

## Beliefs which legitimize political violence against the innocent

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This article analyses the arguments and beliefs published in a newspaper with links to a terrorist group, in an attempt to legitimize the kidnapping and murder of an innocent victim. Widespread public outcry against this act of brutality led the newspaper to create a version of the facts which attempted to reduce their emotional impact and maintain a positive image of the aggressive group. The methods used included: the attribution of responsibilities to the enemy, depersonalization of the victim, and an asymmetric evaluation of suffering.

*Creencias legitimadoras de la violencia política contra los inocentes.* Este artículo analiza los argumentos y creencias publicados por un periódico vinculado a un grupo terrorista, en un intento de legitimar el secuestro y asesinato de una víctima inocente. La amplia respuesta ciudadana contra ese acto criminal obligó a ese periódico a crear una versión de los hechos en la que se intentaba tanto reducir su impacto emocional como mantener la imagen positiva del grupo agresor. Los métodos a los que recurrió fueron: la atribución de responsabilidades al enemigo, la despersonalización de la víctima y la valoración asimétrica del sufrimiento.

A wide variety of intergroup conflicts exist, many of which are peacefully resolved by negotiations aimed at satisfying the demands of the opposing parties. However, in some cases a dialogued settlement is impossible, and instead the groups involved turn to the use of violence.

In its most extreme form, political violence means physically eliminating one's adversaries. The enormous impact caused means that the perpetrators have an even greater epistemic need to explain and justify their acts (Bar-Tal, 2000; Sabucedo et al., 2001). These explanations construct a version of the events which is in their favor, and allows them to maintain a positive image (Pettigrew, 1979; Sande et al., 1989)

However, the use of violence as a type of political action initially produces widespread rejection by society. Therefore the groups involved are likely to make concerted efforts to legitimize their actions, because, as Apter (1997) noted: «The key to political violence is its legitimacy» (p. 5). When violence is legitimized, it is then possible to maintain a positive self-image, and to obtain the support of the public which is a hugely important factor in the development of the conflict (Snow, Hunt and Benford, 1992). It is therefore necessary to understand the different arguments which groups use to justify violence. These arguments must refer to the most important aspects of the process: the existence of a cause which justifies the conflict and then leads to violence, the group's degree of responsibility for these actions, the nature of the enemy, and the actual situation of the group.

Any group which finds itself in a conflictive situation must defend the legitimacy of its position (Eldredge, 1979), by referring to other beliefs and arguments. One of the most important is the identification of who is responsible for the violence. Attribution studies have repeatedly shown that when we are confronted with undesired situations such as violence, there is an external attribution of responsibilities (Hewstone, Jaspars and Lallje, 1982, Taylor and Jaggi, 1974). The group is obliged to create a version of the facts where the enemy is the main cause of the violent situation. This means that when they refer to acts of violence they have carried out, they are presented as the results of a process initiated by their adversaries, or as acts of legitimate defense.

Another process which justifies violence is the de-legitimization of one's opponents (Stagner, 1967; White, 1970). One of the elements that contributes to this process is dehumanization, which involves defining the enemy using a series of 'inhuman' features, such as cruelty or lack of compassion.

Adversaries may also be delegitimized by associating them with other groups with negative values, such as Nazis, fascists, or imperialists, or by associating these terms with the groups or social organizations to which they belong (Bar-Tal, 1998). In either case, the objective is not only to discredit out-groups, but also to establish a clear dividing line between the in-group and its adversaries. Struch and Schwarz (1989) demonstrated that intergroup violence increases when there is a stronger perception of the boundary of impermeability, and when there is an increased use of dehumanization.

Violence against the out-group may therefore be fully justified if it is defined as being 'inhuman', and because its nature and *modus operandi* may pose a threat to the security and/or progress of the group. World history offers numerous examples of violence against adversaries which took place after episodes of de-legitimization.

