TRANSITIONING IDENTITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SOCIAL TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE OF FORMER ARMED GROUP MEMBERS REINTEGRATING INTO COLOMBIAN SOCIETY (2002-2018) FROM A SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE

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The transition of ex-combatants from military to civilian life is a multifaceted psychological journey that necessitates adaptation and time. Despite undergoing demobilization processes designed to facilitate their transition, ex-combatants often struggle to align their identities with civilian norms. This dissertation challenges the assumption that completing reintegration programs equates to seamlessly adopting a civilian identity. Instead, it determines that ex-combatants undergo a three-phase psychological process—separation, transition, and incorporation—running parallel to their reintegration before fully embracing civilian life through the redefinition of their social identity.

Drawing on social identity theory, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 former combatants who reintegrated into Colombian society between 2002 and 2018. The aim was to elucidate the psychological process experienced by these individuals as they reintegrated into society post-demobilization. Given the broad scope of the analysis, the proposed model is also relevant to understanding the experiences of other individuals undergoing analogous reintegration processes.

Separation from armed groups entails more than physical demobilization; it requires individuals to disengage psychologically to transition effectively to civilian life. This leaves ex-combatants in a state of limbo before they fully embrace civilian life. Those whose groups were disbanded found the transition comparatively smoother through their new roles. Conversely, participants whose groups evolved into political entities grappled with identity reassessment, leading some to disengage entirely and others to redefine their political activism apart from their group.

Ex-combatants who establish psychological ties through social identities often find sup-

port and a sense of belonging, eventually incorporating themselves back into society. This support can also be derived from others undergoing reintegration as they reconsider the factors that bind them together beyond their former combat group. The sample demonstrated how some ex-combatants leverage their rural identities to collaborate with local communities, including victims, in addressing shared experiences of violence and trauma, as well as meeting basic needs. Nonetheless, their experiences show that this process can extend over several years.

By successfully disengaging from armed group affiliations and fostering a sense of belonging within society, ex-combatants can integrate into alternative social groups. This research illuminates the intricacies of the social transition process and underscores the pivotal role of social identity in facilitating reintegration into civilian life.

Keywords: ex-combatants, social transition, demobilization, reintegration, Colombia, social identity theory, psychological adjustment, civilian identity.

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PREFACE

This dissertation is based on conversations with former members of the FARC, ELN, and AUC. They generously shared their stories, ideas, and dreams with me without expecting anything in return. I am profoundly thankful for their participation in this study. I am hopeful that the insights presented here will contribute in some way to a better understanding of the social transition ex-combatants undergo as they reintegrate into society, shedding light on the significant life changes they experience.

While all dissertations require time and dedication, this one has been a particularly long journey, marked by numerous unexpected interruptions. Although writing a doctoral dissertation is often a solitary endeavor, I am deeply grateful for the unwavering support of my advisors, colleagues, family, and friends, without whom I would not have been able to complete this work.

There are countless individuals to whom I owe my gratitude, making it difficult to know where to begin. I am immensely thankful to my current PhD advisor, Michael Kenney, who believed in my research project from the outset. His clarity and insightful feedback consistently pushed me to become a better scholar. I am grateful for his guidance, which kept me on track and provided the necessary assistance to navigate the challenges along the way. I extend my appreciation to him and the other members of my doctoral committee, Jennifer Murtazashvili, Luke Condra, and Colin Clarke, for their welcoming support upon my return to my studies after a complicated absence.

I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Celmira Frasser, Diego Jones, and the staff of the Planning Advisory Office at the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, as well as those working in regional offices. Their assistance was invaluable in facilitating access to participants for interviews.

I am forever indebted to my parents, Nelly and Fernando, for instilling in me a curiosity and a lifelong passion for learning. Special thanks to my mother for her frequent trips to provide childcare support. I am grateful to my sisters, Andrea and Maria Fernanda, for being there for my parents in Bogotá since I live abroad. To my beloved children, Nicolas and

Gabriela, you are my daily motivation and the reason I persevered to complete this degree. Nico's eagerness to learn and Gaby's resilience have been constant sources of inspiration. Finally, to my husband, Jose, your unwavering encouragement, exceptional editing skills, and patience have been invaluable throughout this journey. Thank you for your steadfast support.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

1.1   DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT FOR DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION FROM SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs are based on the idea that ex-combatants replace their membership in an armed group with other associations.[1] However, their transition to civilian life necessitates reshaping or dissolving their identity as members of a militarized armed group.[2] Although transforming identities formed during conflicts is considered crucial for establishing long-lasting peace, there is a shortage of research on this process (Gomes Porto et al., 2007). In practice, ex-combatants may physically leave the group, but their self-identity might not align with membership in the broader civilian social category. This transformation constitutes a complex process that takes time and involves psychological adjustment (Maringira, 2018; Mashike, 2007).

I contend that ex-combatants can effectively distance themselves from the identity associated with the rebel group and integrate into alternative social groups once they have successfully disengaged from their armed group affiliation and when they develop a sense of belonging to society.

Some members of armed groups disengage and leave, while others cannot do so despite relinquishing their identification with the group. Some become ex-members through collective

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[1] An "ex-combatant" is an individual who has fulfilled any responsibilities or carried out activities outlined in the Third Geneva Convention of 1949's "combatant" definition. This includes being a member of a national or irregular military group, actively participating in military activities, recruiting or training military personnel, holding a command role, arriving in a host country with arms or military attire, or demonstrating an intent to assume such attributes after entering as a civilian. This person surrenders their arms to enter a DDR process, with certification of former combatant status conducted by a recognized authority. Deserters may also qualify if non-combatant status is demonstrated over time. "IDDRS 1.2 Glossary: Terms and Definitions", United Nations, at: https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-1.20-Glossary.pdf

[2] Civilians are transformed into soldiers through a new identity, that of a masculine "warrior-hero" ready to take risks and venture into new and dangerous terrains. This transformation helps combatants develop a military identity, which includes the ability to use arms discreetly, maintain ongoing social connections among ex-combatants, preserve specific hierarchies within ex-combatant structures, demonstrate loyalty to the group, a readiness to employ violence in response to violence, and maintaining a mindset characterized by hyper-vigilance, wariness, suspicion, and an ideological commitment to the political cause. Therefore, their identity transition necessarily involves their demilitarization. See, Maringira (2018).

demobilization. For certain ex-combatants, the resonance of a past social category or role associated with the armed group may persist even after the tangible role itself has ceased due to their internalization of the group's identity. This lingering aspect of identification, often referred to as a "role residual," might persist in their self-perception because they consider it a core aspect of their identity. Moving away from that specific self-identification involves a personal transformation. External factors can also impact why individuals hold onto their past social categories. For instance, eligibility for benefits and opportunities provided by a DDR program can explain it. In other cases, ex-combatants preserve their military identity because it benefits them and the collective (Maringira, 2018). The lingering aspect of identification illustrates that "what happens after disengagement, in terms of creating an identity that takes into account a previous role, is also an integral part of the role exit" (Ebaugh, 1988; Kassimeris, 2011). It confirms that disentangling themselves from their group's identity is not uniform among all former fighters, which can account for varying resocialization experiences and the overall success of reintegration.

Even though DDR programs aim to facilitate the shift from armed group membership to other social connections, the immediate transformation of their self-identity is not always achieved. The integration of ex-combatants into civilian society might be impeded by their enduring attachment to their former group identity. Understanding the complexities of their social transition to civilian life is crucial for comprehending the varied experiences of ex-combatants during their reintegration. This dissertation contributes to a better understanding of how former ex-combatants (re)construct their self-identity and (re)build relationships with the civilian community and the mechanisms through which their disengagement can support long-lasting peace.

I argue that former combatants who participate in a DDR process experience a transformative journey that serves as the basis for their transition into new roles.[3] This journey closely mirrors a three-stage model: separation, transition, and incorporation, reminiscent of a rite of passage.[4] In this rite of passage, a psychological process unfolds as ex-combatants

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[3] This acronym will apply in this dissertation to both processes, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration, and the Laying Down of Arms, Demobilization, and Reincorporation.

[4] In the dissertation, the rite of passage provides the foundation to understand the social transition to civilian life as a role transition that involves disengaging from the armed group, transitioning to new roles, and the adopting of a civilian identity. This rite of passage follows van Gennep's (1960). The model matches

disengage from their former groups, construct novel identities, and assimilate into economic and cultural life within the framework of societal norms, family dynamics, and friendships.

While I propose that separation, transition, and incorporation be understood as critical stages in an ex-combatant's rite of passage to civilian status, in no way should this continuum be interpreted as the evolution of an ex-combatatant's progress from outsider to "fully fledged" civilian with equal rights in all areas of community life. Nor should this process be viewed as a description of the ex-combatant's journey from outcast to being a valued member of society. The experiences of wartime involvement are heterogeneous, shaping how each ex-combatant reminisces, justifies, and critiques their engagement in conflict and describes their subsequent journey into civilian life. Viewing their transition as a rite of passage emphasizes the discontinuity experienced by ex-combatants and underscores the significance of role boundaries and the distinctions between their exited and entered roles.

At the core of my explanation for this question lies the social identity of combatants and ex-combatants. Social identity, an integral component of an individual's self-concept, emanates from their membership in specific social groups or categories, such as race, gender, nationality, religion, or profession (Abrams, 2001). These identities are shaped by prototypical characteristics like the group's beliefs, practices, and values (Turner, 2010). Consequently, group identification primarily involves categorical rather than relational connections with others (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). When individuals identify with a group, they do not engage with other members on a personal level but instead perceive them as anonymous representatives of the same social category who collectively adhere to the group's prototypical beliefs, practices, and values (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Within this context, group identification refers to the degree to which individuals feel connection, belonging, and commitment to a group.

While the process of disidentifying with the belligerent aspects of an individual's identity is recognized as crucial in understanding the successful transition of ex-combatants to civilian roles and self-identification, there is unexplored terrain concerning the identification of ex-

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the three stages that Cabanes (2013) observed in his study of the demobilization of soldiers after World War I: the separation from "brothers in arms," liminality (when the former soldier forges a new identity), and the former soldier's reintegration into economic and social life. Rites of passage become the "events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies," hence shaping our self-narratives and personal identities (Collins, 2004).

combatants who have demobilized independently, undergone collective demobilization, or been reintegrated into society. Scholars have advocated for research that provides a better insight into the minds and perceptions of ex-combatants to ensure a successful transition from war to peace (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008; Maringira, 2018; Nussio and Ugarriza, 2021; Oppenheim and Söderström, 2018; Phayal et al., 2015; Torjesen, 2013).

This dissertation contributes to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying the disidentification process among ex-combatants with their former armed groups. It explores how assuming diverse roles contributes to their self-categorization as members of alternative social groups and how they cultivate an identity that fosters a sense of belonging within society. This research holds the potential to facilitate more targeted and effective interventions. Such insights would not only promote voluntary exit from armed groups but also contribute to creating conducive conditions for ex-combatants to organically embrace a civilian self-identity.

Understanding and investigating disengagement is crucial for shaping effective strategies and programs aimed at facilitating a smooth transition out of armed groups. This dissertation's research findings hold significant relevance in guiding the creation and implementation of counter-messaging strategies. Notably, studies on terrorism have demonstrated that highlighting the detrimental effects of extremist involvement on an individual's familial and social connections plays a pivotal role in fostering disengagement (Windisch et al., 2016, p. 22). The current work expands on this by delving into the disidentification process among ex-combatants and the nuanced ways in which assuming diverse roles contributes to their self-categorization as members of alternative social groups. The insights gained from this research are not only pertinent for counter-messaging efforts but also have direct implications for DDR programs.

By comprehensively understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying the disidentification process, this dissertation contributes to the design of more targeted and effective interventions. It sheds light on the factors that facilitate a successful transition from belligerent roles to civilian self-identity. Such insights can inform the development of policies that not only promote the voluntary exit of individuals from armed groups but also contribute to creating conducive conditions for ex-combatants to embrace a civilian self-identity organ-

ically. In the realm of DDR programs, the research findings offer valuable perspectives on tailoring interventions to the diverse needs of individuals during their transition to civilian life, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of reintegration efforts.

1.2 THE CASE OF COLOMBIAN EX-COMBATANTS

Colombia offers a compelling case study for investigating the process of psychological disengagement from armed groups. The country has witnessed tens of thousands of former combatants deciding to leave their groups voluntarily, while others remained until the groups were dismantled, surrendering their weapons in collective demobilization and reincorporation processes. Among the second group, some members stayed because they self-identified with their armed group, whereas others were not particularly committed to the group and contributed for pragmatic reasons (to receive benefits or to avoid punishments). Additionally, it is noteworthy that some individuals transitioning to civilian life have not psychologically disengaged despite reintegrating into society.

Psychological disengagement involves breaking ties with an identity closely tied to a role within an armed group. As individuals move away from these groups, some undergo a significant internal transformation, separating themselves from the beliefs, values, and behaviors that once defined their membership. Others struggle to establish an identity apart from the one they built as members of an armed group. Studying the mechanisms of this disengagement provides valuable insights into how former combatants navigate their social transition back into civilian life. Understanding this process can offer researchers and policymakers a deeper understanding of the challenges and complexities involved in effectively supporting the reintegration of ex-combatants into society.

Colombia has been experiencing armed conflict since 1948, when the opposing conservative and liberal political factions triggered a civil war in the country. In the 1960s, left-wing insurgent groups—most notably the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)* and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)*—emerged to overthrow the government. With roots in Marxist ideology, the FARC transformed from a primarily rural-based guer-

rilla movement to a powerful armed group with considerable territorial control and wealth in the 1980s due in part to their participation in Colombia's war-time economy supported by illegal drug production and trafficking (Gutiérrez and Thomson, 2021; Hough, 2011; Ortiz, 2002; Thoumi, 2002). The rebels initially took part in this illicit market "taxing" drug producers and then becoming producers and traffickers themselves. This helped them recruit more heavily and forcibly and violence escalated.

In response to FARC advances in the 1980s, the government initiated large-scale armed responses to combat their activities. Additionally, in the early 1990s, wealthy landowners opposed to the FARC formed various anti-guerrilla units.[5] Initially acting as local "entrepreneurs of violence," these groups aimed to counter the growing guerrilla influence and preserve the existing order (Romero, 2003). Therefore, paramilitary groups were not necessarily created with a clear political ideology; they came together to defend properties and businesses, licit and illicit, in areas of the country where state authority was absent (Jaramillo et al., 2009). Over time, some of these groups received unofficial support from elements within the Colombian military, who relied on them to carry out operations deemed too controversial (often leading to human rights violations).

Colombian paramilitaries regularly have dealt with the provision of private security and have been continuously involved in various forms of extralegal governance: "The paramilitaries are armed groups that are directly or indirectly liked to the state and its local agents, constituted or tolerated by the state, but that are outside of its formal structure" (Kalyvas and Arjona, 2005, p. 29). In 1997, these self-defense groups coalesced under the umbrella organization known as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), commonly referred to as paramilitaries. The AUC transformed into powerful "warlords" controlling entire regions by the late 1990s. However, their growth surged between 1998 and 2002 during the peace negotiations between the government of Andrés Pastrana and the FARC, a process the AUC vehemently opposed (Chernick, 2009; Duncan, 2015).

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[5] Even though some of these groups emerged in the 1970s as self-defense forces organized against guerrillas, the origin of paramilitary groups can be traced back to laws enacted in 1965 that enabled or encouraged the existence of pro-systemic forces. As guerrilla activity expanded, these groups received funding from landowners and drug traffickers to counter guerrilla extortion schemes. However, the legal framework that sustained the original groups was dismantled during negotiations with the "second wave" of guerrillas. A new legal framework created self-defense groups known as Convivir in the early 1990s. It is from these groups that modern paramilitaries were later organized under the banner of Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia.

During this period, paramilitary groups not only established military dominance over vast territories but also infiltrated various social, political, and economic sectors of Colombian society. Although paramilitary groups promoted values of courage, honor, and retaliation as means of resolving conflicts; their alliance with drug lords and resistance to state penetration contributed to a culture of criminality and violence (Romero, 2000). This explains why the threat of extradition to the United States led several paramilitary leaders to participate in the peace process in Colombia and to seek their recognition as political criminals as it protected them from extradition (Jaramillo et al., 2009).

In 2002, the conflict in Colombia reached its peak level of intensity, and paramilitary groups were identified as the primary actors responsible for committing large-scale atrocities as they employed various brutal tactics such as forced displacement and massacres. Leaders of the AUC made public their intent to negotiate terms for the demobilization of their forces, and on December 1, 2002, they declared a unilateral cease-fire.

The Colombian government under President Álvaro Uribe Vélez negotiated in July 2003 a collective demobilization process with the AUC as part of his "Democratic Security Policy" aiming to restore the state's monopoly on the use of force. The Santa Fe de Ralito included the demobilization of all AUC combatants by 2005, the suspension of illegal activities by this group, maintaining the unilateral cease-fire, and the AUC's support of the government's efforts against drug trafficking. By the year's end, most paramilitary groups had accepted a unilateral ceasefire.

The demobilization of the AUC posed a significant challenge due to its fragmented structure. Unlike typical insurgency groups with centralized hierarchies, the AUC comprised factions cooperating or clashing based on their interests (Guáqueta and Arias, 2011). AUC members were argued to originate from three social groups: remnants of old security services from collapsed drug cartels, regional landowners, and small- to medium-sized drug lords (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). Varese (2010) suggests that these groups can be analyzed using the same categories as gangs, organized crime groups, and mafias, each positioned at different points along the extralegal governance continuum. Consequently, these factions were led by leaders with diverse motives for pursuing the demobilization of their armed structures

([Kalyvas and Arjona](), [2005]()).[6] One of the central topics discussed among the parties involved in the collective demobilization of the AUC, as well as in public debates, revolved around the incentives for demobilization considering the existence of arrest warrants and extradition requests for members of the AUC who were implicated in human rights violations and involved in drug trafficking.

A second accord between the Colombian government and the AUC in May 2004 established that paramilitary leaders would assemble in a designated area while their crimes were investigated. Colombian paramilitaries have historically been involved in providing private security and various forms of extralegal governance, so AUC leaders believed they could avoid lengthy prison sentences and extradition to the United States by agreeing to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of their forces ([Kalyvas and Arjona](), [2005]()). However, the justice provision of the agreement posed a major hurdle in negotiations as they were likely to face prosecution and it was unclear if they would be allowed to participate in politics, as some of them wanted to.[7] In 2005, Congress passed the Ley de Justicia y Paz, capping the maximum penalty for ex-paramilitaries at eight years' imprisonment.

The demobilization process resulted in the unexpected demobilization of 31,671 paramilitaries and collaborators who turned in more than 18,000 weapons and surrendered in exchange for legal benefits, such as reduced jail sentences ([Jaramillo et al.](), [2009]()). Rank-and-file paramilitaries who demobilized collectively did so under involuntary circumstances, where commanders held the authority to determine the timing and conditions for surrendering weapons and soldiers to the government ([Oppenheim et al.](), [2015]()). All demobilized individuals received benefits, irrespective of their role within the armed group or the nature of crimes they may have committed. Several laws were also created to prosecute those responsible for perpetrating atrocious crimes during the conflict.

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[6] Colombian paramilitaries regularly have dealt with the provision of private security and have been continuously involved in various forms of extralegal governance: "The paramilitaries are armed groups that are directly or indirectly liked to the state and its local agents, constituted or tolerated by the state, but that are outside of its formal structure"

[7] Paramilitary groups were not necessarily created with a clear political ideology; rather, they came together to defend properties and businesses, licit and illicit, in areas of the country where there was an absence of state authority. One essential characteristic of these paramilitary groups is their close relationship with illegal drug trafficking: several members of these groups are alleged criminals sought for extradition to the United States on trafficking charges.

The Colombian Agency for Reintegration, then-called, designed a model of individual reincorporation comprising eight elements: CODA certification (a military certificate assigned to identify demobilized individuals),[8] Health, Psychological Attention, Education, Training for Work, Economic Reintegration, Social Service, and Legal Assistance. The process involved former combatants following a path (ruta de reintegración) and receiving a series of services for six and a half years to transition from being members of an armed group to citizen.[9]

There has also been a policy in effect since 1984 to encourage individual combatant demobilization. However, it was not until 2002 that this policy gained significant importance as a key element of the government's counterinsurgency strategy aimed at luring members away from the FARC and the ELN to dismantle these groups from below.[10] This approach offers members the chance to receive procedural, social, and economic benefits in exchange for surrendering and cooperating with the authorities.[11] It has been argued that in doing this Colombia shifted its demobilization and reintegration policy away from a strictly collective approach, where all individuals within an armed group's structures surrendered their weapons in a unified process, to also include the desertion of individual combatants (Fattal, 2018).[12] By 2012, there were roughly 55,000 demobilized combatants, most of them collectively demobilized from the AUC and the remainder left the FARC and the ELN on their

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[8] The reintegration process can be accessed by persons accredited as demobilized by the Operational Committee on the Surrender of Arms (CODA—Comité Operativo de Dejación de Armas—for its acronym in Spanish) or the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace.

[9] Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Reintegration. "Benefits of the Demobilized Persons in the Reintegration Process," Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization. See, https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reintegration/Pages/route.aspx

[10] The strategy had the continuous and active involvement of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior and Justice.

[11] Decree 128 of 2003 outlines the framework for individual demobilization in Colombia and establishes how demobilized individuals can access the benefits associated with their demobilization. Specifically, it establishes that persons who intend to avail themselves of the benefits in the areas of health, protection and security, and economic payments for collaborating through the provision of information on activities of illegal organizations and for surrendering their weapons should go before judges, prosecutors, military or police authorities, representatives of the Inspector General (Procurador), representatives of the Human Rights Ombudsman, or local or regional authorities, who will immediately inform the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation and the military garrison closest to the place of surrender. Find this Decree at: Gestor Normativo, Función Pública, "Decreto 128 de 2023," https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=7143.

[12] This conflation of demobilization and desertion has effectively equated an individual's will and desires with the political decisions made by the leadership of a movement.

own or in small groups.[13] Those who demobilized on their own also followed the reintegration path designed for individuals by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration.

In 2016, the government of Colombia and the FARC-EP signed a peace agreement enabling the transition of this organization to legality and mainstream politics. In the negotiations, the FARC-EP insisted on the use of the term "laying down" (*dejación*) of weapons to signify it had been their will to transition from an armed militant group to an unarmed political party. The FARC-EP also insisted on using the term "reincorporation" over "reintegration" because they did not want to include those who were collectively demobilizing as a product of the peace agreement in the same programming category as deserters and paramilitaries (the individual reintegration approach under the Colombian Agency for Reintegration).

The Colombian government and the FARC reached an agreement, which was subjected to a public referendum (October 2016). However, the Colombian public rejected the outcome, dissatisfied with the perceived lack of adequate punishment for guerrilla crimes. Ultimately, the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization accredited 14,024 former FARC members, including prisoners (those who were released from prison after the enactment of the Amnesty Law in December of 2016) and FARC militias as an outcome of the peace process and negotiations.[14]

Instead of adopting the individualistic and urban-centric approach seen in the reintegration efforts following the collective demobilizations from groups like the AUC and the individual demobilizations from the FARC and the ELN, the FARC advocated for collective reintegration of its members since the peace talks (Lucio López, 2023). The FARC leadership envisioned its former fighters living together and transitioning into farming-based livelihoods, believing it would help maintain the chain of command and strengthen their political power in remote rural areas (Segura and Stein, 2019). By keeping former FARC members together, the aim was to foster cooperative rural ventures as examples of communal land management while consolidating political power through community work in these

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[13] Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, "ARN in Numbers," January 2024. See, https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co.

[14] 50.2% rejected the agreement, and more than 60% of eligible voters did not participate. (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2016).

sites. However, during the peace talks, the parties only broadly defined the locations of these sites. Consequently, when the FARC began the demobilization process at the end of 2016, former fighters gathered in 26 sites spread throughout Colombia.[15]

Former fighters arrived expecting permanent housing and essential services, but these were unavailable because the government originally intended the encampments to be temporary during the six-month disarmament process. However, as former fighters were grouped without proper infrastructure, the sites evolved into more permanent settlements than initially conceived.[16] The demobilization sites became Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCRs) in August 2017. Managed by the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN), ETCRs help ex-members transition to civilian life and benefit surrounding communities. Initially set up for two years, they were extended to support continuous adaptation with ongoing training and activities. Most of these spaces have standardized housing, shared amenities, and communal areas, with some including healthcare centers and schools.

The peace agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government sanctioned the creation of a new political party, initially named Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (also referred to as FARC), granting them five seats in each legislative chamber and exempting them from the electoral threshold requirement until 2026. The party seized the chance to participate in the 2018 legislative elections and contest local offices in the 2019 regional elections under the revised name Comunes. As the political successor of the FARC, the Comunes party is a registered communist party that remains ideologically Marxist.

The Colombian Reintegration Agency was renamed in 2017 to the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN).[17] The ARN assists ex-combatants with education, vocational training, grants for microbusiness projects, psychosocial support, healthcare, and a

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[15] These camps have undergone various name changes throughout the process, but their geographic locations and dimensions have remained more or less consistent. Initially, they were known as Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización ("Transitory Village Zones of Normalization," ZVTNs). In total, there were 26 camps, comprising 19 ZVTNs and seven smaller versions called Puntos Transitorios de Normalización ("Transitory Points of Normalization," PTNs).

[16] The demobilization sites became Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCRs) in August 2017. Managed by the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN), ETCRs help ex-members transition to civilian life and benefit surrounding communities. Originally set up for two years in 2017, they were extended to support continuous adaptation with ongoing training and activities.

[17] See Decree 1230 of 2023, which modified the role of the ARN in Colombia.

monthly stipend conditioned on participation in program activities. It split into two distinct programs: one overseeing the reintegration of ex-combatants who demobilized individually (primarily deserters from the FARC and the ELN, as well as AUC ex-combatants who demobilized collectively), and another program managing the reincorporation of ex-combatants from the FARC who demobilized collectively after their group laid down arms.[18] Some of these "reincorporados" opted to collectively reincorporate and they are the ones living in the ETCRs.

According to the ARN, the reintegration of former members of illegal armed groups in Colombia seeks to develop citizen skills and competencies among demobilized persons and their environments. At the same time, it is proposed to provide spaces for coexistence and reconciliation actions, and encourage co-responsibility of external actors.[19]

The Reintegration Roadmap, outlined in Resolution 1356 of 2016, defines a tailored plan of conditions, benefits, strategies, and actions devised by the ARN in consultation with individuals undergoing the reintegration process. Its purpose is to facilitate skills development, overcome vulnerability, and foster autonomous citizenship. The roadmap aims to align activities with the individual's life goals, ensuring compliance with social, economic, and legal aspects of the reintegration process. It emphasizes that achieving sustainability in legality hinges on viewing activities as tools for capacity building, enabling autonomous citizenship. Ultimately, the roadmap seeks to empower individuals to realize their aspirations within the bounds of the law.

1.3   METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF THE SOCIAL TRANSITION OF COLOMBIAN EX-COMBATANTS

Several scholars have advocated for analyses at an individual level, considering that ex-combatants go through their own demobilization and reintegration process regardless

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[18] It was established that the reincorporation process consisted of two stages: a mandatory 24-month early stage followed by the long-term stage, covering education, healthcare, economic sustainability, and housing after the initial phase. "What is reintegration," Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, at: https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reintegration/Pages/what.aspx

[19] Ibid.

of their participation in a DDR program (Torjesen, 2013). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 Colombian ex-combatants who demobilized individually or collectively to understand: 1) how former fighters experience self-esteem through interpersonal relations after they leave their group or once their group is dismantled and what happens to their self-concept when their membership in the group ends; 2) how combatants (and ex-combatants) disengage from armed groups to understand how this affects their reintegration; 3) the process by which former fighters transform identities formed during conflicts; 4) how ex-combatants build a civilian identity when they are reincorporated (given that membership in the group changed because their group transformed and their role is different in it or because the group's change facilitates their taking part of other activities).

In their interviews, these ex-combatants discussed how they self-identified when their demobilization took place (either when they deserted or when their group was dismantled) and as they started to interact with other social groups or social categories. I asked them questions to understand their transformational process to see if they replaced the relationship they had with the armed group with other social connections and how they developed a self-identification from their socialization with other social groups and a sense of belonging to civil society. They described their social transition into civilian life with me and how they have adjusted their self-other interactions, learned to present themselves in their new social setting, dealt with an "ex" role, negotiate intimate relationships, shifted social networks, and connected to others through the new roles they have adopted and with which they have reincorporated into society.

All ex-combatants in Colombia must have: 1) been included in the list of proposed candidates submitted by the government to the Attorney General Office; 2) handed over all property resulting from the crimes they perpetrated; and 3) abstained from all illegal activities. Individually demobilized combatants must also 1) sign a written commitment with the government (the equivalent to the peace agreement signed by the collectively demobilized groups); 2) provide information on and collaborate with the dismantling of the group to which they belonged; and 3) declare that their activities within an armed group were not related to drug trafficking or illicit wealth. Last but not least, ex-combatants who collectively demobilized with their group needed their group to 1) dismantle its military structure,

according to a peace agreement with the government; 2) hand over all minors who had been recruited; and 3) release all kidnapped persons in their custody and provide information on the whereabouts of missing people.

1.4 CLASSIFICATION OF FORMER MEMBERS OF ARMED GROUPS IN COLOMBIA

I divided my sample of ex-combatants into three groups, considering their disengagement due to their understanding of available pathways out of involvement or their perception of the implications of changing roles (Horgan, 2009, p. 152). The first group consists of ex-fighters who voluntarily exited their group and attempted to reintegrate into society on their own.[20] These ex-combatants would have developed a sense of detachment from their group and were willing to face the risks associated with desertion. They could have relied on alternative means of self-identification to validate their choice of leaving the group, and these alternative social identities could have facilitated their reintegration into society. These ex-combatants could have viewed their transition to civilian life as desirable and may have perceived society's preference for their reintegration as a motivating factor for their desertion.[21]

The second set of ex-combatants includes those whose membership in the armed group ended because their group was dismantled following peace agreements or ceasefires.[22] These ex-combatants collectively demobilized with other members of their group. Some valued their membership in the group and were loyal and committed to it, and their role in it was central to their self-identity until their group ceased to exist. Despite their demobilization, these individuals strongly identify but have not disengaged. They are forced to lose the group identity to become civilians and take on new roles that sustain their incorporation. In that sense, their disengagement, when it occurs, is involuntary as it is a product of the

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[20] Ex-combatants who voluntarily exited from the rebel group. This includes ex-fighters who would have had a limited commitment to fighting, assuming they voluntarily exited combat rather than surrendered on their own, being involuntarily forced out due to combat-related injuries. According to Ashforth et al. (2000), individuals undergoing transitions perceive low-magnitude, socially desirable, and voluntary transitions as less challenging and more positive than high-magnitude, socially undesirable, and involuntary transitions.

[21] This could be seen as an expected or anticipated reward for their choice to leave the group.

[22] Involuntary exit from the rebel group may result in their disengagement, which would also be involuntary.

new circumstances more so than their will. I also included in this category ex-combatants who demobilized on their own as a direct outcome of their capture or arrest or those who demobilized in prison. Their capture and or incarceration separated them from the armed group or from the role they used to play, and it is this context that creates the conditions for their disengagement. There is a third subset of ex-combatants in this category of former fighters who collectively demobilized who had already disengaged and disidentified from the group but did not leave it. I refer to them as "defectors". These ex-fighters did not find an opportunity to leave the armed group before it was dismantled, but their contribution to the group was suboptimal because they were no longer committed or self-identified with it.

A crucial consideration about combatants in the second category, those who collectively demobilized, is that their reintegration is determined by bills and statutes that resulted from the peace agreements. Many of them were not allowed to rejoin society along with those others in their military structure because this is perceived by some as threatening security (Kingma, 1997; Spear, 2006; Zukerman Daly, 2012) or increasing revictimization. Therefore, ex-combatants from the AUC could not count on their factional ties because members were separated. Also, these ex-combatants could not choose where their reintegration was going to take place. They could have had family and friends in an area, but if they were also perpetrators there, they had to relocate somewhere else to avoid re-victimization. Both restrictions impact the support network they could have relied on after their demobilization.

The third and last set of ex-combatants comprises "*reincorporados*," or those who rejoined society as an outcome of a peace agreement in which their group transformed.[23] Their group ceased to exist as a military structure but continued to exist as a political entity. These ex-combatants are not required to head into civilian life individually or to break away from their social networks because their collective reintegration is allowed. Also, they may continue to have a role associated with the new group. Some of them continued to interact with other former members and may not have disengaged. The transformation of their group can bring changes to their self-identification and facilitate social interactions with other social groups. This can give them a sense of belonging to the social category of civilians, but some can continue to self-identify as members and support their group in its new shape.

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[23] They could have pursued other roles due to group changes, but their disengagement status is unknown.

Table 1: Classification of former members of armed groups in Colombia

	Type of Demobilization	Level of Disengagement	Reintegration
Deserters (Individual demobilizes and undergoes an individual reintegration)	Individual	Individual	Although they can access benefits under their demobilization, extra help is contingent on what they, as individuals, can provide after they demobilize (information or cooperation). They are at increased risk of punishment or retaliation for their desertion. They cannot reintegrate into the area where they used to operate because their group is still active (personal security issues.) They rejoin society individually and usually seek and benefit from anonymity
Membership in the Group ends through a peace agreement that leads to the group's dismantlement (Individual Collectively Demobilizes and undergoes an individual reintegration	Collective a) strong identification b) defector c) captured	a) Context-dependent disengagement (Involuntary) b) Disengaged c) Context-dependent disengagement (Involuntary)	The location of their reintegration may be restricted by statutes and bills. The statutes and bills may also affect the contact they can have between them and with their support networks (friends and family) The benefits they receive depend on what the group obtains for them at the negotiating table
Membership in the Group ends through a Peace Agreement in which the group lays down arms and transforms into a political entity (Reincorporados)	Collective a) strong identification b) defector	a) Context-dependent disengagement (Involuntary) b) Disengaged	They refer to their return to civilian life as "reincorporation" Their group transformed, and as a result, the roles they had in it, ended. They may continue to be members, but their role has changed. They can rejoin society as groups The benefits they received to transition to civilian life depended on what their group achieved at the negotiating table

1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation follows a structured exploration of the social transition to civilian life among former combatants, aiming to enrich research on reintegration and enhance the effectiveness of reintegration and reincorporation policies. Chapter 2, provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature across various disciplines, focusing on the social transition to civilian life through the lens of social identity theory. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework guiding the study. In Chapter 3, the research questions, overall design, and methodology are outlined, including considerations of participant selection and the researcher's positionality. Chapter 4, delves into the process of former combatants separating from their armed groups, examining individual and collective demobilization experiences. It establishes a difference between the physical separation of the fighter and the group, connected to their type of demobilization, and the psychological disengagement process the individual experiences. Chapter 5 focuses on the transition phase, exploring the identity crisis that occurs in the aftermath of demobilization, as well as the implications of armed group transformation on the identity redefinition of some participants. Chapter 6 investigates how former combatants redefine themselves during the reintegration process, examining their affiliations with different social categories and the development of a civilian identity through social identities. Finally, Chapter 7 synthesizes and discusses the findings, providing policy recommendations contributing to the broader understanding of how ex-combatant embrace civilian life and integrate into society.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of the transition to civilian life encompasses various disciplines. To initiate this research, I delved into several categories of relevant literature, primarily focusing on exit from armed groups. This included a significant emphasis on civil wars and insurgency literature within political science to investigate perspectives on desertion and individual demobilization. Additionally, I explored literature on disengagement from violent extremism, drawing primarily from terrorism studies, and delved into works on role transitions in sociology and social psychology. Overall, my research centers on the social transition to civilian life, relying on a social identity theory framework to contextualize the decision to leave an armed group among ex-combatants from an identity perspective and to understand their self-identification as they reintegrate into society.

In this manner, this dissertation aims to enrich research on reintegration and enhance the effectiveness of DDR programs. It advances our comprehension of disengagement from armed groups and deepens our insight into how self-identification shapes the long-term reintegration prospects of ex-combatants. By fostering a better understanding of the social transition to civilian life, this dissertation contributes to developing a theoretical framework for studying reintegration.

2.1 THE SOCIAL TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE AS IDENTITY CHANGE

In the intricate web of social interactions shaped by intergroup dynamics, individuals align themselves with others, creating distinctions between "us" and "them" categories. This alignment enhances their sense of self, not only by acknowledging their belonging to certain groups but also by recognizing the differences from members of other groups. Such distinctions contribute not only to their self-understanding but also influence their self-evaluations and sense of self-worth. As part of this process, group members assume roles

and adopt social identities aligning with collective grievances and narratives, guided by the meanings the group ascribes to these identities (in terms of Stets and Burke (2000)).

The social identity framework has been used to analyze reintegration processes (Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019; Kaplan and Nussio, 2018; Wessells, 2016). All in all, the DDR process entails the psychological break from the militarized mentality inherent in armed group membership and the associated socialization practices that shape individuals into roles, and requires the abandonment of one social identity for another (Berdal, 1996; Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019; Shibuya, 2012). Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of belonging to specific social categories or groups and how that becomes part of their self-concept (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Burke and Stets 2009, p. 225). It also encompasses the beliefs and feelings one holds regarding groups perceived as opposing the groups to which one belongs, often referred to as "them" or "not us." Self-identifying with these other social categories can help us understand disengagement and reintegration.

Former combatants transitioning to civilian life leave behind what, for some, is a central, behaviorally anchored social identity as they build on or explore new possible selves. This ultimately leads to their self-categorization as members of the civil society social category. While the transformation of identities forged during conflict could be pivotal for the successful reintegration of former members, this transformative process remains insufficiently explored by scholars and practitioners (Gomes Porto et al., 2007). It remains to be established how former combatants adapt to new roles, redefine their identities, and reassess their self-perception upon becoming ex-members of their armed group to reintegrate, which would involve feeling part of the civil society social category.

The formal disbanding of military formations, such as in collective demobilizations or the laying down of arms, entails the physical separation of the combatant from the group, ending the roles they had been playing and creating the psychological conditions for disengagement. In other cases, the psychological factors for this disconnection are present while the individual is still in the group and become catalysts for voluntary exit, as seen in cases of desertion and individual demobilization. It is also possible that some former combatants do not undergo disengagement, such as when individuals continue to live as members despite their demobilization or never associate their social self with their membership in the armed group.

This separation can lead to an existential crisis that necessitates adjustment because, at least temporarily, ex-combatants lose the psychological footing of a pre-existing sense of identity, giving way to doubt, uncertainty, confusion, identity conflict, and ambivalence. Even in cases when ex-combatants rejoin society without having fully identified with their group, the transition period involves a renegotiation of "who" they are and "what" they do, developing a sense of being not-rebel-anymore-and-not-civilian-yet, or feeling in between two identity positions, such as being neither-rebel-nor-civilian or both-rebel-and-civilian. In this sense, what ex-combatants experience during the transition to civilian life denotes a rite of passage. Their thoughts validate their change in status as they pass from one condition of life experience into another, from one stage of life or state of social or status to a more advanced one (van Gennep, 1960).

Studying the social transition of ex-combatants can provide insight into the challenges ex-combatants face as they reshape their self-perception and construct their identity within new interpersonal relationships after demobilization. This is especially important because their previous social position can no longer define their identity or the roles they now play in society. Comprehending how former fighters internalize civilian identities, the contextual factors that highlight new social identities, and how these new identities lead to civilian identity-consistent behavior can offer a comprehensive understanding of reintegration.

Unfortunately, research on the processes involved in leaving social movements or armed militant groups is limited, and the existing works have generated more questions than answers (Ferguson et al., 2015). For instance, Schmidt (2021, 2023) examined FARC ex-combatants' evaluative beliefs and how communication influences their perceptions of available alternatives when choosing to stay or desert this insurgent group. While her work contributes to our understanding of desertion from the FARC, it does not explain why some of its combatants choose to stay or how they rationalize these choices. In that sense, beyond accepting that combatants would side with those who employed the most resonant framings, as Schmidt suggests, this dissertation delves into their self-identification to understand why that would be the case and how it impacts their social transition to civilian life.

Nussio and Ugarriza (2021) assert that organizational decline weakens armed groups' ability to foster collective action through selective incentives, ideological appeal, and co-

ercion. According to them, deteriorating military performance and diminishing financial resources heighten the likelihood of desertion. In their explanation, they indirectly touch upon varying levels of loyalty and the degree to which members internalize values and norms. However, they do not delve into the disengagement process of those who desert. The lack of clarity arises when considering whether those who desert do so due to the organizational decline described by Nussio and Ugarriza or because they never internalized the organization's ideals, despite training and socialization. Nussio and Ugarriza also omit a discussion on how solidarity and a shared sense of identity are influenced by organizational decline. This omission is crucial for understanding desertion from other organizational dynamics perspectives. Members might not effectively interact if they perceive those around them as being there for instrumental reasons, merely obeying regulations and fulfilling a role to avoid punishment rather than being genuinely committed to the group's cause. I think this can be behind the disengagement of some members and can explain why some deserters leave their group when they do.

Minimal research has compared the experiences and outcomes of individuals whose transitions differ based on a single attribute, such as voluntary versus involuntary changes (George et al., 2021, p. 105) This gap indicates a lack of scholarly work in understanding the social transition to civilian life for former combatants who chose a change of life versus those who had to go through it. This dissertation aims to address this gap by exploring the social transition to civilian life through changes in ex-members' identity. This exploration includes those who choose to desert and demobilize on their own and those who surrender with their units either.[1]

The social context presumably regulates identification as a group member. Consequently, changes in the context, such as those brought about by demobilization, can lead to substantial alterations in levels of identification. In that sense, disengagement would involve identity change because rejoining society entails performing other (often new) roles that have associated identities. The process of identity change is viewed as a continuous journey characterized by a significant degree of intentionality, where individuals consciously integrate new elements

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[1] This took place after their armed groups signed peace agreements that resulted in collective demobilization (AUC) or the laydown of arms (FARC).

of embodied meaning and value while reorganizing existing ones. This transformation is not a static event but an ongoing process. Moreover, it is recognized that various conditions influence identity change. These include situations that bring about adjustments in self-meanings inconsistent with an established identity standard, conflicts arising from multiple identities held by an individual, conflicts stemming from the misalignment of an individual's behavior with their identity standard, and negotiation in the presence of others (Burke and Stets, 2009; Todd, 2005).

Reintegration is a multifaceted process involving the discontinuation of violent activities and the adoption of behaviors sanctioned by the mainstream community. Furthermore, social reintegration extends beyond individual behavioral changes; it encompasses the acceptance of ex-combatants by their communities and their active involvement in social and community events, as well as social networks. Research suggests that social reintegration plays a pivotal role in reconstructing ex-combatants' identity, shifting from a combatant to a civilian perspective (Bowd and Özerdem, 2013; Torjesen, 2013; Willems and van Leeuwen, 2015). This transformation entails a comprehensive reinsertion into family and community structures, coupled with a psychological process that eliminates the perception of belonging to a specific group, namely that of a combatant. Their behavioral changes would be motivated by the former combatant's salient social self and rest on a social identity that supports that type of pro-group behavior.

I argue that, alongside developing a sense of detachment from their former group, disengaged members rely on alternative social identities to validate or justify their choice to leave the group and to develop an allegiance to the collective that provides them the basis for identification and belonging in the new social context. When individuals become ex-members because their armed group is dismantled, some of them may cling to their past membership through their group's social identity to alleviate feelings of uncertainty about themselves (Hogg, 2021; Hogg et al., 2017; Hogg and Smith, 2007). Their involvement in new roles, with the associated alternative social identities, could help them disengage and develop a sense of belonging to society that could facilitate their reintegration and self-identification as civilians. When their group transforms into another entity, this can interfere with their adoption of other social identities that could help them connect with others. Whether and

which social identities become salient would be an interactive product of the fit of a particular categorization and their readiness to use it (Oakes et al., 1994).

Social identity has been identified as a critical factor in internalizing group-based norms, values, and beliefs, explaining inter-group violence,[2] and is integral to various theoretical models of radicalization (Hogg et al., 2017). It can help us understand the social transition to civilian life because, according to social identity theory, group identification predominantly entails categorical rather than relational connections with others. In that sense, former combatants must feel part of the same social category of individuals and self-identify with those others who collectively adhere to society's prototypical beliefs, practices, and values to reintegrate. After all, groups provide us with a sense of social identity: "knowledge that [we] belong to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to [us] of this group membership" (Israel and Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). We would observe successful reintegration when former fighters seamlessly engage with others in society, feeling connected. Participating in various activities and roles enables them to establish a shared social identity with those in the broader civil society. In this way, understanding social identity becomes crucial in grasping reintegration, as it fosters individuals' feelings of belonging to society. This is evident through their identification with different social categories and their self-esteem, derived from reflected appraisals. This process involves ex-combatants perceiving that others with whom they reconnect after leaving armed groups accept and value them.

2.1.1 Individual Demobilization as a Type of Exit From an Armed Group

Demobilization involves the individual or collective process of disengaging from an armed group, aiming to reintegrate into society and access government demobilization programs for potential benefits (Oppenheim et al., 2015). Individual demobilization, in particular, refers to the decision of irregular fighters, as individuals or small groups, to quit their conflict with state forces by capitulating to government officials in anticipation of, at some point,

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[2] Several studies that stress the role of social identity in radicalization were reviewed by Echelmeyer et al. (2023), including King and Taylor (2011); McCauley and Moskalenko (2014, 2017); Moghaddam (2005); Schwartz et al. (2009); van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010).

being released into a peaceful civil society.[3] They voluntarily enter government-sponsored programs designed to facilitate individuals' separation from the conflict and reentry into society.

Literature on civil wars and insurgency outlines four main claims that explain why individuals choose to demobilize. The first considers that combatants will demobilize when the adversary makes significant military advances and the likelihood of death or injury through continued combat increases (Kenny, 2010; McLauchlin, 2014). The second states that rebels are more willing to quit the fight when their groups no longer advance their ideals (Anaya, 2007; Costa and Kahn, 2008; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood, 2014; Oppenheim et al., 2015; Weinstein, 2006).[4] The third and fourth argue that the political (Dudouet, 2011; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008) and economic considerations (Anaya, 2007; Jablonski and Oliver, 2013; Weinstein, 2006) that served as drivers of rebel participation can also induce quitting. These four overarching claims seldom present themselves as completely separate justifications for rebel demobilization. While one factor, be it survival, ideology, political motivations, or economic considerations, may hold greater prominence, the presence of other actors also contributes to the decision of certain combatants to quit. Oppenheim et al. (2015) suggest that an interaction of factors can condition rebels' decisions to demobilize more than one driver alone.[5] These explanations suggest that recruitment and retention are distinct processes, as the factors motivating an individual to join an armed group might not necessarily be the same ones influencing their decision to leave.

The four approaches to individual demobilization assume a breakpoint in the fighter's level of commitment to the group, supporting the choice to leave. Some of these studies understood commitment from a military sociology perspective, looking at the rebel group's

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[3] In the DDR literature, the term demobilization has also been used to describe the process of releasing combatants from a mobilized state and involves a psychological break from the militarized mentality stemming from membership in an armed group (Berdal, 1996; Shibuya, 2012). I opted to use the term disengagement when it comes to discussing the psychological process described by these scholars as demobilization. I do this to be able to study the implications of choosing to demobilize and of following a group directive to do so on the reintegration of ex-combatants since I argue that their disengagement plays an integral part in their social transition to civilian life.

[4] Costa and Kahn (2008) argue that Union troops in the US Civil War fought for each other and that this cooperation was facilitated by homogeneity of hometowns, occupations, and age groups within military units. Perhaps, indirectly, they were referring to a common social identity among the fighters.

[5] They argue that motivations for joining, experiences in the armed group, and the changing dynamics of counterinsurgency independently and jointly influence the likelihood of demobilization.

capacity to uphold its structural integrity[6] and cohesion as crucial for maintaining loyalty among its members and preventing deviations, defections, or exiting the group (Costa and Kahn, 2008; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood, 2014; Kalyvas, 2008; Kenny, 2010; Staniland, 2012; Whitehouse and Lanman, 2014). In these works, cohesion is said to play an essential part in mitigating desertion, mutiny, leader assassination, and other factors like drug usage that can undermine the effectiveness and resilience of armed groups in combat. They primarily argue that enhanced group cohesion serves as a deterrent to desertion. Other scholars have examined individual members' choices and motivations to stay or leave an armed group (Koehler et al., 2016; McLauchlin, 2014; Oppenheim et al., 2015).

The literature on intrastate conflict lacks comprehensive studies on individual desertion. This significant research gap is particularly crucial to address since separation marks the initial step in the social transition to civilian life. It has been established that existing research on desertion from insurgent groups is characterized by a disconnect in the analysis between organizational-level efforts to maintain group cohesion and individual-level desertion, a shortage of comparisons between deserters and non-deserters, and limited consideration of women and gender roles in the context of desertion (Schmidt, 2021). Consequently, the four approaches to individual demobilization have not answered why some combatants, facing the same variables as those who demobilize, choose to remain. However, assuming that social identity links organizational-level efforts to maintain armed group cohesion and individual-level decisions to remain with or depart from a group can aid our understanding of desertion and individual demobilization.

As seen above, current scholarly work has emphasized the relationship between commitment and cohesion to explain how group-related factors influence decision-making. However, it is crucial not to isolate the efforts to maintain group cohesion from the strategic interactions between armed groups and the state, as doing so might erroneously attribute causality (the choice to leave or stay) solely to internal organizational factors. Schmidt (2023) states that the information combatants receive is vital in their decisions to stay or leave. She shows

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[6] "Structural integrity is the property of an organization remaining as a single intact entity, while cohesion refers to the creation and maintenance of cooperative effort toward the attainment of the organization's goals" (Kenny, 2010, p. 534).

that framing contests between insurgent groups and the government can influence combatants' commitments during fighting and their perception of exit as an option, both during and after demobilization (Schmidt, 2023). Cohesion is significantly shaped by the internal dynamics of the conflict, especially in interactions with the state's military and intelligence forces.[7] Therefore, the decision to leave an armed group during ongoing military operations involves external factors, such as state-led military operations or the availability of DDR programs, along with associated incentives designed to encourage desertion and mitigate costs.

Robust connections with law-abiding individuals can encourage people to leave, while solid bonds within the group can have the opposite effect. Trauma or the high costs of group membership may push some members out, but they can also instill fear and deter departure, preventing some members from leaving. Some combatants may view their transition to civilian life as socially desirable and perceive society's preference for their reintegration, rather than remaining with their groups, as a motivating factor for their desertion. The stigma associated with being an ex-combatant and labels that persist despite demobilization (such as "narcoterrorists") can also deter some members from leaving their armed group. The exact cause-and-effect relationships of these factors remain unclear, and their combined effects are poorly understood. What they reveal is that a member's commitment to their armed group, and therefore their likelihood of leaving, is not solely determined by internal organizational factors; it is also influenced by the availability of viable alternatives (including alternative ways to self-identify) and the level of resources they have already invested in their current role (in terms of Rusbult's model).[8] Moreover, these factors can have a carry-over effect on their reintegration. For instance, it has been established that ex-combatants conceal their identity as former members of an armed group in favor of better identification with the civilian community (Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019). In the short term, this makes former combatants feel more comfortable with their new roles and decreases their chances

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[7] For more about the impact of those interactions on structural integrity and cohesion, see Kenny (2010).

[8] Rusbult's investment model: Commitment = Satisfaction − Alternatives + Investments, where satisfaction = Actual (Rewards − Costs) − Expected (Rewards − Costs). It is a model from social psychology that explains when and why individuals exit specific roles. Altier et al. (2014) use it as a theoretical framework to advance the understanding of terrorist disengagement. This individual-level analysis is more common in terrorism literature, given its focus on radicalization and deradicalization as psychological processes.

of returning to arms. However, in the long run, it can negatively impact former combatants as it may perpetuate negative representations about them and continued discrimination.

