# "Should I Trust the Bank or the Social Movement?" Constraints to Framing and Debtors' Work to Believe Misinformation

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#### Abstract

How can people believe corporate and state misinformation even though a successful social movement organization (SMO) in their community has been countering this misinformation for years? This article addresses this question through ethnographic analysis of Chilean social housing debtors. I identify three constraints to debtors' trust in SMOs' counter-information and four ways in which some debtors come to accept bank and state misinformation despite knowing they are being misinformed. I argue that debtors must make an effort ("work") to trust and accept dubious misinformation. Studies of social movement framing effectiveness should thus pay more attention to target audiences' interpretive work.

In Chile, social (low-income) housing is sold by private developers and financed by a combination of state subsidies, individual savings, and bank loans. Since 2007, the National Association of Home-Mortgage Debtors (ANDHA) and its splinter groups organized thousands of social housing debtors to collectively default and thus pressure the state to cancel their mortgages. Since then, the government and banks have agreed to put a moratorium on foreclosures, until a solution for the debtors' demands is found. In the meantime, however, banks have not stopped pressuring defaulted debtors to pay. When collectors call ANDHA members, they simply respond, "I'm a debtor with ANDHA-Chile" and collectors give up, anticipating the call is a waste of time. However, when collectors call non-members in default, they threaten foreclosure, and debtors often believe the threat, sometimes taking high-interest loans from other lenders to cover their late installments. How can some debtors still believe collectors' threats, after many years of a moratorium on foreclosures—even when a debtors' social movement organization (SMO) exists in their neighborhood? To put the puzzle more abstractly: how can people be so misinformed after a successful SMO has counter-informed the opposite in their community for years?

The intuitive simple answer to the question is that ANDHA has not done a good job at countering misinformation. This is part of the answer. But the question is more puzzling if we consider that debtors, including members, sometimes trust the banks' and the state's misinformation more than their own organization's counter-information. They do this even when they have heard about the moratorium and know about the banks' and state's misinformation practices. And knowing this, they do not even seek alternative information. Furthermore, they sign loan modifications they do not understand, having heard from neighbors that the terms of the loans are often unilaterally changed adding unexplained charges. Finally, not only do they

knowingly accept being misinformed, but they do not even bother about this much. Previous research would lead us to predict that, as people realize they have been deceived, they would lose trust in institutions and follow activists' counter-information and their calls for collective action (Beamish 2001; Krogman 1996; Robinson 2009). But the case of social housing debtors shows that this is not always true.

Thus, to understand why people are misinformed even when there is an SMO counterinforming, I ask two specific research questions: (1) why do misinformed people not believe SMOs' counter-information?; and (2) why and how do they accept misinformation even though they know they are being deceived? These are important questions for our understanding of the relation between misinformation and acquiescence and for studies of social movement framing and counter-framing. We have begun to learn how people understand and accept authorities' misinformation and "labor of confusion" and how such labor can induce acquiescence, particularly when misinformation is not being challenged (Auyero and Swistun 2009). But, as Auyero and Swistun (p.7) point out, studies depicting movements countering misinformation tend to present a fluid story about a community overcoming misinformation (e.g. Gould 1993; Krogman 1996; Levine 1982). Only recently have we begun to understand the difficulties SMOs' leaders face when trying to contradict government misinformation. Our incipient knowledge about these difficulties is limited to extreme and rare cases in which movements communicate information that goes beyond the "limits of [people's] imagination"—e.g. that Nazis were planning to exterminate all Jews, including those working for them (Einwohner 2009). We still need more research on the difficulties of counter-informing, especially in the more common case in which counter-information is within the limits of the imaginable.

To answer the first research question, I indicate three constraints to people's trust in counter-information that operate in the case of Chilean housing debtors. First, statements made in the name of an institution such as a bank or the state carries a certain credibility in the ears of non-members that is lacking in the speech of SMO leaders. Second, believing an SMO rather than a misinforming corporation is not a purely cognitive act, but also involves risks that debtors are not willing to take. Third, when leaders disappoint expectations and debtors do not "need" the SMOs' assistance, debtors seek someone else to trust, sometimes redirecting their trust to a corporation. At a more general level, these constraints show us that disbelief in counterinformation is not determined by "structural" constraints, but by what Eliasoph (1997) calls individuals' and groups' "work" to select interpretations. More specifically, the first constraint to debtors' trust in counter-information that I identify shows that people make efforts to bolster their trust in misinforming agents, especially when they feel ambivalence because of contradictory information or misinforming agents' bad record. The three constraints indicate that, because who to believe has major practical implications and is difficult, people have to make an effort or "work" to decide whether or not it is worth believing SMOs or the SMOs' adversaries.

To answer the second question, about why people accept misinformation, I argue that debtors interpret evident misinformation in ways that allow them to minimize and counter the feeling of being abused. Because counter-information is perceived as costly in various ways and the banks and state induce debtors to expect misinformation, debtors tend to interpret misinformation as inevitable. Yet instead of feeling upset about it, debtors do interpretive work to frame misinformation as acceptable. One way of doing this work is downplaying it as not so relevant. Another way is reframing their decision to assume the costs created by

misinformation—or that counter-information could diminish—in ways that makes them feel in control of their lives, specifically, their homes. They may not control how much they are charged; yet they don't have to be eternally waiting for an SMO, the state, or the bank to lower their payments, because they can pay and deal with those charges on their own. In doing this, they contribute to their own economic oppression by the banks.

