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“Joining the army is not choosing to kill”: towards an understanding of the emotional narratives of Colombian professional soldiers

Ana María Forero Ángel [CV] (ID) (ORCID)

Professor of Anthropology. Universidad de los Andes, UNIANDES / University of Los Andes, Colombia - Am.forero260@uniandes.edu.co

Catalina González Quintero [CV] (ID) (ORCID)

Professor of Philosophy. Universidad de los Andes, UNIANDES / University of Los Andes, Colombia - cgonzale@uniandes.edu.co

Simón Ramírez González (ID) (ORCID)

Research Assistant. Universidad de los Andes, UNIANDES / University of Los Andes, Colombia
Sm.ramirez1794@uniandes.edu.co

Felipe Zárate Guerrero Research Assistant. Universidad de los Andes, UNIANDES / University of Los Andes, Colombia - f.zarate10@uniandes.edu.co

Abstract

Introduction. This article presents the results of an analysis of two emotional events experienced by Colombian professional soldiers. For the purposes of this study, an emotional event is an event that the narrator defines as life-changing. **Methods.** The study is based on interviews with a sample of professional soldiers, conducted between 2015 and 2017. **Results.** Two emotional events were identified: “I no longer remember my civilian life: I am who I am now”, “Change of mindset”. In the first, the soldiers narrate how once they joined the army, their civilian life ceased to be a benchmark in their daily lives. In the second, soldiers mention that they did not learn to kill in the School of Professional Soldiers (ESPRO), but in the combat zone. **Conclusions.** The study of emotions is of vital

importance to understand the daily life of people who are part of complex institutions such as the Colombian Army.

Keywords

Emotional narratives; rhetoric; professional soldiers; Colombian armed conflict; Colombia.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication, University of London)

1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to analyse specific aspects of the *emotional narratives* included in the testimonials of professional Colombian soldiers about their experiences in war. We believe that the study of the narratives and rhetorical strategies that soldiers use to persuade their listeners offers the social researcher the appropriate point of view to understand historically situated social and institutional processes. *Emotional narratives* give account of the way people live and solve their conflicts, of the meaning they give to their interpersonal relationships and of the temporality of their existence (Fludernik 2005; Ryan, 2007; Poletta, 2011). These narratives are immersed in the discursive formations and conventions of the time and place in which they develop, and through them the narrator establishes chronological and causal connections between important life-changing events (Ryan, 2007). The study of these narratives allows us to give an account of the understandings that a certain group has of itself and of the way it interacts with other groups, as well as of the ways in which individuals live and give meaning to their contexts and establish moral codes that guide their behaviour.

The study of narratives also allows us to adopt a point of view that provides an inner understanding (Ingold, 2015) [2] of the institutions, their actors and the way they give meaning to their social role. In this sense, we assume that institutions must be studied by approaching the daily life of the people that are part of their structure (Veena and Poole, 2008). This work aims to advance a “topography of power” that studies the institutions that determine the fate of nations (Lutz, 2006) and give an account of the exercise, effects, negotiation, dissent and limits of such power (Lutz, 2006, 593) [3].

The National Army of Colombia is one of the few national institutions that over the past 20 years has reached all of the regions of the country, largely determining their everyday life. The way in which the army has intervened in the national daily life has changed throughout history, under the influence of various governmental doctrines, as well as different regional contexts and population groups (Forero,

2017). Hence Colombian soldiers have been admired, namely, seen as guarantors of the security of a particular region, as well as stigmatised, i.e. considered to be enemies of the people. Given that, over the last 20 years, in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the army has also woven alliances with groups outside the law (the so-called “self-defence groups” or “paramilitaries”), and many citizens, in different regions, have learned to relate to the military institution with mistrust (Forero, 2017).

2. Methods

This article focuses on two emotional events identified in the narratives of Colombian professional soldiers and tries to identify in them the “emotional power” (Geertz, 1968, and Rosaldo, 1989) that led them to join the institution and manage the vicissitudes in the combat zone, as well as the justifications used to explain their actions.

