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Is Violence Ever Right? Moral Reasoning about Violence among Youngsters Belonging to Gangs and Peacebuilding Groups

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Contributions

MCDS conceived of the study, developed the study design, collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. SJ participated in the analysis and interpretation of the data, and contributed to the manuscript.
Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Abstract

Objective: We investigate cultural group-level understandings of violence and their connections to individual moral reasoning about violence among disadvantaged young people belonging to gangs (n=33) and peacebuilding (n=30) groups. Methods: Drawing from in-depth interviews in two low-income neighborhoods in Colombia, we use thematic analysis to explore and compare group-level understandings of violence -entailing definitions of violence, causal attributions of violence, and strategies to handle violence in everyday life- by type of youth group. Next, we use a chi-square analysis to assess between-group differences in the proportion of participants endorsing the morality of violence according to eight potential moral violence triggers. Results: Youths from both types of groups define violence in similar terms with one key difference. Only gang members ascribe agency to "the group" (i.e., the gang, the family) describing it as a social entity capable of harming and being harmed. This taken-for-granted cultural assumption frames the gang members' justifications of violence as moral to defend one's group. Concurrently, a higher proportion of youths from violent groups support the morality of violence to defend one's reputation ($p=.001$), honor ($p<.001$), and group ($p=.001$). Conclusions: Between-group differences in shared understandings of violence are consistent with differences in individual moral reasoning about violence across group type. The findings have implications for improving the efficacy of violence prevention interventions, which rarely account for the link between young people's shared understandings of violence and moral reasoning about its use.

Keywords: moral reasoning, violence, youth group, gangs, cultural knowledge

Is Violence Ever Right? Moral Reasoning about Violence among Youngsters Belonging to Gangs and Peacebuilding Groups

Understandings of violence, including what it is, what it does, and what causes it vary considerably across cultures and within societies (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rodgers & Jones, 2009). Yet, these variations are often dismissed as deviations from the norm in studies on moral reasoning about violent behavior. A prominent theory to explain violent behavior is the moral disengagement framework. It posits that harmful acts result from the disengagement of regulatory self-sanctions called moral disengagement strategies (Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996). These strategies enable humans -otherwise deeply harming averse- to hurt others. Yet, this account runs counter to ethnographic and social psychological work showing that humans across societies harm others following moral motivations (Ginges, 2019; Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011; Rai et al., 2017). The virtuous violence framework emphasizes that all cultural communities can experience the exercise of violence as righteous, if not compulsory, to prevent or correct transgressions of cultural models of social order and social relations (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Thus, the framework introduces relational and meta-relational aspects to the theorization of the morality of violence (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2012) that are absent in the moral disengagement framework.

The moral disengagement and virtuous violence frameworks offer competing interpretations of morally justified violence; only the latter takes "moral justification" at face value. The moral disengagement framework sees *moral justification* as a moral disengagement strategy that distorts the values of a society to justify harm (Bandura, 1999). The virtuous violence framework sees the moral justification of violence as a *moral reason*. As such, it provides an inroad to understanding cultural mandates regulating social relations and violent behavior in any cultural community. Ruling out one of these competing interpretations of morally justified violence is not

possible without a thorough study of social and culturally shared understandings of violence and how these connect to individual moral reasoning about violence in a particular local context and by specific groups of people. This qualitative question turns particularly important in contexts where individuals have to navigate violence as part of daily life.

In this study, we focus on the link between socially shared knowledge about violence and moral reasoning about violence. We focus on young people belonging to violent (gangs) and non-violent (peacebuilding) groups living in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Colombia. Through a comparative approach between youth groups in this context, we study whether socially shared understandings of violence link to young people's moral reasoning about it.

Young People's Understandings of Violence in Disadvantaged Contexts

Chronic exposure to urban violence shapes the sense people make of it and the strategies they use to confront it, yielding a more sophisticated understanding of violence than the general population (Auyero & Kilanski, 2015; Villareal, 2015). A study among the general population in Sweden found that violence was mainly defined as physical harm (Larsson & Gill, 2013). In contrast, disadvantaged young people provide elaborate definitions of violence encompassing physical and psychological harm and institutional forms of violence such as discrimination and stereotyping at school or by the police (Daiute & Fine, 2003; Quinn et al., 2007). They also have complex attribution theories about the causes of violence (Johnson et al., 2004; Krause et al., 2014). Youth identify individual-level causes of violence such as impulsivity, alcohol abuse, and stress; family-level causes such as violent households; and community-level causes, including an abundance of negative and a scarcity of positive role models for youth (Johnson et al., 2004). Young people attribute violent behavior to institutional and societal factors, including stigma and discrimination towards disadvantaged and minority young people (Daiute et al., 2003; Daiute &

Fine, 2003; Quinn et al., 2007). This evidence shows that chronic exposure to violence yields elaborate processes of individual and collective sense-making about it.

