Being a Young Person Deprived of Liberty in Cities in the Northern Mexico

Ser joven privado de la libertad en ciudades del norte de México

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to analyze the narratives of four young people from border cities who were deprived of their liberty for having proven their participation in a crime. The narratives are approached from a qualitative perspective to delve into the meanings involved in building identities in a border context. The field work was developed during 2018 and 2019 in the treatment centers for adolescents in San Luis Río Colorado and Nogales, Sonora, as well as in Güémez, Tamaulipas, Mexico. One of the substantive findings was to identify the process of internalization and normalization of a state of permanent precariousness in the actors in the absence of structural strategies that homogenize the youth. The analysis from these dimensions provides empirical elements in the discussion about heterogeneities in youth identities; elements for an epistemological, holistic and situational discussion on the accumulation of situations of vulnerability that certain actors experience in a given geographic space.

Keywords: 1. deprivation of liberty, 2. youth, 3. identities, 4. Sonora, 5. Tamaulipas.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las narrativas de cuatro jóvenes originarios de ciudades fronterizas que fueron privados de su libertad por haberles comprobado su participación en un delito. Las narrativas se abordan desde una perspectiva cualitativa para profundizar en los sentidos y significados que implican construir identidades en un contexto fronterizo. El trabajo de campo se desarrolló durante 2018 y 2019 en los centros de tratamiento para adolescentes de San Luis Río Colorado y Nogales, Sonora, así como en Güémez, Tamaulipas, México. Uno de los hallazgos sustantivos fue identificar el proceso de interiorización y normalización de un estado de precarización permanente en los actores ante la ausencia de estrategias estructurales que homogeneizan las juventudes. El análisis desde estas dimensiones abona elementos empíricos en la discusión sobre las heterogeneidades en las identidades juveniles; se suman estos elementos para una discusión epistemológica, holística y situacional sobre la acumulación de vulnerabilidad que experimentan ciertos actores en un determinado espacio geográfico.

Palabras clave: 1. privación de la libertad, 2. jóvenes, 3. identidades, 4. Sonora, 5. Tamaulipas.

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INTRODUCTION

The main goal of the present article is to analyze the personal interpretation of four youth regarding a specific condition: being deprived of their liberty as they were found guilty of committing a crime in a border context. The category of analysis deprivation of liberty, from a qualitative standpoint, means social stigma from what being imprisoned entails. This category, among others, treats the actors as subjects from the start, "those who lack the means to realize their social expectations and, in this way, they become the 'losers', dispossessed, disenrolled, excluded, disaggregated" (Torres, 2018, p. 36). This condition has a significant influence during the process of construction of youth identities.

It is important to analyze the narrations of youth deprived of liberty in a border context, mainly if we consider identity is build over life: it starts in early adolescence, when interaction takes place between the carrier and the social environment, enabling an interaction with the rest that needs objectivation, and is only accomplished after exteriorizing reality (Reguillo Cruz, 1991). Approaching youth identities is a challenge from a methodologic and epistemological standpoint. We start assuming that the concept of identity "contains cultural repertoires by means of which social actors define their boundaries and distinguish from the rest, all of this in the context of a historically specific and socially structured space" (Giménez Montiel, 2002, p. 38). It is essential to consider that interiorized forms of culture are made selectively and differently. In this sense, the concept of youth, from considering it a social analysis category, may be defined as "a stage of life –as any other– which is grown out of and not permanently lived, is a social process, a cultural making, and is not narrowed to an age range" (Nateras Domínguez, 2019, p. 535).

The importance of specifying this social category is that, as a social age, youth(s) refer to a social reproduction of society through their social practices and cultural manifestations. It is not biological determinism, on the contrary, it is a social construction that gradually generates from objectifying –exteriorizing– social actions.