My answers to these questions have important theoretical implications for our still rather "descriptive" understanding of framing and counter-framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000:626). Framing refers to SMOs' generation of frames or "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate" their activities (2000:614). Counter-framing refers to the "attempts to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's" frames (Benford 1987:75). Benford and Snow have argued that frames resonate with members or potential members, and whether or not they resonate depends largely on the frames' salience to targets of mobilization and their credibility (2000; Snow and Benford 1988). The former is theorized as a function of centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity, while the latter is explained as a function of the frames' consistency, empirical credibility, and the frame articulators' credibility—derived from their status. Unfortunately, Snow and Benford's focus on resonance stresses SMOs' and their leaders' agency in spreading interpretations or ideas that members or potential members adopt, overlooking the agency people have in "deciding" which frame to believe. They have to decide—perhaps not consciously—whose information is more credible and if it is worth believing it. My analysis of people's work to decide what and whose information to believe shows that credibility and framing are more dynamic than what Snow and Benford suggest. Credibility depends not only on frame articulators' efforts and status or on the

phenomenological lifeworld of the targets of framing (Snow and Benford 1988), but on the latter's interpretive work and their relationships with leaders.

Our insufficient knowledge about why some people in a community believe and consent to misinforming sources while others believe SMOs' counter-information is a consequence not only of lack of attention, but also of methodological decisions. Studies dealing with the interpretation of counter-information either focus on variation in time—before and after the SMOs' counter-information (e.g. Levine 1982; Robinson 2009)—or between communities (e.g. Einwohner 2009; Gould 1993). Yet we have not paid enough attention to individual-level variation of meaning-making processes within groups or communities exposed to both information and counter-information (Robinson 2009:25). The case of Chilean social housing debtors is particularly suitable to observe this variation. First, it allows ethnographic comparison of similar people in the same context, some of whom believe misinformation while others do not believe it. Second, interpretations of (mis)information among these debtors correlate with their choices about whether to consent (pay the mortgage) or resist (default).

Beyond these methodological advantages, the case of Chilean social housing debtors is interesting in that it illustrates resistance and active consent to financial oppression. This is a subject of substantive importance and where misinformation is prevalent, as the studies of predatory lending have shown (e.g. Fields et al. 2010; Willis 2006).

# **METHODS**

This article is based on nine months of ethnographic observation, almost five in 2011, four in 2012, and a few days in 2013. For most of this time, I was living in the social housing neighborhood I call Las Lilas, in the periphery of Santiago. It was one of the few neighborhoods with a local chapter of the two largest SMOs that splintered from the original and now defunct

ANDHA Chile. One SMO is ANDHA Chile A Luchar (hereafter simply "ANDHA," as people often call it), the largest debtors' association. This organization engaged in a clientelist relation with current President Piñera when it mobilized electoral support in the 2010 runoff election in exchange for a promised "solution" to the debt problem. However, it partially broke its alliance with the government in 2012, when the promised solution they had patiently waited for appeared to vanish. The other group is ANDHA Chile A Luchar-Democrático (hereafter "ANDHA-Democrático"), which splintered from ANDHA during the 2010 runoff campaign. It supports a confrontationist strategy and its main leader, Roxana Miranda, is the 2013 presidential candidate of the Equality Party (Partido Igualdad), a party formed by leaders of working-class SMOs.

The fieldwork included various methods. I interviewed 79 debtors, 12 of them twice in different years to analyze changes across time, and sometimes with their spouses or neighbors to observe agreements and disagreements. I recorded all but nine of the interviews, after which I recorded or wrote detailed notes. Interviewees were selected by a combination of snowball sampling and intentional sampling to increase trust and variation in terms of leadership status, organizational membership, paying status, change in paying status, eligibility for subsidies, gender, and neighborhood of residence.<sup>4</sup> All interviewee's and informant's names, except those of national leaders, are replaced by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. I interviewed debtors and SMO members in Las Lilas, in other neighborhoods where debtors' organizations exist, and in unorganized neighborhoods. Additionally, I interviewed an advisor of the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism who dealt with debtors for almost a decade and the former president of the StateBank (*BancoEstado*)—the autonomous state-owned bank, which granted almost all of the social housing mortgages with financing from mortgage-backed securities sold to investors.

The participant observation component included attending 48 neighborhood and metropolitan meetings of the debtors' SMOs, seven protests, two ANDHA-Democrático fundraiser parties, and the only Neighborhood Association's assembly that took place during the period. I also followed many debtors to the bank, the Housing and Urbanism Service, and municipal social assistance offices. Of course, I had innumerable informal conversations with homeowners and leaders. Finally, since 2011, I have followed the SMOs', government's, and banks' websites and the news about debtors, and analyzed news and other archival material from previous years.

Access to ANDHA-Democrático was granted through the endorsement of an acquaintance who is a leader of the Equality Party. Access to ANDHA was limited because of their policy of organizational secrecy. Thus, five members rejected an interview, while eleven members granted interviews and other three talked in informal conversations. The sample could be skewed against members who are closer to the leadership and thus more informed and cautious about secrecy. However, this is compensated in part by conversations before the local leader specifically instructed block delegates not to talk to me and by three interviews with members from neighborhoods where leaders had not given such instructions. In any case, organizational differences do not appear relevant in the findings presented here.

In the next two sections, I provide a brief contextualization of the case of Chilean social housing debtors and then explain how banks and the state use misinformation to increase debtors' consent to these institutions' demands. The two subsequent sections address the two specific research questions. First, I show that debtors sometimes do not trust the SMOs counterinformation because the three abovementioned constraints. When faced with these constraints, debtors must engage in interpretive work to choose whom to believe. Second, I argue that

debtors are induced to accept misinformation by various types of costs of counter-information and the normalization of misinformation. But inducements are not enough: debtors also work to make misinformation bearable by downplaying it or reframing it in other ways that allow them to avoid feeling powerless. In the conclusion I discuss my findings' implications for our knowledge of counter-information and, more generally, for the study of social movement framing—which has hitherto overlooked the interpretive agency of frame targets—and suggest ideas for further research.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILEAN MORTGAGE DEBTORS

One of the most important Chilean social movements between 2003 and 2009 was the mortgage debtor's movement, represented by the original ANDHA-Chile and its splinter groups. ANDHA-Chile first organized public housing debtors to collectively default and resist eviction. This pressured the government to grant debt cancellations for all public housing debtors between 2005 and 2007. In 2006, ANDHA began organizing social housing debtors—who had bought low-income, subsidized housing from private developers with loans from banks—to demand cancellations for them. Like public housing debtors had done before, thousands of social housing debtors collectively defaulted in 2007.