2.1.2 Varying Levels of Loyalty and the Choice to Leave an Armed Group

Understanding the individual choice to leave an armed group and the decision of others to stay until its dismantlement involves considering varying levels of loyalty within a rebel group, resulting from the extent to which its members internalize values and norms. Socialization practices motivate individuals to follow orders and fulfill their roles effectively, aligning members (and their identities) with the organization's objectives over time (Gates, 2002). Although scholars have portrayed socialization mechanisms as interchangeable tools to enforce compliance in armed non-state actors,[9] they also help to enhance the members' intrinsic motivation to participate actively (Gates, 2002, 2017; Hoover Green, 2017; Weinstein, 2005).

According to Gates (2017), socialization mechanisms yield three outcomes: norm internalization, role learning, and compliance. The most devoted individuals internalize the group's values and norms, reducing the likelihood of their exit. Conversely, other members acquire norms and rules through emulation, imitation, and personal experience. Their adherence to expectations is not rooted in loyalty but rather in their ability to fulfill roles and adapt behavior to fit within the group. A third group of members comply due to fear or incentives, making a rational choice to align their actions with group norms for instrumental reasons. This suggests that individuals who have internalized the group's values and norms are less likely to exit the group, while others may choose to leave after making rational calculations that indicate an alternative is more favorable for them.

Socialization mechanisms can influence loyalty among members, leading to varying degrees of internalization of norms and values. These mechanisms sometimes result in identity

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[9] Gates (2002) discusses this for armed groups that forcibly recruit members. He explains that in armies where people choose to join (volunteer armies), they also use socialization mechanisms to make people feel part of the group. However, the reasons why members stay in the group are different. A combatant who voluntarily joins a group ideally gets something in return for being part of it, like money or other benefits. They will stay as long as they feel they fit in and their beliefs or identity match with the group's. If the combatant joined for ideology, religion, or ethnic identity, they usually identified with that reason before joining the group, and they will unlikely exit the group when they have been pulled into a group that fights for it.

fusion; in other instances, they lead to group identification. However, in some cases, they primarily shape combatants' behaviors without necessarily reflecting their 'true' preferences or beliefs associated with internalization (Gates, 2017; Hoover Green, 2017).

Identity fusion occurs when socialization mechanisms create a strong personal link between certain members and the group. This connection is characterized by permeable boundaries between personal and social identities. Activation of one identity reinforces the other, promoting activities emblematic of an individual's commitment to the group (Swann et al., 2012, p. 443). Group identification nurtures a sense of belonging and commitment within the armed group. This shared identification fosters loyalty and commitment, motivating members to actively participate and contribute to the group's endeavors. The internalization of the group's norms and values that come with identification reflects people's feelings of allegiance to the collective (Swann et al., 2012, p. 442). One key distinction between identity fusion and group identification is that group identification is relatively weak in eliciting the extreme pro-group behaviors observed in war, suicide terrorism, and other forms of costly altruism, while the power of fusion and psychological kinship sustains extreme self-sacrifice (Swann et al., 2010).

Joining an armed group does not necessarily lead to an identity transformation for all its members. In some, their identity remains personal, and their membership only leads to behavioral adjustments to demonstrate compliance publicly. In these cases, their compliance does not stem from genuine acceptance or internalization of the group's attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or behaviors. Instead, it reflects a pragmatic alignment with the group, driven by reasons such as achieving group goals, avoiding penalties, or cultivating social approval and acceptance (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 166). For instance, Gutiérrez Sanín (2004) explains that promoting wars based on economic incentives is a poor strategy because combatants active in these types of conflicts may prioritize personal gain over the group's goals. This behavior can lead to a breakdown in discipline, trust, and teamwork, all essential for military success.

Going back to the four reasons that explain exit from armed groups, in cases in which demobilization is attributed to battlefield dynamics, for example, at the root of this decision to leave could be the erosion of a key factor that binds combatants together: solidarity and

the norm of perseverance (McLauchlin, 2020). Combatants would not desert due to the fear of defeat or death in battle but rather because they feel a diminishing sense of unity and shared purpose within the group. Even highly identified individuals could exit the armed group in combat. In these cases, the collective belief that they should keep fighting has eroded and weakened their emotional connection to the group and their sense of belonging. Some members would also leave due to the decreasing sense of camaraderie and the erosion of the norm that encourages them to persist in their fight.

The loss of cohesion and shared commitment in the group impacts the group's social identity and can lead some (even those who highly identify with it) to leave it and seek alternatives that go better with their evolving perceptions and motivations. Thus, there is a weaker connection between the personal and social selves in-group identification (Swann et al., 2010). In this example, members who stay when the battlefield dynamics do not favor their group would have chosen to self-sacrifice in combat, given that their identity is fused with the group. They developed strong relational ties with their fellow group members and maintained a lasting commitment to the group, willing to sacrifice their lives to save the lives of fellow group members.

2.1.3 Collective Demobilization as a Type of Exit from an Armed Group

Collective demobilization is another way by which membership in an armed group can come to an end. It often occurs within the context of peace agreements or conflict resolution efforts, aiming to terminate the armed group altogether or facilitate its transformation from an active combatant force into a nonviolent or politically engaged entity. This type of demobilization is usually carried out according to a coordinated and structured plan. The process typically entails the surrender of weapons, the cessation of military activities, and the reintegration of former members into civilian life or other designated societal roles. The entire armed group or organization is dismantled as a unified entity, involving the simultaneous demobilization of multiple fighters.

When considering the four main claims explaining individual demobilization, a similar logic supports the dismantling of military structures through collective demobilization. For

instance, in consensual disarmament processes involving opposing parties surrendering their weapons voluntarily following a negotiated settlement, ceasefire, or peace agreement with a mandate for DDR, economic inducements are considered crucial for achieving the group's demobilization. Economic packages for ex-combatants can stimulate collective demobilization when leaders of armed groups at the negotiation table foresee that their members' livelihoods will be secured owing to their responsibility for their troops. This contrasts with coercive disarmament, where the surrender of weapons is forced upon a party, an instance directly connected to the other party's superiority in the battlefield and an increased chance of defeat in combat. Also, the likelihood of the armed group's transformation into a mainstream political party can prompt the group's demobilization, promising political reintegration in a post-conflict context and the opportunity to address their grievances.

Now, when we think about members who collectively demobilize, we see that they chose to stay or could not leave the group before it was dismantled. This suggests that membership in the armed group may have contributed to the positive identity of at least a set of these ex-combatants. Once their group is dismantled, they cannot continue to perform their roles. Hence, collective demobilization is a permanent interruption to their position within their highly organized system. The dismantlement of their group forces these members to exit their roles involuntarily, even if they would have wanted to continue to perform them. The new circumstances would lead to their disengagement, as it is promoted by their context more so than by any preexisting psychological factors.

2.2 IDENTITY THEORY, SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY, ROLE IDENTITY THEORY AND THE SOCIAL TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Identity theory and social identity theory differ in their focus on the nature of identity. Social identity theory views identity as a dynamic construct that examines the structure and function of identity in relation to people's group memberships (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 265). In contrast, identity theory defines identity as the set of meanings defining who one is when

occupying a particular role in society, being a group member, or claiming specific character-istics that distinguish them as a unique individual (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 3). Identity theory falls within sociological models, while social identity theory adopts a social psycho-logical perspective. In this sense, identity theory and social identity theory are somewhat "scientifically isolated" from each other (Hogg et al., 1995).

Social identity theory suggests that people define their self-concept through the groups to which they belong (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This theory primarily deals with intergroup relations, focusing on how people perceive themselves as members of one group (the in-group) compared to another (the out-group). Social identity involves a sense of belonging to a particular group, sharing commonalities with its members, and adopting the group's perspective (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 226). As discussed earlier, socialization mechanisms are pivotal in shaping group members' identification and behavior. Abrams and Hogg (1998, p. 153) argue that the group exerts significant control over individuals through their social identification. When a member self-categorizes as part of the group, the group functions as a psychological entity that predefines whom to be attracted to, whose norms to adhere to, and the appropriate targets for collective behavior. In-group identification can lead to a higher commitment to the group and a reduced desire to leave, even when the group's status is relatively low (Ellemers et al., 1997). This illustrates why social identity acts as social glue, stabilizing groups that might otherwise collapse (van Vugt and Hart, 2004).

In both social identity theory and identity theory, the self is reflexive, meaning it can recognize, categorize, classify, or define itself in relation to other social categories. This process is called self-categorization in social identity theory and identification in identity theory. Both theories enable individuals to define themselves through the internalization of identities, whether through labeling and commitment in identity theory or the concepts of social identification and self-categorization in social identity theory.

One could argue that the decision of whether to remain in the armed group or to leave is influenced by the degree of identification with the group or the extent to which an in-dividual self-categorizes as a member of the group. According to social identity theory, individuals who strongly identify with a group have integrated their personal identities with their social identity (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This process involves cogni-

tive categorization, which fosters a sense of group belonging and leads individuals to align their behavior with the group's values and norms (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 172). Consequently, group membership occupies a significant position in the self-concept, shaping how individuals think, feel, and behave to maintain their place within the group. Those who self-categorize as group members develop a sense of belonging that is depersonalized, rooted in the shared social identity of the group rather than in individual relationships Brewer (2001); Hogg and Abrams (1988). Their commitment to the group is primarily driven by a positive perception of their group membership (group perception), rather than solely by justifying past investments in the group (self-perception) or adhering to a norm against abandonment (norm perception). As long as individuals identify with the group's social identity, they will continue to view themselves as members of that group, making it their primary identity.

In social identity theory, roles refer to the positions or functions that individuals occupy within a particular group or social context. These roles are often defined by the norms, expectations, and behaviors associated with them. Group members may adopt specific roles based on their identification with the group and its goals (and leave them as an outcome of their disidentification with them). Roles within social identity theory contribute to the formation and maintenance of group cohesion and identity by providing structure and organization to group interactions and behavior. On the other hand, from an identity theory perspective, individuals assume roles that shape how they perceive themselves and behave. These roles are significant because they influence individuals' self-concepts and their interactions with others. People often internalize the roles they occupy, integrating them into their sense of identity and adjusting their behavior to meet role expectations. Additionally, individuals may derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from successfully fulfilling their societal roles.

Role identity is developed through the internalization of meanings acquired through interactions with others and one's understanding of the role (Stryker, 2001). This approach examines the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to objects, behaviors, and events through a symbolic-interactionist perspective. Hence, role identity theory contends that individuals act based on how they like to see themselves and how they like to be seen by others when operating in particular social positions (McCall and Simmons, 1978). The

idiosyncratic nature of these meanings leads to variations in role performances, explaining why role identity literature emphasizes the individual's relationship with a role (Anglin et al., 2022).

Individuals strive to feel competent and effective in their environment, leading them to behave in ways that align with the meanings and expectations associated with their roles. This behavior fosters a heightened sense of self-efficacy (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 117). As individuals develop a role identity, they aim to perform their roles correctly, confirming their role identity to others and coordinating their actions with those of other members, resulting in increased self-efficacy. Consequently, roles can be constructed and deconstructed through social interaction. This process involves individuals leaving one role and adopting another as they navigate through changes in their social environment and self-concept. Therefore, the decision to remain in an armed group or to leave can also be influenced by individuals' identification with their roles within the group and their perceived ability to fulfill those roles.

Some members closely fuse their identity with the group while maintaining their individuality. They form strong relationships with both fellow group members and the group as a whole. Consequently, they care about individual group members as well as the abstract collective, which could even lead them to stay or to self-sacrifice for the other members of their group (due to the relational ties principle of identity fusion; see: Swann and Buhrmester (2015)).

The question that arises is: what happens to a member's group identification when individuals cease their participation in the armed group, whether through individual demobilization, the dissolution of their group (collective demobilization), or its transformation into a different organization, making them ex-members? Ex-members are left with feelings, thoughts, beliefs, intentions, and goals that no longer align with their new social reality of being in a different social position.

To understand what happens to their self-identification, we must consider that people have multiple identities, and the one most prominent at any given time can shift based on life events or exposure to different influences. Individuals can adhere to competing identities, which may involve contradictory elements, reflecting the complexity of "identity-as-label"

Gallagher (1989). For example, the label "radical" may represent an identity, but it does not fully capture the individual's personal attachment or meaning associated with that identity, nor does it account for potential variations in significance or meaning. Recognizing this complexity helps explain how seemingly conflicting identities, such as "radical" and "peace builder" (or "victim" and "perpetrator"), can coexist.

Exploring the social transition of former combatants to civilian life illustrates that individuals are adaptable. They can change how they perceive themselves and how they relate to others due to shifts in their social context or situation. An individual's self-categorization can play a role in determining their connection to their group's social identity. However, it is important to recognize that this social identity is not necessarily one-dimensional, as oversimplifying it can overlook the complexities of the social context. In that sense, our adaptability to changes in the social context illustrates that social identities are relative; they differ in the extent to which individuals perceive them as psychologically meaningful descriptions of self (meaning that they can be more or less central to their self-definition), which explains why their function and meaning can change over time (Haslam et al., 2009).

Reintegrating former combatants with varying levels of identification with their armed groups could be complex. Those who deeply internalized the values of the armed group and developed a strong identification with it (or even fused their identity with the group's) might find reintegration into civilian life more challenging. Their strong allegiance to the group could potentially lead to difficulties adapting to civilian society's norms and expectations. On the other hand, former combatants who did not develop a strong identification with the armed group or internalize its values might experience a smoother transition to civilian life but may also be unable to develop that sense of belonging to other social groups. Their motivations and behaviors may already align with societal norms, making it easier for them to integrate into non-combatant roles and functions.

2.2.1 Disengaging from Armed Groups or Violent Organizations

Different disciplines, such as sociology, criminology, organizational psychology, and political science, have studied violent extremism. Despite their emphasis on entry and recruit-

ment, there is a growing interest in disengagement and deradicalization from both violent ideological and non-ideological groups. Extant works have identified "push" and "pull" factors impacting the exit process in these groups (Altier et al., 2017, 2014; Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009). The former looks at adverse organizational characteristics that lead some members to reconsider their involvement in the group, while the latter refers to features outside of the group that individuals find attractive, making them consider leaving.

While research on disengagement is essential to inform strategies and programs designed to facilitate exit, this field of inquiry itself is relatively new and remains devoid of conceptual clarity. Experts often use the terms disengagement and deradicalization interchangeably and, in that sense, inconsistently (Altier et al., 2014; Windisch et al., 2016).

For this dissertation, I define disengagement as "the process whereby an individual no longer accepts as appropriate the socially defined rights and obligations that accompany a given role in society" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 3). Psychological factors might support the decision to leave an armed group, but disengagement would materialize when members stop defining themselves in terms of the group and when their sense of self goes back to self-defining as "I" and "me" as opposed to "Us" and "we". Disengaged individuals are psychologically disconnected from the group and can play other roles in other/new social contexts. Hence, disengagement is a psychological process by which members disassociate and disidentify with the values, ideas, expectations, and social relationships they had found in society, meaningful roles, and social groups.

Although their role in the armed group could have been central to their self-identity, how they socially categorize as they move away from it helps them reestablish an identity in their new role or, simply put, helps them self-identify as members of the social category represented by civilians.[10] Thus, disengagement differs from deradicalization as this one suggests a transformation of an individual's beliefs.

As observed in the claims explaining individual demobilization, ideological discrepancies can motivate certain combatants to leave their groups, highlighting that not all members

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[10] Ebaugh (1988) argues that to become well integrated and a whole person, an ex must incorporate elements of his or her past history into his or her identity. She explains that being an ex is a unique role experience because identity as an ex rests not on one's current role but on one who one was in the past. In the interviews I conducted, I sought to establish what the ex-combatants had incorporated or kept from their previous self to understand what they valued from their former identity.

equally value the ideology espoused by their group.[11] When we consider disengagement as withdrawing from the group through a person's disconnection from the normative expectations associated with a role, it becomes evident that the deeper transformation of beliefs, ideologies, and attitudes associated with deradicalization may or may not occur. It is still unclear how individuals shed those ideological belief systems as they disengage from the group (Windisch et al., 2016). It seems likely that disengagement could facilitate deradicalization by creating the behavioral predisposition to develop relationships with other groups that reinforce non-deviant behavior to construct a civilian identity.

Maruna and Farrall (2004) studied the transition from being an "offender" to being an "ex-offender" in their work on desistance from criminal activity. They described the long-term shift in which the offender assumes the role of a non-offender or reformed person and argue that it relies on self-identity changes. An individual's "search for a meaningful identity—be it a 'new' identity or the ongoing project of 'self'—presents certain threats to an individual at an existential level".[12] Even though demobilization differs from criminal desistance, ex-combatants could go through a similar existential crisis as part of their social transition, having to think about their new position within the broader social structure, having left their group. How former combatants self-identify as they go through this "liminal phase" could determine how they (re)construct relations with other/new groups in the civilian sphere and when they gain a sense of being part of the *communitas* (in van Gennep's terms).

2.2.2 Disengagement in Terrorism Studies

Terrorism scholars have delved deeply into the study of disengagement, driven by their keen interest in understanding the psychological processes of radicalization and deradicalization(Altier et al., 2014; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009; Chernov Hwang, 2018; Horgan, 2009; Horgan and Altier, 2012; Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2021). Disengagement from terror-

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[11] Other grievances could contribute to their involvement besides ideology such as state predation, discrimination, exclusion (from political structures, systems, and processes), historical or collective trauma, intergroup conflict, and oppression.

[12] There is a sociological existentialism claim that as an individual's sense of who they are develops, or as they leave one social institution and/or join another, their relationships with others change (Maruna and Farrall, 2004).

ism has been defined as "the process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction in violent participation" (Horgan, 2009, p. 152) or as "the process of ceasing terrorist activity" (Altier et al., 2014). It occupies a crucial place in the broader life-cycle of terrorist radicalization, which comprises three distinct phases: "Becoming," "Being," and "Leaving," or "Terminating Involvement" (Barrelle, 2015; Horgan, 2008). Disengagement from violent extremism is not a straightforward, linear progression; instead, it has been described as a gradual and dynamic process that unfolds over time, influenced by various factors (Altier et al., 2017, 2014).[13]

Terrorism experts have defined radicalization as the dominance of a single social identity over other social identities and an individual's personal identity. Consequently, they have characterized disengagement from terrorism as the "ultimate identity transformation" (Barrelle, 2015, p, 136). To better understand why individuals disengage from terrorism, researchers have identified both "pull" and "push" factors, recognizing that there is no single reason behind this process (Horgan, 2009; Reinares, 2011). Push factors encompass elements linked to an individual's experiences within the group that drive them away and directly impact their self-identification with the group's social identity. In contrast, pull factors are external influences that can draw individuals toward other social categories and identifications, leading them to embrace a conventional social role. For instance, Horgan (2009, p. 31) identified psychological factors that serve as precursors for disengagement from terrorism, such as feelings of disillusionment or "burnout," perceiving a mismatch between fantasy and reality, and shifts in personal priorities. These factors prompt individuals to reevaluate the shared collective representation of their identity and behavior conferred by their group membership.

It has been reported that individuals leaving behind terrorism and violent extremism undergo a transformation that includes reduced group identification, the (re)emergence of personal identity, and the development of alternate social identities. These changes facilitate their transition to new roles and identities outside the organization (Altier et al., 2014; Barrelle, 2015).

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[13] The authors argue that just as radicalization was incremental with increasing commitment tests and slow movement toward greater illegality, extremists move away from violence in a similarly gradual process. See, Altier et al. (2014).

Disengagement, on its own, does not automatically signify the deradicalization of a former member. True deradicalization requires a more comprehensive approach to address and reform the extreme beliefs, including the ally-enemy mindset, deeply rooted in the group's radical ideology, to end their involvement in violent activities (Horgan 2009, p. 152-3; Altier et al. 2014, p. 647). Achieving deradicalization could rely on alternative identities because these (e.g., kinship, career, association with other nonviolent groups) may lessen the tendency to use radical means in achieving one's goals and their goal to gain personal significance in particular (Milla et al., 2020, p. 16).[14] For instance, an individual who has disengaged from terrorism may still hold onto the ideology of jihad but chooses not to participate in terrorism due to considerations for their family's well-being. In this case, the individual takes into account the needs of their family, which influences their decision to refrain from waging jihad on the battleground (Milla et al., 2020, p. 25). This illustrates that disengagement and deradicalization are not inherently synonymous.

2.2.3   Disengagement From a Social Identity Perspective

Although a group has normative influence over its members and coercive and rewarding power, the individual members' need for social approval and acceptance varies and, with that, their norm internalization (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 165-6). Thus, while some individuals go along with the group for instrumental reasons, such as attaining group goals, avoiding punishment, or cultivating social approval and acceptance, others adopt the group's normative beliefs as their own (Hogg and Abrams 1988, p. 166, Gates2017). All in all, the level of self-identification of individual members is private information.

Since individuals derive their identity, including their self-concept, from the social categories to which they belong, members of an armed group must undergo a process of redefining and altering their identity as they transition to civilian life. The cognitive process described here refers to the psychological separation of the individual from the normative expectations associated with their role in the group (disengagement), whereas the behavioral one

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[14] According to goal system theory (Kruglanski et al., 2015), the creation of new identities can have a direct impact on reducing levels of radicalism, such as supporting jihad as a form of warfare. The theory suggests that by establishing new identities, individuals can weaken and undermine the previously held identities associated with radical beliefs and behaviors. See, Milla et al. (2020).

involves actions to distance themselves from it, even leading to their exit from the group. It is possible that by adopting other norms and values outside of the group as a new point of reference, some individuals would disengage from their group while physically still being part of it. It is also possible that some individuals are physically separated from their group (including when the group has ceased to exist) and continue to adhere to the values, ideas, expectations, and social relationships integral to their sense of belonging within that group.

Individual demobilizations would occur when members feel they no longer derive a positive identity from their group membership and engage in cognitive and behavioral processes to distance themselves from the group while maintaining a sense of positivity. These individuals may undergo a process of "anticipatory socialization," acquiring values and orientations from statuses and groups they are not yet engaged in but aspire to enter. If this is the case, members of the armed group may internalize societal values before reintegrating, motivating them to leave and rejoin society. This anticipatory socialization may lead them to self-identify with others, potentially making them feel like strangers within their own group and making it difficult to re-engage and find satisfaction in their role within the group.

Disengagement would represent a critical juncture in the self-identification of members and ex-members of armed groups as it would separate them from the group, and they would stop defining themselves in the group's terms. Their sense of self shifts back to self-defining as an "I" and "me" over the "us" and "we" that had linked their self-definition to the group. This turning point motivates ex-combatants to take the actions needed to complete the transition into other social categories. Members who had publicly complied but did not internalize the armed group's attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or behaviors would not disengage from the armed group because they did not privately adopt the group's social identity in the first place.

Exiting an armed group on their own could be indicative of a member's disengagement. It suggests their willingness to connect with new social groups or to take on other roles that could have been incompatible with their role (and membership) in the armed group. Individuals who maintain a strong attachment to the group's identity and prioritize their membership and their role in the group over other roles and social categories would not disengage. They would continue to contribute as members for as long as the context allows

them to do so.

Looking at the sources of identity change as potential causes for disengagement, we can see that collective demobilization changes their situation or their social position. This new context creates a gap between the meanings associated with their identity standard and the meanings they experience in the current situation. This gap can lead to distress and uncertainty. The demobilization of their group, as an external change in the situation, results in their disengagement.

When an armed group collectively demobilizes and dissolves, members who had chosen to stay in the group cannot continue performing roles they value, roles with which they built an idea of themselves and their self-esteem. In the new context, they connect with others and take on new roles from which they rebuild their self-identification and develop a sense of belonging to society.

The transformation of ex-combatants to other social categories relies on self-stereotyping, wherein they would emphasize similarities with other out-group members (civilians) while highlighting differences from their former armed group. Stereotyping encompasses various dimensions, such as attitudes, beliefs, values, affective reactions, emotions, behavioral norms, and language styles, which are subjectively associated with the relevant intergroup categorization (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 21). A self-categorization process with out-groups could facilitate the social transition of ex-combatants into civilian life by generating behavior that aligns with the stereotypical attributes of people in the civilian social category. This suggests their disengagement from the armed group is led by the new context and not something they actively looked for.

Members and ex-members would typically disengage through their individual level of self-categorization, which involves thinking of themselves in terms of differences between them and other in-group members and making their unique identity salient. Former combatants, including ex-members who strongly identified with their armed group, transition into civilian life in a process that may involve an identity shift to better integrate with society, resemble other civilians, and adopt a civilian perspective. Their identity change is possible when one considers identity as a process of "being" or "becoming" and never a final or settled matter (Jenkins, 2008, p. 17). Their ability to reintegrate would require rethinking their

collective self-categorization. Ex-members of armed groups would need to perceive similarity in the cognitive representation of the social category represented by civilians and have the defining features of the prototypical group member to feel incorporated and develop a sense of belonging.

Disengaged ex-combatants might maintain their adherence to the group's ideology, but they would refrain from taking part in rebellion for reasons connected to newly adopted alternative identifications that result from taking on other roles after their demobilization (parent, entrepreneur, or politician. . .). Disengaged former fighters can call for socioeconomic justice and the participation of marginalized sectors in the country's political life because those are their beliefs, even if they were shaped by the group's political or ideological indoctrination.

2.2.4 Disengagement From A Role Identity Perspective

Social structures, such as family, work, and society, shape individuals within these structures by defining their roles and expectations. Members are socialized into these roles, leading to a shift in their self-identity as they incorporate the social role into their self-perception (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 22). Individuals internalize these role expectations and construct their identities based on how they perceive themselves within these roles. Roles also influence how individuals view themselves in relation to others. In that way, the roles individuals adopt become part of their self-concept, contribute to how they see themselves, and determine who they interact with.

Occupying a role within an armed group can hinder individuals from assuming other roles, mainly outside of the group, resulting in a high level of integration between these individuals and their assigned roles. Thus, as members of armed groups immerse themselves in fulfilling their roles, they invest not only skills and effort but also a part of their personal identity. This investment can extend beyond mere participation when it significantly contributes to how they perceive themselves within the context of the group and its objectives. Role attachment explains the degree of intensity of involvement in a given social role. When there is a high degree of integration between the self and the role, there is a high degree of emotional intensity that an individual associates with a specific role and it results in a

higher commitment to continue role performance.

Individuals develop a role identity when they internalize the meanings associated with that role and apply them to themselves (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 114). These meanings are acquired through their group's socialization mechanisms and contribute to their commitment. Individuals invest their time, effort, and emotional energy in their roles, and their commitment is rooted in their understanding of how their contributions align with the group's goals through the roles they fulfill and the tasks they perform. Consequently, assuming a role as a member of an armed group can become a fundamental aspect of an individual's identity when it becomes integrated into how they perceive themselves. This fusion of individual identity and group allegiance shapes the self-concept of some members, reducing their inclination to leave the group. However, the reasons individuals characterize themselves in particular ways (in a group or a role) show that they do so not only to fulfill the need to feel valuable and worthy (self-esteem motive) but also to feel competent and effective (self-efficacy motive) (Stets and Burke, 2000).

Demobilization becomes a viable choice for members of armed groups when they believe it can lead to the exploration of alternative identities or roles, such as envisioning themselves as employees, spouses, or parents. However, it is important to note that for many of them, civilian roles may feel foreign, given their lifelong membership in armed groups, combat experiences, and limited skills outside of their military training (McMullin, 2013). How feasible it is that they move away from their group identity or role identity is directly connected to their ability to disengage. Psychological disengagement can help individuals detach themselves from the values, ideas, expectations, and social relationships that were once integral to their sense of belonging within society, meaningful roles, and social groups (Ebaugh, 1988).

Roles are important in studying the social transition of ex-combatants who demobilize and reintegrate into society, given that their self-identity is closely connected to their roles. Demobilization can be seen as a role exit and reintegration as role entrance and moving from one role to another denotes the redefinition of self. Ebaugh (1988) Ebaugh explains: "Role exits, as well as role entrances, are closely related to self-identity since the roles an individual plays in society become part of one's self-definition. Personal identity is formed

by the internalization of role expectations and the reactions of others to one's position in the social structure."

Which members allow themselves the opportunity to consider alternative selves is determined by their level of loyalty to the group. Individuals who have wholeheartedly embraced group norms, adopted the interests, or possibly assumed the identity of their group will unlikely seek anything outside of this framework (they will likely continue to be engaged). However, those who conform or perform their expected roles not out of loyalty but because they have learned a specific function or for instrumental reasons may contemplate alternative paths. Those who contribute to the group because they have learned a role have associated beliefs tied to that role, which do not replace their pre-existing values but are rather "superimposed" on them and are entirely contingent on their ongoing membership in the group. Since they primarily engage in role-playing, they are not expected to adhere to the group's norms and practices once they leave or become ex-members. Members who perform a role for instrumental reasons would likely exit the group when they no longer benefit from their participation without necessarily going through a disengagement process.

It has been argued that disengagement is a dynamic process that results in a new role (and identity) outside the group (Altier et al., 2014; Ebaugh, 1988). To understand the disengagement of members who self-identify with their armed group we can consider three reasons Ashford outlined to explain role disengagement: personal change, role or context change, and the inability to fulfill the role (Ashforth, 2001). Bearing these in mind, members of armed groups can disengage due to personal maturation or a shift in their social identities, dissolution or changes in their group (problems with group cohesion or structural integrity), or being incarcerated or injured in combat, rendering them unable to carry out the role.

In the first case, ex-combatants are drawn toward developing stable and coherent identities that enable them to adopt roles as productive, responsible, and active citizens within their families, workplaces, and communities. These relationships create obligations with others that reshape an individual's focus, redirecting their time away from their previous roles and toward pro-social actions. This phenomenon has been observed in the literature on desistance from crime, where the development of pro-social bonds provides individuals with a "stake in conformity," leading them away from criminal lifestyles, as well as in cases

of disengagement from terrorism, where alternative social networks challenge their views and assist them in establishing new identities (Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2021; Windisch et al., 2016).

Building and maintaining relationships with new friends, mentors, and supportive family members, even when these individuals may be unaware of the ongoing transition but interact in ways that reinforce the ex-combatants self-definition in their new role, is essential for constructing an alternative identity and facilitating their reintegration. The roles they choose in various situations, and ultimately their successful incorporation into these roles, are influenced by the salience of their identity and the commitments they have established. However, reintegration also depends on ex-combatants embracing a community identity aligned with the norms and values of the areas where they assume these new roles. The redefinition of their social identity grants ex-combatants a place within the economic life of their communities, under the framework of social rules, and in the daily fabric of family and friendly relations.

The three reasons why people disengage from their roles bring with them shifts in the collection of people occupying particular roles associated with an individual in a given social role (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 3). Consequently, these individuals become less oriented toward and involved with current group members. As these members experience alienation and emotional distancing from others, this further diminishes their advantages of remaining in the group. When this impacts their self-identification with the group, it results in their disengagement from their role identity.

Combatants who disengage withdraw from the associated values, norms, social support systems, and cognitive frameworks tied to their role as members of an armed group. This psychological process may lead some of them to choose to leave the group. From a behavioral standpoint, disengagement leads to decreased involvement in violent activities associated with rebellion. Disengaged members may refrain from participating in armed activities, renounce loyalty to the group's goals, and no longer fulfill the expected duties as members. This does not necessarily mean they renounce their belief system, but rather, they are no longer motivated to participate in group activities and fulfill the expected roles for the armed group. Disengagement should not be confused with a complete overhaul of their beliefs or

ideologies; instead, it involves rejecting the rights and obligations that accompany their former identity as a member of the armed group.

Disidentification, which is different from disengagement, refers to the process of no longer primarily defining oneself by one former role within the group. Disengagement could lead to disidentification, in the sense that individuals who withdraw from the social expectations of given roles begin to shift their identities in a new direction, thinking of themselves apart from the people they were in those previous roles' (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 4). This shift in self-identity is a crucial aspect of the broader process of disengagement, potentially leading to the adoption of new identities outside of the armed group.

Both disengagement and disidentification can trigger an identity conflict when roles are closely tied to an individual's self-definition (Ebaugh 1988; Hogg et al. 1995, p. 264). After their demobilizations, ex-members who have their group's role identity find themselves in a new context in which they occupy two or more social positions simultaneously and it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to conform to those sets of role expectations. This process catalyzes the search for new meaning in life, a reevaluation of past experiences, and the pursuit of a new social identity. Former combatants ultimately find their place within society by adopting new roles that align with the social category represented by the civilian community with which they self-identify and develop a sense of belonging.

Some individuals do not renounce the group's belief system and continue to be radicalized despite no longer being active members because they have internalized those beliefs as their own. However, this continued radicalism is not considered problematic since it does not manifest in or justify violent behavior.[15] Ferguson et al. (2015) describes how many former combatants, now dedicated to building peace and a shared future in Northern Ireland, maintain deep radicalization and a strong attachment to their collective identity. In their case, what once fueled political violence now sustains their engagement in peace and community work.

Kenney and Chernov Hwang (2021) observed that "persistent activists," those who remain within the group despite exposure to the same pressures (pull and push factors) that

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[15] Efforts aimed at disengaging individuals from violent extremism are built on the assumption that radical beliefs precede violence, which ignores that factors such as state predation and systemic discrimination are just as likely to justify violence as radical ideology (Bosley, 2020).

could lead to disengagement, further solidify their extremist mentality. These individuals continue to adhere to the ideology, embracing its complexity and perceived truth, becoming career activists. This appears linked to their roles within their networks, as most held leadership or administrative positions. These roles involve giving orders and expecting compliance, potentially isolating them from specific group dynamics and camaraderie. Also, due to their sense of responsibility for the group's well-being, even when forming relationships outside the group, those connections often do not significantly alter their social position, and they can maintain their commitment to their group's ideology. Furthermore, because they are more openly pursued by government authorities, even after their group ceases to exist, leaders do not have the anonymity that allows other members to develop meaningful relationships with people who challenge their views or take on alternative roles that could facilitate the creation of new identities leading to disengagement (Kenney and Chernov Hwang, 2021).

Last, collective demobilization involves a shift to a new social context in which members become ex-combatants. Members who had chosen to stay in the group could no longer perform the roles they valued, with which they identified, and that shaped their self-concept and self-esteem. The collective demobilization signifies their role exit. This contextual change can force their disengagement and make them rethink their self-identification. Since they cannot restore their previous situational meanings, especially when their identity is closely tied to a role in the armed group that no longer exists, the only way to bridge this gap is for their identity standard itself to change, aligning with the new situational meanings they find after their demobilization. Given their opposition to the dominant order for so long, this transition disrupts the categories through which they had defined themselves (Todd, 2005, p. 440). Those who struggle to fit into the available social categories in this new context may face challenges in reintegrating because they find it difficult to disengage from their group identity. Others can assume new roles, through which they rebuild their self-identification and develop a sense of belonging to society.

2.3 CONCLUSION

While we can identify factors that lead combatants to disarm and leave their armed groups, understanding how they relinquish their central, behaviorally-anchored identity connected to their role in that group and navigate new identities outside of it remains elusive. Equally important is understanding the impact of demobilization drivers on their reintegration trajectories. Merely determining whether ex-combatants' exit from a group is voluntary or involuntary does not offer deep insights into the practical challenges involved in changing roles and self-identification during the transition process.

Individual-level analysis is crucial as ex-combatants undergo their demobilization and reintegration as a psychological process. Despite the recognized importance of reintegrating ex-combatants to create conditions for sustainable peace in post-conflict settings, scant attention has been given to examining reintegration experiences from their perspective. The individual perspectives of ex-combatants in DDR environments are often overlooked, highlighting a significant gap in the literature. This dissertation aims to address this gap by providing insights into the transitioning experiences of ex-combatants through conversations conducted during this research. By doing so, I contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their psychological journey, encompassing the process of leaving membership in an armed group behind and developing a sense of belonging to society.

3.0   METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This chapter discusses my research questions, the overall research design, case selection, and hypotheses. I then describe the interview process and the challenges associated with my approach. It covers data collection and participant selection and gives an overview of the participants I interviewed. In this chapter, I also delve into my positionality as a woman conducting academic research virtually from another country, analyzing how my identity and methods potentially influenced data collection and trust-building. Finally, I detail the data analysis procedures, including confidentiality protocols, and discuss the limitations of this study.

3.1   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our understanding of ex-combatants' perceptions of themselves in interpersonal relationships after demobilization and their process of developing a sense of belonging during reintegration into society is limited. We know that when ex-combatants demobilize and sever ties with their armed group their previously defined roles as combatants no longer dictate their daily lives, including the associated responsibilities and expectations.

Exiting an armed group on their own could be indicative of a member's disengagement. It suggests their willingness to connect with new social groups or to take on other roles that could have been incompatible with their role (and membership) in the armed group. Individuals who maintain a strong attachment to the group and prioritize their membership and their role in the group over other roles and social categories would not disengage and continue contributing.

When an armed group collectively demobilizes and dissolves, members who chose to stay in the group cannot continue performing roles they value, roles with which they built an idea of themselves. In this new context, they would connect with other people and take on new roles to rebuild their self-identification and develop a sense of belonging to society. Addition-

ally, some ex-combatants reintegrate collectively with other former members. Their setting changes, and with that, their roles. It remains unclear how this affects their (re)connection with other social groups, their self-perception as civilians, or their sense of belonging to the broader society.

This leads to the following research questions, which I will approach later when I present this dissertation's hypothesis.

1. How do ex-combatants navigate the process of transitioning to civilian life?
2. Can we compare the reintegration experiences and outcomes of individuals based on their voluntary or involuntary disengagement? Does this attribute reflect different values placed on armed group membership and civilian status?
3. Can we compare the reintegration experiences and outcomes of individuals based on their group status (active, dismantled, or transformed) when they demobilize? Does this condition reflect different perceptions of the group's availability as an identity anchor after demobilization?
4. How do the experiences of navigating unfamiliar roles, redefining self-perception, and establishing self-esteem independently of the armed group's influence contribute to the overall process of reintegration for former combatants transitioning to civilian life?

I determined it was crucial to examine how contextual factors make new social identities prominent, how ex-combatants develop a sense of belonging, and how these new social identities shape behavior that aligns with a civilian identity. By addressing these research questions in the interviews, I contribute to deepening the understanding of ex-combatants and valuable insights to promote conflict resolution in post-conflict settings.

3.2   RESEARCH DESIGN

This dissertation utilizes a qualitative multiple-case study to offer a comprehensive and contextualized account of the social transition to civilian life among 32 former combatants who underwent DDR in Colombia between 2002 and 2018. Qualitative inquiry, particularly

a case study design, is chosen to explore the subjective aspects of the transition process, focusing on personal meanings, beliefs, and experiences (Creswell et al., 2007; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009).

Former combatants from diverse backgrounds often encounter similar challenges as they navigate the transition from conflict to civilian existence.[1] All participants in this study reintegrated into society under the Colombian DDR program, offering a shared circumstance for examination across three forms of demobilization: individual, collective, and reincorporation (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Understanding both commonalities and differences among these experiences is essential for crafting effective policy responses that facilitate their incorporation into post-conflict societies.

The individual accounts of former combatants reintegrating in various settings serve as the quintain or target for inquiry (Stake, 2005). The quintain serves as a focal point or target for inquiry, representing the individual accounts of former members of armed groups rejoining society in various settings but under similar circumstances. Each of these accounts represents a unique perspective or case study that contributes to the understanding of the overall process of socially transitioning to civilian life. By examining quintains across different contexts, I highlight the significance of contextual factors in shaping their incorporation into civilian life. Data collected around the quintain reveals salient themes associated with the social transition to civilian life, both within individual cases and across multiple cases (Stake, 2005). This approach facilitates an exploration of self-identification among former fighters, aiding in identifying similarities and differences across cases Yin (2009).

By exploring the identification of individuals who underwent various forms of demobilization, this study aims to capture the spectrum of experiences and illuminate unique challenges ex-combatants face post-demobilization. The application of social identity theory suggests

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[1] They underwent socialized practices through political indoctrination, underwent physical training to be fit for combat, lived a clandestine life involved in activities against the law, and gained first-hand experience in war. At the same time, many ex-combatants have experienced traumatic events during their time as fighters, including exposure to violence, loss of comrades, and witnessing atrocities. They face stigma and social rejection upon reintegration into civilian life. Their demobilization means forfeiting a stable income and livelihood or not having their basic needs met by the group in exchange for participation. They may encounter bureaucratic hurdles or lack awareness of available resources. They may struggle to find their place in civilian society and establish new goals for their lives, and they may seek opportunities to contribute positively to society and rebuild relationships with family and community members.

its potential influence on ex-combatant social transition, contributing to our understanding of ex-combatant social transition into civilian life and to the ongoing development of relevant theories.

Placing individual perspectives at the forefront, this dissertation integrates existing literature with firsthand insights from interviews. The methodology for sampling the participants who were interviewed is outlined in this chapter, considering factors such as central research interests, theoretical foundations related to social transition and disengagement, and practical constraints. Colombia's context provides an ideal setting for sampling former combatants to study disengagement from armed groups and their social transition to civilian life. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Official demobilization from an armed group in Colombia under the ARN, either individually or as part of a collective demobilization process (including laying down arms to reintegrate into society), with demobilization occurring between 2002 and 2018. Exclusion criteria comprised incapability to provide consent or inability to understand and being a minor (under 18) at the time of the interview.

3.3   HYPOTHESES

In this dissertation, I undertake the challenge of examining the social transition of ex-combatants to civilian life. When fighters demobilize, the conclusion of their membership in the armed group entails leaving a role. Similarly, reintegrated ex-combatants adopt or assume a new role. Transitioning from one role within the armed group to a new role within society as civilians can potentially trigger an identity crisis, particularly when their roles within the armed group are tightly intertwined with their self-definition Ebaugh (1988); Hogg and Abrams (1988); Hogg et al. (1995). Disengagement enables them to discover new meaning in life, reconsider past experiences from a different perspective, and prepare to adopt a new social identity that aids their integration into society as civilians.

This dissertation is based on the hypothesis that understanding the social identification of rebels and ex-combatants is crucial for comprehending the nature of their disengagement, their inclination towards demobilization, the roles they assume post-disengagement, and

their subsequent efforts at (re)socialization. The underlying hypothesis suggests that the internal processes involved in transitioning from a self-identity as a member of an armed group to the emergence of a civilian identity can be generalized. How a combatant experiences the termination of their membership in a rebel group, whether through individual demobilization (desertion) or collective demobilization (group dismantlement or transformation), significantly influences their redefinition process, enabling them to feel part of society and develop a sense of belonging to it.

Understanding these disengagement mechanisms can refine strategies aimed at encouraging voluntary exit from armed groups. Additionally, comprehending their identity redefinition can provide policymakers with insights to design targeted interventions that address the unique needs and challenges they face on their journey toward civilian life.

The social identification of rebels and ex-combatants plays a crucial part in understanding their disengagement, propensity for demobilization, roles after disengagement, subsequent efforts for (re)socialization, and how they develop a sense of belonging that supports their reintegration.

3.4   INTERVIEWS

I conducted semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to ask open-ended questions to ex-combatants while following a general script covering various topics (Bernard, 2017, p. 156). The interview guide (See Appendix B) included general questions guiding discussions on separation, transition, and incorporation into society. I used specific questions tailored to different groups in the sample, ensuring coverage of essential topics and allowing versatility in discussing transformation experiences in-depth.

During the pandemic, remote communication through phone or WhatsApp became the primary method of interaction for ex-combatants. When I interviewed the participants, they were already familiar with and comfortable using these channels. Utilizing email and WhatsApp, I sent participants the Verbal Consent form and my card. These channels also facilitated information exchange, with participants who shared pictures, files, videos, and

links that enriched the study.

I interacted with participants about four times before their interviews to build rapport, verify their willingness to participate, and clarify details about the research. I emphasized my academic interest in their social transition to civilian life and the lived experience component, I assured participants of my focus on individuals rather than organizational narratives. I clarified that I had no affiliation with the ARN, ensuring participants felt free to share openly. I also used the same channels to follow up with some participants.

The purpose of conducting interviews with participants was to gain a comprehensive understanding of various aspects, including self-esteem, disengagement from armed groups, identity transformation, and the construction of a civilian identity during reintegration. Ex-combatants engaged in discussions, with varying levels of detail, about self-identification at different points in time, interactions with social groups, and their sense of belonging to civil society. The interviews yielded insights into how participants navigated their past roles, underwent social transitions, adjusted interactions and relationships, presented themselves in new settings, and assumed new self-identifications through roles in society.

Many interviewed ex-combatants had limited educational backgrounds, with a significant number completing high school during their reintegration or reincorporation stage. Consequently, formulating interview questions required a straightforward approach, adhering to the principles of "brevity, grammatical simplicity, specificity, and concreteness" (Foddy, 1993, p. 20). Recognizing the substantial impact of question formulation on findings, I carefully rephrased certain questions and provided clarification to some participants while avoiding leading answers. For instance, when asking ex-combatants to describe themselves, I encountered instances of literal descriptions of physical appearance. Guiding them to identify attributes, qualities, and even negative traits clarified the intended focus of the question, aiming to explore their self-perception.

During the exploration of their incorporation and the development of a civilian identity, I observed that different wording elicited distinct responses. To minimize my influence on the respondents and avoid imposing my views or assumptions on the participants' realities, I carefully formulated questions and analyzed their responses. This was a conscious exercise because, as a researcher, I encode questions and decode answers, while participants

simultaneously decode my questions and encode their responses (Foddy, 1993). Interviewing participants with higher levels of education appeared more straightforward, as they required fewer clarifications and could provide more detailed answers. This might be attributed to some respondents lacking the knowledge or understanding to give a more accurate answer. Nevertheless, in some interviews, the conversation flowed more naturally, as participants were eager to discuss their experiences. In such cases, my planned questions remained relevant, but participants' contributions shaped the direction of the conversation, either supporting the use of specific questions or rendering others unnecessary.

I recognize the inherent limitations associated with depending exclusively on interviews as the primary data source, especially when conducted in a self-report manner. Questions emerge concerning the interviewees' awareness of the implications of their participation, the accuracy of their responses regarding the study's focus, the reliability of their recollections, and whether their answers are influenced by perceived expectations or a desire to provide a "right" response. Additionally, the willingness to engage in discussions on potentially sensitive or personal topics exhibited variability among participants. I report their contributions throughout this dissertation, relying on pseudonyms to protect the identity of the individuals who participated in the research. This is crucial for maintaining confidentiality and ensuring that they cannot be easily identified by others, especially considering this research involves sensitive or personal information. Throughout the dissertation, translated interview extracts are used to illustrate the findings. The material in square brackets was added for contextualization.

3.5   DATA COLLECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted data collection for this dissertation. I planned to conduct fieldwork in Colombia in the summer of 2020. However, the University of Pittsburgh paused non-essential social research, the Colombian government closed its borders, and the United States imposed travel restrictions from Colombia in 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, the emergence of a second wave of COVID-19 in July 2021 indicated

that a return to normalcy might not occur soon. There were additional concerns even if circumstances changed, and I could travel to Colombia. Face-to-face interviews might induce anxiety due to the fear of COVID-19. Participants might feel rushed or uncomfortable interacting with me, considering I would have traveled from another country and met with many other ex-combatants before their interviews. Additionally, economic hardships caused by the pandemic made it unlikely for participants to prioritize meeting with me during lockdowns when they needed to focus on earning a living, especially considering the mobility restrictions in place. As a result, the original research design relying on traditional face-to-face methods had to be suspended.

During preliminary research in Bogotá in 2019, I established connections with intended gatekeepers and potential interviewees. With pandemic-related lockdowns in place, people were no longer meeting in person, and social distancing measures became common practice. Consequently, most gatekeepers I had contacted were either working from home or had postponed their projects, resulting in a lack of communication with ex-combatants. I kept in touch with only one ex-combatant during this period; the other two vanished during the pandemic.

As a doctoral student, I had learned the principles of conducting fieldwork, making the idea of engaging with participants virtually feel less substantial compared to the in-person interviews I could have conducted through travel. It was not until I realized that fieldwork refers to "the data collection phase when the investigators leave their desks and go out 'into the field.' The 'field' is metaphorical: it is not a real field but a setting or a population" (Delamont, 2004, p. 218), that I realized that I could still watch, interact, ask questions, make audio or video recordings, and reflect after this type of participant observation. Furthermore, it was not until I recognized the pandemic's profound influence on reshaping scholarly processes, affecting many beyond myself, that I became at ease with reorganizing my research approach and initiating contact with ex-combatants for virtual participation.

Even as I considered the possibility, I initially hesitated to reach out to them because I thought I might struggle to build rapport remotely. I had concerns that ex-combatants might not be receptive to communication through platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, or Skype

to discuss topics related to their demobilization and reintegration. The first interviews revealed that ex-combatants, like many others, were very comfortable using these channels to communicate. I feel that these means of communication gave participants more control over their interactions. They could choose the places and times that better suited the interview, resulting in detailed answers from some of them precisely because they felt more comfortable talking with me, where and when they chose to do it. I also understood that if I made them uncomfortable during the interviews or if they simply did not want to participate, they could easily block my number. I respected the privacy of former combatants who chose not to participate in my study by eliminating their contact information and sharing with them that I intended to do that.

My conversations with the gatekeepers determined that phone communication was the most suitable approach to contact participants remotely, primarily using platforms such as WhatsApp. Virtual communication tools for data collection are not new, as they have been employed for decades, primarily for conducting surveys. While researchers often favor face-to-face interviews, video conferencing has been recognized as a viable option to overcome geographical barriers and time constraints (Sedgwick and Spiers, 2009). It was also established that the widespread accessibility of voice and video calls through popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp brought connectivity to a larger population, making these virtual communication tools suitable for qualitative interviews (Sah et al., 2020). Since I knew that most ex-combatants do not have access to a computer but likely own a phone, I chose interviews using those platforms. The problem was that even if ex-combatants were using these channels daily, I still needed to reach them to gather a sample of ex-combatants for the interviews.

Overall, virtual interviews allowed participants to share things with me that might have been excluded in a physical setting. For instance, Giancarlo gave me a tour of his bakery and showed me the baked goods he sold. Aurora showed me the plants she uses to make soaps and sent me files to illustrate how she has learned to keep records now that she runs a business. Pablo used the video option to show me the design he could print on a fabric now that he learned how to use a computer. These additional insights added depth to their responses and enriched the information they provided in response to my questions.

3.6   SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

I strived to ensure that individuals engaged in the project encountered no additional risks, aligning with the "do no harm" imperative (Wood, 2006, p. 376). I engaged with participants several times, providing opportunities for questions and allowing them to become acquainted with me. In those interactions, I conveyed the purpose of my research in accessible language, informed them of potential risks and benefits, and emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary, with a commitment to respecting their privacy. I provided the Verbal Consent form as a file via WhatsApp or email, allowing them to retain it for their records and read it independently (See Appendix A). As we engaged in multiple interactions before the interview, and considering that some interviews were scheduled a couple of days later due to their time constraints, I reiterated my accountability to participants and referenced the IRB information in that document. However, I acknowledge that they might not have fully grasped the role of the IRB in overseeing my research. Nevertheless, I ensured that I obtained their informed consent to participate, underscoring their autonomy throughout. I emphasized their right to skip questions, make decisions regarding interview recordings, and reiterated their choice to change their minds and opt out of participation.

The sample comprises 32 former combatants ($N = 32$). I independently reached out to 20 of them, while the remaining 12 were included with the assistance of the Colombian Agency for the Reintegration and Normalization (ARN). The selection of participants took into account the year of their demobilization. I stipulated that all participants should have demobilized between 2002 and 2018. This restriction aimed to capture the variation in the social and political context experienced by participants during their demobilization and reintegration, influenced by the different policies and approaches under Presidents Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) and Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018). Table 2 presents the pseudonym used for each participant and the corresponding interview date.

The first set included 20 former combatants from the AUC who collectively demobilized under Uribe. It also included ex-members of the FARC who laid down their arms and reincorporated in 2016, self-identifying as *"firmantes de paz"* (signatories for peace), some of which are currently collectively reintegrating. The second set of participants comprised

Table 2: Pseudonyms used for each participant and the corresponding interview date.