Group-level Understandings of Violence

We approach the youth group as a cultural community (Kirshner, 2008, 2009; Rogoff, 2003) where youths elaborate shared understandings about themselves, their interactions, and the social world as well as a system that provides behavioral and moral codes (Brice-Heath, 1996; Rodgers & Jones, 2009). Most of what we know about understandings of violence by youth groups in contexts of disadvantage comes from ethnographic research on gangs. This research shows how marginalized young men think of and deploy violence strategically for various purposes, including safety, status, intimidation, and control (Krause et al., 2014; Rodgers, 2009; Zubillaga, 2009). The deployment of violence plays a vital role in the construction of identities and masculinities in the context of the gang (Baird, 2015, 2017) and is used by youths to defend themselves, their neighborhood, or make justice with their own hands. The violence enacted by disadvantaged youths is situated within larger structures of marginalization that shape how violence is used and signified in these contexts (Baird, 2017; Bourgois, 2003). Research on moral reasoning about violence with gang members suggests that they are more likely than non-gang involved youths to use moral disengagement strategies to justify violent acts (Alleyne & Wood, 2010), including moral justifications of violence in the name of one's honor and one's group (Alleyne et al., 2014; Bandura et al., 1996; Niebieszczanski et al., 2015). Yet, there is no research exploring whether there is a link between moral reasoning and the understandings of what violence is or what it does.

Gangs are not the only youth groups to be found in contexts of disadvantage. Young people often organize against the violence they see in their community, as is the case with peacebuilding, civic engagement, or church groups (Amit-Talai & Wulff, 1995). Just like gang

members, these groups guide their actions based on shared understandings of what violence is and what it does. Unfortunately, we know very little about how the shared understandings of peacebuilding groups compare to those of violent youth groups. Studies taking a comparative approach have contrasted gang members against non-gang members. Still, the latter group is selected by its non-membership status, yielding a meaningful comparison between significant youth groups impossible. Only a handful of studies (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012; Taylor et al., 2005) have compared youths belonging to gangs with civic engagement groups, but these focus on outcomes that are relevant for the violent group only, such as criminal activity. Overall, this literature highlights complex meanings and uses of violence organized within the contours of the youth group and portrays violence as having a role in delineating "types" of youth groups. This work lays the ground for research on how sense-making about violence within the group may link to the psychological functioning of group members, here specified as moral reasoning.

Violence and Interpersonal Relations in Disadvantaged Communities in Colombia

Half a century of political conflict in Colombia produced 9 million victims and some of the largest numbers of internally displaced people in the world (IDMC, 2018; Registro Único de Víctimas, 2020). The conflict involved the government, multiple left-wing guerillas, and right-wing paramilitary groups (Menjívar, 2001). The initial fighting for land and territory was aggravated by the assimilation of the drug trade and the illegal mining of gold and coal into the financing scheme of the armed groups involved (CNMH, 2013), which extended the violence to urban areas. Studies on the understandings of violence by people living in poor urban communities in Colombia show that they identify violence-related problems as the most important type of problem they face (Moser & Mcllwaine, 2000, 2004).

This broader context permeates young people's understandings of violence, and so do their cultural models of social relations. Research on the psychological development of Latin American adolescents in disadvantaged contexts shows the positive value attributed to emotional closeness and the intense sociability that characterizes interpersonal relationships in this region of the world (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2014). The former is corroborated by ethnographic work on interpersonal ideology in Colombia, which shows the crucial importance of human connectedness and relationships, whose demands often take precedence over and above individual desires (Fitch, 1990). As such, the youth groups studied in this research -both violent and non-violent- would be expected to be tight-knit and to show close interpersonal distance and high emotional involvement (Kagitcibasi, 2005, 2011). We assume that any differences in moral reasoning about violence -from a virtuous violence perspective- would indicate differences in the ideal models of social relations above and beyond the orientation to close interpersonal distance and emotional involvement that is assumed to be common to all youth in Colombian culture.

Current Study

In this study, we approach young people growing up in disadvantaged contexts as individuals with sophisticated understandings of what violence is and what it does (Auyero & Kilanski, 2015; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Johnson et al., 2004). We rely on the virtuous violence framework proposition that some expressions of violence will be seen as righteous by the individuals of a community when the culturally elaborated social order and social relations have been transgressed (Fiske & Rai, 2015). We focus on young people who live in two disadvantaged communities in Colombia and who belong to youth groups for which violence is a central topic: gangs and peacebuilding groups.

