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Young Men from the West of Ciudad Juárez: Constructing Identities in Violent Contexts

Hombres jóvenes del poniente de Ciudad Juárez: construyendo identidades en contextos de violencia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the process of identity construction in six young men from the west of Ciudad Juárez, in northern Mexico. Qualitative research was carried out using participant observation and semi-structured interviewing as the main co-construction technique, focusing on everyday life and significant affective experiences in their life trajectories. Fieldwork was carried out between 2016 and 2017. The analysis of the data shows that violence, often fatal and predominantly represented by drug trafficking groups, is the main driver in participants' affective and everyday lives. It was also found that young people respond to violence pragmatically by constructing identities that allow them to safeguard their integrity and remain part of the social context.

Keywords: 1. violence, 2. identity, 3. young man, 4. western area, 5. Ciudad Juárez.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente trabajo es analizar el proceso de construcción de identidad en seis hombres jóvenes residentes en el poniente de Ciudad Juárez, al norte de México. Se realizó una investigación cualitativa que empleó la observación participante y la entrevista semiestructurada como principales técnicas para coconstruir la información, teniendo como ejes de análisis la vida cotidiana y las experiencias afectivas significativas de su trayectoria de vida. El trabajo de campo se realizó entre 2016 y 2017. A través de las categorías de análisis, los datos muestran que la violencia –muchas veces mortal y representada predominantemente por grupos del narcotráfico–, es el principal ordenador en la vida cotidiana y/o afectiva de los participantes. También se encontró que ante la violencia, los jóvenes responden pragmáticamente, construyendo identidades que les permiten salvaguardar su integridad y seguir formando parte del contexto social.

Palabras clave: 1. violencia, 2. identidad, 3. hombre joven, 4. Zona poniente, 5. Ciudad Juárez.

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INTRODUCTION

Ciudad Juárez is located in the state of Chihuahua, in northern Mexico, in an arid region that now forms part of the border with the United States. At state level, Ciudad Juárez has the most densely populated urban center. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (2015), the city has 1,391,180 inhabitants, of which 249,808 are young people between 15 and 24 years of age.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Ciudad Juárez was part of a region known as "El Paso del Norte," a Mexican town located on the banks of the Rio Grande. In 1848 Mexico lost the war against the United States, a country that had initiated the conflict a couple of years before, seeking to expand its territory. For Mexico, the defeat meant the reconfiguration of its national territory, since it lost more than half of its land. The agreement between these countries had repercussions for the inhabitants of El Paso del Norte. Two different cities suddenly emerged in this region: Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas, located in two different nations, Mexico and the United States.

The sudden territorial and political reconfiguration experienced by the region allowed for the development of a particular type of border culture, which constitutes a living mestizaje that permanently produces social meanings and practices based on the fusion, complementarity, and juxtaposition of "Mexicanness" and "American way-of-life," where cross-border (everyday and varied links between inhabitants of both cities) and transnational relationships between nation-states converge in a context marked by the power assymetry and dependence on the neighboring country (Ojeda, 2009).

Due to its border position, Ciudad Juárez has been a magnet for different types of migrants, many of them attracted by the maquiladora industry, the main economic engine of the region, which peaked in the 1970's and is now characterized by instability, low salaries and poor working conditions (Sánchez, Ravelo, & Melgoza, 2015).

On the one hand, Ciudad Juárez is linked to the global market, while on the other, it faces intense marginalization and poverty. In this city, production and employment increase year after year, while the purchasing power of its workers decreases, especially among those who work in the *maquila,*[3] whose income amounts to, approximately, one or two minimum salaries (Peña, 2018). Wages are among the lowest in the state. In 2012, 39.8% of the population in Juárez experienced poverty, 22% were vulnerable due to social deprivation, and 15.9% were affected by low income, whereas only 22.3% were considered non-poor and non-vulnerable (Fuentes, Peña, & Hernández, 2018).

Since 2008, this border city has attracted national and international attention; however, not due to its economy or industry but to the high rates of violence, which make it the most dangerous city not only in Mexico but globally (Monárrez, 2017). This attention was

[3]Colloquial name used to refer to the maquiladora industry.

