



Cultures of Denial: Avoiding Knowledge of State Violations of Human Rights in Argentina and the United States¹

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Why and how do individuals distance themselves from information about their government's participation in torture and other human rights violations? Such citizen (non)response implicitly legitimates and thus facilitates the continuation of abusive state actions. Drawing on a model of socially organized denial, we explore how sociocultural contexts and practices mediate individuals' avoidance, justification, normalization, silencing, and outright denial of human rights abuses in two sites: Argentina during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) and the United States during the “war on terror” post September 11, 2001. The study is based on 40 in-depth interviews with members of diverse civic, religious, community, and political organizations in both countries (20 in each site). Comparing the political circumstances of a dictatorship and an electoral democracy, the analysis shows the roles of patriotic and national security ideologies and practices of silence and talk as organizers of cultures of denial.

KEY WORDS: Argentina; denial; human rights; state violence; torture; United States.

INTRODUCTION

In Argentina from 1976 to 1983, a repressive military dictatorship that claimed to be defending national security interests and Western cultural values resorted to massive illegal detention, torture, and “disappearance” of citizens to achieve its goals (CONADEP 1984; Duhalde 1999).⁴ The alleged targets of the

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⁴ See Brysk (1994) on the difficulties of offering an exact count of the number of people “disappeared” during the dictatorship. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, formed right after the military regime ended, estimated at least 8,960 disappearance cases, recognizing that this was a partial list. Human rights organizations have customarily invoked an estimated number of up to 30,000 disappeared.

repression were “subversives,” members of armed groups with leftist leanings. Yet among the people catalogued as subversives were a broad array of activists, artists, journalists, students, teachers, religious leaders, labor organizers, relatives of people already targeted, as well as members of guerrilla organizations. The dictatorship’s torture, disappearances, and arbitrary use of force against the population were paradigmatic of state terrorism. Although much of this violence occurred covertly—in hundreds of clandestine detention centers across the country—government officials captured many individuals in public view and information about these events started to circulate nationally and internationally well before the end of the military regime. At the time and afterward, many Argentines claimed they were unaware of widespread human rights violations. Implicitly, such statements appealed to ignorance as justification for why many people failed to act against atrocities.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, the U.S. government launched the “war on terror” and justified the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of that effort. In that context, state officials perpetrated actions widely considered to be violations of human rights. Documented humiliation, abuse, and torture against detainees occurred in U.S.-run prisons abroad (Danner 2004; Del Rosso 2011; Rejali 2007). The Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq became infamous for the sexualized abuse of prisoners by U.S. military personnel. Suspected “enemy combatants” have been held without due process in detention centers of dubious legitimacy such as the U.S.-run Guantánamo prison in Cuba. Extraordinary rendition programs have allowed for the capture and transfer of suspects to secret sites in different countries for harsh interrogation. Within the United States, the population has experienced increased surveillance, security alerts, ethnoracial profiling, and diminishing rights of suspect groups (particularly immigrants and individuals of real or perceived Muslim or Arab descent) (Welch 2004). Yet normal life continued for most people in the country. As in the Argentine case, a sense of normalcy coexisted with national security rhetoric invoking “unusual times” to circumvent protections against governmental abuse of power.

Over the past century, national laws and international treaties have condemned torture and other abusive treatment of detainees as unacceptable governmental practices. These kinds of dehumanizing behaviors have been prohibited, among others, by the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which has 153 parties including Argentina and the United States (UN 2012). The Geneva Conventions relative to the treatment of prisoners of war also ban torture, and have been ratified by both countries (ICRC 2010). In addition to state commitments, large segments of the public oppose such practice. Ronald Crelinsten (2003: 294) situates torture among “widely disapproved behaviours” in contemporary society, and Richard Jackson (2007: 354) notes that “the practice of torture profoundly challenges deeply-held cultural-political beliefs about US civic identity, the military and the nature of the American polity.” A 2008 World Public Opinion poll (Kull et al., 2008: 1) found that “large majorities in all 19

nations [surveyed] favor a general prohibition against torture. In all nations polled, the number saying that the government should generally be able to use torture is less than one in five.” In the United States, even though in recent years the public has moved toward greater justification of torture, a study of 32 polls over the 2001–2009 period reveals that the majority of the public (Mean = 55%) opposed the use of torture, even when questions suggested that torture of suspected terrorists could save lives (Gronke et al. 2010). In Argentina, 76% of those surveyed in a 2008 poll supported clear rules against torture including in relation to suspected terrorists (Kull et al. n.d.).

In both of the cases we examined, state officials acted or authorized actions outside the bounds of acceptable moral or legal conduct, yet many people seemed to not want to know or talk about such events. Why, while many people find illegitimate state violence reprehensible, do relatively few speak out against it? How do ordinary people experience information about their government’s perpetration of human rights violations? Does living in a democracy or a dictatorship matter for individual and collective responses to such knowledge? Common assumptions about dictatorships and democracies usually draw sharp distinctions between the two systems, and one might expect that responses to abuse by citizens living under these distinct circumstances differ, too. In open democratic societies, as compared with authoritarian regimes, state officials are more limited in the use of force and citizens have more spaces available to express grievances without fear of reprisal. Even though these differences are real and significant, here we show intriguing areas of overlap with respect to citizen (non)response to human rights violations. Focusing on two cases that exemplify a dictatorship and an electoral democracy respectively—Argentina 1976–1983 and United States 2001–2010—this article examines why and how individuals distance themselves from knowledge about their government’s participation in torture and other human rights violations.

While psychological studies provide important insight into dynamics of avoidance, denial, and inaction in the face of disturbing events that demand public intervention, a sociological lens contributes an understanding of the *socially and politically* mediated processes that shape such phenomena. Drawing upon the sociology of culture and cognition as well as on political sociology, we build on notions of socially organized denial (Zerubavel 2006) in order to explain individual distancing from atrocious events as a social process. Crelinsten (2003: 295) notes that “the practice of torture is only possible because reality is defined in such a way as to make it possible.” This “torture-sustaining reality” (Crelinsten 2003: 293) is constructed and maintained through cultural practices enacted by various social actors. While work on denial and human rights violations has tended to focus on how state discourse, policy, and practice helps legitimize, silence, or normalize atrocities, here we concentrate on *citizen accounts* in relation to such processes by drawing on in-depth interviews. We explore how individuals in both sites negotiate prevailing ideologies and engage in patterns of silence and talk that contribute to “cultures of denial” (Cohen 2001: 278). Even though there are

differences in our cases, striking parallels in our interview data, analogous government rhetoric, and similarities in certain abusive practices also emerge when setting these cases side by side.

Governments' disregard of their own stated commitments to human rights is obviously problematic, but why does it matter if ordinary people ignore torture and other illegitimate state violence by their governments? As works on bystanders note (Bar-On 2001; Clarkson 1996), citizen acquiescence, inaction, and silence often serve to legitimate brutal state policy and action. Especially when lack of response occurs in a democracy without evident obstacles to free speech, public silence serves the role of *de facto* endorsement. In the case of authoritarian regimes, officials still rely on the "cooperation" of the population, thus the importance of propaganda and the breaking of solidarity through discursive (as well as forceful) means. The Holocaust is a classic example that points not only to the atrocities of direct perpetrators, but also to the facilitating role of people from all walks of life who failed to act to stop the unfolding horror. As Bar-On (2001: 138) points out, "behind each Nazi perpetrator there must have been at least 10 bystanders who enabled the perpetrators to commit their evil doing."

Attention to the specifics of how people turn a blind eye to atrocious events shines a light into more theoretical questions concerning the cultural reproduction of power. It is not only the state, but civil society institutions and citizen cultural practices that uphold the "torture-sustaining reality" that Crelinsten (2003) describes. That power operates in the realm of culture is central to Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony—the idea that power is maintained by dominant groups in society not so much through the use of overt force, but through securing collective consent. Discussing Gramsci's concepts, Nina Eliasoph (1998: 233) points out that hegemony is an "ongoing cultural process that gerrymanders the boundary of perception"; "the way people make sense of everyday experience usually discourages them from thinking thoughts that might challenge the status quo" (Eliasoph 1998: 232). This project builds on such insights and contributes to the study of denial as a key mechanism in the reproduction of power by 1) exploring denial of state violations of human rights as a *socially and politically mediated* activity, and not merely a psychological process, 2) showing the overlaps between forms of denial in *democracy and dictatorship*, 3) providing an *empirical* illustration of how citizens uphold a "torture-sustaining reality," 4) showing how state structures (here the ability to generate dominant discourse and impose violence) link to cultural practices and individual actions, thereby bridging the macro and micro realms.