Our first goal was to understand and compare group-level understandings of violence held by young people belonging to violent and non-violent groups. To address this goal, we used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore understandings of violence with young people belonging to either type of group. We sought to produce in-depth depictions of the meanings and uses of violence within each group and to identify the convergences and divergences between both. Our second research goal was to examine whether the group-level understandings of violence were linked to young people's moral reasoning about it. To answer this question, we asked the same young people closed-ended questions about the use of violence for eight potential moral violence triggers we derived from the virtuous violence framework (Fiske & Rai, 2015): self-defense, punishment, reputation, honor, group, revenge, authority and god's orders. We tested for statistically significant differences in the proportion of young people belonging to each type of group who endorsed the righteous use of violence in response to the violence triggers. If differences in moral reasoning across groups were to be found, we expected that these could be understood in light of the group-level understandings of violence.

Methods

Setting

The present study was conducted in two low-income urban communities in two mid-size Colombian municipalities. Despite variations in geographical location, these were selected due to a similar history of political and drug-related violence that combines with a strong sense of community and the presence of civil society organizations. The two have been sites of forced displacements, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings and are resettling places for internally displaced people. Illegal armed groups compete for the control of the territory. Both have high criminality and homicide rates, gang activity, and organized criminal bands that specialize in the

micro-trafficking of drugs (Cabrera Cabrera & Romero Tunarosa, 2012; CID, 2010; Gill, 2016). Equally relevant, both sites have well-organized civil society actors, most notably women organizations, victims organizations, and youth organizations led by local people, as well as NGOs working on gender violence, youth gang involvement, and support for substance use disorders (Cabrera Cabrera & Romero Tunarosa, 2012; Gill, 2016; Haugaard & Nicholls, 2010).

Participants and Group Membership

We define violent groups as those that "engage in collective violence to achieve their social, economic, or political goals" (Littman, 2018, p. 79). Participants in our study belonged to youth gangs organized around territory, drug micro-traffic (*bandas* and *parches*), or football teams (*barras*). We define non-violent groups as those that engage in collective action to achieve their social, economic, or political goals, but do not use violence to do so. In our study, members of non-violent groups organized around the goal of building peace, which they understand as keeping young people outside the cycle of violence and transforming violent ways of relating in the community.

Sixty-three young people between the ages of 14 and 24 (mean=16), belonging to violent (n=33), and non-violent (n=30) youth groups participated in the study (see demographic characteristics of participants in supplementary materials). Relying on community networks for recruitment, we sought a minimum of 30 in-depth qualitative interviews per type of group to allow a robust qualitative comparison combined with between-group quantitative comparisons. Following previous experience and the literature (Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017), the sample size was estimated as appropriate to achieve saturation. However, as well as following the gold standard of saturation for sample size in qualitative research, ethical considerations in this hard-to-reach community led us to interview as many youths as possible.

Local NGOs working with us recommended engaging with all youths who expressed interest in participating in the interviews because youths see these encounters as rare opportunities to share their experiences and points of view, in a context that often makes them feel invisible.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a local NGO in coordination with local school workers in each site. Recruitment was done by the NGO program monitor, assisted by a social worker and a psychologist. These professionals were in the best position to recruit participants because they know young people in their communities, their individual and family circumstances, and life stories. They also have relevant local knowledge of the dynamics of violence, including the practices of youth recruitment by violent groups in their communities. Youngsters who belonged to violent and non-violent groups were identified and invited to meet with the researcher. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, by the first author of the study, who is a native Spanish speaker. A confirmatory screening of group affiliation was done at the beginning of the interview. The interviews lasted an average of 43 minutes (range 30-75 minutes). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed *verbatim* for analysis. The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychological and Behavioral Science of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Instruments

Demographic form: A short demographic questionnaire was employed to gather data on age, gender, school enrolment, school year, group affiliation, work status, and household income.

Semi-structured interview guide: An interview guide was developed for this study. The first section focused on definitions of violence and evaluation of the circumstances that would

justify the righteous use of violence. Understandings of violence were explored with questions about what violence is, why does it occur, and how does it work in the community. The second section contained closed-ended questions about eight potential violence triggers we derived from the virtuous violence framework: self-defense, punishment, reputation, honor, group, revenge, authority, and god's orders (Fiske, 2000; Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011). We call these "potential" moral violence triggers because the question required the youths to determine whether violence would be morally right for each of these (yes/no answer) and to explain the reasoning behind their answer. The specific question in each case was, "*Do you think it is morally right to use violence to/in…*". The researcher asked follow up questions to determine whether an affirmative answer referred to social conformity or the social convention domain ("it is right because everyone does it") or if it referred to moral violence ("it is right to use violence in this situation"). This differentiation is critical to differentiate external motivation from internalized moral standards (Miller et al., 2011, 2018). Only the latter were considered affirmative moral violence responses.