The identity of youth must be analyzed as a social construction interiorly determined from social contexts, and these contexts may define or not the position of the actors and guide their actions. Even if each and every youth in Mexico are normatively entitled to fundamental human rights, especial attention is needed for social actors who are in a border context and are susceptible to engage in organized crime owing to their biographic experiences, in which they normalize precariousness as central in the definition of their identities. This document will analyze the narratives of four youth who were or are serving time at border cities in northern Mexico; it is sought to identify the pauperization processes and the way the elements in such processes were interiorized up to considering them normal.[2]

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[2] Fieldwork was carried out from May 2018 to December 2019, in this way, when this article was concluded, it was not known whether the legal status of the participant youth was the same or they have served their precautionary imprisonment.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The exacerbated violence experienced at the border strip in northern Mexico over the last decade places youth within a systematically violent context that includes: corruption, impunity, organized crime, drug trafficking, kidnapping, homicide, executions, setting of scores, robberies, juvenile delinquent behavior, among others (Monárrez Fragoso & García de la Rosa, 2008). In this context, youth must coexist, and define, at once, the identity that will define them as members of a collectivity.

To begin with, a fundamental conceptualization to interpret the meanings and senses from which the youth define their identity: the concept of vulnerability, understood as:

> [Vulnerability is] a latent situation[,] characterized by the concurrence of circumstances that increase the likelihood of individuals and households to suffer contingencies that drastically reduce their wellbeing. It is a multidimensional concept that intends to ascertain factors that reinforce the inception of processes that deteriorate the level of life of households and individuals (Otto Thomasz, Castelao Caruana, Maasot & Eriz, 2014, p. 31).

The condition of vulnerability is linked to the process of pauperization in which youth live. In this process, youth are subjected to pressures and experiences that make them lead a fragile life in the present, uncertain about the future, with insecure identities and devoid of sense of possible development by means of labor and a style of life (Cuevas Valenzuela, 2015).

Conceiving youth is to recognize the relationship between agency and structure in the sense that the youth's actions affect the structures and, at once, are affected by such structures (Grace Newman, 2014). The above refers to the structures that reproduce poverty, violence, lack of education access or family life; situations with direct repercussions for the integral development of these youth.

The increasingly significant participation of youth in actions related to criminal activities is interpreted as the result of an adult-centralist categorization, which defines them as a *marginal class*, understood as:

> A congregation of individuals who, unlike the rest of the population, does not belong to any class, and thereby, does not belong in society […] The only meaning conveyed by 'marginal class' is that of being outside any significant classification; that is to say, every classification based on function and position. The 'marginal class' may be 'within' society, but clearly, it is not (part) 'of' society: it does not contribute with society in anything that is needed for survival and wellbeing (Bauman, 2011, pp. 11-12).

From a holistic conception, the *marginal class* concept, which youth are given, means the confirmation of the stigma for social groups that, owing to their various situations, are forced to make decisions that risk their physical integrity because of the structural lacks that dispossesses them from the rights they have as members of society. The attention focus of this article is on the social action of involving or not in criminal activities and the social repercussions this decision brings along; an instance of this is being considered *marginalized* youth who look for better opportunities within a certain geographic space.

As youth, insecurity related to the planning of a project of life and the unavoidable feeling of uncertainty evince the actors' limited or inexistent opportunities. These *marginalized* (youth) witness the rights they are entitle to pass them by, as compared with those who have the liberty to choose and various options to develop in an integral manner (e.g., right to education).

The autonomy the youth have when making a decision that relates them with criminal activities responds to the influence of structural lacks. Such autonomy is social and has been reasserted by the institutions and society itself, as they are not recognized as social actors and historic agents with an agency of their own, despite the context in which they develop. In order to strengthen the idea, the following is retaken: "the subject [a young individual] has the faculty to endure and reassert themselves because in the invention of the quotidian there are a thousand ways of hunting furtively. What we have, then, are youth in a process of constant constitution, who strive to find a meaning for their biographic trajectories" (Torres, 2018, p. 38).

Uneven access to basic services (health care, education, housing) is directly influenced by the integral development of youth at the social, cognitive and affective levels. In addition to biological elements proper to age, their identity is directly influenced by social classes, since it is assumed from the proper social class. The *signification* of being considered an actor involved in a criminal activity implies the affirmation of scarcity, poverty, and precariousness. The above is relevant for full development, in the sense of defining an identity which youth will display over their lives. These are disenchanted youth, who experience an alien and distant institutionalization that, additionally, does not have any content that enables them to develop an identity that matches with the social collective, which is reproduced in a void of meaning and signification.

Material and symbolical lacks in addition to fear, uncertainty and precariousness, are all elements with which the actors have to plan their lives; these are emotional states increasingly frequent in the young populations that try to define their place in a collectivity and that influences the construction of an identity. Young people interiorize the state of precariousness up to making it a *social stigma*: "as a consequence, migration, informality, drug dealing, and option of violent and violented actions substantially gain terrain as feasible options for the *biographic reconstruction of the self*" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2008, p. 35-36).