Whatever the situation, the actual delegitimizing strategy used will be influenced by the nature of violence itself. Committing an act of aggression against someone already involved in violent actions is not the same as violence against an innocent person; in this case, a specific strategy of delegitimization is often used. If the victim is judged to be 'guilty', the aggressive group will offer relatively detailed information about their profession and personality. However, if the victim is 'innocent', a different technique needs to be used, such as depersonalization.

The use of violence by a group does not prevent it from creating a discourse of victimization, where it is the victim of a conflict caused by an aggressor. According to Bar-Tal (1998), the different groups engaged in a conflictive situation attempt to prove that they alone are the real victims, as this is essential to obtain support from the international community. Victimization also makes it possible to present the use of violence in a more socially acceptable manner: it is not easy to question the rights of a victim to protect himself from aggression.

This feeling of victimization may lead to what Mack (1990) called «the egoism of victimization», the inability of one group to sympathize with the victims of another because of its own traumas. It may be expressed differently if the group attacks an innocent person, and there is a widespread public outcry. In these circumstances, if they wish to maintain a positive social image and the support of the population, it is not possible to totally ignore the suffering of the out-group.

These different beliefs aim to present the enemy as being wholly responsible for situations of violence, and one's own group as the victim rather than the executioner. A key role is played in this task by sections of the media which share the beliefs of the aggressive group, and whose duty is to communicate these beliefs to their sympathizers. By offering particular representations of reality (Gamson, 1988) they contribute to supporting a discourse which justifies violence.

In this study we will analyze how one publication which was sympathetic towards a terrorist group justified an act of violence against an innocent man. We will compare how this newspaper and two others from Spain's Basque Country used the variables which legitimize political violence to create their own version of the events surrounding the kidnap and murder of Miguel Angel Blanco by the Basque terrorist movement ETA. Miguel Ángel Blanco was a local councilor of the Partido Popular (PP)<sup>1</sup> in Ermua, a small town in the Basque Country, and his death provoked a tremendous outcry throughout Spain.

Each of these newspapers would have been expected to present the facts according to their view of the political situation in the Basque Country. We can propose the following hypotheses for the treatment given by the newspaper which supported ETA: a) it would present the Spanish government as the guilty party, responsible for the kidnap and murder carried out by ETA; b) it would attempt to dehumanize the victim, associating him with a political group which it held responsible for the situation, and offer no personal information; c) it would emphasize that suffering of the in-group, the Basque people, was the crux of the matter.

This article considers three points which are of particular interest. Firstly, it analyses the beliefs which serve to legitimize political violence in a real context. We are not dealing with an artificially created situation, in which references to violence may seem more or less credible or real. Secondly, this investigation was made by analyzing an act of violence committed against an innocent

person, and in an atmosphere of widespread social opposition. This makes it possible to see how the legitimizing discourse of violence was adapted to this situation. Thirdly, it shows how these beliefs were analyzed in the media. This final point is particularly relevant if we consider the important role played by the media in creating and communicating representations of reality.

Before focusing on the main subject of this article, we should first examine the events and the context in which they took place.

Context: ETA and the kidnap and murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco

ETA is a terrorist organization which was founded in 1959. It has nationalist and socialist ideologies, and its main objective is the creation of an independent Basque state formed by the Basque provinces of Spain and France. Its struggle in the 1960's and 70's against Franco's dictatorship won it the support and sympathy of a large number of citizens who were opposed to the authoritarian regime of the period, both in the Basque Country and in the rest of Spain.

Once democracy returned to Spain, one sector of ETA changed direction, whereas another decided to continue with its strategy of violence. Since then, there has been a significant increase in both the amount and severity of violence carried out by ETA (Reinares, 1996; Llera, 1993). In the mid-1970's, some writers started to refer to the acts of ETA as terrorism (Wieviorka, 1997).

Groups opposed to ETA carried out other acts of violence in the Basque Country, and in some cases it was proved in court that the police and government had been directly involved. However, these groups ceased all activities several years ago.