As a response, the government granted some concessions. Massively foreclosing debtors appeared politically untenable, and congressmen of the government and opposition began supporting debtors. Debtors also threatened to burn or destroy foreclosed properties. Thus, the state and banks agreed to an informal moratorium on foreclosures until a satisfactory solution to the mortgage problem was reached. As long as debtors' or the state paid later, this was beneficial for banks, as interests accumulated during the moratorium. The state also needed debtors to pay, for three reasons: massive foreclosures would look bad politically; it has to pay warranties for a

percentage of the debt balance not covered by the auctioning of foreclosed homes; and the sustainability of social housing finance policy requires banks' participation and, consequently, the payment of mortgages. The state first tried to encourage people to start paying again by subsidizing loan modifications with a reduced interest rate in 2007. But that was ineffective. Thus, in 2009, the government granted subsidies for 50 or 60 percent of each on-time monthly payment for some of the most "socially vulnerable" debtors, as measured by the Social Welfare Record score—an algorithm computing income generating capacity divided by the family's needs. In 2011, the same and smaller subsidies were extended to debtors from newer housing programs, somewhat less "socially vulnerable" debtors, and divorced wives of debtors.

Many debtors accepted the subsidies. First, the subsidized monthly payments were more affordable. Additionally, after defaulting for a long time, many debtors were losing hopes and worried about possible foreclosures, so they wanted to resume paying to avoid risks. They had wanted to resume paying before but could not do it because until then it was very difficult: they could modify their loan to pay some late installments after the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the mortgage, but the bank required a lump sum to cover some of the late installments and penalty fees upfront. The subsidies for on-time payments were associated with a one-time subsidy for loan modification costs that made it easy to start paying again, thus encouraging many debtors to take these subsidies.

On the other hand, many debtors were not satisfied with these solutions. Some debtors did not qualify for the partial subsidies. Among those who qualified but had been in default, many considered the subsidy insufficient, because they had to pay many additional years for accumulated interest and penalties, often doubling the years remaining. They expected a full or more substantive cancellation of their debt, either as a subsidy, or as a consequence of the debt's

legal expiration after five years of no payment. Ineligible debtors and those unsatisfied with the solution stayed in default; some of them as members of a debtors' SMO, others passively waiting for a solution or "free-riding" on the SMOs' struggle.

#### THE BANKS' AND STATE'S MISINFORMATION PRACTICES

I registered for the credit card, I grabbed the card, I went home, and I stored it. The next month, my friends—the next month!—I received a bill for an insurance attached to the card that I didn't know about: an insurance in case I got lost in Alaska! Can you believe that shit! In Alaska... I said "there must be an error, they made a mistake." I went to the headquarters of Master Plop! [card] to try to solve the problem . . . I got there, a young lady received me; I said "good afternoon, miss." "Good afternoon, mister." "Miss," I said, "I come for the Master Plop card." "I don't know," she said, "I don't know." "No," I said, "the thing is that I registered for the card and they are giving me an insurance that I didn't take." "I don't know," she said, "I don't know, I don't..., I don't know, I don't..." "Miss," I said, "who could help me solve this problem?" "I don't know," she said, "I don't know, I don't..., I don't know, I don't know..." I got upset and I asked her "Well, then what the hell are you doing here?" "I don't know, I don't..., I don't know, I don't know..." "Aaah!" I said, "I'm wasting my time here!" . . . So I left. So I asked "where's the exit, miss" "I don't know," she said, "I don't know." . . . The next month, my friends, I got another debt, for another insurance! In case a kangaroo steps on me!

Chilean stand-up comedian Daniel "Bombo" Fica (2012)

This quote is from a stand-up comedy show that reached the highest Chilean television audience ratings in years. It represents the generalized feeling of Chileans about the underregulated finance industry, which frequently imposes charges without consultation (Weissman 2013). Since 2011, cases of unilateral changes in finance charges for student loans, debit cards, and retailer-generated credit cards, have become known and turned into major scandals in the news (Barrionuevo 2011; Benado 2013; Soto 2012; Weissman 2013). The StateBank, which manages most social housing mortgages, has also been involved in these scandals.

Social housing debtors' also experienced *unilateral changes in terms* and conditions of mortgages with mysterious insurance charges, which ANDHA-Democrático members interpreted by quoting "Bombo" Fica's insurance "in case a kangaroo steps on me." After the third month of modifying defaulted loans and paying again, a surprising insurance charge appeared in mortgage statements, even though the loan modifications signed and bank agents indicated that all insurance charges were included in the price of their first monthly payment. When Samuel (non-member debtor) complained, bank agents could not eliminate the charge even though he was unable to explain what it was for.

A second form of misinformation experienced by debtors involves inducing debtors into transactions without information about the original terms and conditions. For instance, I witnessed how two debtors were told to sign their loan modification on a page where the cell indicating interest rate and amount of each installment were left blank. The bank representative only provided a rough verbal estimate and told them that the actual amounts would appear in the bill next month, after the loan modification was signed and paid for. Another debtor received an unexplained statement for a payment to be made in 2020. The statement apparently concerned a new loan she had not been informed about, to cover interests for defaulted months, to be paid all

at once after the mortgage is paid. Roxana Miranda, ANDHA-Democrático's main leader, reported seeing many cases of second loans about which debtors had not been informed. The exact same practices have been uncovered in news scandals as being massively conducted by other banks (e.g., *El Mostrador* 2013; Pérez and Cércamo 2012; Soto 2012).

