of the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), the former and current editors of Peace and Conflict, Richard Wagner and Susan Opotow, for immensely valuable comments, as well as three highly competent anonymous reviewers for very useful comments on previous versions of this article.

CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE should be addressed to Enzo Nussio, Political Science Department, Universidad de los Andes, Edificio Roberto Franco, Office 324, Carrera 1 Número 18A-10, Bogotá DC, Colombia. E-mail: enzonussio@hotmail.com
around the world. Yet, the bulk of this literature is policy oriented, as Berdal and Ucko (2009) state and, according to Gomes, Parsons, and Alden (2007), the perspective of the target group of DDR processes—ex-combatants—remains underexplored (but see Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, 2009; Jennings, 2007; Utas, 2008). Allport (2009) recounts that World War II returnees to Britain experienced joy at arrival along with feelings of fear and regret. Schafer (2007) looks at roles and life trajectories of former combatants in Mozambique and notes that many veterans characterize their war experience as the defining moment of their lives. However, their involvement in war is not a uniform experience for every ex-combatant but is instead experienced in many different ways. Each demobilized person has a specific way of remembering, justifying, or critiquing his or her personal involvement in war. The way former combatants remember their military past may depend on their economic situation as a civilian (Verwimp & Verpoorten, 2004), their exposure to security threats (Nussio, 2011a, 2012), or their acceptance within local communities after demobilization (Özerdem, 2012).

Emotional legacies are important for various aspects of peacebuilding. Depending on the emotional legacies of war, ex-combatants may respond differently to reconciliation activities and transitional justice measures (see Sriram & Herman, 2009). Also, an emotional legacy of the past may explain part of a person’s willingness to return to illegal behavior, a crucial issue for the success or failure of DDR programs. However, recent studies have not considered emotional legacies as an explaining factor for recidivism (Boas & Hatløy, 2008; Hill, Taylor, & Temin, 2008; Munévar & Nussio, 2009).

This study examines ex-combatants’ perspectives focusing specifically on emotional dimensions of their retrospective understanding of their experience. To develop a model of emotional legacies of past participation in war it asks: How do ex-combatants feel about their past? What emotional legacies remain today? Using a qualitative, inductive approach inspired in the procedures of grounded theory (see especially Corbin & Strauss, 2008) I conducted 62 interviews with former Colombian paramilitaries in four different areas of the country as I will describe after discussing historical background.

**Background: Paramilitary Demobilization in Colombia**

In Colombia, paramilitary groups emerged as a widespread phenomenon in the 1980s in rural regions such as Córdoba and Magdalena Medio (Cruz, 2007; Medina, 1990; Romero, 2003). At the beginning, these local “entrepreneurs of violence” (Romero, 2003, p. 57) were protectors of the status quo. As a response to increasing guerrilla influence they sought to prevent the central government from making a peace deal with the guerrilla. Paramilitary leaders become “warlords” (Duncan, 2006, p. 15), controlling whole regions as para-authorities, particularly during the 1990s, when several paramilitary groups were integrated under the umbrella of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC).

The AUC experienced major growth between 1998 and 2002 while peace talks took place between the government of Andrés Pastrana and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the most powerful guerrilla group in the country (Chernick, 2009). At that time, paramilitary groups not only reached military dominance in large territories, but they also penetrated the social, political, and economic spheres of society (Acemoglu, Robinson, & Santos, 2009; Romero, 2011; Romero & Valencia, 2007). Conflict reached its highest intensity in 2002, when paramilitaries were the main actor responsible for mass atrocities (Sánchez, 2007). The AUC used forced displacement and massacres (e.g., in the year 2000 alone, there were 105 massacres) to destroy support networks of the guerrilla groups and gain adherents to their project (Duncan, 2006). Military activities of the AUC were mainly financed through drug trafficking (Cubides, 2004) and depended on open collaboration with state authorities (El Tiempo, 2011).

When Álvaro Uribe was elected president in 2002, the government explored the possibility of negotiating the demobilization of the paramilitaries with the declared aim of “restoring the monopoly of force in the hands of the state” (Acuerdo de Santa Fe de Ralito, 2003). As a result of these negotiations between 2003 and 2006, 31,671 members of the AUC participated in collective demobilization ceremonies (Restrepo & Bagley, 2011). Some critics of this process have argued that many of the demobil-
lized combatants had not actually been members of the AUC or participated in combat (CNRR, 2010). After demobilization, the commanders and midranking soldiers responsible for mass violence could receive a reduced prison sentence of up to eight years under the controversial Justice and Peace Law (Pizarro & Valencia, 2009; Uprimny, Botero, Restrepo, & Saffon, 2006). Rank-and-file and lower midlevel combatants—such as the 62 interviewees of this study—were pardoned for their involvement in an illegal armed group and have received benefits of a reintegration program (Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 2007). Recently, however, their juridical status has been called into question and eventually resolved by Law 1424 of 2010.