STATE VIOLENCE AND THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DENIAL

Psychologists have long been concerned with denial and avoidance of troubling events or knowledge, from Freud's theories of denial in the psychoanalytic

tradition to scholarship on cognitive dissonance (Festinger et al. 1956), selective exposure (Frey 1986), motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990), bystander effects (Latane and Darley 1970), and psychic numbing (Lifton and Mitchell 1995; Slovic 2007). These studies are important for understanding internal mental processes related to denial. For instance, works within the cognitive dissonance paradigm show that individuals are unpleasantly aroused when holding inconsistent cognitions (for example, holding a particular belief and simultaneously becoming aware of evidence that directly contradicts it), especially when this contradiction threatens the individual's self-concept (Aronson 1968) or when counterattitudinal behavior has foreseeable aversive consequences (Cooper and Fazio 1984). In such situations, individuals are motivated to reduce dissonance, and this process can take place through attitude changes, justifications, or rationalizations. Under certain circumstances, people are likely to selectively turn their attention to stimuli that support their views and avoid disconfirming information (Frey 1986). Work on motivated reasoning also highlights how individuals actively search memory for information that is consistent with their hoped for conclusion (Kunda 1990).

Yet denial, indifference, apathy are not just internal mental processes or dispositions, but phenomena produced in interaction with other people and under socially patterned circumstances, norms, institutional arrangements, and political and economic structures (Cohen 2001; Eliasoph 1998; Norgaard 2011; Zerubavel 2006). As Karen Cerulo (2002: 3) argues, it is important to "locate and analyze cognition in its sociocultural context." Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) refers to the social processes that shape the direction of our attention and contribute to the silencing of disturbing issues as the *social organization of denial*. Often people know more than what they readily admit even to themselves—what Stanley Cohen (2001) calls "knowing and not-knowing," or Michael Taussig (1999) refers to as "knowing what not to know." The process through which people make sense of troublesome information does not happen in a vacuum, but in a social milieu constituted by families, communities, schools, the media, religious organizations, and other institutions. These contexts enable or undermine the possibilities for dissent, critical examination of events, and ultimately, actions to stop human rights violations. Together these sites compose what we can think of as the *soft front* of state violence through which the maintenance of normalcy, ignorance, and innocence is achieved.

Scholars have explored citizen disengagement from atrocious events, including media induced "compassion fatigue" (Moeller 1999), discursive strategies by audiences of humanitarian appeals that contribute to a "morality of unresponsiveness" (Seu 2010), "psychic numbing" in response to unfathomable destruction (Lifton and Mitchell 1995), and social unwillingness or inability to truly listen to testimony of trauma at particular historical moments (Caruth 1995; Felman and Laub 1992; Jelin 2003). The positioning of ordinary people as third parties, as "spectators" of state violence (Taylor 1997) or as indirect targets of a disciplinary state discourse (Bravo 2003), is

important in understanding social processes of silencing and denial. Denial is also facilitated by the norms, cultures, and structural constraints built in *institutions*. Military institutions, with their hierarchies, authority chains, codes of silence, and discouragement of dissent, are obvious candidates for scrutiny. Yet other institutions also play significant roles in enforcing silence or indifference toward atrocities. For example, in looking at development and conflict in Uganda and Nepal, Caddell and Yanacopulos (2006: 569) show how the “institutional mandates” and “pressures to demonstrate success” by international development agencies influenced the virtual erasure of and silence about the armed conflicts and atrocities taking place in the countries where they operate.

Stanley Cohen’s (2001) sociological work on denial is particularly relevant, for it conceptualizes three main varieties of denial: *Literal denial* is the complete negation of the fact of an atrocious situation (“it didn’t happen”); *interpretative denial* is achieved by claiming that “what happened is not what you think it is, not what it looks like, not what you call it” (Cohen 2001: 7) and using jargon, euphemism, and other misleading rhetoric to dispute the meaning of events; *implicatory denial* takes place when the facts of atrocious events are not disputed, but “are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act” (Cohen 2001: 9). Cohen also distinguishes the ways in which denial is organized. In addition to private forms of denial, he introduces *official denial*, a discourse highly structured and organized by the state, and *cultural denial*, which is “neither wholly private nor officially organized by the state,” but has a collective or shared character (Cohen 2001: 10). There are often linkages between these two types of denial.

While work exists on official denial (e.g., Cohen 1996; Del Rosso 2011; Welch 2004) less attention has been paid to the words and experiences of those whose collective silence is a powerful force in allowing the state to commit human rights violations. Our approach, which draws on in-depth interviews interpreted with knowledge of context, allows for a detailed view of cultural denial in two specific places and moments while also gaining insights through the comparison. In contrast with psychological studies that leave out the texture of social and political milieus, our interviews reveal practices of legitimation (and resistance) as embedded in particular social settings.

We describe how in both Argentina and the United States, disturbing knowledge about state violence was legitimated through two sets of cultural practices. First, the ideology of patriotism and national security provided some interviewees with compelling tools to minimize, normalize, or justify human rights violations, facilitating literal and interpretative denial. Second, a broader range of people participated, for different reasons and at different times, in what we call the *social organization of silence and talk*. These cultural practices (e.g., not asking questions, preferring not to be told information, avoiding “political” topics, using euphemistic speech) contribute to keep human rights violations out of mind and sight.

STUDY SITES: THE DUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ARGENTINA AND THE UNITED STATES

Argentina is a particularly interesting site to study responses to knowledge on human rights violations. While many civilians condoned the military regime, state terrorism also sparked groundbreaking human rights organizations. Subsequently, democratic governments dealt with the horrors of the dictatorship through various approaches: a national investigation commission, a trial to the military juntas, impunity laws and governmental pardons, truth trials, and the more recent annulment of impunity laws, opening of new trials, and emerging convictions. People who lived during the dictatorship and who can compare their perceptions then and now can help understand a range of responses. At the time of the dictatorship, public perceptions stemmed partly from propaganda disseminated by the government, media, schools, churches, and other institutions, but as Diana Taylor (1997) also notes, ordinary citizens had more real information than common explanations (“we didn’t know what was happening”) suggest. How did individuals who witnessed or heard about people being “sucked up” (kidnapped) managed to continue normal life? How did ordinary citizens explain and justify what could not be easily normalized?

We can ask similar questions in relation to state violence in the context of the U.S.-led “war on terror.” Knowledge about human rights abuses at the hands of U.S. officials has been available in the mainstream media, and not just in obscure sources. The illegality of torture became a debatable matter aired in the press (Athey 2008), and state and civil society sectors presented the authorization of abusive interrogation methods as a necessity—though often eschewing the torture label (Jackson 2007; Luban 2005). While in this case much of the abuse has been outsourced away from U.S. territory—perhaps facilitating citizen disengagement—U.S. state violence that calls into question definitions of torture is closely connected to U.S. politics. Furthermore, domestic surveillance of U.S. citizens and profiling based on religious or ethnoracial belonging have occurred in the United States. This means that such actions cannot be simply disregarded as something happening elsewhere or unrelated to the lives of U.S. citizens. Whereas segments of the U.S. media and some state officials seem to have manipulated fear of terrorist attacks and even provided misleading information, much of the information that did reach the population graphically exposed gross human rights violations. Especially in a democracy, one might have expected greater public demand for governmental accountability when state officials perpetrate, authorize, or condone abuse.