To begin to define emotional narratives and what we have understood by “emotional event”, it is relevant to recreate the encounter with a group of soldiers that took place on 24 September 2015. That day, the team that carried out the research project “The everyday life of members of the Public Forces: experiences within and out the barracks” [4] explained our intentions to a group of professional soldiers: to find out why they choose the military life and understand how they experienced war. The selected soldiers were keen to participate but insisted that the interviews should be conducted where “the walls do not listen” to what they say. Thus, we went to the cafeteria of the School of Artillery in Bogota, Colombia. There, Kevin, one of the soldiers, locked the door and then said:

Here we are going to talk about *berracas* [5]. So not everyone should hear about it. This is not about secrets, but feelings. Because the war is heartfelt, and it lingers (Field note, Ana María Forero Angel, September 2014).

With this statement and gesture, Kevin put the focus on the emotional character of the testimonials that we were going to listen. During the following three hours, we heard narratives in which emotions were the cause, consequence and framework of reference of decisions and actions.

In the context of the study of narratives, an “emotional event” is understood as an account of a situation that an individual considers having changed his or her life and triggered the type of person he or she is now (Jimeno, 2006, 2010). All emotional events are structured by a temporal delimitation defined by a situation that triggers the event and another that ends it. The narrated event has an “emotional power” that is rooted in the position the subject occupies in the community (Rosaldo, 1989, 24). The emotional power of an event determines the movement of the subject’s positioning and re-positioning before the symbolic structure of his community, i.e., changes in the understanding of his social role, his identity and his relationships with others. Thus, although in any emotional narrative the narrator tries to expose his emotions and actions as legitimate and reasonable according to the expectations of his or her social group (Fisher & Jansz, 2008), emotional narratives also contain instances of rupture with these expectations, given by the “emotional power” of the event in question (as we will see in relation to the second emotional event analysed in this article).

In the sixty-seven interviews conducted for this study, the selected professional soldiers narrated in a similar way and in various occasions their entry to the institution, their first experiences on the combat

zone and their return to civilian life. However, the meeting with Kevin, Maicol, Javier and Tomás [6] was not only one of the most moving during the field work, but also, in our opinion, summed up the emotional events present on all the interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016 [7]. For this reason, this article refers mainly to the group interview with these soldiers.

Respecting the demands of the interviewed soldiers also involved building a method of analysis that would allow us to give an account of the emotional character of their narratives, without labelling these emotions (without deciding, for example, whether the story spoke of fear, sadness or desire for revenge, etc.). In this way, to analyse the narratives we chose the most significant emotional events and then identified *topoi* in them, i.e., the recurrent thematic axes on which the subject builds his story (Sloane, 2001, 779-781), and *tropes*, i.e., the rhetoric strategies used to establish empathy with the interviewer and persuade him about the truth or significance the story (Sloane, 2001, 745-756)-.

This article will address the two main emotional events: “entry to the institution” and “learning to kill”. In the first, we will address the following *topoi*: “the first night in the army”, and “entry strategies: legality and cheating”. Likewise, we will refer to the temporary structure in which soldiers organise these events. In other words, we analyse the narratives that make reference to the past, based on which soldiers legitimise their motivations to join the institution, and the narratives in which the future is projected as the return to civilian life. In the second emotional event, “learning to kill”, we will deal with the moment in which the soldiers identified a change of mindset, i.e., a transition from the attitude they had in training courses - in which there is no real willingness to kill – to the one in the combat zone, when they feel the need to kill the enemy for the first time. Here, we address a unique *topos*: “the loss” that generally refers to the death of the *lanza* (the fellow soldier) in the combat zone. In the narration of this emotional event, soldiers also project the future when referring to their return to civilian life. This article will be divided, then, in two main areas corresponding to the two aforementioned emotional events, and a final one, which describes the projection to the future of these events.

3.1. “I no longer remember my civilian life: I am who I am now”. Entry to the institution: legality and cheating

It is very different to be a civilian, regardless of who you were: it is very different to be a civilian than a professional soldier. And that begins the day you join the institution. You are one person before and another the next day: as they say out there, *you are not born a soldier, but you die a soldier*. In the first night in the army you realise that nothing is going to be the same. And then gradually everything changes: the way you look, the way you walk... However, it is the day that you entered, that day, when you feel the change: you sleep at certain hour, not in your bed, [but] away from home, away from what you know (Field note, Ana María Forero Angel, September 2014)

In the registered narratives, the day of entry to the institution marks a change in people’s lives. When asked about their life before entering the institution, soldiers frequently answered that they remembered little of their civilian life and that, despite having lived nearly 20 years in a context of war, they still remember the day of entry to the institution as the event that determined their identity afterwards. This event marks a break with their previous life and is a symbol of having fulfilled a dream, gotten a job, solved the “draft card situation”, put distance from other armed groups, or done “whatever was necessary” to enter the army.