**Paramilitary Reintegration**

Since 2006, the Office of the High Counselor for Reintegration (Alta Consejería para la Reintegración – ACR) has been in charge of this policy (ACR, 2010). The ACR has assisted ex-combatants with education, vocational training, grants for microbusinesses, psychosocial support, health care, and a monthly stipend dependent on the ex-combatants’ participation to reintegration activities. Of the 31,671 demobilized members of the AUC, 20,267 were active participants in the reintegration program by the end of 2009. The rest were involved in the process of Justice and Peace, imprisoned because of infractions after their demobilization, died, or left the program for unknown reasons.

After the AUC demobilized, many former combatants cohered into newly armed groups (Nussio, 2011b). Granada et al. (2009) and Romero and Arias (2009) call these groups neo-paramilitaries, referring to their close relationship to former paramilitary groups. The Toledo Centre for Peace (Massé, Munévar, Vanegas, & Renán, 2010) calls them armed postdemobilization structures, alluding to their emergence after the AUC demobilization. Government institutions speak of criminal gangs (bandas criminales), downplaying their relation to former paramilitary groups and emphasizing their involvement in drug trafficking. Recent estimates of the total members of these newly armed groups range from 3,900 to 10,200 (CNRR, 2010). The local communities bluntly call them paramilitaries and see no difference between the modus operandi of these new groups and the paramilitaries of the past. Although demobilized people may occupy important positions within the new groups, police estimates based on arrest numbers indicate that only 12% of members are demobilized combatants (Semana.com, 2009).

The newly armed groups related to the demobilized paramilitary groups is important because these may serve as an open door for ex-combatants to return to violence.

**Method**

To examine what I call emotional legacies of war I studied the trajectory of ex-combatants of the AUC. I interviewed 62 individuals who participated in the demobilization process. Because the individual perspectives of ex-combatants in a DDR environment are underexplored, I utilized an inductive approach, grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this approach, the research begins with a broad interest or question that provides an investigator with flexibility (Kelle, 2007; Mintzberg, 2005). The question is refined with continuous data collection and analysis. Walker and Myrick (2007) call this process a “method of constant comparison” (p. 48) between coding and interpreting data.

The concepts, the main unit of analysis, were verified by the process of development and confirmation. They emerged from the interviews and the ongoing coding procedures, allowing the development and verification of central categories (“codes”). In this process, ongoing analysis permits the development of provisional concepts, which in turn provide feedback for further data collection. Thus there is the gradual development of concepts by strengthening their internal variability, conceptual density, and the interrelatedness among them. The process is complete when “theoretical saturation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263) is reached. This means that no new concepts and properties emerge.

**Sampling Procedure**

The present study is based on 62 interviews with former paramilitary fighters conducted between January 2009 and April 2010, three to four years after the conclusion of the paramilitary demobilization. The interviewees were se-
lected based on a limited theoretical sampling procedure until reaching saturation. Although Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe a feedback mechanism between data collection and analysis in which concepts derived from previous data analysis theoretically guide the subsequent purposeful selection of cases, this ideal was partially but not fully possible because of logistical difficulties in accessing potential interviewees. Most interviews \((n = 54)\) were arranged with the help of the Office of the High Counselor for Reintegration (ACR); the remaining eight were selected with the help of other contacts. The overall aim of this approach was to produce a contrasting rather than a representative sample of demobilized persons to “uncover variation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 143).

For the first group of interviews organized with the ACR, it was not possible to apply a straightforward theoretical sampling, as suggested by grounded theory, because of internal requirements of the ACR. The number and type of interviewees had to be agreed with ACR officials from the outset. To avoid a selection of interviewees by ACR staff, I supervised a random selection of reintegration program participants. However, to generate sufficient variation without imposing a rigid preconceived theoretical scheme, I chose interviewees along two variables: location and age. Therefore, the 54 interviewees selected with the assistance of the ACR were chosen from four municipalities: Bogotá, Medellín, Barrancabermeja, and Tierralta. These municipalities differ in population size, number of demobilized people, the demographics of the demobilized community, and security indicators (e.g., homicide rates and current and previous presence of armed groups). Whereas Bogotá and Medellín are cities with large demobilized communities, Barrancabermeja and the extensive rural municipality of Tierralta are located in two critical regions in terms of threats to the reintegration process according to a report of the Support Mission to the Peace Process – MAPP-OEA (2009).