State and bank agents also withhold information or give inaccurate information. Almost as in "Bombo" Fica's joke, agents typically provided very short answers without explaining all the options, and often giving debtors no solution to their requests, even when I assisted in asking questions. When two of the agents asked who I was and I explained I was conducting research for a thesis, they changed their attitude and explained more details in a friendly manner. Yet, even when agents were friendly, they often did not have the necessary information to answer questions, often providing wrong information or continually redirecting debtors to another office. For example, Samuel received information about a subsidy application only after visiting five offices. Later in 2012, when Samuel asked a bank agent why the third installment after the loan modification was more expensive, the agent and supervisor only explained that it corresponded to an insurance, without specifying what kind of insurance. Thus, Samuel will probably never use the insurance.<sup>5</sup> Since the subsidized loan modification indicated all insurance costs were included before the new mysterious one, which almost completely annulled the subsidy on monthly payments, Samuel inquired at the government's Housing and Urbanism Service. One agent told Samuel it was a problem between him and the bank. A supervisor offered to lodge a complaint, but the response, months later, was that he should address that with the bank. An agent at the National Service for Customers offered to send a letter to the bank demanding an explanation, but after a month they replied that the bank had not responded. Similarly, state agents at higher levels of the hierarchy also withheld information. As part of a clientelist

exchange for electoral support, the government restricted information about full debt cancellations for debtors with severe disability or extreme hardship to ANDHA members, even though it publicized information about partial subsidies in radio and newspapers.

False threats and other *lies about the consequences* of not paying constitute the fourth but perhaps most important form of misinformation. In spite of the informal moratorium on foreclosures initiated in 2007, banks normally sent letters informing of possible foreclosures on defaulted loans, as required by the law to collect the state warranty on the loans. Yet these attempts to collect debt were not just a legal obligation, they also worked as a technique to pressure debtors in default back on track with their payments. This is evidenced by insistent phone calls to collect the debt with false threats of foreclosure or seizure of property, which are not required to collect the warranty. Collectors and bank agents also told debtors that by modifying their defaulted loan and paying again, they would be more likely to qualify for new subsidies on monthly payments, which is not true. Finally, bank and state agents misinformed about the consequences of missing a mortgage payment. This led some debtors to believe that if they missed a payment they would lose the subsidy for on-time payments forever, while in fact they would only lose the subsidy for late payments.

In sum, misinformation in various forms is a common practice of state and especially bank agents. In doing this, agents articulate misinforming frames about what will happen depending on debtors' actions—"prognostic frames" (Benford 1993)—or about what is at stake in an exchange—e.g., a legal charge or an abuse, one or two loans, saving the house or not, an issue that involves only the bank and the debtor or also the state, etc. Debtors' adoption of these misinforming frames allows the state to restrict the use of subsidies and allows banks to increase

profits through the payment of additional charges in insurance or loan modifications, or by securing the uncertain payment of defaulted mortgages.

#### **DEBTORS' DISTRUST OF SMOS' COUNTER-INFORMATION**

In this section I explain how debtors' come to trust or distrust the SMOs' counter-information efforts. By trust I refer particularly to the belief that the trusted actor's claims, including promises for future behavior, are true and truthful. More specifically, I refer to trust as a cognition associated with commitments or behaviors (Sztompka 1999:25-9). Debtors do not simply have to believe misinformation or counter-information, but have to *act* as if the information they trust is true.

I begin this section by describing the counter-information practices, their importance for keeping members and non-members from paying, and the weaknesses of the SMOs' work of counter-informing non-members. Each of the subsequent parts of this section explains one of the three abovementioned constraints to debtors' trust in the SMOs' counter-information. These constraints affect both members and non-members. Of course, non-members are generally less likely to trust the SMOs' counter-information, insofar as membership is partly a consequence having some trust in leaders and also contributes to reproducing that trust. However, members also distrust counter-information sometimes, because trust is dynamic, not stable. The analysis below shows that trust in counter-information is neither a learned disposition nor a rational evaluation, as it is generally understood (Nannestad 2008). To a large extent, trust in counter-information is a decision debtors make—considering their previous experiences—when confronted with difficult choices about whom to trust.

# SMOs' Counter-information

As the reader may expect, an important part of the debtors' SMOs' job is to counter the banks' and state's misinformation. Perhaps the most important way in which SMOs counter-inform is by informing about the moratorium on foreclosures. ANDHA-Democrático leaders reassure debtors who receive letters or calls with threats of foreclosures that the moratorium is still active. They explain that letters are a formality required by state's warranty on the loan and that collectors are just trying to reactivate their debt—which, by law, should expire after five years without payment. They also explain that the two evictions in the neighborhood were not related to foreclosures of mortgage debtors but only to termination of contracts of *leasing* (rent-to-buy) tenants.<sup>6</sup> While the first letter scared some members, the leaders' reassurance led these members to maintain their default. They were confident that they will not be foreclosed upon soon, and most of them were confident that even if foreclosures were reactivated, they will be safe if they remain as members because the organization will protect them. Non-members were less confident, but some also resisted debt-payment after leaders taught them about the moratorium on foreclosures, testifying to the importance of counter-information.

SMOs' work countering other forms of misinformation is also important. For instance, when some ANDHA-Democrático members considered modifying their loans to start paying again, its national leader warned about frauds experienced by other defaulters, such as unknowingly signing a second loan to be paid in parallel or one after the mortgage. Patricio (ANDHA-Democrático member) explains this as game-changing information that deterred him from modifying his loan and paying again, particularly after he heard similar experiences from non-members.