From 1968 until the time of Miguel Ángel Blanco's kidnapping, violence by ETA had caused more than 800 deaths, half of which were civilians.

In the months prior to the kidnapping of Miguel Ángel Blanco, ETA and other similar political groups had begun a campaign pressurizing the Spanish government to move jailed members of the organization to prisons in the Basque Country. As part of this strategy they had kidnapped a Prison Service Officer, José Antonio Ortega, who was held hostage for 532 days until his release by security forces on the 1st July 1997.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1997, ETA kidnapped Miguel Ángel Blanco, and threatened to kill him within 48 hours if the Spanish government did not immediately start the process of moving ETA prisoners to Basque jails.

ETA's response produced a massive public outcry. There were hundreds of demonstrations throughout Spain, including the Basque Country, with millions of people demanding Blanco's release.

This mass wave of repulsion was the result of several factors. One was the growing awareness of the population, particularly in the Basque Country, of the need to protest against violence, and to firmly oppose the methods used by ETA (Funes, 1998). Secondly, the nature of the crime: the killing of an innocent and completely defenseless person at a fixed time (Sabucedo, Rodríguez and López, 2000).

Despite these protests, ETA carried out its threat, and shot Miguel Ángel Blanco on the 12<sup>th</sup> July 1997, mortally wounding him. This led to further massive public outcry against ETA and all of the groups and organizations connected with it.

#### Method

In order to explore the issues covered in this article, we analyzed three newspapers. One of them, 'Egin', sympathizes with

ETA, and so its opinions and arguments may be considered as representative of the sectors which support the group. In guarantee a clear understanding of the way events were covered by *Egin*, we compared it with reports from other newspapers. We chose two: 'Deia', which supports the PNV (Basque Nationalist Party, the most popular nationalist party in the region); like 'Egin', it is in favor of Basque nationalism, although it is much less radical, and decries the use of violence. The other is 'El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco', the most widely read paper in the region which does not share the objectives of Basque nationalism.

We analyzed the editorials, front-page stories and other articles from these three newspapers which reported these events and other acts of violence. We collected all of the articles which referred to the underlying motives, or to the victim himself. We analyzed the period between the eleventh and thirteenth of July 1996, as this was when the different political parties made their opinions public, allowing the situation to be interpreted from its different perspectives.

Once we had obtained these articles from the three newspapers, we started to compare how they had dealt with the most important issues. In doing so, we observed two interesting points: firstly, that there were differences in the way they had dealt with the facts surrounding the incident, and secondly, the way in which the events and the victim were described by the newspaper which sympathized with the terrorists.

### Analysis

By analyzing the way the different newspapers covered the kidnapping and murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, three important factors

became apparent: who was responsible for the situation, the method used to describe the victim, and the situation of the aggressive group.

We shall now explore how these publications, particularly *Egin*, dealt with these issues.

#### a) *Attributing responsibility to the opponent*

We shall see how *Egin* and the other two newspapers dealt with the subject of attributing responsibility for the crime. Table 1 shows their front-page headlines.

Here we see how *Egin* directed its readers' attention to the government's attitude, and made it the center of the problem, while ETA remained in the background. Reference was only made to ETA on the 13<sup>th</sup> July, stating that they shot the councilor, although only after reporting that the government had not changed its position. The construction of the sentence turns the shooting into a direct consequence of government inaction.

However, the other two newspapers directly attribute responsibility for the crime to ETA.

Table 2 shows the parts of the editorial section which refer to the attribution of responsibilities.

The attribution of responsibilities presented by each of the newspapers also becomes clear in analyzing these editorials. *Egin* supports ETA's demands and accuses the government and other political parties of not acting on them, and therefore of being responsible for the situation. The other two newspapers refer to ETA as being wholly responsible.