The first night is described as the moment in which soldiers realise that nothing will ever be the same as before, the moment in which they say good bye to civilian life:

On that first night, one feels that some people are crying, that others are pretending to be asleep, and there is fear to get your things stolen, fear of the people who already know it all. You kind of realise that your life has changed, that there is as a breakup... and there, as the saying goes: Never take a step back, not even to gain momentum (Field note, Ana María Forero Angel, September 2014)

The first night is, for professional soldiers, the moment in which the institution begins “to be part” of them, the moment in which, even without having received training, it begins to “enter” their body. The first night is followed by the dawn of the next day: “you feel you are in a place where you don’t understand anything, and you have to do everything very fast, everyone knows how to move around, but you” (Field note, Ana María Forero Angel, September 2015). Sharing the restroom, the shower, arriving on time for breakfast are routines that the recruit incorporates after that first day. To make this happen, it is necessary for the recruit find a *lanza* among fellow soldiers: a person with whom to form a bond of trust and alliances to be able to adjust to the regimes of the institution. Those who overcome the first night, the first dawn, the first meal, should concentrate on learning and assimilating the *perradas*, i.e. the unofficial rules of everyday life in the barracks.

However, entry to the institution is also determined by the moment in which the soldier decides to become a part of it, i.e., the moment he decides to join the army. The emotional event named “entry to the institution” refers to the motivations that legitimise the decision to join the national army.

3.1.1. Narrative strategies to justify the decision to join the institution

Locked in the cafeteria, we asked the group members why did they decide to become professional soldiers and received the following responses:

[When] I was little, I saw some soldiers and said: “when I grow up I want to be a soldier”. I liked it. The FARC [8] were in my village constantly, taking people away, but thanks God it never got my attention or anything... However, to be honest, there was so much corruption, so much evil... What one sees and hears can get one killed. So one learns about this and looks the other way. Then we begin going to school and start working... I finished college and I remember I went to P for a time. I remember that a soldier came, I was in my ninth year. I arrived and there were some canoes and bags of cocaine, and I wondered “Why is the army buying coca?” With a FARC bracelet... “Fuck!”. They were like “come here” with bag and wallet, shaking everything. So one could work producing cocaine there at that time... but it was also hard because there were colleagues involved who earned two million pesos, and got killed by thieves who wanted to steal those two million... so it was complicated (Personal communication, Kevin, 24 September, 2014).

In several of their testimonies, the interviewed soldiers repudiated the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which are represented as a group that cannot be trusted: precarious wages and jobs as well as ambiguous moral codes. Compared to the army, the FARC make no warranty, are not fair with their own members, and are engaged in illegal activities (drug trafficking) that soldiers prefer to avoid. In this way, professional soldiers build a past in which the choice of joining the army is

influenced by the construction of the enemy's identity in the aforementioned terms. Maicol complements Kevin's comments with the following statement:

I joined the army basically because since I was very young I liked gun-action movies starring Vicente Fernández. Sometimes I even stole coins from my mom and save them to go the matinee, which started at three in the afternoon on Sundays... At that time, I also used to watch luchador films starring *El Santo*... and I wanted to be in the middle of the action... I also saw soldiers... at that time I saw a patrol cop, and I looked at him and said "I want to be there" ... making the decision to go to the army was clear, so I this thought started back then... (Personal communication, Maicol, 24 September 2014).

