



# Human Rights in Sociopsychological Perspective

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## Abstract

From the standpoint of sociopsychology, we attempt to isolate those aspects of human rights that are distinctly sociopsychological in nature, to later identify them as interindividual segments of social system dynamics. In social perspective, human rights may be viewed as social events and, in a sociopsychological perspective, all social events are conceptualized as social formations of interacting contingencies. Such social formations are constituted of interindividual relations set in a complex of institutional practices. The interindividual relation is conceptualized as a set of contingencies directly affecting individual behavior and has three dimensions: exchange, power, and sanction. Institutions are conceptualized as sociohistorical circumstances having their origins as informal or formal practices. Human rights are addressed in terms of interindividual dimensions and institutional practices constituting specific social formations.

**Keywords** Human rights · Interindividual relations · Institutional practices · Equality · Humanity

This article is about human rights and the extent to which they can promote progressive social change. Behavior scientists pursue a science that lessens human suffering (Skinner, 1975) and have been involved in several social movements since the 1970s (Ardila-Sánchez et al., 2020a, 2020b). However, as a field, behavior scientists have only recently begun to consider issues of environmental and ecological justice (Mattaini & Roose, 2021). Part of the growing interest in expanding the scope of analysis of social issues within behaviorism is reflected in the work of culturo-behavior science scholars (Cihon et al., 2024; Mattaini, 2020), for whom helping individuals locally means to operate within complex sets of interlaced contingencies (Mattaini, 2019, 2020). An analysis of the aspects of human rights that are distinctly sociopsychological in nature is a step towards conceptual clarity that in turn may lead to progress in the development of large-scale social applications of behavior science.

Drawing upon sociopsychology (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016), the plan outlined here is three-fold: (1) to provide a discussion of the sociohistorical circumstances under which human rights arose in history with respect to institutional

contingencies; (2) to elaborate on the interindividual dimensions of human rights in terms of contingencies related to power and sanctions; and (3) to present the Colombian case as a way to analyze the status of human rights in terms of institutional and interindividual contingencies under specific cultural circumstances.

By way of introduction, sociopsychology is briefly presented below. In addition, the English-speaking audience is encouraged to consult Ardila-Sánchez and López-López (2024) for a more detailed review of sociopsychology in terms of levels of analysis, research, and theory.

## Overview of Sociopsychology

Sociopsychology (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016) is a multidiscipline grounded on the conception that all aspects of social dynamics are organized as social formations. Three types of contingencies coexist in any social formation. The first type of contingency is individual contingencies, or the relations established between individuals and their surrounding environment. These relations are established by means of reinforcement, punishment, and stimulus–stimulus matching. The second type of contingency is interpersonal contingencies, defined as the relations established with those who are part of a close life system, such as family, friends, or those involved in shared recreational activities. The third

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type of contingency is impersonal contingencies, or relations with those who represent some hierarchical function of authority. The existence of one contingency does not exclude the operation of the others.

From the standpoint of social formations, “the participating individual(s) are part of the system and do not confront or interact with it. Interaction, as a functional field, is the function of the system and not something else” (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016, p. 54). Sociopsychology is built upon the assumption that the molecular segments of a social formation, called interindividual relations, can be experimentally studied.

## Interindividual Relations

The relation between the behaviors of individuals (or interindividual relation) and the relation between individual behavior and the environment constitute two distinctly different subjects of study; inasmuch as individual and interindividual contingencies occur simultaneously, they are not reducible to each other. All interindividual relations are conceptualized in terms of three functional dimensions: exchange, power, and sanction.

The most fundamental function of interindividual relations is exchange, which determines the specialized division of labor between individuals in terms tools, production of goods and services, and the distribution and appropriation of resources among the individuals. The relations between production-appropriation factors constitute *exchange contingencies* and affect the extent to which individuals participate in shared contingencies (i.e., work together) and engage in reciprocal responding (Avila-Hernández & Pulido-Avalos, 2018).

The power dynamics resulting from the interactions in exchange relations constitute the second functional dimension of interindividual relations. To the extent that power is conceived as the result of the inequalities established in exchange relations, it represents the hierarchical access to the products of labor (i.e., goods and services). These hierarchies are obtained through authority practices of prescribing, supervising, and administering consequences. *Power contingencies* establish obedience through some or all of these practices; although some may be more effective than others (e.g., low rates of disobedience can be readily obtained through prescription of preestablished norms; Rangel-Bernal, 2008).