Learning the meaning and signification the youth deprived of their liberty give to their particular situation will help understand the effect the phenomenon of violence has at micro-social –normalization of violence– and at macro-social levels –strategies for integral attention.

METHOD

The strategy that was designed for the empirical information posed a challenge, both methodological and epistemological. Since they are so peculiar actors, namely: imprisoned youth after being found guilty of taking part in criminal activities when they were under 18 years of age, the strategy was to send requests to the various Treatment Centers for adolescents in three border cities in northern Mexico, for the purpose of applying a questionnaire with the following

analysis categories: sociodemographic profile (eight questions), migration status (six questions), social vulnerability (five questions) and experience in crime (seven questions).

The migration status category intends to document nationality, place of birth, place of residence before imprisonment, if they had any document that enabled them to enter the U.S. (visa or birth certificate), and the number of crossings (with or without documents). The goal of this last category was to analyze a possible participation as guides for crossing people into the country.

As regards the category on social vulnerability, what was sought was to document the lacks the actor identifies from its situational and symbolical references (sort of family, the parents' main activities, their own schooling, as well as main activity, regarding studying and working at the same time, reasons to look for an economic income).

For the category of criminal experience, the goal was to record if the actors knew for certain why they were deprived of liberty, if it was the first experience in such place, and identify their support networks both familial and criminal, as well as the time they have served so far at the time of applying the questionnaire.

At this first stage, and once the answer to apply the survey was obtained from the chairs of treatment centers, a total of 69 imprisoned youth were interviewed in three treatment centers for adolescents in the states of Sonora and Tamaulipas, Mexico: *Instituto de Tratamiento y Aplicación de Medidas a Adolescentes* (ITAMA) [Institute for the Application of Treatments and Measures on Adolescents] in San Luis Río Colorado and Nogales, Sonora; and *Centro de Reintegración Social y Familiar para Adolescentes* (CRSFA) [Center for the Social and Familial Reintegration of Adolescents] in Güémez, Tamaulipas. Out of the surveyed youth, 94 percent are men (64), while 6 percent, women (5).

Considering that one of the main goals of this article is to analyze the meanings and significations youth deprived of liberty give their experiences of life, and the way these interpretations enable them to build an identity, the most important tool was in-depth interview, understood as a "social technique that places, face to face, a researcher/interviewer and a researched individual in direct communication" (Gaínza Veloso, 2006, p. 219).

It was intended to deepen into *Verstehen* (Weber, 2014), in order to "recover the meanings and senses subjectively mentioned to understand them within the sociohistorical context" (Armenta Álvarez, 2020, p. 24). Four youth were interviewed; their main characteristics are displayed in the following chart (table 1).

The selection of these four youth is because of the following characteristics: for the case of María, the characteristic was being one of the five women who were surveyed, so a voice was given to the female gender in these very particular conditions. Genaro, he himself defines as a street child, despite having a family and a house to live. For José and Mario, each one stated being part of rival criminal groups, this way, they took the role of enemies, despite being deprived of their liberty within the same space that forces them to coexist.

Table 1. General characteristics of the respondents

Treatment center	Reference key for the respondents[3]	Age	Place of birth	Marital status	Crime for which they were deprived of liberty
ITAMA, San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora	María	17	Mexicali, Baja California	Free union with a daughter	Carrying firearms
ITAMA, Nogales, Sonora	Genaro	17	Nogales, Sonora	Single	Theft
CRSFA, Güémez, Tamaulipas	José	22	San Fernando, Tamaulipas	Single	Kidnap and homicide
CRSFA, Güémez, Tamaulipas	Mario	18	Reynosa, Tamaulipas	Single	Murder

Source: Own elaboration based on the surveys applied in the four youth treatment centers.

Learning the narratives of these four youths allowed identifying the way in which from various biographic experiences, a precarious situation is assumed as *normal*. The choice of these four young individuals implies the self-definition they make, and which we refer to the fact of an identity defined from their particular stories of life.

The guide for the interview that was designed for each youth entailed, in addition to questions to deepen into the analysis categories designed for the survey, giving a voice to the actors. In the following section of this article, the narratives of the youth are analyzed in order to identify the meaning and signification in the pauperization processes they experienced and which had an influence to build and define their identities.