Table 1 Front page headlines from the 3 newspapers examined
<p><b>11<sup>th</sup> July</b> EGIN Quoting the Interior Minister: «The government will stand by its obligations».</p> <p>DEIA «ETA kidnaps a P.P. councilor from Ermua and threatens to kill him in 48 hours».</p> <p>EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO «ETA kidnaps a PP councilor and threatens to kill him».</p>
<p><b>12<sup>th</sup> July</b> EGIN «The government prepares for tragic developments».</p> <p>DEIA «Don't kill him».</p> <p>EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO «Unprecedented demonstrations. Society reacts en masse to ETA's threat, in an attempt to save the councilor's life ».</p>
<p><b>13<sup>th</sup> July</b> EGIN «The government took no action, and ETA shot the PP councilor».</p> <p>DEIA «ETA kills Miguel Angel».</p> <p>EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO «Devastation. ETA carries out its threat and leaves Blanco mortally wounded in a valley in Lasarte».</p>

Table 2 Fragments from editorials from the three newspapers about responsibility for the crime
<p><b>11<sup>th</sup> July</b> EGIN There was no editorial dedicated to events.</p> <p>DEIA «... Nobody can justify this kind of act, and those responsible for this kidnapping are wholly responsible for this and whatever they may do in the coming hours».</p> <p>EL CORREO ESPAÑOL- EL PUEBLO VASCO «The terrorist organization ETA yesterday kidnapped Miguel Angel Blanco... «The short period of time offered to the Government in order to agree to an unthinkable condition transformed the kidnapping into an irreversible murder predicted with 48 hours' warning».</p>
<p><b>12<sup>th</sup> July</b> EGIN «Aznar's government has entrenched itself in the intransigence of 'no'» «We are in a critical situation. ETA has asked for the law to be upheld, and the political parties can only think about toughening a discourse plagued with belittlement, and calling for a demonstration». «Making a demonstration of recognizing the rights which help prisoners is by no means giving way to any kind of blackmail».</p> <p>DEIA «... Words sprout forth from different perspectives and enlighten human sensitivity in favor of all innocent victims. In their honor, in the name of human life and liberty, we are obliged to plead that the kidnappers do not carry out their threat to kill Miguel Angel Blanco, and release him unconditionally».</p> <p>EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO «The burden of the crime lies only with its authors and instigators, and in the no way the legitimate government, which has not only the right, but also the legal and moral obligation to watch over the dignity of the State, the wishes of the society which has given it legitimacy through the vote, and the coexistence of the principles of liberty and legality».</p>

It is clear that while *Deia* and *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco* directly blamed ETA for the killing, *Egin* carried out an external attribution of responsibilities, allowing them to accuse the Government and not the terrorist group.

#### b) De-legitimization and depersonalization of the victim

Another of the processes used to justify violence was delegitimization of the enemy. It is important to analyze this issue, as in this case we are dealing with an innocent victim, and it is interesting to examine the type of data and information produced. Table 3 shows the way in which the different newspapers handled the subject, and the way in which they referred to the victim.

Here we can see that *Egin* did not choose a strategy whereby it disqualified the victim's personality: the very nature of Miguel Angel Blanco's personality and political status made this impossible. Instead, it chose to withhold all personal information and merely describe him as a 'PP councilor'. This becomes even more apparent if we examine reports in other newspapers. In *Deia* and *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco*, numerous photos were published of Blanco and his family, together with in-depth articles about different aspects of his life.

*Egin* therefore attempted to depersonalize the victim by converting him into a component element of a political party which it held responsible for the majority of the grievances of the group it supported. Faceless, and without any biographical references, an individual simply ceases to exist, or becomes a distant point on the horizon. This prevents the population from having any type of psychological identification with the hostage. By using this strategy of 'covering up' or de-personalizing the victim, *Egin* attempted to reduce the emotional impact of violence against a person like Blanco. It simultaneously attempted to delegitimize Blanco by identifying him as a representative of the political group which it considered to be the enemy.