Data Analysis Strategies

The first part of the interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis to study *group level understandings of violence*; in the second part, statistical analysis was used to identify differences between groups in *moral reasoning about violence*.

Group level understandings of violence: The thematic analysis included both inductive and deductive approaches producing inter-related thematic networks of codes, sub-themes, and themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A coding frame was developed around three deductive organizing questions: *What is violence? Why does violence occur?* And *How does one deal with violence in daily life?* Within these, we inductively assigned basic codes to

the data following an iterative process of coding and re-coding, as well as grouping and re-grouping codes, and arrived at higher-order sub-themes and themes. The initial round of coding was done by the first author, the higher-order sub-themes and themes were produced in a collaborative manner as was a second-level interpretative analysis of the themes. This second-level analysis found relationships between themes (thematic dyads) focused on the tensions individual-group and individual-society in the sense-making of violence. The thematic dyads were essential to understand the reasoning underlying the understandings of violence.

The coding frame was applied to the data corpus with attention to the similarities and differences between violent and non-violent groups. This enabled us to compare group level understandings of violence in two ways. First, we focused on the content and prevalence of each code and the relations between codes within types of groups. This enabled comparing the meaning-making process between groups. Second, we focused on the similarities and differences across groups in how members positioned themselves in relation to the violence they were describing. We differentiated between descriptive statements of social conventions of the type "this is how things are around here" (observer statement), and normative statements in relation to violence of the type "it is right to use violence in this situation" (agentic statements).

Statistical comparison of moral reasoning about violence: Young people's assertions about the rightful/wrongful use of violence following the eight potential moral violence triggers were assessed using a chi-square analysis. We completed eight separate 2(type of group) X 2(yes or no) analyses to test for significant differences between groups pertaining to the youths' moral evaluations of the use of violence. A post hoc power analysis, conducted using the software package G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), indicated that the test had a power of 0.66. A total sample of 88, rather than 63, would have provided a power of 0.8 for a medium size effect.

Results

Group-level Understandings of Violence: defining, explaining and coping

Across both youth groups, we found an elaborate lay theory of violence in everyday life that is functional at the point of use, serving the purpose of defining violence, explaining why it occurs, and establishing strategies to cope with it in everyday life. Here, we present findings according to these three super-ordinate global themes. Table 1 below shows the themes and sub-themes found, including their descriptions and corresponding codes. A figure depicting the resulting thematic network can be found in the supplementary materials.

Table 1

Themes/Sub-themes in Group-level Understandings of Violence

Theme	Sub- Themes	Description	Codes
What is violence? (Harm: physical and psychological)	Individual Harm	Harm done by an individual to another following individual motivations. Can be physical or psychological	Hitting, cutting hair, stabbing, shooting, raping, threatening, insulting, yelling, stalking.
	Group Harm	Harm done by one group to another. Harm can be physical or symbolic	Fight another group, harming group members, stealing valued objects, invading territory, mocking group members
	Societal Harm	Violence enacted by an individual following socially shaped patterns of conduct that inflict harm in others	Political violence, drug-related violence, gender violence, ethnic discrimination, class discrimination, forced child labor, institutional absence/indifference
Why does violence occur?	Individual history ↕ Thematic dyad Social learning	People turn violent due to their personal history of trauma or lack of impulse control People learn to be violent from other people. Violence modelled	Trauma, being hit as a child, violent impulses Children learn at home, peer learning, rules of the street, strategies of war
	Attack on individual ↕ Thematic dyad Attack on group identity, territory, and honor	Violence is triggered when a person is attacked physically or psychologically Violence is triggered when roles, hierarchies, and territory linked to group identity are transgressed	Rudeness, insults, dismissal of differing points of view, threatening to harm, hitting. Offences/disrespect, neighborhood hierarchies, gender roles, rivalry, territorial control, retaliation
How does one deal with violence in daily life?	Escalation (as a convention observed with caution/as action)	Asymmetric reciprocity to negative acts: violence always brings about greater violence/people are quick to react violently	Use violence only when warranted, unwarranted violence is childish, carve out a threatening image
	Transmission/contagion (as a convention observed with caution/as action)	Blame, guilt, and shame are contagious/transmitted between members of a group.	Do not get family in gang trouble, keep mother out of gang trouble
	Retaliation: (as a convention observed with caution/as action)	Law of talion: an eye for an eye/Violent forms of punishment and retaliation.	Get along with violent people, avoid confronting status, avoid confronting rules

Defining: What is violence?