Identities within contexts of vulnerability and pauperization

We start from considering that youth experience social, cultural, and axiological disenchantment at early ages, among other things, depending on the interpretation of this situation from contextual references such as age, gender and social stratum. The combination of these three elements helps define an actor as a marginalized social being. The four interviewed youth, in their own words on their short biography, identify the fact of being *marginalized* actors, since they experienced social, physical, and symbolical violence, as the following narrations make it clear:

> María: [sighs] I didn't have mother or father. They died already. My dad died in 2015 and my mother, when I was six, when I was very young (María, personal communication, October 17th, 2018).

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[3] For the purpose of this document, the respondents were identified by means of pseudonyms.

Genaro: [answering the question about his childhood] well, more or less; I didn't live with my mom, but with my grandma and she sent me to a boardinghouse. I was about eight when she sent me to Jinesekia.[4] She told me: 'we're going with an aunt of yours!', and there was no aunt [laughter] and she took me to a boardinghouse of DIF [*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de las Familias* / National System for the Integral Development of Families] [in] Nogales, and from there, they sent me to Hermosillo, to Jinesekia, I was there (Genaro, personal communication, November 21st, 2018).

In these two narratives, there was social, cultural and axiological disenchantment in their childhoods. Their individual capacity to positively value their identity is limited by the experience of life at so short an age, as it means to become an orphan, in the first case, whereas in the second, become institutionalized in a social assistance center. This disenchantment significantly influenced the election of social role. As regards other of the respondents, family disenchantment was similar:

José: well… I have always been at the crossings [road intersections with traffic lights], I work at the crossings; I cleaned windshields and sold flowers. In fact, I was the one helping my mom, sometimes we both supported each other when she divorced from my dad, in the end she went with me to the crossings and we supported my sister because she was still studying (José, personal communication, September 23rd, 2019).

The social, cultural and axiological disenchantment reaffirms the institutional abandonment, to a large extent because their demands (observance of rights such as education, health care, or housing) are not satisfied; and these demands are interpreted by children between five and nine years of age. This disenchantment may produce "hatred, concern, frustration, emotional states [that] substantially influence the construction of contemporary subjectivities" (Torres, 2018, pp. 33-35).

It is important to consider that identity is not something given and immovable, but built in daily interaction and is attained by means of a legitimization process that looks for acceptance and recognition (Reguillo Cruz, 1991). Identity is an objective relationship between the youth and the social environment where they develop and project as in a stage that enables them to interact with the rest and it is necessary to exteriorize it, objectivize it. When these relationships are objectivized, youth reinterpret them as something *that was destined for occurring* –a normalization– and face pauperization conjunctures that turn them into circumstantial victims and products of a system that excludes them.

One of the scenarios for significant interaction with the social environment they experienced as social actors was (public) school, as it was in such place where the actors were able to objectify relationships and exteriorize the identity they were forging for themselves. In these experiences during their terms in a public school, their biographies make the *normalization* of precariousness evident.

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[4] Center for social assistance focused on children and adolescents in risk situations in the state of Sonora, located in Hermosillo, 278 km from Nogales, Sonora, in Mexico.

María: in elementary ok; grades alright, even A's. I attended elementary in various schools. [I got expelled] because I was very naughty [laughter], I beat the girls and threw wet toilet paper, [I was expelled] from about four or five [schools]. All of them because I was naughty. I didn't go to middle school, I just [studied] elementary, but I finished secondary in an open [secondary] of ISEA.[5] My sister helped me, she talked to the lady to go to my home because I was married (María, personal communication, October 17th, 2018).

Genaro: I attended middle school too, but I ran away [from Jinesekia, in Hermosillo, Sonora] and I came here, to Nogales, I studied no more. I was in secondary and I had already tried marihuana, cigarettes and pills. I was about 13 [years] when I became a *mariguano* [marihuana smoker], at 14 [I smoked] rock [drug], and at fifteen, I got here for theft (Genaro, personal communication, November 21st, 2018).

During the process by means of which they were defining their identity, the youths above (María and Genaro) experienced a precipitated transit into adulthood, which forced them to take up responsibilities, for example, being a mother and entering into the labor sphere so that they were able to have the economic resources to satisfy their drug consumption. It was a first approach to the pauperization process, in which these youths underwent experiences that would later lead them to a fragile and uncertain existence.