The formalization of the legitimacy of power imbalances in social interactions constitute the third functional dimension of interindividual relations, called *sanction contingencies*. Sanction is understood as the authorization, prohibition, penalization, and restitution, among others of the modes of production and appropriation between individuals.

Sanction contingencies establish what is just and fair in social formations.

If we consider the relation between interindividual and individual behavior, three outcomes can be identified. First, individuals *complement* each other's activities through exchange relations and, in doing so, engage in prosocial behaviors (cooperation, competition, altruism; Atkins et al., 2019). Second, some individuals *dominate* over the access and use of the products of labor through power relations. Third, individuals *establish the limits* of power through sanction contingencies. The legitimacy of recognizing or excluding an individual from social activities is what is at stake in sanction relations. In sum, a complex set of interlaced relations among exchange, power, and sanction contingencies constitute every interindividual relation. However, there are no universal properties or generic configurations of these relations that may be identified across social formations. On the contrary, individuals' participation in interindividual relations is historically embedded into institutional practices.<sup>1</sup>

## Institutional Practices

Recall that a social formation refers to the organization of interindividual relations existing simultaneously and historically with respect to individual behavior. This means that “every interindividual relation constitutes a molecular segment of an institutional practice, whether it is formal and impersonal or informal and interpersonal” (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016, p. 8). Institutional practices do not directly influence social interactions; rather, they determine the functional characteristics of the participating factors in those interactions, comprising what are commonly conceived as the practices of the State (formal institutions) and Culture (informal institutions).

Formal institutional practices represent impersonal roles adopted by individuals in their interactions with others such as educational/professional degrees, religious beliefs, or citizenship. Under formal institutions, interindividual relations operate as impersonal practices. For example, in power and sanction, domination and delimitation occur separately and as hierarchical structures. Informal institutional practices represent interpersonal roles developed as a result of individuals' shared histories such as friendships or family relations (e.g., brother, sister, mother, father). Under informal

<sup>1</sup> From a field perspective, an institution can be defined from at least two distinct vantage points: the sociopsychological perspective, as outlined here, and the psychosociological perspective. Kantor's (1982) Cultural Psychology may be understood as a psychosociological examination of institutions as conventional features (i.e., institutional stimulus functions) of stimulus objects participating in psychological events.

institutions, interindividual relations operate as informal practices. For example, in power and sanction, domination and delimitation are interlaced and operate through traditions.

The discussion now turns to the topic of human rights in sociopsychological perspective. However, it will first be helpful to review what has been stated about social formations up to this point. Social formations are constituted of interindividual relations set in a complex of institutional practices. The interindividual relation is conceptualized as a set of contingencies directly affecting individual behavior and has three dimensions: exchange, power, and sanction. Institutions are conceptualized as sociohistorical circumstances having their origins as informal or formal practices. Human rights are addressed in terms of interindividual dimensions and institutional practices.

## Overview of Human Rights

Some of the key aspects of human rights may be understood by examining the sociohistorical circumstances under which they arose in the twentieth century. The signing members of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) committed to safeguard the *universal* recognition and implementation of human rights among their peoples (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). These events occurred in the aftermath of World War II, wherein international law limited states' right to wage war to circumstances of national security. It also restricted a state's right to internal sovereignty (Rawls, 1971). Human rights were formulated, in part, as means to obtain the latter, that is, as an effort to limit a government's autonomy. Three years after the founding convention of the United Nation (UN) in San Francisco in 1945, the final version of the UDHR was signed by the majority of the then-current UN members (48 countries voted in favor, and 8 abstained). In doing so, these states acquired the obligation to protect, promote, and ensure the enjoyment of human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The UDHR established limitations to governmental action over citizens, whereas the UN constituted an instrument to monitor the adherence to these limitations. The "universality" of human rights indicates, at least, how they should be applied: as impersonal prescriptions stipulating equal opportunities for all individuals. That is, the "universality" of human rights consists of formal institutions (i.e., impersonal practices) under which equal opportunities for individuals may be established.