In this testimony, Maicol uses a recurring *topos* in the narratives of soldiers, namely, that of a past marked by admiration for the armed fight and the army. Maicol does not only recall the armed heroes of the films he watched during his childhood, but also the times he interacted, as a citizen, with the army. There is a certain idealisation during childhood in the previous fragment of his narrative, which contrasts with the rawness of what follows:

I met a man who... got killed [...] and did military service [...] I also had problems with my dad because he drank a lot. All those psychological issues affected me, and I wanted to get out of my house. In my mind there was also the desire to get my own stuff, find a job, get my act together, set goals and work... but the option was always... join the army. So I started talking with a cousin... about joining the *paracos*, the paramilitaries. We went to a village to be interviewed with the paramilitaries, in an office in Yopal, but when we got there the man said, "wait, I am going in first". When he came out he said, "no, walk, let's go out and I will tell you about it, I will tell you and you will decide whether you want to join or not". [...] We went to a mess hall, a shop, and ordered two beers. He said, "This is the situation", and told me about the questions they had asked him to know whether he wanted to join the organisation [...]. The questions were kind of drastic: they asked him whether he was capable of killing a family member, if, let's say, such relative turned out to have ties with the guerrillas, because that part of Casanare was a red zone, because the guerrillas were in the north and the paramilitaries in the south... They asked him, "brother, could you kill your best friend?" and the man said he answered "Yes" [...] I looked at him and asked him, "what did you say?", "Yes!", "Can you kill a friend?", "Yes!", "Can you kill a brother?" "Yes", "Can you kill a woman?" ... So they finally said to him: "it seems that you have a good profile for this". The last question was, "if it turned out to be necessary to kill your mother, would you do it?", so my friend did not say anything and the other man said to him, "no brother, to be honest I see you are not sure, if you don't feel capable of answering leave and come back later", "ok, I'll come back later", so he came out, grabbed me and told me: "you know what?... I'm joining the army" (Personal communication, Maicol, 24 September 2014).

In this fragment we can highlight, first, the soldier's desire to have an adult life away from family conflicts and with some economic prosperity, and, second, his fear to join illegal groups that require crossing certain moral boundaries. Professional soldiers justify their decision to join the army by saying that this institution allows them to enjoy economic stability and above all because it imposes on its member's codes of conduct in which respect for life and people's integrity are central. The rhetorical *tropes* in the previous narrative, such as, for example, the growing tension of the testimony, arranged in the increasingly close degrees of kinship of the family member whom the interviewee should have the courage to kill to be part of the paramilitary group, are essential for the transmission

of the emotional power of the event. Likewise, the decisive end, in which tension is released when Maicol's cousin concluded: "you know what? ... I'm joining the army", shows that there is an intense emotional conflict in the narrator, which is resolved in the most coherent way with the values initially stated, i.e., with his childhood identification with morally suitable armed heroes and his desire to improve economically while being useful to society.

Maicol's emotional narratives were complemented with Javier's statements:

Javier: Well, not in my case, I did my military service, as they say, because I needed to work, I was forced... Well, taking advantage of the fact that in Colombia it was mandatory to serve in the military at that time, the company where I worked said, "you are eighteen already, so we cannot renew your contract until you get your draft card" [9]. So I went to the artillery, introduced myself... very kindly, and they told me, "sure, welcome!" ...

Maicol: Welcome to hell (the other soldiers laugh). (Personal communication, Javier 24 September 2014).

Joining the institution is also marked by fear of not being able to get job for not having the draft card or being caught in the army raids. The professional soldiers remarked how joining the institution guarantees the draft card and access to a monthly salary. Thus, joining the army is justified by the need to become a good citizen (Das and Poole, 2014). This testimony has in common with the previous one the conception of the army as guarantor of legality and economic prosperity. Choosing the National Army over the armed groups outside the law is seen as a way to gain access to citizenship and curb the prevailing poverty in the family and regional context. It is striking, however, Maicol's immediate response to Javier's story, which shows, through the rhetorical use of irony, the contrast between this idealised view of the army and the reality ("welcome to hell").

The desire to join the institution is reflected explicitly in the methods used to secure entry. Among the professional soldiers, it is normal to hear that cheating opened the doors to a law abiding life. As Javier tells us:

(...) when I want something... I always put God first, right? Because I've been a believer. I said to Him: "God, if this is what I like, why won't I be able to do it?" They put me in the unfit folder, and you know... from the outset we always carry things... don't we? I took out a wallet and a *Prestobarba* [10] and I got started and scratched it to delete the "un" part so was "fit" (colleagues laugh) (Personal communication, Javier, 24 September 2014).

