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Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill in Latin American Culture

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Most Latin American countries have no death penalty, but there is a general acceptance of individuals' or communities' right to kill under certain circumstances. This right is not stipulated in any law but it is present in the culture of these societies. To investigate it, a random sample study was carried out in seven Latin American cities. The general results reveal support for the right to kill to defend one's family, but the right to kill to defend one's property was lower. Killing someone who has raped a daughter was positive for all the Latin American cities, although killing an individual who attacks the community receives moderate support. The results for "social purge" killings are lower than the previous. The results are analyzed and presented by cities and social variables and show that there is a cultural pattern in which social norms are not always congruent with law.

Keywords: violence; homicides; lynching; culture; Latin America

Most Latin American countries have no death penalty, but there is a general acceptance of individuals' or communities' right to kill under certain circumstances. This right is not stipulated in any law—not completely at any rate—but regardless of what the written law says, it is present in the culture of these societies, in what people consider to be right or wrong, and the behavior they would approve of or at least tolerate.

A particular legal tradition combined with a predominantly Catholic culture led to the early abolition of capital punishment in the laws of almost all Latin American countries. Guatemala is a recent exception, where the death penalty is applicable to some crimes but has proven very difficult to apply and has been very controversial. On one side of the debate are the victims' families and right-wing political groups that demand its use, and on the other are human rights organizations that totally oppose it on the grounds that in practice it would be applied to the poor and weak and that it is an extremely dangerous sanction in societies where justice systems are particularly subject to the influence of extralegal factors.

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Despite the controversy, capital punishment is becoming more widely accepted by urban populations that are very concerned about crime and demand an effective system of punishment as well as some kind of social vengeance or retribution in response to widespread violence and the resulting culture of fear (Soarez, Sé, Rodriguez, & Carneiro, 1996). For example, the Activa Project, a multicenter study sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization (Cruz, 1999; Fournier, de los Ríos, Orpinas, & Piquet-Carneiro, 1999; Orpinas, 1999; Pan American Health Organization, 1998) found support for the death penalty which, although varying from city to city, was quite significant in light of the region's cultural tradition. Thus, 23% of the respondents in Santiago, Chile, said that the death penalty is justified in certain cases, as did 30% of those in San Salvador (El Salvador), 46% of those in Cali (Colombia), and 65% of those in Caracas (Venezuela).

The death penalty has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from other types of killing that may be recognized as legitimate by society. It is provided for by law and represents the outcome of a judicial procedure under which the sentence is carried out by persons unrelated to the crime, generally faceless executioners who act in the name of the community or society that—as an abstract entity—takes revenge and metes out punishment. But there are other legal ways to "kill" as well, the most common being killing in self-defense. The applicable legislation may vary from country to country, but the underlying idea is the same: When in danger of losing one's own life as a victim of aggression, one is justified in killing one's aggressor. Cultural norms, but not the law, may also justify the right to kill in defense of one's family or property.

Defense of family as a justification for the right to kill is not necessarily related to the danger of death; it may be associated with personal safety or even general morality. Risks such as those of one's wife or daughter being raped may be considered by some people a valid justification for killing, although not by others because those risks do not imply an equivalent physical danger: Rape is not the same as death. Cultural values can, however, make rape and murder equivalent categories of wrong. Similarly, some people also believe that it is legitimate to kill a person in defense of one's goods and wealth. For example, Nisbett and Cohen (1996) argued that this tends to occur more in pastoral societies, where the mobility of livestock makes it easier for people to be robbed of their property and rapidly lose their wealth—much more easily than in societies where wealth is based on crops. This feeling of the fragility or volatility of wealth gives rise to a unique culture of violence that would justify the idea of killing to defend property.

There are other forms of defense that are also manifestations of collective justice. When a community lynches a person who has been committing crimes, it is defending itself against systematic aggression and is taking justice into its own hands in a collective expression of rage, self-defense, and justice (Senechal de la Roche, 1998). Lynching is an informal death penalty, but without due process or the intervention of a third party. The execution is a form of collective action in which the executioners'

anonymity is not that of the faceless mask but that of the absence of individual responsibility (Benavides & Ferreira, 1983). In the historic tradition turned into literature by Lope de Vega (1619/1990), a community was asked, *Who killed the Comendador* [the Commander]*?* Its reply was: *Fuente Ovejuna,* [the name of the town] *Sir!*. It was simultaneously all and none of the inhabitants of Fuente Ovejuna who murdered the Comendador of Calatrava, as the investigating judge reported to the King of Spain:

Y pues tan mal se acomoda	And so difficult is it
el poderlo averiguar	to determine the truth,
o lo has de perdonar,	that you must pardon them
o matar la villa toda.	or kill the entire village.

In the tradition of Lope de Vega's work, the right to lynch is justified by the excesses committed by the Comendador, who personifies the tyrant. In other words, it is an act of self-defense by the community. On that basis, the king pardons the villagers, and the grandmaster dares to express the following opinion: "If it were not to you that they looked, My Lord, without doubt you would teach them to kill commanders" (*Si a vos, señor, no mirara, sin duda les enseñara, a matar comendadores*).