## Universality, Equality, and Cultural Hegemony as Formal Institutional Practices

The universality of human rights needed a justification because it was a completely new way of considering the meaning of rights. According to Moyn (2010), the rise of human rights is not connected to previous social upheavals such as anticolonialism and communist revolutions as these movements pursued their political agendas without advocating for universal rights. That is, in earlier versions of rights (e.g., Aristotle's citizen's rights, Aquinas' natural rights, Jefferson's "all men are created equal"), the concept of humanity (*humanitas*) was not tied to a social reform, whereas in the contemporary definition of human rights is central to advance a social agenda. It was not until 1977 that multiple sociopolitical factors facilitated the rise of human rights. Moreover, human rights initially did not require a political affiliation, finding success as a "last utopia" in the political arena (Moyn, 2010). This "utopia" was tied to the notion of humanity (Moyn, 2010), which became a new way to pursue equality. Equality has to do with the elusive notion of proportionality (Ribes-Iñesta, 2018), which has been discussed by multiple scholars using different indicators (e.g., environmental, socioeconomic). And at least two competing answers have been articulated as to the question of whether inequality is decreasing or increasing.

Looking at the issue globally, the world seems more egalitarian today than it was for the past 2 centuries (Pinker, 2011, 2018). Pinker (2011) argued that violence decreased from nonstate to state societies mainly due to two social forces: the states monopolized the use of violence, and individuals began relying on their capacity for empathy and self-control more often. Following the gradual decrease of violence during the late Middle Ages, the "humanitarian revolution"—the historical moment when the first organized rights movements emerged—led to more just societies (Pinker, 2011). Pinker (2018) argued that since the Enlightenment peoples' fortunes have increased, cutting down economic inequality globally, and highlighting several factors that have historically contributed to said decline, such as globalization and technological advancements. In a similar vein, the moral philosopher MacAskill (2022) points out that happiness inequality (across genders, races, and socioeconomic classes) has decreased over time in countries with sustained economic growth. As such, the world seems to be getting better when comparing countries.

However, as Piketty (2021)<sup>2</sup> points out, although "the inequalities between countries have decreased since the colonial

<sup>2</sup> Piketty relies on the data collected in the World Inequality Database (<http://WID.world>) for income and wealth inequality both between and within countries.

period, they remain extremely high, reflecting in part the fact that the organization of the global economic system is still very hierarchical and inequitable” (p. 21). According to Piketty (2021), one ought to consider the choice of indicators when analyzing equality trends across nations because macroeconomic measures (e.g., gross domestic product per capita) may mask the realities of the poorest and most vulnerable within a nation. Actually, several indicators show inequality is increasing, such as wealth distribution—half of the population own only 4% of the total share in Europe and 2% in Latin America, and unequal access to goods and services—education and health care (Piketty, 2021).

Human rights violations may also be considered as an indicator of inequality. Because national sovereignty determines the allocation of rights among people, all rights must be conceived under specific financial systems (Piketty, 2019). In this sense, some countries are more unequal than others because of prevailing formal institutional practices of hierarchical allocation of rights among the peoples. The fact that violence has increased across the world in the last 2 decades in terms of number and intensity of armed conflicts (Dupuy & Rustad, 2018) may be considered as another indicator of increasing inequality. Although some forms of violence have declined (e.g., civil violence; Turner, 2013), violence has simply *transformed* over the decades. It should be evident to behavior scientists that the world is not getting better due to “the better angels of our nature” (Pinker, 2011), when increasing inequality cuts across all nations (Piketty, 2019).

The effects of the rise of human rights as formal institutional practices has brought about a paradoxical situation: a cultural hegemony of equality/inequality. This is because the value of human rights for a nation resides in how they can mitigate the affirmation of unequal opportunities and possibilities within the hegemonic practices of the state. Cultural hegemony is an effect of formal institutional practices; that is, these practices justify a social order, which among many other things, is produced and reproduces indirect modes of violence (for an analysis of violence as mechanism to avoid direct confrontations within unequal social formations, see Avila-Hernández, 2022).

The continuous need of advocating for human rights obviously means they are consistently violated. Moreover, it points out to an important aspect of all social formations: unequal opportunities and asymmetrical modes of participation are part of all interindividual relations. Considering that the UN has had great difficulties foreseeing that all humans have universal access to rights—famine, wars, and torture are just some of the current crises that are still part of human suffering across the globe, exemplifying the enormous undertaking required to transform “universal” prescriptions into political agendas.

In sum, from the standpoint of formal institutions, human rights arose in the history of thought as an attempt to solve structural issues of social justice and equality. The states’ systematic exclusion of individuals from participating in different social activities is recognized as part of these institutional practices. This means the participation of state-actors is always directed towards the affirmation of unequal opportunities and possibilities within the hegemonic practices of human rights. Yet another way by which the universality of human rights operates is through informal institutional practices. Next, these sorts of practices are considered.