For the cases of the other two youth, their experiences at school are not far from those previously exposed, this hasty transit to adulthood may be noticed as well.

José: in elementary I was in Matamoros [Tamaulipas], and I finished it in San Fernando [Tamaulipas]. I was in about four elementaries, [I was expelled] basically because my dad was a bit down, my old man did drugs and all that. Sometimes, we didn't finish school because, because of him, the things he did, he got drugged and, in the end, he didn't even support us at all, and we had to look after ourselves, I started working at 10 (José, personal communication, September 23rd, 2019).

Mario: I was thrown out [of the school] like a month early, but anyways they gave me my certificate. The teacher was fed up with me and she told me that she would give me the certificate, but I had to leave, she'd had enough, she would give me my certificate but I had to stop going. That was in elementary, I just lasted like three weeks in middle school because I was already working and used to fall asleep during classes (Mario, personal communication, September 22nd, 2019).

The youth interviewed define spaces and social places they gradually interiorize and they do it in the sense of who they are, who they have been and what their objective possibilities are, they perform a representation of themselves and for the rest in relation with their identity. In this way, "young identity is a vital disposition of performative nature regarding reality from the construction with others. Hence, a young condition entails a political will with immense possibilities to build shared horizons of life" (Agudelo López, Villada López & Patiño, 2020, p. 286).

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[5] High school of *Instituto Sonorense de Educación para Adultos*, ISEA [Sonoran Institute for Adult Education], an education program of the government of the state of Sonora.

The young respondents' educational experience accounts for situations of precariousness in their social relationships that influenced the definition of their identity in a space fraught with social, cultural and axiological hostile events. Social relationships that imply an intersubjective interpretation about what to do, how to continue and what to do it for. These youths faced a crossroad of axiological ups and downs that modeled their identities shrouded in a veil of circumstances that rendered them victims and left them unprotected with neither education nor labor opportunities. Objective and symbolic violence was present in their short biographies and was assimilated as a *normal* fact of life, considering that:

> In the imaginary of children and adolescents, organized crime, in the best of cases, is too attractive and promising, as it offers them identification models for being youth, that is to say, *narcos* and *sicarios*, or the *lover* of a *capo*; following a logic of life: *I'd rather die young and rich than old and poor*, which means, whether we like it or not, having money, power, fame, jewels, trucks and above all, building a place, a social status (Nateras Domínguez, 2016, p. 81).

When facing the heterogeneity of violence, with its various faces and masks, the youth face sociocultural occurrences that entail life-or-death situations and the objective impact they have on their health (mental, physical and social). The above has repercussions on their daily life. As an instance, two respondents expressed:

> María: [I lived] with my dad's mom, she hit us with her cane. When my dad died we went with my sister again and there I grew distant from my sister because of the drugs. I have 11 siblings alive and two dead, a girl and boy. I was in elementary when they took me to DIF. They found out I was raped, my brother raped me when I was six, my sister found out because he raped her too, to my twin and my sister the one he lived with, he raped them too (María, personal communication, October 17th, 2018).

> Genaro: my mom, well she hanged out on the streets, she did drugs. In fact, my mom is here next door, in the female center, in prison. I was never with her, [mom] was like a sister to me. [I lived] in some caves at the border line, I went and looked at them and said, I don't have where to live. I did, but I said 'what for, what am I going to make my grandmother suffer for?'. I better stayed to live there [in the caves] (Genaro, personal communication, November 21st, 2018).

Under conditions such as those narrated by María and Genaro, models of vulnerable actors are configured, in which projects of life have to be articulated around physical survival over expectations that enable them to choose what it's rightfully theirs; for example, the right to live as a family. The figure of a family for the other two youth has also an important presence that pushes the actors to search for alternatives that produce economic incomes that enable them to follow a plan of life.

> José: I saw my mom struggling and because of that, basically that, I started working. There was a time when I was down, real down, I was at a low, bad habits. From cleaning windshields, to become a delinquent, you may say. So far, my dad does everything: coke,

rock, *huachicol,*[6] he is a real all-terrain boy. I was also a *sicario* for some time; from 2013 to 2014 I was a *sicario* (José, personal communication, September 23rd, 2019).