This behavior differs from another kind of response that also occurs as a reaction to abuses, but in which the community as a whole does not kill the offending person but entrusts that task to a particular group—social avengers who do what others simply wish for. This is not a case of immediate defense in which people react to a threat but rather a delayed response. It therefore has a component of vengeance, rather than simple self-defense. Actions of this kind have been found in Latin America (Santos, 1992) and the United States (Chevigny, 1995), with a variety of political and social implications. It has been used to kill not only known criminals who are perceived to be capable of evading the criminal justice system but also to kill people on the margins of society (Del Olmo, 1990): beggars; refuse collectors; vagrants; and people who, although not professional criminals, are maladapted to society and may commit many petty thefts (Delgado, 1988). These products of urban poverty are objects of contempt whose mere presence is considered offensive. In Latin America, they are not viewed as delightful picturesque characters, as are the French "*clochards*" depicted on post cards; they are seen as a daily threat. The same is true of street children, who are not intentionally criminal and do not so much break the law as simply ignore it. This makes them "dangerous," because they may steal and not even take the trouble to conceal their actions. This type of killing has also been used to eliminate other kinds of marginal individuals, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, or even "communists." Although it is obviously nothing more than murder, some people consider it legitimate, and that belief supports the groups who do the killing (Neto & Minayo, 1994). Some of these cases have a clear-cut political or commercial motive, such as the murdering of beggars in Colombia's Caribbean coastal region in order to sell their bodies to a medical school in Barranquilla. But in general, actions of this kind have no other purpose than to take abstract social

revenge, characterized by Camacho and Guzmán (1987) as "moralistic violence," or they are an attempt to eliminate a social problem by making those who create it physically disappear.

For example, in Colombia, a group that called itself "Toxicol 90" published the following statement of intent:

> In response to the prevailing wave of insecurity that has recently broken out in the city of Barrancabermeja, our members have assumed, with a firm will, the radical position of eliminating and eradicating, by any means, all kinds of people incapable of living in society, such as muggers, sneak-thieves, marijuana and crack users, etc. (Mateus Guerrero, 1995, p. 111)

In the same statement, the group defined its social purpose as that of performing "human sanitation work." The name it chose for itself reflects that approach: Toxicol 90 is the brand name for a household rat and pest killer. But there is still another type of vengeance that is not abstract but personal and may be carried out by a victim's relative. For example, someone whose son has been murdered often has social approval for killing the murderer. All laws seek to deter this kind of action and transfer the responsibility for punishing crimes to the state, but some cultures may be permissive in this respect, seeking to understand the avenger's motives. One common instance in some cultures—especially in predominantly rural ones—is the defense of family-related honor against the loss or infidelity of a wife or the rape of a daughter (Alvito de Souza, 1996). There is clearly no equivalence between the harm caused by any of these acts and the death of the aggressor; but, under prevailing cultural values, many of these crimes can only be "paid for" with blood because harm is always subjective, and the equivalences established by the law are not always the same as those established by the culture of reciprocity (Spierenburg, 1998).

The right to kill, then, has a range of expressions in Latin American culture, but the issue of support for such actions among the public is of special importance. Pinheiro (1997) commented that these murders are not only supported by the elites but also by the poor, who are the principal victims of violence. Paixao and Beato (1997) speculated that these murders are a response to demands from low-income groups. Zaffaroni (1993) also concluded that the police can carry out these murders provided they are viewed as legitimate by the elites and the lower classes. But is it really true that the public supports the right to kill? Is the support for actions of this kind equally strong in the different cities participating in the study or among the different social strata of those cities? Do men and women equally support the right to kill? Does support vary by religious group? Is that support equally distributed among people with and without formal education? Do heavy drinkers differ from the rest in their support for the right to kill? Do frequent viewers of violent television programs support it more than the rest of the public?

Table 1
Rates of Violence in the Cities Selected for This Study (circa 1996)

Level of Violence	Rates per 100,000 Inhabitants	City	Countries
Very low violence	Fewer than 5 homicides	Madrid	Spain
Low violence	From 5 to 20 homicides	Santiago, San José	Chile, Costa Rica,
Middle violence	From 20 to 50 homicides	Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Caracas	Brazil, Venezuela
Very high violence	More than 50 homicides	Cali, San Salvador	Colombia, El Salvador

The purpose of this article is to explore the level of support for the right to kill among the residents of a sample of Latin American cities and to see how far such support varies across cities and among different social categories. This will help us understand the attitudinal foundation for a type of violent behavior that is itself a response to violence and that, ironically, probably increases rather than reduces its overall levels.

