



THE HUMAN MIND: CRUCIAL IN THE POST- CONFLICT PERIOD



Research in political neuroscience carried out by an interdisciplinary team led by the Universidad del Rosario shows that it is indeed possible to create the necessary conditions for lasting change and sincere reconciliation

← In addition to the neurological component, researchers have identified other conditions that should be considered in order to achieve positive results in meetings among former antagonists and contribute to the much-desired reconciliation.

Adapting the mind to the post-conflict period, just as their minds adapted to situations of armed conflict, is one of the steps that must be taken by victims, ex-combatants, and the communities where they settle if they are to find the road to peace.

“We need to understand reconciliation not only from a cultural, economic, legal, and political standpoint, but also from a neurobiological perspective. What we have seen is that in order to understand whether human interactions are successful, we need to grasp how we process cognitive and emotional information, something all human beings can do. People operate at an unconscious level in these interactions, and their perceptions are subject to implicit bias,” says Juan Esteban Ugarriza, leader of a study carried out by the Human Rights Research Group of the Faculty of Jurisprudence at the Universidad del Rosario.

One of the things that researchers in this interdisciplinary group have learned is that the human mind is malleable. It can be adapted to good or evil purposes, a factor that must be considered in the new stage of reconciliation that is beginning to take shape in Colombia.

CAPACITY FOR ADAPTATION

Researchers have used the principles of neuroscience in analyzing how different people have been affected by the conflict, and they believe that the country now needs to identify the factors behind how people adapted cognitively to it. This information will be key, they say, in designing effective plans for reconciliation.

In other words, says Ugarriza, both victims and combatants have undergone psychological adaptations with biological components, forming barriers to reconciliation.

Their research seeks to determine how neuronal networks are linked in different individuals, and how they can be reconfigured so that those participating in the reconciliation process not only change their attitudes towards others but also change their ways of understanding them.

Researchers have arrived at this point after a decade of work trying to respond to the question of how we can get along with each other in a post-conflict scenario, which is to ask how we can get former antagonists to sit down together and engage in productive dialogue.

“For 10 years we have been organizing group discussions comprising victims of the armed conflict, former combatants, and members of affected communities, deliberating on how we can interact in a civilized and democratic fashion, and as harmoniously as possible,” Ugarriza explains.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

Participating in this interdisciplinary project are political scientists, economists, neurologists, neuropsychologists, linguists, and engineers from the University of Edinburgh, the Universidad de Antioquia, as well as Chile’s Diego Portales

University. The Universidad del Rosario has contributed from the perspective of the social sciences.

The project has progressed in three different phases with the collaboration of the Colombian Agency for Reconciliation, the government body responsible for the reintegration of demobilized combatants.

The first meetings between demobilized guerrillas and paramilitary groups were organized in 2008 in Bogotá, with researchers learning from and noting the interactions at these meetings. The second phase of the project took place from 2013 to 2014, and included victims of the conflict and representatives of urban communities in Cali, Palmira, Tierra Alta, Villavicencio, Florencia, Bogotá, and Medellín, all places where former combatants had been resettled.

The third and current phase began in 2016–2017, and sat down former combatants (both guerrillas and paramilitary fighters), with victims and community representatives from the rural areas of Jamundí, Chaparral, San Vicente del Caguán, Florencia, Cali, Puerto Asís, Santa Rosa del Sur, and El Bagre.

“In this third phase, we incorporated neurobiological measurements using a computational tool that helps us determine—based on the unconscious attitudes individuals assume toward others—how they adapt to the experience of conflict,” explains Ugarriza.

In order to make these measurements and find the ‘biological effect’ on people, the research team used a mini-laboratory and a portable electroencephalography device which allowed them to evaluate indicators of implicit bias measured as electrical brain signals. They also developed software that enabled computerized tasks to be designed for the discussion groups, and data to be extracted and analyzed.

Thus, the research group ran a pilot project in the municipalities of Santo Domingo and Marinilla, within the administrative department of Antioquia, to determine if the implicit bias displayed in interactions between those affected by the conflict differed between the victims of paramilitaries and those of guerrillas.

Santo Domingo had experienced a much greater extent of violence by armed groups (both guerrillas and paramilitary groups), resulting in a kind of collective trauma that persists. Marinilla, however, remained on the periphery of the conflict.



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There is a greater chance of successful dialogue between antagonistic groups when their discussions and interactions are based on personal experiences and perspectives rather than focusing the actual dispute.

“We analyzed these different kinds of victimization and used a scale commonly applied in psychological research, adapting it to the issue of conflict. We measured 18 forms of victimization, either direct—through kidnapping, the burning of a workplace, an armed robbery or an injury—or indirect, such as the death or kidnapping of a family member” explains Ugarriza.

According to the computerized scales, the outcomes revealed that the greater the experience of the individual’s victimization, the greater were his or her unconscious negative attitudes toward ex-combatants. “Not taking these results into account could lessen the possibility of success in reconciliation efforts,” he said.

IN THE SHOES OF THE OTHER

In addition to the neurological component, the researchers have identified other conditions that should be considered in order to bring about successful meetings among former antagonists and contribute to the yearned-for reconciliation. The three conditions that they identified stem from 40 years of scientific research and 10 years of experience with social sectors.

The first condition is that there must be a balance among the participants represented in the process. People who represent minority positions in their groups are not as inclined



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to open up to others or even to participate. “It is a question of psychological security. In some way, balance within the group contributes to at least a minimal perception that all those present are on an equal footing,” points out the research leader.

The second condition is that bringing the parties together should be a joint task. “When different groups have something in common, interaction tends to be much better,” Ugarriza avers.

And the third is that a third party should participate, and this should be a legitimate authority in the view of those involved, as in the case of the university organizing the encounters.

The research group adds one other condition to these three. In 10 years of fieldwork it has become clear that when discussions and interactions between antagonistic groups are based on personal experiences and perspectives rather than focusing the actual dispute, there is a greater possibility for successful dialogue.

“Instead of asking them their opinions and what they propose based on their positions, we ask them to base their discussion on their personal experiences during the conflict. This substantially changes the dynamics of the discussion. Now I’m not focusing on your arguments but rather on your history and what you have to say about what you’ve been through.

This produces a greater number of empathetic expressions among them. It is the ability to put myself in your shoes. When I humanize the others I can imagine myself in their situation and change my attitudes,” concludes the professor.

RECONCILIATION IS NOT SPONTANEOUS

“Finally, the researchers recommend that organized interactions among former antagonists look to the future and not the past. The goal is not to revisit tragic histories or reopen wounds, but to imagine, based on our experiences, what a future together can look like.

Reconciliation is indeed possible, but it does not occur spontaneously and it cannot be achieved through just any method. I need to establish a process where people come together repeatedly in different kinds of interactions. If relations are to be restored, we need better attitudes and emotions amongst all taking part, and then we can say that we are on the right road.” ■



Juan Esteban Ugarriza says that those who have been victimized or who have participated in the conflict as combatants have gone through psychological adaptations that are reflected in their biology, constituting barriers to reconciliation.