	Pseudonym	Interview Date
1	Pablo	August 2nd, 2021
2	Carlos	March 9th, 2022
3	Vanessa	March 4th, 2022
4	Javier	June 18th, 2021
5	Richard	October 2nd, 2021
6	Ramón	February 26th, 2022
7	Gladys	September 3rd, 2021
8	Sebastián	April 12th, 2022
9	Henry	February 19th, 2022
10	Germán	February 13th, 2022
11	Lina	March 2nd, 2022
12	Pipe	June 19th, 2021
13	Eduardo	December 12th, 2021
14	Cindy	July 16th, 2021
15	Sandra	July 15th, 2021
16	Ramiro	October 5th, 2021
17	Giancarlo	June 19th, 2021
18	Christian	February 22nd, 2022
19	Juan	June 22nd, 2021
20	Alberto	September 10th, 2021
21	Francisco	October 14th, 2021
22	Miguel	September 28th, 2021
23	Guillermo	July 14th, 2021
24	Mariana	March 16th, 2022
25	Aurora	September 24th, 2021
26	Marlon	August 11th, 2021
27	Ingrid	August 3rd, 2021
28	José	March 4th, 2022
28	Tito	March 9th, 2022
30	Pedro	December 14th, 2021
31	César	November 29th, 2021
32	David	March 4th, 2022

12 ex-combatants who had individually demobilized. Seven of them are ex-combatants from the FARC, and five used to be members of the ELN. The second set of participants allowed me to study desertion and increased the variation among participants as they demobilized from other groups in different years and places, contributing to a more comprehensive and diverse sample.

3.6.1 First Set of Participants

The first set comprised 20 participants ($N = 20$) who had been members of the AUC or the FARC. Their interviews were possible because I maintained sporadic communication with gatekeepers through emails and WhatsApp during the pandemic. Our interactions reflected the shared burdens imposed on everyone by the context since all of us were facing the challenges of the pandemic. Some juggled family responsibilities (including caring for children or elderly parents), the ex-combatant struggled to find employment, and others worked from home. Even though our communications were not always smooth or consistent, they were connected to the target population and had met me, which helped establish a connection with the participants they referred.

The interviews were conducted through five different entry points, including a person working for an NGO that utilizes art and communication tools to facilitate behavioral changes in former combatants in Bogotá and Medellín (two participants); the owner of a store in Bogotá that sells products made by former combatants in different parts of Colombia (three participants); the owner of a fashion company that employs former combatants (four participants); a lawyer providing legal counsel to ex-combatants (seven participants); and an ex-combatant from the FARC whom I met during preliminary research in 2019 in Bogotá (four participants).[2]

I knew and understood that the other gatekeepers, particularly those who interacted with the ex-combatant community through an NGO, could not share their phone numbers with me or openly reach them and ask for their participation because my research was not connected to their job or organization. Since they were not meeting with former combatants during the pandemic, they could not informally ask them to be interviewed, as we agreed to do before the pandemic. Thus, I had to share the details of my study with the NGO (Fundación Prolongar) and hold meetings with their staff for them to authorize a formal referral through their channels. Besides the Verbal Consent form, I also sent them proof of my training to conduct research with human subjects. Once they were familiar with my research, they authorized a member of their staff to share the details of my research

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[2] Although I had met this ex-combatant in person in the past, he was not readily available for an interview when I first asked him about it or to refer other ex-combatants for phone (WhatsApp) interviews.

with potential participants and, after they had agreed, for him to share with me the phone numbers of those participants who agreed to participate. That is how I interviewed the first participants.

The lawyer acting as gatekeeper knew former combatants because he had been providing legal counsel to them. He gave my contact information to a former combatant from the AUC in Tierralta. This person called me, and after several interactions, he agreed to be interviewed. I chose to use snowball sampling to interview other participants through him. This sampling technique offers several advantages when interviewing hard-to-reach populations, such as ex-combatants, as they may be hesitant to participate or may not be easily identifiable through conventional sampling techniques. However, it does not produce a statistically representative sample in a large population (Bernard, 2017, p. 148) (Bernard 2011 :148). This participant started a respondent chain that led me to another six participants in that city.

However, snowball sampling has limitations, including potential bias and the risk of over-representing specific subgroups. To mitigate these biases in my analysis and interpretation of findings, I stopped the interviews through this chain when I reached the point of saturation. This happened when I recognized continuous and repeating patterns during the simultaneous analysis of interview data. It does not mean, however, that all concepts were saturated simultaneously. I started other referral chains and continued interviewing other participants by relying on other entry points for participant recruitment. This approach helped ensure a more diverse sample and avoid overrepresentation of specific experiences given that all ex-combatants I interviewed in this first chain came from a particular group (the AUC), were or had been involved in specific activities, lived in the same city, and had rejoined society for around the same amount of time.

The store owner in Bogotá shared with me a list of around 18 brands of products manufactured by former combatants that he sold. I independently and randomly contacted several of these brands using their associated phone numbers, Instagram, and Facebook accounts. Three individuals I interacted with through those channels provided me with their phone numbers to discuss my research when I mentioned that I had visited a store selling their products in Bogotá and that I knew its owner, which all of them liked. Even

though entrepreneurship can help former combatants overcome discrimination, transform their identities, and reintegrate peacefully into civil society (Barrios Fajardo et al., 2019), I only interviewed these three participants to avoid their overrepresentation in the sample as they were not the main scope of my study.

The clothing business owner is a political scientist whom I met in Bogotá during preliminary research. She agreed to inquire among her employees who would be willing to be interviewed by phone by me. She provided me with the phone numbers of four participants located in Icononzo (Tolima) and Bogotá. Since their employer asked them if they wanted to be interviewed, our initial interactions were meant to confirm their genuine interest in participating. I assured them that there would be no consequences for declining participation, as she was helping me due to our shared academic interests. When I asked these four people if they could refer other participants, they were reluctant. Lastly, I interviewed the ex-combatant I met in 2019, and after his interview, he referred three participants.

This is how the first set of 20 study participants was established. Through these referrals, I had the opportunity to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives within the ex-combatant population in Colombia, the information I detail later in the Participant Overview part. This approach significantly contributed to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of their diversity.

Participants in the first set had mainly collectively demobilized as part of the negotiations between their respective armed groups and the Colombian government. The set includes nine former combatants from the AUC and 11 ex-members from the FARC. Only one had individually demobilized, though he did it in prison. To diversify my sample and ensure a more balanced and unbiased representation within the study, I organized a second set of interviews with the assistance of the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) in Colombia.

3.6.2 Second Set of Participants

The collaboration with the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) in Colombia presented both significant advantages and notable disadvantages. The primary

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advantage was the guaranteed access to many ex-combatants, which could greatly expand the geographical reach of the sample. The second set of participants ($N = 12$) comprises ex-combatants who individually demobilized. Seven of them are ex-combatants from the FARC, and five used to be members of the ELN. With the help of the ARN, I interviewed ex-combatants in Bello, Magangué, Cartagena, Tumaco, Bogotá, and Medellín. The ARN's information system facilitated the selection of a diverse range of interviewees, enhancing the sample's representativeness.

Collaborating with a government institution like the ARN also involved navigating bureaucratic requirements.[3] The ARN requested that I adhere to ethical guidelines regarding autonomy, anonymity, and confidentiality during the initial preparation for virtual data collection, but most importantly, I had to go through the ARN's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain access to the participants. Despite already having most of the materials they requested (which had previously been submitted and approved by the University of Pittsburgh's IRB), I had to translate what I had and adapt it to fit the ARN's specific format and submit an official request. Additionally, I was required to share with the ARN the questionnaires I intended to use and to define the profiles of the participants I sought. For the former, I shared the questions I intended to ask and specified that those were meant to serve as a guide as I intended to conduct semi-structured interviews. For the latter, I did not give them a specific profile and did my best to ensure they would not put me in touch with a specific type of respondent. The only predetermined criteria I gave was for the ARN to help me connect with ex-combatants anywhere in the country who had self-demobilized between 2004 and 2018 and to include at least a former combatant from the ELN. I was asked to share the findings and conclusions of my dissertation with the ARN. I agreed to do this since it confirmed that this agency was not expecting me to share any specific details about the contributions of each participant with them.

As soon as I received the ARN authorization, I coordinated the terms of their support with the ARN Territorial Articulation Office in Bogotá. They connected me with people working for the ARN in four regional offices (Bogotá, Nariño, Antioquia, and Sucre-

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[3] I submitted a research proposal meeting the ARN requirements, signed a confidentiality agreement form the ARN provided, provided a copy of my Colombian national ID, and attached a letter in which the University of Pittsburgh presented me and described the training I received to conduct my field work.

Bolivar-Córdoba). Each regional office was required to provide the contact information of 3-4 ex-combatants to include an ELN in those names if possible, and we randomly assigned each office with years within the period to look in their system for participants. Random sampling, these two variables—year of demobilization and location—allowed the selection of ex-combatants with differing characteristics through the ARN.

The staff at the ARN, who assisted me in arranging the interviews, were accustomed to interacting with others through platforms like Zoom or Skype and had previously engaged with other researchers for similar purposes. The pandemic paved the way for this virtual interaction, making it more acceptable and commonplace. The fact that I was based in the United States while conducting my research did not pose a challenge for setting up the interviews with the ARN as their institutional IRB detailed that I was conducting remote/virtual interviews.

The Agency's Rout Advisors (the ARN staff who follow up on the reintegration of former combatants) in the regional offices contacted potential participants and talked with them about my research. They shared with them the Verbal Consent document I used for this study, assured the potential participants I had received clearance to discuss issues regarding their demobilization and reintegration, and guaranteed the information they were to provide was confidential. The regional office contacted me once the ex-combatants agreed to share their phone numbers with me so we could start talking about the interview.

The regional offices primarily provided me with potential participants' names, phone numbers, and Colombian national identification numbers. Some also included details like their CODA number (certifying demobilized combatant status), current location, or year of demobilization. However, the format was not uniform. Through the ARN, I received the contact information of 14 ex-combatants, but I only interviewed 12, as two declined to participate when contacted. The main reason given by those who declined was a lack of time for interviews, although some also expressed a perceived lack of usefulness in participating. This sentiment echoed what other former combatants had mentioned during my initial independent outreach when establishing the first set of interviews. Only one ex-combatant I contacted requested payment for his contribution, citing his numerous needs and job instability. However, during one of our calls, he was intoxicated. He declined to participate when he

understood the interviews did not involve remuneration. I removed his information from my records, as I have been doing with information from others who declined to participate, and limited the second set of participants to the 12 ex-combatants who agreed to be interviewed.

The second set of participants consisted of ex-combatants who had self-demobilized, including five former members from the ELN. They helped me broaden the study's range of perspectives and experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the ex-combatant transition to civilian life. This aspect was particularly insightful in exploring the disengagement from an armed group, the choice to leave such a group and the various contexts in which combatants independently left their groups. This set represented those not initially included in the study, offering a glimpse into the experiences of individuals who had individually demobilized. On one hand, it sheds light on those who might have had different experiences when rejoining society. On the other hand, the interviews I had previously conducted independently helped mitigate the potential risk of a biased sample if the ARN had solely selected ex-combatants for interviews. However, a limitation in the sample is that virtually all participants who self-demobilized (12 out of the 13) were selected with the help of ARN because I could not reach more of them on my own. They do not seem as connected with other former combatants as those who collectively demobilized from the AUC or the FARC and may benefit from increased anonymity efforts.

Implementing different criteria for participant selection resulted in a diverse range of individuals and increased variance in the sample. The 32 ex-combatants included in the study represent the FARC, the AUC, and the ELN, originating from various blocs or fronts (and military units of various sizes) that operated in different regions of Colombia, who became ex-combatants in different locations and who are currently living in different parts of the country. They also differ in terms of their membership duration in their respective armed groups and their experiences transitioning out of those groups and reintegrating into society. Furthermore, the temporal distance from the year of demobilization influenced their responses and reflections on the transition process.

Participants who had demobilized many years ago could provide insights from observing their transformation, whereas those who recently became ex-combatants lacked that long-term perspective but could add more details to their answers. In addition to this, it was

important to have a sample with participants of different ages since younger ex-combatants likely spent less time in the armed group, could have been recruited as minors, their set of skills would be more strongly linked to their role in the armed group, and could be either single or have very young kids. Older ex-combatants could have spent more time in the group or had jobs or occupations before becoming combatants and, in that sense, could have been civilians. Their age differences result in a sample of participants with diversified skills and connections to other social groups.

Even though I intended to interview ex-combatants with varying ranks and perspectives within their respective groups, I interviewed two higher-ranking ex-combatants through the independent chain of referrals. The first held a commander position within the AUC and was extradited to the United States for his role in this group.[4] The other held a leadership position in the FARC during the peace talks in Havana and continues to hold a leadership position within the Comunes political party.[5]

While I acknowledge that their experiences becoming ex-combatants and reintegrating may differ from those of the average or majority of ex-members, I included them in this study because they willingly agreed to be interviewed, they were referred to me by two different gatekeepers who also referred lower-ranking ex-combatants, and I consider that their inclusion further ensured a diverse sample. Additionally, I thought this was an opportunity to capture the transition processes of these higher-ranking members to gain insights into the distinct challenges they may face, such as economic and social status loss during reintegration. Higher-ranking members bear greater responsibility for their actions before the law than lower-ranking members, which could significantly influence their transition to civilian life. As some mid-ranking ex-combatants, they have ongoing legal obligations and are required to face the courts and accept responsibility for actions committed under their command. Understanding these unique circumstances is crucial to comprehend the complexities and intricacies of their reintegration or reincorporation process.

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[4] It is worth noting that while he suggested interviewing in English, considering Spanish is my native language, it was reasonable to conduct it in our shared language.

[5] Even though I was given this participant's email by an ex-member of the FARC who referred him, the interview was arranged via WhatsApp with his secretary. She was the one who talked to me before the actual interview, assisted him in setting up Zoom that day, and resolved technical issues during the interview. To talk to me he requested the questionnaire I intended to use, which I shared along with a copy of the verbal consent form I used.

How the participants live today also adds variance to the sample. Some participants achieved economic or job stability, some established their families, some have gained skills as part of their transformation, some still consider they are connected in some way to the group, some live in rural areas, some are close to their families, some consider they are in the process of becoming someone else, others cannot see themselves as civilians.

Communication methods varied among individuals. Some participants could only receive phone calls, while others had limited internet access, primarily when at home or in places with free WiFi, to reply to my messages or take my calls. I interacted with two by email, but I mainly communicated with the participants via WhatsApp. Only a couple used Instagram or Facebook to talk to me before their interviews; they had business and used these platforms to increase their outreach. Out of the 32 ex-combatants I interviewed, only five reported owning a computer.[6] They suggested using Skype or Zoom for their interviews. All of them told me they used computers when they were in their group and that they were comfortable talking with me using Skype or Zoom as a channel. Only one of the ex-combatants I interviewed via WhatsApp stated she agreed to talk to me because this platform was safe. She pointed to the encryption of the calls when she explained to me why.

The first set of interviews took place from May to August 2021. All of these ex-combatants owned a phone and I chatted with them regularly using WhatsApp to build rapport before formally interviewing them. On average, I chatted with them about four times before interviewing them. That said, some of them wanted to be interviewed and get done with it as soon as they could, while others were fine with interacting more with me before the official interview.

The second set of interviews took place between March and May of 2022. I relied on the ARN's Route Advisors to create the necessary link with the interview participants. To conduct these interviews, I mainly interacted with the former combatants to arrange a date and time that worked for them. WhatsApp allowed me to write to the ex-combatants or send them a voice note, and they would reply whenever they could. Most participants count

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[6] Two of them had been higher ranking members (one worked in finances-related assignments for the AUC and the other had been assigned diplomatic and political work for the FARC), the third was a family member of a prominent FARC leader, and the fourth one was part of a FARC front that operated in Bogotá and used to have assignments in universities in the city.

on data coverage at home to use WhatsApp as they interacted with me from other places only when they had access to Free WiFi. After they were interviewed, I kept in touch with a couple who either mostly "stopped by" via text to say hello or send stickers and ask me if I had finished the dissertation.

3.7 CLASSIFICATION OF THE EX-COMBATANTS IN THE SAMPLE

All ex-combatants in Colombia must have: 1) been included in the list of proposed candidates submitted by the government to the Attorney General's Office; 2) handed over all property resulting from the crimes they perpetrated; and 3) abstain from taking part in illegal activities from the moment they receive that label. Individually demobilized combatants must also 1) sign a written commitment with the government (the equivalent to the peace agreement signed by the collectively demobilized groups); 2) provide information on and collaborate with the dismantling of the group to which they belonged; and 3) declare that their activities within an armed group were not related to drug trafficking or illicit wealth. Last but not least, ex-combatants who collectively demobilized with their group needed their group to 1) dismantle its military structure, according to a peace agreement with the government; 2) hand over all minors who had been recruited; and 3) release all kidnapped persons in their custody and provide information on the whereabouts of missing people for them to be considered ex-combatants under the law.

3.8 PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

By considering these various factors in the selection of participants, the study encompasses a broad range of experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and nuances of the transition process for ex-combatants. The sample, however, was too small to select cases according to all of the above-mentioned criteria.

Sampling on the location variable for the second set of participants resulted in obtaining

a sample of demobilized combatants residing in 12 different cities in Colombia: 8 in Bogotá, 8 in Tierralta, 4 in Medellín, 3 in Icononzo, 2 in Tumaco, 1 in Bello, 1 in Cali, 1 in Montería, 1 in Magangué, 1 in Cartagena, 1 in Mesetas, and 1 in Dabeiba (for a description of their local contexts, see below). Accordingly, the sample includes ex-combatants who demobilized between 2004 and 2018.

The majority of participants in the sample (19 out of 32) became ex-combatants when their armed group signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government. Eight of them collectively demobilized from the AUC between 2004 and 2006, and the remaining 11 laid down their arms with the FARC in 2016. Additionally, two other participants were demobilized in 2016, one from the ELN and the other from the FARC, but they did so individually. Therefore, the majority of participants in the sample demobilized in 2016.

I took note of the place where their demobilization took place to understand how voluntary or how much of a choice their demobilization was. Sixteen participants said they had demobilized in a place determined by their group, 6 in combat, eight demobilized close to their area of operation, and 2 in a remote area of operation. Seven participants stated it had been their choice to leave their group, whereas the other 25 did not choose when and how they were going to demobilize. Among those who did not personally choose to demobilize, 19 followed terms agreed by their group and the Colombian government. The other 6 participants were captured, and that led to their demobilization.[7] In that sense, I consider that those 25 combatants did not choose to end their membership when and how they did. They performed their role in their group until they could not.

Most participants in the sample came from different groups, fronts, or blocs, although four participants collectively demobilized from the AUC Córdoba bloc (they were part of the same chain of referrals, although it is unclear if all of them knew each other). The participants who used to be AUC combatants had demobilized around 15 years before the interview. Seven of them live in Tierralta, and one of them lives in Medellín. Four of them were members of the Córdoba bloc (Córdoba), one from the Tayrona bloc (Magdalena), one

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[7] Two participants in this subset became "separated youths" when the Colombian military removed them from the conflict zone during combat when they realized she was a minor. I also classified their demobilization as contextual because it was not their choice to leave the group. According to the ARN system, they self-demobilized, but they do not think they exited the group and described the incident as being captured in combat.

from the Minero bloc (Antioquia), one from the Norte bloc (Guajira), and one from the Catatumbo bloc (Norte de Santander). In this regard, four of this subset of participants remained in the same location where they were active as combatants, while the other four relocated to different places. The AUC ex-combatant who demobilized on his own was the one who lived in Medellín; he used to be a member of the Calima bloc (Valle). Those who were not living in their place of origin told me that they were not allowed to return to avoid revictimization or for their security. However, others mentioned that they relocated to that city for their families or because they knew there was a large AUC ex-combatant community.

Among those who collectively demobilized from the FARC, five live in an official transitional zone (known as Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation or ETCRs), four live in Bogotá, one in Montería, and one in Cali. All of them came from a different military unit.[8] Two former combatants from the FARC who demobilized on their own were living in Bogotá, 2 in Medellín, 2 in Tumaco, and 1 in Tierralta. They came from different military units too.[9] None of them were living in the area where they were active as combatants or in their place of origin.

Participants who demobilized on their own from the ELN had been in the José Martínez front (Norte de Santander), an undisclosed front operating in Nariño, the Comandante Diego Company (Norte de Santander or Catatumbo region), the Cimarrón front (Chocó), and one of them did not disclose his unit. ELN participants lived in different cities: Magangué, Bogotá, Bello, Medellín, and Cartagena. None of them lived where they were active as combatants or in their place of origin.

Restricting the search for participants by year (with the help of the ARN system) increased the chances of interviewing an ex-combatant from the ELN since that group is still active. This resulted in having five ex-combatants from that group in the second sample.

Due to the mixed nature of the sampling, a whole set of other varying characteristics emerged. Eight women from the AUC, the FARC, and the ELN were interviewed. While

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[8] Ex-combatants from the FARC came from the Abelardo Romero front (Sumapaz region), Compañía Luis Pardo of the Oriental Bloc (Meta), 5th front (Urabá region), Antonio Nariño Column (Bogotá), José María Córdoba Bloc (Antioquia), Victor Saavedra Mobile Column (Valle), 33rd front (Magdalena Medio region), 59th front (Guajira), Jorge Briceño front in the Oriental bloc (Meta and Caquetá), and one of them did not disclose his unit.

[9] They had operated in the 36th front (Antioquia), 7th Front (Guaviare), 18th Front, Teófilo Forero Mobile Column (Caquetá), and the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column (Nariño).

some women had been directly involved in combat and held a lower ranking in their groups, they had been active as logistical personnel or nurses. Three former combatants in the sample were recruited and rejoined society as minors; two of them were women, one from the FARC and the other from the ELN. One woman was with her group for almost 30 years. She was released from prison as part of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC. She, along with four other ex-combatants, still considers herself a member of this group.

About half of the participants in the sample, 15 out of the 32, were in their group between 5 and 15 years. Most of them became mid-ranking combatants and only one of them was a high-ranking combatant despite having spent similar time in the group with other mid-rank combatants. He was related to a higher-ranking commander in the AUC, which explains why he did not have to spend more time in the group to become a commander. He told me he was trusted from an early age with specific tasks or his group precisely because his relative supported him. The other higher-ranking commander in the sample had been about forty years with the FARC when the group signed the peace agreement with the Colombian government.

The average age of the participants was 42 years, but five of them did not disclose their age during the interview or provide other details to help calculate it. The average age of the former AUC combatants in the sample at the time of their demobilization was 32, though one of them did not disclose her age. The average age of the FARC combatants in the sample at the time of their collective demobilization in 2016 was 38, though one of them did not disclose his age. The average age at the time of demobilization for ex-combatants who demobilized individually in the sample was 24, though three ex-combatants who individually demobilized did not disclose their age.

I took notes on their age as I consider it an important factor in how ex-combatants approach their transformation into civilian life. It can determine if an ex-combatant is at a productive age, how easily he or she could learn a new skill to perform a different role, and, in female ex-combatants, if they are still in reproductive age. In that sense, age can determine roles an ex-combatant can assume: full-time dedication to training and education, ability to take on heavy labor (for farming or work in construction), or parenting. It also

shows that some did not have previous experience as civilians because they joined their groups as minors. Therefore, they became adults in the group or around the time of their demobilization. For them, this involved taking on the associated responsibilities of living on their own and providing for themselves.

When looking at their current age, it is unsurprising that two-thirds of the participants declared having children and that half of them reported having been in a stable relationship after their demobilization (including those two combatants who reported being divorced and widowed). Concerning their family situation, 12 interviewees claimed to be in a stable relationship, while 11 identified as single. One of them discussed at length the implications of relying on his wife's support, given that he is an ex-combatant and can not be as independent as he would like to. Seven participants did not disclose their relationship status, and this subgroup tended to avoid the most personal questions.

The majority of participants in the sample were employed. Five participants openly stated they were unemployed, and three did not disclose their occupation status. There is, however, a wide variety of occupations within the sample. Unsurprisingly, given that one of my entry points was a store selling products made by ex-combatants, at least five participants declared they owned their own business. Two former combatants from the FARC identified as politicians of the Comunes political party. However, other former combatants from the FARC in the sample are actively involved in other political groups, mainly because they do not feel the Comunes political party truthfully represents the FARC as they understood it.[10] Former members of the AUC in the sample are not involved in politics because they cannot do it. Generally, the participants made political statements during the interviews.

Most ex-combatants I interviewed have low-income occupations, such as being part of cleaning crews, working in factories or construction jobs, guards in private security companies, tailors, or store clerks. Those who were unemployed at the time of the interview told me that they either stayed at home or worked on their land, which provided some sustenance for them. Three ex-combatants from the AUC reported they receive income connected to the reintegration benefits they received when they demobilized over 15 years ago. Even though

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[10] I discuss this in detail when I describe how and when they disengaged from the FARC in the Transition Chapter.

the lands they received did not end up being used as intended, they rent them and receive an income from that.

The interviews allowed me to explore the self-identification of former combatants, how their self-concept is linked to their idea of membership in an armed group, how reintegrated they self-perceived, and the roles they performed after their demobilization. The majority explicitly stated that they felt reintegrated into civil society according to their understanding of reintegration. Three ex-combatants said they still are in the process of reintegrating, and two said they have not reintegrated. Last but not least, even though 29 out of the 32 participants told me they were civilians, three said they were not.

Even though I did not ask participants about their race or sexual orientation, I took notes during the interviews when they considered these were elements of their self-identification and helped them feel part of a community or because these were obstacles to their reintegration. I did not ask either if they had pending issues with the authorities to avoid having them discuss sensitive information of this nature with me. However, when some participants wanted to talk about this, I encouraged them to describe how that affected their reintegration more than the issues that led to this type of problem they faced. The 11 former combatants who collectively demobilized from the FARC told me they were concerned about their security as ex-combatants, given that around 300 signatories of the peace agreement had been murdered in various regions of the country.

Eight participants live in Bogotá, seven in Tierralta, four in Medellín, three in Icononzo, two in Tumaco, two in Montería, and one in Cali, Magangué, Cartagena, Bello, Mesetas, and Dabeiba. These locations involve different dynamics due to their size, conflict history, characteristics of the demobilized people living in them, economic situation, current security situation, etc. This adds variance to the sample. Given that the list includes 12 places where participants reside, I will briefly introduce some of them here.

Bogotá is the capital of Colombia and the largest city in the country. It boasts a comparatively low level of insecurity and lacks direct conflict activity. It appears that a significant number of former combatants in the city were once members of the FARC or the AUC. Bogotá is home to the highest concentration of former combatants in Colombia. According to the Mayor's Office of Bogotá, between 2003 and 2016, 5,719 individuals arrived in the city as

"former combatants," constituting approximately 10% of the total demobilized population in the country. Around 75% (3,975) demobilized individually, while the remaining 25% became ex-combatants through collective demobilization. Of the total, 54% were former members of the FARC, while 38.6% were members of the AUC. Only 7.25% originated from the ELN. Most former combatants in Bogotá (84%) are male, and 66% of the total population of ex-combatants were between 24 and 40 years old. The participants in this study align with these demographic statistics.

Tierralta is a municipality located in the Córdoba department. In the mid-80s, the region became a red zone due to the presence of the FARC and EPL, and Tierralta became one of the ten municipalities most seized and attacked by the guerrillas in Colombia.[11] Its relevance and representation in the sample stems from the fact that it used to be a stronghold of the AUC. Negotiation between the Uribe administration and the AUC took place in the rural area of this municipality.

Medellín is the second largest city in Colombia. It is the capital of the Antioquia department, which has seen high levels of criminal and conflict-related violence linked to guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers. Medellín hosts a large population of predominantly collectively demobilized ex-combatants. Many of them were active in Antioquia, but others came from other parts of the country.

The study had participants in three different *Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (ETCRs)*, or Territorial Spaces for Training and Reintegration. Three of them were in Icononzo (Tolima), one in the Mesetas (Meta), and one in Dabeiba (Antioquia).[12] These ETCRs function as designated spaces where training and early reincorporation activities are conducted, with the primary goal of facilitating the transition of FARC members into civilian life while simultaneously creating a positive impact on the surrounding communities.

Despite full citizenship and freedom of movement, former FARC members are not obligated to stay within these spaces, leading the ARN to implement the "reincorporation offer"

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[11] González, Eric. "21 years after the Tierralta massacre" Victim Unit of Colombia, July 17, 2020, at: https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co

[12] Since 2016, approximately 8,200 FARC members have resided in 24 Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (ETCRs) established in 16 Departments of Colombia, making use of the reincorporation services provided by the Colombian government.

inside and outside the ETCRs.[13] Also, the ETCRs are not exclusively for former combatants; commanders determine the use of space, define the social hierarchy of its inhabitants, and decide the activities that can take place there (Bolaño-Peña and Mejía-Escalante., 2020). The ETCRs are also home to militias and the relatives of former members, including those who were never part of the organization.

The participants reported the ETCR in Mesetas to face issues with infertile land, which significantly affects their self-sufficiency. The ETCR Jacobo Arango, located in Dabeiba houses a substantial number of victim and peace-related institutions, including the JEP (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz—Special Jurisdiction for Peace).[14] Due to its strategic location, controlling the corridor between Medellin and the Caribbean Coast, Dabeiba remains an area still impacted by confrontations. The residents of this ETCR are not as concerned about their security as they are about the promises made to ex-combatants in Havana and the indicators related to truth, justice, and reparation (Dixon and Firchow, 2022). Lastly, the ETCR Antonio Nariño, located in Icononzo (Tolima), is home to 300 former FARC combatants. It has been reported that 60% of its land cannot be used to develop housing projects for its inhabitants. The houses where they currently live were meant to be temporary, but there are no ongoing construction projects to suggest a more permanent solution to their housing needs. The inadequacy of those conditions was discussed in one interview.

Table 3: Aggregated Characteristics of the Set of Interviewed Participants

Variable	Values	Number	Source

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[13] Although the majority of demobilized FARC ex-combatants currently reside outside them, approximately 23 percent of registered ex-combatants were reported living in ETCRs by the end of 2019. See ARN, "Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation," https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reincorporation/Pages/default.aspx.

[14] Dabeiba is currently involved in two cases being heard by the JEP (Special Jurisdiction for Peace): Case 004 and Case 003. Case 004 is a geographical case that specifically addresses the historically conflicted Urabá region. It focuses on crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in the region between January 1, 1986, and December 1, 2016. On the other hand, Case 003 is a macro-case that centers around the infamous "false positives" incidents, in which members of the Colombian army unlawfully killed civilians, falsely presenting them as combatants. See JEP, "Datasheet Dabeiba," at https://www.jep.gov.co/Sala-de-Prensa/Documents1/Data%20Sheet%20Dabeiba.pdf#search=dabeiba

Category		Count	Source
Location	Bogotá	4	Self-reported
	Bogotá	4	ARN
	Medellín	2	ARN
	Medellín	2	Self-reported
	Bello	1	ARN
	Cali	1	Self-reported
	Tierralta	1	ARN
	Tierralta	7	Self-reported
	Montería	1	Self-reported
	Tumaco	2	ARN
	Magangué	1	ARN
	Cartagena	1	ARN
	Icononzo (ETCR)	3	Self-reported
	Mesetas (ETCR)	1	Self-reported
	Dabeiba (ETCR)	1	Self-reported
Age	Younger than 30	7	Self-reported
	Between 30 and 50	14	Self-reported
	Older than 50	8	Self-reported
	Undisclosed	3	-
Gender	Male	24	
	Female	8	
Armed Group	FARC	18	Self-reported
	ELN[15]	5	Self-reported
	AUC	9	Self-reported
Year of Demobilization	2004	1	Self-reported
	2005	4	Self-reported
	2006	3	Self-reported
	2008	1	ARN
	2008	1	Self-reported
	2010	1	ARN
	2011	1	ARN
	2012	1	ARN
	2015	2	ARN
	2016	11[16]	Self-reported
	2016	2	ARN
	2017	2	ARN
	2018	2	ARN
Type of Demobilization	Individual	13	
	FARC	7	
	ELN	5	
	AUC	1	
	Collective	19	
	FARC	11	
	AUC	8	

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[15] Among them, was an ex-combatant who reported he side switched having been in the FARC before joing the ELN.

[16] Two of them were released from prison as part of the peace agreement with the FARC.

Motive of Demobilization	Deserter[17]	9	Self-reported
	Followed group[18]	19	
	In Combat[19]	2	Self-reported
	In prison[20]	2	
Former Rank	Rank-and-file	21	
	Mid-rank	9	
	High-rank	2	
Time in the Group	0-5 years	9	Self-reported
	5-15 years	15	Self-reported
	15 years or more	8	Self-reported
Time since Demobilization	0-5 years	3	Self-reported
	5-10 years	18	Self-reported
	10 years or more	11	Self-reported
Declared membership status	Member	4	Self-reported
	Ex-member	28	Self-reported
Place of Reintegration/Reincorporation	Bogotá	4	Self-reported
	Bogotá	4	ARN
	Cali	1	Self-reported
	Montería	1	Self-reported
	Montería	1	ARN
	Tumaco	2	ARN
	Magangué	1	ARN
	Cartagena	1	ARN
	Montería	7	Self-reported
	Tierralta	2	ARN
	Medellín	2	Self-reported
	Bello	1	ARN
	Icononzo (ETCR)	3	Self-reported
	Mesetas (ETCR)	1	Self-reported
	Dabeiba (ETCR)	1	Self-reported
Place of Demobilization	Determined by the group	16	Self-reported
	Combat/Prison	6	Self-reported
	Near the group's area of operation	8	Self-reported
	Outside of the group's area of operation	2	Self-reported

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[17] Designates the individual chose when and how he or she was going to demobilize.

[18] Designates the individual demobilizes or lays down arms when his or her group tells them to do it. Former combatants from the AUC (8) along with (11) peace signatories from the FARC.

[19] The participants discussed their demobilization as an outcome of combat and in that sense, results from their surrender to the Colombian military forces.

[20] One member describes he individually demobilized while he was imprisoned for his activities in the FARC, because he disliked how thinks worked now that he was in prison. The other participant individually demobilized when his group had already collectively demobilized. Both of them discussed how they had been active members of their armed groups while they were in prison and how this new context led to their individual demobilization. Had they stayed with their group, it seems unlikely that they had individually demobilized. Both seemed to have internalized the norms of the group and committed to it until their social context changed.

Partner Relationship	Single	11	Self-reported
	Stable Partner	12	Self-reported
	Undisclosed	7	
	Divorced	1	Self-reported
	Widower	1	Self-reported
Children	Yes	23	Self-reported
	No	6	Self-reported
	Undisclosed	3	
Race or Ethnicity	Not mentioned	29	
	Afro or Black	3	
Job Situation	Employed	24	Self-reported
	Unemployed	5	Self-reported
	Undisclosed	3	
Occupation	Politician	3	Self-reported
	Owns Business	5	Self-reported
	Construction Worker	1	Self-reported
	Private Security	2	Self-reported
	Factory	1	Self-reported
	Nurse	1	Self-reported
	Cleaning	3	Self-reported
	Tailor	3	Self-reported
	Office Staff	2	Self-reported
	Informal Worker	3	Self-reported
	Student (virtually)	1	Self-reported
	Rural Worker	2	Self-reported
	Sore Clerck	1	Self-reported
	Home	1	Self-reported
	Undisclosed	3	Self-reported
Pending Issues with the Law[21]	Yes	4	Self-reported
	No	26	Self-reported
	Did ndisclosed this	3	Self-reported
Feeling Reintegrated/Reincorporated	Yes	27	Self-reported
	No	2	Self-reported
	Unsure/Ongoing	3	Self-reported
Civilian identity	Yes	29	Self-reported
	No	3	Self-reported

Table 3 presents some variables related to the ex-combatants' group: age, gender, rank, family and employment situations, current location, time in the group, time since their demobilization, and self-reported membership and civilian statuses. This wide variety of participants contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the social transition to civilian life among ex-combatants in Colombia.[22]

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[21] I did not ask questions on this specific matter, but these ex-combatants mention this aspect and how that affects their social transition to civilian life.

[22] The table is not based on a representative sample of the ex-combatant population in Colombia. Therefore, the numbers presented in the table do not provide generalizable insights about the overall ex-combatant population. Instead, they solely describe the characteristics and findings of the specific sample used for this

3.9 POSITIONALITY

I believe readers need to know my identity as a researcher, my investment in this topic, and my intentions in this project. I conducted this research to obtain my doctoral degree in the field of international relations. I was born in Colombia and came to the United States to undertake my graduate studies, seeking to understand the conflict in my country better and contribute to its solution. As a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh, my initial approach to the conflict was exploring counterinsurgency and how the Colombian government has been trying to consolidate its monopoly of force through strategies such as the promotion of desertion (individual demobilization) and participating in peace negotiations with illegal armed groups. Two notable instances were the collective demobilization experiences of the AUC that led to the dismantlement of this armed group under President Uribe and the transformation of the FARC-EP into a political party as an outcome of the peace process with that group under the Santos administration. This redirected my academic focus to the study of DDR within the field of international relations.

During the iterative process of narrowing down my research topic, honing my questions, and selecting the most appropriate research method for conceptualizing and designing my dissertation project, I visited Colombia and conducted preliminary research in 2019, meeting former combatants for the first time. This experience led me to focus on their social reintegration from their lived experiences and to rely on a qualitative approach, primarily conducting interviews, to explore their transition to civilian life.

I recognized that while studying in a public policy school, the policies we analyze and design around the world directly impact the populations they serve. This realization allowed me to evaluate the utility of case study methodology for my dissertation research and determine the most suitable approach to align with my epistemological orientation as an emerging researcher. The current document reflects the culmination of this decision-making process.

When the gatekeepers connected me to some of the study participants, they were informed that I was a student conducting interviews and could be trusted. To arrange the interviews, I introduced myself as a Colombian doctoral student in the United States working

study.

on my dissertation and was prepared to verify this upon request.[23] Verbal consent included my information and research purpose. My role as a student alleviated suspicion, confirmed by gatekeepers, as hesitant participants saw me in that role working independently from home. Some participants expressed their willingness to participate only if I assured them I was not a journalist, which I did. I explained that the information shared would be used in this dissertation with pseudonyms for confidentiality, convincing most participants to agree to be interviewed.

While my identity as a researcher, linked to an urban background, socioeconomic privileges, and furthering my education abroad, distanced me from the participants, it facilitated a connection with the gatekeepers who knew them and helped things flow. This was particularly beneficial for the Colombian Agency for the Reincorporation and Normalization.

Overall, I felt that even as I presented myself as a Colombian student, the participants were ex-combatants who had lived in Colombia's rural and conflict-affected side and were rejoining society in ways I could only get to know through academic research. In that way, I understood the privilege associated with my identity, so I transmitted to them my genuine interest in understanding changes in their self-identification as they underwent their social transition to civilian life. I also felt that some ex-combatants chose to interact with me at first out of curiosity about my experiences living and studying here in the United States. Notably, three participants agreed to be interviewed because they expected the exercise to be intellectually stimulating. One was completing their undergraduate studies in public administration, while the other two were senior former members of the FARC who had worked in their political division.

During the interviews, I confronted instances that heightened my awareness of my positionality as an outsider in the lives of these ex-combatants. Two participants made comments that left me uncomfortable and compelled me to reflect deeply on my role as a researcher. Specifically, Ramón, an ex-combatant who demobilized individually from the FARC, used the video camera during our interview—an option I had provided to participants. While he responded to all my questions, his reserved demeanor became apparent. However, amid one

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[23] I had presentation letters from the University of Pittsburgh, an institutional email linking me to this university, and I could show them I was listed as a student on the Graduate School of Public International Affairs' homepage.

of his answers, he inquired about the increase in prices in the United States post-pandemic. I shared with him that here, as in Colombia, we experienced such changes too. He immediately remarked, "Well, but your sweater looks new." This seemingly innocuous statement served as a poignant realization that the segment of the population I was studying underwent economic insecurities in a manner I could not personally relate to, a crucial insight for comprehending their current perspectives and emotions. As our interview concluded, Ramon mentioned that he had to leave due to work commitments. His parting comment resonated with me, serving as a subtle reminder that, in his eyes, my effort to understand his experiences as a researcher was merely an attempt. His remarks highlighted that, for some participants, I was a privileged Colombian woman studying abroad, immersing myself in the lives of individuals whose experiences stood worlds apart.

Then there was Gladys, a former member of the FARC who had been interviewed by researchers before. Midway through our conversation, she expressed discomfort with my questioning line. She said, *"It's like you guys feel we are weird bugs. I feel researchers study us because you guys think we are weird bugs. I honestly want to know what you can get about me by asking me these questions."* I reassured Gladys that my intent was never to make her uncomfortable, and I emphasized my genuine interest in her experiences. I explained that I was studying the social transition to civilian life and that her input was invaluable because of her first-hand experience. In response, she asked me to share the final version of my dissertation with her so she could better understand my research. I agreed (and plan to do so), but her comment made me uneasy. In a way, Gladys was right; I was asking questions because I wanted to gain knowledge about a topic that fascinated me and remained foreign. Her defensive posture that day served as a stark reminder that the subject matter of my study was not just academic; it was intensely personal and intimate to the ex-combatants.

Following this interview, I became acutely aware of the need to provide additional context to future participants to avoid any perception of intrusiveness in their lives. This experience underscored the importance of reflecting on the interview process and considering how certain questions may be interpreted (Richards, 2009, p. 43). I realized the necessity of finding ways to help interviewees express their views naturally and recording the interview in unobtrusive ways. Consequently, I made adjustments to some questions and the tone I used

during interviews, allowing participants more time to process questions and emphasizing their autonomy in choosing whether to respond. Moreover, I recognized that some of my questions, given my scholarly background, were overly focused on academic aspects.

I informally interacted several times with participants, discussing various topics, and only conducted the interviews when they communicated that they were ready. I acknowledge that trust levels varied among participants, influencing the extent to which they divulged details in their responses. Simultaneously, for the same reasons, I have confidence that they had little incentive to deceive me. Consequently, the data analysis chapters include responses from participants who were more actively engaged in the conversation.

Being a woman influenced both my data collection and analysis. It often facilitated my access to some participants in the study, making me appear less threatening or intimidating to former combatants. This may have encouraged participants to open up and share their experiences in greater detail, as many of them had interacted with women in similar roles, such as psychologists or counselors, and they may have seen me in a similar light.

During interviews with women who were former combatants, they would sometimes apologize for having their children present or for facing a higher likelihood of interruptions during our talk. I could fully relate to these challenges and shared that similar situations could occur on my end as well. This common ground helped establish a connection and facilitated smoother interviews. Those interviews would have ended up discussing family roles at length.

During our interviews, I witnessed former combatants, both women and men, engaging with their children. They would feed them, set up their tablets (Ipads) to keep them occupied and comfort them when needed. My gender may have affected their comfort level, as some may have agreed to be interviewed in their homes where they played these caregiving roles just because I am a woman. The reality is that if I had met these individuals in an office setting, I might not have had the opportunity to witness this aspect of their lives, which is crucial for understanding their adaptation to new roles.

Some people preferred to talk to me during their work breaks or on the weekends because they were alone. In those cases, they felt more comfortable discussing things they could not talk about around people who knew them. I asked some participants about the advantages of using WhatsApp to interview them. David expressed:

I feel we can talk more, and it feels like a regular conversation rather than an interview. You can interact here with the person, not the ex-insurgent. After all, I am just a person... Do you remember when I mentioned that I rarely discuss this with anyone? Well, you became the person I could share this with. I had an urge to share, but there was no one around me I could talk to about this. I feel I can get this out here. It's not like I go to the store and start talking about this with the clerk or bring it up to my wife...

Vanessa, who demobilized as a minor, told me:

I used to talk about this when I was little [having rejoined society as a minor] because I had to, but I have not discussed it in a long time. Its like I feel I can talk about anything but this. But I feel good here. I also felt your good vibe, and I could share this with you for that reason. It feels good to talk even if it is a dark aspect of my past that I normally keep to myself.

These testimonials underscore the utility of the virtual interview approach in creating a more open and comfortable environment for some participants. Other participants may have felt this communication channel was inadequate for conducting an interview, and their responses could have been brief when that happened.

3.10   DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of interviews focused on identifying common themes, emotions, and experiences, aiming to understand the impact of disengagement on reintegration trajectories. Participants shared their journey from armed group membership to civilian life, with data collected through handwritten and typed field notes, audio recordings, transcribed texts, and documents like pictures, videos, and written statements. Each participant formed a separate case within an NVivo project, enabling data organization and deeper analysis. Coding in NVivo aided in retrieving and categorizing similar data chunks, facilitating the exploration of specific topics, hypotheses, or research questions.

Approximately 50 codes, including inductive and deductive ones, were created and grouped into subcategories and categories reflecting aspects of separation, transition, and incorporation based on social identity theory. For example, the main claims of individual demobilization were coded separately under the subcategory of "Voluntary Exit" within the

category of "Separation." Additionally, "Involuntary Exit" encompassed those who became ex-members, further categorized into "Collective Demobilization" and "Reincorporated" sub-categories, representing former members of the AUC and FARC, respectively.

I also include a code grouping the subset of participants who were imprisoned, for example, to study the effect of this experience in their disengagement and demobilization, precisely because it either facilitated the disengagement of some (as a change in context that disconnects the individual from the roles played in the organization) but also reinforced the idea of being a member of others despite that disconnection.

I also utilized NVivo coding to distill words and short phrases from participants' language in the data records, aiding the identification of contributions aligned with specific topics. This coding approach is widely applicable to qualitative studies and is and recommended for researchers emphasizing and respecting participant voices (Miles et al., 2019, p. 74).

The codes employed in NVivo evolved into constructs, symbolizing and attributing interpreted meaning to each datum. These codes proved instrumental in subsequent stages of pattern detection, categorization, and other analytical processes. This categorization became essential as it became evident during interviews that disengagement experiences varied widely, with some being individual or even nonexistent. Some ex-combatants were never fully engaged in developing a group identity or adopting the group's social identity.

For individuals lacking attachment to their armed group, the reintegration experience differed from those more deeply connected. Consequently, I refrained from equating demobilization with separation or reintegration with incorporation and instead utilized four distinct codes. "Demobilization" exclusively detailes the event in which individuals officially demobilized. "Separation," on the other hand, explored their disengagement and whether it had been voluntary or contextual. Similarly, "Reintegration" examined the periods when the former combatant rejoined society, while "Incorporation" included elements indicating the development of a civilian identity.

This coding approach illustrated that some individuals demobilize without disengaging or reintegrating without fully developing a civilian identity. After all, I asked the participants about their membership status, and most of them talked about it in the past, but four of them still considered themselves members of their group. The statements they made were:

"I never left the FARC. The group signed an agreement with the Colombian government, with the Santos administration" or *"I agreed to leave the arms behind, but I'm with my group."*

As I went through the interview files in NVivo, it became evident that only some participants consistently used collective pronouns like "we" or "us" when recounting their experiences in the group. This inclination persisted for some, even when discussing their reintegration, especially among those who maintained specific group dynamics (mainly "*reincorporados*" living in ETCRs). Notably, when confronted with questions such as "How were you when you were in the group?" or "As a combatant, how was your contact with civilians?" some respondents opted to respond using the collective "we." I meticulously documented these instances and sought additional contextual cues to enhance my understanding of their self-identification, specifically discerning how they transitioned from a group-centric identity to viewing themselves as individuals. This process helped me pinpoint when disengagement might have occurred—whether before their demobilization, after, or if it has not occurred at all.

The use of NVivo also enabled me to label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participants or those inferred during the interview based on their responses. I identified statements containing expressions such as "I feel" or "I felt" under the code "Feeling," as well as instances where participants explicitly stated their emotions (happiness, sadness, excitement, hopelessness, mistrust, fear, etc.). This approach facilitated the exploration of both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions associated with these feelings, providing a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions.

3.11 LIMITATIONS

In this section, I delineate specific biases and limitations inherent in the present study. One notable limitation requiring attention pertains to some participants' loose connection to their armed groups. For instance, one participant explicitly described a supporting role, mediating community disputes, and providing transportation. His demobilization was prompted

by directives from AUC leaders in his town, ensuring benefits from the demobilization and reintegration processes. On the other hand, an individual who individually demobilized from the FARC and identified as part of the group's militias described his participation in criminal activities such as extortion. His demobilization occurred after the FARC signed an agreement with the government, suggesting that he was in a dissident faction that may not have been representative of the average FARC unit. This set these participants apart from the broader sample. They represent the extremes, complicating an understanding of separation, transition, and incorporation from a social identity perspective.

I interviewed ex-combatants who rejoined society over 15 years ago, so I recognize the limitation that some may have forgotten certain aspects of their feelings and experiences during their separation and transition stages. However, I also appreciate that their contributions carry extra depth due to the impact that time has had in their incorporation stage.

While I interviewed a diverse range of participants, certain segments of the ex-combatant population were not included due to feasibility and security concerns. For instance, those who deserted and rejoined society without government assistance are not represented here. Locating them proved extremely challenging, leading to a decision to restrict the inclusion criteria to individuals who had been under the official DDR program. Consequently, their decision to move forward with their lives outside of a policy designed to aid their reintegration into society remains unexplored. Additionally, for security considerations, I did not interview individuals who joined dissident factions from the AUC or the FARC after these groups signed peace agreements with the government or active members of the ELN. A comprehensive understanding of disengagement and the process of leaving behind membership in an armed group would ideally encompass data on these populations, too. Talking with them could help us understand why some members refuse to demobilize and continue fighting and how schisms occur when armed groups are at the negotiation table and collective demobilization is possible.

While the strength of employing the self-report method, specifically interviews, lies in its capacity to unveil insights into previously unexplored areas, an associated challenge is verifying the accuracy of participants' responses. For example, as certain questions delved into

self-perception, involving personal reflection and identification of qualities and self-criticism, inherent ambiguity surrounded the truthfulness of their responses. A lack of trust in me could have potentially influenced this. To address this problem, I employed various strategies, including personal engagement before interviews, consultation with those who referred participants, and follow-up assessments post-interviews. While these strategies enhanced reliability, inherent limitations persist, as the data is confined to what participants chose to disclose, introducing potential biases into the findings. Additionally, my role as a participant in the research process could have influenced the dynamics of the interviews. While some participants viewed the interview as an opportunity to share their stories, others may have participated as a mere exercise.

The most evident limitation lies in the data itself, restricting insights into what participants revealed during the interviews. This limitation may compromise the analytical coherence of my findings. Last but not least, I need to acknowledge here that as I prioritized an individual process, in doing so, I could not fully capture structural and societal dynamics that also affected the participants' social transition to civilian life.

4.0   UNRAVELING BONDS, THE SEPARATION PHASE IN COMBATANT DEMOBILIZATION

4.1   BECOMING AN EX-MEMBER OF AN ARMED GROUP

Demobilization marks the official transition of ex-combatants from military to civilian status within the DDR process. It involves combatants' physical and psychological separation from an armed group's command and control structure and their camaraderie and support systems. As a result, they transition from one role in the social structure to another. The psychological separation primarily entails the combatants' disengagement from the group—a process where individuals no longer deem the socially defined rights and obligations associated with their membership in an armed group appropriate. Horgan identified feelings of disillusionment, "burnout," perceiving a mismatch between fantasy and reality, and changes in personal priorities as precursors for disengaging from terrorism (Horgan, 2009, p. 31). Similar feelings were expressed by participants I interviewed who disengaged from an armed group.

Combatants may disengage either before or after their group demobilizes, or they may never disengage despite the group's dissolution. When a member disengages while still part of an armed group, it can lead to defection, suboptimal fulfillment of their role, desertion, and even demobilization. Group members can no longer fulfill their previous roles when their group undergoes collective demobilization and comes to an end. It is worth mentioning that among those ending their membership in the group then some who had already disengaged but were unable to leave the armed group. All in all, the dismantling of an armed group, even when it transforms into a political entity, affects the collective representation of its members. Hence, disengagement from an armed group is a personal process, with some finding it easier to accomplish than others.