The organizations do not systematically spread this information to non-members. ANDHA prohibits members from sharing information, because it defends information and the subsidies obtained through information as "selective incentives" (Olson 1965)—that is, benefits for members only, meant to motivate participation. On the other hand, ANDHA-Democrático spreads information on a random basis, mostly because local members are not interested in recruiting new members, whom they see as dropouts who had a chance for organizational support and did not take it. About two or three times a year the main national leader, Roxana Miranda, visits each neighborhood, sometimes inviting potential new members to meetings and informing them about the moratorium. Non-members sometimes also hear about this when they run into a local leader or a somewhat trusted member such as a neighbor from their block. However, non-members receive less clear or complete information than members: non-leaders have less knowledge to explain a situation and, when non-members attend meetings, leaders seldom go out of their way to explain laws or concepts that members know but non-members are not familiar with. In sum, while debtors' SMOs counter-information is sometimes effective, they do not do the best job at counter-informing non-members.

# The Risks of Trusting SMOs' Counter-Information

In January 2011, Ismael modified his loan for the third time, after his third default in ten years. He soon missed a payment again. In May, after the second missed payment, the bank called, threatening with seizure of his goods and eviction if he did not pay. Though he was a member of ANDHA until 2009 and thus knew about the moratorium of foreclosures at that time, he believed the threat. He thought that maybe now, with a right wing government, foreclosures or at least seizures of goods were reactivated, even though he had been in default for many months under the same administration in 2010. Thus, he tried to gather the money to catch up on payments.

He gathered the money, but the day before he had planned to pay, he ran into Carola, one of ANDHA-Democrático's neighborhood leaders. Ismael told her about his plan to pay because of the threats. Carola told him not to worry because the moratorium was still active, explaining that many of his neighbors have not been foreclosed upon after years of default. She also invited Ismael to the weekly meeting. He trusted Carola, at least until the next day, and decided not to pay, but he was "not untroubled," he said. When I interviewed him the next day he was still saving the money for the late payments, just in case, and asked me to confirm if Carola's word was true. What if Carola was wrong and he actually got evicted? Believing her involved a major risk. The risk constrained Ismael from fully trusting Carola. On the other hand, he had borrowed money to pay because he was having financial difficulties—he was not working overtime since his employer was going bankrupt. He knew that if he repaid, he would probably miss payments again next month. Thus, he wanted not to pay, but had to make a difficult *decision* about whether to trust Carola and assume the associated risk.

# The Trustworthiness of Institutions and the Untrustworthiness of Leaders

Ismael had felt disappointed ANDHA's leaders' promise of a solution in 2009. While Carola was not the leader who disappointed him, he was reluctant to trust a leader so easily. Carola was not one of the leaders who had disappointed him before, but Ismael was generally distrustful of leaders. The day after the meeting, during an interview, he asked me about the moratorium to confirm Carola's word. "But, how come they call? The bank agents call you that they'll foreclose on your home!" he said, when I confirmed the moratorium's current validity. Ismael ended up not paying, thus believing me; yet he was not immediately convinced.

Ismael's question suggests that statements made in the name of institutions like the state and banks carry a certain institutional credibility in the ears of non-members, which gives institutional misinformation an advantage over SMO's counter-information. Non-members did not consider bank or state agents as necessarily helpful or saying all the truth, but they believed that agents cannot easily make up regulations or facts. Some non-members may not have trusted bank agents very much; however, when they expressed suspicion of institutional information, they generally directed distrust against municipal agents, whom many perceived as saving municipal resources for relatives and mayors' political clients. Debtors invoked regulations against institutional fraud and the formality of institutions as reasons to trust them. Take, for example, Ximena's explanation for why she trusted a bank agent who promised that installments would not increase with unexpected insurance charges or second loans after signing a loan modification to start paying again:

I believe what the girl [bank agent] says [about no additional insurance being added later], because I think that if they're not trained to give information to the people they shouldn't talk. I mean, I think I don't think it [the mortgage] is a game aaaaaand... the thing about the loan modification, I don't think either [that it could be fraudulent], because you are signing a document and the document is respected until the last month

In contrast to non-members, SMO members tended to take bank and state information with a grain of salt—however, given ANDHA's clientelist ties to the government, ANDHA members generally trusted the government until the partial breakdown of their alliance in May 2012. SMO members had learned that banks and the state often misinformed them with false threats for a long time and thus assume that they may be trying to trick debtors into paying. They would trust the Housing Minister's advisors' promises sometimes, but only when they felt there was no other option, as when an advisor promised to obtain a special subsidy for a *leasing* rent-to-buy debtor

facing eviction. Even then, Carola, ANDHA-Democrático's local leader, would constantly call the advisor to pressure her, knowing that things could get delayed or that the advisor could change her mind and not help obtain the subsidy. Members would only trust written documents, recurrently saying things like "I will believe it when I see the document in my hands." But since early 2012, they would be skeptical of written documents as well. They had heard of insurance charges added without consultation and of debtors signing loans modifications without seeing an attached second loan to pay penalties or interests on late payments. Thus, when Angélica inquired about the conditions for a loan modification to start paying again, members were suspicious and asked if the bank agent gave her any written explanation of the terms and conditions; but even after hearing that the document said all insurance charges were included from the beginning, members were worried about unexpected "kangaroo loans"—referring to Bombo Fica's stand-up routine. As mentioned above, Patricio explained that he did not start paying again because he feared potential undisclosed second loans attached to loan modifications.

Given non-members' tendency to doubt that state and bank agents' would lie, these debtors sought other sources to confirm counter-information, such as trusted neighbors or, in Ismael and Miguel's case, an informed "third party" like me. With this information, and considering the risks involved, they had to *decide* who to trust. Ismael and Miguel ended up trusting Carola and me, but Esteban did not. While trust or distrust may partially be a disposition adopted through a long relationship with leaders or institutions, when confronted with a difficult decision they did not pre-reflexively trust one source; rather, they engaged in an active decision about who to trust.