In each of the four municipalities, I targeted 18 persons, six from each of three age groups (18 to 25, 26 to 40, and older than 40 years) to generate variation. For the second group of eight interviews organized independently from the ACR, I used straightforward theoretical sampling to compensate for the limited theoretical sampling in the ACR organized interviews. These interviews resulted from informal talks with friends of demobilized persons known through the ACR interviews or through contacts otherwise related to the demobilized community. The eight interviewees corresponded to types of demobilized persons I specifically sought based on analysis of previous interviews, such as midlevel ex-combatants, demobilized people who left the ACR program, and persons who reengaged in illegal activities. This second subsample guaranteed for sufficient variation for theoretical saturation in line with grounded theory procedures.

Data Collection

In conformity with the research review process at University of St. Gallen (the university where I worked at that time), a confidentiality agreement was signed before each interview indicating the rights of the interviewees and duties of the researcher. With one exception all interviewees agreed to be audio-recorded. Unlike the 54 interviews organized with the help of the ACR, which were conducted in private offices at the ACR service center, these eight additional interviews were conducted in an informal setting—restaurants and university facilities in Bogotá.

In line with the feedback principles of grounded theory, interview questions were modified over time as a result of the ongoing analysis. Initial interview questions were open-ended and aimed at getting a feeling for the stories of former combatants (e.g., “tell me about your life after demobilization,” “what has been positive/negative since you demobilized?”). The continuous thematic analysis during data collection allowed for the establishment of provisional themes (e.g., emotional legacies) that were later refined through the subsequent interviews (e.g., “Why did you join the paramilitaries? How do you feel about your reason to join war?”). Thus, the thematic analysis proceeded according to three coding steps—open, axial, and selective as proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008), allowing me to identify relevant themes that reflected ex-combatants’ understanding of their past participation in war.

Participants

Between January 2009 and April 2010 I interviewed 62 demobilized people of the AUC. Eighteen were from Bogotá, 10 from Medellín, 15
from Barrancabermeja, and 19 from Tierralta (see Table 1). They are distributed in three more or less equal age groups. The interviewees were mostly men (53 men and 9 women), corresponding to the predominantly male AUC. Women were from Tierralta or Barrancabermeja.

The former rank of the interviewed persons is based on self-reports. Fourteen said that they commanded at least a small group of AUC members. Two interviewees of the youngest age group (younger than 26) claimed to be former midlevel combatants, the other 12 are older than 26 years of age.

Concerning participants’ current employment, the six ex-combatants who reported having a stable job were former midlevel combatants. Concerning participants’ family situation, 28 interviewees stated they were in a stable relationship, whereas 29 self-identified as single. Forty-three interviewees reported having children.

In February 2010, approximately one year after the majority of the interviews were conducted, the ACR information system reported that all interviewees continued as active participants in the reintegration program indicating that they had participated in at least one reintegration activity in the preceding three months. According to media sources, one of the interviewees was arrested in early 2010 for participating in a massacre during the time he was active in the AUC; he is currently imprisoned.

Results

This section first introduces the remembered war past distinguishing between reasons for joining and experiences of war (see left column of Figure 1). The second section outlines the connections between today’s perceptions and the related emotional legacies of war (see middle and right column of Figure 1). Each subsection in this second section corresponds to the horizontal pairs indicated in Figure 1 (i.e., illegitimate motivations and regret; legitimate motivations and pride; imposed decisions and resentment; positive experiences and nostalgia; and negative experiences and tiredness).

Remembered War Past

Reasons for joining. Many interviewed ex-combatants mention economic motivations as reason for their entry to the AUC. They often claim that they joined the group because they lacked job opportunities. This is especially true in the municipality of Tierralta where nearly all interviewees mention economic reasons as their main motivation. Some are aware of having acted out of envy toward others who joined the paramilitaries earlier and came back rich: “I was lacking many essential things, walked around barefoot and in shorts. When I saw those young men nicely dressed, I said to myself ‘if it’s like this, I’ll go there as well’” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed April 28, 2009).

Some ex-combatants, especially younger ex-combatants, mention fun, adventure, or self-fulfillment as reasons for their entry to the AUC: “That’s why you join the groups, because you liked the weapons, the motorbikes.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed March 17, 2009). Another said: “Imagine how it feels like having an AK-47 in your hands as a 14-year-old. You feel powerful and everybody respects you.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed October 28, 2009)

A few interviewed ex-combatants (especially former midranking combatants) explicitly men-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location of residence</td>
<td>Bogotá</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medellín</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barrancabermeja</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tierralta</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Younger than 26</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Between 26 and 40</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older than 40</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of demobilization</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former rank</td>
<td>Mid-ranked</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rank-and-file</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job situation</td>
<td>Stable job</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal job</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No job</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sources: ACR and interviews.