#### c) Victimization and Asymmetrical evaluation of suffering

Finally, we shall explore how *Egin* constructed the discourse of victimization which it used to legitimize Blanco's murder.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> July, when the kidnapping was first reported, *Egin* published an article entitled «Reflections». This article did not directly refer to the crime, although it fits within the same context due to its subject matter and the time of its appearance. We have included some selected paragraphs.

The article contained a series of editorials about the two recent ETA kidnappings of Cosme Declaux and José Antonio Ortega, and the arrest of Mari Atxabal by Spanish security forces in June 1996. It reads: «*Cosme Declaux, kidnapped by ETA, was in the hands of the organization for more than 200 days. His kidnapping comes to an end, he walks out on his own, arrives home, has a shower, greets his neighbors, chats to his family, gives declarations to a judge, gives a press conference and goes on holiday.*

«*José Antonio Ortega, kidnapped by ETA for more than 500 days, ends his kidnapping, walks home, has a shower and greets his neighbors, chats to his family, declares before a judge, and gradually returns to normality.*

«*In June 1997, Mari Atxabal returns home temporarily, not on foot, as she has been in bed more than one month, cannot get up or fend for herself, will have to be medicated, or rather drugged, for months, and thus the future of her physical and psychiatric he-*

*alth is uncertain, with loss of consciousness and reality on a nearly daily basis.*

«*It is not possible to deny the distress suffered by those who have been kidnapped, nor would I wish to do so; I imagine that they have had to be very strong and in thoroughly good shape, something which maybe they have not managed to do, and will take them a long time to recover. All I would say is that torture may adopt many guises, and they may have been tortured in one way or another, and I propose that we carry out an exercise in comparison and analysis between them:*

Table 3  
News reports about the victim

#### 11<sup>th</sup> July (the day after the kidnapping)

##### EGIN

Published a photo of Blanco (on page 10).

Dedicated one page (p. 10) to the news.

When they mentioned his name, they usually did so associating him with the PP.

The only reference to Miguel Angel Blanco is the following: «*Miguel Angel Blanco was born in 1968 in Ermua and lives at the family home in Iparraguirre Street, together with his parents and sister. An economist by profession, Miguel Angel Blanco's political experience began in 1995, when he presented himself in third place for the PP candidature in Ermua. He had previously worked on the executive committee of the PP in Bizkaia.*

##### DEIA

Published two photos of Miguel Angel Blanco, one on the front page.

Dedicated three pages to the story.

On one of these pages, it dedicated a 59-line column in its interior to the hostage's personal and family life. The column was entitled: «*Miguel Angel Blanco, the economist who worked as a laborer*». Two sections within this column were entitled «*The grief-stricken parents*» and «*Not a professional politician*». Some of the biographical elements offered included: «*He worked for two years as a laborer for his father. He is single, although he has had a girlfriend for seven years. His hobbies include music (playing drums in a local band in Ermua... which played at a wedding in the town) and sport. His father works as a laborer.*

##### EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO

Published two photos of Blanco, one filling the front page, and another of his father.

Dedicated five other pages to the subject.

Featured a 104-line column entitled «*the councilor who loves drumming*». In bold text it states: «*Miguel Angel Blanco divides his life between his job, his girlfriend and occasional work in Ermua's Town Hall. The neighbors of ETA's latest victim describe him as a 'noble, straightforward and friendly' young man*». The text also mentions that he was born into a humble family, that he helped out his father, a builder, and that he was member of a pop group which played at local festivals.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> July (at 4 o'clock, ETA's deadline would expire, and new demonstrations had been called in the Basque Country and Spain demanding his freedom.)

##### EGIN

Did not publish any photos of Miguel Angel Blanco.

Dedicated five internal pages to the news.

Did not give any personal information about the victim.

##### DEIA

Published three photos of Miguel Angel Blanco, one on the front page. There was also a photo on the front page of his sister and girlfriend at a demonstration the day before, demanding that he should be set free. On the inside pages there were other photos of his family.