### Cultural Identity and Empathy as Informal Institutional Practices

The implementation of human rights in a social formation also exists in informal institutional practices; but in this case, it occurs in a subtle manner. Hegemony, at the informal level, operates through the customs and traditions of individuals such as patriarchal, racial, or sexist relations to achieve social cohesion (Ribes-Iñesta, 2023). Social cohesion simply means individuals learn to recognize others as part of the social formation. According to Ribes-Iñesta et al. (2016), an individual may be recognized as part of the group through learning cultural ways of reacting, such as feeling empathy. Empathy is an affective reactivity shared with individuals within a social formation that varies along a sympathy–antipathy axis (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016). When one feels sympathy, one recognizes others as fellow humans. When one feels antipathy, one recognizes others as different. Sympathy fosters solidarity, whereas antipathy fosters violations of rights. Insofar as our feelings are bounded to institutional practices, we all share these practices in a social formation. The main point, citing Foucault (1984), becomes “there exists an international citizenship that has its rights and its duties, and that obliges one to rise up against every abuse of power, whoever its author, whoever its victims. After all, we are all of the governed and, to that extent, in solidarity” (p. 22). We are all part of the hegemonic activities recognizing human rights; and to this extent, we are all responsible for everyone’s rights.

In sum, human rights are incorporated into the cultural practices of individuals as modes of inclusion by exclusion: recognizing us versus them. At the level of informal institutional practices, therefore, human rights determine to some extent the cultural identity of individuals (e.g., establishing different modes of participation as minorities within the group).

There are two additional ways to consider the role of human rights in a social formation. These have to do with power and sanction, as interindividual dimensions, of a social formation. In the next sections, the focus shifts to the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as an example of power relations, and civil resistance as an example of sanction relations.



## Authority and NGOs as Power Contingencies

NGOs provide not only support to individuals seeking protection of their rights, but also put pressure upon governmental agencies when they commit violations against them. Anti-Slavery International (a continuation of the British Anti-Slavery Society), Amnesty International (founded in 1961), Doctors without Borders (founded in 1971), and Human Rights Watch (founded in 1978) are some of the initial NGOs that have provided continuous essential support to citizens around the globe. During social upheavals, they monitor that citizens' rights are not violated, and advocate for the implementation of sanctions when violations occur. NGOs have proliferated across nations and have become fundamental mechanisms for the protection of rights. NGOs address violations of human rights as problems with different histories, chronologies, and geographies (Moyn, 2010). However, the role of NGOs within nations is mostly limited to supervising and writing reports based on their observations concerning violent acts. Further, their recommendations are sometimes dismissed as they rarely embody authority figures. The extent to which an NGO is considered an authority figure influences how it can affect individuals' conception of rights and obligations. Authority means the recognition of an individual or collective right to command over others and the obligation to conform to the commands (Rangel-Bernal, 2008). NGOs, at the level of power contingencies, affect the positions of dominance from which the individual participates, even if not actively controlling the actions of others.

## Civil Resistance as Sanction Contingencies

In regard to sanction contingencies, it is perhaps first relevant to consider who applies sanctions given the forms of sanctions may vary considerably from one case to another. The ruling minority applies sanctions to preserve certain formal institutional practices. Some examples of sanction relations deployed by different governments, borrowed from Galeano (1989), are the fact that Nelson Mandela, a human rights activist, was on the U.S. terrorist watchlist until 2008. Or, the fact that Ecuador granted nature constitutional rights in 2008 (Constitución Política de la República del Ecuador, 2008). And, the fact that in the United States, private companies have had human rights since 1886 (Harlan & Supreme Court of the United States, 1885). As such, sanctions applied by the ruling minority promote injustice and inequality based on the maintenance of the status quo as a 'just system' (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016, p. 276). Moreover, as political scientists Ritter and Conrad (2016) pointed out, governmental repression is

also present in nations in which citizens are not actively repressed.