Although the two sites/periods under examination can be treated as separate and distinct case studies, it is also important to recognize some connecting threads between the cases, namely some U.S. administrations’ support of Latin American repressive military regimes, including Argentina’s (e.g., National Security Archive 2006), as part of an anticommunist cold war strategy. Among other things, the U.S.-sponsored School of the Americas (now Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) provided training in

counterinsurgency tactics to Latin American militaries, and a number of repressors from the region attended the institution (see Gill 2004). Some of the techniques used by Latin American dictatorships, as well as the national security logic that enabled them, bear resemblance to those deployed in the more contemporary contexts of the U.S.-led “war on terror.” Examples of such recycled practices include hooding and waterboarding detainees, picking up suspects for harsh interrogation, and holding people in detention without due process (Calveiro 2012; Jackson 2007).

Yet there are also key differences between both cases: the U.S. “war on terror” human rights violations happened under an electoral democratic system, while Argentina’s systematic state terrorist practices developed largely during a dictatorship (but repression had already started before the military coup). Most of the people targeted by the Argentine military regime were in Argentina’s territory while most people targeted by the U.S. “war on terror” have been individuals located abroad (although enhanced surveillance and questionable detentions within the United States have been reported, too. See, e.g., ACLU 2011; CCR n.d.; Patel and Paltrowitz n.d.). The United States is a global superpower whereas Argentina’s scope of influence has been much more limited. And of course, each country’s politics are infused with their own specific cultures and social events.

Pairing the citizen responses in Argentina and the United States allows us to construct a conversation between the supposedly polar opposite political circumstances of democracy and dictatorship. This approach also creates a dialogue between the dynamics of state violence in the past, with the relative clarity of 20/20 hindsight, with the perhaps more elusive and opaque dynamics of the unfolding present. This dialogue can help to better understand the processes of denial that are repeated across time and space, and in different political systems.

METHODS

Why and how do some people avoid, justify, normalize, silence, or outright deny information about human rights violations perpetrated by their governments? We explore this central question based on 40 semistructured, in-depth interviews with members of diverse civic, religious, community, and political organizations in urban areas in Argentina and in the United States (20 in each country). These include cooperatives, religious groups, volunteer and charity organizations, political parties of different stripes, human rights and antiwar organizations as well as organizations for the rights of poor communities, people of color, women, youth, and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) people. This purposeful sample includes individuals representing diverse styles of citizen involvement and political orientation (e.g., conservative, moderate, leftist). The sample was composed by 19 men and 21 women. Most interviewees had some college or completed college education. Interviewees included

professionals (e.g., attorney, doctor, economist, graphic designer), school and college educators, executive officers and staff in nonprofit and political organizations, business and administrative employees, entrepreneurs, homemakers, retirees (including a war veteran), religious leaders, members of the police department and other governmental divisions, blue collar and domestic workers, and members of cooperatives.

We recruited interviewees relying on several strategies: directly contacting a range of organizations, starting with references provided by acquaintances, and using snowballing to recruit additional interviewees. We sampled for people who performed some sort of political activism, public service, volunteer work, or other community-oriented endeavors. Rather than achieving population generalizability, we were more interested in understanding how social forces and interactions played out in the way in which people with various political, civic, and service engagement understood and grappled with disturbing information on human rights abuses. We recruited individuals who presumably cared about issues beyond their personal lives, as reflected by their organizational involvement and public service. Thus our sampling strategy set a high bar to address denial issues, starting with people who in theory might be less likely to be apathetic or indifferent to social and political affairs.

Interviews took place between 2007 and 2010. In Argentina, questions were centered on subjects' memory of their responses to and awareness of state terrorist practices during the last military dictatorship. That is, the Argentine interviewees' narratives were retrospective accounts, gathered decades after the regime fell, and thus likely influenced by the processes of democratization and political debates that followed the dictatorship. In the United States, questions focused on knowledge and reaction to human rights violations committed under the U.S.-led "war on terror." These accounts were about ongoing processes as well as events that had happened several years earlier, but still fresher than in the Argentine case. While there are limitations to accounts based on "memory work" (including how people reconstruct past events according to present contexts) these narratives are still valuable for examining long-term processes as they encouraged reflexivity upon both past and present developments. Another possible limitation of relying on interviewees' self-reports, is that it may underestimate the extent of denial. However, our goal was not to quantify the amount of denial present, but to understand how it is shaped by sociocultural processes in particular contexts.

In both sites we started interviews asking general questions about interviewees' lives in relation to political participation and/or community involvement. We then proceeded to introduce questions about life under the dictatorship (in the case of Argentina) and in the context of the "war on terror" (in the case of the United States). In some cases, interviewees expressed on their own accounts about surveillance, torture, state kidnappings, or other abuses, and in others we asked specific questions in that regard. We analyzed the interviews by looking for emerging themes and patterns, writing descriptive and/or analytic notes about different interview

encounters, developing working typologies and matrices on different topics, and generating categories that emerged from the questionnaire and the interviewees' narratives. Important themes include the role of emotions, silence and talk, ideology and trust in the government, attitudes about torture, and definitions of human rights.

Two central themes discussed here are the roles of dominant ideologies (on national security, patriotism) and patterns of talk and silence in organizing various forms of denial of human rights abuses. A focus on ideology reveals how some individuals deploy state sponsored discourse in ways that undermine full recognition of human rights abuses. Attention to the practice of talk and silence shows how social interactions and patterns of speech, specifically whether and how people talk about human rights abuses by their governments, help to keep this information at arm's length.

CULTURES OF DENIAL

In both Argentina and the United States interviewees offered rich descriptions of how they grappled with disturbing information about human rights abuses. While we heard various types and degrees of denial, not all interviewees resorted to denial practices, and even a number of those who did so also exhibited a complex relationship with the information (including sparks of acknowledgment or attitude changes over time as a result of the shifting political climate or personal experiences). Thus, though we focus here on denial varieties, it is important to note that responses ranged from claims of ignorance and innocence, rationalization and justification, acknowledgment and paralysis, to awareness and action. A number of interviewees in each country actively denounced and resisted human rights abuses by their governments. For example, in Argentina, some interviewees helped to compile lists of people disappeared or publicly spoke out or politically organized against the regime. In the United States, some interviewees protested the U.S. "war on terror" and sought to create awareness by organizing public events.

For some interviewees, particularly those whose views resonated with official discourse, both patriotic and national security ideology as well as practices of silence and talk kept knowledge at a distance. Among those who were more critical of official discourse and who recognized the abuse, certain practices of silence and talk were more salient as a distancing strategy. However, these are not static categories, as what individuals think, do, and tell is susceptible to change over time and according to specific circumstances. For example, in our study we found individuals who tended to downplay or rationalize human rights abuses by their government, but who also recognized the abuse in particular situations. Conversely, some individuals were highly critical of official discourse, and even actively oppositional, but at times resorted to silence as a way of protecting themselves from disturbing thoughts, to avoid unpleasant interactions, or for fear of governmental reprisals.

Legitimizing Ideologies: Patriotism and National Security

In each case, nationalistic and patriotic ideology (Anderson 1991; Calhoun 1997) provided a prevalent discursive context for interviewees' interpretations of human rights violations. Both the Bush administration following 9/11⁵ and the military juntas in Argentina rallied national unity in the face of threats (terrorists, "subversives"), used national security discourse to justify curtailment of freedoms, and conveyed the idea that the population should deposit their trust in military authorities to protect them. Each government also used ambiguity in defining the targets of state violence (broad conception of "the enemy"), in explaining key dimensions of their military mission (methods used), and in describing the timeline of the project (open-ended). These mechanisms are not new or original, as wars and other looming threats are notorious for bringing a sense of nationalist cohesion and patriotism that enable the justification of actions more difficult to uphold under different circumstances. Both in Argentina and the United States, interviews illustrate how, confronted with knowledge of human rights abuses, patriotic and national security ideologies were embraced by individuals, helping to construct conditions of socially organized denial. A number of respondents explicitly relied on official discourse as antidotes to feelings of insecurity and to uphold beliefs in the goodness of their governments' mission.