Mario: well… when I was at school I was 12 or 13, I looked at my partners or friends [and I thought] 'someday, I will be a hitman'. That was my dream; my first dream was to ride trucks and I said, well I'll be a *sicario* one day. I was at school and I studied and did well, but one day I didn't like it. I wanted to be well dressed and I had friends and suddenly one day, we were there and some vatos arrive and told us: 'want a job or what?', 'hell yeah, I want a job', 'well that's it' he took me to work as a guard [a soldier in organized crime] (Mario, personal communication, September 22nd, 2019).

The narrations by José and Mario are interpreted as process of social self-exclusion, which is possible to analyze from the standpoint of a *chain with disadvantage links* (Saraví, 2015), along which "a substantive link is the violence that represents an inflection point in the biography of the youth in a context of social and economic disadvantages that detach them from institutional spaces and places them at risk of performing unlawful activities" (De la O Martínez, 2020, p. 156).

Social self-exclusion is implicit in the recognition of the structural absences that would allow their full development. From this standpoint, organized crime appears as a window for immediate opportunities for it promotes allegories of sudden wealth and social recognition. Paradoxically, these actions "promote isolation and social alienation, though this they do 'by means of' and 'in interaction with' other subjective inequality dimensions, as they are based on the subject's experience" (Saraví, 2015, p. 38), for instance, the fact of being recognized as no-students as compared with the rest of youth who attend school.

So far, the narrations by María, Genaro, José, and Mario are not the way by means of which they can incorporate into the social world via the emotions these experiences caused them, but are ways to objectively interpret their social reality, since they are objectifying it, exteriorizing actions linked with some crime. The subjective dimensions –emotions and the axiological context– reproduce structural inequality and significantly contribute to the affirmation of two things: 1) a precariousness situation; and, 2) social fragmentation. The social inequalities, which interact in a relational manner with the youth, live, hide, produce and reproduce.

these youth face a crossroad of intense violence in the country that has turned them into merchandise with a price, into circumstantial victims, and into products of a system that excludes them. They live in disenchantment with the lack of education and labor opportunities, and for many, violence has been an ever-present factor in their short lives (De la O Martínez, 2020, p. 153).

In the biographies, organized crime is an illusion that promotes allegories of wealth, since it promises immediate gratifications through various activities with two possible eventual results: death or prison. Interaction with activities proper to organized crime implies three things: 1) the

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[6] In reference to the consumption of solvents such as thinner or gasoline, inhaled using a rag or oakum.

erosion of future imaginaries; 2) the increase of structural and subjective precariousness; and, 3) the crisis of the State's political legitimacy.

Analyzing the youth's narrations as regards interactions with organized crime activities allows us to identify what those experiences meant for them, since they recall them and reveal the importance of relationships with other people from substantial actions and decisions at defining moments that produced their deprivation of liberty. That is to say, their futures erode, while structural and subjective precariousness increase at once, and add to the loss of State legitimacy for the youth. As it is the case of the circumstances owing to which they were or are deprived of their liberty:

> María: [I'm here because I possessed] firearms, some three or five makeshift shotguns. We were in a hotel when patrols arrived, the hotel owner called them. No! I didn't even know they were there [the guns], there were only two and the other two were added by policemen when they took us on detention, they said we had them, be we didn't have anything. I mean, I didn't know they had them, but it was as if I had them (María, personal communication, October 17th, 2018).

> Genaro: once in the barrio there was this man called B, and he told me: "do you want to cross?" Uncle B they called him. 'Do you want to cross into the U.S.? We pay you good' and well, I didn't know and said yes, truth is I wanted money; they would pay by the *pollo* [migrants] I managed to cross. Yeah… [crossing] people, and I would be the guide… well I went, and I crossed and I got caught [laughter]. The second [second attempt to cross people], I managed to cross with seven *pollos*. Five hundred per *pollo* they gave me; five hundred dollars for each *pollo* (Genaro, personal communication, November 21st, 2018).

In the narrations, geographic spaces with high crime rate are identified; they become the place where youth have to learn to live in a hostile environment with aggressions from their young rivals, adding to the symbolic violence expressed by police coercion and the absence of public policies. The geographic space turns into a heavy burden on the shoulders of new generations.