Youth in both groups define violence as physical and psychological harm. This definition is qualified by a) nuanced understandings of who is able to do harm and to be harmed, with agency placed in individuals, the group, and society and b) detailed examples of physical harm with varying levels of severity (from twisting an arm to killing someone) and psychological harm (making someone feel unsafe, or undervalued). The issue of what or who is the agent driving physical and psychological harm is central to understanding the thematic networks expressed in youth's conceptions of violence. All participants share the notion of the individual as an agent capable of both harming and being harmed. All consider that society can be harmful. A key difference between violent and non-violent groups is that members of violent groups focus on the group level, including the harm done to a group by another group, in their definition of violence.

The sub-theme of violence as "group harm" was prevalent in two-thirds of members of violent groups, who talked about it frequently discussing how and why rival groups such as gangs, cliques from schools, and families fight each other. In contrast, this notion was rare in the definitions offered by members of non-violent groups, with only two participants talking about it and only once. For violent groups, the harm done to a group by another, be it physical (fighting, hurting, killing members of other groups) or symbolic (for example, stealing valued objects or territory), is a central definition of violence. Here, the group is a bounded entity capable of enacting and receiving violence:

> You see, violence can take many forms; there are many types of violence. One is the "inter-family" violence [violence between different families] and the violence between gangs (BA215, violent groups, male, 16-17 years old).

While the sub-theme societal harm captures the violence enacted by individuals following socially-shaped patterns of conduct, it also expresses youth's acute awareness and

elaborate understanding of the social dimension as a source of violence in and of itself, illustrated by a diverse range of examples including gender violence, political violence, violence related to the drug trade, violence related to child labor and to class and ethnic discrimination.

> Societal violence, you know, like if the guerillas caught someone doing drugs or smoking weed, you know, just doing their own thing, boom! They would kill him. If someone here had a disagreement with another person, say they were drunk or had a problem with a neighbor, that would often end up in someone being killed because that's how people deal with problems around here (BA202, non-violent groups, male, 19-24 years old).

In summary, while all youth consider individuals and society in their definitions of violence, only youth participating in violent groups consider the group itself as an agentic social entity capable of harming and being harmed.

Explaining: Why does violence occur?

Participants explain violence through sophisticated causal attributions that include individual history and predispositions, the role of social learning, and the consequences of aggression at the individual and group levels. The sub-themes and their relations reflect a rich and culturally situated lay theory of violence in-context that underscores the tensions in the relationships between individual-society and individual-group. A first sub-theme refers to individual history as a driver of violent behavior. Youngsters across groups identified violent impulses and trauma as causes of violent behavior. Violence can arise from inside the individual, and little can be done to prevent it from happening. A second sub-theme was the social learning of violence. Youngsters know that people learn from others: children mimic family members, adolescents are taught the "rules of the street" by peers, and adults may adopt the "tactics" employed by drug trafficking groups against opponents. A core idea was that individuals learn the "rules" of violence in society, either vicariously or through interactions with violent people.

A third sub-theme about the causes of violence was "attack on the individual." Violence can be caused by physical or psychological attacks on a person, including rudeness, insults, or yelling. Members from non-violent groups added that a trigger of this violence is the clashing of diverse viewpoints. This is relevant for understanding differences between the groups' conceptions of the dyad individual-group and suggestive of the emphasis non-violent groups place on the self and its autonomy. A fourth theme was "attack on group identity, territory, and honor." The unifying idea of this theme is that violence is triggered when roles, hierarchies, and territory linked to group identity are transgressed. Members of both types of groups described rivalry, retaliation, and territorial control as main triggers of violence between gangs, football gangs, and drug-dealing groups. Disrespecting the neighborhood *duro* (a gang member with high status) and staring at "another man's girlfriend" were all described as causes of violence.

Noteworthy differences between groups emerged in relation to the thematic dyad "attack on the individual/attack on group identity, territory, and honor." The vast majority of study participants justified violence in self-defense, with an understanding that "attacks on the individual" can cause justified violence aimed at preventing *physical* harm against oneself.

> To me, I think violence is not wrong if used in self-defense. Because in that case, you are defending your own life. If someone else comes and attacks you, and you are just going around doing your own business, then I think you ought to defend yourself. (BA205, Non-violent group, female, 14-15 years old).