Method

The study was carried out in 1996-1997 in seven cities from six Latin American countries, which were chosen so as to include jurisdictions with varied homicide rates (see Table 1). Madrid, Spain, was also included in the study for comparative purposes. Random samples of approximately 1,200 respondents between 18 and 70 years of age were drawn, giving 10,821 valid interviews in total, with little variation from city to city. There were 1,384 respondents in Salvador-Bahía (Brazil), 1,114 in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), 1,212 in Santiago (Chile), 2,228 in Cali (Colombia), 1,131 in San José (Costa Rica), 1,290 in San Salvador (El Salvador), 1,297 in Caracas (Venezuela), and 1,105 in Madrid (Spain). The rates of nonresponse varied between 6% and 35%. Respondents were selected by their residences through a stratified and systematic sampling system with no substitution, yielding a confidence level of 95%.

The data were collected at households by means of a face-to-face questionnaire (administered by trained interviewers) that was drawn up in Spanish and Portuguese by the participating researchers and adapted to local forms of speech where necessary. The questionnaire had various sections covering victimization by interpersonal violence and domestic violence, perceptions of the efficacy of the police and other criminal justice institutions, and norms and attitudes toward violence. The questions on attitudes toward violence were the following: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (a) A person has the right to kill to defend his or her family, and (b) a person has the right to kill to defend his or her property. (Responses were coded on a Likert-type scale with five choices: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neither agree nor*

disagree, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*.) Would you approve if (c) a person killed someone who had raped his daughter; (d) there was a person who keeps a community in a state of uproar/anguish and someone killed him; (e) a group of people began to carry out a social purge, that is, kill undesirable individuals? (Possible responses were *approve*, *disapprove but understand*, or *neither approve nor understand*.)

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis involved cross-tabulating two variables and estimating odds (as a quotient of probabilities and in particular the probability of an Event A in relation to the probability of a complementary Event A^c) and odds ratios (as a quotient of odds for two different conditions in relation to a given categorical variable) for different categories of the variables of interest as the corresponding quotient of relative frequencies (Christensen, 1990). These odds were calculated for all polar categories (agreement vs. disagreement;[1] would understand vs. would not approve) regarding the right to kill, by sex, age, education, ethnic identity, occupational status, work, religion, alcohol consumption, and liking for violent TV programs, for each city included in the study.

We also calculated 95%-level confidence intervals on the basis of the normal level for certain odds ratios (Christensen, 1990) in order to compare different conditions defined by social variables because any confidence interval that does not contain the value 1 indicates that we can reject the null hypothesis at a 5% significance level of equal odds for the two conditions being compared.[2]

Results

The general results reveal a substantial degree of support for the right to kill to defend one's family (see Table 2). In all cities, the percentages of approval are close to, or above, half the respondents. Madrid (47%) and Cali (47%) are the cities where this idea was least accepted; Caracas (70%) was the one in which it was most widely accepted. The rest of the participating cities (Rio de Janeiro, San José, Santiago, San Salvador, and Salvador-Bahía) were close together, in the 60% range.

These results can also be viewed from a different perspective, that of the group of people in each city who disagreed with the right to kill. When we examine the balance between those who supported and those who disagreed with the right to kill in defense of the family, the odds ratios reveal three distinct groups of cities (see Table 2). In the first group, comprising Cali (1.00) and Madrid (1.02), disagreement was equal to or higher than support. In the second group, support substantially exceeded disagreement, with ratios of 0.63 to 0.54 (for Salvador-Bahía, Rio de Janeiro, San Salvador, Santiago, and San José, in ascending order). The last group includes only one city, Caracas, where just 0.37 respondents rejected the idea for each one who

Table 2
Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill to Defend's One's Family

	Percentage of Approval[a]	Percentage of Rejection[b]	Quotients of Odds for Rejection vs. Approval
Bahía	59.5	37.9	0.6370
Cali	47.3	47.5	1.0042
Caracas	70.2	26.2	0.3732
Madrid	47.2	48.4	1.0254
Rio de Janeiro	60.4	34.7	0.5745
San José	60.2	32.6	0.5415
San Salvador	59.5	33.7	0.5664
Santiago	59.9	33.1	0.5526

a. *Strongly agrees* or *agrees* on a Likert-type scale.
b. *Strongly disagrees* or *disagrees* on a Likert-type scale.

Table 3
Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill to Defend One's Property

	Percentage of Approval[a]	Percentage of Rejection[b]	Quotients of Odds for Rejection vs. Approval
Bahía	38.1	58.1	1.5249
Cali	34.6	59.2	1.7110
Caracas	60.5	35.9	0.5934
Madrid	16.8	79.3	4.7024
Rio de Janeiro	44.6	49.2	1.1031
San José	43.1	48.8	1.1323
San Salvador	42.3	51.9	1.2270
Santiago	49.4	44.9	0.9089

a. *Strongly agrees* or *agrees* on a Likert-type scale.
b. *Strongly disagrees* or *disagrees* on Likert-type scale.

approved it. Expressed the other way round, 2.7 respondents supported the right to kill for every one who rejected it.

The level of support for the right to kill to defend one's property was lower than for the right to kill to defend one's family (see Table 3). Here, also, there were much wider differences among cities: Whereas the range between the highest and lowest percentage was 23 points for the right to kill in defense of family, the range for the right to kill in defense of property was 43 points. The city in which the latter idea garnered the least support was Madrid (17%), followed by Cali where the percentage doubled (35%). It was most widely supported in Caracas (60%), whereas support in the other cities ranged from 38% in Bahía to 49% in Santiago.