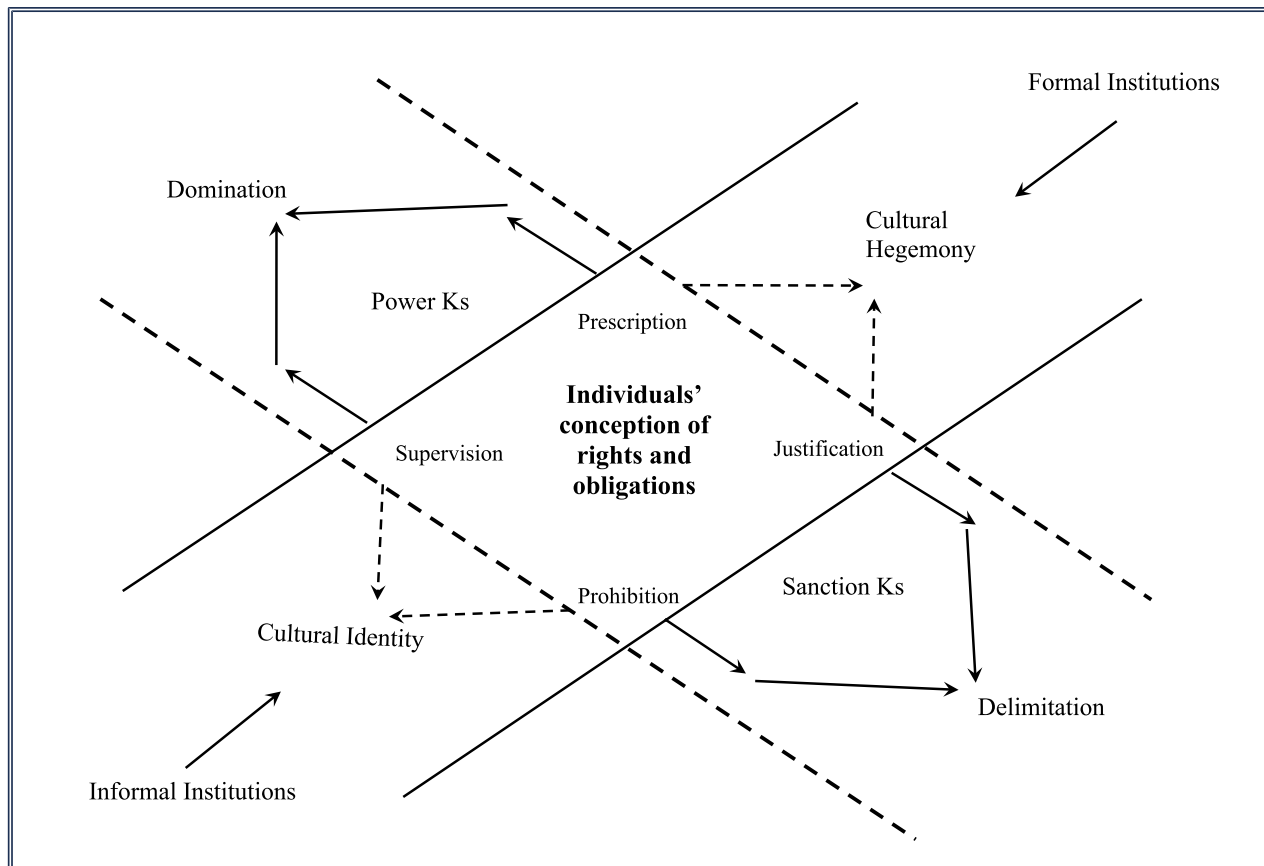
Sanctions applied by the governed promote civil resistance. Civil resistance means collectively affecting the socio-political status quo without using any form of violence (Chenoweth, 2021). Said another way, civil resistance is a method to promote peace that involves unarmed civilians sanctioning members of the collective as well as other collectives, such as through achieving long-term peace agreements. Resisting is a form of sanction for which the domination of the few over the many is delimited through different collective actions. Mattaini (2013) has analyzed, in detail and from a behavior systemic perspective, three different modes of non-violent resistance movements that may lead to such socially significant results: constructive noncooperation, nonviolent persuasion and protest, and disruptive noncooperation. These strategies are the most sensible alternative models to warfare, militarism, and violence. Mattaini's (2013) analysis provides important insights as to how behavior scientific knowledge can be used to build peace and promote equal rights. One of the main points that support focusing on these strategies and not others is that there are enough data as of today to assert that constructive noncooperation is far more effective at achieving transformation of social systems than overt forms of violence (Chenoweth, 2021).

To recapitulate, human rights may be conceived as a matrix of interindividual relations and institutional practices. Figure 1 represents these two complementary analyses diagrammatically: synchronically in terms of power and sanction contingencies and diachronically in terms of institutional practices. In power relations, human rights prescribe roles (victims, aggressors, perpetrators, advocates, etc.) and modes of authority (state, NGOs). In sanction relations, human rights delimit the range of actions of the actors through resistance. From the standpoint of institutions, human rights establish individuals' cultural identity as well as hegemonic practices of equality. The interlacing of interindividual relations and institutional practices constitute the functional meaning of human rights.