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associated with the constant and deadly dispute between the Juárez Cartel *(los de casa)* and the Sinaloa Cartel (*los de afuera, los de El Chapo*) for the control of the drug-trafficking territory and to perpetrate other equally profitable high-impact crimes, such as human trafficking, arms trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion (Díaz, 2008; Monárrez, 2017). In four years (2008-2011), there were more than 13,000 homicides (Sánchez et al., 2015). It is estimated that 74.2% of murders in Juárez between 2007 and 2010 occurred due to alleged criminal rivalry (México Evalúa, 2012). Another contributing factor was the alleged "war on drugs" started by President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), and continued by his successor, Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), since this "war" involved the militarization of the northern border and other parts of the country. Military interventions that, in addition to violent practices, have also resulted in violations to the human rights of the population (Sánchez et al., 2015), especially among certain youth sectors.

The phenomenon of violence in Ciudad Juárez is old, complex, and multifactorial. Structural conditions of social inequality are another structural vein; individual poverty, social exclusion, and marginality (Nateras, 2016), combined with a historical culture of impunity and illegality exacerbated by drug trafficking and the militarization of the region. These are the conditions imposed by the neoliberal system governing the regional economy, as well as a gender ideology that maintains traditional and stereotypical ways of life, including the use of firearms, homicide, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs (Cruz, 2011, 2014, 2016; Monárrez, 2017).

The Western Zone of Ciudad Juárez and Its Young People

The social reality of Ciudad Juárez is intense, complex, and unique (Jusidman, 2007), although it is heterogeneous and impacts people unequally (Dreier, 2011). In the western part of the town, adverse social conditions are exacerbated. Historically, this region has been occupied by poor and migrant populations, as opposed to the eastern region, where most of the non-poor and non-vulnerable people live (Fuentes et al., 2018). The lowest educational levels of the municipality and the highest percentage of people living in extreme poverty and vulnerable conditions are also found there (Fuentes et al., 2018). According to data from the National Program for the Social Prevention of Violence and Crime (PNPSVD, 2015), 34.4% of the population lacks any form of employment and 26.9% work in *the maquila*. In other words, their income is significantly low, insufficient to adequately cover basic food, health, housing, or recreational needs.

This area resulted from the presence of irregular settlements and has had to undergo different stages of urban consolidation, generally slow and outpaced in comparison with the rest of the municipality, known simply as Juárez (Moreno, 2007; PNPSVD, 2015). Approximately 25% of the houses in the area are thought to be abandoned (PNPSVD, 2015). These constructions are usually made of industrial waste materials that fail to offer adequate structural safety or adequately protect against the city's extreme weather. Basic

services (water, electric, gas and drainage) and other urban and social services (paving, lighting and health centers) are practically non-existent (Moreno, 2007).

Traditionally, the west has been one of the most conflictive areas in the municipality, with the highest rates of child abuse, juvenile delinquency, insecurity and violence (Cervera & Monárrez, 2010). For decades, the presence of a large number of gangs were observed in the area, which were constantly at odds due to their control over the territory (Almada, 2012). As of 2008, drug trafficking groups appropriated the public space and recruited hundreds of young people from the region, sometimes enough to form whole gangs large enough to annihilate other gangs, either as an extreme means of social control or as a result of criminal rivalry (Cruz, 2016). Therefore, the city's west was the main battlefield for drug trafficking cartels (Díaz, 2008). As of 2013, there was a significant decrease in violence rates in the municipality of Juárez; however, the western region continued to present crime rates higher than the municipal average for crimes such as intentional injuries, homicide and robberies at homes, businesses, or targeted at bystanders (PNPSVD, 2015).

Young people in the west face stigma and criminalization on a daily basis. Adults living in the same region perceive them as one of the largest socio-community conflicts in the area, especially when they gather in public spaces such as the streets (PNPSVD, 2015). Among the inhabitants of other areas, a social representation sees criminals from the west who come down to rob in the east (Moreno, 2007). Young people are classified as drug addicts or criminals by arbitrary detention, extortion, and harassment by security forces based on their place of residence, outfit, accent, or type of social activities (Almada, 2012).

Different social realities coexist and complement each other as they create meaning, subjectivity, and social ties; one of these exists in the west. These realities identify variations built and shaped by gender, race, and social class, as Connel (1995) has pointed out, and also by one's biographical stage (Duarte, 2000; Taguencia, 2009; Urteaga & Sáenz, 2012), one's position in the social structure, the pragmatic importance of one's involvement, and significant life experiences (Dreier, 2011). These dimensions can be articulated based on the category of "young man," understood as the identity resulting from the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and social age (Cruz, 2011; García & Ito, 2009).