Yet, only members of violent groups justified violence in response to psychological attacks on the individual (e.g. insults) and violence linked to group identity, honor, and territory. In line with their definition of violence, an offense against a group member equals an offense to the group as a whole so that "what is done to one is done to all*" (lo que es con uno es con todos).*

> Me and my girls have always supported each other. If you mess with one of us, you are messing with all of us. Even if the other person is right (…) forget it! She is with me,

> leave her alone. If the other person wants to fight, she is picking a fight with all of us. If you hit one of us, you hit all of us. Even if the other person is right because it is true that sometimes we can go a bit too far (laughs). But still, the group always comes first. (SO266, violent group, female, 16-17 years old).

These distinctions are underpinned by differences in the type of statements participants used when explaining what causes violence. We differentiate between descriptive statements of social conventions that express the local factors that cause violence (i.e., "how things are around here") and normative statements about the righteous use of violence in a given situation (i.e., justifications of said violence). Peacebuilding groups observe and challenge the violence around them taking up the position of cautious participant-observers through reflection and distanciation. Gang members get themselves involved in violence with little critique and distancing from it, becoming full participants merged in the context.

Coping: How does one deal with violence in daily life?

Participants elaborated on the strategies they use to deal with violence in everyday life. We call these "strategies" because they were described as practical knowledge that everyone in the community accepts as needed to navigate the violent context (Auyero & Kilanski, 2015; Johnson et al., 2004; Villareal, 2015). As such, this knowledge feeds both moral and practical reasoning about violence in this given context. We identified three sub-themes grouping these strategies: escalation, transmission/contagion, and retaliation. Members of violent groups cited these know-hows more often and described them in more depth, which is to be expected given their higher involvement with violence in everyday life. Non-violent groups equally understand and deploy them in everyday life in order to avoid any violence that can be directed towards them. Violent groups speak as active adopters of these strategies, whereas non-violent groups speak of them as onlookers of cultural norms and behavioral strategies imposed by the context.

Here, as before, the groups differ in describing the context and its social conventions critically, and statements that are drawn as acceptable and owned responses to deal with violence.

Escalation refers to the asymmetric reciprocity to negative acts (Keysar et al., 2008), conveyed by the core assumption that "violence always brings about greater violence." This principle is supplemented by common sense knowledge dictating that people, in general, have an inclination to react aggressively, and therefore the smallest episode can spark violence. The common-sense implication of this assumption is that one should use violence only when warranted. If a violent act will be retributed asymmetrically, and people are quick to react violently, it is wise to avoid the use of gratuitous violence. Members of violent groups described the effectiveness of carving out a threatening image to deter unnecessary confrontations as a strategy to deal with violence (Baird, 2015; Bourgois, 2003) and judged the use of unwarranted violence as childish because it exposes the entire group to harm.

A second sub-theme related to the transmission and contagiousness of blame, guilt, and shame in this context. These are described as transferable within the group in the same way harm is. A clear example used by the youths and indeed frequent in the local context is the description of how a gang can exert violence against a rival gang by targeting the family of any of the rival gang members. In these accounts of the social world, group membership (be it to a gang or a family) takes precedence over individual characteristics. Therefore, youths were aware of the constant risk of getting their families -particularly their mothers- involved in retaliatory gang violence targeted at themselves. As such, an important mandate is to do everything possible to ensure that one keeps family out of gang trouble.

Violence against one's family, like violence against one's gang, is a serious offense that requires retaliation, the third sub-theme found. Participants referred to retaliation as the unwritten

rule guiding how violence works in the community. The law of talion expressed in the knowledge that "he who does it, pays for it" and "an eye for an eye" is central for defining everyday strategies deployed by youth to get along with violent people. Rather than ostracizing people like drug dealers, one should keep a safe but friendly distance from them, know who they are, and avoid confronting their status or rules in public. As one youngster explained, "If they are mean people, it's better to have them as friends, not enemies." In the case of youths from violent groups, this closeness serves the added purpose of assuring protection against thieves and gangs from other neighborhoods.

Moral Reasoning about Violence

A chi-square test of independence was performed to test for significant differences between groups. We analyzed the youths' moral evaluations of the use of violence according to eight potential moral violence triggers. The majority of participants of violent (82%) and non-violent groups (77%) considered violence in self-defense to be morally right (x^2 [1, N=63] = 0.25, p=.61, r= -.06). Thus, the endorsement of the morality of violence in self-defense emerges as a key common ground between violent and non-violent groups. A significantly higher proportion of members of violent groups consider the use of violence to be morally right to defend their reputation, 36% of participants of violent groups endorse it vs. 3% of participants of non-violent groups (x^2 [1, N=63] = 10.47, p= .001, r= -.41), their honor 58% vs. 10% (x^2 [1, N=63] = 15.65, p< .001, r= -.50), and their group 49% vs. 10% (x^2 [1, N=63] = 11.05, p= .001, r= -.42). There were no significant differences between groups in the evaluations of the righteous use of violence for punishment 56% vs. 40% (x^2 [1, N=62] = 1.64, p= .20, r= -.16), revenge 30% vs. 17% (x^2 [1, N=63] = 1.61, p= .20, r= -.16), or the lead of authority 18% vs. 13% (x^2 [1,

N=63] = 0.28, p= .60, r= -.07). None of the participants thought violence would be righteously used following god's orders.