**Redirecting Trust** 

When debtors' expectations of receiving a satisfactory solution to their mortgage problem was

low, they generally tried to start paying again, either taking whatever existing subsidy they

qualified for, or paying a required lump sum. But sometimes, they did not qualify for a subsidy

or a loan modification was not a satisfactory solution. This was typically the case when they did

not have the lump sum or when they believed they would have to pay too much for too many

years. In such cases, members made an effort or "worked" (Eliasoph 1997) to convince

themselves and their peers that a satisfactory solution will come and that the SMO will help

them. Ximena's account of how she dealt with limited hopes in 2011 illustrates such work:

Ximena: I still have... as the saying goes, hope or faith is the only... the *last* thing

that we lose, I still have lots of faith . . . [inaudible] I've been down sometimes;

once I cried with the bad news, they had said that... I don't even remember what

it was... It was some news they said the day of a meeting. I cried of anger,

because why the hell did I get into what I shouldn't have been into [i.e. into

default or ANDHA-Democrático]!?

Author: Because of the concern that foreclosures may be reactivated any time?

Ximena: Yeah, it hit me there. [pause]

Author: Uhu.

Ximena: But then I said "no, it can't be," and there, everyone helping, I mean,

supporting more than anything, because I was the only one in tears... and quietly,

y'know! So then, my neighbors were like "no, the last thing that we lose is faith,

vou always tell us," "carry on [i.e., stay in ANDHA-Democrático] Ximena, we're

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already in this [i.e., in default, in ANDHA-Democrático], we're almost there [i.e., about to obtain a satisfactory subsidy], we were already in debt [i.e., already in default when they joined the organization]." (original emphasis)

In contrast, when members with low expectations saw an alternative that did not require the organization's assistance, they did not make an effort to regain hopes and trust in the organization. This was Ximena's situation in 2012, after visiting the bank with Carola (the local leader). Before that visit, Ximena thought that if she decided to take the subsidy on monthly payments, she would have to sign a loan modification to pay for almost 30 more years, as some of her neighbors had. However, given the new loan modification system, in her visit she found out that the loan modification would commit her to pay only for 14 more years. ANDHA-Democrático leaders warned Ximena that if she signed a loan modification, there could be a surprising insurance charge later, or that she could unknowingly be signing for a second loan to cover penalties and accumulated interests. Furthermore, Ximena's friend, Ingrid (ANDHA member), had informed Ximena that she received a statement for second loan after the second month of signing a loan modification. In spite of Ingrid's experience, Ximena did not make an effort to believe ANDHA-Democrático leaders. Why? It appears that Ximena, like others in similar situations, did not try to trust leaders because she did not need to trust those who had disappointed her expectations in order to maintain hope.

Not only did Ximena not trust the leaders' warning; she also had to make an effort to trust bank agents. She worked to overcome her doubts and justify her trust in the bank agent only eight minutes after narrating Ingrid's story of an undisclosed second loan, as if Ingrid story had not happened: ". . . aaaaaaand... the thing about the loan modification, I don't think either [that it could be fraudulent], because you are signing a document and the document is respected until the

last month" (see also the complete quote under the previous subheading). Why would she trust bank agents, after having learned for years, as a member of ANDHA-Democrático, of the banks' misinforming practices and after hearing Ingrid's experience? Ximena had to trust somebody and decide who, and although trusting the bank agent was risky, it was not somebody who had disappointed her before. Thus, she redirected her trust to the bank agent. In contrast, Patricio, who was also offered a similar loan modification, *preferred* to trust ANDHA-Democrático leaders' warning, because he was not disappointed by leaders and still had hopes that he could obtain something better by struggling with ANDHA-Democrático.

To summarize: when members' expectations had been disappointed by leaders and they had lost hopes, they worked to raise their hopes if they felt they needed the SMO; however, when they felt they did not need the SMO, because they could solve their debt or default problems on their own, they redirected their trust away from previously disappointing leaders and towards banks and the state. This only applies to debtors disappointed by the SMO, since those not disappointed tended to believe leaders' interpretations, namely, that the available solution to their debt or default problem is not that good or can backfire. Unlike the two previous constraints to debtors' trust in counter-information, which constrain mostly non-members' trust, the effort to redirect trust constrains some members' trust in leaders, moving them away form the SMOs and closer to the banks and state.

# **ACCEPTING MISINFORMATION**

Why and how do debtors come to accept misinformation even when they know they are being deceived? There are four complementary answers to this question. First, counter-information is perceived as costly, not only in terms of its associated organizational commitments, but also in terms of the emotional costs of some interactions and state threats against counter-information.

Second, debtors come to expect misinformation as the norm, both because of its frequency and because the bank and state teach debtors to expect it and not fight against it. Third, debtors work to make misinformation not only expected but also acceptable as not a major problem, by downplaying it. Finally, by downplaying misinformation and other practices, debtors reframe misinformation in ways that allow them to avoid the powerlessness associated with being misinformed and not being able to fight it. These reframing practices make debtors feel more in control of their homes in spite of misinformation, and work as psychological rewards for accepting misinformation.

#### The Costs of Obtaining Counter-information

The simplest answer to why debtors accept the state's or banks' misinformation is that they do not want to ask the SMOs because they perceive there are costs associated to it. The most obvious cost is the requirement to participate, if not in protests, at least in meetings. This expectation has its origins in ANDHA's long-standing policy of treating information as a benefit for members only, although ANDHA-Democrático does not share this policy. The four non-members who attended one ANDHA-Democrático meeting during my fieldwork invoked time constraints or their unwillingness to attend protests when explaining why they never contacted the leader or attended another meeting afterwards. These debtors ended up obtaining (mis)information from banks or the state rather than from ANDHA-Democrático, even though they had been informed about banks and the state's misinformation practices.