The results of the odds ratios for the right to kill in defense of property are radically different from those for the right to kill in defense of the family. In all cities except Caracas and Santiago, a majority rejected this idea. The highest level of rejection was found in Madrid, where 4.7 respondents disagreed with this idea for every one who supported it. Cali (1.7) and Salvador-Bahía (1.52) had intermediate levels of rejection, whereas San Salvador (1.22), San José (1.13), and Rio de Janeiro (1.19) had low levels. In Santiago, there were 0.9 disagreements for every agreement, and in Caracas 0.59 respondents disagreed for every one who accepted the idea. Expressed the other way round, in Caracas 1.69 respondents supported this right for every respondent who rejected it.

There is still another kind of comparison that can be made. The results discussed above show that many people put a higher value on defense of family than on defense of property. If people believe it is equally acceptable to kill to defend one's family or one's property, we can conclude that both family and property have a similar subjective value. If not, the conclusion would be that higher value is attributed to family (a higher value attributed to property is unlikely to occur). We call this comparison between the percentage of approval of the right to kill to defend one's family and the percentage of approval of the right to kill to defend one's property the Differential Value of Family (DVF). The results in this respect also reveal three distinct groups of cities. The first, in which family has a higher value than property, is composed only of Madrid, where 30% more respondents would kill for their families than for their property. The intermediate group is composed of Salvador-Bahía (20% more), San José and San Salvador (17% more), and Rio de Janeiro (16% more). The group in which family has the least differential value is that of Cali (13% more), Santiago (11% more), and Caracas (10% more). Although we can understand the differences based on the value attributed to human life in comparison to material goods, it is not easy to explain the differences between the cities, and more research is needed in this area.

Turning to the matter of killing a daughter's rapist, the results differed widely between the Latin American cities and Madrid (see Table 4). The city where this proposition garnered most support was Salvador-Bahía, where 58% of respondents approved of someone killing a man who had raped his daughter, followed by Santiago, with 54% support. Caracas followed, with 49%, and then Rio de Janeiro with 41%. San Salvador, Cali, and San José were in an intermediate range with values of 39%, 36%, and 31%, respectively. Support was least evident in Madrid, where only 19% approved.

Taking the polar responses to this question (would approve, would not approve or understand) and discarding those who would understand but not approve, we can construct a ratio of approval to disapproval. The balance was positive for all the Latin American cities, meaning that more respondents supported killing a daughter's rapist than rejected it. But that was not the case in Madrid, where rejections exceeded approvals. The Latin American cities in which approval was highest were Caracas, with odds of 0.14 (7.14 respondents approved for every one who disapproved);

Table 4
Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill a Daughter's Rapist

	Percentage of Approval	Percentage of Rejection	Quotients of Odds for Rejection vs. Approval
Bahía	57.6	20.6	0.3576
Cali	36.4	20.8	0.5714
Caracas	48.4	7.1	0.1467
Madrid	19.3	31.5	1.6321
Rio de Janeiro	41.7	21.4	0.5132
San José	30.8	21.2	0.6883
San Salvador	38.9	20.5	0.5270
Santiago	53.8	12.2	0.2268

Santiago, where the odds were 0.22 (4.55 approvals for each disapproval); and Salvador-Bahía, with 0.35 odds (2.86 respondents approved for each one who did not). Rio de Janeiro (0.51), San Salvador (0.52), Cali (0.57), and San José (0.68) comprised an intermediate group. On the other hand, disapproval prevailed in Madrid, with 1.63 respondents saying no for each one who said yes.

With regard to killing an individual who attacks the community, the results reveal moderate support: Between one fourth and one third of the respondents approve (see Table 5). The highest level of support was in Salvador-Bahía (35%), followed by Caracas (33%) and Rio de Janeiro (26%). San Salvador (22%) and Santiago (20%) were at a lower level, and the Latin American city in which this action was least widely approved was San José (15%). Even so, the latter figure more than doubled the one recorded in Madrid, where a mere 7% of the respondents approved. As with previous analyses, the results are modified when the respondents who rejected the action are taken into account. When the odds comparing those who approved and those who disapproved are calculated, Caracas again appears in first place with 0.37, whereas the corresponding figure for Salvador-Bahía is 0.89. Those were the only two cities in which support for killing aggressors against the community prevailed; in all the others, this position was rejected. The odds were 1.25 for Rio de Janeiro, 1.40 for San Salvador, 1.83 for Santiago, and 2.89 for San José. In Madrid, the odds favoring rejection came to 9.34.