1 All interviews with former paramilitary members are conducted in Spanish and translated into English by the author.
tion ideological motivations as their primary reason for entry to the AUC, for example: “For me, when I entered, the AUC were like part of me. I said that this was necessary for the conflict we’re living here in Colombia” (Male, midlevel ex-combatant interviewed February 25, 2009). Most demobilized individuals state that they agreed with the paramilitary ideology and that they wanted to fight against the guerrilla for the sake of the country. However, ideological motivations are in most cases not stated as the principal reason for joining. Rather, they seem to act as a favorable precondition. Many of the ex-combatants state that they would not have joined if they had not agreed with counterinsurgent ideology.

A few interviewed ex-combatants describe seeking security as their reason for joining the AUC. A demobilized man from a Caribbean region entered the paramilitaries looking for protection from opposing groups. He said: “I got into war automatically because the guerrilla wanted to recruit me by force, so I went somewhere else and didn’t get involved with the guerrilla. That’s why I went to the AUC, and I lasted 10 years there.” (Male, midlevel ex-combatant, interviewed January 22, 2009)

A number of interviewed ex-combatants mention revenge for acts committed by the FARC as reason for joining the AUC, often along with other reasons. As one man said, “I went there because they [FARC] killed a brother of mine. [...] This was always my motive, the death of my brother; it brought me this far.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 26, 2009)

One interviewed ex-combatant mentions forcible recruitment as reason for his entry to the AUC. He said: “I wasn’t part of the armed group because I wanted to but because they took me with them.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed January 21, 2009) This reason is either alluded to vaguely or appears in combination with other reasons in various other interviews as well.

**Experiences.** When ex-combatants are asked about their war experiences, few admit to having killed somebody, and most do not want to talk about violent events. However, some openly declare having killed innocent people, and one proudly describes ordering “social cleansing” to further the AUC policy of eliminating such “undesirable social elements” as street children, homeless people, prostitutes, and criminals (see, e.g., Wilson & Greider-Durango, 1998). Press releases reveal that another interviewee was involved in a massacre during his paramilitary time.

When they think back, male interviewees mention economic benefits of the AUC – the money it provided for parties, women, and alcohol. Many interviewees state they had more money before, while in the AUC, than they do now. Some see the comradeship as a benefit of armed life as fellow combatants acted, in some cases, as replacements for family. Bonds during war could grow very strong: “What family was for me? The people with whom I lived in the

---

**Figure 1.** Emotional legacies of war.

---

**Table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for joining</th>
<th>Emotional legacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic, self-fulfillment etc.</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology, security, vengeance etc.</td>
<td>Regret or shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible recruitment</td>
<td>Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money, food, women, comrades etc.</td>
<td>Imposed decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger, no family, no freedom etc.</td>
<td>Tiredness of being at war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Figure 1. Emotional legacies of war.
group. [...] You save my life, I save yours.” (Male, midlevel ex-combatant, interviewed February 25, 2009) Others report having learned to be responsible, to treat people with respect, to comply with orders, to protect their family, or to win the support of local people. Lack of freedom and danger are further elements they frequently remember: “Being in an armed group you’re never at ease, always at the edge of a canyon, receiving orders, how annoying. ‘Bring me this!’ No, this is no life.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 26, 2009)

The perception of the AUC itself is somewhat controversial among those interviewed. Most interviewees excuse the use of violence in the past with the argument that these were legitimate means during war. Nonetheless, some acknowledge the damage caused to civilians and the maltreatment toward members within the group. An extreme case is represented in the following quotation of a former paramilitary who was obliged to execute his fellow paramilitary for stealing some cocaine while on guard duty:

I had to shoot a comrade of mine who was from the same neighborhood. If not, they would have killed me. We studied together, we did military service together, sometimes he even ate at my place. I had to because it was him or me. (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed April 29, 2009)

The interviewee starts crying while he is telling this story.

Today’s Perception and Emotional Legacies

Illegitimate motivations and regret or shame. Interviewees identify motives for joining and describe these as legitimate or illegitimate. Those who have identified economic and self-fulfillment reasons for joining the paramilitaries usually perceive these motivations as illegitimate today. This perception comes generally along with a feeling of regret (cf. Figure 1, Columns 2 & 3).

Several examples reveal the connections between illegitimate motivations and regret: “It was totally an error. At that time you don’t know what happens to you, you don’t think about it. It was maybe the easiest way out, for working, [...] it was the way to get an income” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed April 28, 2009). Regret in this example points to the original decision and the motivations connected with this decision. The interviewee categorizes his economic motivation as illegitimate, saying that it was a “easy way out” (today’s perception of his past motivation). The resulting emotional legacy is regret: “It was an error.”

An interviewee who joined for economic reasons says: “I regret having been there, lost time. If I caused any damage, I regret all this as well.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed January 27, 2009) He regrets his decision to join the paramilitaries and its consequences. However, his construction of regret starts with his reason for entry.