The way in which the narrator introduces the story of the time he cheated with an allusion to his religious faith is interesting in this testimony. While the narrator prepares himself to carry out an illegal action, he does it, so to speak, with the permission of the highest authority: God. This rhetorical strategy gives an account of the emotional power of Javier's desire to be part of the army. Kevin complements the story in the following way:

(...) I told the captain [...], who is now the colonel, "my captain, I already made two deliveries of C. and I was told I'm not suitable because of the bite". He looked at my medical records and saw I was all right, except for that. "But it says you are "suitable", "but yeah... you know". That is, I deleted the

information about the bite, but I informed him why I did that... He told me, “I need four hundred [soldiers], if they ask me a hundred and fifty more, I will take you in”. And I was thoughtful, I wanted in... He said, “they didn’t request one hundred and fifty, they requested eighty and no more” ... A Sergeant First Class told him: “come on, put this guy on the list”, and the man said, “no my captain, this guy is not good, is not fit”, and the man said: “Sergeant, receive the man’s folder and that’s it”, and so the man got through [colleagues laugh]. But from the start I already knew what was coming, as the story goes, because I, since tenth grade, started to work out my chest, legs and do jumps in the morning, and I could do 200, 300 chest repetitions... (Personal communication, Kevin, 24 September 2014).

In these testimonies, cheating is a valid means to secure entry to the institution. Soldiers used different rhetorical strategies to present cheating as a legitimate way of entering the institution: the allusion to God, in the first story, or the reference to their physical preparation before enrolling, in the second. The most important of these stories is that, paradoxically, through cheating, upon entering the army, soldiers manage to become morally fit subjects, whose behaviour respects certain ethical standards and legal guidelines. In other words, cheating is, in these stories, a legitimate means of becoming a morally acceptable citizen who has made the most suitable decision in ethical terms, namely, to participate in the right side of the war.

3.2. “Learning to kill”: the reality of the combat zone and soldiers’ “change of mindset”

In school, the first thing they teach you is to carry with you everything you need [...]. An excessively heavy bag for whatever we are learning to survive (...). There, they teach you to shoot, teach you theory, but never teach you to kill (Personal communication, Javier, G, 24 September 2015).

“Learning to kill” is another fundamental emotional event in the emotional narratives of professional soldiers. These soldiers explain that in the different professionalisation courses they receive, they are never taught about the reality of war. In other words, they are not told that in the combat zone, war “smells and hurts”; they are not told that when they are there, they must kill. Military training is focused on controlling emotions and enhancing the body of the fighter. New soldiers learn to maintain an emotional balance that allows them to react appropriately to guerrilla attacks, while receiving physical training that helps them resist hunger and bad weather. However, the real learning, both physical and emotional, takes place in the combat zone. This is how soldiers understand it:

Actually, none of the courses in the army ever prepare you for what we will face. Courses in the army always focus on how to develop physical abilities, sometimes psychological, so that we know what to do in a particular case, how to react, and obviously how to handle weapons. *In the army you are never taught to kill, ever*. They teach you to use a weapon, but do not teach you to kill a person, that’s another story. According to them, the theory of the army, one learns by force, because one does not kill someone, but one *defends himself* (Personal communication, Javier, 24 September 2015).

For weeks, professional soldiers are trained in the simulated environments built for their professionalisation: their body acquires the skills required to shoot the target, and learns to move, “running and making noise” down the training tracks; the soldiers overcome their fear of heights by jumping off an artificial tower, they learn to cross rivers by swimming in pools, and learn to endure hunger in exercises that simulate the risks and hardships of everyday life in the combat zone. However,

during the weeks dedicated to professionalisation, it is impossible to learn to attack and to react to the hostility of the enemy.