Finally, the results for "social purge" killings (groups that set out to kill individuals they consider undesirable) are different from, and lower than, those for the previous types of killing (see Table 6). Overall, the percentage of approval tended to be about half of that expressed when it is the community itself that takes the initiative. Madrid was the exception; the percentages of approval were nearly equal (5% and 7%), but the percentages of rejection diverged (58% vs. 76%). The highest level of approval was found in Caracas (20%), which displaced Salvador-Bahía from its usual first place in terms of support for violent action. Salvador-Bahía and San Salvador both recorded 16% approval, followed by Cali with 13%, and Rio de Janeiro with

Table 5
Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill Against a Person
Who Terrorizes a Community (Lynching)

	Percentage of Approval	Percentage of Rejection	Quotients of Odds for Rejection vs. Approval
Bahía	34.9	31.1	0.8911
Cali	NA	NA	NA
Caracas	32.6	12.2	0.3742
Madrid	6.9	64.5	9.3478
Rio de Janeiro	25.9	32.5	1.2548
San José	14.4	41.7	2.8958
San Salvador	21.8	30.6	1.4037
Santiago	19.7	36.2	1.8376

Note: NA = not available.

Table 6
Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill For "Social Purging"

	Percentage of Approval	Percentage of Rejection	Quotients of Odds for Rejection vs. Approval
Bahía	15.9	57.1	3.6603
Cali	13.2	63.6	4.8182
Caracas	20.5	26.4	1.2878
Madrid	5.1	80.7	15.8235
Rio de Janeiro	10.6	61.4	5.7925
San José	8.2	64.0	7.8049
San Salvador	15.6	37.8	2.4231
Santiago	5.8	63.1	10.8793

11%. The lowest levels of approval were recorded in San José (8%), Santiago (6%), and Madrid (5%). In terms of the odds, this was the only question for which rejection exceeded approval in all the participating cities. There were three distinct groups of cities, characterized by a high level of rejection (Madrid, 15.82), an intermediate level of rejection (Santiago, 10.87; San José, 7.80), and a low level of rejection (Rio de Janeiro, 5.79; Cali, 4.81; Salvador-Bahía, 3.66; San Salvador, 2.42; Caracas, 1.28).

Social Variables

The results of the analysis of odds ratios reveal certain differential features for the social variables and cities considered. Table 7 shows a summary of the variables for each question and city found to be significant at the 95% interval of confidence.

Table 7
Significant Odds Ratios on Attitudes Toward the Right to Kill by City[a]

	To Defend Family	To Defend Property	Kill a Daughter's Rapist	Kill a Person Who Threatens the Community	For "Social Purge"
Bahía, Brazil	Men Working Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	Men Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	With higher education Believe in God but do not go to church Like violent TV	With higher education Believe in God but does not go to church Like violent TV	Men Believe in God but do not go to church +5 drinks Like violent TV
Cali, Colombia	Men With higher education Salaried worker Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	Men Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	Like violent TV		50-70 years With higher education White Like violent TV
Caracas, Venezuela	Men	Men +5 drinks			
Madrid, Spain	Men Like violent TV	Men 50-70 years Incomplete primary education Like violent TV		50-70 years	Like violent TV
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Men With higher education Working Catholic	Men 50-70 years Catholic Like violent TV	18-29 years With higher education Catholic	50-70 years With higher education Working Catholic	
San José, Costa Rica	Men 50-59 years Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	Men 50-70 years Catholic Like violent TV	Women With higher education Mixed race	With higher education	
San Salvador, El Salvador	Men With higher education Catholic +5 drinks Like violent TV	Men Catholic Catholic / +5 drinks Like violent TV Men	With higher education	With higher education White	With higher education Catholic
Santiago, Chile	Men Working Catholic Like violent TV	50-70 years Working Protestant	With higher education	With higher education White	Men 50-70 years Incomplete primary education Believe in God but do not go to church Like violent TV

a. Only reports significant comparisons established using 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios.

Sex. When the distribution of approval/disapproval of the five types of murder is compared, we find that men supported the right to kill in defense of family and property much more than women in all cities. Men also differed significantly from women in their support for "social purge" killings in Salvador-Bahía and Santiago. The only case in which women exceeded men in support was for fathers who kill their daughters' rapists (in San José).

Age. When comparing respondents below 29 years of age with those over 50, we found a balance in the distribution of approval for the right to kill, favorable among those younger than 29 in some cases and among those older than 50 in others. For the right to kill in defense of property and to kill a person who is threatening the community, there was significantly more support among those older than 50 in Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago. Regarding the right to kill those who threaten the community, there was a significant difference among those younger than 29 in Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago. In San José, the 50- to 59-year-old group favored killing in defense of family, and the 50- to 70-year-old group favored it in defense of property. In Cali, there was a significant difference only for 18- to 29-year-olds favoring "social purge" killings. In Rio de Janeiro, there was a significant difference of support for killing a daughter's rapist among the 18- to 29-year-old respondents.

Education. Overall, the comparison between the least educated and most educated respondents shows that the latter group is more in favor of the right to kill in all cities. Regarding the killing of a daughter's rapist, respondents with higher education showed greater approval in Salvador-Bahía, Rio de Janeiro, San José, San Salvador, and Santiago. Similar results were found regarding the right to kill an individual who threatens the community in the first three of those cities. Respondents with higher education were significantly more likely than those with the least education to support killing in defense of the family in Cali, Rio de Janeiro, and San Salvador. The results were divided with regard to "social purge" killings: In Cali and San Salvador, the university-educated respondents supported it, whereas support was highest among illiterates and respondents with incomplete primary education in Santiago. The only significant support for killing in defense of property was expressed by those with incomplete primary education in Madrid.