There are also ex-combatants who feel exposed to social rejection today. This casts the decision to join just for money or just for experimenting, in retrospect, a poor one. Asked why he regrets having been a member of the AUC, one ex-combatant replies: “Because in any case you’re stigmatized, as if you were the worst. That’s how most people see you.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 24, 2009) Although subsequent activities or the consequences for today’s life may have re-shaped interviewees’ accounts, in these three examples, regret is rooted in the perception of the remembered decision of entry.

Some ex-combatants, and particularly women who participated in the AUC, express shame as their predominant emotional legacy: “For me, this doesn’t mean pride. This means shame.” (Female, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed March 17, 2009) This is largely related to a sense of neglecting important obligations toward family or boyfriends. The emotional legacy of shame seems similar to regret; it is a negative feeling that is connected with the perception of an illegitimate or unjustifiable decision to have joined an armed group.

Legitimate motivations and pride. Economic motivations, when considered from the vantage point of the present, are generally perceived as illegitimate, but if these motives are rooted in economic survival or as redressing a grievance rather than as greed, such motivations can be construed as legitimate in the present. For example, having joined the paramilitaries because of starvation and because “the AUC were the only employer in the region” (Female, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed April 28, 2009) can be seen as legitimate. While var-
ious ex-combatants from Tierralta ascribe to this point of view, the perception that economic motivations are an illegitimate entry reason prevails among the interviewees.

More generally speaking, ideological, security, and revenge reasons are, in retrospect, seen as legitimate reasons for entry into paramilitary groups and produce a feeling of pride or, at least, the absence of regret. We see the relation between justifiable motivations and pride as expressed by a former midlevel soldier: “I’m proud that I participated in the AUC. [. . .] I’m a ‘paraco’ [colloquial for paramilitary] since before I was born. And I would go back again.” (Male, midlevel ex-combatant, interviewed October 22, 2009)

A demobilized man from Medellín, who describes entering the paramilitaries out of a mixture of vengeance and ideology, is proud about what he did: “I would go back, and now more enthusiastically, to the self-defense groups.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 26, 2009)

However, these two ex-combatants have not gone back to a newly armed group. Why not? There are two recurring answers to this question from ex-combatants who express motivations for joining that they now see as legitimate. First, they state that paramilitaries are no longer necessary now that the State has the guerrillas under control. Second, they state they would not join these new groups because they have no counterinsurgent component as the AUC had: “They’re only thinking about drugs, have no other ideals.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 26, 2009) Hence, joining this new type of groups would not fit into their accounts rooted in ideological and vengeance motivations.

**Imposed decisions and resentment.** Coerced former combatants feel differently about their past than the “legitimate” or “illegitimate” joiners. They do not regret the decision of entry nor feel proud of it because it was not their decision; it was imposed on them. However, those who felt they had been coerced feel resentment. This resentment is directed toward the abductors or to state institutions that did not provide them with protection. As one ex-combatant describes, “I should sue the state since in the constitution it says that they have to protect me as a citizen and when I needed them, they weren’t there. I’m a victim.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed January 21, 2009) During this interview, remarks about the importance of state responsibility were frequent. This ex-combatant from Bogotá now represents his isolation and vulnerability, leaving him with memories of victimization that feed his current blame and distrust of state institutions.

**Positive experiences and nostalgia.** Although some ex-combatants I interviewed have mixed feelings about their past participation in war, some clearly identify positive elements such as the armed group as family substitute, sufficient financial income, or fighting a “bad” enemy for a “good and respectable” organization. These positive perceptions come along with nostalgia, an emotional legacy of longing for the good old days, reflected in the current activities of former combatants. Some of these activities are important especially, but not only, among the demobilized people who see their war experiences as something positive. They are keen on preserving something positive from this remembered past. For example, nostalgic ex-combatants tend to keep in touch with commanders and companions. They also remain linked to old networks that guarantee some kind of social safety and physical security as well as continuity.

Exposure to illegality is higher when ex-combatants preserve old networks because offers to reengage in violence persist or information about others who went back to armed conflict is continuous. Bonds of loyalty may make ex-combatants unintended accomplices of illegal activities and persisting contacts with former comrades might remind them of better times.

As a further element of continuity, some ex-combatants work in the security sector or provide informal, vigilante services in their neighborhoods. This community activity offers a source of empowerment. One male ex-combatant describes how vigilantism offers him justification for an enforcement role:

The community feels safe, they can sleep with open doors and know they won’t lose anything. Drug users have their zone of tolerance. [If we catch] a thief, we take his clothes away, leave him in underwear, put a sign on his back, give him a broom and make him clean a very long street, and the sign says “I’m sweeping because I’m a thief.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed February 26, 2009)
This nostalgic ex-combatant is enacting a familiar role, enforcing what security means for a social unit, which is evidently a source of pride.