Violence in Ciudad Juárez, From Male to Juvenile Homicide

Violence can be understood as a transgression of human rights, which favors the deliberate and intentional use of force from a position of power used by one or more individuals to harm; it can result in emotional, psychological, physical, and economic damage, or even death (Cervera & Monárrez, 2010). It can occur in any type of social bond, including the State, its security forces, organized crime, or any other social institution with respect to certain social groups, such as women, youth groups, indigenous groups, or LGBTQ+ and religious groups.

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Violence directly and indirectly affects and transcends materiality (politically, economically or socially), since it includes what it represents and what it means by way of its symbolic vein, that is, the immaterial, the implicit and the latent, hence its capacity to endure over time and to influence the way in which social practice is built (Nateras, 2016).

One of the most frequently used indicators to measure violence is the number of murders taking place at a specific time, place, and population (Cervera & Monárrez, 2010); although this crime represents only one expression of criminal activity, it can be associated with what Nateras (2016) calls "violence of death." Along with forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, murder is perhaps one of the most significant crimes due to the direct effect on the individual victim and the social effect on the context. These irreparable crimes affect not only the victims themselves but also their social context (México Evalúa, 2012). They take away one's fundamental right to life, therefore, they represent the most serious transgression of social norms and laws (Martínez & Howard, 2006).

As a social phenomenon, murder is a synonym of social pain since it affects moods, emotions, feelings, effectiveness, behaviors, and attitudes (Nateras, 2016). Additionally, when the phenomenon is intense or constant, social trauma will persist over time, taking hold in the collective memory and affecting members of society as a whole because it deeply alters the social structure, the norms governing coexistence, and the institutions that regulate everyday life (Kovalskys, 2006). In the case of Ciudad Juárez, violence has generated permanent feelings of fear and terror among its inhabitants due to the risk of insecurity and death that takes place on a daily basis, as well as a de facto suspension of constitutional guarantees and civil rights, which Domínguez and Ravelo (2011) call the "dismantling of citizenship."

Types of murder include femicide and homicide, which are malicious acts with different but closely related causes since they refer to asymmetries of power around gender, class, and social age (Cervera & Monárrez, 2010; Cruz, 2014). For women who are murdered by men simply because of their gender or men who kill each other as a result of the systematic use of violent relational practices, both situations affect mostly young and poor people who, in addition to being the victims, are permanently stigmatized or criminalized because of their gender, lifestyle, social condition, place of residence, or identity ascription.

Male homicide is not a new phenomenon in Ciudad Juárez (Martínez & Howard, 2006), although it grew exponentially over the past decade due to the uncontrolled presence of organized crime. Mortal violence found most of its victims among young people (Cruz, 2011; Monárrez, 2017), which amounts to what Valenzuela (2015) calls *juvenicide.* This is a condition in which specific sectors of the youth population are stigmatized, discredited and murdered. Mortal violence involving processes of economic and social scarcity, the banalization of evil, the discrediting of institutions and the spread of corruption, impunity and death. This is always due to the complicity of the State, either due to omission, such as

its inability to guarantee the rule of law, or action, especially when it criminalizes and persecutes certain youth sectors.

Thus, deadly, gender-based, and often juvenile violence became part of everyday life for the people of Juárez. It is also a structural expression of the social reality and subjectivities that take place in the city (Domínguez & Ravelo, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2015). Cruz (2016) states that more than 9,500 male homicides occurred in Juárez from 2008 to 2011; 4,000 of the victims were people under 29 years of age. These people are systematically criminalized, pejoratively and contextually classified as "cholos,"[4] "delinquents," "*narquillos*," and "from the west," regardless of their their identity ascriptions or the role they play in violent acts. In general, they tend to be young people with few or no opportunities to access education, housing, social recreation, dignified treatment, culture and a life project in their current circumstances (Nateras, 2016).

The existence of these young people takes place amidst abandonment, violence, and social exclusion (Almada, 2012). As expressed by Díaz (2008), nobody cares about these people; they come from poor and vulnerable families, they are the children of migrants or single mothers and are often abandoned because of work in the maquila. They lack basic education and have few alternatives to build a decent life. They live between informality and illegality. Part students and part criminals, many of them are drug users. They are seen as "cannon fodder" by drug trafficking groups, who take advantage of their disadvantageous social conditions to recruit them, sometimes forcibly, in exchange for a "salary" that, although precarious, exceeds considerably what they could earn by working in a blue-collar job or learning a trade, which are the types of jobs they can usually access (Cruz, 2014).