In the face of these violent attacks, the socialization process orients toward immediate satisfactions that enable them to live. In words by Encinas Garza (2016) "receiving the most advantage without investing much time and effort is a guilt-free pleasure whose only end is being autonomous from the family and hold power in the barrio" (p. 60). Violent attacks are expressed by other actors as follows:

> José: No, the place my mom lives [San Fernando, Tamaulipas] are the *salideras* [roads], though which *maña* [organized crime] enters and leaves town, there are also safehouses. I went to the crossroad and sold and so I started to meet people and eventually I got involved, making friends. I had been invited, right, but I hadn't said yes. Suddenly, one day, after two or three months, they told me I was in the payroll, that someone above had said I was already in the payroll, just by hanging out with them, and that my check was on its way, that day was payday, and the check arrived 'how much was the check worth?', well, it was 15 thousand pesos (José, personal communication, September 23rd, 2019).

> Mario: [at first, I was] *a lookout*. And then I knew of places where drug was sold and I started as a pusher. The dude told me: 'What's up! Come and help me with the balance';

'Yeah', it was done. Well, I carried on, I liked math a bit, it went alright, the balance was correct and all. Then, this guy told me: 'well, when do you want to start? We find you a spot' and I said: 'sure, I can do that'. And they put me there in *gran canal*, they call it like that, they got me there and started selling rock, weed, and fixes [crack, marihuana with coke]. Well, the money was coming in and all of a sudden, I didn't like it and I told him 'No, my dream is to ride patrols, buzzing around [being armed and equipped]'. My first confrontation was at 14 [years], I faced the Navy [Mexican Navy]. After being a hitman, they moved me to the kitchen,[7] but I couldn't bear it. I couldn't put up with it, I looked at the face of one [guy] and it broke me. And I said: 'no, I'm not ready for the kitchen, I'm not ready' (Mario, personal communication, September 22nd, 2019).

As regards historic beings with agency capacity, youth tell stories in which past, present, and future intermingle in an intersubjective manner with the times of their peers. "These narrations are the measurement, as co-production of reality, as an alternative to consolidate worlds shared in function of the constructed meanings, histories and empathies" (Agudelo López et al., 2020, p. 293). It is visible that it is only in everydayness where the feasibility of identity configuration is secured on the basis of their realities. In words by Hernández Baca (2020), the relationship between youth and law is explained as:

> it is a structural confrontation in two senses: on one side, the youth who share criminalized environments interact by means of social recognition codes that contest the statutes of a society from which they feel excluded; on the other, the stigma built around their condition of youths, masculinity and marginalization turns these youth into suspects for the authorities that constantly harass and discriminate them (Hernández Baca, 2020, p. 133).

The quote above implies that participating in an action linked to organized crime is normalized, and it may be interpreted by the actors as *productive*, giving an account of the way various societies perceive and value the world, and by doing so, certain social actors. In this sense, youth are social systems and products of the social contract where the social action of involvement in criminal activities is normalized from its acceptance by the society itself in terms of assuming it as something predestined, from the actors' individual particularities. Under this premise, the young respondents build their identity as "a set of interiorized cultural and social repertoires, by means of which, define their boundaries and distinguish –or intend to– from the rest of the actors in a similar situation" (Giménez Montiel, 2002, p. 38).

Taking part in criminal activities becomes a substantial element at the moment of defining as an actor of society, for the self-representation schemas configure uneven fields of action (Reguillo Cruz, 2008). Presently, behaving as a responsible social actor is increasingly needed and valorized.

The pauperization process experienced by the respondents during their short lives, exemplifies the way uneven conditions are directly linked with institutional capacity to ensure fundamental rights such as education, health care, and housing for youth in a hostile border context. This

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[7] It refers to the places the criminal group uses to dissolve dead bodies. Likewise, people involved in this activity with organized crime are called *cocineros*.

inability polarizes human segments, being less favored those groups –the youth, for instance– for which economic and social conditions, as well as the systematic violation of their human rights, lead them to a risk society which at once, reconfigures social incorporation spaces and other forms of building themselves as subjects (Valenzuela Arce, 2015). In words by Torres Maestro (2013):

> we are facing a rupture in the social fabric, where youth are deprived of a future, it is a social holocaust; an actual euthanasia of the poor owing to the existence of large masses of permanently unemployed individuals, and pauperized occasional, informal workers. Diluting the certainties inherent to the mechanisms of social incorporation, such youth without a future are product of social fascism because extensive population segments are ejected from any sort of social contract (Torres Maestro, 2013, p. 15).