In Argentina, people had to grapple with patriotic and national security discourse disseminated by the regime. The military fueled patriotic sentiments by framing the fight against "subversion" as a patriotic mission, rallying nationalism through sports (e.g., the soccer World Cup in Argentina, 1978), and waging war with England over the *Islas Malvinas*/Falkland Islands (1982). Interviewees who initially supported the dictatorship, found particularly salient the need for order, security, and tranquillity. They embraced the notion of the military as protectors, even if they had reached government positions illegitimately. For interviewees who received the news of the coup with relief, trust in the government helped them to continue their lives, and they did not think much about abuses by the military or they engaged in efforts to give a positive spin to information that contradicted the idea of military as protectors.

Amadeo, an upper-middle-class conservative who had supported the military, argued that much of Argentine society gave an "implicit mandate" to the armed forces to deal with the guerrilla and ensure security:

Solve this problem because we can't take this anymore. Now, solve it now, don't explain me how, but solve it. That is, *yo no me meto* [I don't get involved], I don't want to be involved, it is not my problem, it is your problem [...] you have to solve this and I don't want to know how you do it, do it as you see fit.

⁵ The presidency of George W. Bush was steeped in notions of patriotism and national security as an overriding theme, even at the expense of curtailment of freedoms for people in the United States. While the subsequent administration of Barack Obama in 2008 overturned policies such as Bush's waterboarding authorization, it continued (and even reinforced) a number of the "war on terror" policies initiated by his predecessor.

Similarly, Lucía—a middle-class woman in a military family—said that while she agreed with the goal of “killing them all” [the guerrillas] because “they were undermining my way of life,” in retrospect she now feels that the military committed “excesses” that should not have happened. She heard “subliminal,” “very subtle comments” that suggested the existence of clandestine detention centers, but she did not question much what was going on there, and lived with this semi-awareness. For people who supported the military agenda, “not knowing” helped them continue normal life and not question their ideological commitments.

In Argentina, national security concerns and patriotic feelings were evoked to support the military and suppress the evidence or hints that the government’s activities constituted human rights abuses. Maureen, a middle-class woman who had first welcomed the military intervention, narrated her efforts to keep negative information out of focus and how she wanted to believe the official discourse. This included the dissemination of stickers with the colors of the Argentine flag and a slogan that read “*Los Argentinos Somos Derechos y Humanos*” (“We Argentines Are Right and Human/Humane”). The creation of these stickers was ordered by the government in 1979 before the visit of the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States. The purpose of the visit was to investigate complaints of human rights abuses in Argentina, which the government countered as an “anti-Argentine campaign” (Seoane 2006). This is how Maureen reacted:

So the sticker came out and I didn’t quite understand why. I believed in “wow, the World Cup,” “Argentines together at last,” “we can point [in the same direction] and not protest so much”... I believed them in that [...] I believed it, deep down I wanted to believe it.

Later on Maureen was confronted with various events that made her initial period of denial unsustainable, including the situation of her roommate, who had family members disappeared. Maureen also witnessed instances of obvious military indoctrination that scared her. On an occasion in which she was trying to sell raffles at a military event, she saw an instructional blackboard in the facility with a drawing (apparently done by military personnel) of a tree depicting the interconnections between “subversives”: the tree branches included “leftists,” “communists,” “ERP” (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo/People’s Revolutionary Army), “Montoneros” (armed branch of Peronism), “artists,” “singers.” She realized that ultimately this list could include her as the enemy: “everybody, we were all there.”

But as psychological theories on cognitive dissonance tell us (e.g., Festinger et al. 1956), direct confrontations with contradictory evidence may be insufficient to disconfirm one’s beliefs, especially in the face of strong ideological and personal motivation. Maureen had already started a period of personal and political change that made alternative perspectives more accessible. In contrast, Santiago, a middle-class interviewee who had also welcomed the military and who had adopted the official discourse had a different response. He was confronted at least three times with information on human rights violations, yet he

dismissed it: One time, in a recreation center he was a member of, a group of children showed up playing with a stick and a human skull, possibly coming from a nearby military facility by the river. Santiago reported that adults' overt reaction was merely of disgust, ordering the children to drop "that," but not expressing curiosity as to where "that" had come from. On another occasion, during a social event, an acquaintance left earlier saying that he needed to go to "*bajar tipos* [i.e., gun men down], kill *Montos* [pejorative for Montoneros]." The group sharing the table did not take his words seriously. And finally, Santiago met with friends who had been doing research on human rights violations in Chile and told him what was going on in the region. He refused to believe the information, saying that they were ill informed, and that it was all a "a fabrication mounted by the Left." During the interview, Santiago explained, "I didn't accept that there was torture, [I thought] that all those things that were said were lies, that there were excesses of war, that people died like in all wars." In hindsight, Santiago now regrets such views, but still struggles to make sense of his literal denial:

Yes, unconsciously we wanted to cover it up [...] it is a phenomenon that when you look at it now, you say "How could I..." It is a challenge to [one's] intelligence. How could it be that way? How could I've been in such a comfortable situation? [...] The power of communications is huge, so when you have, on the one hand, a whole propaganda [apparatus] that manages all information, and on the other hand, when you really, from your deepest convictions, you are totally against having the country run by Marxists, Leninists [...] if you have to choose, well yes, unfortunately the world is divided in two [...] What would have I done if I would have realized at that moment [about the military human rights violations]? I don't know...and honestly, I don't know, I would have to be in that moment again, because evidently it would have been...a terrible shock.

As in the case of the United States, when President Bush claimed "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror" (CNN US, 2001), Santiago and other Argentine interviewees also perceived the situation in Argentina during the dictatorship in a dichotomous way, and felt personally invested in the outcome. In choosing the side proclaimed by official state discourse, Santiago became especially motivated to overlook the abuses of the military (on which he had put his faith). Confronting the reality of state atrocities would have created an existential crisis of sorts, threatening his worldviews, feelings of security, and possibly his identity as an ethical person.

Heightened patriotism and national security discourse was also evident in post-9/11 United States, as reflected by government rhetoric (e.g., the naming of antiterrorist legislation as USA PATRIOT Act) and the proliferation of stickers, banners, flags, and other signs asserting "United We Stand." In the United States, language appealing to patriotism, national unity, and national security goals particularly resonated with interviewees with conservative political orientation. Interviewees who strongly relied on patriotic ideology (including not seeing any low point about their country) exhibited a reluctance to acknowledge or condemn violations of human rights by U.S. officials, particularly under the administration they supported. These interviewees tended to see a higher likelihood of such events happening at the hands of people from other countries.

To illustrate, when asked about abuses in the context of the U.S. involvement in the Iraq war, Susan, an elected local official, resorted to a kind of interpretative denial: “I see human rights as completely different. Human rights [abuse] is typically the kind of stuff that we walked off from Kosovo, and have ignored in Darfur,” but presumably not anything that U.S. officials had perpetrated. When asked about other U.S. actions, specifically extraordinary renditions, Susan first said she was unfamiliar with the concept (and did not ask to know more). When the concept was spontaneously explained by the interviewer, Susan responded, “I’ve never heard of such a thing.” The fact that an elected official either does not know this information, or thinks that it will be a believable option not to know is an indication that such issues are not salient in the public mind. Similarly, Patrick—a generally well-informed and politically active conservative—explained that the Bush administration had turned a blind eye to violations of religious freedoms in Tibet, but when asked about abuses in U.S.-run prisons during the “war on terror,” he said that he did not know whether torture had been committed in Abu Ghraib.⁶

The fact that some interviewees were quick to note illegitimate state violence committed by other governments, but not one’s own, points to cultural double standards and builds on notions of U.S. exceptionalism (Ignatieff 2005). Importantly, this is also consistent with “war on terror” key public narratives that set a binary frame depicting “ruthless, evil and inhuman enemies while Americans were good, peace-loving, heroic and united” (Jackson 2007: 360). A dichotomous and morally charged contrast between the national in-group (“us”) and other nations (“them”) aided various forms of denial. While the national in-group was presented as the “civilized world” whose members are implicitly seen as less likely to commit human rights abuses, other cultures were cast in a negative light or deemed unintelligible—in the words of Susan, “stuff that to the civilized world doesn’t make a lot of sense.” Similarly, Roger, a city councillor and member of a church group, was upset about the media focus on “something wrong that a [U.S.] soldier had done,” for example, at Abu Ghraib. Echoing the Bush administration’s explanations about “a few bad apples,” Roger felt that more attention should be given to the good actions of most troops. While he emphasized the threat to national security that such media attention could trigger (as it could incite terrorists), the comment was embedded in a more general negative view about people in “those countries” (including Iraq) who “kill each other a lot,” and who have “hatred for their people, just hatred in general.” In these and other similar accounts by other interviewees, abuse by U.S. officials is minimized and paired with abuses by non-U.S. citizens or general negative assumptions about other cultures.