Núñez and Espinosa (2017) have stated that drug dealing can be thought of as a "gender-sex" power device that produces ideas, values, attitudes, perceptions, practices, relationships, subjectivities, and sexual and gender identities. A mechanism or device rooted in domination. This concept makes it possible to understand the ease with which young men from the region become involved in criminal activity and access the power it produces, although their positions are those of highest risk and lowest privilege, often leading to their deaths.

Due to its geographical position, Ciudad Juárez is in an advantageous location for the smuggling of drugs into the United States, the largest drug consumer market in the world. Traditionally, this territory had been controlled by the Juárez Cartel, however, in 2007, the Sinaloa Cartel decided to fight for the territory, leading to a bitter and deadly war. The drug cartels took advantage of old disputes among local gangs to form some of their armed

[4]Cruz (2016) states that the identity of a *cholo* in Ciudad Juárez emerges as a cross-border, countercultural juvenile phenomenon. Beyond certain clothing or slang, it is characterized by ethnic segregation, drug consumption, violence, poverty, and a certain shame for one's own culture. This identity is proscribed, rejected, and sometimes persecuted.

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extensions, among them the Aztecs (part of the city's cartel) and the Mexicles *los doblados,* who work for the Sinaloa cartel. Both groups, made up of mostly young men without formal weapons training are also in charge of drug dealing and other crimes in the territories that they control.

Violence rates have decreased significantly in Juárez over the past years. The decrease is associated with the implementation of governmental and civil society strategies, the withdrawal of armed forces, and especially with agreements among drug trafficking cartels (Sánchez et al., 2015). Cartels themselves "ended" the violence by agreeing on the areas each would de facto control; the north-west-center is governed by the local cartel, whereas the south-east by the outsiders. This pact is evident because in the drug-trafficking network in the city and the recent escalation of violence associated with the re-capture of the visible leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín Guzmán Loera ("El Chapo"), which resulted in internal rearrangements and new disputes.

In this context, male homicide and juvenicide are closely associated with asymmetries of power and ideologies of extreme domination. These inequalities are represented in social forms such as the patriarchal system, characterized by its privileging the masculine over the feminine, but also by its advocating the hegemonic masculinity over other types of masculinity. Thus, men are also excluded and impacted in different ways as generic subjects classified by such order, stratified and alienated, either because they confront dominant discourses (Núñez, 2004) or because they actively participate in them (Cruz, 2011; 2014, 2016).

Therefore, many of the homicides in Ciudad Juárez can be thought of as a type of deadly transaction involving men, such as those described by Foucault (1988), that is, violent relationships around power that act on the body and use force to subdue and destroy the other, closing the door to all possibilities because and taking young men's lives; passivity and absolute submission are the alternative to this transaction. Hence the need to analyze the construction process of young men's identities in specific contexts such as the west of Ciudad Juárez.

IDENTITY, GENDER, AND YOUTH

For Wenger (1998), identity is a particular way of being in the world and acting accordingly, which is built relationally, continuously, and contextually; for Alberti (1995), it is learned and constructed as a useful instrument for individuals to regulate their behavior, to relate with the social apparatus and themselves, to channel their fantasies, goals, desires, and decisions. Thus, identity is not something static, but dynamic, such as the social reality that creates it and is involved with it.

Identity integrates a set of meanings and representations of its own, as well as of others shaped by the historically instituted political, economic, social, and cultural structures.

Identity is not an attribute or an intrinsic, immovable or immutable property, but a subjective, relational, and dynamic position that includes what is done and said, but also what is not done and not said, what is thought and what is felt, longed for, feared, and fantasied (Salguero, 2008). There is no absolute identity but different identities that can be relative, temporal, contextual, strategic, or predominant, capable of subordinating and configuring other identities by fragmenting, fracturing, and combining them.

Lagarde (1990) stated that individual identities evolve throughout people's lives based on their first gender-based classification, later making sense with other conditions such as class or race. Lagarde (1990) considers gender-based references as primary landmarks in the shaping of people and their identity, although this does not mean stability or immutability.

Butler (1990) pointed out that people become intelligible only when they have a gender identity that conforms to some extent to recognizable social norms that, based on sexual difference, govern behavior, functions, opportunities and valuations for women and men; the author adds that gender identities entail a social temporality sustained in an external space by means of a stylized repetition of acts, constituted as a performative realization entailing the certain obligatory nature of norms that predate the subject and are assumed to be true, hence its strength and pervasiveness.