Ethnicity. Comparing mixed-race respondents with White respondents, we found four cases of significant divergence. In two of them, Whites exceeded mixed-race respondents in their approval of murder (in San José for killing a daughter's rapist and in Cali for "social purge" killings), whereas mixed-race respondents were more in favor of killing an individual who threatens the community in San Salvador and Santiago.

Employment. A comparison between respondents who were working and those who were unemployed revealed five cases of significant differences of odds. Working respondents were significantly more likely to approve killing in defense of the family in Salvador-Bahía, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago and were also more likely to defend the killing of a daughter's rapist in Santiago and the killing of individuals who threaten the community in Rio de Janeiro.

Labor status. There was only one case of a significant difference between employers and salaried workers: in Cali. There were no significant differences of odds between those two groups in any other city; both employers and workers favored the right to kill in roughly equal proportions.

Religion. We made two kinds of comparisons involving religious behavior: one between Catholics and Protestants, and another between practicing Catholics and respondents who believe in God but do not go to church. In the first case, there were significant differences in 14 cases; in 13 of them, Catholics approved of the right to kill more than Protestants. Significant odds ratios were found in relation to the right to kill in defense of family and property in Salvador-Bahía, Cali, Rio de Janeiro, San José, San Salvador, and Santiago. But in Santiago, the direction is reversed, and Protestants showed significantly more approval than Catholics. From another perspective, the greatest difference between Catholics and Protestants was found in Rio de Janeiro, reaching significance in four of the five comparisons involved. The comparison between practicing Catholics and those who believe in God but do not go to church revealed that the latter are more supportive of the right to kill in three of the four significant cases. And Salvador-Bahía was the site of two such cases, involving (a) the killing of individuals who threaten the community and (b) "social purge" killings. Significance was also found for the latter variable in Santiago. The only city where practicing Catholics dominated was San Salvador, in relation to killing to defend property.

Alcohol consumption. When we compared those who never drink and those who drink to excess (consistently downing more than five drinks), we found that the latter were significantly more in favor of the right to kill in nine cases. Eight of these involve killing in defense of family and property, in Salvador-Bahía, Cali, San Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and Caracas. There was also a significant difference in Bahía regarding "social purge" killing and killing individuals who threaten the community.

Violent television. There were 21 cases of significant odds in favor of those who like to watch violent television programs over those who do not, regarding support for the right to kill. Those differences occurred for all variables in Bahía and Cali. There was also a major predominance in the odds ratio toward killing in defense of

family (except in Rio de Janeiro), killing in defense of property (except in Santiago), and "social purge" killing (except in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, San José, and San Salvador).

Results for Cities

The results for each city show that, for all the variables involved in the calculation of odds, the highest levels of approval for the right to kill were recorded in Caracas and the lowest in Madrid; the rest of the cities occupied intermediate positions, without a well-defined pattern. The distance between the odds in Madrid and Caracas (as can be seen in Tables 2 through 6) varied among the different types of scenario. It was greatest for "social purge" killings, followed by the killing of individuals who threaten the community; it was smallest (i.e., with the greatest similarity among all the cities) for killing in defense of the family, followed by killing a daughter's rapist.

Specifically, the results for each of the eight cities studies are as follows (see Table 7):

Salvador-Bahía. Here there were two distinct patterns of support: for the "killing to defend family and property" variables, men, Catholics, and heavy drinkers were most supportive, whereas for the other three scenarios respondents with higher education and those who believe in God but do not go to church were the strongest supporters. In addition, taste for violent television was associated with significantly higher levels of support in all scenarios.

Cali. Here the chief supporters of killing in defense of family were men and Catholics, but also respondents with higher education, those who like violent television shows, and heavy drinkers. The pattern of support for "social purge" killings was based more on social class; respondents who had higher education and Whites were most supportive of this kind of violence.

Caracas. The chief difference was higher support for killing in defense of family and property among men. To this must be added the taste for violent television shows in relation to those two types of killing and labor status and heavy drinking for each one separately.

Rio de Janeiro. The pattern here is highly class-dependent. Men, Catholics, respondents with higher education, in one case respondents of 50 years of age or older, and in others those 29 years of age or less, were the most supportive of the right to kill.

San José. Here the pattern is clear for the "killing in defense of family and property" variables: Men, Catholics older than 50, and respondents who like violent

television shows were most supportive. But that is not the case for the other variables: San José differs from other cities regarding killing a daughter's rapist because women, respondents with higher education, and Whites were the most supportive of this kind of violence.

San Salvador. The pattern is quite well defined for killing in defense of family and property, in the sense that nothing out of the ordinary was reported: Catholics, respondents with higher education, those who like violent television shows, and those who down more than five drinks on a regular basis were the most supportive. However, as in the other cities, respondents with higher education were significantly more supportive of social-vengeance killings and were similar to those in Cali regarding "social purge" killings.