It is a general formulation, however, and specific types of human rights issues vary in detail. In the case of the Colombian cultural context, a number of distinguishing features may be identified that warrant specialized treatment. In what follows we attempt to do such an analysis.

## The Colombian Cultural Context

Colombia has suffered an armed conflict since 1946 (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022), characterized by the systematic use of diverse violent acts (i.e., massacres, kidnap,



**Fig. 1** Human Rights as Interlacing of Interindividual Relations with Institutions. *Note.* The dotted lines represent formal and informal institutional practices as diachronic cuts of a social formation. The solid lines represent power and sanction contingencies (Ks) as synchronic cuts of a social formation. The dotted arrows are the effects of institutional practices regulating interindividual relations of human

rights. Solid arrows are the main activities in power (supervision and prescription) and in sanction (prohibition and justification) interindividual relations. The “outcomes” of power and sanction relations are identified with solid arrows (domination and delimitation, respectively)

forced displacement) against civilians and the involvement of state and nonstate actors, namely guerrilla, paramilitary, and state military in the perpetration of these violent acts. Multiple left-wing insurgent groups have waged war against the state for over 50 years, including Latin America’s largest guerrilla army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC–EP by its Spanish initials).<sup>3</sup>

Guerrilla and paramilitary groups gained control of large parts of the national territory and took over the illegal drug trade during the 1980s, which intensified the violence in most cities across the country. At the beginning of the current century, the Colombian army regained control of most of the lost territory and paramilitary groups were dismantled. A peace agreement between the Colombian

government and the FARC was reached in 2016. This agreement included the creation of a truth Commission for the Elucidation of Truth, Coexistence, and Never Again, officially established in December 2018. This commission investigates multiple dimensions of the armed conflict, namely, the roots of the different forms of violence, acts that have perpetuated violations of human rights, the social impact of the conflict on vulnerable populations, and the collective responsibility of national and international actors (Velez et al., 2020). The peace agreement resulted in a momentary decrease in violence; however, over the past few years armed groups and criminal organizations expanded their presence over the territory previously controlled by the FARC, leading to a rise in selective killings and forced displacement (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022).

A few years ago, the president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro (2022–2026), proposed an ambitious agenda. The current government aims to reach “total peace” with all the

<sup>3</sup> In Spanish, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo.

insurgent armed groups and effectively end war in Colombia (Law 2272 of 2022). The total peace policy aims to end the armed conflict through negotiating disarmament with multiple armed groups throughout the country. In 2023, bilateral ceasefires were agreed upon between the government and the National Liberation Army (ELN by its Spanish initials),<sup>4</sup> the Central General Staff (EMC by its Spanish initials),<sup>5</sup> and two paramilitary groups. Nevertheless, the government has resumed its military operations against all these groups with the exception of the ELN because of failure to adhere to the conditions for negotiations (i.e., do not engage in violent acts) on the part of these armed groups.

### The Effects of Inequality—Formal Institutional Practices

The ongoing armed conflict in Colombia has affected the population unevenly (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022) resulting in its segregation in terms of “minorities.” In 2023, 77% of all displacement victims were Afro-descendant and indigenous individuals (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2023). Those individuals seen as minorities are, as the Uruguayan essayist Eduardo Galeano (1989) put it:

the no ones, the nobodies, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way. Who are not, but could be. Who don’t speak languages, but dialects. Who don’t have religions, but superstitions. Who don’t create art, but handicrafts. Who don’t have culture, but folklore. Who are not human beings, but human resources. (p. 73)

Indeed, individuals who are treated merely as resources are also systematically excluded from participating in multiple social relations. The nobodies are those who, for many reasons, are excluded from enjoying human rights as the rest of “us.” Social leaders and human rights defenders protecting minority groups (i.e., the nobodies) in different territories are at higher risk of threats (Correa-Chica et al., 2024) because their work attempts to break the cultural barriers that prevent conceiving “others” as “us.” In 2021, Colombia registered a total of 145 homicides of social leaders working in human rights protection (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2022). At the beginning of 2022, a 14-year-old indigenous activist was murdered in the department of Cauca, one of the most affected parts of the Colombian territory.

As for sexual violence, it has been historically used as means of domination both in the internal conflict as well as during civil protest. The report *Baton, God, and Homeland*,

elaborated by Temblores NGO, documented 214 acts of sexual violence perpetrated by national police and military between 2017 and 2019, of which 80.4% were against women (Camargo-Sánchez et al., 2021). Simply put, an encounter with Colombian police for women means a high likelihood of being raped.