In modern societies, youth is a sociocultural construct presented as a phase of life between childhood and adulthood. Biographical stages are equally constructed, which presupposes more or less permeable borders and institutionalized forms of passage and action between them. In this regard, Urteaga and Sáenz (2012) refer that a hallmark of youth ever since its social emergence as a phase of life is its liminal situation in the power relationships that take place between childhood dependence and adult autonomy. For Valenzuela (2015), youth is a diachronic, heterogeneous, and dynamic social condition; it is also perishable and can be accessed regardless of biological age. It always depends on social class and context. This socio-historical approach introduces order and meaning and imposes and demands certain social practices, with significant variations based on cultural constructions based on gender.

One of the main symbolic-relational references that allow for the articulation of the juvenile condition is its binary, dialectic, and antagonistic relationship with adulthood, in which young people systematically occupy positions of subordination; on the other hand, young people converge with their peers, with whom they share certain symbolic universes (Reguillo, 2005), this is independent of will and not necessarily interaction or equal conditions.

Since the emergence of the youth, adults and the institutions that they govern have sought to control the young to preserve privileged places, generating an adult-centric look that homogenizes and stigmatizes young people, pigeonholing their existential forms under labels such as "irresponsibility," "irreverence," "risk/threat social group." Such a collective

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needs to be controlled and subdued, since they cannot take care of themselves and do not know what they want or what they do (Duarte, 2000).

Adult-centrism also imposes social ideals of how things should be organized around the notion of social moratorium, which, beyond the demands of consumer societies, conceives young people as subjects for the future (susceptible of being recognized and socially validated only when they reach adulthood), and at the same time, it denies their present, *their being* as sexualized subjects with their own desires and interests, current and existing, which tend to be different from those assumed (Taguencia, 2009).

For its part, the peer group acts as an identifying referential model that allows young people to group and acknowledge themselves, but that, at the same time, acts as a differentiating and disintegrating force. The group represents a subjective-relational mirror that constantly confronts alterity (necessary to entrench identity) but is not synonymous with difference; rather it means seeing oneself through the eyes of the other in order to understand and reconcile internal discrepancies and articulate specific characteristics, contents, limits, to what is "being young" (Reguillo, 2005).

Gangs are a traditional and deeply rooted youth group in the west part of Ciudad Juárez. In this context, gangs are known as *el barrio*, and they have allowed thousands of young people in the region to compensate for certain emotional deficiencies, build loyalties, and create a new symbolic family and sense of life, transforming social exclusion into identity (Almada, 2012). In 2008, there were at least 600 gangs involved in criminal activity in the city (Monárrez, 2017).

The *barrio* can be thought of as a community practice of identity-building (Wenger, 1998). It is predominantly masculine, stratified, youthful and violent. The identity of the *barrio* is characterized by the public search and demonstration of masculinity associated with power and physical strength based on the domination of social territories including the people who inhabit them, especially other youth groups (Cruz, 2014).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This qualitative study used a hermeneutic-relational method[5] with the purpose of identifying practices, discourses and institutions involved in the construction of young men's identities in the west of Ciudad Juárez. Information based on semi-structured interviews carried out with six young people in the region between 18 and 25 years of age was used to create a data corpus. In addition, the method included participant observation in some of the participants' everyday contexts.

[5]The constructions are extracted and reworked through interactions between researcher and interviewee, at the same time they are interpreted by both with the aim of create consensus.

Four incursions, each lasting between 5 and 15 days, were carried out between 2016 and 2017. The main axes guiding the collection of information and the subsequent analysis of content by categories were everyday life and significant affective experiences in the participants' life trajectories. Based on the ethical principles of the investigation, the participants' personal data was safeguarded to protect their integrity.

The initial approach to the study of participants' identity processes was to locate them within the social structure of the city, characterized by the predominance of asymmetric power relationships that generate social bonds of domination, exploitation, and alienation from subjectivities. In this contextual location, young people occupy positions of subordination that reduce their agency as sexual, political, and social actors (Nateras, 2016; Reguillo, 2005; Urteaga & Sáenz, 2012).

VIOLENCE, DRUG TRAFFICKING, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

In the west of Ciudad Juárez, violence is often deadly and almost always associated with drug trafficking cartels, and it became the main organizer of daily life for the participants. By using different violent practices to exercise social control in the region, organized crime has a direct effect on the social practice and subjectivities constructed in the area.