Twenty-four pages were dedicated to the news. Two of these (p. 12 and p. 14) were dedicated to his neighbors, family and workmates, feature personal details about Blanco, and the anguish suffered by his family.

##### EL CORREO ESPAÑOL-EL PUEBLO VASCO

Front page featuring a photo of Miguel Angel Blanco, and another of his girlfriend and sister at a demonstration calling for his freedom. Inside there were another two photos of Blanco, one with the members of his band, and another with members of his family.

Sixteen pages were dedicated to the story.

It reported on the emotional state of his family, and gave more personal information about the victim.

A) *José Antonio Ortega, held for more than 500 days by ETA*, B) *Cosme Declaux, held for more than 200 days by ETA*, C) *Mari Atxabal, held for just 3 days by the Guardia Civil...*» (Egin, 11<sup>th</sup> July, p. 7).

The text plays down the seriousness of ETA kidnappings, compared to treatment at the hands of the security forces. If we allow ourselves to be guided only by the description given in this article of kidnapping victims, «*they walk out on their own, arrive home, have a shower, chat to their family, greet their neighbors...*» then we would have to conclude that being kidnapped is not really that traumatic after all.

The editorial of *Egin* dated 13<sup>th</sup> July, after describing the murder of Blanco as 'a tragedy', affirms: «*Today Miguel Angel Blanco is in the news. Meanwhile the reality of the inhuman and illegal treatment of Basque prisoners is a constant reality...*» (Egin, 13<sup>th</sup> July, p. 7).

In an article which appeared in the same newspaper on the 14<sup>th</sup> July, analyzing the facts surrounding the murder using a familiar metaphor, it states «*today the 'woods' within which Basque prisoners are suffering, the very origin of the situation we are going through, cannot be seen for the trees. More than six hundred prisoners, for whom thousands of citizens have risked their lives with hunger strikes and demonstrations over the years, with the economic support of family and friends* (Egin, 14<sup>th</sup> July, p. 7).

The paragraph abounds with the idea of playing down ETA's actions as much as possible, shielding itself with the suffering of others. Here, the murder is «*news today*», and what is «*constant*» is the «*inhuman*» treatment given to ETA prisoners. This act is something circumstantial and not worthy of our concern, as it would prevent us from a clear view of the «*woods within which Basque prisoners are suffering*».

Here *Egin* is attempting to create a version of the events where one group suffers more than the other. However, in *Deia* and *El Correo Español- El Pueblo Vasco*, no attempt was made to play down ETA's actions by referring to the victims on the other side of the conflict.

If we examine comments which appeared in *Egin* throughout the period of the kidnapping and murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, a belief comes to light which we have denominated an **asymmetrical evaluation of suffering**, or the conviction that «*it's tougher for us than it is for them*». Instead of denying the victims' suffering, making them appear inhuman and therefore being counterproductive for the group's image, their grief is recognized. The group is defined as putting up with much greater hardships: the suffering of those held by the security forces is worse than those kidnapped by ETA, the suffering of the families of ETA members who are held and killed is worse than the suffering of the families of those kidnapped and killed by ETA, and so on.

### Conclusions

Political violence is accompanied by discourses which attempt to make it legitimate. The end result is not only to justify aggression against one's enemy, but also to be considered as victims and therefore to maintain a positive image, making it possible to obtain as the support of society. In the process of creating this discourse, it is important to attribute responsibility to the enemy, to consider those who have suffered violence, and to refer to the situation of the group itself.

Our study demonstrates how these aspects, which are present when different types of political violence are legitimized, adopt a different guise when there is violence against the innocent, and when there is widespread public outcry against this type of action. As would be expected, there is an external attribution of responsibilities. However, in this particular case, with an innocent victim and the solidarity of the vast majority of the population, there was no possible way that he could have been blamed for the situation. It therefore became the responsibility of the Government, for not bowing to ETA's demands. It was responsible on two fronts: firstly, for the conflict which led to Blanco having been kidnapped by ETA, and secondly, for his possible death should their conditions not be agreed to. An attempt was made to absolve ETA of any responsibility whatsoever for either the kidnapping or the murder.