Thus, the emotional event labelled as “change of mindset” is anchored to a past in which the soldier receives training for war but is also protected from it. During the professionalisation, the soldier does not experience the hardships of the combat zone, and this ultimately means that although he naturalises the military identity, he does not naturalise the identity of the fighter. His mentality, according to professional soldiers, remains innocent, despite the harshness of the training. In other words, his mind remains away from the thought of having to kill. The “change of mindset” that prepares the soldier to kill only occurs in the combat zone:

Initially our mindset is to not kill anyone, right? Because we come from a change. When we join the army, killing a person never crosses your mind. You develop that idea over time, after we see, as your fellow soldiers say, that they have killed your *lanza*, the corporal, fellow soldiers, the Lieutenant, our friends. If we don't shoot them, they shoot us. So your mentality changes when you begin to see dead people, not before that, because before that you don't think about it, you have not seen anything, and you are afraid of killing another person. But after seeing your fellow soldiers getting killed, one says “ok, let's do it too”, but this only happens after some time (Personal communication, Kevin, 24 September 2015).

Learning to kill is an emotional event that is central to the narratives of soldiers because it marks a crucial change in their lives. Learning to kill, either for revenge for the death of one of his fellow soldiers or as an act to defend themselves or their fellow soldiers, implies that the bonds between professional soldiers have become so strong that they are now a kind of “family”: they defend each other, they develop bonds of solidarity and build a community in which they exchange experiences and share their traumas and suffering. The most recurrent *topos* in the emotional event named “learning to kill” is the loss of the *lanza*. The following testimony provides an example:

At work, one begins to feel the need to take revenge and participate in fights, one starts to hate the guerrilla members because in our work we suddenly develop a camaraderie with fellow soldiers, because we have breakfast together, eat lunch together, have dinner together, live together and spend months together. Thus, these people become brothers for us, as they watch our backs, they give you a glass of water... they are with whom we have developed a deep-rooted social environment. So when a person is so close and so friendly with us and then gets suddenly shot and killed, then the conflict is no longer a conflict of the government with the guerrillas or any terrorist situation: it becomes personal, the war becomes personal. One wonders, “What are we doing here thinking about the freedom of Colombians and world peace?” “They hurt me, they affected me psychologically and emotionally”. It is for having caused such harm that I'm going to kill them... so our mentality changes for those circumstances (Personal communication, Javier, 24 September 2015).

The emotional power of this story is indisputable and allows us to give an account of how the loss of the *lanza* has an important role in shaping the identity of the soldier. The narrators expressed their pain over the death of their fellow soldiers and justify their desire for revenge with this loss. Thus, war becomes a personal conflict that allows them to persevere in battle. With the loss of the *lanza*, war

ceases to be an abstract task, based on socially justified discourses and feelings of patriotism, to become a personal matter. The testimony of Javier is followed by the following intervention by Maicol:

Let's say, I don't know, but from my point of view, you know someone that has been very bad and gets killed, at the end and after all, he was bad. But if the man is good in every sense of the word, and gets killed, then no, no brother, no! So this changes your mentality totally, and one focuses on it... Moreover, when you arrive to the combat zone and a fellow soldier is killed, one more or less knows how to react, but when they kill one of the people you know, like... my *lanza*, one becomes even more poisons, brother... (Personal communication, Maicol, 24 September 2015).

In this testimony the soldier clearly expresses his refusal to accept the deaths of his comrades with whom he has formed bonds of affection and whom he considers moral persons. The soldier also describes his psychic change as a “poisoning”, as a corrosive transformation of his individuality. Once the mindset changes, which involves “learning to kill”, the identity of the soldier is consolidated, his initial inspirations -abstract and idealistic- are transformed or anchored in a specific reality: the need to defend himself and defend his new family, his fellow soldiers in the combat zone.

These two emotional events involve, as mentioned, the projection of the future of the professional soldier, i.e., his return to civilian life. His way of imagining and feeling that step is also affected by a huge emotional power (Rosaldo, 1989), which manifests the positioning and re-positioning of the soldier towards the institution as well as the Colombian society. The soldier's future is marked by awareness of the fact that he will be one of those who “will not be able to live without war, because when he returns to civilian life he will remember everything that was done to him and, above all, everything he has done” (Field note, Ana María Forero, 24 September 2015). The next and final section explains how the emotional narratives of the soldier are projected into the future.