Since 2008, many of the youth groups in the west of Ciudad Juárez modified their everyday socialization practices, and gangs practically disappeared in their traditional form because some of its constituent practices, such social gatherings together or the violent appropriation of public spaces became almost impossible due to the increased danger of such activities. Israel, a 19-year-old young man, describes the violent experiences that forced him to change his life. In 2011, a criminal group murdered several of his friends because they considered their forms of socialization a threat to their territorial domination. This deadly violence that contributed to the transformation of its identity: he became a *cholo*, a gang member:

> So imagine a couple of issues, the mafia and all that shit, the mafia was starting, those guys started coming in, and they didn't want people in their territory and they started taking people, and they took a couple of friends and killed them, and I saw that and I felt I should leave, and those guys they knew where the action was, and since I am a gang member, and another zone comes in, and trouble starts, but those guys don't want the police to come, they just want more territory (Israel, personal communication, March 25, 2017).

Violence in the West of Ciudad Juárez, a Long-Established Phenomenon

Violence had been present in the west of Ciudad Juárez since before ten years ago, when drug-trafficking groups occupied the region. For decades, local men have been socialized along lines of domination and control that use violence as their main relational medium,

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often with deadly consequences. Jose Luis, a 25-year-old man who currently works as a supervisor in the *maquila* said that one of his most painful experiences was the assassination of one of his symbolic brothers because they were actively involved in the *barrio*. This homicide occurred 12 years ago, before the period of exacerbated violence associated with disputes among drug cartels:

> The first thing that happened when one of my friends died, well he was like my brother, was my best friend who died, we were fourteen, fifteen, and so because we were in the street and stuff, unfortunately one of died... And all of us in the barrio were talking, we were just chilling and some guys from the other barrio came and stated making trouble, and what we saw was that one of our guys messed up because he made a graffiti in one of their walls knowing that we weren't allowed to go there, and so they got pissed at us, and they brought a gun, and when they drew it out practically all of us ran away but my friend was in shock and just when he was going to flee they got him, like, damn! He was shot three times in the back, and he fell to the ravine practically at once (José Luis, personal communication, March 29, 2017).

Young Men from the West, Recurrent Victims of Violence

Violence has killed thousands of young men in Ciudad Juárez over the past decade. It has also resulted in other victims, who suffer in silence most of the time and are constantly and permanently made invisible. Young people who are not spoken of or thought of, who have experienced painful and often traumatic experiences associated with the murder of a loved one or with aggressions that have endangered their lives or the life of someone close to them.

Fredy, a 21-year-old man who is currently employed by the *maquila,* is one of the thousands of indirect victims of deadly violence in the region. This young man described the murder of one of his friends, which took place in 2013, during his life as a student. This violent experience, which he considers the saddest part of his life, has had a negative impact on his emotions and severely hampered his exercise of the social bond which reinforced his decision to drop out of school. His account reflects a criminalization of the direct victim:

> Well, the saddest thing ... when they killed my buddy, he was from high school, we were always hanging out together, to have lunch or to his house or mine; so, we would do that, and then one day I found out that he had been killed because he was doing shady stuff… We were very close, no shitting, that was the saddest thing… When he was killed, well, I didn't want to go out anymore, I didn't want to do many things, we used to hang out with out girlfriends, our friends, and like, 'I won't give up because of this!,' 'We'll go

> through, right?,' I better go from home to school and from there back to my place, and that's it (Fredy, personal communication, March 26, 2017).

For these young people, the phenomenon of violence is not impersonal or abstract. For them, direct victims turn out to be their siblings, friends, or parents and they often experience a high degree of involvement in the violent events, an intensity that usually becomes traumatic and has harmful effects that endure over time. Jesús, a 19-year-old young man who likes to play soccer, reports that the most painful thing he has experienced occurred in 2014, when he saw his father, an ex-convict accused of distributing drugs and attempted homicide, being shot. Jesús thinks that his father is a member of Los Aztecas, a gang in permanent conflict with its enemies:

> When my dad got out of the CEFERESO (prison)[6] I saw how he got shot, and I saw everything because I was staying at his place, he told me we would go get some "menudo" and I said: Sure, let's go! A truck came and asked him for "two bags" *[of marihuana]* and when he turned around to get them, there it was, bang, bang, bang. I was very impressed, I thought: 'He's fucked!,' and then in shock just watching him lying there, and then a friend came along running, he grabbed a gun and went after the guys on the truck and bang, bang, bang, he got one of them. We took my dad straight on the pick-up and ran, he spent one week in intensive therapy. Sometimes I can't sleep because I have this image of him lying on the street, with blood and all shot (Jesús, personal communication, October 26, 2017).