On the basis of the previous quotation, we infer that the fact of being a young person in a particular situation allows involving in criminal activities, which may be interpreted as an accomplishment to reach power and the desire of becoming a social actor recognized within a violent context. Violence produces in youth a different rationality around the social position that *they must* occupy in the collective; their –antisocial– practices enable them to *insure* their life by means of volatile loyalties and enforced adscriptions (De la O Martínez, 2014). At this point, youth reproduce a stigma from the events experienced, since participating in criminal activities deeply marks them for life. Youth are at critical time in the process of socialization and identity construction that defines the spaces for social integration.

On the basis of the pauperization processes these youth experienced in their biographies, they articulated the support for the definition of their identity. Understanding that "the notion of identity responds to a social construction by means of which the subjects objectify their own self-awareness and self-reference capability" (Trejo Quintana, 2008, p. 40). By considering identity as a process in permanent construction, youth are projecting their lives by means of the narratives, since exteriorizing an identity entails an individual interpretation, in which the context is fundamental. However, the context should not be considered the only reason for the pauperization process, structural lacks (education, health care and housing) added to the contextual elements are important from the interpretation, construction, and assimilation the subjects make from their intersubjectivity.

AS A CONCLUSION

The process to define an identity in a border context as the one analyzed for this group of youth shall be understood from the strategies by means of which they incorporate and interpret a social world. The experiences of María, Genaro, José and Mario reveal fragile existences in a border context, and they have to be grasped as one of the ways they interpret the world; these are subjective dimensions, which not only reproduce structural inequalities, but directly contribute to their individual interpretations of the structural inequalities that socially fragment them and keep them in precarious situations that enable them to take up a predetermined social role.

The young interviewees interpret their situation from the intersubjective elements, which are supported on their individual experiences such as living in a hostile environment with no opportunities to carry on studying and assuming the consequences from a particular rationality. As a *marginal class*, assuming an interment situation against their will implies that these youth have interacted with specific cultural and social elements that restrain their full development. For youth in a context as the one described by María, Genaro, José and Mario, social identities are born as symbolized thresholds and ascription/differentiation and belonging/exclusion meanings, inscribed in specific *sociohistorical* contexts and *sociocultural* networks.

The meaning of ascription/differentiation is the way the respondents assume the fact of being deprived of liberty –as a second chance– and produces in them belonging/exclusion in society from what might be materialized of what they want to do when they are released. In this sense, the youth in this document normalize the stigma of being deprived of their liberty from a learning process that offers them a *second opportunity*.

We may argue that the collective of border youth has a particular rationality, which enables them to identify the aspirations they have once they interpret and assume a specific social role, they define themselves from a historic/situational perspective with lacks in minimum supports for social independence.

The participation of the youth in actions conflicting with the law may be an inflection point in their biographic experience, at once it places them in disadvantage: the interpretation of their environment will be from what they considered a *justification* for involvement –elements that may be extreme poverty or exacerbated violence–, they face a conflict between fear and desire, while trying to strengthen via attitudes toward the others.

As actors of a collectivity with agency of their own, the youth of these two cities at the Mexican northern border should not be identified as a homogenous block, different variables that make them a heterogenous group that shares contextual affinities marked by uprooting, e.g., the early obligation of assuming responsibilities of adult people such as being a mother at early ages or becoming responsible for economic incomes have to be considered. Elements which, from an endogenous perspective, outline the symbolic distance that separates them from the rest of the collectivity.

Defining an identity for the youth in a border context is not exclusively ontological, it is *relational* between scarcity and the elements they have to face it. Mainly, if we consider that the symbolic borders in which they live as a youth collective in a border context produce territorial, institutional, axiological and identity topographies, which besides, share senses and meanings.

It is essential to analyze the past and the way in which it is interpreted by the young border subjects who have experienced pauperization processes; the above entails the recognition of their capability to define the present and what they will project in the future. Taking the past and the pauperization process into consideration is proposed as the base for approaching youth populations deprived of their liberty and thus, interpret the action of taking part in criminal

activities as the result of a gradual process of stigmatization and lack of trust in institutions run by a failed State, incapable of ensuring full development for these youth.

Translation: Luis Cejudo-Espinoza

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