The systematic killings of human rights activists and sexual violence against women crudely reveal the fact that human rights-related practices threaten the position of domination of multiple actors. This status quo fosters violence.

### The Effects of Cultural Identities—Informal Institutional Practices

Several studies show that victims’ trust in former perpetrators varies across type of actors. Ex-guerrilla members tend to rank lower than ex-paramilitary members with respect to trustworthiness (López-López et al., 2018). However, the same perspective does not seem to hold across all Colombian citizens, particularly in the case of the youth (López-López et al., 2020). López-López et al. (2020) examined the willingness to forgive violent acts among children (between 10 and 13 years old) from two different sociodemographic groups: those directly affected by the conflict and living in precarious conditions (vulnerable children), and those not affected by the conflict and living in optimal conditions (nonvulnerable children). They found low willingness to forgive among nonvulnerable children, but not in the case of vulnerable children. Moreover, in the vulnerable group, the children’s narratives were found to revolve around peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness as feasible and necessary to end the conflict (López-López et al., 2020).

Trust and reconciliation, as interindividual relations, are affected by the extent to which individuals recognize the other as part of their collective. The split of the Colombian population between victims and perpetrators prevents individuals from developing shared affective reactions, which are key in recognizing others’ rights.

### The Effects of Authority—Power Contingencies

The participation of the state in the protection of human rights is supervised through international and national systems. However, the roles of the authority figures vary greatly according to whether they operate in formal or informal institutions. Consider, for example, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) visit to Colombia to assess the extent to which the government was guaranteeing citizens’ right to protest during the 2021 national strike. The IACHR monitors whether the state guarantees access to human rights for all its citizens, especially during social upheavals. The IACHR report indicated the violation of multiple rights and gave some recommendations for Duque’s

<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*.

<sup>5</sup> In Spanish, *Estado Mayor Central*. This is a group of dissidents of the FARC-EP who did not sign the 2016 Peace Agreement.

(president, 2018–2022) government to safeguard citizen's rights. The official response to the government's report, through President Duque and Foreign Minister Ramírez, was complete rejection. For Duque, "No one can recommend a country to be tolerant with acts of criminality" referring to the road blockades organized by citizens and that the IACHR urged the government to allow as a legitimate form of protesting (p. 1). Yet, in Duque's government, strikes were illegal because they supposedly affected the rights of those who were not protesting (Duque, 2021).

In contrast, at the level of informal institutions, several programs have been implemented as a result of the 2016 peace agreement. Transitional justice programs, invented in the 1980s, represent a case in point. Transitional justice is a term used to describe legal procedures enabling transitions from violent conflicts to peaceful states (Caicedo-Moreno et al., 2021). The Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition monitors the fulfillment of victims' rights (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz de Colombia, 2018).<sup>6</sup> An important aspect directly tied to victims' rights is achieving structural transformation of the Colombian countryside, which has been promoted from within the communities with Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDET by its Spanish initials).<sup>7</sup>

PDET is a governmental strategy for land transformation through cultural practices (informal institutions). PDETs represent the national territories with the highest incidence of violence, poverty, absence of the state (i.e. health, security, and justice governmental institutions have been taken over by illegal armed actors), and illegal crops. These territories are at the center of confrontations between the state and insurgent groups in Colombia, and represent one third of the entire country. They are also home to more than 6 million Colombians (Encuentro Nacional de Comunidades, 2022). PDETs are mechanisms by which the state (1) establishes authority and (2) obtains compliance on the part of citizens to adhere to the stipulated programs for victims. These programs deploy interventions aimed at helping citizens identify the most pressing problems they want to solve with the participation of state institutions. It has been in the context of governmental programs such as PDET that citizens, especially those involved in community leadership, have learned to defend their rights as victims.

In sum, it is more likely that authority can be established by actively participating in the social context than through

impersonal institutions such as passing laws (Rangel-Bernal, 2008). In turn, authority through coercion by the government can result in the neglect of rights of some parts of the population.

### The Effects of Civil Resistance—Sanction Contingencies

Citizens face the necessity of incorporating peacebuilding in their social life. Peacebuilding is a key structural feature to end violence in formal and informal institutions. At the formal institutional level, peacebuilding requires promotion as a collective practice of communities. For example, citizens in some parts of the Colombian territory have organized into semi-autonomous communities, collectively refusing to participate in the conflict between state and insurgent groups. Civilians living in "peace communities" have been successful in negotiating peace agreements with each of the actors involved in the conflict, whereas humanitarian organizations have not been able to do so (Kaplan, 2013).