Young people in the west are often direct victims of violence by drug trafficking groups in the region. Although they did not lose their lives, they suffered violent traumatic experiences that significantly disrupted their identity. In the next interview fragment, Israel accounts how the Mafia was about to assassinate him due to his identity practices as a young man in the Western Zone:

> So, one time they came, but they were out for me, they told me to get inside and what could I do? They had a gun. So, I got inside and they started hitting me. They started asking me about my *barrio* and slapping me, hitting me, and I said that we painted graffiti and stuff, and they said, 'you want us to kill you?' 'No!' Now I was freaked out. 'We don't do anything wrong; we just stand out ground.' They let me out the next day around eight in the morning and I went home, thinking, while my wounds healed (Israel, personal communication, March 25, 2017).

[6] Federal Social Readaptation Center.

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Some Subjective-Relational Consequences of Violence

Although violence has become part of the culture and everyday life in this city, its harmful effects remain strong and are often traumatic. When the experience is close in relational or affective terms, it evokes meanings associated with pain. Pain, however, is not the only adverse effect of the homicide of a relative or friend, but also frustration and helplessness before the power asymmetries that indirect victims perceive in relation to the alleged perpetrators. Most of the time, due to the type of violent practices used for killing, murderers are assumed to be members of drug trafficking groups. These crimes take place in a social context of impunity that prevent the victims' families from having real access to justice. In addition, young men experience certain pressures and limits imposed by traditional gender stereotypes concerning the verbalization of emotions such as fear or sadness, which are certainly common in this type of experience.

Gabriel, a young 18-year-old athlete, was visibly moved by the loss he has experienced. He described two experiences associated with the death of loved ones, both very different from each other. The first, a natural death caused by disease, although painful, was easier to elaborate subjectively and relationally. The second was a homicide, a phenomenon characterized by the opacity of both the motives and in the identification of the perpetrators. These circumstances made it very difficult for the interviewee to elaborate the experience, and he refers certain difficulties in recognizing the emotions associated with death:

> …They didn't kill hum [the grandfather] or anything like that, he died when he came to the hospital, he died of a disease het had ... He [the stepfather] was also killed, murdered; that was about five years ago… He was drinking with some friends and suddenly a truck came, and they were forced inside and that's it, they threw him out near the Camino Real, we didn't find out anything else, it was difficult, especially for my mom (Gabriel, personal communication, October 26, 2017).

Male homicide also confronts young people with the possibility of being killed in the same circumstances and by the same people, especially when the victim turns out to be another young man, someone from the peer group with whom there was a strong bond based not only on concordance but also on affection. Israel narrates how the murder of his comrades gave rise to a fear of dying that contributed to the transformation of his identity:

> …I learned this from my own experience and from others' because I saw how my friends fell… and when it was my turn, I said, 'I better run, fuck it,' I left, because next time it'll be me, and so I left the *barrio* and the streets (Israel, personal communication, March 25, 2017).

Regardless of their daily practices, young people in the west live permanently under threat from the violence that pervades the city. Jesús narrates how the violent practices associated with the father's lifestyle threatened his integrity and provoked a relational and emotional distancing with him:

> I don't feel like going there, because he [the father] is still the same, with the drugs and the guns, and the last time I went there they wanted to take me because I'm his kid, and I don't know how I just fled and said, 'fuck it, I'm out of here,' I ran fast and those guys were after me and I got to a house and a man said, 'Come on, get inside, it's ok,' and I got into the backyard of some house and ran away, and I said 'I'm not going down there anymore! ." I think it was his enemies, because my old man is an Azteca and The Mexiclas are at war with them, so I haven't been back (Jesús, personal communication, October 26, 2017).

Another effect of the violence is forced displacement, which sometimes mobilizes entire families, usually within the same region. Young people such as Israel or Jesus were forced to abandon their place of residence in order to safeguard their integrity or a family member's. Tomás, an extremely shy 18-year-old young man, narrated that he is always out on the street, just getting high. He indicated that, in 2016, the violence of drug trafficking groups forced the family to move to the neighborhood where the interview took place:

> It's not because we wanted it, but we had an issue at X and we had to come over here… they got into our house, they broke our windows, they threatened to kill us, they said that they had a lot of people here and in Mazatlán and elsewhere, that they can come here and stuff. Since that day when they told us they were going to kill us, I haven't seen any movement, but better safe than sorry (Tomás, personal communication, October 26, 2019).