For obvious reasons, there was no attempt to dehumanize Blanco in the information which was given. Instead, *Egin* attempted to maintain the logic of the kidnapper's actions, only referring to him as a member of a political party which was obliged to comply with a series of demands. An attempt at de-legitimization was made by associating him with the political symbol considered as responsible for the situation of some members of the aggressive group. This strategy calls for a depersonalization of the victim, by withholding any type of information or personal references beyond party affiliations, preventing the appearance of any feelings of solidarity or identification between the population and victims. In turn, this emotional distancing softens possible criticisms against the acts of violence carried out by the group.

But when this is not the case, and there is a powerful public backlash which sympathizes with the victim and calls for violence to end, the group cannot turn to either dehumanizing or to the egoism of victimization. In this case, our study revealed the existence of what we have called the «*asymmetrical evaluation of adversity*». As we mentioned in the introduction, it was to be expected that when faced with an act of violence against an innocent individual combined with widespread social outcry, the aggressive group could not limit itself to the egoism of victimization. In fact, the results reveal that as well as citing 'the others' as being responsible for violence carried out by their own group, they unite with public opinion and demonstrate their concern for the fate of the victim. This attitude of presumed empathy with the victim makes it possible to present a more affable and 'humane' image of the terrorist group, which is vital in the struggle for public support. However, if we carefully analyze the range of the group's positions, we see that the criminal act itself is never actually questioned. Confronted with the opposing situation, solidarity and the recognition of suffering are designed to emphasize the opponent's responsibility, and that the situation of the group is by far the worst, in an effort to counterbalance condemnation for their criminal actions.

An asymmetrical evaluation of suffering becomes an important conviction in the effort to maintain support for the group and the sectors close to it, in response to criticism for acts of violence. There are several reasons for this: firstly, one of the aspects which include the belief of an asymmetrical evaluation of suffering is concern for the suffering of the enemy, which allows the aggressor to offer a more positive image. Secondly, defending the posture that the group's situation is by far the worse attempts to draw attention away from the act itself onto its opponent's actions. Thirdly, as well as attempting to distract attention, emphasizing the group's suffering attempts to reduce criticism of the crime.

Obviously, if these types of attributions and beliefs are upheld, then the use of violence will continue to be legitimized. Therefore, one way of dealing with the problem is to try and modify this discourse. This is no easy task, although it is important to note that these are not immovable situations: they are created using the information provided by the media and the exchange of information between individuals. Little by little, these interactions and exchanges allow a specific definition and interpretation of reality to be constructed (Mead, 1934; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). This means it is important that there are discourses and beliefs within the group's social context, as well as the sectors which support it, that reject the use of violence, which humanize victims and assume that suffering is the same on all sides. The existence and social visibility of this type of discourse makes it possible for there to be a 'mobilization of consensus' (Klandermans, 1988) which calls for an end to all types of political violence and the opening of inroads which permit a negotiated settlement.

In closing, we should remember that this study is based on the analysis of one particular case. It has the virtue of shedding light on a political phenomenon as intriguing as the legitimization of political violence against an innocent person, within a specific political context and by a specific publication. Nevertheless, caution is needed when considering the importance of the results obtained in this study. Further studies are needed using a different context, to see how the media with links to aggressive groups use the same argument to justify these types of violent situations. The importance of this topic is evident: the discourses which justify violence are created by beliefs based on the attribution of responsibilities, dehumanization of the enemy, and victimization of the in-group.

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> The PP is a conservative party, integrated within the international Christian-Democratic movement. The kidnapping and murder of Miguel Ángel took place when the PP was in power.

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