Dominant patriotic frames depicting the United States as a paramount defender of human rights and freedom—a portrayal more readily challenged by

⁶ Remarkably, after the interview, he contacted one of the researchers to say that after looking for information he realized that torture had occurred, and perhaps even homicide. By raising questions, the interview itself prompted him to turn his attention in a different direction, producing acknowledgment.

interviewees with more liberal views—helped to guide selective perception of human rights abuses. Ashley, a white woman active in a conservative political group, made a point to contrast the United States as a land of freedom in opposition to the kind of regimes that are likely to perpetrate abuses. Referring to immigrants, she stated:

You want to be here, fine, don't come and change me. Assimilate! Assimilate! Don't make me what you left behind [. . .] I mean, a lot of the South American countries had dictatorships, [. . .] juntas, people with guns taking over, we never had that here, so don't bring me that, I'm not interested.

Ashley's narrative positions the United States as a country whose government would not use force arbitrarily (and, would behave differently from the Latin American juntas—dictatorships which, in fact, some U.S. administrations supported). She reconciled this view with an implicit recognition that U.S. state officials may not have totally clean hands. With respect to potential abuse by military authorities she suggested that bad things happen in war and asserted, "I don't always want to know every bit." According to Ashley, ordinary citizens should leave it to the military to determine the most appropriate treatment of detainees. Thus, she was able to keep information of abuse at arm's length by resorting to trust in the U.S. military as a competent protector. Not only did Ashley's feelings of security depend on upholding the official discourse, but as social psychologists would suggest, outright acknowledgment of human rights violations by U.S. officials could lead to cognitive dissonance. Her passionate view of the United States as an ethical force in the world may partly depend on not dwelling too much on issues that may call these beliefs into question. One way to resolve inconsistent pieces of information, particularly with respect to the nation that she strongly identifies with and loves, is by creating distance from disturbing knowledge. She echoed the national security rhetoric disseminated by the government when she expressed, "we have to give up some of our rights to make the country safe."

Similarly, for Betty, another white conservative and visibly patriotic woman, national security was paramount, and this ideological priority helped her rationalize certain abuses while maintaining the view of the U.S. government as a defender of freedom. Her place was decorated with patriotic symbols, including ribbons with the colors of the U.S. flag and one stating that "freedom is not free." When asked about whether she was aware of any kind of human rights violations committed in the context of the "war on terror," she said, "I'm not. But then I'm not totally involved in the war on terror. Do I think that abuses can go on? Absolutely." Betty struck a balance between not knowing and knowing. She also tried to reconcile her adamant opposition to practices that she deemed dehumanizing with justification of practices such as waterboarding: "I am not opposed to waterboarding, all right? If I feel that that person has information that will protect my country, I would support using a technique like that." She then proceeded to distinguish between "torture for pleasure" (mentioning the events at Abu Ghraib, which

she condemned) and “torture for information” (e.g., waterboarding) of which she approved. She went further:

If it is going to protect my country or the country that I am in or other people there that I'm supposed to be protecting, do it! Ah . . . Ah . . . Look, I . . . I . . . I . . . Use sodium pentothal if you have to! [laughs] I mean, what's the problem here, guys? [laughs] Where's the reality? If you are fighting a war to win, you use every method short of outright torture . . . for pleasure. There's a difference, there's torture for pleasure and there's torture for information.

In other segments of the interview Betty had decried human rights violations she found “abhorrent,” yet here she endorsed abusive treatment for instrumental purposes. The latter part of the extract shows Betty grappling with her beliefs, juggling with terms that may point to inconsistencies in her attitudes toward human rights violations. One almost can see the process of rationalization in action as she rejects torture, pauses, and then distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable forms. Ultimately, national security imperatives override what for a split moment seems like an outright rejection of torture in the narrative. In the interview, Betty moves from a claim of ignorance, to suspicion that abuse does occur, to justification of the abuse. These notions resonate with official national security discourse that fed into abusive interrogation policy and practice, namely, the depiction of such tactics as a self-defense measure needed to fight a “new” type of war that rendered certain legal protections inapplicable to “enemy combatants” (Jackson 2007; Luban 2005).

Another operating, but more implicit, dynamic among some interviewees who are likely to be perceived as full members of the national in-group is the notion that state violence will only be turned outward (against people from other countries or homegrown terrorists), but not against law-abiding citizens in the United States. This is the idea that state violence “can't happen to me” (Crelinsten 2003: 303). For instance, Betty supported profiling, and yet complained about invasive security measures in airports by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which affected her more directly. She protested, “they are looking at the wrong people, they are going after the wrong people.” Her support of profiling suggests that it is not people who look like her who should be in the state's radar. U.S. citizens have been targeted in the context of the “war on terror,” but the fact that many of these individuals are people of color, Muslim, and have been surveilled or detained under the frame of terrorist has perhaps facilitated disengagement from dominant groups. Furthermore, this dynamic is built upon the unsteady ground of who is really considered a citizen. If the more obvious targets of surveillance and detention were predominantly white, Christian, U.S. citizens, one may wonder whether a greater public outcry might ensue. The preexisting construction of a sense of “the other” seems to allow many individual bystanders with racial/religious/citizenship privilege to maintain the notion that “this would not happen here, or to us” and not question human rights abuses by their government.

In contrast, a number of interviewees who were ethnoracial minorities in the United States and/or politically critical of the U.S.-led “war on terror” were

more skeptical, noticing parallels between human rights abuses abroad and at home, and in doing so, they raised the specter that people deemed as “other” might be wrongly targeted. For example, Tyron—an African American pastor working with underserved communities of color—expressed no surprise about human rights abuses abroad by U.S. state officials:

My personal feeling is it is no different from what happens here in America, on a local level, how the police go and target individuals and violate their human rights based on suspicion that has no foundation. So it is done on a national level, when our military do it to other countries, but it is being done every day here, and over here, and every day here in our urban neighborhood.

From a historical perspective, Anne—a second-generation Chinese American citizen—pointed out similar linkages, including the mistreatment of African-American, Chinese, and Mexican people in the country: “I think that goes back to the power and oppression, in how we diminish the rights of people around the world, the fact that we can keep them there without any due process. To me, again, if you look historically at how the U.S. has treated slaves [. . .] is no difference really.” Acknowledgment of past and present human rights abuses *within* the United States creates cracks in dominant patriotic and national security ideologies, raising questions about who really is protected or not protected through policies such as the PATRIOT Act.

Unlike interviewees who echoed patriotic narratives as they sidestepped abuses, other interviewees recognized and expressed disturbing feelings about human rights violations by U.S. officers under the “war on terror.” Michelle, a Mexican American member of a progressive women’s organization, expressed:

It makes me feel I don’t want to be a citizen of this country. You know, is shameful. . . and I think that like we are responsible [. . .] this is my government whether or not I like it [. . .] For me, I have a sense of responsibility, like you know, maybe I didn’t vote for that people who were in power but it’s still my country and out there in the rest of the world, around the globe, those actions are seen as mine, so I felt a lot of shame, a lot of responsibility for that. . . . I felt helpless as I couldn’t do anything about it . . .

In the case of Michelle, while at first sight it might seem that her attachment to the United States is weaker than that of more overtly patriotic interviewees, the fact that she claims responsibility for governmental actions, in fact, shows strong identification, revealing her membership in the national body. However, her ideological and ethnic marginalization may have allowed her to deconstruct the dominant discourse, recognize state abuse, and protest these actions. This was in sharp contrast to interviewees who echoed official discourse as they justified abuse.