3.3. The return to civilian life: the imagined future in emotional events

I am afraid to return to my civilian life. I joined the army since I was a *pelao* [11], I do not know anything else. I barely know my wife and my children. When I have permission to visit them, I find it difficult to sleep in my bed (laughs) and play with my children. I want to be active all the time and I am always watching out who is looking at me, who is close to me. We listen to our fellow soldiers who have returned to the civilian life... that is fucked up. I hope in 20 years not to be so crazy and work on my own thing, without having to report to anyone (Personal communication, 8 June 2016).

All emotional events, as mentioned, imply an expectation for the future. In the case of the analysed narratives, this expectation is the return to civilian life. The future is defined as the time at which the soldier ceases to be so and must learn to behave in an unknown scenario. The recurring *topoi* in the narration of the future are: “the return to the family”, “the return to the community” and “the relationship with the army” to which they will no longer belong.

Professional soldiers represent the return to their family as the time in which they realise that war is something that “lingers” (Forero 2017). The narrators imagine their future life based on the experiences lived during the brief moments they were able to visit their home and express profound uncertainty in this regard:

(...) a life in which one does not know what to do or how to do it. How can I get home and start bossing around? My wife is the one who knows the children, the one who has disciplined them, the one who has kept the family together. For me it is too difficult to get there and sort things out. Eventually one gets used to the family and the family to us. But the war doesn't end. For example, when I arrive to my house I prefer to sleep on the floor... I feel safer there. (Personal communication, Kevin, 24 September 2015)

The narrators defined their return to civilian life as the moment at which their know-how and their forged fighter identity make it impossible to adapt to a life without war. In the future, the family will be the place of protection for the soldier, but not necessarily the place where he will be understood: "War-related problems are not only spoken by people who lived them. Nobody is going to understand what happens there and we do not want to be looked at with pity, or as if we were crazy, so that only happens between our *lanzas* ["fellow soldiers"]" (Field note, Ana María Forero, 24 September 2015). Thus, in their return to civilian life, the professional soldier does not count with the community built during his time in the combat zone. The emotional stories that justify his decisions and legitimise his actions in front of his fellow soldiers lose their meaning. During his whole life, the soldier has structured his narratives around war-related events and has also structured his identity around war with these stories. When talking about the future, the soldier perceives that he will probably end up without interlocutors, without a person to share his emotional experiences, so that he will have to learn to adapt his narratives to an audience that has not been in the war.

Returning to civilian life is also as described as the moment in which the soldier realises that a large part of the civilian population hates or distrusts soldiers. His feelings of inadequacy to the new life are fed by the rejection he receives from the population. In the stories of Maicol, Kevin and Javier, "civilians" are depicted as people who do not understand the work of the soldier:

There is no feeling of solidarity towards soldiers. You see, even if we come from the armed forces people look at us with distrust and expect the worst from us. And in many of our regions the guerrilla is still present, and obviously over there the mistrust is worse and mutual... There is no one to prepare you for that. (Personal communication, Javier, 24 September 2015)

The emotional power of the expectations of the future is marked by anxiety, which appears also in the narrations referring to the relationship that the soldier is expected to develop with the army once he becomes a pensioner:

You are not born a soldier, but you die a soldier. A soldier who returns to civilian life, goes back to build his house, to recover his home and start a business or to work in security. However, he will always be a soldier. He was doing it for 20 years. The experiences of war *linger*. And when we are out we take it with more serenity, but we are still soldiers. We come out filled with much fear, and it doesn't go away, one can no longer sleep. But yeah, with the savings from the army, one moves forward. That's why I am so grateful with my institution, but also resented. They leave you on your own. We see the fellow soldiers who gave their life to the institution and got screwed up, and that is when we realise we are cannon fodder. That is, when we are no longer useful, we are forgotten (Personal communication, Javier, 6 June 2016).