As highlighted in the literature review, some combatants never fully internalize their group norms or adopt its identity; they simply fulfill tasks associated with their role and comply, either because they know what is expected of them and carry it out or because it is

in their best interest to conform. Consequently, these combatants never truly connect their social identity with their membership in the armed group. Although they do not disengage, they still face the challenge of readjusting to civilian life after demobilization, as it marks the beginning of their status as former members of an armed group.

Some participants mentioned aspects of their lives they had to leave behind as they transitioned socially to civilian life. It is worth noting that their disengagement involved leaving behind not only membership in the armed group but also a setting where they had performed a role and the way of life they had established there. For instance, David explains,

> I wouldn't say that I missed life in an armed group because that is a pretty basic life. I liked walking and missed the smell of the mountains, the clear water in the streams, the food we made there, and everything we shared as a group that was not particularly military. I missed nature and the very clean environment where my life had existed.

Along the same lines, Richard stated,

> I missed the silence! Now there's all sorts of noise where I live. There are pets, horns, radios, TVs, and loud people arguing and music. The store on the corner works 24-7, and there's always something going on there, for example. Calmness was an integral part of our life.

These testimonies underscore the profound impact of their disengagement, emphasizing that in leaving behind their life in an armed group, they also relinquished the natural environment and communal experiences associated with their past role.

Understanding the disengagement of individuals whose social identity was closely tied to their membership is crucial for comprehending how they distance themselves from the rights and obligations associated with their role, especially when being a member constituted a central part of their self-identity. Equally important is addressing the reintegration of those who never truly identified with their armed group, as their status as ex-members still carries an associated stigma, making it challenging for them to develop a civilian identity and a sense of belonging to society.

This chapter delves into the process of former combatants separating from their armed groups. Initially, it focuses on individual demobilization among the ex-combatants I interviewed, specifically identifying participants who left their groups to understand their reasons for exiting. I closely examine the circumstances surrounding their demobilization experi-

ences, assessing whether these align with themes identified in the civil war and insurgency literature. I assume that their disengagement led to the choice of exiting the group. Then, I study the cases in which members were physically separated from the group to understand how their involuntary disengagement evolved. These participants were two minors who were found in combat and a participant who demobilized while he was in prison. Subsequently, I shift my attention to individuals who became ex-combatants through collective demobilization and/or following an order to end their membership in the group. Some maintained a social identity linked to their role as members of an armed group despite that demobilization. I look at how the psychological disengagement of some of them. Additionally, I explore in this subset the phenomenon of psychological disengagement alongside continued contribution (physically staying in the group), as some participants had been contributing to their group despite feeling disconnected from it and only ended their membership when the group was dismantled. Finally, I conclude the chapter by discussing instances where participants resist psychologically separating from their armed group and continue to strongly identify with it.

Across both individual and collective demobilization contexts, I explore the experiences of ex-combatants who had internalized the group's norms, making group membership a central element of their self-identity to learn how they navigate the process of disengagement. For those combatants who complied without developing a profound commitment to their group, I investigate how they relinquished their previous roles and broke away from their experiences within the armed group. Finally, the chapter addresses the commonalities in the separation stage experienced by participants, regardless of how they became ex-combatants.

4.1.1 Individual Demobilization

In this section, I examine the separation experiences of the Colombian irregular fighters I interviewed who underwent individual demobilization, deciding to abandon their armed struggle by capitulating to government officials either as individuals or small groups. A critical aspect of individual demobilization is the combatants' willingness to voluntarily enter government-sponsored programs that facilitate their separation from the conflict and reentry into society. To understand their separation, I looked in the sample for participants who

were looking for a role change and taking steps to reintegrate into society. I explored the circumstances leading to this decision and evaluated how they align with established claims explaining demobilization.

Among the 32 participants in the sample, I interviewed 13 who were classified as individually demobilized combatants. Seven of these participants were former members of the FARC, five of the ELN, and one of the AUC. Notably, only 10 of them had deserted before undergoing demobilization. Specifically, eight ex-combatants left their armed group individually, one left with his faction, and one demobilized while he was imprisoned. The average time spent in the armed group for those who deserted and then demobilized was 7.7 years, which confirms that they were not properly new when they chose to leave. Only one participant in the subset of those who chose to individually demobilize, formerly with the FARC, took advantage of the ceasefire and the group's participation in the peace talks to leave. Ramón, was in the FARC for about nine years when he chose to demobilize individually. He said:

> In 2015, amid the negotiation process, my unit's activities slowed down, and it became a bit boring. Not believing in the peace process, I didn't wait for the FARC to demobilize officially. With an ongoing cease-fire, I realized that I was not indispensable; with or without me, the FARC was no different. They did not need me, and I wanted to do something else, so I left.

Lastly, two participants who underwent individual demobilization expressed that, despite their association with an armed group, they never truly felt a sense of belonging to their group. In their case, they did not recategorize as civilians upon reintegrating into society because, during their time in the group, they felt closer to having a civilian identity than a group identity or even a military one.

Looking at the subset of participants who individually demobilized I wanted to establish which of them voluntarily terminated their membership in the armed group and entered the demobilization program. I did this because individual demobilization can be viewed as a voluntary departure from a particular role. Some scholars (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988) suggest that a voluntary exit implies it is easier for individuals to psychologically disengage from their role and adapt to a new one. If individual demobilization entails this, the social transition to civilian life could be smoother. Those who left their group and then demobilized

comprise 31.25% of the participants in the sample, illustrating that only one out of three participants in my study actively sought to transition to civilian life and took steps toward reintegrating into society.[1]

Existing research underscores various "push" and "pull" factors in elucidating individuals' decisions to disengage from terrorism (Altier et al., 2017, 2014; Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009). The study of demobilization and reintegration can leverage this approach, especially concerning members of armed groups who harbor deep commitments to the group and must relinquish these ties to reintegrate into society. In the context of this dissertation, push factors pertain to experiences within an armed group that compel individuals to distance themselves from the organization. Pull factors encompass influences external to the group that attract members towards more conventional social roles.

Participants cited various push factors influencing their decision to leave an armed group. These factors included witnessing forced recruitment, observing members' killings by the group, experiencing disillusionment when group goals were unmet, war exhaustion, dissatisfaction with commanders' behavior, forced displacement caused by their group, reluctance to relocate to another front, facing an inability to express their concerns to commanders, group involvement in negotiations, encountering less opposition to desertion, witnessing mistreatment of civilians, internal struggles for control with other armed groups, and disliking gender equality in the group. The pull factors facilitating participants' exits from their groups included reuniting with their families and a desire to play a role in family life (or the desire to start a family of their own), knowledge of the government's policy promoting individual demobilization, the perception that demobilizing would protect their rights or lives, the opportunity to enjoy basic amenities that were inaccessible during combat, the chance to pursue romantic relationships, aging, the desire for an ordinary and calmer life (tired of risking their lives), and access to benefits from demobilization.

The two participants who conveyed that they had not developed a sense of belonging

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[1] Desertion is the rule-breaking departure from military service and includes both desertion proper (leaving the group to return to civilian life) and defection (switching sides). It involves leaving an armed group without participating in demobilization programs. Side-switching entails leaving an armed group but remaining in the fight with another group representing the same ideological or ethnic constituency. Since all the participants I interviewed did not return to civilian life independently but under a demobilization program, they are more accurately categorized as demobilized combatants. One demobilized combatant also side-switched. See, McLauchlin (2011); Oppenheim et al. (2015).

to their armed group identified pull factors in the reasons why they chose to leave. One of them left the group to reunite with her children, indicating that her previous role as a mother prevented her from further committing to the group and seeing herself exclusively or mostly as a member of the ELN. The other participant fell in love with another member of the ELN. She was also a minor when she rejoined society. Both deserted to be a couple and start a family, which suggests that even if they were socialized to make them committed members of their group, they did not adopt the group social identity to give up other possible selves.

Notably, only one participant expressed reluctance to demobilize following his desertion, driven by mistrust, given that Colombia's DDR programs involve several different agencies working for the government against whom he had been fighting. Since he did not demobilize following his desertion, he was captured and sent to prison for his previous involvement with the FARC. He explained:

> We were told by the FARC that we couldn't demobilize because demobilization was a lie. They told us that our value lay only in providing information, but once the Colombian military obtained it, they would kill us. Some left, disappearing without a trace. When someone deserted the FARC would tell us the government was killing them. It was a terrifying situation, and anyone considering leaving faced this risk. So, I deserted. Had I known better, I would have demobilized...I would not have been imprisoned later for rebellion. I had heard about the program on the radio, about the legal and economic benefits of demobilizing, but I simply didn't think they applied to me. In reality, I didn't believe that could be true so I was not looking to do it.[2]

Three participants in the subset of individually demobilized combatants initially harbored no intentions of leaving their respective groups but eventually took this unforeseen path. Two of them demobilized during confrontations, while the third participant demobilized because his group was dismantled, marking the end of his membership. Their narratives reveal the complex dynamics that influence participation in armed groups and how these impact leaving an armed group behind, either due to a strong identification with the group or the lack of other socially meaningful connections.

Carlos was one of them. During the interview, he expressed the challenging nature of life within the FARC, acknowledging the difficulties that members faced—hard work, minimal sleep, and constant threats from external forces. Despite these adversities and a palpable

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[2] José, former combatant of the FARC's 36th front.

sense of fear, he did not contemplate leaving. His reluctance stemmed from the realization that leaving meant returning to the circumstances that initially led to group involvement, and that was an unappealing prospect.[3] He was in the group for about 3 years. He mentioned:

> Some days, it was hard to be there [in the FARC]; we had to work hard, and we barely slept. I knew that the Police and other groups were after us... I was afraid, but I did not consider leaving because I would have gone back to the same circumstances that made me join.

Vanessa, the other participant who did not consider leaving, shed light on the inherent risks associated with exiting the FARC, emphasizing the group's stringent control over its members.[4] She said,

> They [the FARC] don't let their people leave. Taking that risk was too dangerous. Those who left were either killed or punished. I was just not willing to risk it.

The fear of potential consequences, such as death or punishment, acted as a formidable deterrent, discouraging any inclination to take any step of leaving the group. In their accounts, the intricate interplay of personal considerations, external threats, and the coercive nature of armed groups surfaces, underscores the complexities that shape the trajectories of leaving behind membership an armed group for those involved.

Javier, a former member of the Calima bloc of the AUC, also individually demobilized even though he was not actively seeking to end his membership in the armed group.[5] He emerged as a unique participant, distinguishing himself from others in critical aspects. Firstly, he singularly cited the violence he committed with his group as a compelling reason for staying in it. He said:

> When you choose to join, you know you will have to kill. You understand that once in, you must become a killing machine. I joined because I felt I had to do it for my country, and I must admit now that killing is and was not right. But, at that time, I felt I had to do it for this country. I was just not going to leave the group after having killed.

This statement sets him apart from the rest, shedding light on the profound impact of group activities involving violence on individual choices. Javier was also different from the

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[3] Carlos is a former member of the FARC in the Mobile Column Daniel Aldana (Tumaco, Nariño.

[4] Vanessa is a former member of the FARC in the 45th front (Arauquita, Arauca). She was in the group for about 2 years.

[5] Javier was in the AUC for 13 years.

other participants in that he cherished his group membership, a sentiment not shared by those others who underwent individual demobilization. His deep connection to the group's identity was evident in his candid statement: *"I will state this openly and clearly: being a group member goes beyond merely joining, wearing a uniform, carrying a weapon, and moving around."*

Throughout the interview, it became clear that for Javier, his commitment to the AUC transcended mere affiliation; it involved a sense of duty and purpose, even if it conflicted with moral standards. He was well aware that the AUC engaged in unlawful activities, but he highlighted the independence and distinctiveness of his bloc, emphasizing, *"We were too perfect!...I never considered leaving."* He felt well-integrated with other members and saw in them partners with whom he worked great.[6] His group convinced him to engage in violence because it was not only legitimate but necessary for achieving the AUC's goals, which he came to see as his own. In synthesizing these elements, Javier's narrative is a unique testament to the multifaceted nature of group allegiance and the intricate interplay between developing a sense of belonging and collective identity. For this reason, despite encountering challenges, Javier maintained an unwavering commitment to the AUC. He shared:

> As years went by there were other groups with us [when the AUC became an umbrella organization operating in other parts of Colombia]. This growth caused an internal struggle in the AUC that affected our unit and resulted in the death of many of my partners. A new commander arrived, and I was transferred to the Calima bloc (in the Valle department). Even then, with all those changes, I did not consider leaving; I never left the AUC.

Identity theory establishes that identities are made salient and prominent through a commitment to networks and relationships (Brenner et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2010) (Brenner et al. 2014; Owens et al. 2010). Despite internal organizational turmoil, leadership shifts, the unsettling fate of his partners, and his relocation, Javier accepted the new terms of his membership because he was committed to the AUC and identified, above all, as a member. When he describes his group as "perfect" and talks about the partnership he lived with others, this

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[6] When individuals take on a group-based identity, there is uniformity of perception among members from which they develop a sense of "we" or "us" (toward the group) and "them" (toward the outgroup). These Collective level we's are derived from cognitive processes such as group categorization (when individuals embody the ingroup prototype) and group evaluation (one positively evaluates the ingroup and negatively evaluates the outgroup) and when the individual cannot see himself as the ingroup prototype, he would disengage.

denotes he developed role attachment, which refers to the degree of emotional intensity that an individual associates with a specific role (Ebaugh, 1988). Collective identity centralizes the member's emotional attachment to member identity formation and maintenance,[7] even in adverse situations (Brewer and Silver, 2000). Hence, while others might have considered exiting, Javier's sense of purpose and dedication remained unwavering because he socially identified as a member of the AUC. For him, the struggle against the guerrillas endured, albeit under different leadership and in another region of Colombia, because he still was an AUC combatant there.

Several of Javier's statements indicate that, as a combatant, he perceived himself as embodying the ingroup prototype, which led to his depersonalization and adoption of the group's social identity.[8] The adoption of this identity involved producing, negotiating, and maintaining a set of beliefs and meanings that inspired and legitimated his activities as a member. He was committed to his role in the AUC, which increased the probability of remaining in it (Ebaugh, 1988). His conviction that by staying, he was contributing to his group's overarching mission highlights the complexity of individual motivations within armed groups and explains why some members choose to stay when others would leave.

Javier maintained his affiliation with the AUC while incarcerated in La Modelo prison in Bogotá. He followed orders, retained his rank, and stayed in touch with other AUC members outside. However, his disengagement unfolded during his imprisonment, coinciding with the demobilization of his group.

While incarcerated, especially as certain blocs of the AUC began collective demobilization, the social bonds integral to Javier's role in the AUC became inaccessible. Without these connections, Javier struggled to maintain his social identity as a group member, impacting his sense of belonging and self-worth since fewer people and instances could verify his identity (Stets and Burke, 2000). Additionally, alongside other imprisoned AUC combatants, Javier was excluded from the larger group undergoing collective demobilization. This exclusion confirmed Javier's deviation from the ingroup prototype, affecting his sense

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[7] Polletta and Jasper (2001) talk about how this affects the connection between an activist and the social movement to which he belongs.

[8] The prototype is the interrelated set of perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behavior that captures similarities among ingroup members and differences between ingroup members and outgroup members (Hogg and Smith, 2007).

of "us" or "we" toward the ingroup, especially since prototypical members did demobilize. This likely prompted him to shift his commitments from the group toward a more personal orientation, facilitating his disengagement. He said,

> My story as a group member ended when I decided it was over, okay? It's not about certain events happening; what matters here is that I was the one who brought that story to an end. I could say that, in my case, one day, I simply said, 'I'm done!' and since then, I've been doing things for myself. Regardless of the date, it was only then that my story in the AUC truly ended. This happens when you commit to yourself... After I said 'I'm done,' I requested my demobilization. Some partners distanced themselves when I made this choice, but I had to do it and did it for myself.

Without the group, as it was dismantled, Javier could move beyond his former role as a combatant, contemplating who he could become rather than being confined to his previous identity.

4.1.1.1 Individual Demobilization and Battlefield Dynamics

I asked all ex-combatants who had individually demobilized why they chose to leave their group and why they did it when they did. Five of them explained that battlefield dynamics motivated their decisions to demobilize. The battlefield dynamics explanation suggests that combatants demobilize when the adversary makes significant military advances, increasing the likelihood of death or injury through continued combat (Kenny, 2010; McLauchlin, 2014). Within this framework, one participant shared that he demobilized with his faction when they perceived that continuing the fight after the dismantlement of the FARC would impact the battlefield dynamics in their operating area, exposing them to more attacks.[9] He explained,

> Our unit, which was a dissident faction, chose to demobilize after the FARC laid down its arms. We did not want to give up the fight when the FARC was taking part in the talks... when all the other FARC fronts were being dismantled; we realized that that was going to intensify the hostilities in our area.[10]

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[9] The FARC could not remain as a single entity when it was at the negotiation table. Structural integrity problems explain the emergence of those dissident factions. There were also problems in the FARC's cohesion since most dissident factions were already not invested in the attainment of the organization's political goals which is why these groups did not follow orders to halt attacks during the cease-fire or to lay down arms once the FARC reached an agreement with the Colombian government. See, Kenny (2010).

[10] Sebastián, a former member of the Daniel Aldana mobile column.

When the FARC agreed to lay down arms, the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column aimed to continue the fight independently. However, it is conceivable that its members chose to demobilize due to a lack of cohesion to sustain the conflict. Without effective socialization, they could not internalize the necessary norms and, consequently, could not rely on ideology (Ugarriza and Craig, 2013), selective incentives (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004), discipline (Strachan, 2006), or primary group solidarity (Shils and Janowitz, 1948) to have the necessary cohesion to persevere. Faced with the fear of the immiseration of their frontline troops, the loss of access to material resources, and the attrition of the most experienced fighters, demobilization became a more viable option. The demobilization of a faction of men from this military unit can illustrate that the process of schism is more complex than an individual's decision to exit their group. Schism involves both the process of a subgroup exit and a decision to form a new superordinate group, with direct implications on the notion of membership within the subgroup (Wagoner et al., 2022).

Henry, a former member of the FARC 7th Front, which operated in the Guayabero region in San José del Guaviare also explained how battlefield dynamics affected his decision to demobilize individually,

> There were airstrikes in our area that destroyed everything. I started to think that one of those bombs would fall and wipe us out. I was very scared. It was horrific. You saw the destruction of those bombs in nearby mountains. Those airstrikes ended with everything around us. It was just like witnessing the effects of a nuclear bomb on land. I realized that I was too small and those were big and real threats, and I started to think about leaving then.

Henry's account of his decision to desert underscores his refusal to continue fighting for the FARC, particularly as the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign heightened the risks of capture or death. Throughout the interview, Henry portrayed fellow combatants not merely as friends but as brothers, emphasizing the familial bonds within the group. He expressed a profound sense of responsibility towards these comrades, highlighting the group's family-like atmosphere. However, Henry's perspective diverged when it came to the commanders, whom he perceived as cruel and unjust to both himself and others, including civilians. This distinction suggests that while Henry recognized familial ties among fellow combatants, he did not extend this perception to include the commanders. The discrepancy indicates

that Henry's identity experienced local but not extended fusion, as he did not view FARC members with whom he did not directly interact as part of his familial network.[11] It also shows that Henry experienced primary or interpersonal cohesion with individuals in his military unit, developing a sense of collective responsibility and mutual trust, but did not experience secondary or ideological cohesion to identify with the armed organization as a whole (Schubiger, 2023; Wood, 2009). Choosing to remain with his group when he knew he could not fight for his life represented an extreme pro-group behavior or self-sacrifice that he was not willing to accept because his identity was not fused with the FARC Swann et al. (2010).

Henry did not fully internalize the group's norms and values despite being recruited at a young age. In the interview, he shared that he participated in combat, having received military training, but recounted instances outside of the battlefield where he questioned the group's decisions and sided with others rather than the group. He also shared that he had been sanctioned because of his compassion, which clashed with what he perceived as his group's inflexibility. The way that Henry describes his participation indicates a level of resistance or nonconformity to the FARC's expectations and weaker group identification. This illustrates a variation in how individuals embody their militarized environments and create a particular way of thinking about their own membership in an armed group and in how social norms and social actions associated with the military enter a person's self-perception.

Social identity formulations state that when a group is salient for an individual, the primary recognition of other group members revolves around their ability to convey information about the group's values and norms. In this context, members are interconnected through collective ties, primarily influenced by the extent to which each member embodies the prototypic qualities of the group rather than being grounded in the individual relationships they establish with each other (Swann et al., 2014). Henry's inability to comprehend these collective ties within the FARC suggests a lack of strong identification with the group,

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[11] According to Fusion theory, individuals within a group, even when the group is prominent, acknowledge and value the distinct relationships they establish with fellow members, similar to the familial bonds experienced among family members. Fused individuals cultivate robust familial or relational connections with other group members while also fostering collective ties to the broader group category. See, (Swann et al., 2014).

meaning that he could not develop its social identity even though he performed his role and worked well with other members.

The demobilization policy in Colombia played a significant part in achieving counterinsurgency goals, contributing to the battlefield dynamics claim. Even though DDR programs have mostly been implemented in post-conflict scenarios in support of peace-building activities, these have also been used in counter-insurgency and stability operations and counter-terrorism and anti-crime measures. DDR programs have been used to weaken opposing rebel groups, facilitate a military victory over them, or force rebels into the negotiation table. They target group membership and affiliation, either encouraging the exit of disengaged individuals or facilitating the conditions for their disconnection from armed non-state actors.

The promotion of individual demobilization became a campaign with which the Colombian government specifically targeted distinct guerrilla fronts and individual combatants from the middle and upper echelons of the FARC and ELN hierarchy. The primary objectives were to gain valuable insights into FARC commanders, identify weapons, drugs, and money caches, and leverage the extensive knowledge of Colombian troops regarding the terrain.[12] Overall, the policy empowered the Colombian military to make significant military advances, impacting the number of members in enemy lines. Consequently, this increased the likelihood of death or injury through continued combat for those who were part of the most targeted fronts.

For Henry, the pivotal moment occurred when he discovered a flyer talking about the demobilization program thrown by a helicopter in his area. He studied it meticulously, memorizing its contents, as higher-ranking members had instructed them not to pick them up. Around 10 combatants from his unit had already deserted by that time, and seeing them leave made him question why he should stay, adding urgency to his demobilization timing as he recognized that further delay would make leaving nearly impossible. Armed with information that assured him the Colombian military would safeguard his life, Henry planned and executed his demobilization. Despite the uncertainties associated with surrendering individually and the unknown outcomes, he trusted his instincts and seized the opportunity. His

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[12] The flyers were part of a broader campaign coordinated by the Program for the Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized Combatant, Lowe/SSP3 (a marketing firm), and regional intelligence services throughout the country. See, (Fattal, 2019).

choice was driven by a combination of strategic awareness, physical readiness, and confidence that the demobilization policy would adhere to human rights principles. Henry recounted:

> I had the right information to demobilize when I did. I knew there were fewer troops in the area, and since I had my GPS, I established where I needed to be to demobilize. I also knew it was then or never. I walked that night about 10 kilometers and was very cautious. I was confident in that I could do it because I had been trained in special forces; I had learned to move fast when needed. To be honest, I was so excited that day thatI didn't even feel tired. I felt physically fit. I learned that the military forces were going to respect my life under the demobilization policy. That impacted my decision. In a way, I trusted my gut because when I decided to demobilize, It was like walking in absolute darkness; I couldn't really know what they were going to do with me when I surrendered individually.

I asked Henry why he had chosen to demobilize in an Army compound, considering that the Army had been his adversary until that moment. He explained,

> After years of fighting the Army, I knew it wouldn't be wise to demobilize amid combat. I had witnessed instances where they killed our wounded and those attempting to surrender. However, around the time of my demobilization, I observed some changes. Some members of the Army had Human Rights insignias, did not engage in combat with us, and carried shorter weapons... Upon reaching the Army Battalion, I specifically requested to meet with Human Rights personnel. I trusted that they would respect my life and take me in as a demobilized combatant. Fortunately, they did... The head of that unit greeted me saying "Welcome to freedom!"

Germán, a former member of the José Manuel Martínez Quiroz front of the ELN operating in Norte de Santander on the border with Venezuela, decided to demobilize when he perceived that the demobilizations of other members of his unit increased his chances of capture or death. Recruited as a child, Germán spent approximately eight years with the ELN. He recounted his militarization, highlighting his forced recruitment by the group, and discussed the indoctrination and military training he underwent, which ultimately led him to embrace his role. However, he expressed a profound sense of guilt regarding his decision to demobilize, particularly considering his leadership position within a combat unit akin to special forces. Germán confided that he felt troubled knowing that his demobilization would impact those he left behind, for whom he felt responsible, and he anticipated potential blame or accusations against them.

Following his demobilization, Germán sought information about his former unit from a relative, who informed him that they continued to operate effectively in his absence. This

revelation played a pivotal role in his disengagement, as Germán realized that others could fulfill his role, alleviating the guilt he felt for leaving and enabling him to move on. In reflecting on his experience, Germán shared,

> I left my group because the confrontation was really tough. I was in charge of a good combat unit, almost like special forces, and it made me feel bad to leave them. Before I left, I thought about how it would affect the people I was responsible for. I was worried that the leaders might blame or accuse them of helping me leave. Leaving them behind weighed heavily on my heart...Three months after I left, I called my cousin to find out how my old unit was doing because I kept thinking about them. He told me someone had taken my place. That's when I realized the ELN didn't need me specifically. They had others who could do my job. Once I understood that, I moved on...

Lina, a former member of the ELN Cimarrón front operating in the Bajo Baudó region in Chocó had been in that military unit for about two years when she individually demobilized. She joined the ELN to escape a domestic violence situation. Lina's role in the Resistencia Cimarrón front was mainly supportive; she had guard duty, cooked, operated a radio, distributed food ratios, and cured those who were injured in combat. Based on her account, she was not a soldier in the strict sense but was engaged in supporting tasks. When asked why she stayed in the group, Lina said that being there was better than being at home with her husband. She made no statements that could have suggested she had developed a strong commitment to the ELN or adopted the group's values. Lina explained that she understood that she only needed to do her job to stay out of trouble, emphasizing that her adherence to expectations was not rooted in loyalty but rather in her ability to fulfill her role. This confirms that pragmatic reasons drove her contribution to the group, and she adapted her behavior to fit in (Gates, 2017). It seems likely that the Cimarrón front of the ELN did not need to socialize members like Lina into internalizing norms or developing a group identity to keep them contributing, perhaps due to the supportive nature of their roles.

Lina's demobilization also aligns with the battlefield dynamics framework as she left the group and demobilized after meeting a former member of her unit who had demobilized and was supporting the Army in the area where her unit operated. She recalled,

> I recognized him, and we talked. He told me that he had demobilized and was with the Army now. I had heard about the program on the radio but was told by others in my group that it was a lie. They said that the government claimed many insurgents were leaving when, in reality, they were killing them, that those who fell into that trap were

presented as casualties later…So, I was there looking at him and talking to him, and he looked fine. Seeing him there made me make up my mind. That week, when the group sent me to town to buy food, I never returned.

I demobilized in a military unit, and they treated me well. I was with them for about a month. During that time, I did not have to do anything. In the morning, they brought breakfast; at noon, some lunch, and later, I got dinner. That is what we did, we ate and we slept. Then, we were sent to see higher-ranking officials, and they asked many questions. They mainly asked me to identify who the leaders were. At first, when they asked about this, I was scared. They told me my statements were anonymized and that I should not be afraid. They said that I could help those who I left behind by talking, and that is when I started to talk.

Pipe, a former member of the Armando Calvo Guerrero front of the ELN, had been in the ELN for about eight years when he individually demobilized.[13] His disengagement is closely connected to the behavior of the commanders of his unit,

Commanders were behaving poorly, not following rules, mistreating us [troops] and civilians, and spending nights in town with women. It was upsetting to witness this! Despite we [the troops] lacked basic items (boots and even underwear), they gave money to their women. I knew other fronts had misbehaving commanders, but at least they provided for their troops. I couldn't voice my disapproval; I feared sanctions or relocation. I was just so filled with anger when I left.

Notably, Pipe was the only member of the sample who not only contributed to the Colombian forces with information about his group when he demobilized but also supported them on the ground. His work with the Army for approximately two years suggests that changes in leadership and within the group itself might have prompted his disengagement, subsequent individual demobilization, and willingness to impact his group on the battlefield.

4.1.1.2 Individual Demobilization In Prison

Two former combatants, David and José, individually demobilized while they were in prison. José, a former member of the 36th front of the FARC, which operated in an area north of the Antioquia department, spent 12 years in the group before deserting in 2005. His case exemplifies how "push" factors affect the decision of combatants to leave their group

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[13] Pipe, explained that he had been deeply ingrained in the ELN since birth, having been born in the Catatumbo region, traditionally under the influence of this group. He expressed that he always felt destined to join them and believed the ELN was where he needed to be.

since he left the group when he observed that the FARC was departing from its original commitment to serving the people and the leaders encouraged brutality against them: *"I felt we were no longer the army of the people. Civilians in our area were scared of us and were now practically kicking us out of their houses. We behaved differently and the people stopped believing in us. I could not see how we acted was justified."* José's decision to leave his group is an example of the claim that states that rebels are more willing to quit the fight when their ideals are no longer being advanced by their groups (Anaya, 2007; Costa and Kahn, 2008; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008; Oppenheim et al., 2015; Weinstein, 2006).

José said that he discussed his intentions to leave with another member, although he risked being reported. However, she also wanted to leave, and they plotted together on how to do it. An essential aspect of the stories behind how combatants desert includes the decision of what they bring with them. José, like other participants, explained that it was worse to leave and take with them the radio, shotgun, grenades, and ammunition they had because those were not theirs. Many of them understood the value they held for the group as well as how their desertion affected an investment the group had made in training them as soldiers.

The day José left, he got members of his unit drunk and left some of his things with them. To increase his chances of successful desertion, José brought with him a gun and decided to head to Medellín, a large city where the group could not easily track him. However, he was captured a year later there for his participation in a kidnapping for extortion case in which he was involved when he was in the FARC. José requested a transfer to a different prison wing along with other deserters to ensure his safety. As he was no longer an active FARC member, the group considered him a traitor. Inmates in his wing organized themselves as a neutral party called "Brothers for Peace." José officially became an individually demobilized combatant when he finished serving his sentence eight years later in 2014 to access the benefits given to demobilized ex-combatants.

David also used to be a member of the FARC, though he was part of the Teófilo Forero Mobile Column, which operated in the San Vicente del Caguán region, traditionally controlled by this insurgent group.[14] He was in the FARC for 13 years until he was captured

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[14] When I interviewed him, he was living in Bogotá, where he had relocated and worked as a driver for

and subsequently sentenced to prison for rebellion and kidnapping. David had been arrested three times before, but this last time led to his exit from the FARC. He shared with me how he was captured:

> In late December of 2006, I was captured when I was going to kidnap a higher-ranking official from the Colombian military. I gathered for the strike, prepared the provisions, lined up the cars, and everyone working with me knew what they had to do. The commander sent me the money needed for the operation, about $500 million pesos, but he sent it with an experienced figure in the group. This person didn't want someone like me behind such an important operation; he was jealous. He took some money and brought the rest to General Naranjo [Colombian Army]. He demobilized, disclosed our plan, provided information about our whereabouts, and received some benefits for doing this. He was a snitch, and I was captured.

I asked him if he ever considered deserting, and he said he did not. The events that led to his capture are instrumental in his understanding of what he defined as enemy-type desertion and of other individual demobilizations. He explained,

> There are two types of desertions. The first type is the friendly one. These deserters were tired, unable to keep up, or simply wanted to go home. The other kind is the enemy-type desertion. This occurs when a member seeks individual benefits in exchange for their exit from the group and when they join the state forces against their group. So, if you ask me about desertion, I can understand the friendly type because many things can happen to a person, but I find the other one very problematic. Those deserters killed former partners and hurt people, civilians, who had helped them.

Even though David was physically separated from his military unit and his role when he was captured and sent to prison, that did not lead to his immediate disengagement; he was in the FARC for four years while he was incarcerated. Until his arrest, and for a total of about thirteen years, David's life consisted of fulfilling military tasks for the FARC.[15] He valued his role in his group, which helped him have a positive self-concept, and saw performing this role as his individual contribution to the FARC. He stated,

> I'm persistent, and that helped me do my job. For instance, I had to plan a kidnap once. They sent some people from the 25th front and failed; then, they sent others from the 53rd front, and they couldn't do it either. The target person had many bodyguards…They came to me to plot the kidnapping. I spent about three months undercover where that

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a transportation company with an app that allows passengers to hail a ride and drivers to charge fares and get paid.

[15] His work, according to him, entailed "detecting, identifying, mapping, and conducting intelligence work that supported military strikes such as kidnappings and assaults on small and medium-sized military units."

person lived. I lived in shorts and sandals [chanclas], hanging out in a bar, drinking beer, and playing billiards. I was a loafer [he used the term "gamín"]. But I came up with a plan. I asked the group for five people. The commanders could not believe I would do it with such a small team when other fronts had failed the task and they had used more men, but they trusted me, and it worked. I found out what the problem was and came up with a solution. That is how a persistent person works. I'm resourceful and take the time to think about alternative ways to solve problems, even to this day. That worked well then and made me good at what I did.

During the interview, for example, David shared some of his experiences interacting with civilians when he was a combatant:

I had to go on reconnaissance missions. I wore civilian clothing and had to visit different places. Let's say I had to go to Finca La Juliana, and you're the owner. I had to think about my interaction with you. So I came to your house, said hello, looked around, and shared who I was, like, "I am with Company #5". After that, we would talk. You would tell me what was happening and share your complaints. But our interaction would not end there. Once the talking was done, we would get some firewood, and at lunchtime, we would cook together in the kitchen. That's how we [the FARC] built support. We were one with them [civilians in FARC-controlled territories], and they were one with us.

I asked him how much of that hypothetical interaction he chose to talk about was motivated by his personality and how much because he was fulfilling a role. David insisted that he behaved the way he did because he felt truly connected to those people: *"With them, I felt at home. My family was humble like theirs. Their house was just like mine; we were campesinos and I shared with them that way of life."*

The term *"campesino"* encompasses more than a small-scale farmer, which is its translation. In Colombia and various parts of Latin America, it has a broader social meaning, serving as a social identity classification for individuals whose traditions, beliefs, lifestyle, and social, economic, political, and cultural practices are intricately linked with rural land and the economy (López, 2019). Hence, David also had a campesino social identity, which is consistent with what has been established for members of the FARC (Higgs, 2019; Schmidt, 2023). He was not the only participant in the sample who self-identified as campesino during the interview; other participants also claimed that identity, whether they were originally from rural areas or not, and perceived themselves as representing the interests and struggles of the rural campesino population. Members coming from the FARC, the ELN, and the AUC who were interviewed justified their involvement or arrival to the group, relying on

their campesino identity and background.[16]

Specifically, the FARC portrays campesinos as victimized, poor, working-class Colombians oppressed by the ruling class and government. This portrayal is a key aspect of the FARC's identity, as it positions itself as a rural-based Marxist guerrilla movement (Pécaut, 2008). As part of the othering process and to justify its actions, the FARC claims that just as the Colombian government has its armed forces and employs them against the campesinos, the oppressed can rely on the FARC as their legitimate defenders. Given the argument that individuals commit violence through indoctrination, a process that aids in shedding their personal identity for the larger organizational identity (Post et al., 2003), FARC members come to perceive their involvement not just as legitimate but also as essential in advancing the group's objectives as they internalize its identity.

David's justification for his participation in FARC is closely tied to his self-identification with the campesino identity. Embracing this identity allows FARC members like David to seamlessly adopt the larger group identity, providing a rationale for their involvement in the conflict. Throughout the interview, David's statements reveal a strong attachment to being a combatant and a sense of belonging to the FARC as an organization. This dual identification serves as a foundation for justifying his role in the war, intertwining his personal commitment as a combatant with a broader allegiance to the FARC's goals and principles. The campesino identity acts as a transformative force, enabling individuals like David to align themselves with the collective identity of the FARC and, in turn, rationalize their active participation in the armed struggle. David explained,

> People looked to the group as their judge or attorney because no one else was there to solve their problems. When differences arose, when trouble loomed, we were there. They fully trusted in the wisdom of the commander and knew that the group would support them. The people [campesinos] were connected to the group and were our unconditional supporters because the group respected them.

His arrest brought about a change in role, the setting in which his role needed to be performed, and his overall position in the broader social structure. The FARC in prison

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[16] It has been contended that the primary divide in the Colombian conflict is rooted more in class and skin color than in specific ethnicities and that this division is between urban dwellers, wealthy landowners, and rural campesinos. Under this lens, the state is responsible for violence in rural areas, driving the FARC to bear arms in defense of the campesino population, establishing itself as a people's army. See, Schmidt (2023).

differed from the military structure he was accustomed to, influencing his disidentification with the group. Moreover, legislative changes in Colombia extended the prison time for kidnapping, resulting in a longer imprisonment period for David.[17] This is an example of how certain push factors may cause some members of armed groups to disengage. It illustrates how Rusbult's investment model from social psychology, which has been used to explore disengagement from violent terrorist organizations (Altier et al., 2017), can also provide a framework for understanding individual exit decisions from armed groups.

To evaluate David's commitment to his role or the FARC (or his likelihood of exit), we must consider the satisfaction he derived from his involvement in the group, available alternatives, and investments incurred while he was imprisoned. David's imprisonment increased the actual costs and decreased the actual rewards of being part of the FARC, resulting in decreased satisfaction with his involvement in the group. He said:

> The FARC in prison were different and very unequal! Seeing that, and finding out that I was going to be old when I recovered my liberty made me think about myself…I realized I wanted a different life and sought my individual demobilization in 2011 under Decree 1059 of 2008.[18]

Additionally, David now regularly interacted with individuals who held diverse roles beyond their shared identity as inmates. They, like him, were inmates, but they also played roles such as husbands, parents, or children. As David assessed the costs and benefits associated with staying with the group or leaving, these factors played a crucial role in influencing his disengagement.

Prisons in Colombia grapple with an absence of state control, plagued by issues of overcrowding and under-resourcing. This vacuum has given rise to corruption, the presence of armed groups, and organized crime, reflecting the broader challenges in the country's underworld and ongoing conflict. All participants I interviewed who had experienced im-

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[17] "I learned about changes in the laws while I was already imprisoned. I ran some numbers. Instead of being released after serving 3/5 of my sentence, I would have to spend at least 2/3 of my time. I realized that I was going to be in prison between six and eight years more and that I would be released when I was old, which I didn't like. It was a significant amount of time in prison this time, and I felt frustrated. I attempted to escape from prison several times but could not succeed."

[18] The Decree 1059 of 2008, which regulates Law 418 of 1997, stipulates that members of guerrilla groups deprived of liberty may individually demobilize, provided they were detained before April 4, 2008. Following this, Decree 4619 of 2010 set March 13, 2011, as the deadline for such demobilizations, eliminating any further opportunity for demobilization for incarcerated members of guerrilla forces.

prisonment highlighted this aspect. To comprehend how David shifted his perception of the FARC and ceased identifying with the group, I inquired about the functioning of the wing in which he spent time when he was incarcerated since it was exclusively designated for the FARC. He explained that even while detained, members maintain their hierarchical positions in these wings and are organized under a leader or commander, mirroring the organizational structure present in regular units.[19] David shared that things were not functioning as they should with *"el colectivo,"* the FARC unit operating in this wing:

> El colectivo, in the end, turned out to be the leader oppressing those of us under him. He should have been in charge of maintaining order in our wing, the prison yard, or corridors (a prison in itself), but he was not. He behaved unethically and against the statutes because there was no oversight from the FARC outside. He drank and used drugs and expected those under him to do certain things for him, like cleaning. I disliked that! To complicate matters, he was the person who received the money the group sent for all of us. Each member should receive between $100,000 and $200,000 pesos back then. That money paid for what we needed, like toiletries and such, but our leader got the money and conditioned giving it to us by making us do those other tasks for him. You know, he didn't give us the money, and it was ours! I left el colectivo then. Others told our commander outside (in the mountains) what was going on. He was told that I didn't want to follow orders and would likely become a snitch. I could not take it any longer and left the organization. I think I dealt with things in the best way to avoid trouble, but the truth is that the others abandoned me then; they politically abandoned me. They wouldn't see me as one of them after what I did.

I interpreted the last part of his statement as him realizing that other members also knew their leader was acting against FARC regulations but preferred to stay on good terms with him rather than support David in pointing this out. The corruption he identified could have eroded the solidarity among members who didn't support him when this happened. It seems possible that the perceived diminishing sense of unity and purpose in prison motivated David's disengagement, but at the root of David's decision to stop contributing is the realization of his autonomy. He said *"I felt I was on my own when I did it. I knew what was happening. . . since I didn't want to follow his orders anymore, I stopped doing my assigned tasks."* He stated that what happened fractured his collective mindset (*"A mí se me rompió la mentalidad colectiva con eso!"*). After that, he began to think about himself and set individual goals, understanding that he would now have to achieve his objectives independently

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[19] Interviews that discussed imprisonment and how things work for imprisoned members: Giancarlo, David, Ramiro, and Gladys.

without the group. David considered that the psychological support he received in prison helped him break apart from the group: *"She [his psychologist] made me realize I didn't want to be in the group anymore."*

In the interview, David articulated his careful approach to the decision-making process, emphasizing its prudence, especially considering his ongoing interactions with FARC members until his eventual release from prison. He explained:

> I demobilized autonomously, maturely, and for myself under the Justice and Peace Act. Opting for this path involved openly discussing my individual participation and responsibility in specific events. It became evident to me that I no longer wanted to be associated with the FARC, yet I also did not wish to act against them. I focused solely on discussing my actions and what I, as an individual, had done.

As part of his exit strategy, David sent a message to the FARC commanders (outside prison), notifying them about his decision: *"Given that you have consigned some of your members to personal and political oblivion, I am seeking a way to leave."* In the note, he made it clear that he would exclusively discuss with the Colombian authorities his involvement and nothing more. This is relevant for understanding David's disengagement. Responsibilities for acts in the armed group are not individualized but taken up in the group identity. By choosing to leave and demobilize, David accepted to take on individual responsibility for his involvement and no longer relied on "us," the FARC, for it. Only after he communicated this decision to the FARC, he officially requested his individual demobilization. He may have chosen to notify his exit to the FARC outside because he was still going to be in prison surrounded by FARC members and they could interpret this as him respecting the organization despite leaving. It also shows that he believed that the FARC structure in prison was not representative of the organization itself, the one he once identified with.

Even though David demobilized in prison, I cannot establish that imprisonment invariably leads to the disengagement of members of armed groups, as two other participants, Gladys and Ramiro, were incarcerated and did not disengage then.[20] Javier, the ex-combatant who also demobilized in prison, disengaged only after his membership in the group ended as his group was dismantled.

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[20] Both were exchanged as political prisoners within the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016, with one of them disengaging after rejoining society, and the other one not having disengaged at the time of the interview.

4.1.2 Separated Youths

While minimizing the presence of minors within their ranks serves the interests of armed groups that demobilize or lay down their arms, helping them avoid legal, political, and reputational consequences and potentially facilitating their reintegration into society, the reality is that thousands of minors have been members of armed groups in Colombia. The challenge they face involves readjusting to civilian life, which may be largely unfamiliar to them due to their age when they joined the group and the duration of their involvement, often immersed in the violence that initially drew them into the conflict. In doing so they must reject the use of violence and disidentify with the sets of beliefs that justified it.

In Colombia, children typically enter the demobilization process after escaping from their groups or being captured by government armed forces (Higgs, 2019). Vanessa and Carlos were not actively seeking to separate from their group. If they had spent more time in the FARC, they might have developed a stronger identification with the group. However, their membership in the FARC ended when the military found them during combat, and they reintegrated into society as separated youths:

> My demobilization occurred during an Army assault. It was about 3 to 4 in the morning, and we were near a civilian's house. Then, the helicopters arrived, and the bombardment started. So, I ran and reached that house. I told the person there to tell the Army that I was a civilian, just like her, and I threw away all the gear I had. However, she didn't want to cover up this. She told them I was with the FARC". (Vanessa)
>
> The Army caught me. First, they got the leader of my group, and with him, they captured all of us. I knew that once they had him, they would come after us...I was trying to escape when the Army got me". (Carlos)

At the time of their capture, Vanessa, aged 14, and Carlos, aged 16, fell under the legal category of children, as outlined by international law, which considers individuals under the age of eighteen as victims of conflict with the right to reparation rather than combatants.[21] Consequently, when apprehended by the Army, they could not be classified as ex-combatants; they were categorized as *"jóvenes desvinculados"* ("separated youths"), which includes the subset of persons under eighteen who have participated in war actions directed by an illicit

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[21] The proportion of demobilized combatants who were recruited as child soldiers is in the range of 44–50% for former FARC members and in the range of 35–40% for former AUC. These estimates are based on Springer (2012).

armed group, due to a political motivation, and who have been captured, have voluntarily surrendered, or were handed over to the state by the illicit group to which they belonged. Vanessa shared her apprehension, recalling, *"I was so scared because the group had told us that if they [Colombian military] found us, they would kill us. However, they learned I was with the FARC and told me to stop worrying because I was a minor."*

Vanessa and Carlos assured that they had joined the FARC voluntarily.[22]. They faced dismal conditions at home, involving poverty and domestic violence, and had been exposed to armed groups and conflict from an early age. The AUC killed Vanessa's dad, who had been in the FARC himself. She explained she joined the FARC when she was 12 years old, seeking to avenge her dad's death. This suggests that Vanessa underwent anticipatory socialization, or the acquisition of values or orientations found in statuses and groups one is not yet engaged but which one is likely to enter (Ebaugh, 1988). Having internalized the group values prior to joining may have helped Vanessa join the FARC as a minor. It is also possible that she could have adopted the group's values and normative expectations before she actually assumed the rights and obligations of a member of the FARC.

Carlos was born on the outskirts of the municipality of Tumaco, a port city located in the extreme south of the country's Pacific coast. He ran away from home when he was 12 and became involved in a drug gang, which eventually led him to join the FARC as a member of the Daniel Aldana Mobil Column,[23] a unit known to have focused primarily on drug trafficking (Salas Salazar et al., 2019). While Carlos likely belonged to the FARC militias, he did not identify as such; he said he was a rank-and-file combatant. Both, Vanessa and Carlos required minimal reservation-level benefits and the compatibility constraint from the FARC to ensure compliance or allegiance within an organization.[24]

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[22] There is evidence that suggests that a very high percentage of children enlist voluntarily in Colombia, with no more than 20 percent of the minors forced at gunpoint into the groups, mainly because there are war and armed groups where they live. See, Brett and Specht (2004); Gutiérrez Sanín (2010)

[23] During Carlos's time in the Daniel Aldana Column, this unit was responsible for controlling Cabo Manglares, a strategically significant location for drug production and the export of cocaine, as well as the border with Ecuador.

[24] Gates explains that the reservation level of benefits is the minimally acceptable level of benefits for the agent; otherwise, he will not work for the rebel leader (meaning he will not join the group). This reservation level defines the agent's participation constrain, which in turn determines the level of recruitment. The reservation level for children like Vanessa and Carlos is quite low, meaning that the FARC does not have to work too hard in recruiting them or keeping them in the group. They do not seem to have many alternatives to staying in the group. See, (Gates, 2017).

Carlos was not the sole participant I interviewed who had been a former member of the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column of the FARC. Sebastian, recruited by that unit during his teenage years, individually demobilized as an adult along with other members after that unit splintered from the FARC. Sebastian explicitly identified himself as a member of the FARC militias, detailing his assigned duties, which involved maintaining control through intimidation, coercion, or violence over the population and extorting those with means. He was the only participant who talked about consuming drugs while in the armed group. He carried out his responsibilities in exchange for economic remuneration. He shared,

> We could not really rest; I did not sleep, I did not eat. My body was practically made of steel at that point because I needed to be ready to go. I needed drugs to keep going, to do what needed to be done, be it staying up all night, acting as a guard, or to use violence

Both Carlos and Sebastian revealed that they joined the FARC under the influence of friends, driven by the desire for income and the belief that being part of an armed group and possessing a weapon enhanced their appeal to young women. He mentioned,

> What I really liked about being with them is that I could stand out. If I saw a young lady and wanted to be with her, for sure she was going to end up with me. You know, women in Tumaco like armed men (*'hombre de cuento'*), not the average man. I could have whoever I wanted to.

In reflecting on his time with the FARC, Carlos expressed, *"The thing is that I was there because. . . well, I don't even know why. . . maybe to have an income, some money to give to my mom. . . "* At a different moment during the interview Carlos stated: *"Sometimes I had problems with the leaders because they would only give us a partial payment and facing needs that was upsetting."* His narrative resonates with the harsh realities of poverty, marginalization, and weak governance, rooted in the enduring legacy of slavery, particularly prevalent in regions where Afro-Colombians constitute the majority, like the Pacific region.[25] Carlos asserted: *"I didn't like what they [the FARC] did, but I had to do what I was told because there was no alternative. I was not there for the weapons, Miss; I always had food to eat while I was with them."* In that sense, Carlos may have initially joined seeking the status of being armed but stayed in the group because there was no alternative.

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[25] This context significantly heightens the vulnerability of Pacific coast communities in the Nariño and Chocó departments to the influence of armed groups and illicit economies.

Scholars have established that FARC fighters did not receive a regular salary, forming a historically significant principle (Ferro and Uribe Ramón, 2002; Gutiérrez and Thomson, 2021; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2004). Gutiérrez Sanín (2010) contends that the FARC, being "too big and too serious," did not rely on selective incentives and emphasized the group's consistent political ideology, minimal rent-seeking, and the development of socialization mechanisms fostering gregariousness and a collective sense in recruits to deter rent-seeking behavior. A nonnormative individual, someone opting for illegal work to secure income (like Carlos or Sebastian), would find joining drug traffickers more profitable and less risky (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010). However, I interviewed Carlos and Sebastian and both identified as fomer FARC members and claimed to have received a salary for their participation.

Certain FARC fronts derived financial benefits from the drug economy and this involvement did not depoliticize the group since these fronts remained engaged in inherently political governance activities (Gutiérrez and Thomson, 2021). Carlos and Sebastian are not profiteering criminals just because they were part of the FARC militias, given that they, as the majority of people in this organization, did not substantially benefit from the conflict economically. Their "salary" served as a key compatibility constraint ensuring their compliance, coupled with the fear of punishment for defection, indicating that their military unit could discern when they deviated from orders (Gates, 2017). However, what we can assume is that leaders in the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column knew about members like Carlos and Sebastian who were with them for the money or to have their basic needs fulfilled and may not have found it necessary to socialize them into adopting the group's social identity to ensure task adherence. This can explain why Sebastian and others established a dissident faction in 2015 and separated from the FARC. Its members would have been disconnected from it to feel compelled by the peace talks and the decision of the FARC leadership to lay down arms. Thus, they continued to perform their roles and contribute to their faction's goals to continue to receive financial compensation for it or to continue having the basic needs taken care of.

Sebastian shared that once his unit chose to be on its own, they fought other armed groups to control the Pacific region. Sebastian complained about the implications this had on his life:

When we splintered from the FARC, we were assigned additional responsibilities, and un-expectedly, I found myself with even more tasks. Under the new commander, I felt I had to handle everything, and although I wanted to protest, I couldn't—it was dangerous. I understood that I was given extra responsibilities because there were tasks to be done and they trusted me, which is positive, but it didn't translate into higher pay for the extra tasks I undertook. I felt overworked and exhausted. I was putting in more effort than others who received the same compensation.

Despite Sebastián's desire to quit, he still relied on his income and feared reprisals against his family for leaving. It was not until a group of members of his faction, fearing battlefield exhaustion, chose to undergo together their individual demobilization that he ended his participation. What happened with the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column shows that offering financial incentives serves as a means of enticing recruits like Carlos and Sebastiaán, but is a poor strategy from a military standpoint (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2004). Since its main goal became material gain, evident in becoming a dissident faction deeply involved in drug trafficking, when its members perceived they could be defeated in combat, they quit. Feeling under attack, they lacked a strong conviction to keep fighting. This became a collective feeling that helped them exit the dissident unit, and no individual member took on the risks of desertion.