As shown earlier in this section, both in Argentina and the United States instances of denial are socially organized through ideological mechanisms, including how individuals deploy official discourse. Figure 1 illustrates legitimating ideologies related to patriotism and national security, as they emerged explicitly or implicitly in our interviews, which in turn overlap with Cohen’s (2001) analysis of denial.

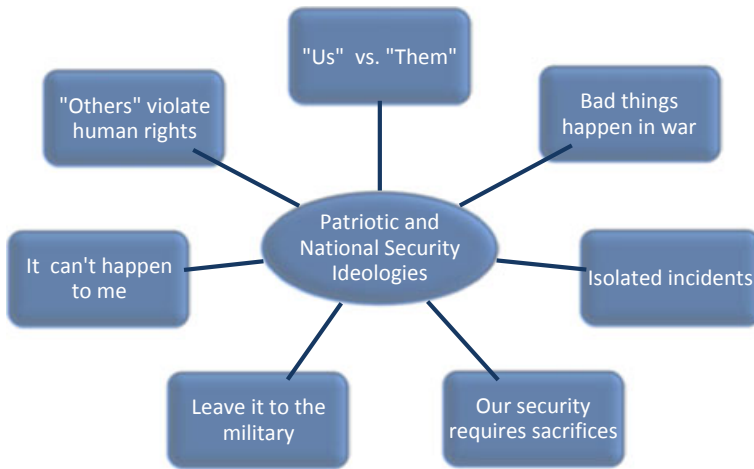


Fig. 1. Legitimizing Ideologies: Patriotism and National Security.

These legitimating ideologies are integral to upholding existing power relations. Although the expression of power through outright coercion is consequential, as the violent actions of authoritarian regimes show, it is also more easily detected and categorized as reproachable behavior. In contrast, a less evident form of social control occurs through what Steven Lukes (1974: 24) describes as a dimension of power that is closely tied to ideology:

[I]s it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?

This dimension of power contributes to cultural denial and is particularly effective because it is invisible and is not experienced as imposition.

The Social Organization of Silence and Talk

In addition to the role that dominant ideologies played in producing denial as a socially organized (rather than just individual) phenomenon, a number of responses, both in Argentina and in the United States, point to the importance of silence and talk to understanding people's ability to fully engage with evidence and the implications of human rights violations. As Robert Wuthnow (2011: 9) asserts, "talk is cultural work that people do to make sense of their lives and to orient their behavior." Silence is its counterpart, but can also be a form of speech in the sense that it conveys meaning. For example, not talking about something can implicitly indicate that what is not discussed is not happening. A climate of silence helps to create what Taussig (1999: 5) calls a "public secret":

“that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated.” Like ideologies, public secrets can fulfill legitimizing roles.

How, where, and whether people talk about political topics such as human rights violations helps to shape perception and responses to such knowledge. Nina Eliasoph (1998) further argues that ordinary citizens’ political talk can be a source of social power; it can help citizens challenge governmental actions when in disagreement and denaturalize taken-for-granted power relations. To the extent that people are censored or self-censor from political talk (in this case about human rights violations), they are discouraged from engagement with key social problems. Silencing takes place as institutions overtly or subtly shatter public speech relevant to human rights violations and as talk about politics, and state violence specifically, is discouraged in everyday interactions and informal conversations. Figure 2 illustrates a spectrum of socially organized silence practices, explained later in this section.

Institutions such as the media or the state are spaces in which individuals can potentially make visible and speak out against human rights violations. Yet both in dictatorships and democracies turning to such institutions to voice concerns can be difficult, although in different ways and degrees. Juan, a middle-class man who was doing the mandatory military service during the Argentine dictatorship, narrated how during that period he witnessed a higher-ranking officer telling in detail the military gang rape and brutal murder of a “subversive” woman. He was “horrified [...] paralyzed, you did not know with whom to talk.” Juan referred to the lack of “institutionalized spaces where you knew you could present this, with freedom” as directly related to the normalization and



Fig. 2. The Social Organization of Silence.

tacit acceptance of the situation. Neither the state, nor the media were good candidates to share this knowledge at the time. “And that’s what was terrible about that moment of state terrorism, the lack of official levels and spaces of trust [...] I think that powerlessness, on the one hand, and the lack of those levels [to talk], made you react with ‘Well, this is how things are.’” Here institutional and political contexts were directly related to disengagement, encouraging individuals to look the other way and not doing anything with the information.

This lack of institutional spaces for talking about human rights abuses is not surprising in a dictatorship, given that censorship was rampant and reprisals for dissenting political talk could well follow. In democratic societies, there still can be a sense that certain kinds of speech are not to be uttered even in the context of institutions that are central to democracies, such as the media. During the U.S. “war on terror,” the mainstream media played an important role in framing events. For instance, in the months preceding the invasion of Iraq, the media watch organization FAIR “examined the 393 on-camera sources who appeared in nightly news stories about Iraq” in four major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS) from January 30 to February 12, 2003. Among other findings, the study shows that “[o]f all 393 sources, only three (less than 1 percent) were identified with organized protests or anti-war groups.” The report concluded that “[n]etwork newscasts, dominated by current and former U.S. officials, largely exclude Americans who are skeptical of or opposed to an invasion of Iraq” (FAIR 2003).

This kind of media coverage, though not necessarily the result of direct censorship, likely constrains individuals’ ability to develop their own interpretations or to freely present a counternarrative. Joan, an interviewee who actively opposed the war, spoke of this potential gag effect even in an electoral democracy: “A lot of the stuff that goes on here is very [...] subliminal. It’s like the message pumped out by the media is, you know, if you stand up against things you’re not supportive of this country, therefore you’re an enemy, therefore by Bush’s definition you could be detained as someone supporting the enemy.” This climate can have a chilling effect on critical political talk, particularly for groups of people who have been constructed as suspects, even if individuals in the group have formal citizenship rights. It was telling that Omar, a Muslim immigrant in the United States, started the interview by announcing that he did not wish to address political issues. We treaded carefully around topics, leaving it to him to decide what he considered political or not. While he did not offer explanations about his desire to avoid politics, one may wonder to what extent it may feel perilous to address certain topics in a political context that has contributed to the demonization of Muslims. While Omar expressed awareness of and condemned abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, at the same time he conveyed a feeling of resignation, which related to his reporting about not spending too much time thinking about these issues.

What individuals do or do not express in everyday interactions shapes the degree to which people think about, and how they construe, political issues. As Eliasoph (1998: 6) argues “empathy for foreign victims of war; worries about the

environment; horror over injustice: only by speaking do people give these meaning and form, providing socially recognizable tools for thinking and acting.” Even without direct fear of governmental repression, informal codes of interaction in everyday spaces influence avoidance of difficult political topics. Loretta, an African American religious leader in a charity organization, expressed awareness and anger about torture perpetrated by U.S. state officials, but said that she didn’t think she “ever had a conversation with anybody about this.” She related that if “we start talking about this stuff [it] might bring up things that you don’t want to be brought up.” While Joan, an antiwar activist, talked frequently about the war in the context of her organizing, she explained how discussion of troubling concepts such as U.S. involvement in torture may be shunned in conversations: “The deeper you are into a political analysis the more uncomfortable it gets for people [. . .] [Some people] just say, I’m not going to ask the questions anymore, because no one wants to hear these aspects to troubling events.” Later in the interview, Joan refers to doing a “self-check” when talking about other disturbing political issues with family members. Conversation rules and interaction cues (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 2005) denote that some political talk is off limits (Eliasoph 1998). This was echoed by Jennifer, a neighborhood watch group member with moderate political views, who explained that political issues, including the war, is not the kind of issue likely to be discussed with friends or during family reunions. The construction of certain topics as unsavory, inappropriate, or impolite can help keep human rights violations out of public discussion, even in democracies.