Justice can be achieved within self-contained social systems such as peace communities in part because these groups not only establish dialogues with the actors in the conflict, but they also participate in economic development of the territory (Kaplan, 2013). This is because injustice is an issue that emerges from economic inequality rooted in exchange relations (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016). And this is why wealth redistribution of the dominant classes can be theoretically justified as a solution to end social injustice across nations (Piketty, 2019), although macrosocial change is not within the scope of sociopsychology.

From the standpoint of informal institutions, individuals' perceived acts of violence have different outcomes according to the actors participating in the violent act. In this context, willingness to forgive various war crimes for nondirect victims differs depending on the type of violent act; and most important, the kind of actor (military vs. paramilitary versus guerrilla; López-López et al., 2012). That is, although peace is evidently a necessary structural factor to change interindividual relations of power in Colombia, it has been difficult to justify as various forms of violence have affected all citizens and in different degrees.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, from a sociopsychological perspective, human rights must be addressed in terms of interindividual relations and institutional practices constituting specific social formations. One of the main characteristics of social formations underscored in this text is the asymmetrical relations at the level of exchange, which affects inequality experienced by individuals at other levels of the social formation.

<sup>6</sup> Victims are considered to be those persons who individually or collectively have suffered harm as a result of events occurring on or after January 1, 1985 as a consequence of breaches of International Humanitarian Law or violations of international human rights occurring as a result of the internal armed conflict. It is estimated that the total number of victims are 9,514,863 (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> In Spanish, Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial.



Pulido-Avalos and Ribes-Iñesta (2023) have pointed out that the interlaced operation of interindividual relations may be empirically tested by studying the effects of sharing resources and within-group cooperation on individuals' conception about rights and obligations.

In the Colombian cultural context, it was suggested that sanctioning the perpetrators of violations of human rights is a contested activity because the justification of *whose* rights are to be protected can change from the standpoint of formal versus informal institutions. The mitigation of violence by peace communities is achieved in zones where the actors are actively fighting for control over the territory (Kaplan, 2013), which underscores that peace, as a fundamentally informal practice, cannot be achieved through coercive domination. Moreover, sanction contingencies in Colombia operate more effectively under informal institutions such as dialogue between citizens of peace communities and armed groups, rather than under formal practices such as humanitarian groups advocating for the safety of citizens living in zones of active war.

Human rights are not simply interindividual relations though. They are interlaced exchange, power, and sanction contingencies operating under institutions. Hence, the institutional practices related to the application of human rights were also examined. In this regard, it is suggested that human rights represent the status of humanity from a formal institutional level, and in concert with certain cultural identities from an informal institutional level. Humanity, as a very recent ideology in the history of thought (Moyn, 2010), may be said to refer to the participation (or the possibility to participate) in interindividual relations for which obligations are stipulated, and rights are granted. This does not mean that there are no rights for nonhuman animals and other living beings for which to advocate. For example, Nussbaum (2023) pointed out that for reasons other than those presented here, justice for animals is an independent matter and not an extension of how humans live under economic and political systems. In understanding the institutional nature of the subject matter we may avoid confounding ecological and social justice issues, for instance. Justice and equity issues must be localized within specific social formations; that is, it is central to understand the sociohistorical circumstances of human rights issues. From a similar view, Mattaini and Roose (2021) proposed that social, economic, environmental, and ecological injustices (defined in terms of different sorts of inequality) must all be addressed in order to advance global climate justice.

Mattaini (2023) provided several recommendations for advancing knowledge that can help to mitigate human suffering at a global scale. To do so, Mattaini points out that it is necessary to cultivate knowledge about the relevant facts (in our case, of human rights) at the local and global level, through the theory and application of nonviolent action (e.g.,

Ardila-Sánchez et al., 2020a, 2020b; Mattaini, 2013), and an analytic focus on the dynamics of cultural systems. In addition, from the authors' perspective, behavior scientists who develop an appreciation for nonoganocentric models of behavior and cultural systems are in a better analytic position to identify how behavior represents structural changes in the system. Sociopsychology (Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2016) offers such an alternative model of strategic cultural systems analysis that permits expanding our attention to institutional practices and interindividual contingencies affecting the behavior of individuals.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** N/a.

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