Vanessa, the other minor who unexpectedly demobilized, described how she was social-ized into becoming a member of the FARC and how that promoted her allegiance to the group:

Their laws, statutes, and rules are shared. It's just like when you start working in a new job and are told what to do as an employee there. They read all those things to you and make you "study". It is not studying. You just learn how things work and what their expectations are so that you don't mess around and do what you're not supposed to do. That is how they teach you what is right and what is not. You get all that information, and you understand how things work, how what you do supports the cause. We see how what we do is right because the government, the Army, and the Police murder the people...When the FARC killed civilians (because they had helped the Army), it was awful and upsetting, I didn't like that, but I knew it was best not to question those decisions. I never saw them killing partners, but I saw them killing a child, and that was very sad and hard to witness. After all, I was very sensitive because I had had such an awful childhood.

Children recruited into the FARC underwent profound internal and social transforma-tions, resulting in their militarization (Higgs, 2019). Military training and observation sig-nificantly facilitate the process of drawing minors into the collective identity of the FARC,

causing them to lose their individual sense of identity, with the group becoming the central and most important aspect of their identity. However, neither Vanessa nor Carlos internalized the FARC's identity or values to the point of having a lasting self-identification with the organization. Both voluntarily joined the FARC driven by motives such as protection and vengeance rather than finding the organization particularly appealing. This does not mean that child recruits are opportunistic or lack determination, as they may still be highly committed to fighting against the state or other armed groups, but not necessarily to the organization under whose banner they fight (Mironova, 2019; Weinstein, 2006).

It has been established that young adolescents are systematically recruited into armed groups, often coerced, due to their overrepresentation in the population, heightened effectiveness as guerrillas compared to younger children, and greater susceptibility to indoctrination compared to adults (Blattman and Annan, 2010). Coercion plays a role in compelling them to fulfill the armed group's needs by manipulating their beliefs and values, detaching them from their previous identities. This process makes young members feel closer to the group[26] and creates distinctions between those "inside' and "outside" the group (Beber and Blattman, 2013; Medina Arbeláez, 2008).[27] Armed groups also strategically employ indoctrination, psychologically transformative experiences, or belief alteration to ensure these young recruits internalize group norms (Gates, 2017; Hoover Green, 2017). Indoctrination intensifies group control post-recruitment, fostering a fervent desire for belonging while impairing critical thinking and decision-making abilities (Eck, 2014). This process is intricately linked to creating a common identity, be it religious, racial, tribal, or ethnic, marking the "other" as the enemy.

Comparing the group with others cultivates a sense of "social psychological distinctiveness," which reinforces members' identities (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Additionally, self-categorization is influenced by several factors, including perceiver readiness, comparative fit,

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[26] Several participants said they might have disliked certain things in the FARC but kept quiet about them because they thought that voicing their concerns would be seen by others as questioning the group, which other members could interpret as an indicator that they were outsiders or had infiltrated the group. For the comprehensive analysis of the link between coercion and child participation in rebel groups. See, (Higgs, 2019).

[27] Beber and Blattman (2013) argue that because youths are more responsive to coercive tactics and, therefore, stay longer than adults, rebel leaders yield smaller benefits per recruit but accrue these benefits over a longer period of time, making the child abduction enterprise profitable in the long run.

and normative fit. Of these, the normative fit is particularly relevant to child soldiers. It refers to the degree to which a person's or group's behavior or attributes align with the perceiver's social expectations, which are informed by social norms and world knowledge. Wessells (2016, p. 107) explains: "For example, a civilian who sees a boy wearing a uniform and carrying a gun may automatically categorize the boy as a "soldier". Such normative fit may also lead the boy to categorize himself as a soldier".

Experiences during adolescence in armed groups may have long-term consequences on self-identity, potentially leading to challenges in post-conflict reintegration and adapting to civilian life, young members of armed groups could temporarily adopt the group's identity during a stage of identity foreclosure. If that is the case, they would be prematurely committing to the FARC's identity because they have not had the opportunity to explore other identities. After all, the group insists on having that identity, relying on violence to "foreclose" their choices (Marcia, 1966). One must bear in mind that their youth, isolation from other social groups, and the requirement of life membership sustain the notion that children in the FARC cannot leave, which limits their identity and would explain why they potentially experience identity foreclosure as a result.

Young recruits can follow the lead of "significant others" (prototypical members in their armed group), adopting their behaviors and identities. They can learn what their role is and acquire norms and rules through emulation, imitation, and personal experience. Consequently, some may embrace the group's identity by adjusting their preferences to create a positive experience while they perform their roles, and they do all of this for pragmatic reasons.

Carlos's limited identification with the FARC becomes evident when examining his responses and experiences within the group. Unlike typical FARC recruits interviewed who talked about the rigorous ideological training, military drills, and physical conditioning they underwent to instill discipline and commitment, Carlos mentioned no such training. His role in the group, as succinctly stated, was to follow orders without any indication of a deeper socialization process. The absence of efforts by his unit to develop strong social ties or convey the importance of collective tasks suggested a lack of investment in his group membership. Instead, it appears that Carlos complied with orders for pragmatic reasons, not out of a gen-

uine allegiance to the FARC Gates (2017). This lack of depth in commitment, highlighted by his response that he missed the income the most after demobilization, contrasts with the typical internalization of group norms through socialization processes.

Armed groups rely on coherent frameworks and instruments to align the commitments and preferences of individual fighters with the organization's goals and principles as defined by the leadership. In particular, strong institutions for indoctrination and political education help the armed group to achieve secondary or ideological cohesion (Hoover Green, 2017; Schubiger, 2023). FARC may not have needed the indoctrination and political education of all of its members when they knew some would still contribute despite not being ideologically committed. Carlos's entry into the FARC under promises of economic opportunities, coupled with peer pressure in the absence of robust social connections, underscores the transactional nature of his involvement rather than a profound commitment to the group's ideology or social identity.

Perhaps only those members fulfilling traditional insurgency roles can adopt an insurgent group's social identity. Members engaged in activities related to the drug trade or other illegal activities may struggle to connect their actions with the organization's political goals, hindering their alignment with the group's principles. The case of the Daniel Aldana Mobile Column and its members suggests this dynamic, as they did not adhere to peace talks and splintered as dissidents after the FARC signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government. Carlos and Sebastian, who remained with the group, likely never fully committed because their involvement served as a survival strategy and a means to attain power and status not otherwise attainable given their socioeconomic background.

4.2   COLLECTIVE DEMOBILIZATION AND SEPARATION FROM AN ARMED GROUP

Collective demobilization involves disbanding the entire armed group as a unified entity, with multiple fighters demobilizing simultaneously. This structured process includes surrendering weapons, halting military activities, and reintegrating former members into civilian

life. Typically occurring within peace agreements or conflict resolution efforts, it aims to terminate the armed group or transform it into a nonviolent or politically engaged entity, signifying the end of membership. However, this doesn't automatically mean former members perceive a fundamental change in themselves or satisfaction with their past membership.

My sample comprises 19 participants who underwent collective demobilization, most becoming ex-members as determined by their group leaders. Eight were former AUC members, and 11 were former FARC members. Notably, two higher-ranking participants—one from each group—were part of negotiation teams for peace agreements with the Colombian government. The prominent former AUC member was imprisoned and extradited to the U.S. for his bloc's drug trafficking involvement. The former FARC commander continues to have a higher rank in the Comunes political party post-peace agreement. While their separation experiences differ from the average ex-combatant, studying their process remains underexplored.

Thirteen participants, primarily former FARC members, never considered leaving their group. Only one participant in this subset expressed a lack of belonging to the armed group.[28] Finally, five participants from this subset are collectively reintegrating into society in former Spaces for Territorial Training and Reincorporation or ETCRs, living there at the time of the interview.

4.2.1 Becoming an Ex-Member of an Armed Group Following an Order to Demobilize

Participants in my study who collectively demobilized with the AUC did so between 2004 and 2007. Consequently, 15 years had already passed since the demobilization of some of them at the time of the interview.[29] Seven out of the 8 of them demobilized following orders

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[28] César used to be a combatant of the Córdoba Bloc of the AUC, which operated in the Caramelo area near Tierralta, in the Córdba department. He was in the group between 2000 and 2004. When I asked César, why he stayed in the AUC for four years if he did not feel part of the group, he explained, *"I could have stopped contributing and leave, but I felt they [the AUC] would not have liked that decision so I stayed."* Members of armed groups may not feel close to their group, but coercion keeps them contributing.

[29] This certainly affected how much they recalled from their experience separating from the group, though it could have added perspective to their responses. Three of them had been combatants (Eduardo, Alex, and Luis), two described their role as armed community work (Fernando, César), two were nurses (Cindy and Sandra), and one used to be commander (Giancarlo).

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of their commanders, as one participant had a higher rank and was in the group that decided when and how his structure would demobilize.[30] The fact that these eight participants stayed with the AUC until their blocs were dismantled does not necessarily indicate that, up until that moment, they socially identified with the AUC, were satisfied with their membership in this armed group, or were committed members.

Two participants in this subset asserted that they were coerced to join and stay in the AUC. Four informed me that they joined the AUC because they had directly suffered at the hands of the guerrillas and felt compelled to fight against them. The former AUC commander whom I interviewed was part of a family involved in the creation of this organization. To him, being part of this group was unavoidable.

Five former members of the AUC expressed that they felt relief when their bloc demobilized. Eduardo, a former member of the Córdoba Bloc who was in this group for around seven years was among them. He shared that he felt relief when the commanders announced the demobilization of his bloc, coupled with the assurance of financial support from the Colombian government: *"When we heard the group was disbanding, I was thrilled! Commanders assured ongoing support, mentioning financial assistance from the Colombian government. Honestly, I didn't want to be there. This was the best scenario—leaving openly without the risk of hiding or running away."*

Since Eduardo made it explicit that he was pleased with the end of his membership in the AUC, I inquired why he was there all those years. He stated that he had joined them because he needed to earn a living to support his family, that he worked as a *"punto"* gathering intelligence for the bloc, and that he felt part of the AUC. After all, with them, he had a job and received compensation for what he was doing.

I discuss his case because it exemplifies psychological disengagement before demobilization, which led to his less-than-optimal contribution to the group despite physically staying in the AUC until the group underwent collective demobilization. Eduardo, an example of a defector, shared with me that there had been instances when he disagreed with his group but refrained from openly questioning the orders he received or leaving due to fear of reprisals against him or his family. However, he explained that he shirked, when possible, arguing he

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[30] Eduardo, Fernando, Alex, Cesar, Cindy, Luis, and Sandra.

chose to do it because he was not a "bad person." When asked to elaborate, Eduardo gave me an example and described an instance when he withheld information from his bloc to prevent the forced displacement of peasants, a situation he empathized with deeply due to his own experience of having been forcibly displaced when he was younger by the guerrillas. Unable to justify inflicting hardships on civilians, he refused to share the intelligence he had collected.[31]

Thinking of himself as a good person influenced Eduardo's choice to shirk, as it aligned with what he considered the right thing to do as an individual to maintain his moral identity.[32] Eduardo's insubordination illustrates that he did not self-categorize as AUC when it implied acting against civilians.[33] In his view, the "other", the guerrillas, were the ones causing forced displacement. Hence, he was eager to provide information that helped the AUC operationally in their fight against the guerrillas, but not if it would make the AUC a bad group and him a bad person.

Members who align with the group identity may play roles to uphold its norms and further interests, either assimilating themselves to the group or contrasting themselves with other members. Eduardo's deviation from group norms, driven by personal moral values, suggests weak identification with the AUC. Choosing to withhold information and feeling relief during the bloc's dismantling indicates Eduardo's disengagement at the time of his demobilization. His shirking aligns with predictions for disengagement among weakly identified members facing normative conflict, considering they possess a lower tolerance for discrepancies between group norms and important alternate standards for behavior (Packer, 2008). Unlike Eduardo, strongly identified members might deviate if they believed group norms were harmful to change the collective perceptions of the group (Packer, 2008).

The dissatisfaction with membership in the AUC expressed by five participants could

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[31] Eduardo was not the only participant who faced this dilemma. Pipe, who individually demobilized from the ELN, mentioned that his decision to demobilize was motivated by his desire to distance himself from orders he received from his commanders when he perceived those orders to be atrocious.

[32] According to Burke and Stets (2009), moral identity is a personal aspect focused on self-perception as a good or bad entity, guiding normative behavior, they stated: "The moral identity is a person identity in which the meanings involve sustaining the self as a good/bad entity. Since according to identity theory, one's identity and behavior are linked through a common system of meaning.

[33] Hogg and Abrams (1988) explain that group belongingness and normative behavior, or conformity to group norms, are inextricable products of a cognitive process of categorization that generates a perceptual distortion (accentuation) responsible for stereotyping.

indicate that they either disengaged from or never developed a strong self-identification with the group. The majority of these participants stayed in their group and were motivated by a combination of material incentives and coercion, suggesting that pragmatic reasons may have driven their contributions.

For instance, Cindy joined the Catatumbo Bloc of the AUC after becoming a widow to support her seven children. She explained, *"I needed that income, and they [the AUC] knew my situation. They allowed me to be around my kids as much as possible to watch over them."* Individual-level role identities serve to provide positive self-conceptions and explain why Cindy referred to herself as an individual, saying, "I," and identified herself in a role such as, "I provided health care for the group." This role identity prevented her from identifying with others in the group and seeing herself or self-categorizing as a member despite being part of the group (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Since she had minimal reservation-level benefits, the AUC did not need to socialize her for compliance (Gates, 2002, 2017). She also did not require a significant investment to stay in the group, being the sole provider for her seven children, living in Tibu where there were limited opportunities for work as a health provider with her basic training, and, most importantly, because others knew she was with the AUC, blocking other alternatives. Despite Cindy never adopting an identity closely connected to the AUC, she said she never considered leaving and only demobilized following the orders of the commanders of her bloc. She shared that up until her demobilization, she performed her assignments because these required using skills that she, as an individual, possessed. This explanation confirms that her role identity prevented her from taking on the group's social identity Burke and Stets (2009).[34] For her, what she did differ from what the prototypical member did, so she was not like them. Hence, she did not disengage when the group demobilized because she was not as involved as the prototypical member in the first place.

Sandra joined the Cordoba Bloc of the AUC when the father of her three children left, forcing her to provide for them due to limited employment options stemming from her lack

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[34] In her case, the role identity she has is an individual identity. Some people adopt role identities that are collective identities too, which is why some participants who identified with their role as combatants identified with the group they were fighting for. Burke and Stets (2009) explain: "We need to be careful about understanding when a person is acting in a role on the basis of a role identity or is part of a collective or group and acting on the basis of the social identity."

of education. Joining the AUC meant leaving her family behind and relocating to a different region. While Sandra and Cindy shared a common reason for joining, Sandra underwent militarization and changed her identity as it hindered assimilation.

Sandra shared that interacting with AUC members led her to adopt the "para" behavior, shedding perceived weaknesses and embracing resilience. Amid militarized men, she forged a stronger identity, challenging traditional gender norms. Assuming family responsibilities and following orders, Sandra's self-categorization reshaped her views on gender roles and impacted her personal identity.[35] Group membership brought newfound worthiness, making her feel *"berraquita"* (resilient) and aiding her adaptation to the group's environment.

Away from her family and through social attraction, Sandra's combatant identity took precedence, aligning with her situation.[36] Interacting with group members verified her social identity, fostering a sense of belonging and raising her self-worth. She saw herself as a group member, experiencing positive feelings when accepted and valued by other AUC members for who she was, not just for what she was doing for them.[37]

Even though Sandra's identification as an AUC member boosted her self-esteem, she felt a sense of relief upon learning about the group's disbandment. While she embraced her identity as an AUC combatant and felt a strong connection to the group, she also faced ongoing challenges in her role as a combatant. Sandra actively adhered to AUC norms as a group member, but with the group's dissolution, she could no longer identify herself as a member. This led to her psychological disengagement, which involved withdrawing from the group's normative expectations and rejecting the socially defined rights and obligations associated with her role as an AUC combatant (Ebaugh, 1988).

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[35] Ebaugh (1988, p. 22) explains that personal identity is formed by the internalization of role expectations and the reactions of others to one's position in the social structure, leading to a mutable self. To illustrate this, Sandra exited her role as a mother to take on the role identity of a combatant. She brought with her the sensitivity and weakness traits that were part of her self-concept, and these persisted until she found stability in viewing herself as a combatant

[36] Identity salience refers to the degree to which a particular role is involved in different situations. The higher the identity in the role hierarchy, the more likely that identity will be invoked in various situations. Social identity theorists discuss the switching of identities between personal and social. They have established that the group can exert control over an individual through their feelings of identification with the group in a typical social identity situation in cases when that collective identity presents the best fit and is the most accessible to a group member (Burke and Stets, 2009; Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

[37] Identity verification occurs when perceived self-in-situation meanings align with identity-standard meanings to ensure that the meanings of behavior remain consistent with the identity standard (Burke and Stets, 2009).

4.2.2 Becoming an Ex-Member of an Armed Group Following an Order to Lay Down Arms

I interviewed 11 participants who became ex-members of their group after the FARC signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016, leading to the laying down of their arms.[38] Five of them opted for collective reincorporation and resided in ETCRs during the interviews. Two participants in this subset were released from prison with the status of political prisoners.[39]

Four individuals in this subset considered themselves FARC members at the time of the interview, with two living in an ETCR and two residing outside.[40] They stressed that the FARC, as an organization, did not cease to exist but transformed into a political party following the peace treaty, and that's why they still were members. For them, while abandoning armed conflict, the Comunes Political party adheres to the FARC's goals, aiming to consolidate regional and national political authority to bring about the change they previously pursued through armed means. By supporting the Comunes Political Party, they continue to live FARC membership.

Among these four participants, only one mentioned that considering herself a FARC member made it impossible for her to self-categorize as a civilian. However, other participants in this subset also did not feel the category "civilian"" applied to them. Richard explained that he could not self-categorize as a civilian because he associates that category with anti-values. Ramiro shared that he views civilians as neutrals and that since he maintains his opposition to the government, he cannot be a civilian. Gladys expressed that she cannot self-categorize as a civilian when those in that category do not see her as an equal. This diverse range of perspectives within the subset highlights the nuanced and evolving nature of their self-identification within the context of the peace agreement. It illustrates that when armed groups disband, former members undergo a process of redefining the categories through which they self-identify.

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[38] The Participants living in ETCRs were Richard (ETCR in Mesetas), Aurora (ETCR Dabeiba), Luis, Marlon, and Juan (Icononzo ETCR). The participants living outside of an ETCR were Rana, Miguel, Gladys, Ingrid, Francisco, and Alberto.

[39] Gladys and Ramiro.

[40] Gladys, Alberto, Pablo, and Juan.

The peace agreement impacted the social identity of those members who had integrated group membership in the FARC into their self-concept.[41] Until then, they self-identified as part of the FARC, held positive evaluations of the group, and had emotional connections to it.[42] They also embraced FARC meanings and shared them with other members. The transformation of the FARC into a political entity altered those meanings, along with the rights and obligations individuals used to have as members, leading to the loss of accessible categories that had previously helped them make sense of immediate situations when the FARC was an armed group.

In the interviews, these 11 participants self-categorized either as *"firmantes de paz"* (signatories for peace) or *"reincorporados"* or *"persona en proceso de reincorporación"* (individuals undergoing reincorporation). These forward-looking labels distinguish them from terms like "ex-FARC," "ex-member," or "ex-combatant," and underscore that those adopting these labels are actively transitioning into civilian life while working toward peace. Opting for these designations, or self-categorization, reflects a proactive approach to nurturing positive self-esteem and social identity. It also maintains a connection to their previous social identity as FARC members, as some emphasized during the interviews that the FARC always sought a negotiated resolution to the conflict.

Individuals seek positive self-esteem by favorably comparing themselves, while positive social identity arises from favorable comparisons between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Consequently, former FARC members identifying themselves as *"firmantes de paz"* or *"reincorporados"* emphasize that these categories encompass individuals striving for peace as a collective good, contrasting with other categories that may include those pursuing selfish or personal interests, such as former FARC members who demobilized individually and individuals advocating for the continuation of the armed conflict. This categorization distinguishes them from the *"desmovilizados"* category, which encompasses those who deserted and demobilized on their own, as well as former members of the AUC

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[41] Self-categorization involves grouping oneself and fellow category members as "us" and distinguishing them from members of another category, forming social identity. Changes in the group can impact the level of self-categorization as social identity through modifications in the shared traits that had grouped members together.

[42] The components of social identity are a cognitive component, an evaluative component, and an affective component.

who collectively demobilized under the Uribe administration.[43]

4.2.3 Separating From the Armed Group After Agreeing to Dismantle it

Giancarlo, formerly the head of finances for an AUC bloc that operated in the north of Colombia was born into a family deeply entrenched in paramilitary operations. His social circle naturally revolved around the group's activities. He recounted the origins of this group, stating,

> We started as a self-defense group in aiming to combat rebel kidnappings and extortion by guerrillas. I joined at the age of 16, with my uncle as commander, along with other family members, neighbors, and friends. Our primary goal was to protect the *campesinos* in the area, and we always included them in our activities, welcoming everyone to our gatherings. Despite some of us being armed we were part of the same community. Our close relationship with the locals was evident as we frequently stayed in their homes and entered their lands.

He shared the collective belief that they were combatting guerrilla forces and providing security in the absence of state presence. Embracing the group's social identity, he adopted its perspective, fostering an "us versus them" mentality—seeing the group as the righteous defenders ("us") against guerrillas and their sympathizers ("them"). This distinction solidified his sense of belonging and his role within the group, despite not engaging in combat himself. Though not the typical member, Giancarlo embodied the group's attributes, particularly in his entrusted financial administration role. His statements reflect a group-centric identity, where he viewed himself and fellow members positively while negatively evaluating outsiders. This sense of "we" versus "them" further underlines his ingroup loyalty and outgroup bias.

Giancarlo recounted how, despite their initial desire to maintain autonomy, their self-defense group was assimilated by the AUC under the Castaño brothers in late 2002, even adopting a different name under them.[44] This transition altered the dynamics of ingroup

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[43] This subset of participants disliked being referred to as individuals who demobilized. Also, some of them disliked their process to be seen under the DDR framework. (Juan, Francisco, and Alberto's testimonies particularly.)

[44] The consolidation of the ACCU (Peasant Self Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá) under the AUC occurred between 1999 and 2000, resulting in the formation of the Norte Bloc. The AUC's expansion across Colombia led to conflict with the group that, until that moment, had controlled that part of the country in late 2002 and early 2003. Its leader surrendered control of the region and continued to operate, but now under an AUC bloc until its collective demobilization.

relations significantly. Giancarlo expressed apprehension about the loss of independence, increased insecurity, and a surge in civilian casualties under the leadership of the AUC. He lamented their indifference to truth, which often resulted in violence and forced displacement in that region. Being under the AUC reshaped Giancarlo's perception of who belonged to the "us" category in intergroup relations. While the AUC bloc under which they operated shared a counterinsurgency agenda, Giancarlo noted distinctions in their methods.[45] He observed that other paramilitary groups arriving in his territory targeted locals, lacking the same connections as his group. Despite similar objectives, such as dismantling guerrilla support networks, the AUC Bloc relied heavily on drug trafficking for funding and assured that in his role, he had to let them use their land for those purposes. Ultimately, he felt disconnected from the group upon its absorption by that bloc.

Working now under the AUC did not result in him feeling part of the larger structure mainly because this association did not contribute to his self-enhancement or reduce uncertainty, two qualities that are important when feeling part of a group (Burke and Stets, 2009). Ever since they arrived in their region, the environment became unpredictable, mostly due to their involvement in the drug trade, which Giancarlo told me he could not question or oppose because those who had arrived were extremely powerful and, in that sense, dangerous. However, as the AUC operated in an area traditionally controlled by his group, he explained that this association ultimately linked him to drug trafficking, leading to him facing an extradition order to the United States. Giancarlo recognized the complexity of his situation:

> After the extradition order, I felt chased, fleeing whenever I sensed the authorities. It was draining. I understood I had to confront the authorities to lead a normal life. Ultimately, I wanted the group to demobilize and my leadership role to end, desiring to live like everyone else. The challenge was giving up the effective but illegal security we provided. We discussed demobilization with my uncle, the group's top commander, agreeing it was time to disband. By then, around 10,000 men had already demobilized.

Surrendering with his unit aimed to clarify his true involvement in the recent events in

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[45] This trend was not unique to the arrival of the AUC in the area. It was reported that the original group had also employed displacement as a tactic to root out guerrilla elements within the population. Additionally, conflicts between them and the FARC caused displacements, and it was strategically executed for economic purposes when the group needed to control specific areas for their operations.

their region. He stated:

> I realized I was in trouble when I heard about the extradition order. It was a turning point in my life, a situation you wouldn't wish on anyone. Imagine, at 23 years old, facing extradition. I knew I had to address it and considered surrendering to authorities in Panama in 2005, just before our group's demobilization. At that time, I wasn't facing charges in Colombia. However, I understood this stemmed from my role in the group—I managed the finances and had been receiving money from those involved in drug shipments from territories we had traditionally controlled, whether by speedboats or other routes.

It has been established that ceasing criminal activities often follows various negative outcomes, such as imprisonment, with several processes reinforcing this decision (National Research Council, 2007). Therefore, the organizational changes affecting Giancarlo's group and his role within it, along with the extradition order he faced, may have motivated him to end his association with the group and the associated responsibilities. This could explain why he, as an individual, favored the collective demobilization of his group, as it could have catalyzed his desire to maintain a sustained absence from the criminal activities in which he was involved by virtue of his role. Giancarlo may have developed an awareness and willingness to end his involvement in the paramilitary group, recognizing it as both desirable and necessary to live an ordinary life. However, since this alone was insufficient, the collective demobilization of his group could have served as the "hook for change" or the structural component that, together with his agency, could lead him to adopt a new, law-abiding role, aligning with his goal of living the life of an average person.

Giancarlo explained that he and other commanders of the original group agreed to demobilize and dismantle their group when they perceived that the extralegal governance their group had provided was no longer necessary, as they believed that state forces could take control. His bloc demobilized in early 2006.

Considering that the disengagement process involves shifts in role sets—the network of individuals associated with an individual in a specific role (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988)—these changes could have contributed to Giancarlo's disengagement. As the former head of finances for the group and nephew of the commander, Giancarlo interacted with various individuals, including family members, friends, landowners, peasants, fighters, businesspeople, contraband traders, local coca growers, drug traffickers, and others subject to his group's

taxation. However, with the appointment of a new leader in the region, Giancarlo's interactions expanded to include combatants from other regions, more powerful AUC commanders, government officials, and prominent drug traffickers. Consequently, his role underwent a significant transformation. Under the AUC bloc, Giancarlo experienced significant role transitions (Ashforth, 2001). There was a disruption in the consistency of his role, as he continued to oversee finances for the front but found himself subordinate to external figures. Simultaneously, he was required to maintain his role as commander among his people. This understanding is relevant in interpreting his disengagement because it suggests Giancarlo ceased to feel part of the same group, which had implications for his self-identification as a member. Ashforth (2001) explains, "The more involuntary one perceives a role transition to be, the greater is the threat to one's sense of control (even if the role transition is otherwise desirable) and, indeed, perhaps one's ability to maintain valued identities and a sense of meaningfulness and belonging."

Giancarlo identified several "push" factors"elements tied to his experiences within the group that drove him away and directly impacted his self-identification with the group's social identity, suggesting his disengagement during his bloc's demobilization. These factors included having excessive responsibilities in his role, gaining a higher profile, making him a target for enemies and authorities, feeling unacknowledged by those he used to lead due to the structure being under the AUC bloc, being unrecognized as a commander by newcomers despite operating in his area, facing pressure managing large sums of money and being held accountable for their use, and feeling responsible for the well-being of people in the area where he grew up.

Conversely, the "pull" factors or external influences that drew him toward other social categories and identifications, leading him to embrace a more conventional social role, including the strengthening of state forces, which he perceived would protect territories they formerly controlled from the guerrillas (rendering his group unnecessary), President Uribe's demobilization offer, the desire for a low-profile life surrounded by family, the opportunity to travel the world (restricted due to his increased profile in the AUC), facing legal charges at a young age and wishing to address them, and receiving personal benefits in his sentence for demobilizing his structure.

4.3 CONCLUSION

Although I hypothesized that disengaged individuals would find it easier to adopt a civilian identity than those who remain psychologically connected to the armed group, the reality is more complex. Disengagement helped them leave the group, but they lacked a plan for post-demobilization, leaving them unprepared for the challenges they encountered.

In cases where demobilization led to involuntary disengagement, minors received support not available to non-combatant minors, serving as reparations for their recruitment. These participants would likely have stayed with their group if not captured, indicating that although they may not have strongly identified with their group, they lacked better alternatives. The relocation of one of these minors facilitated her disengagement, showing that individuals reintegrated at a young age can restart their lives. Another individual, who also rejoined society as a minor, received remuneration to support his education, aiming for socioeconomic improvement in an environment where other armed groups continue to recruit vulnerable individuals.

Some disengaged members discuss shirking and defection, highlighting the implications of psychological disconnection from the group. Collective demobilization affected members unable to fulfill previous roles, leading to readjustment challenges. Their testimonies confirm that psychological disengagement is a personal process, easier for some than others.

While some combatants merely comply with group norms without fully internalizing them, others face challenges readjusting to civilian life after demobilization. Disengagement involves leaving behind not just group membership but also established roles and ways of life.

Former combatants physically separate from their armed group through desertion, voluntary or forced demobilization, or peace processes. Demobilization is considered when it offers opportunities for exploration of other identities or roles. Experiences differ based on the group's fate post-peace agreement. A peace agreement resulted in physical separation from the group for some, prompting the redefinition of the identity of some of the participants. This chapter also sheds light on the disengagement of a high-ranking leader and how that process impacts armed group dismantling and his own civilian identity reconfiguration.

In the following chapter, I explore how former combatants transition into civilian life, often facing an identity crisis as they navigate disengagement from the armed group without psychological closure.

5.0 THE TRANSITIONAL PHASE AND IDENTITY AMBIGUITY

5.1 EX-COMBATANT IDENTITY AND LIMINALITY

Demobilization signifies a process of transitioning combatants from a mobilized state. It entails a psychological departure from the militarized mindset associated with membership in an armed group (Shibuya, 2012). For many ex-combatants, their identity as fighters persists even post-demobilization, including those who have deserted. In the Colombian context, DDR programming deliberately aims to dismantle this fighter identity (Schmidt, 2021). Consequently, the psychological journey to civilian status entails a transition period that elicits feelings of doubt, confusion, and ambivalence, prompting ex-combatants to reconsider their collective self or social identity (Ibarra, 2005). The transition triggers uncertainty regarding their identity and behavior to occupy another social position.

van Gennep (1960) introduced a structural framework elucidating the identity transformation process and the role of rituals in organizing transitional phases. Ex-combatants encounter ambiguity as they cross the threshold before establishing themselves as civilians. This liminality, derived from the word "limen," Latin for threshold, denotes their state of being stuck between past and future identifications. Consequently, they navigate a phase of uncertainty, neither fully identifying with their armed group nor as civilians, losing the narrative thread of their lives (Ibarra, 2005). The transitional individual perceives this stage as a state of limbo, or what Hogg (2021) terms as a time of self-uncertainty in a new social context.[1]

Social psychologists recognize uncertainty as a primary motivator of human behavior. Individuals are driven to pursue clarity, a sense of self and purpose, and a feeling of belonging and solidarity with others to mitigate their uncertainty (Fromm, 1947; Hogg, 2021). Therefore, at the core of their social transition to civilian life lies how ex-combatants manage the uncertainty associated with this identity limbo. According to the uncertainty-identity

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[1] Hogg (2021) includes in the many potential causes of self-uncertainty new social contexts, life crises, relationship changes, new work circumstances, technological and social change, immigration and emigration, sociopolitical and economic turmoil, and even pandemics and natural disasters.

theory, they should seek to reduce feelings of uncertainty about themselves by driving group identification (Hogg, 2021). This adjustment process involves individuals grappling with a loss of psychological stability as they shift from their known social position to a new one and embark on a quest for a new social identity, seeking new meanings in life (Haslam et al., 2009; Hogg et al., 2017).

This chapter delves into how participants are shaping, or have shaped, a new identity after ending their membership in armed groups, acknowledging that the values, beliefs, and norms they once embraced no longer apply in their new social context. With demobilization, they not only left behind their former comrades and activities but also underwent a profound shift in their understanding of the social world and their place within it. The bonds formed with fellow group members, the influence of group identity on their self-concept, and the militarization of their minds have all impacted their transition to civilian life. Therefore, as ex-combatants reintegrate into society, they must address the uncertainty they feel and adapt to develop or embrace an identity that aligns with their new social environment.

Terrorism scholars have contended that "what happens after disengagement, in terms of creating an identity that takes into account a previous role, is also an integral part of the role exit" (Kassimeris, 2011). When leaving behind a role, there is tension between an individual's past, present, and future. Ex-combatants struggle to include past identities and a role residual into present conceptions of self to reintegrate. However, since this is a self-reflective process, the presence of elements of their past can help them self-identify as ex-members of an armed group, which in itself is a social category, and how that facilitates the incorporation of some of them.

The first section of this chapter examines the transition phase of former armed group members, investigating the aftermath of the choice to demobilize. It explores how participants carry the lived experience of the group, face the stigma of their past life, and grapple with the implications of decisions made during demobilization. In the second section, the focus shifts to the implications of the FARC's transformation into a political party on the lives of former members. It considers the experiences of those who rejoined society having redefined their membership in a group that transformed, including the disengagement of some as an outcome of this transformation. The third part discusses the transition of

participants who rejoined society during adolescence, a pivotal period for self-discovery and identity formation. Many ex-combatants join armed groups as minors, where the group's identity becomes their primary source of identification. Some of them also transition to civilian life as minors, which coincides with their journey into adulthood and their realization of their victim condition. Lastly, the chapter delves into the transition phase of a high-ranking member of the AUC involved in dismantling his armed group, a paramilitary bloc. It explores his ongoing involvement in investigations related to his military unit, which he describes as a juridical limbo that keeps him in a permanent state of liminality.

Since this dissertation is grounded in the hypothesis that the social identification of rebels and ex-combatants holds the key to comprehending the nature of their disengagement, their inclination towards demobilization, the roles they embrace post-disengagement, and their subsequent (re)socialization efforts, understanding how former members of armed groups manage the uncertainty connected to their identity redefinition and how they cross this threshold is crucial. The chapter examines the experiences of different subsets of participants to illustrate how each way of ending membership in an armed group (desertion, collective demobilization with the dismantlement of the group, or collective demobilization with the transformation of the armed group into a political party) significantly impacts the identity redefinition of these ex-members, thereby impacting their reintegration into civilian communities.

5.1.1 Transitioning to Civilian Life After Demobilization

Ex-combatants often find themselves caught between their past and future identities, navigating a sense of limbo characterized by doubt and ambivalence. The conflict between these identities leaves them uncertain about how to define themselves and their place in society, resulting in feelings of doubt and ambivalence as they transition to civilian life. This phenomenon is not unique to this social transition. Similar identity renegotiations have been observed among individuals disengaging from violent extremism and in studies of criminal desistance as individuals seek a meaningful identity (Greenwood, 2019; Maruna and Farrall,

2004).[2]

McFee (2016) observed in Colombia that ex-combatants embody at least two distinct selves: they are demobilized combatants seeking government support, and they are "passing" citizens attempting to conceal their former affiliations to avoid stigma. In explaining how individuals construct their ex-role, Ebaugh argues that even when individuals make socially desirable changes, they still encounter negative societal reactions rooted in their past identities (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 158). This situation leaves them trapped in a "no man's land" (the liminal state) as they lose the strong primary group association with their former peers and face challenges in gaining acceptance in mainstream society. Consequently, they often find themselves caught between two worlds, experiencing minimal acceptance from either. Nussio and Ugarriza (2021) wrote about the emotional legacies of war for Colombia's ex-combatants, noting, among other findings, that shame over past actions and fear of social rejection connect the past and present of ex-combatants, driving their behavior in the context of postwar DDR.

Giancarlo, former member of the AUC, talked about this:

> I often have to disclose my past as a former member of the AUC when dealing with government offices, especially in ongoing investigations related to my bloc or events promoting national reconciliation. Each time I attend a hearing or participate in these investigations, I am forced to revisit that period of my life. I want to move on, use my real name, and leave the past behind but I cannot. Some may find me interesting since my case is so well-known that they think they know who I am, but the majority choose to avoid me because of what they have heard, fearing associating with me could damage their reputation.

Transitioning to a new identity involves various stages, one of which is validating the new role. This process encompasses both internal and external validation. Internally, individuals undergo a psychological process of abandoning their previous status or disengagement as they adopt a new identity. Externally, this transition is confirmed through ceremonies and rituals in which others acknowledge the end of membership in the group and the individual's new social position. These rites of passage symbolically mark the beginning of an individual's reintegration into society and serve a broader social function beyond encourag-

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[2] Greenwood (2019) saw this in foreign fighters returning to Denmark after participating in jihadist militias in the Middle East actively engage in reinterpreting their journeys and reconstructing their relationships, both personal and societal. Essentially, these returnees embark on a journey of rediscovery and redefinition, grappling with the complexities of their past as they strive to carve out a new place in the world.

ing help-seeking or prosocial behavior; they contribute to healing and reconciliation at the community level.

The experience of Henry, a former member of the FARC 7th front operating in the Guayabero region in San José del Guaviare, offers insight into validation. On the one hand, his decision to desert from the FARC reflects a meticulous evaluation of the risks of ongoing engagement in armed conflict. His choice to demobilize was influenced by strategic awareness, physical preparedness, and trust in the government's assurances, which pushed him to leave behind his previous status as a member of the FARC. On the other hand, Henry mentioned that only after he received acknowledgment of his rights from government officials upon reintegrating into society did he begin to perceive himself differently from who he had been until that moment. By welcoming him into his new role, they validated his personal choice and indicated that society approved of his role change, providing him with the external validation he needed. He shared:

> In the battalion where I demobilized, a senior Army Officer in the Human Rights division welcomed me to freedom. He told me that I could receive help. They provided clothes for me, I underwent a medical evaluation, and I was then sent to a hotel they had within the battalion. I stayed there for about a month and a half. It was during this time that I learned about my rights. Knowing that I had rights made me realize that I could truly change, move on, and become someone else.

Sandra is a participant who joined the Cordoba Bloc of the AUC when the father of her three children left, forcing her to provide for them due to limited employment options stemming from her lack of education. Joining the AUC meant leaving her family behind and relocating to a different region. Upon returning to her place of origin with her family, interactions with different social groups created a disparity between the identity meanings tied to the AUC identity that Sandra had embraced and brought with her and the self-in-situation meanings that would define her in a family and community context. This incongruence prompted a modification in Sandra's behavior, aligning the meanings of the self with identity-standard meanings and facilitating identity verification in her family role. Her post-demobilization behavior was now independent and based on personal standards. Sandra stated: *"The person who demobilized was very different from the person who returned. Although I started a family at a young age with no education, I understood that my time in*

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the AUC made me stronger; it gave me skills to be independent, and that helped me as a single mother." Her experience illustrates the adjustment in identity and behavior that results from the end of membership in an armed group, particularly when the group is dismantled.

5.1.1.1 Transitioning After Choosing to Leave an Armed Group

Approximately one out of three participants in my sample actively sought to transition to civilian life by voluntarily terminating their membership in the armed group and entering the demobilization program. Some scholars suggest that a voluntary exit makes it easier for individuals to disengage from a role and adapt to new ones (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988). Others contend that when people voluntarily choose to transition, the transition phase arises as they develop competing commitments to and investments in two or more seemingly incompatible futures (Ibarra, 2005).

Based on this premise, I expected to observe smoother transitions to civilian life among participants who ended their membership in armed groups and demobilized, compared to those who remained affiliated until the group chose to demobilize collectively or to lay down its arms. However, these participants still acknowledged challenges in adapting to their new social reality, lacking concrete plans for life after leaving the group and feeling uncertain about the practical aspects of demobilization. Role-exit theory framework suggests that acquiring a new role may or may not be important for those exiting a role, with a primary focus on moving away from an undesirable present role. For instance, Germán, a former member of the José Manuel Martínez Quiroz front of the ELN operating in Norte de Santander on the border with Venezuela, shared that he knew he had to leave despite uncertainty about what would follow. He mentioned relocating to the city after demobilization, feeling unable to stay where he was with his group, which was still active. Germán described feeling disoriented after leaving the ELN and shared he learned what to do post-demobilization from a fellow ex-combatant also transitioning into civilian life:

> I left the ELN while we were in La Gabarra. Over the next three months, I made my way to the Atlantic coast, surviving as I could. When I arrived in Barranquilla, I met someone who I could tell had been in an armed group. We struck up a conversation because she also sensed that I had been involved and assumed I had already demobilized. When I explained that I hadn't, she was the one who showed me what steps I needed to take.

One issue Germán encountered during this transitional phase was his inability to verify his past membership in the ELN. He explained, *"I couldn't demobilize when I initially wanted to because I couldn't prove my identity as I joined the group as a minor and didn't possess a Colombian identification card when I left."* Instead, he had a fake Venezuelan ID that the group provided, as they operated on both sides of the border. When Germán attempted to prove his affiliation, he was sent home, which he found frustrating. Eventually, the Army received reports from Norte de Santander that corroborated the information he had shared, confirming his association with the group, and his official demobilization process started. Moments like this can not only impact how long an individual is in this liminal stage, stuck between an identity as a member of an armed group and self-identifying as a civilian, but could even discourage some deserters from demobilizing.

Germán shared that the Army assisted him in locating his father so he could confirm Germán's Colombian citizenship and obtain a Colombian identification card, a crucial step for enrollment in the program. This aspect of his transition proved challenging due to his forced recruitment and strained family relations. Germán explained,

> I had been forcibly recruited, and my family didn't look for me when this happened. I felt I had no choice but to comply because I had nowhere else to go; my family abandoned me there. So when I left the ELN, I didn't even consider looking for them because they had essentially given up on me and let me go.

Despite his resentment, Germán realized he needed their cooperation to complete the necessary paperwork for the next stage of his journey. He dealt with the challenge of confronting his family before he could adapt to his new social context and redefine as a civilian. Germán received psychological support to address the trauma he experienced growing up in the ELN and explained that working out and practicing sports helped him leave his membership in the ELN behind. During our conversation, he said, *"I'm not a bad man. I am a victim. I did not join the guerrillas because I wanted to. I am a victim here."* Germán's acceptance of his victimhood played a crucial role in his transition to assuming a civilian identity, echoing similar experiences observed among individuals reintegrating into society as minors and those others who were also recruited at a young age.[3]

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[3] Germán was forcibly recruited at 12. When he joined them, the group assigned him minor tasks and

Javier, a former member of the AUC Calima bloc, was in the group for 13 years. His disengagement unfolded during his imprisonment, coinciding with the collective demobilization of his group. He shared:

> While in prison, I realized that being a combatant and wielding a weapon didn't truly resolve anything. My involvement in the AUC turned me into a killing machine and earned me enemies. I grew concerned about my situation. Contemplating the many problems I faced, I decided to demobilize. Upon my release, I was determined to lead a different life, so I began to consider how I would shape my future and committed to living differently.

Knowing he would spend several years in prison, Javier used the time to acquire skills for his post-release life. These skills broadened the things he could do upon leaving prison, which helped him redefine himself as someone who could occupy other roles and who was different from the person who was imprisoned and from the convict. Although reluctant to discuss his civilian life adjustment through his prison experience, arguing he has been trying to move past it, Javier explained,

> It's not just about going through the formal demobilization process; your mindset must also change. A lot of the people who left the group with me ended up getting arrested again because they couldn't stay out of trouble. I was determined to leave that life behind when I got out of prison. That's why I focused on studying. I had plenty of time to learn new skills while I was there. I got my high school diploma and took other courses offered by the INPEC (National Penitentiary and Prison Institute of Colombia) and the municipality where the prison was located.

Something that became evident in talking with Javier is that during his transition, he carefully considered his future options with and without demobilization, a decision he reflected on while in prison. He had disengaged and desired to move on to a different path. However, he understood that by demobilizing, he would have access to financial benefits and government support to ease his transition to civilian life. Without demobilization, he would have to reintegrate into society independently, carrying the labels of ex-combatant and ex-convict, which come with negative stereotypes. Recognizing these challenges, he ultimately chose to demobilize, believing that the support from the ARN could help him overcome

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kept him tied because they were afraid he was going to escape. He shared that when he turned 14, the group allowed him to receive political and military training. He explained that it was then that he began to understand why he was there, as the emphasis of the classes he received was on the injustices that exist in Colombia, things that he could easily see around him.

obstacles and secure a job, paving the way for him to establish a civilian identity despite his past involvement with the AUC and incarceration.

One participant, Cristian, deserted the FARC to join the ELN, providing insight into why some members switch groups during the conflict. While officially demobilized from the ELN by the ARN system after five years, Cristian revealed during the interview that he had previously spent 18 years with the FARC until 2003. Disenchanted with the FARC's departure from its original principles and political decline, he held a higher regard for his time with the ELN. Cristian's disillusionment with the FARC stemmed from his disagreement with the leadership transition from Jacobo Arenas to Alfonso Cano, whom he considered inadequate and blamed for the group's political decline.[4] Reflecting on his personal experience during this decline, he stated:

> Under Cano, the organization lost its political goals and became involved in criminal activities. In my unit, leaders indulged in luxuries, while we, the rank-and-file, fought for social transformation on the battlefield. I witnessed infighting over money, resulting in some members being killed by the group and incidents in which members simply took the money and left. I chose to leave before things worsened further

Cristian remained committed to revolution, joining the ELN in the Serranía de San Lucas region. Despite his ideological dedication, he also became disillusioned with the ELN when he observed the group's involvement in criminal activities. He expressed his dismay, sharing,

> I felt exploited. I didn't expect financial compensation for my duties because I understood that I was not there for money. However, our basic needs weren't being met. It was infuriating! You know, having to fulfill your duties while knowing that the group is involved in illegal gold mining and others in the group are getting rich.

His case illustrates the demobilization claim of fighters quitting the fight when their groups no longer advance their ideals. Having witnessed the ideological deterioration of the FARC and the ELN led to Cristian's disengagement, which led to his exit, but also to a disillusionment with life as an insurgent, paving the way to his self-identification as a civilian.

I inquired why Cristian chose to demobilize in 2008, given that Colombia's socioeconomic conditions had not significantly changed since 2003, when he opted to join another group

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[4] Cristian attributed the FARC's political decline to him, noting that he allowed the FARC to detach from the Colombian Communist Party, which Cristian believed was crucial for including urban areas in the revolution combining all forms of struggle.

to continue his fight for social justice. He explained that after 23 years in the guerrillas, he felt less physically capable of enduring the demanding mountain life typical for armed group members. In his final years with the FARC, he transitioned from combatant to a role providing medical care, assigned due to his experience and trustworthiness, which could have impacted his morale. Joining the ELN in his 40s, he emphasized his expertise in medical care, knowing it would be valued. As his physical abilities further declined, he began contemplating life outside the group. Recognizing the challenges of employment at his age and with his background, he understood that demobilizing was necessary to access support from the Colombian government for his reintegration.

Cristian revealed that his sexual orientation as a gay man was another factor influencing his decision to leave in 2008. He had concealed his identity in both the FARC and the ELN, but as he aged and found it harder to maintain his previous lifestyle, he desired companionship and the opportunity to grow old with a partner, which he knew would not be possible within the armed groups. Within these groups, his sexuality and gender identity were suppressed to conform to heteronormative standards, likely to align with positive categories and maintain his status as a typical member. Also, individuals often seek alignment with positive categories to enhance self-esteem (Abrams and Hogg, 1998). This adherence to militarized masculinity, shaped by combat training and associated with strength, toughness, and aggressive heterosexuality, was prominent in the narratives of participants.[5] However, as Cristian confronted the inevitability of aging, he likely realized the diminishing value of his bodily capital and the decreasing relevance of adhering to a militarized masculinity, contributing to his disengagement and decision to demobilize in 2008. This realization likely facilitated his adoption of a civilian identity as he rejoined society.

Although traditional masculine norms, emphasizing traits like aggression and dominance, tend to be reinforced as individuals rejoin society after conflict, this tends to overshadow

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[5] Dietrich Ortega (2012) points at the evidence of varying and flexible forms of masculinity in armed groups in Colombia and elsewhere. However, this dominant form of militarized masculinity was prominent in the narratives of the participants I interviewed. Also, in her work, Theidon (2009) discusses the *"technique du corps"* that shapes the body and demeanor of soldiers among ex-combatants in Colombia. She highlights the adoption of militarized masculinity resulting from combat training, including emotional and physical indoctrination. It involves the fusion of masculine practices with the use of weapons. Duncanson found that this type of masculinity is also associated with practices of strength, toughness, and aggressive heterosexuality.

alternative forms of masculinity that may have emerged within militant contexts (Dietrich Ortega, 2012). These alternative forms of masculinity could shed light on how Cristian redefined his identity as he rejoined society.

While exploring the factors that contribute to the formation of gender identities among ex-combatants and considering how these identities evolve or are reinforced during reintegration into society, which is undeniably important, I encountered challenges discussing this with Cristian during the interview. Therefore, I chose not to pursue this line of inquiry. The difficulty stemmed mainly from the private nature of the topic and the possibility that he might be hesitant to openly discuss personal experiences related to gender and sexuality as part of his transition to civilian life.[6]

5.1.1.2 On Leaving An Armed Group And Living In A State Of Permanent Liminality

Pipe, a former member of the Armando Calvo Guerrero front of the ELN, spent approximately eight years with the organization before deciding to demobilize on his own. Among the participants studied, Pipe stands out as the sole member who not only shared information about his group with Colombian forces upon demobilization but also provided them with on-the-ground support. He recounted how, after his demobilization in 2012, he has had to relocate multiple times to different cities with his wife and child for their safety. These forced relocations have meant abandoning everything they have and not feeling able to live in one place safely.

When I inquired about these relocations, I assumed the Colombian government had helped him, but he explained that he was on his own finding where to relocate:

> You can be in one of those shelters, but you, in the end, have to figure things out for your family. In those places, people are coming from other groups and they are not designed to make you feel comfortable. They exist just until you figure out what you are going to do.

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[6] Had I explored this, I would have attempted to establish several key points. These include alternative forms of masculinity in the FARC and the ELN, the intersectionality of gender with other identities such as ethnicity or class, the role of gender in shaping relationships and power dynamics within guerrilla organizations, how ex-combatants reconcile their gender identity and sexuality after suppressing these aspects of their lives to conform to group norms, and which elements of his militarized masculine identity persist despite transitioning to civilian life and living openly as a gay man.

For instance, when I left the shelter, I chose to go to a place located south of the Tolima department and I stayed there a couple of months. They gave me $600,000 to support my relocation and pretty much wished me good luck. I got to my destination and it was hard because you know no one and, for that reason, people don't want you renting a room in their house.

Pipe shared that in Tolima, he sought assistance from the ARN as he had chosen to live there and argued that they shared his whereabouts with both the Army and the Attorney General's Office. As a result, both the Army and the Attorney General's Office showed up where he had relocated, looking for him to gather intelligence or seek his cooperation in ongoing operations against the ELN in Norte de Santander. His first assignment with them was talking about his experience of being demobilized in the Army's radio station, as this is known to have broad coverage to promote desertions in that area.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable to retaliation from his former group, Pipe decided to leave this town in Tolima. He chose to go to Bucaramanga, a larger city, in an attempt to evade detection and ensure his safety. He shared that he cried and lamented his situation because he never thought about having to live that way and with his family:

Before, I had dealt with sleeping in a hammock in the mountains, and then I saw us, my family and me, carrying with us all our belongings. That was really hard. The ARN was giving me $160,000, but it was 4 of us now, and accessing those funds was conditioned on my studying. I knew I could not study in one of the courses in the SENA to learn a trade to support my family because I had very basic schooling. I needed to work to cover all of our expenses.