Additionally, there are emotional costs to contacting the SMOs. Most debtors who dropped out from SMOs and resumed paying ended in bad terms with some members, with members and dropouts feeling betrayal or disappointment with each other. Recent dropouts still talked to members that were closer to them, but they were hurt with leaders and expressed not

feeling like talking to leaders, even if leaders were willing to talk to them again. Some would not even greet each other in the street. Those who had been warned about deceitful loan modifications had asked leaders to accompany them to sign so that leaders could read the contract, expressing that they would take full responsibility for their decision if they decided to sign. Thus, while it was not acknowledged, it appears that dropouts' pride prevented them from asking for help regarding insurance charges or second loans. Similarly, given a history of conflict between both SMOs in Las Lilas, Manuela, who had dropped out of ANDHA, did not feel so comfortable asking ANDHA-Democrático members for information about an unexpected bill for a second loan. In sum, the relationships in which debtors were embedded made counter-information emotionally costly.

The third type of cost is created by the state. This was not as common as the other ones, but was very relevant in at least one occasion. Isabel, a *leasing* (rent-to-buy) tenant who had reoccupied her foreclosed home with ANDHA-Democrático's help, was waiting for a special (discretionarily granted) subsidy to buy her home from the leasing agency. Carola was the one trying to obtain the subsidy by pressing the Housing Minister's advisor. Carola would also always accompany Isabel to do any paperwork related to the subsidy. After a few months, the Minister's advisor called Isabel to inform her that the subsidy was ready, but that she had to sign without Carola and that she could not tell Carola, otherwise, they would take the subsidy away. Fearing to lose her subsidy, Isabel was ready to go without Carola when Carola found out and stopped her.

In sum, an important reason for debtors to accept the banks' and state's misinformation is that there are costs associated with not accepting it. These costs result not only from the demand for participation in exchange for the SMO's information as a selective incentive, but also from the emotional relationships in which counter-information processes are embedded or are created by the state.

# Normalizing Misinformation

As "Bombo" Fica's previously quoted stand-up routine illustrates, misinformation is so common in Chile, and customer services are so unhelpful, that debtors come to see it as normal. First, given the complexity of some issues, debtors do not even try to understand them. They feel there is some abuse in the way things are charged, but they often think they cannot understand charges given their limited financial and legal knowledge, so they do not even consider bothering about them. As Cristóbal says, upset, "with the story that they give you there about interest, they stick a bunch of stuff in between at the bank, the amortization and what not, I have no idea what I pay; I just pay." In any case, the only explanation non-members could expect from agents is that the insurance charges or second loans in their bill are "what the [computer] system indicates." By doing this, agents depict loan conditions as a "mysterious thing" that cannot be understood, as Auyero describes a similar situation (2012:115-8).

Second, when debtors do not expect as much misinformation as the norm, banks and the state teach them a lesson to adjust their expectations. This was the case of Samuel when, as I mentioned above, he had to visit five offices to obtain information about a subsidy and, after visiting three other offices, he never obtained an explanation of the mysterious insurance charge.

#### Downplaying misinformation

However, the banks' and state's lesson is not enough by itself; debtors need to make an effort to make sense of it in a way that makes misinformation not only expected but also acceptable. Since Samuel had recently abandoned ANDHA-Democrático, he did not even consider asking them for help. Thus, after his wasteful experiences at the bank, the Housing Service, and the

National Consumer Service, Samuel had learned there was not much he could do. Thus, he just convinced himself that it was not worth fighting for and it was not a big deal: it was a waste of time and, anyways, he said, he could pay the extra \$28 a month and at least he did not have to worry about a reactivation of foreclosures anymore. This does not mean Samuel came to consider the insurance charge as normatively right, but as something acceptable that he can live with without worrying.

Other debtors, who saw their mortgage payments increase \$5 or \$10 dollars after their second month of going back to paying, even considered it normatively acceptable. They thought they were probably being misinformed and charged in excess. However, they thought, the mortgage was cheaper now, given a subsidy of between \$60 and \$110 on each monthly payment, so they were thankful that it was payable and there was not much to complain about.

# **Avoiding Powerlessness**

Housing debtors' work to interpret misinformation as acceptable did not only make it more bearable; it also functioned as a "psychological reward" for their consent to the bank's and state's demands (Burawoy 1979:85). By accepting misinformation, they were giving up hopes for paying less, but obtained something in exchange: a feeling that they have some control of their lives, specifically, their homes. They may have given up all controlled of how much they were charged; however, they did not have to be wasting time and eternally waiting for an SMO, the state, or the bank to solve a problem, because they could pay and deal with those charges without someone else's assistance. Thus, they avoided the feeling of powerlessness that would otherwise be associated with being misinformed.

Downplaying misinformation as something debtors can handle is one way of making misinformation acceptable that also tends to help debtors avoid feeling powerless, but there are

other forms in which they avoid feeling powerless about misinformation. For instance, Samuel also reframed his lack of options about having to pay the mysterious insurance as his own responsibility rather than the bank's, and as something he overcame satisfactorily:

I fucked up by not paying anymore [i.e., when he defaulted almost five years ago]. Nobody told me not to pay, I mean, I was the owner of my decision about whether or not to pay . . . I fucked up, I got into it [i.e. the SMO] too much . . . Anyways, at least I didn't spend the money [from mortgage payments], I invested it in the business . . . but most people didn't . . . Yeah, most people spent it. (From fieldnotes, possibly not verbatim)

While avoiding the costs of counter-information and normalization induce people to accept misinformation, downplaying misinformation and reframing it to avoid powerlessness are probably post-hoc rationalizations, made after deciding to accept misinformation. Nevertheless, these post-hoc rationalizations seem to be important for making misinformation bearable and sustainable. Thus, each time debtors pay whatever they are charged, thus confirming their acceptance of misinformation, they feel somehow rewarded rather than purely abused. In sum, by actively reframing their acceptance of misinformation as their own choice and as something that they are able to handle satisfactory on their own, debtors feel better about accepting misinformation and about consenting to the misinforming institutions' demands.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

In this article, I have discussed how people believe corporate and state misinformation that induces them to acquiesce in spite of the counter-information available through a relatively successful SMO in their community. Previous research had led us to expect that, unless counter-information is beyond the limits of the imaginable, people believe misinformation because

counter-information is not available. Furthermore, we had learned that people tend to side with counter-informing SMOs as soon as people realize they are being misinformed by corporations or the state. However, the case of Chilean social housing debtors shows that this is not always true. Counter-information—and, more generally, counter-framing—is more difficult than it appeared. I have tried to begin understanding why.