Each of the 14 mostly male former midlevel combatants I interviewed describe nostalgia for their past. For them, demobilization meant greater losses in economic benefits and social prestige than it did for lower-level ex-combatants. They tend to perceive their active time in war as comparatively positive, resulting in nostalgia for the past. Ex-combatants who had been involved in social activities or were active in the political branch of the AUC remember their active time with positive feelings because they were able to help people: “The good thing about the organization was the political part and the social work we were doing [...] which thank God I belonged to.” (Female, midlevel ex-combatant, interviewed March 19, 2009)

**Negative experiences and war tiredness.**
About half of the interviewees today see their active time negatively because of lack of freedom, danger, and living at a distance from their family. Because distance from family is generally seen as a negative element of their prior involvement in war, some interviewees now subordinate everything under this newly found or refound social anchor.

Some express frustration that their participation in the paramilitary groups did not help end the conflict. Others show signs of posttraumatic stress disorder caused by participation in war, which has resulted in current problems in their daily lives. One man said: “Sometimes, I wake up and hear a helicopter or an airplane and I get psychotic. I mean, it really startles me because when I was with the group and heard a helicopter or an airplane, I would have to hide.” (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed January 22, 2009)

Feeling tired from being at war (or war tiredness) is the emotional legacy connected to negative perceptions of war experiences, such as having had to carry out orders of others and constantly living in danger. War tiredness is not to be confused with battle fatigue or combat stress reaction. War tiredness manifests itself in these participants’ current way of living. Breaking with an earlier role is one strategy for leaving behind or never again living the horrendous experience of war. Such a rupture may be found in the behavior of some ex-combatants when they describe avoiding other demobilized people to stay out of trouble or making an effort to distance themselves from inducements to renew their engagement in violence. Avoiding other demobilized people can secure a sense of personal safety and can also facilitate processes of social acceptance and combat the stigma that ex-combatants face in their society. Some cut old bonds even when they live in the same neighborhood as old comrades or other ex-combatants.

To address current economic difficulties, many of the ex-combatants I interviewed describe studying or participating in vocational training offered by the state to learn something new and prepare themselves for the labor market. The few that have found a job are attentive to the obligations of professional life so that they can achieve financial stability in a field unrelated to conflict.

Ex-combatants who experience war tiredness often express commitment to their pact with the state. They are grateful for the opportunity to demobilize, which has finally allowed them to leave the AUC.

From the perspective of interviewees who are war tired, this rupture with the previous role is exemplified when they disparage the recruitment strategies of armed groups today, as one young ex-combatant describes:

I’ve talked to more than one young guy who’s asked “How is it there with the AUC?” because more than one has been recruited under false pretenses. They think they’ll get a motorbike, a pistol, like they were a big shot. But it’s all a lie because they send you to the jungle, like cannon fodder. (Male, rank-and-file ex-combatant, interviewed January 22, 2009)

Ex-combatants who are tired of being at war try to convince young men to stay away from weapons by describing their own difficult experiences.

**Discussion**

All ex-combatants interviewed for this study had been back in civil society for more than three years at the time I conducted the interviews. These data indicate that most individuals emphasize the importance of their past involvement in war. Without this, their reintegration story seems to be incomplete. Without denying the importance of a person’s entire biography (cf. Schafer, 2007), involvement in war is a defining moment for an ex-combatant. In fact, it
is often at this point that the interviewees themselves start to make sense of their current situation as demobilized individuals. In these interviews, very few go back further in time.

**Emotional Legacies**

These interviews indicate that specific emotional dimensions are associated with their descriptions of past involvement in war. I call these emotional dimensions *emotional legacies* because they refer to the past, particularly their current perceptions of the past. *Legacy* is meant to express this connection between past and present. It is difficult to separate the emotional legacies from the perception itself because the two are closely entwined. Emotional legacies of war are the emotional dimension of today’s perception of the past involvement in war.

These interviews indicate that ex-combatants perceive their reason to join war as *illegitimate* when they entered the AUC for economic reasons or self-fulfillment. This perception is usually mixed with the emotions *regret* or *shame*. Ex-combatants perceive their reason to join war as *legitimate* when they entered for ideological or security reasons. This perception is mixed with *pride* or, at least, not regret. Ex-combatants perceive their reason to join war as *imposed*, when they were forced to enter the AUC. This perception is mixed with *resentment*. For some, there are simultaneous, multiple, and related reasons for having joined the AUC.

These interviews indicate that ex-combatants view their war experiences as *positive* and feel *nostalgic* when they recall having had enough money, loyal comrades, and women available to them. This is often expressed in their current activities that aim at continuity. Ex-combatants view their war experiences as *negative* and feel *war tired* when they recall having experienced dangerous situations, had no freedom, or had no access to their families. They think back and try to break with past activities.