The Army recruited Pipe to provide operational support, rearming him and assigning him a role akin to his previous one within the ELN. His tasks included decoding group messages, gathering intelligence from peasants, and aiding military operations for two years in the Catatumbo region. Despite initially feeling coerced, Pipe recognized his skills were valued by Colombian forces. Pipe had mixed feelings as he resented the ELN for having forced him and his family to relocate, leaving what they owned behind, yet felt pressured to assist the Army due to financial constraints. Moreover, his transition to supporting Colombian forces did not represent a significant departure from his past role, blurring the line between combatant and civilian identities post-demobilization. Pipe shared that the information he provided to the Army led to the capture of ELN leaders, further entangling him in their

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prosecution and increasing his exposure to retaliation.

Pipe collaborated with the Army for a couple of years, partly because the environment resembled what he was accustomed to and mostly because he felt at ease with them. He mentioned, *"I never had an issue with the troops; we got along fine as soldiers. I liked the commanders, too. All in all, we worked well together."* However, despite his collaboration with the Colombian government, he still faces distrust from those who only see him as a former ELN member. He recounted instances where police officers mistreated him, even after showing his demobilization credential (CODA certificate), and once stole from him. Reflecting on these incidents, Pipe revealed his lingering militarized mindset, expressing, *"Had I been armed, they would not have been able to mistreat me like that!"*

Although Pipe cited issues within his unit's command structure as a motivating factor for his disengagement and decision to exit the ELN, he regrets getting involved in supporting Colombian state forces after his demobilization. He expressed:

> My conflict with both the ELN and the government stems from the predicament I'm currently facing. While deserting the group was one thing, dealing with the government's demands was another. They approached me seeking information and in-ground assistance, conditioning my reintegration into society, including receiving CODA certification, on my cooperation. Feeling pressured, I reluctantly agreed, only to find myself and my wife in jeopardy. I now require protection just to go outside, provided by the Protection Unit, but only after surviving a gunshot and my wife enduring a physical assault. My continued exposure to retaliation from the group is a direct consequence of the information I shared with the Attorney General's Office. I somehow became a witness in an FBI case, resulting in an extradition to the United States that further exacerbated the situation. It's disheartening that despite providing invaluable information, I now find myself in constant danger.

One could argue that Pipe's perception of insecurity places him in a liminal phase, according to van Gennep (1960), as his identity remains ambiguous. Despite disengaging from the ELN, his involvement in assisting state forces extended his time in the war, preventing a complete transition to civilian life. Consequently, he has not yet embraced a civilian identity; he has not crossed that threshold. Since this decision continues to pose significant security threats to him, requiring protective measures, Pipe remains in a permanent state of liminality. The beginning of this period traces back to his demobilization, but what comes next appears more multifaceted. His case illustrates that transitioning to civilian life is not linear, with experiences in armed groups and post-demobilization settings leaving lasting impacts

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on individuals, influencing their everyday decision-making and interpersonal interactions, thereby affecting their incorporation into society.

Pipe shared that he does not miss anything from his time as a combatant in the ELN and recognizes that leaving was a good decision because he enjoys some aspects of life that were not part of his time as a combatant. However, he admits feeling he is facing danger alone, whereas before, he may have faced danger but felt the support of an armed structure.

5.1.2 The Transformation of an Armed Group Into a Political Party and its Impact on the Social Transition to Civilian Life

The peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC sanctioned the creation of a new political party, initially named Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (FARC kept as its acronym). After the collective demobilization in 2016, different factions within the organization pursued divergent paths. While the majority opted to transition into the political sphere and join the founding party, a minority defected, forming armed splinter groups.

Although FARC combatants supported the group's transformation into a political party, there were significant differences regarding its trajectory. Hardliners sought to maintain ties to the guerrilla's ideology, symbols, and origin story, while moderates advocated for a more contemporary image to broaden their appeal and distance themselves from aspects of their insurgent past (Curiel et al., 2023). At the root of this variation was the potential change of status of the group with the transformation. As conceived in social identity theory, status refers to the subjectively perceived outcomes of inter-group comparison (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). How people strive for or maintain positive social identity is heavily influenced by their subjective perceptions of the nature of the relations between groups, particularly how stable and legitimate the outcomes of the intergroup comparisons are.

Due to the nature of the FARC, their socialization system instilled a belief in social change, which is rooted in accepting the impermeability of intergroup boundaries and the relative impossibility of transitioning from a low-status group to a high-status one psychologically. They believed that the boundaries between groups are rigid, fixed, and impermeable;

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thus, individuals could not escape their lower status by simply redefining themselves outside of the group (rural, campesino, poor, oppressed) and into the dominant group (ruling class, urban, bourgeoisie, rich). The FARC emerged to challenge the legitimacy of this social order by employing a strategy of social competition, which relied on an armed struggle to effect social change.

The transformation of the FARC into a political party suggests their redefinition of the strategy. Comunes may have given up the armed struggle, but it still can compete with other groups or entities to promote their ideological agenda, gain support from the population, and ultimately achieve the desired social change. As a political party, it can be involved in activities such as advocating for reforms, mobilizing supporters, engaging in political or ideological battles, and resorting to confrontational tactics to challenge the status quo and advance the group's objectives. The transformation of the FARC into Comunes led members to reassess their affiliation as they transitioned to civilian life. Among 11 participants categorized as *"reincorporados"* or *"firmantes,"* only five discussed reevaluating their role as group members given the group's transformation during the interview. Two became involved in politics as representatives of Comunes, while three severed ties with the group but remained active in political endeavors. One participant actively supports Comunes but does not hold an official party position.

The peace agreement granted the FARC five seats in each legislative chamber, and the electoral threshold requirement was waived until 2026. Consequently, the party had the opportunity to contest seats in the 2018 legislative elections and participate in local elections in 2019 under the new party name Comunes.

Ugarriza et al. (2023) studied the changes in the FARC's statutes during its transition to a political entity. They argue that only some former members still adhere to remnants of the group's principles, such as rights and obligations, as these are not as strictly enforced within Comunes due to its lack of coercive means. In contrast to their perspective, I contend that adherence to the FARC's principles during the group's transition into a political party depended on the individual member's psychological relationship with Comunes, the new group (identification, non-identification, or active disidentification and rejection of the group). Also, maintaining adherence to FARC principles after former members laid down

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their arms appeared to alleviate uncertainty and anxiety, providing a supportive environment for gradual social identity transformation (Gluecker et al., 2022).

Social identity plays a crucial role when individuals perceive a threat to the group's status, serving as a cornerstone for maintaining high group integrity, and it is vital for the group's survival as it supports group loyalty (van Vugt and Hart, 2004). Groups are not just external features influencing human behavior; they also shape our psychology through their capacity to be internalized and contribute to our sense of self. That is why some former members persist in adhering to remnants of the FARC's principles, even without coercive means, which impacts how they self-identify.

Hogg and Abrams (1988, p. 174-5) that, in the absence of coercion, individuals conform to groups they identify with, maintain independence from those they do not identify with and exhibit anti or counter-conformity if they actively wish to dissociate themselves from a particular group. In the context of the FARC's transition into a political entity without coercion, those who identified with the FARC naturally aligned themselves with the Comunes party. Conversely, individuals who did not identify with the FARC saw the transition as an opportunity to pursue an independent path, as they also could not identify with Comunes. Additionally, those who disagreed with the normative or stereotypical tendencies of the original group, as well as with the decision to lay down arms, chose to separate from the group. This last scenario has continued to unfold post-peace agreement, contributing to internal divisions within the Comunes party. These divisions exemplify the counter-conformity of former members who, still adhering to remnants of FARC principles, perceive Comunes as not living up to them. This variability in adherence to those principles affects the ability of some former members to establish distinct identities and pursue other roles or social categories during their transition to civilian life.

5.1.2.1 Transitioning to Civilian Life when Socially Identifying with the Group that Transformed

In light of Hogg and Abrams's (1988) observations on conformity, FARC members underwent a process of redefining their identification with the organization after its transfor-

mation into the Comunes political party. Those who strongly identified with the FARC would have embodied the normative tendencies most representative of the group's identity, thereby aligning themselves with the group prototype. This alignment with Comunes would have been influenced by referent informational influence. They would have conformed to the group's transformation through their private acceptance via social identification and self-categorization with the FARC (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 174). This is possible because conformity is often heightened by identity salience, where the more salient an identity, the stronger the expectation of agreement among group members, thereby increasing pressure for conformity when disagreement arises.

Gladys, a former member of the José María Cordoba of the FARC, was released from prison in 2017 following the enactment of the Amnesty Law in December 2006. This law provided special legal treatment, including amnesty and pardon, to FARC members accused of political and related crimes within the context of the peace agreement. When asked about her feelings upon being released from prison following the dissolution of her group due to the peace agreement, Gladys responded assertively, affirming the continuity of the FARC's existence. She explained,

> We were not just an armed group; we operated as a political and military organization. Our *raison d'être* was political, which is why the group persists. The issues that drove our fight are still present. The FARC transformed into the Comunes Political Party, of which I am an active member.

Her testimony illustrates how members who strongly identified with the FARC perceive its continuation in Comunes. Participants who continued to self-identify with the FARC generally spoke in the interview as an organization, for example using first-person plural forms in their speech, saying *"nosotros"* ("we") [the FARC] instead of *"yo"* ("I").

It appears that Gladys mitigated potential uncertainty upon her release from prison and the group's transformation into Comunes by maintaining her association with the FARC. Such continued affiliation has been reported to alleviate reintegration-related anxiety among former members (Gluecker et al., 2022). Gladys' deep attachment to the FARC is evident in her open identification as a group member, emphasizing her strong connection. Her interview statement reinforced this sentiment: *"In the FARC, we share ideals, tragedies, and dreams;*

we are family.'' Here, she underscores shared values and a profound sense of belonging, indicating a strong bond with fellow group members. Gladys also emphasized that members recognized equal rights and obligations within the FARC regardless of gender or other factors as they collectively pursued common objectives. She attributed her close relationship with other FARC members to camaraderie, honesty, shared values, and a mutual commitment to fostering a more equitable and just society. She explained: *"While war is not a choice many willingly make, we in the FARC felt it was our only option. Believing that our participation in the group could enact change, we were determined to be the catalysts for the transformation we sought in our country."*

Initially sentenced to 40 years, Gladys described her imprisonment as a challenging period that demanded resilience. She mentioned that the amnesty surprised her because she never anticipated a peace agreement, expecting the government to breach it upon its passing. Gladys recognized that her time in prison altered the social dynamics of her membership, as she had contact with family and friends, fostering a social life incompatible with her previous role in the FARC as a combatant. Consequently, she acknowledged she had rejoined society, having been already exposed to it in prison, which differed from the experience of members who were with the group when the peace agreement was signed.

Throughout the interview, Gladys expressed distrust of the government, particularly in discussing her transition to civilian life, citing concerns about personal security due to the targeting of ex-combatants. She emphasized the importance of ensuring physical safety, pursuing financial stability as an entrepreneur, and remaining vigilant against potential government traps, citing the case of Santrich.[7] Her reluctance to share specific details of her prison experience and current involvement with the Comunes Political Party likely stems from security concerns. During the interview, she stated: *"In the past, I had my weapon to defend myself, but with ex-combatants being targeted and killed, the threat of violence remains. Hence, I still worry about dying, well, of being killed."* When asked if she considered herself civilian, she said she did not and explained:

I seldom see myself as a civilian because others consistently label me as an ex-combatant,

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[7] Santrich, a prominent member of the FARC Secretariat and key negotiator in the Colombian peace process, faced extradition to the United States, posing a significant test for the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). See, Segura (2019)

which affects everyday tasks. Despite not regretting my past, it's frustrating to be expected to adhere to societal norms that don't consider our unique circumstances. Banking and paperwork illustrate this challenge. I have been unable to request a loan due to my lack of credit history and the difficulty in finding a guarantor, making it impossible to access financial assistance. Our distinct background is often overlooked in these situations.

Gladys' adherence to the FARC's norms facilitated her transition into the Comunes political party membership. In the FARC she shifted her identity within the group from personal to social, aligning her behavior with its norms, a common scenario in social identity theory. With the transition of the FARC into the Comunes Political Party, there was likely a dynamic negotiation of prototypicality or normativeness, impacting individuals like her who identified strongly with the group. Therefore, her continued adherence to the FARC's norms was crucial in her redefined membership within the Comunes political party.

Juan, a combatant for nearly 19 years, proudly identified himself as a former member of the FARC or, as he said, *"the peasant army,"* at the beginning of the interview. He demonstrated a deep understanding of the group's transformation into a political entity and, like Gladys, views Comunes as a continuation of the FARC. He stated: *"I consider myself a member of the Comunes Political Party. I strongly identify with Comunes, as it's the group I have always participated in. Despite the shift from armed to political struggle, my affiliation remains unchanged."*

Residing in an ETCR in Icononzo, Juan was elected as a councilman representing Comunes. He underscored his dedication to community service by connecting his combatant experience with his current role as an elected official. Juan emphasized how his time in the FARC instilled in him a desire to work for the collective good and provided him with leadership skills that he now applies in his council position. He remains unwavering in his commitment to addressing the needs of rural communities.

Reflecting on his time as a combatant in the FARC, Juan described the group as the *"people's army,"* emphasizing their role as representatives of the communities they served. He stressed that the needs and priorities of these communities guided their efforts to bring about social change in Colombia. Juan argued that his involvement in the FARC stemmed from a sense of social injustice and the perceived marginalization of peasants and the poor by the ruling class. He saw armed struggle as a necessary means to achieve the societal changes

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he deemed essential. Juan's identity is deeply intertwined with the FARC's, highlighting his dedication to collective action and shared goals with other group members.

Juan acknowledged the toll of the conflict, emphasizing the FARC's ultimate goal of negotiating and resolving differences politically. He remarked, *"More than following what the leaders determined for the group, I think we all wanted to leave the war behind."* He explained that there were dissenting voices within the group during the negotiations. Those who disagreed with the chosen course of action separated from the FARC and continued fighting (the counter-conformity argument elaborated earlier). In his view, those members who are still committed to bringing social change to Colombia understand that Comunes is the FARC today.

Juan said: *"I firmly believe that by surrendering my weapons, I played a role in ending the war. To me, signing the agreement signified a personal commitment to cease my participation in the conflict."* This statement underscores his commitment to peace and his decision to lay down his weapons as a pivotal moment in his life. Juan believes that this action played a role in bringing an end to the conflict. This reflects his disengagement and deradicalization, as he no longer believes in the necessity of armed struggle for social change. While Juan views the party (Comunes) as a continuation of the FARC, he rejects the social norms and obligations associated with his previous role as a combatant. This rejection signifies his disidentification with the FARC's militant identity, highlighting his disengagement from the group's armed activities, which is why he self-identified and represented Comunes as an elected official when he was interviewed

Another participant, Alberto, spent 40 years in the FARC, primarily involved in political affairs, eventually rising to a leadership role. He participated in the peace talks in Havana, was among those who wrote the draft leading to the accord, and currently holds a prominent position representing the Comunes political party in one legislative chamber. Alberto provided valuable insights into the redefinition of membership within the group in light of the FARC's transformation, offering his perspective from a high-ranking position.[8]

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[8] Alberto mentioned that he agreed to speak with me based on my credentials and his overall interest in engaging in meaningful conversations. When asked about his primary strength, he highlighted his political and ideological understanding. While he acknowledged that it might be presumptuous to consider this as a strength, he believed that it played a crucial role in his leadership within the FARC, particularly in political matters.

Alberto requested some time to clarify certain points, recognizing my interest as a student in the social transition to civilian life for ex-combatants. He began by discussing the agreement signed between the FARC and the Colombian government in 2016. He explained that this agreement does not align with the traditional DDR framework because the FARC members did not undergo demobilization in the traditional sense. This was because the group was not defeated, surrendered, or dismantled. Instead, the agreement aimed to facilitate the transformation of the FARC into a political party, allowing them to operate within a legal framework.

Alberto mentioned he joined the FARC and felt part of it for so many years because he shared ideals with others in the group who also believed in revolutionary struggle as the means to bring about social change in Colombia. In his view, it is reductionist to solely focus on the fact that the FARC laid down its arms, as they initially took up arms to pursue political objectives. He elaborated on the reasons behind the FARC's acceptance of the accord terms, emphasizing that they recognized they would not seize power in the short term, understood the degrading nature of the war, and acknowledged that a shift towards political engagement had always been part of the FARC's long-term goals. He stated, *"We [the FARC] knew we could not win, we knew we were not going to be defeated either, and we understood that the continuation of the war was at the expense of people who had already suffered greatly."* Logically, Alberto sees the continuation of these ideals in the Comunes political party:

> Our goal in the FARC, relying on revolutionary violence, was to achieve political objectives because we recognized the need for structural change in Colombia. The peace accord reflects these objectives, which we now pursue as Comunes. This political party advocates for the victims of the conflict, including those affected by the actions of the FARC and those impacted by state-sponsored paramilitary groups.

Alberto secured a seat in one legislative chamber when the FARC transitioned into politics, becoming the Comunes political party. Despite the assembly's negative reputation, he understood Comunes had to join the political system to enact the social change they envisioned. Alberto, along with 19 other representatives, actively engages in opposition, scrutinizing government actions and policies while proposing alternative solutions. Although they face resistance, Alberto affirmed Comunes' commitment to advocating for social change

and exposing corruption. He acknowledged that transformation requires collective effort but highlighted the party's success in prompting ministerial resignations. Alberto believes that amplifying dissenting voices and addressing public dissatisfaction is essential for achieving the party's political objectives.

Gladys, Juan, and Alberto exemplify how the transformation of the FARC into Comunes altered the group prototype, influencing the perceived norms and identity of those strongly aligned with it. Consequently, individuals who previously identified with the FARC adjusted their identification to align with the new norms and characteristics of Comunes. These high identifiers demonstrate a cohesive group response, remaining unified when the group faced threats.

An important consideration here is Juan and Alberto's political involvement. Both are politicians, with one elected and the other appointed by Comunes' leadership. Their political participation may be influenced by party discipline, stemming from their identification with the group and internalization of its norms. Alternatively, it could have also emerged from their sense of duty recognizing the importance of the party's contribution to effecting social change (Curiel et al., 2023). Both factors may have been instrumental in redefining their membership in Comunes and how it coexists with their identity now that they occupy a role as politicians in the democratic system. On the one hand, Juan, who was elected, may have perceived that his electoral viability required moderation, leading to his disengagement from more extreme positions. On the other hand, Alberto, appointed by the party, might have adopted a moderate stance within the organizational and leadership changes induced by his democratic political engagement (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2004). By supporting or representing the Comunes party, Gladys, Juan, and Alberto, along with other former members who see Comunes as the continuation of the FARC, may have indicated a preference for democratic politics over non-democratic alternatives, and this helped them redefine their membership in Comunesto support a civilian identification.

5.1.2.2 Disidentifying and Disengaging as an Outcome of Transitioning to Civilian Life

The transformation of the FARC into Comunes resulted in the loss of its coercive mechanisms which is why individuals who did not identify with the group stopped complying, became independent from it, and rejoined society with no connection to Comunes. However, since the transformation into a political party is a period of change, significant disagreement among individual members or subgroups continues to emerge. Around the time of the peace negotiations, some members actively disassociated from the FARC and organized dissident factions that kept fighting to indicate their counter-conformity with the transformation into a political party. More recently, other former members of the FARC have experienced a period of ambiguous, contested, and temporary identities as they have not been able to self-identify with the Comunes party, having rejoined society as ex-combatants. This loss of identification with Comunes entails their disidentification from the group, as they perceive Comunes as not adhering to the FARC's norms and characteristics. Individuals can undergo this transitional process independently, signifying their psychological disconnection from the group. However, when they organize into ex-combatant factions around their retained ideas and shared transitional experiences, they may forsake the democratic path and resort to warfare (Curiel et al., 2023). Some estimates suggest this occurs in approximately half of all rebel-to-party transitions (Zukerman Daly, 2021).

Francisco, a former member of the 59th Front of the FARC who was in the group for 14 years, rejoined society in 2016 as an outcome of the peace agreement. However, he mentioned that he started to disidentify with the group during the negotiations because he saw that the leaders were not openly discussing certain topics. He said:

> I feel there wasn't enough information, education, or spaces for us to discuss how we were going to transition into a political party. I'm not saying the agreement was wrong, but rather that the leadership excluded the grassroots from important discussions. It was at that point that I began to fear for the future of the FARC. I believed their actions would contribute to our dispersion or diaspora, as there would be members who wouldn't feel supported or embraced by them. In the end, I could not think that things were going to be even worse

At the core of disputes in the Comunes are conflicting opinions regarding the extent to

which the organization's leadership should be decentralized (Segura and Stein, 2019). These divisions stem from tensions surrounding whether former fighters or allied urban intellectuals should assume leadership roles, disagreements regarding the filling of congressional seats and resource allocation, and frustration among local ex-FARC leaders due to their limited access to central party decision-making.

Ramiro, a former member of the Antonio Nariño front of the FARC, which operated in Bogotá and Meta, spent 13 years with the group. He was incarcerated for the last six years of that period and was released in 2017 following the passing of the Amnesty Law in December 2016.[9] He described his role in the FARC as involving clandestine work in universities in Bogotá and working with the masses. He felt connected to other members because they shared the same goal, pointing to ideology as the factor that linked them. Ramiro denounced INPEC's oppressive conduct in prisons, highlighting human degradation, corruption, and rights abuses. Despite adversities, he staunchly upheld his allegiance to the FARC, citing family bonds, duty, and the group's mission. He defied coercion, fueled by his commitment and familial activist heritage. Within the FARC's prison 'colectivo,' he pushed for improved conditions and medical care for inmates while resisting authority abuses.[10]

Ramiro highlighted that during the peace talks, the FARC maintained communication with its incarcerated members through those colectivo groups. He became a recognized speaker who contributed insights, even to those in Havana. In his view, their endorsement of the peace agreement was largely driven by the attractive prospect of amnesty for incarcerated members, with the common desire for freedom and active participation in accord implementation. However, Ramiro's optimism took a downturn after he was released from prison with the emergence of Comunes.

Upon his release from prison, Ramiro considered returning to Bogotá to reunite with his mother. His interest in politics and group dynamics fueled his desire to continue working and studying public administration. Having served as a spokesperson for incarcerated FARC

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[9] Ramiro attributed his capture by Colombian authorities to the government's policy promoting individual demobilization, as someone from his unit demobilized and provided information about his whereabouts.

[10] Ramiro served his sentence in 4 different prisons. He mentioned that in La Modelo prison, his wing was controlled by former paramilitaries and drug traffickers, which forced him to operate clandestinely. However, he said that when he was in La Picota, a maximum-security facility, guerrilla fighters had more influence, and they had been the ones coordinating activities within their wing.

members, he developed close ties with FARC leaders and aimed to collaborate with them in implementing the accord. However, he found they were unavailable when attempting to reach out to them when he was released from prison, and he felt he could only rely on the people he met there.

Ramiro expressed disappointment in the party's transformation, citing a loss of unity, shared beliefs, and mutual support among members. Despite this disillusionment, he found solace in initiatives like the Autonomous Workgroup for Reincorporation, where former members collaborate independently, without any connection with Comunes, mainly because they do not self-identify with this party. Various avenues are available to former members who want to engage in political activism, such as advocacy groups, community organizing, or joining political parties that align with their beliefs. Those who engage in political activism after demobilization are influenced by both the combat experience and the political ideals developed during the conflict rather than solely based on group allegiance Söderström (2016). Ramiro criticized top representatives of Comunes for betraying the FARC's original goals, leading to what he termed "political heartache" (*"tusa política"*) or his psychological disengagement from the group. He. took six months to process his decision before moving forward, not viewing himself as a civilian but as a *guerrillero*, an identification he embraces and associates with the FARC.

Just like Ramiro, Francisco disengaged from the group. He, along with other former members, sent a letter to the leadership officially renouncing their membership. In this letter, which they sent in August of 2022, they express feeling unrepresented and unembraced by the party, state that Comunes' decisions do not reflect their shared revolutionary and political history, which was established by Jacobo Arenas and Manuel Marulanda, and criticize how top leaders have politicized certain entities meant to serve the entire population of *reincorporados*. For instance, they highlight how Comunes uses the National Council for Reincorporation to appoint individuals close to the party, excluding critics of their decisions, despite the entity's mandate to serve all members of that population. The letter also addresses cases of bullying towards those who openly oppose the party. Francisco was involved in several organizations grouping *reincorporados*, and shared that he felt closer to the Pacto Histórico political party. The last time I talked to him, he was running for a local position

in La Guajira with that political party.

Last but not least, Miguel, a former member of the Victor Saavedra Mobile Column, described his participation in organizations of ex-combatants. He joined these groups because he believed the revolutionary experience changed people. Although he considers himself a civilian now, he feels a strong connection to social work, which he attributes directly to his time in the FARC. Miguel, who acquired a disability during combat, finds that fellow former combatants are more accepting of his disability because they understand the circumstances that led to it and appreciate his physical sacrifice for the cause. Despite feeling that joining the FARC expanded his perspective, allowing him to be someone beyond an average campesino (peasant), Juan ceased identifying with Comunes when he realized that party members were disconnected from the realities faced by *reincorporados* like himself. As a result, he has redirected all his efforts towards working with other former combatants to improve their collective conditions.

Ramiro, Francisco, and Miguel have undergone a journey of identity marked by ambiguity, conflict, and impermanence. They found themselves unable to align with the Comunes party upon reintegrating into society as ex-combatants. Their disconnection from Comunes reflects their psychological detachment from the group due to perceived deviations from the FARC's values and traits. However, Francisco's running under the Pacto Histórico party indicates a preference for democratic politics over non-democratic alternatives. He may no longer support Comunes, but by self-identifying with this other party, he may also have realized that his electoral viability required moderation, leading to his disengagement from more extreme positions (which was Juan's experience running under Comunes).

5.1.3   Transitioning Into Civilian Life as Youth

Adolescence marks a critical phase for self-discovery within the ongoing journey of identity development. While some individuals may find joining armed groups during adolescence a path to genuine self-expression, the challenge arises in cultivating a healthy and authentic identity within the confines of such groups. Interviews revealed that minors who grew into adults within these groups relied heavily on the group's norms and values for

self-identification. However, the coercive and controlling atmosphere within armed groups hindered many from developing a well-rounded and socially adaptable self-concept, posing a significant obstacle to their identity formation as they transitioned away from the group.

Individuals who were formerly recruited as child soldiers and attempted to reintegrate into society face significant challenges, especially when they do so as minors. One major challenge is how they are perceived by their families and communities, as well as how they perceive themselves (Wessells, 2016). In doing so, they must grapple, leaving behind the values, beliefs, and perceptions instilled in them by the armed groups. To complicate this process, upon reintegrating, they often find themselves in a society plagued by corruption and poverty, which often reinforces the narratives of rebel groups and makes it difficult for some to let go of their past identities and embrace their new lives and for others, adds friction to their adjustment process. Additionally, part of this transition involves overcoming the ideas of "othering". However, the greatest challenge they face is that if they fail to establish a new identity, they may be drawn back into armed groups, especially in an ongoing conflict.

The Colombian government has entrusted the responsibility of caring for and protecting minors affected by conflict to the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). Upon demobilization, minors commit to ceasing their involvement in illegal activities, surrendering their weapons, and renouncing their affiliation with any illegal armed group. Separated youths receive comprehensive benefits covering education, health, housing, therapy, and skills development. Upon reaching the age of 18, they have the option to continue receiving support from programs administered by the ARN. Alternatively, they may choose to exit the demobilization process, in which case the label of demobilized combatant no longer applies to them.

There were three separated youths in my sample, Carlos and Vanessa, and both of them opted for continued assistance from the ARN after turning 18. Carlos openly stated that he joined the FARC for pragmatic reasons, primarily financial, while Vanessa attributed more profound meaning to her time in the FARC. Both were in the FARC for approximately two years, recruited as young teenagers. Given their status as minors when they joined and rejoined society, their transition to civilian life occurred during adolescence.

Higgs (2019) studied the adoption of a militarized identity by child recruits in the FARC.

She argues that understanding why children join armed groups, what keeps them there, and how they shape their identities in relation to these groups requires insight into both their civilian lifeworlds and the lifeworlds of the armed groups themselves. Lifeworlds, as she defines them, are social spheres that influence our perception of the world and ourselves. According to Higgs, young recruits develop their sense of self and understanding of their place in the world within the social context they inhabit, providing them with a framework for interpreting social norms, values, and expectations, thereby influencing their behaviors and decisions. She explains that because the violent nature of the armed group mirrors the violent environment in which they have grown up, the transition into an armed group is relatively smooth. The FARC did not need to break down young recruits and deconstruct their identities to adapt to violence because the environment they came from was already violent.

Expanding on Higgs' perspective, I argue that young recruits adopt a military identity through their social identities. Their psychological reality stems from social reality, as they become militarized through their affiliation with the armed group and the life they had had before them. However, their militarization is part of the psychological processes underlying both their individual behavior and group behavior when they self-identify with the armed group. While they may have been exposed to violence and, in that sense, predisposed to that militarization, by internalizing its norms, values, and beliefs, forming strong ingroup bonds with other members, and engaging in behaviors consistent with the group, young recruits develop a militarized identity because it helps them attain social validation as members and develop a sense of self-worth.

For instance, Vanessa shared that she never felt loved at home and experienced pressure from a young age growing up in Arauca. She indirectly interacted with the FARC as a child because her dad was a member, which may have made joining at 12 for her reasonable knowing the paramilitaries killed him. When reflecting on her childhood, she recalled:

> When I was growing up, my father believed that the most important thing for me to learn was how to work in the fields. His beliefs were deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. Though he wasn't physically abusive, he placed greater value on my labor than on my education. He needed me to work on our land and valued my hard work more than anything else. My older brother, influenced by the same gender biases, felt entitled to mistreat me because I was a woman. Since my father was often absent due to his involvement with the

FARC, my older brother, being the dominant figure at home, often resorted to physical violence to keep me working. These experiences had a profound impact on my self-esteem throughout my childhood and teenage years and, I would say, on my willingness to join the FARC.

Vanessa could have been introduced to the FARC's values and norms through her father, a group member, and where she lived, as it was an area of FARC influence. However, joining the group and feeling that being there was the only alternative for her could have explained why she was more vulnerable to the socialization she underwent. At that young age and within her limited social context, she had not explored alternative identity options. Furthermore, within the FARC, violence was used to constrain her identity choices, so she could have adopted the identity of a FARC member through a phenomenon known as identity "foreclosure" (Marcia, 1966). Vanessa described the FARC as having strict rules, which compelled her to comply. While she may have harbored reservations about certain aspects of the group, she did not actively oppose them. For instance, due to her age and physical condition, she struggled to carry the same gear as adult members, leading her to disagree with the group's notion of gender equality. Nonetheless, she explained that she performed her tasks without complaint or seeking assistance because she wanted to fit in.

Although Vanessa may have adopted a militarized identity while in the group, developing a sense of loyalty, discipline, and adherence to hierarchy, she did not fully embrace or glorify violence as a means to achieve goals. She described herself as a sensitive and empathetic woman, which she found challenging within the group. This aspect of her personal identity, shaped by the struggles she faced at home, made it difficult for her to reconcile certain events that occurred within the group. She recounted how the killing of a young boy deeply affected her, as the victim was of a similar age to herself. However, she understood the need to conceal her emotions, fearing that showing weakness would undermine her standing among other group members. Consequently, she had to mask her true nature to maintain her perceived status within the group.

When Colombian military forces discovered Vanessa during an Army operation in the region where her front was operating, they identified her as a minor and a victim.[11] She

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[11] According to Colombian law, those who come out of the armed groups who are under 18 years old are considered victims. The Peace and Justice Law (Law 975 of 2005) states that all children and adolescents

recalled the soldiers saw her and told her to calm down, and assured her that everything would be ok. Recognizing the potential risks she faced—either retaliation for being discovered by the Army or the possibility of rejoining the armed group if she remained in the area—authorities decided to relocate her to Bogotá. Vanessa found herself enthralled by her relocation experience. She was fascinated by the Army airplane ride, the El Dorado airport, and the bustling streets of the capital city, as well as its modern buildings. Everything was new to her. This urban environment, a long-held aspiration from her childhood, offered her a sense of new beginnings,

> Suddenly, I found myself in Bogotá, where I had always dreamed of being. You know, where I come from, there was always that lucky person who went to Bogotá, and I dreamed of coming here one day. So, as soon as I arrived, I started thinking about myself, feeling I could be whoever I wanted to be in this city.

As Vanessa transitioned to civilian life in Bogotá, she encountered a specific challenge. Growing up, she was accustomed to hard work, and within the FARC, she was treated as an adult like any other combatant. Therefore, upon her arrival in Bogotá, she anticipated some degree of independence and desired freedom. However, the reality of her transition was more complex. The ICBF arranged for her to reside in a foster home (*hogar tutor*) specifically designed to accommodate minors on a voluntary or temporary basis. While the foster family itself was supportive, as Vanessa described them, she struggled with the expectations placed upon her. Bogotá was a different lifeworld, and she found it difficult to adjust to living as part of a family, focusing on her studies, and could not pursue job training or earn an income due to her status as a minor. This discrepancy between her initial expectations and reality, the mismatch between the lifeworlds she knew and the one she now lived in, left her feeling disappointed and ambivalent.

Her relocation to Bogotá triggered a sudden shift in Vanessa's psychological state, separating her from the FARC and the way of life she had known. This change allowed her to suspend her past identity as a member of the FARC, explore different aspects of herself, and eventually embrace new identities. Schmid and Jones (1991) noted that individuals entering a new social situation may suspend their previous identity to adopt a new one relevant to

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affected by the conflict are considered victims and have the right to reparation.

the context. In Bogotá, Vanessa distanced herself from the social and political practices ingrained through her experiences with the FARC and their indoctrination, beginning to reconstruct her identity around non-violent ideals. While this facilitated her disengagement from the FARC group identity, she struggled to fully embrace civilian life in Bogotá due to the need for adaptation to the new context. This challenge is not unique to Vanessa, as it has been established that demobilized combatants in Colombia face emotional problems exacerbated by identity issues, given that they enter urban life at a stage when they have not fully embraced their role as civilians (Anaya, 2007).

Vanessa arrived at this foster home at 15 and lived there for two years and three months until she ran away with her partner and dropped out of school. Transitioning to civilian life posed significant challenges for Vanessa as she navigated adulthood. It was only after her partner abandoned her and their two children that Vanessa recognized the importance of furthering her education. Faced with the responsibility of providing for her family, she realized the necessity of obtaining a high school diploma to secure employment opportunities in the city. Seeking support from the ARN as she was now over 18, Vanessa pursued the status of a demobilized combatant to access government assistance. Reflecting on this period, she recalled, *"The ARN assisted me in finding a school, but financial constraints made it very difficult. There were days when I couldn't even afford bus fare to attend school or purchase essential supplies."*

In addition to educational support, the ARN also provided psychosocial assistance to help Vanessa cope with traumas from her childhood, her experiences in the FARC, and her adaptation to life in Bogotá. She shared, *"With their help, I began to let go of painful memories related to my childhood and early teenage years to rebuild my sense of self. They helped me recognize my inherent value and capacity for love, despite the lack of affection I received as a child."* Vanessa currently has her two girls in daycare while she works and says that she strives to provide them with a good childhood and a loving environment. She mentioned that only now, as a parent, she has taken part in activities such as going to a playground or park and having fun.

Vanessa primarily identifies herself as a mother and then as an employee. Some perceive her as a civilian and mother rather than an ex-combatant, observing her fulfilling maternal

duties such as feeding and protecting her children, teaching them good behavior, and instilling non-militaristic values in her household. Additionally, others recognize her work in an office and the tasks associated with that position. Her ability to earn a living legally and without relying on violence has been crucial to fulfilling her roles and identities as a mother and civilian, something that has been reported in other contexts facilitating the reintegration of women like Vanessa (McKay et al., 2011).

Carlos, the other participant recruited as a minor who reintegrated into society during his teenage years, returned to a social environment not vastly different from the one he left when he joined the FARC. This environment was still characterized by poverty, lack of opportunities, and the presence of armed groups. The Army also identified him as a minor and victim during a military operation against his group, so he was sent back to Salahonda, Nariño, with his mother. At 18, he had the option to leave the demobilization process and begin his life as a civilian. However, since the economic conditions in his town were the same, he chose to become a demobilized combatant to receive government assistance. He, along with 20 other participants I interviewed (comprising 65% of my sample), stated that their lack of additional work experience or education had affected their chances of providing for themselves as they established a new life.

Although education could provide Carlos with opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable, he attends school because the financial support he receives as a demobilized combatant is contingent upon it. He stated: *"Before joining the group, I didn't even know how to read; it was bad! I know I'm better off now because I can study and receive an income for doing it,"* he shared. Carlos explained that he had joined the FARC because they covered his basic needs.

Before joining, Carlos had dropped out of school to find ways to help his mother financially, contributing his share to family expenses. Now, with income to support his education, he can finally focus on studying. Wessells (2016) contends that returning former child soldiers are more likely to be perceived as children and civilians by their community and peers when they attend school. However, as Carlos was incentivized to join the FARC for material reasons, his challenge in reintegrating is to become financially independent. This is particularly crucial as he continues to navigate a world where drugs and armed groups of-

fer lucrative and easy forms of survival. Assuming that education facilitates Carlos's social mobility, his case highlights the importance of providing young former members of armed groups with alternative pathways to empowerment and self-worth. Without psychological support, minors transitioning into society are likely to be drawn to groups and ideologies that legitimize and reward their rage, fear, and hateful cynicism (Boothby and Knudsen, 2000). This trend has been observed in cases where gangs and militias have flourished after the official end of a war, indicating its potential occurrence in the Colombian context, given the presence of active armed groups in the country.

5.1.4 Transitioning to Civilian Life as a Higher-Ranking Member

Giancarlo, the head of finances of a paramilitary group, was one of the two high-ranking participants I interviewed. Born into a family deeply involved in what he described as peasant self-defense activities, Giancarlo developed a profound sense of belonging to the group. His social circle revolved around the group's activities, and he adopted meanings associated with this social identity. He shared: *"Our group, a peasant self-defense unit, prioritized sharing with the peasants, believing our existence was to protect them."* Giancarlo fully embraced his group's social identity, revolving around the belief that they were defenders against guerrilla forces in the absence of state presence, fostering an "us versus them" mentality.

Considering the tendency of higher-status individuals to prioritize the group (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 18), Giancarlo may have disengaged when his group was absorbed by the AUC in 2003. These organizational changes impacted his social standing as commander since they, the traditional leaders, lost control over what happened in their territory. He argued that decisions made by the AUC leadership altered the nature of his social group, which could have undermined the meanings he had traditionally associated with it: *"When our group came under the Castaño house in 2002-2003, the AUC chiefs that arrived were impulsive, ordering killings and were not interested in supporting these decisions with thorough investigations. This led to injustices, exposing us to retaliation. Under them, we lost autonomy."*

Becoming subordinate to the AUC meant losing power, which made it difficult for him to maintain a sense of leadership and belonging within a group he no longer controlled.

While a role is attached to a structural position, role identity determines how an individual interprets that role and corresponding expectations (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). In that sense, these organizational changes profoundly impacted his role identity, which he had internalized through socialization within the original group. Under the AUC, his role lost its previous significance due to the reactions of others, leading to a reshaping of his understanding of his leadership role. He shared: *"Since we joined the AUC, our group became a mix of people, making it challenging to manage because some didn't follow my orders and didn't recognize me as their commander."* Although he retained control over the bloc's finances, his subordination to the AUC and the Castaño brothers involved a transition in roles.

Role transitions encompass psychological and sometimes physical changes between or among roles, including the process of disengaging from one role and engaging in another (Ashforth et al., 2000). These transitions are often linked to temporary or permanent shifts in identity (Ashforth, 2001). Giancarlo's experience illustrates that the construction and maintenance of role identities result from a complex interplay of individual and situational factors. He developed and negotiated his role identity based on his perceptions of what someone in his position should do and through interactions with others.

In July 2003, the AUC signed the Santa Fe de Ralito Accord agreeing to a continuous ceasefire and the demobilization of all its combatants by December 31, 2005. In exchange, the government agreed to suspend arrest warrants and to restrict criminal prosecution and extradition of ex-combatants. These concessions were subsequently formalized in the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975) in July 2005. Giancarlo's group underwent demobilization in the second semester of 2006. When I asked him what he felt then, he shared:

> I felt like a zombie and like a weight lift off my shoulders. I didn't have my gun or my guys protecting me anymore, and not being in charge felt strange. It was such a mix of emotions. I was relieved I didn't have to worry about responsibilities or being captured by the authorities. Seeing my mom again after a long time brought me happiness and it made me believe I could finally have a normal life. However, deep down, I felt guilty for things that I knew had happened, responsible for the future of the guys [demobilized combatants] and I thought a lot about what I went through personally, especially towards the end. I was in shock, happy, and nostalgic.

Giancarlo joined other former AUC chiefs at La Ceja, a municipality near Medellín, in November 2006. They were gathered there as they awaited a resolution of their illegal

activities.[12] He told me that during that time they collectively brainstormed projects to pursue having surrendered their units, believing that the government would allow them to run these projects under a form of agricultural penal colony. He was expecting to spend no more than five years in prison due to the passing of the Justice and Peace Law in Congress in 2005.[13] In that sense, Giancarlo, like the other paramilitary leaders who were in La Ceja, did not consider how the substantial changes that had occurred in international human rights and norms, the increasing demand for truth, justice, and reparations following armed conflicts would affect his transition to civilian life.

When asked what was his original plan when he was convincing other leaders of his paramilitary group to demobilize, he explained:

> I had envisioned retiring at 25 and was focusing on managing what I had accumulated until that point. I started working when I was 9, and at 12, after my father was killed by the FARC, I left my town and moved up north with my uncle, who was the founder of the group. I learned to make money by trading cattle in my teenage years. I was entrusted with the group's finances because I was good with money and because I was family. Upon assuming command of the group's finances, I delegated the management of my own affairs. So, I wanted the group to demobilize to end all the problems associated with it and to resume my business.

By then, Giancarlo had become aware that some of his former men were returning to the mountains. Having had their needs met in their previous roles—uniforms, clothing, medications, and financial security through salaries—he understood their struggle.[14] Although the demobilization allowed Giancarlo to distance himself from the role sets associated with his position as a commander in the armed group, being with other ex-paramilitary chiefs in La Ceja placed him back in a position of authority under his previous role. Grouped with other former chiefs of the AUC allowed vestiges and residuals of Giancarlo's previous role to

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[12] The justice provision of the agreement between the Colombian government and the AUC posed a major hurdle in the negotiations, as paramilitary chiefs were likely to face prosecution, and it was unclear if they would be allowed to participate in politics. This issue persisted even after they demobilized their units.

[13] This law (Law 975 of 2005) regulated the investigation, prosecution, and punishment of people who demobilized and awarded them certain legal benefits on the condition that they adhered to measures geared towards national reconciliation such as truth-seeking, reparations for victims, and resocialization. In 2012, Congress passed Law 1592, which reformed it.

[14] His bloc paid $450,000 for the lower-ranking members, and upon their demobilization, they were receiving approximately the same amount. However, they now needed to use those funds to cover expenses such as rent, utilities, and groceries for themselves and their families. Additionally, since the terms of the agreement mandated pursuing education or training, this hindered their prospects for alternative employment.

persist, making it challenging for him to unlearn normative expectations and start his social transition into an ex-member of an armed group in an average civilian role. For instance, his former men sought him out looking to continue working for him and asking for help finding additional sources of income. Also, since he and the other paramilitary chiefs were perceived still to hold power and influence in their traditional strongholds, he shared that they were approached by drug traffickers asking them for protection to keep running their business in territories they perceived they still controlled.[15] He was constantly told by his visitors that he could easily remobilize his men if he wanted to. Giancarlo told me that he did not accept those offers or assist his former men, as he didn't want to jeopardize his transition to civilian life.

In the interview, Giancarlo shared that he felt like a lab rat after his group's demobilization. He explained that ongoing debates and changes in the judicial system, along with emerging concepts like transitional justice, truth, reparation, and forgiveness, added uncertainty to his transition to civilian life. Although he feared severe legal consequences due to his role in commanding a unit involved in paramilitary activities, human rights abuses, drug trafficking, and other criminal activities, he believed that its demobilization and highlighting that he had been subordinated to other more powerful AUC leaders would absolve him from responsibilities in those matters. Still, he, along with fifty-six other former paramilitary chiefs, was transferred from La Ceja to the maximum-security prison in Itaguí in December where he spent almost one and a half years incarcerated before being extradited to the United States in May 2008. Giancarlo stated:

> I trusted the Colombian government, but they treated us like mere commodities, shipping us off to the United States instead and violating our rights. The sting came from being labeled as narco-terrorists, even compared to Pablo Escobar—it was a tough blow. Our efforts in demobilization, crucial for peace in Colombia, went unrecognized. Most importantly, they elevated my status within the AUC hierarchy by sending me with the others that day. I spent 4 years in Florida and another 3 in Virginia, totaling 7 years and 13 days under extradition in the United States.

The transition Giancarlo underwent from being a commander of a paramilitary group

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[15] Giancarlo told me that these individuals wanted the paramilitary groups to continue operating, offering substantial sums, including millions of dollars because there were still illegal crops in that area and the region continued to be a trafficking route.

involved in illegal activities to becoming a civilian and ex-member of that group, has been marked by his imprisonment and ongoing involvement in investigations post-release, leaving him in a state of liminality.[16]

Court judgments often reduce individuals to labels such as "criminals" and "convicts," simplifying their identities. Although Giancarlo could have relinquished his commanding role when his group was absorbed by the AUC, his extradition to the U.S. physically removed him from the social structure where he still wielded power, even as a former AUC chief.[17] It was when he was disconnected from those who had previously validated him in a leadership and commander role that he stopped seeing himself in that social position. After all, a role is the set of expectations tied to a social position that guides people's attitudes and behavior (Burke and Stets, 2009). From this symbolic-interactionist perspective, roles are assumed to be flexible and negotiated and, in that sense, made or unmade through social interaction.

Giancarlo's social position as head of finances of the paramilitary bloc could have been associated with tasks such as budgeting, financial planning, accounting, cash management, risk management, and financial reporting. The expectations linked to this role could have encompassed his leadership skills, efficient resource management, development of strategies for financial growth, cash flow monitoring, and identification of risks affecting the group's finances, among others. Therefore, due to his specific knowledge and skills, he continued to exert influence even after his group demobilized and he was imprisoned in Colombia.

Interactions with others often reinforce various aspects of one's identity, and without this interaction, individuals can struggle to maintain clarity about who they are. While he was in Colombia before his extradition, some people verified his identity as a member of a group, which fostered feelings of self-worth, acceptance, and belonging. Others recognized his role as a commander, which meant that he had the competence and fulfilled expectations both for himself and others in that position. Additionally, some validated his personal identity, contributing to a sense of authenticity as he pursued his own expectations and aspirations.

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[16] A liminal state is characterized by ambiguity because individuals shed attributes from their previous state without yet acquiring a new stable state. They transition from one condition of life experience to another or from one stage of life or state of social status to a more advanced one. See, van Gennep (1960)

[17] President Alvaro Uribe stated that AUC chiefs were extradited due to their continued involvement in criminal activities, lack of full cooperation with authorities, and failure to assist in victim reparation by concealing assets or refusing to part with properties.

However, in the U.S. prison environment where he was incarcerated, the people he interacted with regularly could not confirm his identity as others had done before. Furthermore, upon extradition, he was labeled a "narcoterrorist," a term he vehemently disliked and believed did not accurately represent who he was or the actions of his group. Despite his self-identification as the head of finances for a self-defense group, he faced charges of conspiracy to traffic cocaine into the United States. Giancarlo expressed profound sadness at being categorized with these labels. Until that moment, he assured that he believed he had merely managed the group's funds and not actively participated in the drug trade. He mentioned that he only truly comprehended why he had been extradited during court proceedings when the attorney explained the connection to him:

> I understood that since I managed the group's finances when I received money from individuals involved in drug trafficking within our operating areas, I became complicit in their activities. Despite the drugs not belonging to me, I should have reported these illicit activities to the authorities and refused their money. However, what the attorney could not understand is that refusing would have led to my death at their hands. I explained to him that I received the money and reported it to higher-ranking commanders, who then decided how it would support our fight against illegally armed groups hostile to the United States. Nonetheless, this explanation didn't matter in court. The fact remains that by accepting their money, both pesos and dollars, I became complicit in conspiring to traffic drugs into the U.S. and that is why I had to be prosecuted there.

Up until that moment, Giancarlo may have been loyal to other members of his group and people with whom he interacted previously, but in his new social context, he prioritized his self-interest since he wanted to spend the least amount of time in prison. He expressed, *"I became an informant and disclosed information, much like everyone else. I understood early on that if I didn't inform the authorities about what I owned or share what I knew, someone else would gain from me choosing to stay quiet."* Additionally, changes in Colombian legislation required him, as a former commander, to assume responsibility for everything that occurred in the area while he was a commander, even if he did not give an order. He perceived this as a new burden, which intensified his feelings of doubt, uncertainty, confusion, identity conflict, and ambivalence. Giancarlo experienced a profound loss of his previous sense of self after his demobilization; he explained:

> Even though I was managing the group's finances, changes in Colombian laws made me accountable for a range of atrocities within my bloc because of my role as commander.

This included incidents such as killings, displacements, and cases of sexual abuse. It was an overwhelming burden to carry! Despite providing all relevant information on what I knew and how I managed the group's finances to authorities in Colombia and the United States, I found myself implicated in these other events. With the changes, I have had to acknowledge responsibility for numerous incidents in my region over the years. Since 2013, I have had to repeatedly express my accountability in investigations of events I wasn't even aware of, stating, *"I accept responsibility for my command of the group and seek forgiveness from the victims."*

Besides agreeing to be interviewed for this dissertation, Giancarlo shared with me the lyrics of songs he has composed in the last few years. Among the songs he sent, there is one in which he describes his extradition to the United States and his time in U.S. prisons. In it, he talks about adjusting to life as an inmate there, including wearing a uniform, speaking a different language, and being tied and handcuffed. He described this as a sad time for him because he was fed different food (in the actual lyrics of the song, he says it was pig food), faced restrictions on sun exposure, and could not see his family because their visas to enter the country were denied.

Goffman (1963) described incarceration rituals as "mortification processes," which involve various forms of degradation and humiliation aimed at dismantling individuals' previous social status and role assignments, ultimately marking them as "inmates." Giancarlo confirmed it: *"In prison, you learn to do things on your own; you have to make your bed and clean, you know, women's stuff that until then I never did."* By acknowledging these tasks as "women's stuff" that he had never done before, Giancarlo recognized the gendered roles that existed in his previous life when he was not an inmate and that he considered were not social expectations associated to any of the roles he used to play. His ability to delegate these tasks to others had been influenced by his socioeconomic position and his role as commander of the paramilitary group, where he had the means and power to have others take care of these things for him.

The months before his extradition, when he was imprisoned in Colombia, would not have affected this, as he could have arranged for someone else to do those things. Upon entering prison in the United States, that changed. He had to do those tasks himself, which challenged traditional gender roles, values, and ideas he may have had before in his powerful position and confirmed he now was an inmate. In the interview, he shared that having lived

this prompted him to reconsider his own involvement in domestic tasks when he was released from prison and said that he voluntarily does those things at home now.