Santiago. The results here diverge somewhat from the pattern characterizing the other cities: Although there were Catholics among the supporters of violence, Protestants and those who did not go to church also appeared for some variables. There were respondents with higher education who supported killing a daughter's rapist, but the odds are reversed, and it is the least educated respondents who most supported "social purge" killings.

Discussion and Conclusions

These results confirm some tendencies that have been detected before (Briceño-León, Carneiro, & Cruz, 1999), but in the present case we have the advantage of clearly demonstrating them in view of the dramatic nature of the subject matter. The results show that there is a cultural pattern in which social norms are not always congruent with law. These unwritten social and practical norms are reflected in the attitudes of people and vary according to certain social characteristics and their country of residence. There is a social group that reacts to violence in a more traditional way, expressing the idea that killing is legitimate in the defense of family and property: These are the older respondents, men, and Catholics. But there is also a group that reacts to violence by supporting "social vengeance," that is, responding to violence with violence; these are the younger respondents and those with higher education. The rule of law is most firmly internalized in Madrid and least firmly internalized in Caracas where the highest levels of support for violent responses to violence are found. And surprisingly, there is very little support for violent action in Cali, perhaps because of that city's painful experience with violence and a noteworthy violence prevention program, Programa DESEPAZ (1995), implemented by local authorities during the years prior to the present study (Concha Eastman, Espitia, Espinoza, & Guerrero, 2002).

From the standpoint of social characteristics, the study confirms that violence is a male prerogative. Men are those who most support violent responses to violence.

The only exception to that rule was found in San José, Costa Rica, where women supported the killing of a daughter's rapist by her father more than men did. This is a very sensitive issue, but it is still striking that women exceeded men in this regard. Among men, a violent response could be associated with the defense of personal honor, whereas among women it may reflect identification with the victim, making a daughter's rape seem like an aggression against the mother as well. What is striking here is that this pattern was only found in San José, which is considered to be one of the least violent cities in Latin America.

The pattern is very clear in regard to religion: Those who most support the right to kill were Catholics; Protestants were more respectful of the right to life in all cases. Protestantism in Latin America, unlike Catholicism, tends to be not only a spiritual experience and belief but also a detailed behavior orientation code that controls the everyday life of its believers. Furthermore, Protestants are a minority, and because many of them are recent converts, they tend to have a stronger faith than that which prevails among the followers of Catholicism—the dominant and inherited religion. As a result, religion has a greater power of control over Latin American Protestants than Catholics. The only exception among Protestants was in Santiago, and, significantly, it was in regard to killing in defense of property. It seems that there is a unique kind of reaction in Chile, where political confrontations among supporters of socialist reform policies and those of the former dictatorship were always focused on the issue of property, with an intensity not found in the other cities involved in the study. This fact may account for the atypical attitude of Protestants in Santiago, compared with the other cities, because the political conflicts have also involved opposing currents within the Catholic Church.

In relation to education, two clear-cut patterns emerge. One is found in Madrid, where the least educated were most supportive of the right to kill. This is a very classic pattern in behavior of this kind, and it may be that the least educated tend to support violent behavior because of a lack of civic or legal information or because of a reactionary behavior that has been attributed to the poor since Marx's time (see Marx's [2002] analysis of the French political conflict in the time of Luis Bonaparte). What is most striking, however, is that in the rest of the cities surveyed (i.e., in Latin America), it was the most educated who tended to be the strongest supporters of violent responses to violence. Hence, in Latin America, this attitude does not reflect a lack of information, but perhaps a desire for social vengeance, skepticism about the institutions, and class prejudice in the sense that more educated people may believe they would never be the object of such killings.

The significant results in regard to ethnicity are few but interesting. In Cali, the White respondents were most in favor of "social purge" killings. This could be a "racist" response based on the stereotyping and social labeling of the mixed-race or Blacks—who are at the same time poor—as dangerous and violent, because they are victims and perpetrators at the same time (Cruz, 1999; Espitia & Velasco, 1998). A different interpretation could be given for the mixed-race respondents in San

Salvador or Santiago who supported the killing of individuals who threaten the community. Here, we believe their attitude is not racist because their violence would not be aimed at other social groups but at the residents of their own poor communities, because they see themselves as threatened by people from those same communities, and agree that those individuals should be killed in order to defend themselves and solve the problem in an extrajudicial fashion.

The results showing that those who most supported violent responses are those who most watched violent television shows also confirm an association in which no causal relationship can be established but that points to a complex and dangerous linkage. We have no way of knowing whether these respondents support killing as a result of television's influence or whether they like those programs as a reflection of previously held attitudes. But there is a clear relationship that ought to be examined in greater detail and modified in some way. One cannot ignore the large number of movies that have treated individual avengers as heroes, such as *Dirty Harry* or *Cobra*, depicting characters who take it upon themselves to eliminate criminals in view of the inefficiency or complicity of the police or the complexities of the legal system. We believe the influence of these screen heroes on the collective imagination cannot be ignored, in light of this study's results.