Discussion

Our aim in this study was to describe and compare group-level understandings of violence across violent and non-violent youth groups in two disadvantaged communities in Colombia. Our results indicate that young people in both groups show rich definitions of violence through elaborate sense-making processes that explain what violence is, why it happens, and how it can be dealt with in everyday life. At its core, violence is thought of as physical and psychological harm made by an individual to another following her own motivations or socially shaped patterns of behavior that inflict harm. A key between-groups difference was the view of "the group" as a social entity capable of becoming an agent and a victim of violence. This theme was prominent among members of violent groups and informed the youths' causal attributions of violence as well as their reasoning and strategies to cope with violence in everyday life.

A second aim was to identify whether group level understandings of violence are linked to young people's moral reasoning about it. We found that they are. In synchrony with a definition of violence as harm inflicted by an individual on another, the majority of youngsters across groups saw the use of violence in self-defense as righteous. A caveat was that members of non-violent groups only saw life-threatening physical attacks on the individual as a cause of righteous violence. Members of violent groups also did but added psychological attacks on one's reputation (e.g. insults, disrespectful behavior) as triggers of righteous violence. Differences in moral reasoning about violence -such as the increased endorsement of violence as righteous to defend one's group, honor, and reputation by members of violent groups- are linked to key differences in group level understandings of violence as explained below.

In synchrony with the sub-theme of violence as harm done by a group to another, members of violent groups saw an attack on one's group as a trigger of righteous violence. Attacks can be physical or symbolic, always related to group identity, territory, and honor. Such understandings resonate with processes of collective violence catalyzed by social identity (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012; Littman, 2018; Littman & Paluck, 2015), where the ingroup and the outgroup are bound to each other by the cyclical retribution of violence. In practice, this explains violence between gang A and gang B. Yet, our findings reveal something novel and important; a view of the social world as comprised by groups as prominent "social entities" that supersede the self. Members of violent groups extend the territory of the self to the group, not only the one that is salient in a situation of intergroup conflict (for example, the gang) but to other significant groups they are a member of, such as the family. The quantitative comparison of moral reasoning was consistent with the thematic analysis of group-level understandings of violence. The definition of violence as *a group doing harm to another group* and the causal attribution of violence being triggered by *attacks on group identity, territory, and honor* seem to have a strong bearing in shaping how members of violent groups think of morally justified violence. Taken together, the findings point to a link between how violence is made sense of within each type of group and how its members determine the righteousness of using violence in specific social and cultural circumstances.

The relational and collective concerns among violent groups seem organized around the moral motive of unity (Fiske & Rai, 2015; Rai & Fiske, 2011). This motive is about "caring for and supporting the integrity of in-groups through a sense of collective responsibility and common fate" (Rai & Fiske, 2011, p. 61). Members of violent groups conveyed a sense of moral obligation to defend their group and take care of fellow group members. They also described a

transferability of guilt, harm, and blame within the group. All of these assumptions and complex explanations of violence converge to support our thesis that young people belonging to violent groups offer a moral reason when they explain why aggressing to defend one's group is morally right. They also challenge the idea that these statements are mere moral justifications used as a strategy to disengage cognitive controls on violence. While moral justification understood as a moral disengagement strategy has been studied among gang members, findings are contradictory. Some show that gang members are more likely to use moral justification than non-gang involved youths (Alleyne et al., 2014; Niebieszczanski et al., 2015), and others find no differences to this respect (Alleyne & Wood, 2010).

Members of non-violent groups recognize the cultural importance of the group but place emphasis on the autonomy of the self. As cautious observers of their cultural context, they share the understandings of violent groups. However, they approach the context critically, seeking to transform the reality of violence by challenging the totalizing influence of the group. They foreground agency by empowering youth to think of themselves as agents. This adds to our knowledge of how the dyad self-group is played out in contexts of violence and to culturally produced assumptions about the boundaries around the territory of the self (Shweder et al., 2003). It suggests caution in homogenizing the psychology of youth growing up in violent contexts; cultural assumptions intersect with conceptions of violence and agency, regulating youth's self-understanding of agency and collective action in different ways.