Giancarlo was returned to Colombia after more than seven years of imprisonment in the United States. As a result of his time served in both Colombia and the United States, he is currently on parole. He remains in a transitional state, unable to fully integrate into civilian life, as his encounters with the justice system have impeded his ability to incorporate into society as an ordinary citizen:

> Civilians are embraced by society and have citizen duties and rights. When I left my group and surrendered my arms, I was told, "Welcome to your life as a civilian." However, it has been 15 years, and I still do not feel like an average person. I am stuck in a judicial limbo with no end in sight. The group existed from 1982 to 2006, yet I am still facing authorities and taking on responsibilities for events that I never knew occurred. I am uncertain when this will end. I went to the United States to address matters there, but now I am back in Colombia where I'm under the threat of spending 40 years in prison if I fail to meet expectations. I cannot move on and lead a normal life because I constantly dwell on the past. The ongoing investigations, accusations, and appearances of new individuals, not only in cases before judges of the Justice and Peace Law, keep dragging me back to my past life in the group. No matter how hard I try to move on, I cannot do so.

Other former members of the AUC find themselves in a permanent liminal state as they navigate the justice system for events that occurred during their time in the armed group. Javier, for example, spent 15 years in prison for crimes related to the conflict and demobilized in prison after his bloc was dismantled in 2005. Although he managed to reconnect with his family post-demobilization, he acknowledges that his problems persisted even after demobilization and incarceration. When I interviewed him in June of 2021, he had already been released from prison for two years and elaborated, saying,

> I consider myself a free ex-combatant because I have a stable job and good health, yet, I still face significant security challenges. As a former member of the AUC, we have taken responsibility for numerous past actions and have aided in revealing the truth, often providing closure to victims regarding the fate of their loved ones. However, this ongoing process presents difficulties, as not all victims are prepared to forgive and move forward. In my case, my bloc was implicated in a high-profile case that continues to garner considerable media attention. As a result, I am frequently called upon to provide information to authorities, including representatives from the Attorney General's Office and the Supreme Court of Justice. The unresolved nature of the case means I remain under scrutiny, despite my demobilization in 2005.

5.2 CONCLUSION

The reintegration process of former combatants transitioning to civilian life involves grappling with their identity, facing stigma, and adapting to new social contexts. Despite disengaging from armed groups, they continue to question their identity, with the DDR program offering validation and assistance in this transition. Whether demobilizing individually or collectively, individuals must adjust their self-perceptions, with some embracing victimhood, adulthood, or their gender identification as they cross an identity threshold. Challenges such as stigma and ongoing security threats can perpetuate a state of liminality for some participants.[18] Others live their transitioning stage through the redefinition of their membership or association with a political group, crossing their identity threshold as it facilitates their political engagement.

During the liminal phase, participants seized the opportunity to reinvent themselves. In addition to distancing themselves from their former group, disengaged members turned to alternative social identities and self-categorized differently to navigate the transition, confirming the hypothesized process. This involved redefining their identity and self-perception and establishing self-esteem independently from the armed group. Such a process helped them manage the uncertainty associated with their life change and the ambiguity of no longer being in the armed group but not yet being civilians.

Those participants whose group transformed from an armed group to a political party had to redefine their relationship with the new group upon reintegrating. Discussing their cases illustrates that reintegrating former combatants with varying levels of identification with their group is complex. Some embraced the FARC's transformation, while others disengaged because they couldn't identify with the Comunes political party. In their case, membership or affiliation with the new group stopped being beneficial for their self-esteem. It was surprising to find that some participants who were former FARC and strongly identified with this group remained politically engaged but not with Comunes, with one even running for another political party.

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[18] The 11 former combatants who collectively demobilized from the FARC mentioned being worried about their security as ex-combatants, given that around 300 signatories for peace had been murdered in various regions of the country when I interviewed them.

Last but not least, although crossing the identity threshold is important in establishing themselves as civilians because that transformation is socially desirable, ex-combatants would only truly develop a sense of belonging and feel socially supported by others in society when those others see them as ingroup members and that is the basis for their incorporation. We would observe successful reintegration when former fighters seamlessly engage with others in society, feeling connected.

6.0   THE INCORPORATION PHASE, FINDING A PLACE IN SOCIETY

6.1   IDENTIFYING AS A CIVILIAN, THE END GOAL OF DDR

To successfully establish an independent civilian identity, former members of armed groups must disentangle themselves from an identity deeply intertwined with their armed group, shaped by training, indoctrination, and war experiences that have become ingrained within them. Reintegration has been described as the process in which fighters change that identity and modify their behavior to become civilians, ceasing their use of violent means and increasing their involvement in activities sanctioned by the mainstream community (Torjesen, 2013).

This transformation hinges on extended contact between former combatants and various social groups during the post-demobilization stage. Such contact facilitates recategorization and reinforces civilian status, thereby aiding incorporation into society in a new capacity. As former combatants strive to establish themselves as civilians, they navigate a delicate balance between disclosing their past to support collective memory, truth, justice, and reconciliation efforts, and maintaining anonymity to ensure physical security, protect against discrimination, and prevent recidivism—particularly in contexts like Colombia, marked by ongoing violence and societal polarization regarding societal inclusion.

This chapter delves into the incorporation stage, where reintegrating combatants redefine themselves by affiliating with different social categories during the transition back into society. First, I examine this stage through the lens of social identity theory, seeking to understand how establishing psychological connections with others, including fellow ex-combatants, contributes to individuals' overall well-being during reintegration. This exploration illuminates how participants navigate relationships with various social groups, identify with others, develop a sense of belonging in society, and manifest pro-social behavior.

At the core of this process lies their self-categorization as group members, intertwined with developing a sense of group belonging and societal validation, which provides social support to those reintegrating into society. For that reason, I examine the experiences of

participants who underwent individual demobilization and those who experienced collective demobilization, aiming to identify both facilitators and barriers to their incorporation during the reintegration process. Additionally, I investigate the experiences of participants currently undergoing reincorporation to discern factors contributing to the development of a civilian identity and the obstacles impeding it. Specifically, I consider the implications of the FARC's transformation into the Comunes political party on its former members' identification under other identities and social categories. I then explore how the collective reincorporation experience of former FARC members in ETCRs, rooted in their shared past as members of an armed group, serves as a basis for social identification as they rejoin society, enhancing their prospects for successful incorporation as civilians. Finally, in the conclusion section, I synthesize and discuss the findings of my study.

6.1.1 The Incorporation Phase

The incorporation phase is the final stage of a rite of passage, where individuals rejoin society with their new status or role. In it, they differentiate themselves as members of social categories (represented by the civilian community) from relevant out-groups (mainly those who continue in arms) and develop a sense of belonging and a positive identity from those memberships.

Self-categorization transforms ex-combatants into group members and their individuality into group behavior (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 261). The social category they adopt provides them with a sense of identity and belonging, shaping their self-concept by incorporating the defining characteristics of the group. When a former fighter categorizes themselves as a civilian, it not only alters their self-perception but also fosters a sense of belonging to society and identification with the civilian group as a whole. This process leads to conformity with the civilian group's prototype, influencing thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behavior to align with the in-group (Hogg and Smith, 2007, p. 11).

Moreover, embracing new social identities becomes the foundation for their adaptation and socialization in the new social context. Their self-perception and behavior become stereotypical and normative within the in-group, while their perception of relevant out-

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group members becomes stereotypical. Intergroup behavior may exhibit varying degrees of competitiveness and discrimination, influenced by the dynamics between the groups.

The incorporation stage involves accepting the reintegrating or reincorporating individual back into the social group or community in their transformed state, now equipped with the new identity or status acquired during the transition phase. In that sense, incorporation is simultaneously a social process (achieved via social interaction) and an individual one (achieved in isolation and different from other individuals and groups' reintegration/reincorporation experience within any given context).

As a social process, interacting with community members can assist in incorporating former combatants, normalizing their presence, and reducing stigma. When these interactions are positive, they can help ex-combatants feel accepted and valued within society. Those with whom they interact can help them address issues such as trauma, unemployment, and housing. Engaging in social interactions allows former combatants to rebuild relationships with family members, friends, and community members that may have been strained or broken during their time in the armed conflict. When they do not have those significant others to rely on, ex-combatants can still redefine who they are, and they can choose who they interact with in their new social position. It may facilitate reconciliation and healing within communities affected by conflict.

Also, there is a psychological process by which the ex-combatant incorporates related to their self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction. Self-enhancement is the desire to seek positive information about the self. When rejoining society, the ex-combatant compares himself with others along particular dimensions, establishing ingroup members to judge the group positively and the outgroup negatively, thereby raising the evaluation of themselves as ingroup members. For example, if the ingroup consists of former members of the FARC who are signatories for peace and who are reincorporating into society as an outcome of a peace agreement, the value "working for peace in Colombia" would benefit the members of the ingroup and degrade the value of outgroup members who do not share this value. Knowing that members in the ingroup share this value makes the ingroup more attractive to ingroup members and would make this set of ex-combatants glad to be members. Given the life-changing process they are living, when ex-combatants begin their reintegration or

reincorporation process, they are called for uncertainty reduction. They want their environment to be predictable. The more predictable their environment is, the more incorporated they are.

Building and maintaining relationships with new friends, mentors, and supportive family members, even when these individuals may be unaware of the ongoing transition but interact in ways that reinforce the ex-combatants self-definition in their new role, is essential for constructing an alternative identity and facilitating their reintegration. The roles they choose in various situations, and ultimately their successful incorporation into these roles, are influenced by the salience of their identity and the commitments they have established.

Participants who remain in a perpetual state of liminality caught between their identities as members of armed groups and civilians, face significant barriers to incorporation. While they may technically be rejoining society through processes of reintegration or reincorporation, they encounter challenges such as ongoing threats to their physical safety or being embroiled in prolonged legal proceedings. These circumstances disrupt the stability of their environment, making it difficult for them to embrace a civilian identity and lead a conventional life fully. Consequently, they struggle to activate a sense of belonging or to elevate their self-worth. The first issue stems from the persistent violence prevalent in the country, while the latter highlights a practical challenge: the investigation and prosecution of systematic acts of violence overwhelm the capacity of the legal system in Colombia, resulting in prolonged processes that individuals involved in these proceedings are unable to escape.

Ten out of the 32 participants referred to themselves as "normal people" when discussing their reintegration or describing the civilian status they acquired post-demobilization. Using this self-description, they emphasized their similarity to civilians and their embrace of typical life experiences. For instance, one participant stated, *"I am a normal person just like you, a mother who takes care of her child, a person who thinks, feels, gets worried, faces challenges, and in that sense, an average person."* Another expressed, *"I am normal because I live the normal life that civilians live."* Similarly, others mentioned "being normal" as they approached their reintegration or reincorporation experiences. One participant reflected, *"Although I am reincorporating, I am normal. I feel people have lived more extraordinary experiences than I do."* Another described how they regained a sense of self after demobi-

lization, stating, *"I recovered my personality after my demobilization. I feel I am the person I used to be, like a normal person. I can be nice to others, social, outgoing, and I am calmed. I know that no one is looking for me to kill me, I can have a normal life."*

By describing themselves as "normal people," these participants emphasized their alignment with civilian life, including caring for their children, facing challenges, and engaging in everyday activities. This self-identification suggests an identity transition from a combatant to a civilian, symbolizing their integration into civilian society. Acknowledging their "normal;; status reflects a desire to be perceived as regular members of the community, free from the stigma and isolation often associated with their past involvement in armed conflict. Thus, by embracing their "normalcy," former fighters can demonstrate their incorporation into civilian life and their efforts to construct a positive identity within the broader societal context.

6.1.2 Incorporation from a Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory suggests that individuals often derive their sense of self from group membership within various social contexts. For ex-combatants, social identities offer a framework for establishing a psychological connection with others that they perceive as ingroup members. Consequently, their own psychological well-being is often intertwined with the status of the groups that define their sense of self (ingroups) post-demobilization. It has been established that social identities provide stability, meaning, purpose, and direction, having positive implications for an individual's mental health (Haslam et al., 2009). These positive effects highlight the significance of their identity transformation, as it not only shapes their immediate experiences during the transition period but also has enduring impacts on their sources of support, control, belonging, and inclusion in the future (Haslam et al., 2009).

Social identity approaches suggest that the motivation for pro-group behavior primarily hinges on the significance of one's social identity (Hopkins et al., 2007). When individuals strongly identify with a specific social group, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that benefit the group, such as cooperation, solidarity, and collective action. By identifying with others in society, former members of armed groups can demonstrate pro-social behav-

ior, which helps maintain a positive self-image and enhances the group's reputation. This behavior fosters interindividual attraction, contributing to their sense of psychological group belongingness.

The concept of "belonging" encompasses affinity, togetherness, recognition, acceptance, and safety in social relationships. Belongingness is expressed through membership in social networks, communities, or societal organizations, where group affiliation signifies acceptance in relations between self and others and self and society (Goffman, 1963). This sense of belonging is crucial in assessing the incorporation of former combatants, as it is at the individual level, through their self-identity, that we can ascertain if they feel included and accepted in society.

However, belonging extends beyond the individual, shaped by the interplay between subjective self, collective agency, and structural positioning. Former combatants may have demobilized, but they often find themselves marginalized or excluded post-demobilization. Their inclusion is not a default condition but rather something that they must actively pursue and fight for. The sense of belonging of individuals transitioning to civilian life is more than just an individual feeling—it involves a hotly contested political issue with collective consequences. In that sense, the incorporation of former members of armed groups who are transitioning into civilian life can be seen as a struggle for power over representation and membership (May, 2011). Consequently, the focus of studying their social transition to civilian life must examine the interaction of ex-combatants with others in social, political, and economic spaces, as these interactions profoundly influence the former fighter's sense of belonging to society (Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019).

In addition to the sense of belonging, various factors influence how a former member adapts to the changes occurring during their social transition into civilian life and manage the associated uncertainty they feel. These include their access to existing social connections, the compatibility of these connections with new ones formed after rejoining society, and the extent to which both can provide support in their new social context. These changes prompt questions not only about who the person wants to become post-demobilization but also about who will support their emerging self.

Social identity plays a pivotal part in determining the social support available to ex-

combatants during reintegration and in identifying the sources of that support. Research indicates that individuals are more likely to give and receive support from those with whom they share a social identity (Haslam et al., 2005). Hence, ex-combatants are likely to receive support from individuals or groups who share their social identity, including fellow former combatants, local community members, family, friends, and new connections. For this reason, Nilsson (2005, p. 90) warns: "Trying to erase their identities as ex-combatants is therefore likely to be futile. Even if such a transformation is possible, it is questionable whether it is desirable, as the comradeship between ex-combatants is sometimes the only social forum at their disposal." Community organizations and religious groups aligned with their identity or values may offer support.

Ex-combatants can cope with psychological distress and manage uncertainty during their transition when others foster their sense of belonging and are perceived as sources of support, even without direct provision of assistance. Social identification with groups provides individuals with basic psychological resources fundamental to adaptive functioning and good health.[1] Hence, social groups, through the identities attached to them, are thought to serve as "social cures" (Panagiotopoulos and Pavlopoulos, 2024), and in that sense, can contribute to the incorporation of individuals undergoing a social transition to civilian life.

6.1.3   Incorporation when Reintegrating

The Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) is the Colombian agency in charge of reintegrating ex-combatants from all armed groups. It defines reintegration as a six-and-a-half-year offer made by the Colombian State to demobilized individuals from illegal armed groups who are willing to reintegrate into social and economic life.[2] According to the agency, the reintegration program aims at people who demobilize from self-defense and guerrilla groups individually or collectively. To date, around 25,000 people in reintegration have completed their transition to civilian life through the process established by the program.[3]

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[1] These include the need to belong, the need for self-esteem, the need for control, and the need for a meaningful existence. See, Greenaway et al. (2016).

[2] Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, "Reincorporation." See, https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reincorporation/

[3] Ibid.

The ARN also states that eight out of ten individuals who have undergone the reintegration process remain law-abiding citizens, and 73% have undergone training for various trades.

Cristian, a former member of the ELN who demobilized in 2003, sought support from the ARN to access the benefits of the reintegration program. Having disengaged prior to leaving the group, I classified him as a deserter. He understood that the DDR program would help him secure some funds, recognizing that restarting his life in his 40s would be very demanding. Following his demobilization, Cristian pursued education. Although he would have preferred to study something connected to healthcare provision, he shared that the government did not offer training in that field. Upon completing high school, he enrolled in courses offered by the SENA, where he learned skills such as fixing refrigerators and making candies, among others. However, he explained that he did not utilize what he learned in those trainings because he lacked the means to establish his business. He humorously remarked that only a few refrigerators needed fixing in a small town on a regular basis for his business to thrive and to compete with others in the same line of work.

Initially relocating to Bogotá to be closer to his sister, Cristian soon realized that her welcome was motivated by selfishness. He recounted:

> I packed my things and went to Bogotá to be with my sister. She welcomed me, assuming I had money because she had heard that those demobilizing were receiving financial assistance. However, the reality was that the money I received could only cover my basic expenses, and she eventually asked me to leave. I couldn't afford to stay in Bogotá. I ended up scavenging food from trash cans and living in El Cartucho because I am not a thief. I faced constant humiliation while living there. Eventually, when I saved enough money, I returned to the Bolivar department. Although I don't have much, I feel more at peace here. The challenge remains the same: finding the means to survive, but at least the cost of living is lower here in Magangué, and there is an ex-combatant population in the town, so I don't feel discriminated against.

Despite his years fighting for social change, Cristian understood what happened with her as an example of how capitalist values dictate people's worth based on wealth and resources. At the root of the incident is the fact that communities where reintegration takes place, even the most immediate circles of reintegrating combatants, do not understand what benefits the ex-combatants are receiving, leading to misperceptions that they are being rewarded or favored and that continues to be the case with the recent reincorporation of members of the FARC, mostly of those living in ETCRs.

Cristian's relocation to Maguangué, a smaller town in the Bolivar department, made rejoining society manageable not only because he could afford civilian life there, but because he was not discriminated against because of his past and found the social support for his incorporation in a civilian identity. Cristian perceives that some people accept him for who he is and have been empathetic to his circumstances, even offering help. When asked if he wanted to live in Magangué forever, he said he did and shared that a family he's close to wants him to stay. They even show they care about him by paying for his burial insurance to make sure he does not have to worry about those types of things. He shared:

> Whenever I visit a friend's house, I feel warmly welcomed. They always invite me to join them at the table if they're eating. Magangué feels like a true home to me. When I returned from Bogotá, someone I met noticed that I needed financial support, so they gave me a glass cabinet to use for selling things. I currently make a living this way, and that person has become my friend. Overall, I feel surrounded by good people.

Though Cristian still espouses radical political views internalized during his time with the FARC and the ELN, he refrains from participating in political activism but stated that he planned to vote in the presidential elections in 2022.[4] Cristian still advocates for socioeconomic justice and the participation of marginalized sectors in the country's political life, as these beliefs were shaped by his time in two insurgent groups through their political and ideological indoctrination. He cited safety concerns for not being involved more actively in politics due to his political views: *"Being involved in such activities risks death, as the system has agents to eliminate dissenters. Capitalists do not tolerate opposition, although merely advocating for your rights and seeking peace isn't revolutionary at all."*

In the interview, Cristian expressed dissatisfaction with the assistance received. Despite support systems in place, intermediaries seemed to benefit more than intended beneficiaries, with funds not effectively utilized. Cristian believed it would have been more beneficial if the government had invested in sustainable businesses for them and shared:

> I believe the assistance we received failed. I felt like we [ex-combatants] were treated as a herd of cows left in a field without proper care. We weren't provided the necessary support,

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[4] The last time I talked to Cristian (March 23, 2023) he expressed his happiness for the election of Gustavo Petro as the new President of Colombia, saying, "Now we have a president who will fight for the poor and social equality! I feel that he has already accomplished a lot, and that's why the oligarchy hates him...What they [the oligarchy] have taken away from us [the people] all these years, they will pay back through taxes. With him, those funds will finally end up in the hands of those who truly need them."

such as food or medical attention, and there was little oversight to ensure our well-being. Additionally, while there were support systems in place, there were also numerous intermediaries who seemed to benefit more from the assistance intended for us. It's frustrating to think that if the government allocated a certain amount of money for each of us, a significant portion of those funds ended up lining the pockets of individuals who weren't the intended beneficiaries. It would have been more beneficial if the government had invested the same amount of money in establishing sustainable businesses for us, ones that could continue generating income over time. Instead, the money we received was quickly spent, while it seems that those intermediaries have only grown wealthier over time.

Guillermo, a former member of the AUC in Tierralta, Córdoba, echoed this sentiment. Guillermo was a defector who contributed to the AUC, motivated more by rewards than by a strong commitment to the group. In this sense, the dismantlement of his bloc led to an involuntary disengagement, and he had to adjust to civilian life with the assistance of the DDR program to compensate for the loss of income he derived from his participation in the AUC. Given the option to receive land or establish a small business, he chose the latter, hoping for a productive project. However, the business was unprofitable, and funds were mismanaged, leaving only 25% of the allocated funds for implementation. He recounted,

> There was a project aimed at growing acacia trees for their wood, and the funds I received were allocated to establish this business. However, despite having the land to grow the trees, there was no demand for this type of wood, rendering the project ineffective. Additionally, there were proposed projects involving cattle, rubber, and cacao, which the community would have preferred. However, the funds intended for implementing these projects had already been depleted. Since the responsible parties planning these projects were government officials, community members could not voice their concerns or protest the situation. As a result, we were left with the land, resorting only to harvesting rice and yuca for sustenance. This situation affects 525 former AUC members who depend on the productivity of the land for their livelihoods.

Despite these challenges, he saw organizing Afro-descendants in his town as an opportunity to meet his needs. Guillermo stated, *"From the moment I realized that was my identity, I have been involved promoting our interests. In doing so, I have left my past association with the AUC behind."* Cristian explained that his organization was legally established in 2009 and brought together individuals who self-identify as victims belonging to ethnic minorities such as natives, Afro-descendants, raizales, or palenques living in Tierralta. This case illustrates how organizing along their social identity provides a platform for reintegrating combatants to collectively address challenges, access resources, build solidarity, and

advocate for their rights, ultimately facilitating their successful reintegration into society.

Organizing around this shared social identity can amplify the voices of ex-combatants transitioning to civilian life by connecting them with others in the local community, enabling more effective advocacy for their needs. Additionally, if there is a reluctance to provide support to former combatants, identifying with minorities and victims—which they are—can help secure the necessary assistance. This approach allows them to access financial aid, training programs, employment opportunities, and social welfare benefits. Importantly, these benefits are crucial considering that any support linked to their time in the group has long ceased, while their connection to these social groups remains.

Moreover, these organized groups provide a platform for ex-combatants to exchange skills, knowledge, and experiences, fostering mutual support and collaboration. By establishing networks along social identity lines, they gain emotional support, practical assistance, and mentorship, aiding them in navigating challenges and accessing opportunities for successful incorporation into society.

Groups led by individuals like Guillermo can also facilitate capacity-building initiatives, addressing the ongoing struggle for sustainable livelihoods and economic independence, even years after demobilization. Through these organized efforts, ex-combatants can enhance their political representation, advocating for policies and programs tailored to address their specific needs.

In addition to that, socially identifying as part of those groups has helped Guillermo to overcome the othering practices of the time when he was in the AUC:

> I represent Afro-descendants in a victims' workgroup in Tierralta. One of the demobilization sites of the FARC was located in 2016 in this region. Some of them have relocated to the rural outskirts of this town, many of them being paisas [referring to people coming from the northwest region of Colombia], and some have brought their families to start their reintegration process here. The Office of the Ombudsman in the town asked me to reach out to them upon their. When we met, I felt empathetic toward their situation as I could relate to what they were experiencing. I chose not to disclose my past affiliation with the AUC to make them feel more comfortable. I am a spokesperson for a group representing the interests of my social group, and I understood that revealing my past could have increased their distrust at a time when they needed social support. Instead, I informed them that I was working for victims, and I felt we connected. Despite having fought against the FARC for years, I don't harbor hatred toward them. I now understand that both they and I joined our respective groups due to a lack of opportunities. I could sense their desire

to move forward, and if I can, I am willing to assist them in overcoming the challenges associated with reintegrating into society.

When Guillermo perceives others, whether they are victims in Tierralta or former FARC members, as part of his social category (which could be based on ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, rural background, or their ex-combatant status), it triggers an "in-group" identification. This fosters solidarity and positive attitudes based on shared goals and values. He previously viewed former FARC members as "out-group" enemies due to perceived differences. However, recognizing their shared social categories blurs the distinction between "us" and "them," shifting his perception. This realization promotes empathy and positive attitudes towards former adversaries, reducing intergroup bias and hostility.

The last time I spoke with Guillermo was in May 2022, which was eight months after his interview. He mentioned that he had been collaborating with former FARC members who had joined his group, advocating for the interests of victims from minority groups. While they worked together to organize an Afro-Colombianity day in the town, they have struggled to make further progress in addressing their needs despite the high number of victims in the city. Guillermo mentioned that they have been collaborating with other social leaders in the area and have received support from organizations such as USAID, the Dioceses of Montelíbano and Apartadó, MAPOEA, and Cordupaz. However, he noted that the current mayor is not particularly interested in addressing the needs.

Community organizations and religious groups aligned with the identity or values of the ex-combatants can socially support their incorporation. For instance, Mario, a former combatant in the AUC Minero bloc, underwent collective demobilization with his unit in 2005 and embraced Christianity in 2011. He was the sole participant in the study who experienced religious conversion as part of his reintegration journey. Mario expressed that his involvement in a congregation has provided him with a sense of support and acceptance. He explained that everyone in his church is aware of his past but accepts him because they recognize the transformation he has undergone since finding God. Mario shared, *"During my time in the paramilitary bloc, I believed in God, but now I identify as a Christian. While I once hoped for God's protection in combat, I viewed my faith as personal. Now, I feel connected to a community of believers and practice my faith with them."*

José, a former combatant of the FARC's 36th front, spent 13 years with the group before deserting and subsequently being captured by authorities. According to my classification, he was a deserter who had disengaged and sought a life change. José was imprisoned for involvement in a kidnapping case during his time with the FARC. While in prison, he requested individual demobilization to access benefits aimed at assisting in reintegrating combatants to access the benefits offered to demobilized combatants, improving his reintegration experience. Upon release, the FARC had signed the peace agreement and established demobilization sites in designated areas. Despite the opportunity of collectively reincorporating with them, José chose not to do so, citing his rejection of the collective mentality required to live in such spaces. He stated: *"I knew I needed to work for myself; no group would provide what I needed. I understood my capacity to pursue my interests; I had worked for the group before, so I could work for myself now"*.

Having disengaged, José felt capable and independent. However, legal restrictions limited where he could reintegrate. Despite his affection for the rural region where he operated with his group, he understood the need to prevent further victimization of those affected by the FARC.[5] He expressed a deep longing for rural Colombia, its landscapes, and environment. He shared:

> If I had the choice, I'd go to the south of Colombia, not because of the group but because I love the area where we operated. Despite finishing my sentence and being released from prison, I'm confined to living in this city [Bogotá]."

José perceives Bogotá as a catalyst for transforming his life, especially for the sake of his family, particularly his daughter. He views the city as where he has redefined his role by pursuing a different path. Despite encountering financial hurdles and encountering resistance due to his past, José remains hopeful about his prospects. He expressed gratitude for the assistance provided by the ARN, which has facilitated his pursuit of a technical degree as a pharmacy assistant (regente de Farmacia), a career that will help him live a good life and let him embrace civilian life. He considers that a specific role can help him feel like an ordinary

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[5] This was also something that Giancarlo and Javier, former members of the AUC shared. They could not reintegrate where they wanted to avoid the revictimization of their victims. In their case, that distances them from the networks of family and friends they have and forces them to establish new social connections for their reintegration.

man incorporated into civilian life.

Although he acknowledges the country's inequalities and recognizes the need for social change, José feels he contributed as he could. He understands today that his contribution, having taken arms against the government, was a mistake but sees his time in prison and his subsequent efforts to rebuild his life during his reintegration as a way of rectifying that mistake. I believe that coming to terms with this is fundamental for ex-combatants, and in order for people like José to feel incorporated, he must feel that society sees his imprisonment and pro-social life enough to open room for him as a member of the collectivity.

To understand the social support network of ex-combatants, I asked participants whom they relied on. José mentioned his wife but acknowledged feeling the stigma of being an ex-combatant, even in their intimate relationship at home. From a social identity perspective, individuals derive their self-esteem and develop a sense of belonging from their group memberships. Living with other people in their house, José feels compelled to pass as an ordinary man to avoid rejection. He shared that he performs around them as an ordinary citizen by engaging in little talk related to typical topics like his job or studies. In this way José attempts to align himself with the norms and expectations of the social group he is interacting with. This behavior reflects his desire to avoid negative judgments from others based on his past as an ex-combatant.

Most importantly, he expressed feeling trapped by his wife because she knows he needs her support. They have a daughter together, and José believed that when they started a family, she recognized his potential for a different life by living a family-oriented role. However, he believes his wife uses his ex-combatant status and his reliance on her to manipulate him into doing what she wants, leading him to feel used. José's inability to open a bank account or own a phone in his name further solidifies his dependence on his wife. He sees this as a means for her to control him and inhibit his autonomy, illustrating the complexities of relying on someone when you are part of a stigmatized population. He stated:

> She's aware of my past and the challenges I face as an ex-combatant, and she manipulates me with that knowledge. I have no choice but to endure it because there's no other option. She often tells me that she feels obligated to assist me but also views supporting me as a burden. It's disheartening to realize that even my own wife sees helping me as a chore. How can I feel supported by society when my closest companion feels this way?

José shared that he has chosen to keep his past hidden, confiding in only his wife and two other individuals. One of these individuals was a man he worked for, who owned a company where José was employed as a truck driver. For three and a half years, José successfully concealed his past until changes in legislation required commercial truck drivers to undergo background checks. Unfortunately, the results revealed José's previous involvement with the FARC, particularly in a kidnapping case, leading to uncertainty about his continued employment. However, due to the trust and relationship built over time, the owner allowed José to continue working. José believes that the man got to know him as a person, which is why he was not taken aback by his past and understands that is why he supported him.

An important element for the transition to civilian life is trust between ex-combatants and society since both groups could benefit from reconciliation and peace. On the one hand, ex-combatants are expected to be open about their past as they reintegrate into society. They know about events that took place during the conflict, and they can provide information that can help construct collective memory. On the other, the anonymity of the ex-combatants not only guarantees their physical security but protects them from discrimination and prevents recidivism.

Cuénoud González and Clémence (2019) looked at how and when an ex-combatant identity (the past of a person) is disclosed and found that ex-combatants frequently conceal their former identity and that this has a small but positive effect on their reintegration. Keeping their past self to themselves not only prevents the rejection of ex-combatants from the groups they intend to join but favors a better identification with the civil community, which indirectly decreases the desire to take up arms again (Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019, p. 952).

When José learned about a job opening within the ARN, he applied. The position involved social work, guiding former combatants and serving as a liaison between them and the ARN. Feeling well-suited for the role, José applied, only to encounter the same background check process that had previously caused him issues. This time, however, it resulted in him being denied the position. This rejection came as a shock to José, as he believed he could contribute effectively to the agency's mission. He found the situation ironic, considering that the agency claims to aim to remove barriers for former combatants,

yet its own practices seemed to contradict this goal.

Ex-combatants often carry elements of their former identity into their civilian roles, a phenomenon known as role residual or hangover identity. According to Ebaugh (1988, p. 5), this residual identity becomes integrated into their self-conception. Germán, along with another participant (Guillermo), works as a security guard for a private security company. His duties include patrolling property, monitoring surveillance equipment, and managing access points. Having been an ex-combatant, Germán brings valuable skills to his role as a security guard. His experience in handling weapons, maintaining vigilance, and ensuring security were transferable skills. Additionally, his background in conflict situations likely honed his ability to remain calm under pressure, make quick decisions, and assess potential risks, all of which are essential traits for a security guard. Thus, when asked about his strengths, Germán emphasized his creativity and perseverance, highlighting his ability to tackle challenges with problem-solving strategies rather than becoming overwhelmed. He credited this skill to his experiences during the war, which helped him confront state forces, survive, and now guides him through the challenges he faces in civilian life.

Transitioning to the role of a security guard represents a departure from the violence and conflict of Germán's past as a combatant. In his new role, his focus is on maintaining safety and order within a civilian context rather than engaging in armed conflict. This transition reflects his desire to move away from his past involvement in violence and contribute positively to society in a non-military capacity. Germán mentioned that the person who trained him for this position provided guidance but shared that he also applies what he learned from survival training in the ELN. However, he explained that his current approach to what he does in his job as a security guard in a private security company leans more towards providing a service, leading him to prioritize professionalism over an impulsive response. This commitment to personal development is evident in his dedication to ongoing study and training for his current profession.

When considering the social transition of ex-combatants to civilian life, it's crucial to recognize that, from a structural-functional perspective, roles can be seen as "rules" governing the broader social system or society. These rules impose expectations on individuals occupying roles, and typically, individuals cannot easily change or escape the influence of these

rules. Some ex-combatants may leave their armed group behind, but their social transition to civilian life is affected by the other roles they have. Mariana's case illustrates this.

Mariana was recruited as a minor to join an ELN front operating in the Nariāo department. Despite her dissatisfaction with the group's demanding tasks, such as guard duty and long walks, as well as the constant stress of staying alert and witnessing punishments for minor infractions, she stayed there due to her feelings for another member. After they became a couple, they deserted wanting to live a life together. Mariana was a minor then and mentioned they knew they needed to leave and exited without fully considering the consequences.

Following a year of hiding, Mariana and her partner moved to Bogotá, where Mariana's father lived, in search of increased anonymity. They made this move due to the ongoing risk of retaliation from the ELN after deserting their ranks. Unable to financially support them, Mariana's father encouraged the couple to demobilize to access government benefits and took them to a battalion in the city, where they officially started their DDR process. In that sense, I classified her as a deserter. Mariana's partner spent four months in a shelter with other ex-combatants outside of Bogotá. Upon his return, they started living together and had two children. Despite their romantic relationship ending, she believes their decision to leave the group together was the right one, as they found happiness as a couple after desertion.

Mariana's case illustrates the intersectionality of grappling with multiple layers of stigma during reintegration. Through the framework of social identity theory, Mariana's experience showcases the complex negotiation of different stigmatized identities upon rejoining society. As a poor black woman hailing from Tumaco, Nariāo, and an ex-combatant, she encountered a myriad of challenges upon her relocation to Bogotá. In Tumaco, located in the Pacific region, the majority of the population shares her racial identity, with 81% identifying as black, many of whom reside in impoverished rural areas.[6] Upon her arrival in Bogotá, Mariana grappled with literacy challenges, underscoring the profound impact of her marginalized so-

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[6] Tumaco is a city situated in the Pacific region with a population of 257,000 inhabitants, with 87,000 (34%) residing in urban areas and the remainder in rural zones. Among its population, 81% are black, and 9% are indigenous communities. Additionally, in Tumaco, 24% of residents are illiterate, and 54% live in abject poverty, one of the highest rates in the country.

cioeconomic background on her educational opportunities. Despite receiving ARN support for education, her lack of prior schooling has significantly prolonged her journey to obtain a high school diploma, thereby affecting her social mobility and sense of belonging in the city. Mariana also depends on assistance from various government programs, including but not limited to those she receives as an ex-combatant, to meet her basic needs. She is deeply motivated to graduate, recognizing its pivotal role in achieving upward mobility within her newfound social context.

Mariana's decision to relocate to Bogotá was motivated by the desire to escape punishment from the ELN and the limited opportunities in her hometown. However, she acknowledges the inherent tradeoffs involved, including the risk of discrimination and the daunting challenges of adapting to a new environment. Despite her efforts to pass as an average citizen by concealing her past and covering gaps in socialization, education, and work history and by responding to the demands for competence in daily life with performances of being ordinary in the city, the color of her skin makes her vulnerable to racial discrimination in Bogotá. She lamented: *"People here are generally nice, but there's racism. I've faced discrimination because I'm black. Racism is prevalent in this city."* Racial roles prescribe behaviors, statuses, and opportunities based on an individual's racial or ethnic identity, shaping patterns of social interaction, power dynamics, and access to resources. Mariana's case illustrates how societal norms and expectations based on race can significantly affect an individual's ability to integrate into a new social environment despite their efforts to conform to societal norms.

Sandra, a participant who joined the Cordoba Bloc of the AUC when the father of her three children left, was forced to provide for them due to limited employment options stemming from her lack of education. Joining the AUC meant leaving her family behind and relocating to a different region. Sandra contributed to the group in exchange for remuneration and was not committed to the group. Although she developed identity meanings tied to the AUC, she was not committed to the group and did not adopt the group's identity. She did not go through a process of disengagement per se, but upon returning to her place of origin with her family, interactions with different social groups created a disparity between the identity meanings tied to the AUC that Sandra had and the self-in-situation meanings that

defined her in a family and community context. This incongruence prompted a modification in Sandra's behavior to align the meanings of the self with identity-standard meanings, facilitating identity verification in her family role. The dismantlement of the group made it possible for her post-demobilization to become independent from the AUC and based on personal standards. Sandra stated: *"The person who demobilized was very different from the person who returned. I started a family at a young age and had no education, so I see my time in the AUC as an experience that made me stronger, gave me skills, and made me the independent woman I am today. Thanks to my time in the AUC, I can take care of my family as a single mother".*

Taking on other roles after demobilization could lead ex-combatants to adopt role identities that link their self-perception to the social context where reintegration/reincorporation occurs, as it is here where their new role is played. This could be how new roles help ex-combatants adopt an identity with which they can label themselves as members of a social group. This is possible because role identity is developed through the internalization of meanings acquired through interactions with others and one's understanding of the role (Stryker, 2001). The subjective meanings that ex-combatants attribute to objects, behaviors, and events would impact their actions based on how they like to see themselves and how they like to be seen by others when performing their role in particular social positions (McCall and Simmons, 1978).

Sandra recognized that utilizing the funds provided by the DDR program wisely could improve her chances of successful reintegration. She saw her return to civilian life as an opportunity for personal reinvention. Rejecting the notion of being solely a stay-at-home mother, she had already been providing for her family during her time with the AUC. Therefore, Sandra decided to complete her high school education and ventured into entrepreneurship. She started by selling tamales and later expanded into clothing sales. Despite receiving job offers to join armed groups again, she prioritized her independence. For her, rejoining society represented a chance to redefine herself as a self-employed woman. Currently, she is employed in her chosen field, demonstrating her successful transition to civilian life through entrepreneurship and education.

These cases show that by self-categorizing as members of other groups, ex-combatants

cognitively internalize a shared in-group prototype that describes and prescribes who they are and how they should behave. This reconfiguration of their collective self (re)shapes their identity and gives them some stability and control of their social environment. Ex-combatants integrate an alternative identity and assume membership in a new social category represented by the civilian community, leaving behind the social category of combatants (Cuénoud González and Clémence, 2019). They can group themselves as identical to some and different to others, and in this distinction, they can incorporate finding their place in society.

6.1.4 Incorporation When Reincorporating

The Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) is the Colombian agency that assists in the process of reincorporation of former members of the FARC. Within the framework of the peace agreement between the National Government and the FARC, it was established that reincorporation is "a process of socioeconomic stabilization of the signatories of peace who handed over their weapons within the framework of the signing of the Final Agreement between the State and the FARC".[7] The peace agreement also created a new council, called the National Council for Reincorporation, comprising two members of the FARC and two members of the government giving equal voice to the FARC and the government in planning reincorporation.

The idea behind this council was to have FARC leadership in the council advocating for the needs and concerns of its former combatants, ensuring that their interests were taken into account in the planning and execution of reincorporation programs. The expectation was for the resulting political party (currently Comunes) to provide support and guidance to facilitate the transition of its former members back into civilian life. Therefore, the collaborative efforts between the FARC and its former members have the potential to address challenges, promote reconciliation, and foster sustainable peace in Colombia.

There are 11 participants in the sample who are *firmantes* (signatories for peace) or *reincorporados*, thereby rejoining society after the FARC signed the peace agreement with

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[7] Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, "Reincorporation." See, `https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reincorporation/`

the Colombian government. Among them, 5 chose collective reincorporation, while six opted for individual reincorporation. The five participants living in an ETCR at the time of the interview—Pablo, Marlon, Juan, Aurora, and Richard—mentioned in the interview that they valued rejoining society with others like them. All of them strongly identify with the FARC, but only three of them (Pablo, Marlon, and Juan) said they supported or felt represented by Comunes. Having undergone the laying down of arms as an outcome of a peace agreement with the government, the process resembles a collective demobilization. The six participants reincorporating outside ETCRs also strongly identified with the FARC. However, only two declared that their strong identification with FARC meant they now identified with Comunes, with one of them being a representative of the political party and another identifying as a supporter. These strongly identified members rejoined society either undergoing a process of involuntary disengagement, marked by their new context and the transformation of the group into a political party, or redefining their identification and membership with the Comunes political party (as seen in the previous chapter).

Four out of the five participants who were living in an ETCR at the time of the interview ran small, productive businesses through cooperatives to derive an income. They discussed this experience, which confirms that shared identity as ex-combatants enables effective collaboration (Nilsson, 2005; Themnér, 2011).

During the peace talks between the FARC and the Colombian government, combatants were organized into groups and underwent the process of role exiting alongside others. This likely facilitated the deliberative stage of the process, as individuals could present the advantages and disadvantages of exiting, along with their own evaluations (Ebaugh, 1988). Although this groundwork could have prepared combatants for life adjustments, the speed of the implementation left FARC-EP commanders little time to prepare combatants mentally for the experience of demobilization, and the state had insufficient time to build the housing, infrastructure, and services needed in the safe zones.

Van Gennep discusses the concept of journeying together through transitional experiences. He introduces the term *"communitas,"* which describes a temporary state of collective solidarity, equality, and camaraderie experienced by individuals during transitional phases or rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960). In this context, certain members of the FARC likely de-

veloped a strong sense of community and mutual support during the peace talks, especially while at the demobilization sites (Transitory Normalization Township Zones). This helps explain why some of them chose to remain in the ETCRs (Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation) to undergo their collective reincorporation process.[8]

Although adjustments associated with role exiting often involve changes in the individual's friendship groups (Ebaugh, 1988), the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC allowed collective reincorporation. Even if former FARC did not purposely relocate with "friends" or other members of their unit to these spaces, they were connected to other former FARC members through self-stereotyping. Barriers that could have separated them before in the military unit (ranking, occupation, area of operation, time in the group...) dissolved in this transition.

Richard, a former Eastern Bloc FARC member, resided in the ETCR in Mesetas, Meta department. He chose to reside in an ETCR because he believed in maintaining the unity of the FARC's social base after the peace agreement and strongly identified with his group.[9] Richard is one spokesperson of his ETCR, located in Mesetas, in the Meta department. When explaining his decision to live in an ETCR he said:

> I chose to live in an ETCR because I thought that our goal as former FARC was to stay together. There are 198 former combatants here, and we live with our families and others who chose to live around us. The truth is, even though each of us has our own family now, we don't want to lose the bond that unites us. We want to stay connected with the same people we've been with.

Richard was part of the rank-and-file who traveled to Havana to contribute to drafting the terms of the agreement. He hoped that planned reforms would alleviate hardships in neglected rural areas and bring essential state services to the countryside. Choosing to stay in one of the demobilization sites when they became ETCR, Richard believed that collective

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[8] According to the ARN, as of May 2023, approximately 2,400 ex-members of the FARC (17% of a total of 14,157) were residing in Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCRs). See, Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, "Reincorporación en Cifras," https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/en/reincorporation/.

[9] Born into a family with FARC ties, with his father being one of the founders, Richard officially joined the FARC at 16 for safety reasons. Despite his father's role, he experienced no special privileges and had to meet the same demands as any other member. Life as a FARC member, according to him, required adaptation to its norms, discipline, following a strict schedule, and having a clear understanding of its cause.

reincorporation could help the FARC remain a potent, unarmed social and political force across Colombia.

Even though Richard recognized that the negotiation was necessary because people were suffering the effects of such a prolonged conflict, he mentioned that he had supported the transformation of the group into a political party because he wanted his thoughts and ideas to be accepted and recognized by others outside of the group.

Upon arriving at the demobilization site, Richard expected government support, including food, housing, and education, as outlined in the peace agreement. He remained there over time, trusting that these provisions would eventually reach the site. Richard noted the diverse demographics of those residing in the ETCR, with some bringing their families and others starting families there.

He favored collective reincorporation over the individual one, trusting that being surrounded by former FARC would make the transition to civilian life easier due to their shared history, ongoing challenges, and collective hopes for a better future. When asked if he considered himself a civilian, Richard stated: *"When thinking about my role in society, I cannot identify as a civilian because I link that category to anti-values. I am here [in the ETCR in Mesetas] with my people."* His explanation reveals that he rejects the categorization of civilians due to the conflicting values he associates with it. Instead, he emphasized his identification as a member of the ETCR community by stating that he lives "with his people." This self-categorization highlights his strong identification with the ingroup (ETCR inhabitants) and his reluctance to align himself with the outgroup (civilians).

Although he aimed to maintain the values instilled by the FARC in his daily life, Richard does not self-identify with Comunes, arguing that the party's leadership abandoned former members of the FARC in the ETCRs. He said:

> The Comunes party leaders used to live among us and shared our experiences, but they shouldn't have abandoned us here. We worked and protected them for years. While I understand they have political responsibilities now, they have disconnected from us here in the ETCRs; we are the base. Before, leaders and troops formed close partnerships and families, relying on each other. However, they no longer seem to share that group vision. They abandoned us. Seeing this, we knew we had to move forward independently. We learned that we should not depend on them.

Former FARC members living in these spaces underwent a process of self-categorization that emphasized the similarities between themselves and other inhabitants of the ETCR (ingroupers) while highlighting the differences between them and outsiders. In doing so, that established a difference between them and other *firmantes* (signatories for peace) who chose to reincorporate outside ETCRs. Although linked to ETCRs as a physical location, this self-categorization revolves around rejoining society as a collectivity.

Self-categorization leads individuals to perceive themselves and define themselves based on the characteristics of the group they identify with. Stereotyping can influence various aspects of their attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions, and behaviors (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). While those residing in an ETCR may feel a sense of collective identity, this does not prevent them from identifying with other social groups. Richard's talked about this process.

> At first, I thought we were different, but then I realized I'm just an average person like them. When I talk to them, I see they might not have much education, and neither do I. When I go to a healthcare center, I don't get to see a specialist any faster or slower than anyone else. We all have to wait for hours in the waiting room. If you need to see a doctor, you might have to wait for a week, just like everyone else in Colombia. The group used to solve my problems, but now I know it takes time and effort to find a way to solve them, just like everyone else. We're all the same

Initially, he believed there were differences between himself and others, but he realized that he was just like them—an average person. He noticed similarities in their levels of education and experiences when accessing healthcare. Despite previously relying on his group for solutions, he now understands that finding solutions requires time and effort, much like it does for everyone else. Richard's experience exemplifies how ex-combatants self-categorize similarly to other individuals in society (the local community where his ETCR is located).

Former members of the FARC residing in ETCRs have a significant impact on neighboring communities, and this reciprocal influence can lead to an exchange of ideas, behaviors, emotions, and other factors that shape those involved. In these areas, people mutually influence each other, shaping and being shaped by their interactions. This interdependent relationship, where all parties impact one another, can strengthen the integration of ex-combatants into society. Intersubjectivity is crucial because collective understandings, upon

which our sense of belonging is built, are not simply the result of individuals internalizing their shared conditions in the same way but are negotiated accomplishments (Bottero, 2009, p. 412-14). The group, whether defined by membership in a social category linked to poverty and rural background, shapes their sense of self. By advancing the group and its members, individuals act in their own self-interest, not against it. This explains why, in cases where ETCR neighboring communities were initially anti-FARC, ex-combatants and their neighbors were able to overcome their divisions when they realized their shared rural identity and their common experience of being neglected by the state (Dixon and Firchow, 2022).

The campesino identity trascends rural areas. Former combatants who have reintegrated into major Colombian cities talked about their campesino background to justify their participation in the armed group. Participants residing in informal settlements in the peripheries of major cities have preserved identities rooted in rural memories and practices, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between space and emotions (López, 2019). Meanwhile, other participants who have reintegrated into smaller cities or towns, like the group of former members of the AUC I interviewed in Tierralta, Córdoba department, have leveraged their campesino and rural identities and practices as tools to collaborate with others in their communities, including victims. They have drawn upon their varied territorial understandings and rural customs to collectively confront the emotionally charged experiences of violence, trauma, and exclusion. This is because the campesino identity is deeply intertwined not only with rural land but also with themes of victimhood, resistance, displacement hard, and state persecution, particularly targeting ex-members of rebel groups (Schmidt, 2023).

Richard had been living in the ETCR for five years at the time of the interview. During this time, he finished high school and received training. He argued that people in the ETCR struggle because the terms of the agreement have not been fulfilled. He shared that he never thought it was going to take that long for the government to meet their basic needs there. He elaborated, stating,

> We have been living in the same boxes for five years. Those boxes were built when we arrived and were intended to be our temporary housing. We work and struggle, and now we firsthand experience the difficulties of not having our own homes. Previously, we didn't prioritize housing because of our previous activities, but now it's different as we have our families here. Some people are unaware of this type of struggle. In the ETCR, we're collaborating to address this issue. I knew that peace takes time, but we simply weren't

prepared to confront the challenges we're facing.

Richard runs a small business with other ex-combatants producing coffee. He mentioned that he studied courses related to coffee production and marketing. He met the other members of this cooperative in the ETCR. As part of their marketing strategy, they emphasize that their coffee involves the labor of former combatants who are now committed to peace.

When asked about his transition from combatant to running a small business, Richard explained, *"After laying down our weapons, we attempted to reintegrate into society, which connected us to a capitalist world. We have immersed ourselves in market life, and that has forced us to learn more about our product."* He noted that all of them had to learn about coffee from scratch, including planting, harvesting, processing, drying methods, roasting, and brewing, as their survival depended on the success of their coffee business.

Richard mentioned receiving support from people who have supported the FARC's decision to lay down weapons, whom he refers to as "peace friends." However, in the interview, he also highlighted challenges faced, including friction that hinders their business operations. For instance, he explained that to sell their coffee legally, they must meet specific regulatory requirements, such as obtaining approval from the Ministry of Health's INVIMA office and acquiring a barcode. Despite their specific circumstances, they still must pay for registration and the barcode like any other business. Richard emphasized the financial strain this poses, as they are yet to generate sufficient income to cover these costs. He stressed the need for special considerations for ex-combatants to navigate such challenges effectively.

Aurora, a former member of the 5th Front, lives in the ETCR in Dabeiba, Antioquia. Aurora was recruited as a teenager and was part of a mobile military unit operating in Urabá for over ten years. She mentioned that she felt attracted to the FARC right away because she perceived them as a powerful party at a time when her family was forcibly displaced into an area that the group controlled. Aurora made several statements that indicated that she strongly identified with the FARC, even describing those in her front as her family. Aurora shared that she never thought about leaving the FARC, stating: *"I joined, and I was never bored in the group. I never considered going back to my family. I liked what I did and where I was, and I knew very well why I stayed."* When asked what those reasons were she argued

that being an average civilian had not appealed to her while she was a combatant because they were too vulnerable:

> Having experienced displacement myself, I understood the economic struggles of peasants facing similar situations, sometimes resorting to theft for survival. While I disapproved of their actions, I empathized with their condition. I recognized that desertion would mean reliving those hardships. Unwilling to resort to a life of crime or live in hiding, I didn't dream of a civilian life.

Aurora was open to discussing her life and small business, which involves collaborating with other women from a cooperative to produce artisanal soaps in the ETCR. She explained that she chose to reside in the ETCR in Dabeiba because, during the peace talks, she discovered that people she had strong connections with were relocating there. While Aurora enjoys interacting with individuals outside the ETCR, especially when selling the soaps in town or attending meetings in the town center, where she has recently met women and minorities, she emphasized feeling a profound connection and sense of belonging within the ETCR community. She said:

> I live here with other former members whom I met in the FARC. My neighbors were part of my unit, and some friendships have endured despite life's changes. I know some keep their distance from us in the ETCR. I prefer living with former FARC members because we know each other. We've endured hardships together and continue to support one another here.