The results also confirm the linkage between heavy drinking and attitudes favorable to violence. In behavioral terms, alcohol can be viewed as a facilitator or precipitator of violent action, in association with favorable attitudes (Reiss & Roth, 1993). This issue deserves more detailed study to determine the causes of recurrent alcohol consumption and thereby develop a better explanation of why heavy drinkers tend to support violent responses to violence.

The results by city reveal two distinct patterns or social types (Weber, 1944); the first is related to the idea of killing in personal defense, the second to killing as reciprocity. There is a first type of person who supports the idea of killing to "defend" property or family: They are men, Catholics, older than 50, who drink frequently, and like violent television programs. In this respect, we believe the idea of "defense" acts as a rationale for a particular type of attitude and may represent the most traditional attitude present in Latin America. The second social type is less clear because the answers are not homogeneous and vary a great deal from city to city. This second social type prevails among younger respondents and those with higher education, and in this case, we believe support for the right to kill occurs most often as a form of reciprocity that uses social vengeance as a way to respond to violence suffered or feared. Reciprocity is a core mechanism of social life (Mauss, 1950), and because violence is a process of social interaction, this basic social norm can hardly be excluded (Levi-Strauss, 1964). In this difference, and in the reciprocity concept we propose, it seems to us that there may be a clue for interesting research into violent responses to violence; people feel that they have the right to behave with violence or to support extrajudicial behaviors because they are actual or vicarious victims.

Three cities merit special attention. One is Madrid, where support for the rule of law is strongest. This is also the city in which there is least victimization of the participants in the study (Martin, 1999), but it is the one in which belief in the institutions is strongest as well. That belief probably contributes to the higher level of rejection of illegal actions. Cali is in a very different situation. Despite its having been among the cities with the highest homicide rates in the Hemisphere, support for the right to kill and social vengeance is surprisingly low. How can this be explained? We believe that there are two possible interpretations: For one thing, the population has a firsthand knowledge of the cost of violence because it has lived through a great deal of it and that makes people cautious in regard to any suggestion for even more violence because they know very well what it is like. We believe the same interpretation permits an explanation of the high degree of support for extrajudicial action in Caracas, but in reverse. The support for the right to kill in Caracas is a result of widespread victimization and fear among the population; that fear is very intense, but actual experience with violence is limited; it is of recent inception and on a much smaller scale than that experienced in Colombia (and Cali in particular). That may explain why people tend to support violent responses without a second thought and without understanding the consequences those actions may bring. A second explanation of the low support for violence in Cali may be found in the intensive government action taken in recent years to prevent violence. Cali is well aware of the problem and has seen a public response designed to change perceptions and modes of response to violence; that has unquestionably had an impact that is now reflected in the study results.

However, support for the right to kill in defense, and above all for the right to kill in order to take social vengeance grounded in reciprocity, does not make any contribution to reducing violence or to respect for human rights. One may well understand and find explanations for its existence, but there is no way to justify it, either ethically or politically. Violence is a multifactorial social phenomenon, and to prevent it requires social and economic intervention at different levels of society (Briceño-León, 2005). But violence can only be adequately reduced through a strengthening of the rule of law. Only to the degree that the concept of the right to kill is purged from citizens' minds—in other words, that violence is removed from society—that it is restricted to official State action, and that society imposes a strict control on state violence so as to avoid extrajudicial actions and keep it within the limits established by the law is there a basis for expectations of a substantial reduction of the level of violence prevailing in Latin America.

The attitudes supporting the right to kill reflect a cultural norm that is present in society and persists alongside the formal rule of law. These attitudes reinforce extrajudicial action by the police and paramilitary organizations, and despite the naive view of many citizens that crime can only be controlled by "an iron fist," what such policies actually do is intensify the existing violence. Since Beccaria (1764/1973) wrote his famous book *Dei Delliti e delle Pene* (On Crime and Punishments), we

know that it is not the severity of punishments (and far less their extrajudicial application) that reduces crime but the certainty of the law's timely execution (*prontezza della pena*). And to achieve that certainty, much more is needed than a citizen's right to kill or the police officer's iron fist (which in this case is more a murdering fist). What is required is to improve the police and judicial systems, to democratize them and make them fair, and to force the citizens and the police alike to act as defenders of the law rather than as transgressors. In a memorable text, Jean Paul Sartre (1961) wrote that violence among the population was like Achilles' lance, which healed the very wound it inflicted. Historical experience has shown that that is not the case and that even well-intentioned violence can open wider the wound we all want to cure.

Notes

1. Agreement included *strongly agree* and *agree*; disagreement included *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. In the subsequent text, agreement is often termed *approval* and disagreement termed *disapproval*.

2. There is a direct linkage between the chi-square test of independence for bivariate tables and the presence of odds ratios equal to 1. Consequently, if we reject the null hypothesis of independence between two variables, there must then exist at least an odds ratio between two categories of those variables, higher or lower than 1.

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