**Changes Over Time**

Views of war experiences and their associated emotional legacies may change over time. Wishing oneself back in time may be a result of the limited perspectives shortly after demobilization. Learning to appreciate the advantages of civilian life may lead to a reinterpretation of the earlier activities and result in a rupture with the past, as is the case of this long-term former paramilitary:

> I had my doubts in the beginning and I thought about going back again. But only in the beginning, when it’s a big life change. Those 13 years were great […] but then again… I drank every day, lots of drinking. My life was neither fish nor fowl, I had no objectives. (Male, midlevel ex-combatant, interviewed February 25, 2009)

The contrary case of growing frustration with reintegration has also been observed in some interviews, especially in combination with negative experiences with the reintegration program. Hence, the accounts about the wartime past are influenced by a comparison between life today and life before.

**Contributions to the Literature on Demobilization**

My findings are consistent with literature on various aspects of ex-combatants’ previous and current lives. Several scholars have studied the motivations for joining war among former paramilitaries in Colombia (e.g., Arjona & Kalyvas, 2009; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008; Villegas, 2009). Similar to my findings, these studies have described economic reasons, seeking fun and adventure, ideological motivations, protection, vengeance, and forcible recruitment.

Several scholars have studied phenomena similar to the emotional legacies related to reasons for joining war. Similar to my findings about regret, Allport (2009) describes this emotion as common among ex-combatants. Similar to my findings, Coulter (2006) describes shame experienced by demobilized women in Sierra Leone, which hinders their enlistment in DDR programs. My studies found that shame leads to a silent reaction of not wanting anybody to know about one’s identity as demobilized person. This is in line with my results where women tend to express shame and men tend to express regret when thinking back to an illegitimate decision of joining an armed group. Similar to my findings about pride, Bolívar (2006) finds that soldiers who learned the “emotional discourse” (p. 33) of heroism and believe that their organization was heroic tend to construct a discourse of pride after their demobilization. Similar to my findings about resentment, war veterans in Mozambique portray their entry into war as forced, blame their leaders for the war,
and express resentment about their participation (Schafer, 2007). As a complement to my findings, Gutiérrez (2008) warns that ex-combatants might have an incentive to state that they were forced to participate and resent their past coercion.

Several scholars have studied phenomena similar to the emotional legacies related to war experiences. Similar to my findings about nostalgia, scholars researching ex-combatants’ experience in the DDR and other contexts (cf. Douglas, Farr, Hill, & Kasuma, 2004; Gleichmann, Odenwald, Steenken, & Wilkinson, 2004; Nussio, 2012) have found that armed groups function like family-like environments, which can later be recalled positively. Several scholars have referred to persistent contacts among ex-combatants. Nilsson (2008) calls the connections between former rank-and-file and midlevel combatants encountered in the case of Congo and Sierra Leone “dangerous liaisons” (p. 178; see also Christensen & Utas, 2008). In the Colombian city Medellín, the creation of informal vigilante organizations is based on earlier paramilitary networks (Rozema, 2008; Theidon & Betancourt, 2006). Other scholars, however, have found that the continuing contacts resulting from a strong social network may have positive potential for the integration of former combatants into the labor market and for the construction of social capital (de Vries & Wiegink, 2011; Kingma & Muggah, 2009; Zycz, 2009).

Similar to my findings about war tiredness, Annan et al. (2009) claim that former abductees in Uganda try to “forget their memories” and “break with the past” (p. 659). In prior research (Nussio, 2011a), I find that demobilized people apply specific security strategies like anonymity, good citizenship, and isolation from other demobilized people as a result of war tiredness. Although war tiredness was a recurring emotional legacy encountered in the interviews, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) did not emerge as a dominant topic. This contrasts to the widespread assumption that PTSD is a natural and inevitable consequence of participation in war. Several studies have examined symptoms of PTSD, especially among former child soldiers (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab Stone, 2004; Kohrt et al., 2010). Bayer et al. (2007) found that child soldiers with PTSD symptoms in Congo and Uganda are less open to reconciliation and more inclined to feelings of revenge. However, stereotyping all former combatants as traumatized has recently been challenged in a series of publications. Özerdem & Podder (2011) call for undermining such stereotypes. Blattman and Annan (2010) find evidence in Uganda that formerly abducted child soldiers are surprisingly resilient, both socially and psychologically. Wessells (2006) highlights the enormous complexity in the stories of former child soldiers and the factors that influence their well-being (see also Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Boyden, 2003; Honwana, 2007).

This study connects with earlier research on the emotional state of ex-combatants that is emerging in the existing literature. It calls for a more complex understanding of former members of armed groups rather than the prevailing view that treats ex-combatants as traumatized social pariahs. The present study advances the current literature in a model that connects remembered wartime past, its current appraisal, and related emotional legacies. These connections are contributions to theory and policy because of their potential to explain part of the ex-combatants’ behavior today.