I tackled the problem with two specific questions. First, why do misinformed debtors do not believe the SMOs' counter-information? I showed that there are at least three constraints to debtors' trust in counter-information: (a) believing SMOs counter-information can involve risks debtors are hesitant to take; (b) speech in the name of an institutional carries a certain credibility that SMOs' leaders speech does not have in the ears of non-members; and (c) when debtors' do not feel they need the organization and have been disappointed by leaders, they prefer to direct trust away from leaders and towards bank or state agents. But these constraints do not determine distrust. Rather, they force debtors to work to decide whom to trust and to convince themselves about the adequacy of their decision.

Second, I asked why debtors accept misinformation even when they know they are being deceived. I found four answers to this question: (a) there exist costs to counter-information, notably, organizational demands for participation, loss of pride in asking for help after abandoning an SMO, and possible loss of benefits threatened by the state; (b) debtors expect misinformation given its frequency and the banks' and state's lessons that there is nothing to do against misinformation; (c) debtors downplay misinformation to make it acceptable; and (d) debtors reframe misinformation in ways that make them feel in control of their homes rather than powerless to confront misinformation and the financial abuses associated with it. As with the

"choice" of who to trust, the acceptance of misinformation involves active interpretive work by debtors.

The most evident contribution of these findings is to our knowledge of how misinformation works and produces acquiescence. We now know that having an SMO spreading counter-information "in the right ways" is not sufficient, because there are constraints that are beyond the SMOs' control. Belief in misinformation and counter-information are not simply structurally predetermined by dispositions to trust some actors; rather, they are active difficult decisions. They are motivated by associated risks, the institutional credibility of SMOs' adversaries, the need (or lack thereof) for support of SMOs, the expectation of misinformation, and the costs of obtaining information—i.e., the costs do not only make counter-information less available but also induce certain interpretations, namely, the acceptance of available misinformation. Finally, we have learned that people do not only accept misinformation when there is no alternative, but they actively work to make blatant misinformation acceptable.

Given that counter-informing is a form of counter-framing, my findings have important implications for our understanding of counter-framing processes. Until now, analysts of framing processes have focused on how counter-frames motivating participants or potential participants resonates with them or their "phenomenological lifeworld," as if the match between the frame and the lifeworld *ipso facto* motivated the adoption of the frame (Snow and Benford 1988). However, my analysis shows that social movement frames countering corporate or state frames do not simply resonate, but that people have to engage in interpretive work and *decide* to embrace one or another frame. The same applies to the process of embracing corporate or state frames. Certainly, the assumption of trustworthiness of institutions is part of Chilean non-member debtors' lifeworld affecting frame resonance. I have argued, however, that given the

combination of such cultural assumptions, alternative information presented by counter-framing leaders, and other conditions, people have to engage in an active decision of whom to trust. In other words, cultural dispositions or phenomenological "resonance" constraints matter, but they are malleable, and some contexts induce people to go against previous dispositions—e.g., when debtors' redirected trust away from their own leaders. Social movement scholars would benefit from paying more attention to the ways in which people actively engage with frames and counter-frames, the rationales motivating their choices of frames, and the motivated rationalizations that help sustaining frame alignment. Theories of social movement framing have until now focused on the agency of SMOs' leaders' and their adversaries in producing mobilizing or demobilizing interpretations, but we should now focus more on members' and potential members' interpretative agency.

Of course, my findings are not free of limitations, which could be addressed by further research. First, certain constraints to people's trust in counter-information may be different in other cases. For instance, it is likely that people are better disposed to trust SMO countering state misinformation in countries were corruption is more pervasive and expected than in Chile. Further research should explore what constraints to trust in SMOs' counter-information operate in other contexts. Second, I have not explored how social capital and certain cultures such as privatism, may affect trust in counter-information. It is possible that trust in counter-information may be affected by membership in churches or other communities that encourage or discourage social trust. Future research could better identify and explore the role of such mezzo-structural factors. In sum, I have just begun to explore how people work to interpret misinformation when counter-information is available and there is still much more to investigate.

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# **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> The moratorium apparently ended in late 2012, after I conducted most fieldwork, although I have not heard of foreclosures yet.
- <sup>2</sup> Einwohner hints at this interpretive work in her definition of "cultured ignorance" (2009:410-
- 1). However, she returns to the paradigm of passive "resonance" when she concludes that "Frame resonance is . . . limited both by the experiences and world views of the intended targets and by what they can reasonably imagine to be true" (p.424).
- <sup>3</sup> Robinson began addressing this issue, but dedicated only two sentences to it, contrasting with her many pages dedicated to those who questioned the government's misinformation.
- <sup>4</sup> Interviewees contacted without snowball sampling almost always demonstrated trust by talking about their lies in the Social Welfare Record survey to lower their scores.
- <sup>5</sup> Similarly, the 2011 subsidy on monthly payments comes with a fully-subsidized insurance covering mortgage installments in case of unemployment or disability, but no interviewee knew about this; thus, it is unlikely that debtors will ever use it.
- <sup>6</sup> Some ANDHA members were unsure and thought that only organized debtors are protected from foreclosures.