When talking about their business, Aurora explained that the 11 women she works with also used to be members of her front, so she has known them for many years. Her case illustrates that ex-combatants' comradeship in ETCRs enables effective and pro-social collaboration (Nilsson, 2005).

Another crucial factor in Aurora's decision to relocate to an ETCR was the belief that it would provide a safe environment for raising her child. Aurora disclosed that she had given birth to a child while she was with the FARC but was unable to raise him herself, so someone else assisted in raising him. Therefore, when the FARC signed the peace agreement, she viewed it as an opportunity to reunite with her son. Aurora expressed confidence that people in the ETCR would be more empathetic towards the circumstances that led to their separation.

Former FARC members like Aurora faced potential social stigma for prioritizing their involvement in the group over raising their children—a situation reminiscent of mothers without custody who are often unfairly labeled as irresponsible, cold-hearted, or selfish, placing their own needs above their children's (Ebaugh, 1988). Thus, choosing to relocate with her son to an ETCR was Aurora's attempt to foster a positive self-concept after having made the difficult decision to relinquish her child for upbringing by others.

Aurora's reincorporation has centered on her role as a single mother, being the sole provider for her child. After the peace agreement was signed, she expected to study, find a job, and live happily with her son, but she argued that this did not happen. Although she obtained her high school diploma, she has struggled to secure employment. She explained that most of the time, she is either at home or working in the fields because there are few job opportunities in the ETCR. Consequently, she and other women in the ETCR make artisanal soaps to generate income, but she does not consider herself employed. She stated:

> Today, I must strive for self-sufficiency because, without work, I can't provide food for my child. Previously, I didn't worry about this as the group provided for us. However, now I understand that when I do not work, we go hungry. I need to earn $35,000, to feed my child. These responsibilities are new and compel me to work.

Despite her economic hardships, Aurora's ability to rely on the women in the cooperative and the support she receives from people in the ETCR indicates that her incorporation occurred while living in the ETCR surrounded by former FARC.

Marlon, a former FARC member and medium-ranking commander in the Combatientes del Yarí front, currently lives in the ETCR located in Icononzo, Tolima. Marlon strongly identifies with the FARC and takes pride in his association with the group. His following statement echoes the sentiment of the other five participants residing in ETCRs at the time of the interview:

> I joined the FARC willingly and remained committed to the cause; my decision to disarm was solely due to the peace agreement. I was content with my role and not coerced into being there. With the signing of the peace agreement, I followed the directives of higher-ranking members and surrendered my arms.

Over his 20 years in the FARC, Marlon unwaveringly upheld his ideological commitment, fully embracing the group's decisions and socially identifying with the FARC. Having been

in the FARC when it took part in previous peace talks (under the Pastrana administration), he was not expecting an agreement. After laying down his weapons, Marlon's partner, also a former FARC member, became pregnant. Although during this time, the FARC transformed into a political party, he argued that the prospect of fatherhood prompted his disengagement since it marked the first time in 17 years that he prioritized his family over the FARC.[10] Due to their distrust in the government, they opted to relocate to an ETCR to undergo their collective reincorporation, aiming to avoid challenges associated with staying in an area where they had been active members.[11]

Living in an ETCR established to maintain communal and social organization similar to that in the FARC, Marlon, and other former members had to adapt to a new social environment. Despite sharing backgrounds and political views with others in the ETCR in Icononzo, Marlon noticed a lack of discipline and solidarity once characteristic of FARC members. With the group no longer providing structure and support, he described how former FARC members living in ETCRs rebuilt family ties and engaged in economic activities to fulfill needs previously covered by the FARC. This change in responsibilities and social dynamics likely also facilitated Marlon's disengagement from his former role and identity within the group. Marlon expressed,

> I know that I left behind my life in the mountains, and now I feel free. I am the one choosing where to go, and adhering to societal norms. I don't want any problems, which is why I follow those norms. In doing so, I ensure a smooth and trouble-free existence as much as I can.

Also, since Marlon feels the Comunes leadership is disconnected from the realities they face in the ETCR, he stopped identifying with the FARC.

Since arriving at the ETCR with a pregnant partner, Marlon felt pressured to provide for his family and learned how to sew. He is involved in a small business through a cooperative established in the ETCR, working as a tailor crafting garments for a fashion brand that

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[10] Marlon mentioned that he distanced himself from his family upon joining, only reconnecting after 17 years when he sensed significant changes would take place. He also shared that during his time in the FARC, he refrained from having a child due to group norms, which led him to take contraception seriously while he was a member.

[11] Marlon said that, with the peace agreement, not everything was a bed of roses ("Con la firma del acuerdo, no todo es color de rosa").

markets the finished products as items made by former combatants. Additionally, he mentioned that he finished high school but lamented not receiving further assistance to continue studying because he could not afford it.

Marlon explained that he chose to collectively reincorporate in the ETCR out of fear for his life, seeking safety and security by aligning himself with a group that shares similar experiences and challenges and seeking solidarity and protection within that group. However, he does not feel entirely free from risk, citing the high number of former FARC members who have been killed after the peace agreement. Marlon referenced the results of the plebiscite as evidence of how unwelcome they were.[12] For him, when society voted against the peace agreement, they did so because they were not directly affected by the war like them, who prioritized peace precisely because they had participated in the confrontations.

The risk of death at the hands of some people opposing the reincorporation of FARC members highlights the intergroup dynamics at play. Those who oppose their reincorporation may view former combatants as a threat or enemy, leading to violence and hostility. While this threat underscores the boundaries between social groups, it also intensifies the sense of belonging and loyalty among former combatants, connecting signatories for peace (*firmantes*) in the ETCRs with others undergoing individual reincorporation.

Furthermore, the results of the plebiscite against peace in Colombia underscore the division within society regarding the peace process. Marlon's perception that society does not genuinely support peace reflects Colombian society's polarization and conflicting social identities. Those who were directly affected by the war, like Marlon and other former combatants, may feel marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, leading to a sense of alienation and distrust.

The risk of death and the lack of societal support for peace have significant repercussions on Marlon's social identity. They reinforce his identification with the group of former combatants and his perception of being apart from society, contributing to a heightened sense of vulnerability and marginalization. Additionally, they highlight the importance of collective identity in seeking safety and solidarity in the face of external threats and societal divisions.

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[12] Ingrid, who reincorporated alone in Bogotá, also linked the risk of death and the results of the plebiscite as indications of societal rejection towards former FARC members.

Upon arriving to the ETCR in Icononzo, Marlon believed the leaders of the party (Comunes) would ensure the well-being of former rank-and-file members, but he feels they abandoned them there. Consequently, he feels that his well-being depends on his collaboration with other combatants residing in the ETCR, most specifically, those with whom he works in the cooperative. He shared:

> We're here, working to support our families through our business. Personally, I go to work every day for my daughter's sake. I feel like we haven't seen the benefits promised in the peace agreement. Despite our efforts, we're still waiting for what was agreed upon at the negotiation table. Initially, I wasn't very hopeful about the peace agreement, but now that I've been here for a while, it's disheartening to see our business struggle while we're doing our part. It feels like peace depends on our efforts, but the government isn't holding up its end of the deal. This lack of support seems to come from a lack of social support from Colombians. They voted against the agreement because they were told we were receiving benefits despite many of them having little themselves. If they had believed in the process, things would be different here.

Former combatants residing in ETCRs find comfort and camaraderie in their factional identities, facilitating their integration into various social circles within their new environment. These identities offer psychological, social, and practical benefits, fostering friendships, boosting self-esteem, facilitating information exchange, ensuring security, and opening up job opportunities (Themnér, 2011). Despite the argument that enduring bonds among former combatants ease their post-demobilization organization (Nilsson, 2005), I have found that their shared self-categorization further promotes cooperation and mutual support among ETCR residents. By distancing themselves from their military past and embracing new norms and values, such as those derived from their former group, they collectively address the challenges they face now as ex-combatants and enhance their well-being. This underscores the significance of factional identities in facilitating the social transition of former combatants.

Pablo, Marlon, Aurora, and Richard have small businesses through cooperatives working in ETCRs. Another participant, Gladys, undergoing individual reincorporation in Bogotá runs a small micro-brewery business with other fellow ex-combatants from the FARC. She said she works with them because she trusts them, emphasizing their shared commitment to peace-building and implementing the peace accord. Reflecting on her entrepreneurial endeavors, she expressed,

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I never imagined myself running a business because I never considered a life outside of the FARC. It was unimaginable, given our mindset of living day by day, aware that tomorrow might not come. In the FARC, we focused on the present, understanding that our actions today shape our future. Therefore, we prioritized sowing seeds over reaping the rewards of our labor. Now, I have this business, which I see as a place for reconciliation and unity. Those who work here and those who visit share the conviction that returning to war is not an option, and implementing the peace agreement is the only path forward. Our goal extends beyond selling products; we aim to create a space where peace can be built together.

Barrios Fajardo et al. (2019) established that engaging in economic activities and building connections within the market domain facilitates the transition and personal development of former combatants, allowing them to redefine their identities and adjust to civilian life. They hey assert that the learning process, connected to acquiring skills and behaviors, helps former combatants embrace the idea of being entrepreneurs, thereby transitioning to civilian status, which can significantly impact their livelihoods and perspectives. The authors observed that entrepreneurship was crucial in helping ex-combatants overcome discrimination, reshape their identities, and reintegrate into the post-conflict economy. Additionally, it has also been established that taking on new roles, such as entrepreneurship, can facilitate deradicalization by redirecting the goals of ex-combatants away from previously held identities built on the ideological justification of violence and extremism (Chandra, 2017).

Ingrid, a former member of the 33rd Front, chose individual reincorporation in Bogotá. During the peace talks between the government and the FARC, Ingrid struggled with the concept of returning to a normal life. She found it challenging to desire normalcy, which would entail having a job and earning an income, especially after relying on the group for her needs for so long. Additionally, having spent 13 years in the group, she grappled with the idea of reintegrating, having fought all those years the government and criticized its rule. Reintegrating seemed contradictory to her, as it meant accepting the rule of law after opposing it for so long. The process of laying down her weapon was instrumental in her disengagement. She described her disengagement process:

Upon learning about the peace agreement while in the demobilization sites, I felt pressured to change my life, not by the government, but by our leaders. I resisted giving up my weapon because I believed it would leave us vulnerable. However, I eventually laid it down, trusting our leaders' decision. Afterward, everything felt strange. Before, we knew what each day held; the structure was clear. We were just there, waiting in those demobilization

sites, unsure of what to do next. The uncertainty left me feeling isolated and prompted me to leave, realizing I was on my own now.

During her time in the FARC, Ingrid served as a combatant and received training to provide oral healthcare to other members. She shared that she was trained by someone with credentials and worked in this field during the last six of her 13 years in the group. Therefore, she hoped the peace agreement would enable her to pursue a degree in oral healthcare. Ingrid believed that the government would certify the training that she received in the FARC and allow her to be evaluated to demonstrate her knowledge. With these expectations, she thought that the most logical step was to relocate to Bogotá because she believed the tests or continued education would occur there. However, the government did not authorize the tests that would have granted her a technical certificate to continue working in that field during her reincorporation. She felt frustrated because she had started dreaming of working in a dentist's office, which would have improved her economic situation and provided financial stability. Since no scholarships were available to study oral health, Ingrid pursued accounting instead. When asked if she liked that choice, Ingrid explained that she chose accounting because it was the only degree for which she received a scholarship. Even though it wasn't her preference, she said that she had learned to accept adverse circumstances in the FARC and that she saw that as a change of plans that demanded her to adapt.

After the peace agreement was signed, Ingrid initially expected support from the Comunes political party as she reincorporated into society. However, she stopped backing the party when she found that support was lacking. She expressed her disappointment, saying, *"The FARC became political and stopped fighting. When I saw that the Comunes party was ineffective in politics and not meeting my needs, I realized I was alone."* While the ARN provides guidance, Ingrid feels that her situation ultimately depends on her choices.

At the time of the interview, Ingrid had been living in Bogotá for four years. She is a single mother who studies and works. Although she disengaged and now focuses on having a better life for her child, Ingrid recognizes the impact her decision to reincorporate alone has had on raising her. She doesn't know or trust many people in Bogotá to help her care for her daughter. Therefore, she often has to bring her daughter wherever she goes, even to class sometimes.

She mainly interacts with classmates and customers and doesn't rely on her family due to the strain caused by the peace agreement. Previously, the FARC provided for their needs, but now, struggling to support herself and her daughter in Bogotá, she cannot send them money. Her family doesn't understand her situation and expects financial support, causing tension. Despite this, she feels they should appreciate her independence and understand she must prioritize her own needs.

Last but not least, the objective of the Law of Justice and Peace is to facilitate the peace process and the reintegration of demobilized paramilitaries or guerrillas while securing the rights of victims to truth, justice, and reparations. Javier and Giancarlo, two former members of the AUC, talked about their responsibility as perpetrators in their interviews, and this impacts their incorporation. Giancarlo expressed frustration with contributing to transitional justice requirements because it affects his transition to civilian life. Despite being released from prison, he feels unable to live the life of an average citizen. He believes that his involvement in securing victims' rights has left him in a permanent state of liminality, or what he calls a juridical limbo, due to ongoing legal processes. Although he demobilized, he cannot embrace civilian life, knowing that he must take responsibility for every single event that occurred in the jurisdiction of his group. Similarly, Javier stated that despite spending 15 years in prison for his actions, he continues to be summoned to court for cases in which he did not directly participate. He feels frustrated by the repetitive nature of the legal proceedings since 2005 as he struggles to disconnect from his past life in the AUC. Additionally, Javier worries about potential retaliation from some victims who cannot let go of the past, posing a security concern for him despite the overarching goal of national reconciliation.

6.2   CONCLUSION

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive a part of their self-concept from their membership in various social groups, influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with others. Throughout this chapter, I have explored how participants establish

psychological connections with others, including fellow ex-combatants, through their social identities, contributing to their overall well-being and aiding in their incorporation into society.

Participants discussed various topics when connecting with society, indicating the multidimensional nature of their reintegration. Those reintegrated through collective demobilization with the AUC pooled resources together to ensure a stable income, while others pursued education independently for social mobility, not because it was conditioned by assistance. Leveraging their campesino and rural identities, some participants collaborated with others in their communities, including victims, to collectively confront experiences of violence, trauma, and exclusion. This collaboration ensures a continued flow of resources to ex-combatants and avoids the misperception of favoritism in resource allocation.

Richard's case exemplifies the roles ex-combatants fulfill during reintegration. As a spokesperson for his ETCR and a member of a cooperative, he navigates various social roles, contributing to his incorporation into society. Despite not targeting a civilian identity, these roles foster pro-social behavior, benefiting both himself and the collective, even beyond the ETCR.

By organizing around social identities, ex-combatants can access financial aid, training programs, and employment opportunities crucial for successful incorporation. Moreover, organized groups provide a platform for ex-combatants to exchange skills, knowledge, and experiences, fostering mutual support and collaboration. By establishing networks along social identity lines, they gain emotional support and practical assistance, aiding in navigating challenges and accessing opportunities for successful reintegration.

Lastly, the risk of violence against former combatants opposing their reincorporation, which was less evident in the case of the AUC as the group itself was pro-status quo, underscores intergroup dynamics and societal polarization around social inclusion. However, it also intensifies the sense of belonging and loyalty among former combatants, connecting them across ETCRs and individual reincorporation efforts to coordinate support, particularly when they feel unsupported by political parties.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

The transition from military to civilian life for ex-combatants constitutes a complex psychological journey that demands significant adaptation and time. Despite undergoing demobilization processes, ex-combatants often face challenges in aligning their identities with civilian norms. This dissertation challenges the assumption that completing reintegration programs leads to a seamless adoption of civilian identity. Instead, it proposes that ex-combatants undergo a three-phase psychological process—separation, transition, and incorporation—in tandem with their reintegration before fully embracing civilian life through the redefinition of their social identity.

Rites of passage play a crucial role in shaping personal and social identity by offering individuals opportunities for self-discovery, community connection, and recognition of achievements. The social transition to civilian life can be likened to a transformative journey akin to a rite of passage, where individuals undergo profound personal and social changes. Just as traditional rites of passage mark significant life transitions, the demobilization and reintegration process serve as pivotal moments for ex-combatants to redefine themselves and their societal roles.

This dissertation is based on a qualitative study that examined the social transition to civilian life of 32 former combatants who reintegrated into Colombian society between 2002 and 2018. The study drew on social identity theory, which postulates that social behavior is determined by the character and motivations of the person as an individual and by the person's group membership. The transitional process examined in this study is pertinent not only to individuals reintegrating into society post-demobilization but also to veterans. The testimonies I used offer a comprehensive understanding of the psychological journey experienced by individuals leaving behind life in a military organization and having been exposed to armed conflict.

The dissertation delved into the phases through which combatants disengage from their roles as members of armed groups. It then explored the aftermath of their demobilization, examining how they carry the lived experience of the armed group, confront the stigma of

their past life, and grapple with the implications of decisions made during reintegration into society. Furthermore, it examined how some ex-combatants have integrated into society, redefining themselves through various social categories during the transition and adopting roles contributing to their self-concept and self-esteem.

I delved into literature on civil wars, insurgency, and political science to explore how desertion and demobilization have been conceptualized. From this exploration, I identified four claims that elucidate the circumstances under which combatants are likely to demobilize. These claims highlight scenarios such as significant military advances by the adversary leading to increased risks of death or injury in combat, instances where armed groups no longer uphold their original ideals, and situations where the economic and political motivations driving rebel participation can be satisfied through demobilization. However, by focusing on the social identity of combatants, which connects efforts at the organizational level to maintain group cohesion with individual-level decisions to stay with or leave the group, I examined desertion and demobilization through the lens of identity theories, particularly social identity theory, and self-categorization theory. In doing so, I presented the process of psychological disengagement as an alternative explanation for exiting armed groups and as a means by which ex-combatants navigate the uncertainty associated with changes in their social status when their groups collectively demobilize. Psychological disengagement emerges as a precursor for exit but also facilitates the identity redefinition process for those who perceive their social context changing as an outcome of demobilization. Through the experiences of the participants that I interviewed, I showed that individuals who strongly identify with their armed group and witness its transformation into a political party redefine their membership, converting their group affiliation into political support, especially if they view the new group as a continuation of the original one. Alternatively, others engage in political activism if they perceive the new group as deviating from the ideals of the original one.

I looked into the intricate process of reintegration and the significant psychological transformations ex-combatants undergo upon separating from an armed group. When examined through the framework of role transitions, reintegrating into society entails leaving behind a previous role and assuming new roles, and the characteristics of each phase impact the

other. Drawing from the participants' experiences, I demonstrated how former members of armed groups adapt their identities and associated meanings when taking on new roles and social positions after demobilization.

Moreover, the dissertation highlighted that while the primary goal is to embrace civilian life, akin to leading an ordinary life similar to that of an average person, some former combatants struggle to overcome this identity threshold. The disengagement of individuals closely tied to their membership in armed groups entails distancing from the rights and obligations associated with their role, particularly when membership forms a central part of their self-identity. While some members may have performed their roles without fully developing a group identity, reintegrating into society still represents a significant life change and the movement between positions in a social system. Hence, they readjust and adopt alternative roles to foster a positive self-concept.

The multifaceted nature of the social transition to civilian life was illuminated through interviews with participants, examining various factors influencing reintegration experiences and their impact on the overall transition process. Additionally, the dissertation compared reintegration experiences based on the circumstances of disengagement, investigating whether voluntary and involuntary disengagement reflect different values regarding armed group membership and civilian life and how these values are reconciled upon rejoining society.

Furthermore, the dissertation explored the relationship between group status—active, dismantled, or transformed—and the ability of former combatants to establish identity anchors during the reintegration process and its impact on their sense of belonging to society. Lastly, it examined the interconnectedness of psychological and social factors involved in the reintegration process, particularly how navigating unfamiliar roles, redefining self-perception, and establishing self-esteem collectively influence the successful transition to civilian life among former combatants.

Findings. In the dissertation, I established that the social transition to civilian life is not a straightforward, step-by-step process. Several factors contribute to this non-linearity. Firstly, although some ex-combatants demobilize with members of their military structures, they do not undergo the process simultaneously. Some may be more ready to transition into society than others, leading to variations in their progress as they navigate

their identification with civilian life and the group they are separating from. Additionally, external circumstances such as security conditions, availability of resources, and political dynamics can influence the pace and implementation of initiatives aimed at helping them embrace civilian life.

I observed various mechanisms through which ex-combatants temporarily adjusted to losing their previous sense of identity. In some, this led to shirking or the suboptimal performance of their jobs when they were members; in others, it led to their exit. Upon examining the experiences of participants who chose to leave, it became evident that while they desired this life change, it did not make their social transition to civilian life more manageable than those who underwent collective demobilization when assuming that those who collectively demobilized had chosen to stay.

My research revealed that, despite disengagement or a desire for a change in roles, many ex-combatants primarily focus on leaving without a clear plan for their post-demobilization future. Even those with some foresight often encounter unforeseen financial, legal, and social obstacles post-demobilization, including resistance to their reintegration within polarized notions of social inclusion. In this sense, it is evident that those who have disengaged or contributed to the group for pragmatic reasons only knew they wanted a life change but could not foresee what that new life would entail.

Deserters who demobilize due to battlefield dynamics or government policies promoting individual demobilizations often hide their past out of fear of retaliation and social rejection, as society stigmatizes the social category of ex-combatants. Despite the social desirability of leaving armed groups, this does not guarantee social inclusion. As a result, many deserters strive to integrate into civilian life, leveraging anonymity and gradually assuming new roles to secure income. Engaging in these new roles boosts their self-esteem, and they cultivate a sense of belonging through self-categorization.

I had a conversation with a participant who deserted, demobilized, and later collaborated with the Army in ground military operations against his former group. While such cases were rare in Colombia, as the number of collaborators was low compared to the total number of demobilized combatants, state forces relied on the assistance of some former combatants to help restore the government's monopoly of force. This participant recounted ongoing security

risks he faces due to his collaboration with the Army eight years ago, as his former group, the ELN, remains active and continues to pose threats of retaliation. He shared instances where both he and his wife were targeted in attacks, forcing them to relocate three times. Now, he requires bodyguards for protection and wears a tactical multi-threat vest whenever he goes outside. His experiences underscore how security conditions deeply affect the lives of ex-combatants, making it difficult for them to embrace civilian life fully. The heightened security risk he faces is a direct result of his collaboration with the Army and reflects the broader reality that being an ex-combatant in Colombia comes with inherent security risks.

Former members of the FARC who reintegrated into society under the peace agreement with the government also feel compelled to conceal their past for safety reasons. This is evident from the alarming statistic that 400 signatories for peace, former FARC members, were killed between the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 and February 2024. Consequently, ex-combatants are vulnerable to retaliation from their former groups or rival factions, and collaboration with government forces makes them targets for revenge attacks. Moreover, the stigma attached to their social category further exposes them to discrimination, social exclusion, and violence.

Some participants became ex-members when their groups underwent collective demobilizations. I interviewed two subsets of collectively demobilized combatants; the first one consisted of former members of the AUC. They brought more experiences post-demobilization to the study of reintegration since they rejoined society over 15 years ago at the time of their interviews. In that sense, conversations with this subset of participants could explore what happened after they stopped receiving assistance from the reintegration program and how they not only established a civilian identity but stopped thinking about themselves as ex-combatants.

One significant challenge affecting the transition to civilian life for some former members of the AUC I interviewed was their expectation of broader amnesties. Average rank-and-file participants assumed that their participation in the AUC would be excluded from background checks, given their reintegration into society occurred within a DDR and under a peace agreement. The former paramilitary leader I spoke with was caught off guard by the criminal prosecution he faced after choosing to dismantle his military unit. He recounted how his

extradition to the United States and involvement in multiple investigations from then on have significantly disrupted his transition. The implementation of the Justice and Peace Law exacerbated his situation, as his former commanding role now holds him accountable for all investigations related to war crimes and crimes against humanity despite his previous responsibilities being limited to managing finances. Similarly, other participants remain entangled in criminal prosecutions as potential witnesses, further hindering their ability to embrace civilian life as they are forced to revisit their past involvement with the AUC and fear that contributing to the truth does not guarantee the forgiveness of the victims.

Several participants mentioned that the prosecution of their leaders, including their extraditions, marked the end of their groups rather than the collective demobilizations themselves. Identifying higher-ranking members as responsible parties set them apart from rank-and-file combatants, who were perceived as merely following orders. Ongoing investigations to identify individual responsible parties could have potentially facilitated the reintegration of average members who did not face criminal prosecutions, as they could take on new roles in society without revisiting their past, at least not before the courts. Reducing collective guilt assigned by victims and the broader society may have helped these individuals reintegrate more successfully.

According to participants' accounts, smaller rebranded paramilitary groups attempted to recruit them. They revealed that they declined these offers for several reasons: viewing the collective demobilization as an opportunity to leave their involvement in war behind, receiving assurances from their former leaders that they would still receive income through government assistance, believing the peace agreement would bring social and economic investment to their communities, and, most importantly, feeling exhausted from the conflict and yearning to reunite with their families. The decision of some ex-combatants to remain in the demobilization program despite offers to join these other groups by fulfilling the government's schooling and training requirements suggests that while they may have identified with the goals of the AUC, they did not see joining these emerging groups as a continuation of their experience as members of the AUC.

Neo-paramilitary groups emerged to provide private security and engage in various forms of extralegal governance following the collective demobilization of the AUC. Some former

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members may have joined them to sustain counterinsurgency efforts, given that guerrilla groups were still active or to continue benefiting from their involvement in criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking. Therefore, although demobilized combatants could have received payment for their involvement with these new paramilitary groups, they were aware of the risks associated with joining them. They remained hopeful for a positive life change and did not accept those offers and that suggests their psychological separation from the group and their readiness to embrace civilian life.

Former AUC members reflected on the changes in their lives when the reintegration assistance ended and discussed the roles they assumed post-demobilization. Despite their group's alignment with government policies, that did not facilitate transitioning to civilian life. Some could not reintegrate in their desired locations to avoid re-victimization, leading them to relocate away from familiar surroundings.

In my interviews with former AUC members residing in Tierralta, a region formerly under AUC influence, they expressed that they did not need to conceal their identity because they reintegrated into a zone known to be "para." This group recounted experiences of failed projects and the bonds formed within their community, enabling them to navigate challenges and pool resources for mutual benefit collectively. Additionally, one participant mentioned he worked with victims and Afro-descendants, emphasizing the significance of shared social identities in fostering collaboration and addressing common concerns within local communities. This confirms my hypothesis that the social identification of ex-combatants plays a crucial part in their (re)socialization efforts and in developing a sense of belonging that supports their reintegration.

The second subset of collectively demobilized combatants comprised former members of the FARC who reintegrated into society following the peace agreement between their group and the Colombian government. Through conversations with them, it became evident that all had remained in the group because of their strong identification with it, leading them to struggle with reconciling the values, beliefs, and norms they once cherished, as these no longer aligned with their new social context. When the FARC transformed into the Comunes political party, members who maintained a strong identification with the group faced the challenge of redefining their membership and transitioning into political supporters. How-

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ever, there were others who, despite also strongly identifying with the FARC, perceived the Comunes party as failing to uphold the original group's ideals, resulting in their psychological disengagement. Some even channeled their dissatisfaction with Comunes into political activism, with one participant even running as a representative for another political party.

The risk of death at the hands of some people opposing the reincorporation of FARC members highlights the intergroup dynamics at play. Those who oppose their reincorporation may view former combatants as a threat or enemy, leading to violence and hostility. While this threat underscores the boundaries between social groups, it also intensifies the sense of belonging and loyalty among former combatants, connecting signatories for peace (*firmantes*) in the ETCRs with others undergoing individual reincorporation. Building a sense of community around this social category confirms the hypothesis that their social identification supports not only their disengagement from the FARC but also their reincorporation and the social processes by which they are rejoining society.

I utilized social identity theory to understand the post-demobilization stage, which I called the social transition from combatant to civilian identity. In doing so, I aimed to address the research question of whether individuals who choose to leave armed groups are better equipped for this transition than those who do not. My findings suggest that only those who had access to social support were able to develop a sense of belonging, regardless of the circumstances that led them to become ex-combatants. Participants who successfully managed the psychological challenges accompanying this life change were more likely to transition effectively to civilian life. However, not all ex-combatants have been able to achieve this transition. Therefore, we cannot assume that simply completing the period of government support outlined in the ARN's reintegration route guarantees successful incorporation into civilian life.

When we contemplate the many changes associated with each stage (separation, liminal stage, and incorporation), it becomes evident why socially transitioning to civilian life is so impactful and why the adjustment process consumes significant psychological resources. In that sense, what former members do as they transition to civilian life is to manage the uncertainties they face with the resources at hand. Some of them have resources in the form of social networks, like those who can count on their families, friends, or other ex-

combatants; others must establish their new selves by building social connections. I found that ex-combatants can cope with psychological distress and manage uncertainty during their transition when others foster their sense of belonging and are perceived as sources of support, even without direct provision of assistance.

Policy Implications. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs need to be flexible and adaptable to accommodate the diverse needs and circumstances of former combatants. Recognizing the varied pathways and timing of reintegration is crucial for effectively addressing the complexities of post-conflict transitions and supporting sustainable peacebuilding efforts. In that sense, policies should prioritize facilitating opportunities for ex-combatants to build social connections with individuals who can offer them support after demobilization.

The Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) engages ex-combatants in community-based programs, vocational training initiatives, and educational opportunities to foster social interaction and integration. However, when the training and educational programs offered are not aligned with potential roles they could fulfill in society, mainly guaranteeing they secure employment, ex-combatants may perceive their efforts as futile, impacting their self-esteem. Therefore, these programs should address the identified occupational needs within the communities where ex-combatants reintegrate. Ideally, they should also consider the recipients' interests to maintain their motivation and focus, facilitating their transition into other societal roles. Additionally, such training should leverage the skills and knowledge that ex-combatants already possess, maximizing their potential for successful reintegration.

Two participants have secured employment as security guards, embarking on their transition to civilian life through these new roles, even though they draw heavily on skills and experiences acquired during their time in the armed group. However, not all former combatants opt to continue their previous lifestyle in this manner; some may choose these positions because their expertise is recognized and valued. Furthermore, the assumption that individuals from armed groups are solely knowledgeable about warfare perpetuates a misconception.

Efforts should be focused on recognizing and harnessing the diverse skill sets of ex-combatants from their time in armed groups. This approach not only helps enhance their

self-perception as civilians but also contributes to their successful reintegration into society. For instance, many former members previously held roles ensuring their group's logistical needs, such as procuring supplies and equipment and viewed themselves as indispensable contributors to the group's functionality. This sense of importance likely bolstered their self-esteem and fostered a deep understanding of responsibility for the group's efficiency and survival, further reinforcing their identification with the group. They may still regard their past roles as vital in sustaining the organization's operations.

These individuals continue to see themselves as problem-solvers, having successfully navigated challenges related to resource scarcity, transportation, and distribution during their time in armed groups, as well as other difficulties upon reintegrating into society. They also perceive themselves as collaborators and team players, often reflecting on their visible and tangible contributions to the functioning of the armed group and how these enhanced their social standing and sense of fulfillment at the time.

Reintegration policies should reinforce the idea that leaving an armed group is socially desirable while highlighting that individuals can still contribute to society, which benefits their self-esteem and sense of belonging. In my interviews with former FARC members, they expressed this belief. All of them argued that by laying down their weapons and engaging in ordinary activities, they were contributing to peace in Colombia. However, this self-perception was not instilled by the reincorporation policy but was socialized by the FARC during the peace talks. Reintegration and reincorporation policies should emphasize how ex-combatants can continue to serve the community, especially since many view their time in an armed group as an act of service and highlight they care about the collective good.

The skills and expertise acquired in armed groups remain valuable post-demobilization, presenting opportunities for meaningful contributions within the communities they rejoin. For example, their proficiency in identifying suppliers, negotiating deals, and managing logistics can be leveraged to benefit local communities. Their ability to work collaboratively towards common goals is a valuable asset. Policies facilitating their reintegration should highlight the valuable skills and experiences they bring to the table, reframing perceptions of them within society. By doing so, communities may no longer view them as burdens or competitors but as valuable assets capable of significantly contributing to societal develop-

ment.

Reintegration and reincorporation policies should provide resources and programs that facilitate the maintenance and strengthening of networks with local communities to enhance the ability of ex-combatants to navigate the challenges of civilian life. Social identification with other social groups can provide them with essential psychological resources fundamental to adaptive functioning and good health, like the need to belong, the need for self-esteem, the need for control, and the need for meaningful existence. These policies must connect them with racial or ethnic minorities or victim groups, considering that many of them joined as minors or had been forcibly displaced themselves. This can help them secure additional support, given that social mobility is more challenging for double-stigmatized populations.

Three participants appeared to be in a perpetual liminal position, constantly crossing the identity threshold, and as a result, identified with none or many positions simultaneously. Two of them were still involved in ongoing criminal prosecutions of events that happened during the conflict despite the fact they demobilized over ten years ago. This is an unforeseen outcome of the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law in 2005, which attempted to investigate, prosecute, and punish every atrocious crime perpetrated by about 4,000 paramilitaries and guerrillas behind them. However, Colombia lacked the institutions for the task and, in eight years of operations, only reached the final sentencing stage of 8 of them.

Policy efforts should be concentrated on the prosecutions of the most responsible ones to use the available means optimally. In that way, low-level perpetrators can cross the identity threshold and rejoin society, mainly since many spent time in prison, and those with commanding power are punished for what they ordered or allowed to happen.

Policymakers must pragmatically prioritize transitional justice measures and other peace-building expenditures based on available resources. While it's crucial to address Colombia's past for the nation's future development, such efforts should not indefinitely impede other essential investments required for achieving lasting peace. It seems likely that Colombia has understood this, having created in 2016 a specialized court with tribunals dedicated to cases pertaining to transitional justice with specialized judicial bodies focused solely on addressing crimes committed during periods of conflict. This should allow for faster adjudication of cases and assist perpetrators in crossing the identity threshold. Providing support and resources

tailored to different levels of identification could be beneficial. For those deeply connected to the armed group's norms and values, programs addressing their sense of belonging and offering alternatives to the group's structure and purpose might be crucial. For those with weaker identification, assistance in acquiring new skills and adapting to civilian roles could be more effective. The success of reintegrating former combatants depends on understanding their levels of identification with the armed group and with society, tailoring reintegration efforts to address their specific needs and challenges.

Reintegration or reincorporation policies must support ex-combatants in enhancing their political representation by providing opportunities for them to advocate for policies and programs tailored to address their specific needs. This could involve training programs on advocacy and lobbying, as well as creating platforms for ex-combatants to voice their concerns and propose solutions at local and national levels.

Despite Colombia's extensive experience with DDR processes, the persistent lack of security guarantees has remained a critical barrier to the successful integration of ex-combatants into civilian life. Ensuring the security of ex-combatants should be a top priority in reintegration and reincorporation policies. Firstly, ex-combatants who have assisted state forces against their former group must be protected from retaliation for as long as necessary. While this may entail high and sometimes unclear costs, the government must bear the associated expense if it relies on their assistance. Secondly, ex-combatants face significant vulnerability to violent attacks by both state and non-state actors. They join other vulnerable groups in Colombia, including rural, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian leaders and communities, human rights defenders, and environmental activists.

Collaboration among demobilized fighters and these other vulnerable groups is crucial for enhancing their collective security and advancing their shared interests. Shared social identities can facilitate this cooperation. These groups can build trust and solidarity by recognizing commonalities and shared experiences, such as facing threats and persecution. Promoting activities that foster dialogue, build trust, and address underlying grievances is essential for overcoming barriers to cooperation. Through collaboration, these groups can strengthen their resilience, amplify their voices, and advocate for policies and measures that promote peace, justice, and even reconciliation. By working together, they can create a safer

and more inclusive society where the rights and security of all individuals are respected and protected.

APPENDIX A

VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Title of Project: Understanding the Repercussions of Demobilization on Reintegration, a Comparative Analysis of the Life Trajectories of Ex-Combatants Who Surrendered on their Own and those Others Who Demobilized Collectively in Colombia (2002-2018)

Principal Investigator:

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1. Purpose of Study: Offer a potential explanation of what facilitates the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants by exploring their identity when they leave an armed group and as they rejoin civil society. This study will also study how the demobilization and reintegration personal experiences are connected.
2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to engage in an interview, lasting no more than two hours. The interview will be semi-structured. I will ask you a series of questions. You are asked to answer these questions to the best of your ability. You are under no obligation to answer any or all questions in this interview if you so wish.
3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced by individuals who are in public life and express their opinions. The focus of the study is on how you left your armed group and how you have been connecting to other people/civilian communities. I will not inquire about any previous criminal behavior or about your involvement in any actions against the law. I assume that you do not wish to be identified by name, and as a result, I will not disclose your identity. If you agree to participate in this research, your interview data will be identified with a code. In addition, there may be minimal inconvenience for you for the time it takes to complete this interview.
4. Benefits: While there is no immediate benefit to you from this research, I intend to share my findings with others in a series of publications. This research has the potential to contribute to society's understanding of demobilization and reintegration.

5. Duration: The interview will last approximately two hours, depending on how extensive you wish your answers to be.
6. Voluntary Participation and the Right to Ask Questions: Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this interview at any time without suffering any negative consequences. You are free to refuse to participate without causing any problems to me or anyone else. If you have any questions about this research, or your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Pittsburgh's Human Research Protection Office:

> Human Research Protection Office
>
> 3500 Fifth Ave
> Hieber Building
> Main Office, Suite 106
> Pittsburgh, PA 15213
> Email: askirb@pitt.edu

You can also contact the Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) if you feel this study has harmed you. Questions about research procedures should be directed to me, not the HRPO. I will also give you my business card now in case you have any further questions or comments at a later date. Do you have questions you would like to ask about this research now?

7. Recording the Interview and Confidentiality: With your permission, I will record this interview using my digital audio recorder. This will ensure the highest possible quality is preserved in the data I will collect. If you consent to being interviewed and recorded, I will ask you to say "Yes, I agree to being recorded" at the beginning of the interview, and on tape. I will transcribe the tape of the interview. In addition, when the results of this work are published, your name will never be used in any publications from this research. Nor will your name be disclosed to anyone. If you agree to this recording, the file will be stored in high security for three years at which point it will be destroyed. All that will remain of the interview will be a transcript that does not identify you.
8. Finally, you must be 18 years or over to participate in this research.
9. Please tell me now if you can participate in this project (make sure to check below)

Yes ____   No _____

GUIÓN DE CONSENTIMIENTO VERBAL

Título del Proyecto: Comprendiendo las Repercusiones de la Desmovilización en la Reintegración: Análisis Comparativo de las Trayectorias de Vida de Ex-combatientes que se Desmovilizaron Colectiva e Individualmente en Colombia (2002-2018)

Investigadora Principal:

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Candidata a Doctorado

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Mentor Académico:

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Profesor, Escuela de Posgrados en Asuntos Públicos e Internacionales-GSPIA de la Universidad de Pittsburgh

Teléfono: +1 (412) 624-7921 (Estados Unidos)

Correo Electrónico: mkenney@pitt.edu

10. Propósito del Estudio: Ofrecer una potencial explicación a la pregunta de qué facilita la desmovilización y la reintegración de ex-combatientes a través de la exploración de su identidad cuando dejan el grupo armado y cuando vuelven a la sociedad civil. Este estudio también aborda cómo las experiencias personales de desmovilización y reintegración están conectadas en la persona que las vive.

11. Procedimiento a Seguir: A usted se le solicita su participación en una entrevista que no durará más de dos horas. En esta entrevista le haré unas preguntas y usted deberá contestarlas de la mejor forma que pueda. Usted no está en la obligación de participar y puede escoger no contestar las preguntas o puede contestar las que usted quiere, si así lo estima.

12. Incomodidades y Riesgos: No existen riesgos ligados a la participación en la entrevista pues sólo se espera que usted exprese su opinión abiertamente como cualquier persona. No le preguntaré nada relacionado con actividades ilegales o contra la ley en las que pudo haber participado con su grupo armado antes de su desmovilización. La investigación se enfoca en cómo usted dejó su grupo armado y cómo se ha venido conectando con otras personas o comunidades a partir de ese momento. Asumo que usted no quiere ser identificado por su nombre y por lo tanto desde este momento yo no me referiré a usted por el mismo. De aquí en adelante para referirme a usted y a su relato utilizaré un código numérico. Es posible que usted experimente una mínima incomodidad con su participación pues ella tomará de su tiempo.

13. Beneficios: Usted no se beneficiará directamente de esta investigación. Yo intento explorar en esta entrevista la relación entre la desmovilización y la reintegración como experiencias vividas. Los resultados de este trabajo pueden llegar a contribuir a una mejor comprensión de ambas experiencias por parte de la comunidad.

14. Duración: Abordar las preguntas puede tomarle dos horas, pero ello dependerá sobre todo de qué tan detalladas sean sus respuestas.

15. Participación Voluntaria y su Derecho a Preguntar: Su participación en esta investigación es absolutamente voluntaria. Usted puede escoger no participar, puede terminar la entrevista o negarse a contestar ciertas preguntas y ello no le traerá consecuencias negativas ni tampoco me causará problemas.

    Si usted tiene preguntas acerca del proceso de investigación o acerca de sus derechos como participante, puede contactar a la Oficina de Protección de Investigación con Personas (HRPO, por sus siglas en inglés) de la Universidad de Pittsburgh pues a esta institución estoy afiliada como estudiante doctoral:

    Human Research Protection Office

    3500 Fifth Ave
    Hieber Building
    Main Office, Suite 106
    Pittsburgh, PA 15213, Estados Unidos
    Correo Electrónico: askirb@pitt.edu

Usted también puede contactar la HRPO si usted considera que el presente estudio le ha causado algún daño. Las preguntas relacionadas con esta investigación me las puede hacer a mi directamente. Le daré en este momento mi tarjeta en caso de que usted tenga preguntas o comentarios para mi después de la entrevista. ¿Tiene usted alguna pregunta para mi acerca de mi investigación o de esta entrevista?

16. Grabación de la Entrevista y Confidencialidad: Contando con su permiso, yo grabaré la entrevista utilizando mi grabadora digital. Esto lo hago para garantizar que la calidad de la información que usted compartirá conmigo se preserve. Si usted acepta ser grabado diga por favor: "Si, acepto ser grabado" al comenzar la entrevista. Yo seré quien transcriba la entrevista y quien analice los datos obtenidos de usted y de todos los participantes. Su nombre nunca será revelado a nadie. Si usted acepta ser grabado, el archivo de audio lo guardaré por 3 años bajo alta seguridad y después de este tiempo lo destruiré y lo único que quedará será la transcripción de la entrevista. En la transcripción y en mi investigación me referiré a su aporte por un código que solo yo conozco y que no permitirá identificarlo.

17. Finalmente, usted debe ser mayor de 18 años para participar en esta investigación.

18. Por favor, dígame si podría participar en este proyecto (seleccione lo que decidió)

    Si   ____   No _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title of Project: Understanding the Repercussions of Demobilization on Reintegration, a Comparative Analysis of the Life Trajectories of Ex-Combatants Who Surrendered on their Own and those Others Who Demobilized Collectively in Colombia (2002-2018)

QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions exploring the experiences of the individual while in the armed group:

1. Could you please describe yourself when you were member of the armed group?
2. What made you feel connected/close to the armed group and/or to other members when you were in this group? (what made you feel you were part of the group)
3. What was something you did not like about your group and/or about other members when you were a combatant? (Was this something that always bothered you or when did this bother you?)
4. What was appealing about having a civilian life when you were a combatant? Did you envy something about the lives of civilians you interacted with when you were a combatant? (Was this something that you were always interested in or when did this caught your attention?)
5. What was something you disliked about having a civilian life when you were a combatant? Did you feel lucky you did not have to worry about something in particular that you thought civilians had to worry about just because you belonged to an armed group?
6. When you were a combatant, were you able to be in touch with non-members for personal reasons? If so, who would you say were the closest non-members you had? (not by name but by affiliation or how were you linked to them)
7. What did you think about desertion before your own demobilization?

Questions looking at demobilization as a lived experience:

8. Could you please describe yourself at the time when you left the armed group?
9. How did you experience demobilization? (Self-demobilization, collective)
10. What did you miss from your group right after you demobilized? (Have you ever been nostalgic about your experience with the armed group? If so, why?)
11. What was something you stopped worrying about having demobilized? What worries you today?

Questions exploring self-perception, self-esteem, and self-identity:

12. What do you think is a strength you have? How did you use that strength when you were in your group and how are you using it now as a civilian?

13. What do you think is a weakness you have? How did that weakness affect you when you were in your group and how has it affected you now as a civilian?

Questions raised exclusively to those who voluntarily demobilized:

14. Why did you demobilize?
15. Did your group do something concrete to discourage your demobilization and/or for you to continue to stay with them? If so, what was it?
16. Were there any disagreements with other members and/or with leaders prior to your demobilization?
17. When you demobilized, did you think your group was going to be affected by your demobilization, remain the same, or that it was going to be better off without you? If so, why?
18. Did you think your life was going to improve, stay the same, or be worse with your demobilization? Why?
19. Where did you picture yourself after you left your group?
20. Who did you think could make your life easier/better once you demobilized? Was that the case? (by relationship, not by name)
21. Who did you think could complicate or make worse your life once you demobilized? Was that the case? (by relationship, not by name)
22. Who did you feel you were going to come in contact with after your demobilization? Was that the case? (by relationship, not by name)

Questions that explore the reintegration of ex-combatants

23. When you thought about reintegration, did you think about rejoining your family? Going back to your place of origin? Or did you simply want to start a new chapter in a new place with new people? Why?
24. What words would you use to describe yourself now?
25. Do you think of yourself as a civilian? If so, what makes you a civilian?
26. Have you stopped thinking about yourself as a former member of "X" group and began thinking about yourself as "your name", just another person living in this city?
27. What groups do you currently feel part of? Who are you interacting with regularly? (by relationship, not by name)
28. What do you think is something new about yourself having reintegrated?
29. Does your life today match the idea you could have had about life as a civilian or about life outside of the armed group?
30. Have you developed friendships as deep as the ones you could have had with other combatants? What made you feel close to these people?

Comprendiendo las Repercusiones que tiene el fin de la Participación Individual en Grupos Armados en la Reintegración y/o Reincorporación de Ex-combatientes en Colombia (2002-2018)

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Correo Electrónico: devia.gspia@gmail.com

Preguntas Generales

- ¿A qué grupo perteneció? (frente- zona del país en el que haya estado, frente/bloque)
- ¿Cuánto tiempo estuvo en el grupo?
- ¿A qué se dedicaba en su grupo?

Preguntas con respecto a experiencia en el grupo armado:

31. ¿Podría describirse cuando hacía parte del grupo armado?
32. Qué lo hacía sentir cercano a su grupo armado y/o a sus compañeros? ¿Qué lo hacía sentir parte del grupo?
33. ¿Qué no le gustaba de su grupo y/o de sus compañeros cuando era combatiente? (¿Esto fue algo que siempre le molestó o fue algo que le empezó a molestar en cierto momento?)
34. ¿Qué le llamaba la atención de la vida de los civiles cuando usted era combatiente? ¿Les envidiaba algo? (Si así es, ¿fue esto algo que siempre le interesó o cuándo le empezó a llamar más la atención?)
35. ¿Había algo que a usted no le gustara en particular acerca de la vida que llevan los civiles cuando estuvo en su grupo? ¿Se sintió afortunado de no tener las preocupaciones que usted veía que los civiles sí tenían?
36. ¿Cómo fue su contacto con civiles mientras estuvo con su grupo? (fue por su propia voluntad?) Si así fue, ¿qué buscaba? ¿quiénes fueron los civiles más cercanos con quien usted tuvo relación mientras estaba en su grupo? (no por nombre sino por afiliación/relación).
37. ¿Qué pensaba de la deserción cuando era miembro de su grupo?

Preguntas con respecto a experiencia de desmovilización:

38. ¿Puede usted describirse al momento en que deja su grupo armado?

39. ¿Cómo deja usted de ser parte del grupo armado? (desmovilización individual, colectiva, sometimiento de su unidad, acuerdo de paz-reconciliación)

40. ¿Qué extrañó del grupo armado o de su vida en el grupo armado tan pronto dejó de ser parte del mismo? (¿Ha sentido nostalgia con respecto a su tiempo con el grupo?)

41. ¿Existe algo que dejó de preocuparle al no ser parte del grupo? ¿Qué le preocupa a usted hoy/ahora? (pregunta más orientada a la experiencia de reintegración/reincorporación)

Preguntas sobre identidad y autoconocimiento

42. ¿Puede usted identificar una fortaleza suya? (Fortaleza = Virtud, capacidad o rasgo positivo en particular) Si la identifica: ¿para qué le sirvió cuando estuvo en el grupo armado y para qué le sirve esta fortaleza en este momento?

43. ¿Puede usted identificar una debilidad suya? (Debilidad= Defecto, incapacidad o rasgo negativo) ¿cómo le afectó esto cuando estuvo en el grupo armado y cómo lo afecta hoy en día?

Preguntas para personas que dejaron el grupo armado voluntariamente (individualmente):

44. ¿Por qué se desmovilizó?

45. ¿Usted sabía si su grupo hacía algo específico para impedir su desmovilización (suya en específico) o para que usted se quedara con ellos? ¿Qué hacía su grupo?

46. ¿Tuvo desacuerdos con compañeros y/o con sus superiores antes de su desmovilización?

47. ¿Cuándo dejó el grupo usted pensó que su deserción afectaba a su grupo, lo dejaba igual, o que su grupo iba a estar mejor con usted por fuera? ¿Por qué? ¿Supo algo de su grupo después de que salió?

Preguntas para todos los participantes:

48. ¿Usted creía que su vida iba a mejorar, seguir igual, o empeorar sin su grupo? ¿Por qué?

49. ¿Qué se imaginaba haciendo si usted estaba fuera del grupo (estando en el grupo)? ¿Fue ese el caso?

50. ¿Quién consideró usted podía facilitarle/mejorar su vida por fuera del grupo? ¿Fue ese el caso? (tipo de persona, organización, no por nombre propio.)

51. ¿Quién consideró podría complicarle su vida por fuera del grupo armado? ¿Fue ese el caso? (tipo de persona, organización, no por nombre propio.)

52. ¿Con quién pensó usted entraría en contacto una vez estuviera fuera del grupo? ¿Fue ese el caso?

Preguntas acerca de la reintegración a la sociedad:

53. ¿Estando en el grupo, cuándo pensaba en su reintegración (o reincorporación), qué relaciones pensó restablecer? (Pensó en volver con su familia, a su lugar de origen o quiso empezar de cero en otra parte/ con otra gente?) ¿Por qué? ¿Está hoy usted rodeado de las personas que pensó que tendría cerca estando fuera del grupo?

54. ¿Qué palabras utilizaría para describirse hoy?

55. ¿Suele identificarse a sí mismo como civil? Si ese es el caso, ¿qué considera lo hace "civil"?

56. ¿Ha dejado de identificarse por su nombre en el grupo? se refiere a sí mismo ante otras personas como ex miembro de un grupo armado? ¿Qué siente cuando piensa en el nombre que lo identificaba dentro del grupo? ¿Si ya no piensa en usted como esa persona que era miembro de un grupo armado, piensa que usted es un ciudadano más, si, no, por qué? (cree usted que piensa mucho o poco en su experiencia en el grupo armado? ¿Piensa usted mucho o poco en cómo terminó su historia dentro de su grupo?)

57. ¿De qué grupos/asociaciones se siente hoy miembro/parte? ¿Interactúa regularmente con este grupo de personas?

58. ¿Qué considera es un nuevo aspecto en su persona tras su reintegración/reincorporación?

59. ¿Su idea de la vida por fuera del grupo es cercana a la que se imaginaba? ¿Por qué?

60. ¿Ha desarrollado en este tiempo por fuera de su grupo amistades/relaciones estrechas como las que pudo haber tenido con sus compañeros en el grupo armado? Si es así, ¿qué considera lo ha acercado a estas personas?

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