While interviewees across the political spectrum engaged in silence, there are different intervening dynamics associated with this behavior. Interviewees who were critical of the government actions (both moderate and more to the left) expressed that at times they refrained from talking, but part of the reason behind the silence is the negative feedback from other people (e.g., uncomfortable situation) or from institutions (e.g., state targeting people labeled unpatriotic or enemy). In contrast, for some of the interviewees who endorsed the official discourse, silence played an ideological sustaining role. That is, talking about such issues might have led to question a government/policy they had no interest in challenging. When John—a U.S. police officer who reported having nothing critical to say about his country—was asked about the controversies surrounding Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, and whether he had any concern about the U.S. conduct at war, he said, “No, I don’t. And I don’t want get into much more detail.” He added, “I don’t talk about it, don’t think about it.” Similarly, when Patrick (a politically active conservative) was asked whether he talks about issues pertaining to the war, he responded: “I don’t remember having whole detailed conversations about that.” Lack of conversation not only helps to maintain abuse invisible, but in some cases is functional to upholding ideological commitments.

In Argentina, both direct state censorship and the reality of people disappearing played an important role in silencing individuals’ political talk in everyday interactions. Sara, who was an activist during her youth, described how

political talk was discouraged during the dictatorship: “we scarcely talked about politics, because it was best, but not talking was really hard because we both [she and her husband] had friends who had disappeared, some who were involved, some who had nothing to do with anything.” Fear of the government helped produce a culture of silence in Argentina, something that was markedly less pronounced among U.S. interviewees. While some U.S. interviewees who were critical of governmental policy pointed to the chilling effect of surveillance, being labeled unpatriotic, and parallels with past histories of oppression, in Argentina many interviewees who were critical of the dictatorship reported deep-seated fear, even terror. They had feared for their own lives and bodily integrity, and/or told stories of other people (relatives, acquaintances) being afraid or issuing warnings to keep silent. As Sara observed, protesting could have meant being “the next to disappear.” Rolando, a shanty town dweller, echoed that idea: “If I rebel against this, they kill me, directly.” Alejo, a high school student at the time, was warned by a teacher to keep his oppositional political views quiet as she knew of students who had disappeared.

In Argentina, despite government propaganda that supposedly only targeted “subversion,” people seemed to recognize that one needed to be careful about what to say or do—and not just those who were activists. Leonor, a working-class woman who had no political involvement during the dictatorship, expressed that if one spoke critically of governmental officials “the military would take you to a place [...] or they would kill you.” Elena, who was living abroad during the dictatorship but who visited Argentina periodically, explained, “the ones who were here [in Argentina] were absolutely mute [...] the paranoia was too great. That is, you would be careful of who you talked with, or whether you said something or not.” This idea of having to be careful, speaking in whispers, or engaging in political talk selectively, and not openly, appears in several interviews with Argentines who disagreed with the government: As Clemente, a resident in a poor neighborhood and now a popular education practitioner, commented, during the dictatorship some topics were to be addressed “in low voice, ‘watch who you talk to.’” This approach seemed to have even traveled with some people in exile, mostly because of fear. María, who went to Brazil with her family, mentioned that it was “a very silent exile.” Though there was political talk in her family, talking was not safe given that there was a dictatorship in Brazil, too.

While knowing what not to talk about evidences awareness, silence upholds the proverbial “elephant in the room” (Zerubavel 2006), helping to construct “public secrets” that legitimize the status quo (Taussig 1999). A striking example of the cultural reproduction of a “public secret” during the Argentine dictatorship is illustrated by the story of Ramón, a professor who at the time of the military regime was a political activist:

I was in a bus, going home [...] Suddenly, I look and I see [on the sidewalk] a line of armed guys, at least ten, dressed in disguise. I remember that one of them had a sock on his face, another with a ski mask, all lined up with large machine guns, and they were coming [...] [trying] to jump inside [a home ...]. Nobody in the bus moved, nobody made

a comment, nobody said anything. But imagine, it was the *patota* [gang, group of state repressors] in action. I was an activist, and I knew about these things, but this was the only time I saw something like that. I knew, but it was better not to see it, it was something of terror [. . .] Nobody even looked at the person nearby. It was silence, something terrible, I remember that perfectly.

In Ramón's account not talking, not seeing, and not knowing—or “knowing what not to know”—were intricately linked. The collective silence in the bus helped to maintain the public secret of state terrorism in place. For passengers to say something would have meant to acknowledge a reality that could be dangerous to know. In this concrete situation, fear seems to influence collective silence, but perhaps fear does not tell the whole story. Irene, a human rights activist and survivor of a torture camp, explained that during the dictatorship there was an implicit social understanding with respect to human rights violations: *de eso no se habla* (“you don't talk about that”). Acknowledging and talking about the dictatorship's human rights violations might have forced some people to take a stance incongruent with their ideological position, or it could produce negative affect, such as guilt. Says Olivia, another human rights activist: “They tried not to know, because [knowing] generated guilt, [. . .] because they knew that [the armed/security forces] had taken their neighbor and they had closed their doors.” Lack of acknowledgment of human rights violations was produced not only by state propaganda, but through ordinary people's informal conversations and social interactions situated in the broader political context of state terror.

From the opposite side of the political spectrum, conservative Amadeo concurs that at the time of the dictatorship there was an implicit consensus to keep silent. He mentioned that if his interview would have taken place during that period, he “would not have said anything.” He emphasized that one “did not talk about that, didn't talk.” In his case not talking was not driven by fear, but was congruent with his ideological perspectives. Amadeo first mentioned that he did not know what was happening, but with further introspection, he explained:

Because I cannot really understand how come I did not hear [about it], but in truth, if I have to tell you now, it was not that I felt that someone was disappeared. No, it's as if they didn't exist. I would read the newspaper and the newspaper would say, “Well, they captured 50 guerrillas,” and I would say, “I think that's very good, very good, because in this way they [guerrillas] do not continue killing.” But I would not question what they did with these guerrillas, how they were treated, I would not question it.

While for people who were targeted or felt potentially targeted fear drove silence, and for some bystanders it might have been guilt, as Olivia suggested, there were others for whom silence was an implicit requirement to let the military do the job of producing the “security” and “order” that they yearned for.

As seen in this section, different factors mediated the social construction of silence. Both in the United States and in Argentina, people abstained from speaking for different reasons (illustrated in Figure 3). Some of these factors are related to institutions, some involve social expectations about appropriate talk



Fig. 3. Factors Mediating the Social Construction of Silence.

at the interpersonal level, and some are connected to individual emotions understood in social context.

Yet it is not only what citizens talk about or fail to talk about, but *how* they do so that facilitates cultural denial. As shown earlier, sometimes talk is used to assert that something didn't happen, as in the case of Santiago who denied the Argentine dictatorship's engagement in torture saying that it was "a fabrication mounted by the Left." More subtle forms of denial take place through idiomatic expressions and language that foster normalization. Rhetorical tricks such as the use of euphemisms invite avoidance by trivializing or preventing full recognition of atrocious events. This is what Cohen calls interpretative denial, a practice rampant among state authorities but which is also adopted by the more general population. In Argentina, the phrase "they must have done something" blamed the disappeared for their fate, and calling military atrocities "excesses" tried to limit responsibility. In the case of the United States, official explanations about "a few bad apples" who committed abuses at Abu Ghraib, for example, could conveniently circumscribe the problem leaving the system and military mission intact.

The military dictatorship in Argentina was adept at twisting the meaning of words, generating a whole "lexicon of terror" in which things did not mean what they seemed (Feitlowitz 1998). A corridor in a clandestine detention center torture chamber became "the avenue of happiness" and "transfer" meant state assassinations. Many language distortions—some originating from security forces lingo and some from civilians—percolated through the rest of society in the form of everyday mannerisms. Olivia, who left the country during the dictatorship, explained the role of language that seemed to make things all right. In her view, this was embodied by the widespread utilization of the colloquial phrase *no hay drama* ("there's no drama," no problem):

When I came back to Argentina, I noticed. . . well, I was surprised by some linguistic modes that had been incorporated during the years I was not here. And I think that it depicts very well what was happening in society. One was *no hay drama* [there's no drama]. For years, it was said "there's no drama," and I combated that. I would say "there's no drama?" 30,000 disappeared, 10,000 political prisoners, the dead in the streets and "there's no drama"? They are excavating everywhere. . . . Buenos Aires is a big cemetery. They excavate and they take bones, excavate and take bones, and "there's no drama"? "There's no drama" this society would say about anything.