Our study has focused on the meaning of violence and how it links to moral reasoning, tapping on the similarities and differences between two sub-cultural groups in a disadvantaged environment. It shows the relevance of understanding local meanings of violence when studying youth's moral reasoning about it and how intertwined these two are; definitions of violence (for

example, “groups can be victims of violence”) are integrated with moral motives (for example, unity) that trigger the use of violence to regulate social relations when these have been transgressed (for example, violence to defend one’s group welfare when it has been attacked or disrespected). Whereas the regulation of violent behavior involves more than moral reasoning (Bandura et al., 1996), no account of violent behavior is complete without a thorough cultural contextualization of the phenomenon, including its links with local meanings and different forms of group organization. Moral judgment about violence is one determinant of violent behavior; however, overlooking its cultural determinants increases the risk of both misunderstanding it and decreasing our chances to develop adequate and effective violence prevention interventions.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design of the present study does not allow us to determine whether moral reasoning about violence is a function of self-selection into violent or non-violent groups. We expect self-selection to play a role; however, research also suggests that the youth group enhances individual characteristics related to violence (Barnes, Beaver, & Miller, 2010; Brown, 1990; Thornberry, 1987). Evidence through randomized and longitudinal designs would allow us to specify the roles of self-selection and group socialization in relation to moral reasoning about violence. Another limitation concerns the low power provided by the chi-square model; the post-hoc power analysis indicated a larger sample would have been desirable. Given the exploratory nature of our hypotheses, the statistical comparison provided a way of testing key differences made evident through the qualitative comparison between groups. Future studies should replicate the comparison, focusing on the righteous use of violence to defend honor, group, and respect among gang members. Another limitation is the lack of developmental specificity of the findings. The study participants were 14-24 years old, but our sample is too small to know if

there were systematic differences between younger and older participants in how they define violence and reason morally about it. Finally, participants confirmed their group affiliation, but no data was collected on how this translates into actual violent behavior. We privileged the analysis of the link between cultural understandings of violence and moral reasoning.

A double strength of this study was its comparative approach working with a hard to access population usually treated as homogenous and the detailed analysis of representations of, and reasoning about, violence among groups highly impacted by urban violence. As such, it provides in-depth accounts of meaning-making processes about violence and its links to moral reasoning and social cognition in context. These findings may not be generalizable to middle- or high-income settings where violence is not widespread and where institutions such as the school have a more substantial presence. Importantly, the findings show a high degree of variation between youths living in similar conditions of exposure to chronic violence, in a sociocultural environment that privileges tightly knit relationships. This speaks to the importance of avoiding the homogenization of young people living in disadvantaged communities and hard to access contexts and populations.

Research implications

Violence experienced as righteous should be studied as such. Our findings are in line with previous research showing that dehumanization -a prime moral disengagement mechanism- is not triggered when individuals act upon moral violence (Rai et al., 2017). This suggests that the processing of moral violence does not follow a cost-benefit assessment or instrumental rationality. Instead, it works through value reasoning where violence is motivated by commitments to sacred ideas and values that come under threat (Ginges, 2019). Future research should account for this evidence in the theorization of violence. While some violent acts are

enabled by moral disengagement, others are driven by moral assessments according to specific motives.

Prevention and Policy Implications

Our findings show the importance of accounting for culturally relevant, group-level understandings of violence in the work with at-risk or gang-involved young people. Current violence prevention programs could expand their focus to tackle the cultural premises and everyday understandings of violence that justify its use. Programs can specifically target the autonomy of the self and critical thinking about the dyad individual-group, helping young people to reflect on group identity, territoriality, and honor as extensions of selfhood and question the transferability of shame, guilt, and blame. The diverse nature of youth groups in adverse contexts needs addressing. Peacebuilding groups create opportunities for young people to develop a critical perspective of the violent context, which allows them to distance themselves from it and act as agents of social change. Policymakers and program implementers should develop collaborative strategies with youth, using and scaling-up the in-depth insights and on-the-ground strategies young people themselves develop to deal with violence in their everyday lives.

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Supplementary materials

Table
Demographic Characteristics by Type of Youth Group

Characteristic	Non-violent (n=30)	Violent (n=33)
Age		
14-15	9	14
16-18	19	15
19-24	2	4
Gender		
Female	13	12
Male	17	21
Site		
#1	22	15
#2	8	18
Grade		
6th - 8th	1	8
9th - 10th	17	16
11th	12	9
Income*		
<160	15	19
<160-480<	13	12
>480	1	2

*Monthly household income in USD

Figure: Thematic Networks