**Policy Implications**

What are policy implications of emotional legacies? Ex-combatants who regret their decision to join the armed group may behave differently than former paramilitaries who are proud of their past. Former AUC members who experience regret may be more open to interactions with the receiving community, more ready to ask for pardon, and more likely to integrate themselves into local civilian activities. This may be a result of the fact that they have a sense of humility because they are conscious of and regret earlier errors.

This suggests that regretful or war tired ex-combatants may be effective as agents for the nonrepetition of violence. Some ex-combatants state that on their own initiative, they give advice to teenagers in their neighborhoods and encourage them not to engage with criminal gangs or armed groups. Such demobilized persons could be recruited for violence reduction programs that seek to prevent youth recruitment—a second generation approach that complements classical DDR efforts (Kingma &
There could be at least two positive side effects from this type of initiative. First, ex-combatants in charge of such important tasks feel socially empowered, providing a powerful protective shield against their recidivism. Second, community members may be convinced of the constructive role of former combatants and reduce prejudices against demobilized people.

In Colombia, regret is the emotion that victims and civil society members expect ex-combatants to have, because for them, the ex-paramilitaries’ past decision of joining illegal groups and fighting a war is unjustifiable. However, the results of this study show that the emotional legacies of former combatants are complex. Simplistic, normative attitudes (e.g., ex-combatants should feel regret) may be counterproductive for the construction of sustainable reintegration programs. For proud ex-combatants, fighting stigma or social exclusion may be particularly difficult programatically because they do not perceive their earlier activities as erroneous. On the contrary, they believe they should be seen as heroes. This can prevent their sincere participation in reconciliation activities. Resentful ex-combatants see themselves as victims who have suffered acts of violence against their own will and do not understand why they should ask for pardon. Consciousness that there are a variety of needs, perspectives, and emotional legacies among ex-combatants allows for a more grounded, nuanced, and possibly more effective design of reintegration and reconciliation initiatives.

In these data, the terms *nostalgia* and *war tiredness* have their roots in continuity or rupture. Understanding these roots may facilitate the design of interventions that can both serve society and ex-combatants. Identifying emotional legacies may effectively guide assistance to former combatants, particularly those at risk of recidivism. In times of shrinking national budgets, it may be prudent to concentrate on higher-risk nostalgic ex-combatants rather than lower-risk ex-combatants who feel war tiredness.

The emotional legacies of war may continue to change over time. This opens a window of opportunity for strategies to counterbalance the undesired effects of the past involvement in war. A number of interviewees in this study went through a process of change after their demobilization that facilitated later reintegration into civil society. However, there are also many demobilized people who do not see benefits in their current life as civilians. As Jennings (2007) warns, effects of dissatisfaction among ex-combatants she studied in Liberia could lead to recidivism. Former midlevel commanders may feel particularly dissatisfied because of their relatively larger losses in organizational and social prestige. Without effective interventions, those who feel nostalgic may return to violence (Stockholm Initiative, 2006; Themnér, 2011).

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are various limitations in the present study. One limitation results from self-report interviews used here. Interviewees may describe their past reasons of joining the AUC and their past experiences as more positive than they actually were. They may also have reinterpreted, exaggerated, or obliterated parts of their past consciously or unconsciously (Elster, 2007; Fuji, 2010; Kalyvas, 2006; Robben, 1995). Another limitation is the limited theoretical sampling for this grounded theory study. The bureaucratic procedures of the Colombian reintegration program did not allow for a fully theoretically developed sample drawing on preliminary identified concepts, as prescribed by grounded theory.

Another limitation consists in the boundedness of this study. The generalizability of an inductive study about one time period and locale with no representative sample is evidently limited. Its value lies primarily in the “force of example” it presents (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228). Former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army or the Free Aceh Movement may look back with different feelings because they mostly consider themselves as heroes, as does the local population, and they may remember their past with pride. Also, it is possible that other contexts produce emotional legacies that are not present in the case of Colombian paramilitaries. Additional case studies using the present model may complement the model and increase its generalizability.

Questions that could be addressed in follow-up studies include the following: Why are certain motivations perceived as legitimate or illegitimate? Why are certain experiences seen
as positive or negative? What effects do different emotional legacies have on the behavior of former combatants? Whereas most of the existing DDR literature divides ex-combatants along gender, age, rank, or geographical lines, future studies might include the emotional legacies as a variable to examine ex-combatants’ current attitudes and activities with a focus on recidivism. The present model can also connect the reconciliation literature (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007) to ask the following: How do ex-combatants participate in reconciliation activities depending on their varying emotional legacies of war?

References