After 20 years of service, the professional soldier will return to his region and family with anxiety and fear. However, this does not imply the elimination of the physicality and emotionality he learnt in the military life. The war starts to “linger” even though the professional soldier must learn to live a life without military enemies. Thus, his future is associated with the certainty that what was learnt in the army will never be forgotten; with having to deal, in a different scenario, with the knowledge of his body and his mind which were trained on the combat zone. Imagining the openness of an activity that ensures the economic well-being of his family relieves the expectation and anxiety produced by his future in the civilian life. As his life project is defined, the feeling of gratitude towards the institution is preserved and, with it, the morale of the soldier who, “although retired, remains faithful to the cause and the institution”.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the emotional narratives of the interviewed Colombian professional soldiers aims to contribute to the study of the narratives and rhetoric of institutions that have been crucial to the life of a nation, in this case, the Colombian Army. As mentioned in the introduction, this institution has been one of the main actors in an armed conflict that has lasted more than 40 years in Colombia. Approaching the emotional events identified as “entry into the institution” and “change of mentality” enabled us to address the discourses of soldiers, not to determine whether they are true or false, historically correct or politically influential, but to understand the decisions taken and the justifications built to remain in the army and survive the war. The study of the aforementioned emotional events helps us understand how professional soldiers differentiate themselves morally from other armed groups, finding in the Colombian Army a place where to become ideal citizens; and how, based on the loss of their fellow soldiers in the combat zone, they begin to establish emotional ties that enable them to persevere in their decision to remain in the army and make the war a personal business.

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5. Notes

[1] Ana María Forero Ángel and Catalina González Quintero are direct authors of the text; anthropologist Simón Ramírez and philosopher Felipe Zárate are indirect authors (FACISO publication regulations, University of Los Andes).

[2] It is important to clarify that the topography of power presented here differs from the one presented by Colombian researchers Elsa Blair (1999); Atehortúa (1994 and 2004); Francisco Leal Buitrago

(2003 and 2006); and Dávila and González-Chavarría (2016). Our analysis is more related to the studies carried out by Sabina Frederic (2013), in relation to the role played by emotions and morality in the Argentinean security forces; Celso Castro (1990), on the identity-building processes in the Brazilian army; Rosana Guber (2013), with respect to the Argentinean army and the Falklands conflict; Lucas (2009), with respect to the Iraqi armies; and MacLeish (2013), around the daily life at Fort Hood, USA. This work is also similar to the one carried out by Lutz (2006) about the institutions that condition the future of nations, and Guterson (2007), who relies on the theoretical and methodological frameworks offered by anthropology and insists on the importance of dealing with groups other than the marginal ones. Along this line, we can highlight the work of Camargo Leirmer (1997) on hierarchy in the Brazilian armed forces, particularly in *Escola de Comando e Estado-Maior do Exército* (Eceme).

[3] Although with this term Lutz refers specifically to the analysis of North American military institutions, we consider that the concept can be used for the analysis of other national military institutions, such as the National Army of Colombia.

[4] This research has been funded by the Assistant Faculty Support Fund (FAPA) of the University of Los Andes and was coordinated by Professor Ana María Forero Ángel. The research team was composed by anthropologist Mabel Carmona, Lorenzo Granada and Julián Vásquez.

[5] The dictionary of Latin American phrases of the Association of Spanish Language Academies offers the following two meanings for the term *verraco* (“boar”): “...an extraordinary, magnificent person or thing (*verraco*)” or “a complicated and difficult-to-solve activity or problem”. (Available at: <http://lema.rae.es/damer/?key=berraco>) In our opinion, the interviewed soldiers refer simultaneously to these two meanings.

[6] These are the nicknames selected by soldiers. In order to respect their anonymity, the article does not mention their names, places of origin or combat zones.

[7] The ethnographic material on which this article is based is also the basis of the text *El Ejército Nacional de Colombia y sus heridas: una aproximación a las narrativas militares de dolor y desilusión* (“The National Army of Colombia and its wounds: an approach to the military narratives of pain and disappointment”) (Forero, 2017a) and the book *El Coronel no tiene quien le escuche: una aproximación antropológica a las narrativas militares* (“No one listens to the Colonel: an anthropological approach to military narratives”) (Forero, 2017).

[8] *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* [FARC] is a guerrilla movement that emerged in 1964 and participated since then in the Colombian armed conflict. It became demobilised when it signed peace agreements with the Colombian Government in 2016 and became a political party.

[9] The draft card (known as *libreta militar in Colombia*) is required to Colombian men aged 18 and older to demonstrate they have completed their compulsory military service or have been exempted from it for valid reasons contemplated by the law.

[10] *Prestobarba* is a common brand of disposable razors in Colombia.

[11] *Pelao* or *pelado* are common Colombian words used to refer to a little boy.

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