By opposing a seemingly harmless language turn, Olivia resisted denial and oblivion, bringing to consciousness the atrocities she condemned. During the dictatorship, state violence was hidden behind the idea that the military was fighting a "war," the "excesses" people come to expect in war, and the blanket label of "subversive" attached to dissidents (whether they were armed or not). These words were often deployed by some interviewees who had either welcomed the military or were ideologically aligned with the regime.

In the United States, the use of euphemistic terms by the government, such as "collateral damage" (to refer to the killing of innocent civilians) or "enhanced interrogation techniques" (to refer to abusive methods including torture) serves to legitimate disturbing dimensions of foreign policy. A case in point is waterboarding. While this interrogation technique produces sensation of suffocation and drowning, the term *waterboarding* may not readily evoke the negative imagery that "torture" does—it almost sounds like a sport (skateboarding, snowboarding, surfboarding) and as such may subtly carry neutral, or even positive, connotations. Thus it is not surprising how President Bush could assert "we don't torture" (McNamara 2009) while also having authorized waterboarding. Similarly, referring to the treatment of detainees under the "war on terror," Ashley expressed, "I don't believe in torture, but I do believe in persuasion [laughs] and I am not sure exactly where that line draws. But I think the military has a better idea about it than I do, and I am willing to trust them." By resorting to the euphemistic term *persuasion*, Ashley grapples with knowledge of abuse and motivated ignorance, resorting to interpretative denial.

Even some U.S. interviewees who were critical of the government policies sometimes used language that implicitly downplayed the seriousness of the events described via the use of colloquialisms. For example, both Mathew (a young political organizer) and Mary (a seasoned member of a city council) used the word *ridiculous* in relation to torture and abuse by U.S. officials. In Mary's words: "I think it's kind of stupid if you [go] back to the Abu Ghraib thing and about the pictures and all that. Yeah, that was ridiculous." Mathew criticized the tactic of waterboarding prisoners stating, "with some of the things they [interrogators] do, even if these people have information or not, they're going to say that they do, just because they're so ridiculously in. . . some of the tactics that they use." While the word *ridiculous* is one of disapproval, it somewhat trivializes the events described. In that vein, Mary also spoke of how the Abu Ghraib personnel "should have gotten into trouble, and they did." Even though this kind of language might be just a colloquial expression, not necessarily reflecting the depth of the interviewees' consternation, it perhaps more readily evokes

mischievous or inappropriate deeds than serious human rights violations. Colloquialisms often have the effect of reducing the seriousness of the issues addressed, and while they may not constitute denial per se, they can have that function. To summarize, Figure 4 offers examples of euphemisms, colloquialisms, and other speech practices that contribute to the social organization of talk about human rights abuses, obscuring or keeping knowledge of state violence at arm's length.

It is easy to see power operating when military officials take people at gunpoint or media are censored through government decree. We can certainly recognize more obvious instances of fear or a sense of powerlessness in a number of our interviewees' accounts, particularly in the context of the Argentine military dictatorship. Yet in some of the phrases that people adopt to justify behaviors, in the ways they refrain themselves from speaking, and in their efforts to steer conversations to more comfortable terrain, we can also detect an intimate illustration of more subtle power operations. Cohen (2001: 10–11) notes, "Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about), and without being punished for 'knowing' the wrong things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged."

While some of the above dynamics of talk may feel or be accepted "just like everyday life," they seem to also reflect a social context that contributes to normalize disturbing political affairs. "Normal" reality is partly created through language and conversation that make some things salient while hiding others from perception. Thus, citizens in Argentina and in the United States legitimized the status quo not only through direct actions of support in some cases, but also by not thinking or talking about various highly disturbing forms of state violence, and by employing forms of speech that downplay the significance of

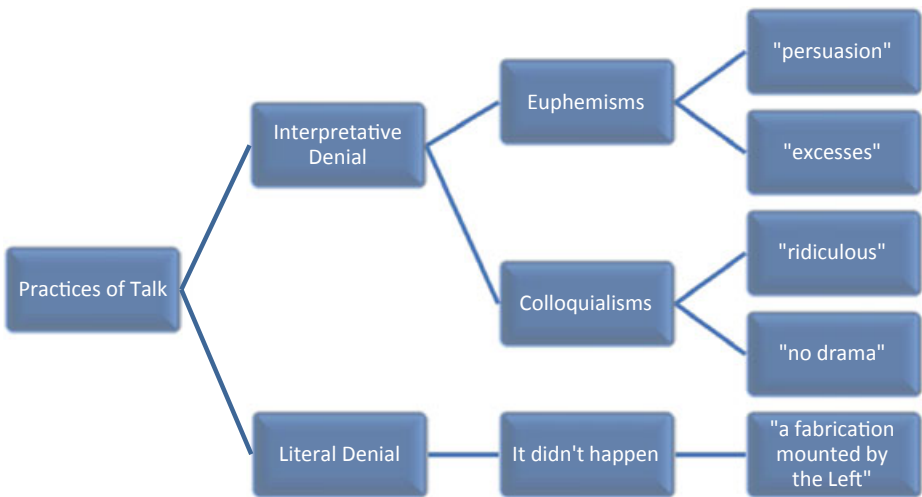


Fig. 4. The Social Organization of Talk.

such events. Ultimately, the absence of political conversations about illegitimate state violence works to hold this “normal” reality in place. Leigh Payne’s (2008) examination of “unsettling accounts” of human rights abuses committed during authoritarian and democratic systems (including the cases examined here), points to the importance of citizen political participation as a way to crack state secrecy and denial. Even if painful, difficult, and contentious, public debate that fully engages with evidence of illegitimate state violence is essential to fostering a human rights culture.

CONCLUSION

A rich tradition of psychological research documents denial as an internal mental process. However, individual cognitive mechanisms are rarely analyzed in social or political context, and seldom are these concepts combined with social or political theory. Our project builds a bridge between psychological and sociological work. We explore, for example, how cognitive dissonance or threats to individual feelings of security are sometimes resolved through denial practices that are mediated by highly charged political situations.

In addition, this project interrogates common assumptions about how information on human rights abuses circulates in society. It is often assumed that if information were truly available to the public (through the mass media, word of mouth, or other channels), it would lead to greater public outcry and action for social change (see, e.g., Zhou 2013). Yet our work indicates that this process is more complicated. Instead, knowledge is affected not only by the quality and nature of the circulating information, but by how the public negotiates this information and the power relations embedded in such dynamics. Although outright censorship and/or more subtle suppression of information was occurring in each case, our interviews indicate that there was “enough” information available to potentially provoke widespread condemnation. And still, even many well-meaning individuals looked the other way.

Thus this study is also about the cultural reproduction of power involving state-civil society relations. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony suggests that ordinary people’s “consent” is central to the maintenance of the status quo, and this cooperation is secured through cultural ideas and practices. How people make sense of political events, including human rights violations, is shaped by ideology and social interactions, both in the private and public realms. We outline how the ideologies of patriotism and national security on the one hand, and the social organization of silence and talk on the other each function as legitimating cultural practices in two different national and political contexts.

In this way, the study highlights areas of overlap regarding ordinary people’s responses to human rights violations under political systems often seen as diametrically opposed. Even though we heard resistive narratives in both cases, we also found that individuals in each place were affected by and contributed to cultures of denial that incorporated aspects of official accounts in various

degrees. While official discourse and goals can be more directly enforced in a dictatorship than in a democracy—e.g., through the use of arbitrary and brutal force—fear of retaliation is only part of the story. We show how official denial is culturally reproduced, for example, through nationalistic attachment, ideological alignment with those in power, endorsement of national security definitions, trust in the military as protectors, “us” versus “them” mentality, as well as implicit norms about what is appropriate to say or not say in everyday conversations and in the broader public sphere.

While it is generally not socially acceptable to support torture and related abuses, many people tacitly condone their practice. Understanding the socially organized mechanisms by which ordinary people turn a blind eye to human rights violations is essential to stopping such abuses, bringing perpetrators to justice, and preventing future occurrences.

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