Although the new neighborhood is expected to be a safe environment, it usually has similar social practices compared with the former neighborhood. It is a symbolic alien territory where newcomers are systematically and violently excluded, especially if they seek to participate in the public space. They experience pressure and physical aggression from their peers based on the dominant juvenile and gender norms in the region. Tomás described about some of the violent practices taking place among young men in the west, which also affect women, who are treated as objects:

> It was only the first three months that nobody would talk to me, I got into trouble over some girls, and I honestly don't think it's worth it, much less if she goes out looking for it, if she starts telling stories, and other guys come picking a fight, I get upset, they punch me or something and I that pisses me off (Tomás, personal communication, October 26, 2019).

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Youth Identities as Subjective and Relational Responses to Violence

The violence described thus far in this paper is imposed upon young people in a massive and intense manner, forcing them to develop different positions that allow them to safeguard their integrity and remain part of their social context. These positions include moving away from their place of residence, relinquishing everyday social interaction, and even refraining from forming close emotional bonds with people, as it represents risk. These measures are conflictive and painful because they are forced and sudden, and sometimes experienced as a true *loss of self* since they attempt against their own identity. Visibly confused, Israel describes the most difficult thing he has ever lived and the terrible transformation of his identity:

> The hardest part?... I don't know... living this life... I've had a couple of problems, but they're hard to move over, you know? The hardest thing… well, I don't know, not to do the things or other dudes do, not going to friends' houses, not being present because it's like not being there, the hardest thing was when I lost those guys, it's the hardest thing I've lived and they let me go really beat-up (Israel, personal communication, March 25, 2017).

In addition to poverty and vulnerability, violence precipitates the formal entry of young people into the labor market, mostly in the *maquila*, which represents low salaries and poor conditions but is one of the few options young people have for accessing a life project within the legal framework that guarantees certain security based on a contract. Nevertheless, many of them are forced to limit their socialization practices, especially with their peers, to closed spaces that provide better conditions of security and self-regulation.

Many young people, such as Israel (personal communication, March 25, 2017) continue to "party, more pot, more beer, between homies, but always drugs, sometimes a girl, but now we finish early because we have to work tomorrow." Others, such as Fredy, although they continue to use drugs, "a small puff every now and then, a beer" (personal communication, March 27, 2017), they do it at a friend's house, and almost always on weekends after work. While others, as in the case of Jesús (personal communication, October 26, 2017), reorganize their everyday life between old and new practices: "some days work, others party, others a girl, and sometimes beer."

In the same vein and when they have some money, young men in the west also use information technologies to establish emotional, amorous, or erotic relationships. A type of contemporary bonding that also allows them to protect themselves from violence.

There are young people who attend previously unappealing contexts such as the church, the community center, the park, or artistic activities, from which they develop new identity ascriptions that bypass the limitations imposed by violence. These transformations are not always favorable; for example, after being forced to move, Tomás built a new identity as a drug addict based on lingering at the park. He damages his health and suffers

discrimination, but this praxis has allowed him to become part of the masculine social organization of the youth in his new neighborhood, although he occupies one of the lowest hierarchical positions:

> Well, I'm always in the streets, well, not always, not all the time, but almost every day I'm here at the park, dusk till dawn, and since everybody is here, it's all I do. Also, because I just quit my job, coming here is all I do, getting high all the time. I'm a drug addict now, as people say, and I resent what people say about me. Smoking all day and in the streets, what would you call somebody like that? A drug addict, right? (Tomás, personal communication, October 26, 2019).

There are other cases, such as José Luis', in which young people use the arts (for him it's rap music) to process their violent experiences and transform themselves and their identity as well as their social context. Young people are taking on much more active roles in the non-violent recovery of public spaces, as long as their integrity is not at risk:

> They say that this neighborhood has a very bad reputation, and yes, they [other people in the context] have gone through some bad experiences, but this neighborhood has truly changed since some of us began doing rap, because the movement is really going places here, and thanks to rap I've been able to move on, it's what's helped me change my life, there's an event we do on Sundays, we want to do a movement here in Juárez… it's for getting together every Sunday, the guys who rap, so we can do something together (José Luis, personal communication, March 29, 2017).

CLOSING REMARKS

The present study found that violence, often deadly and predominantly caused by drug trafficking cartels, stands out as the main driver of the everyday and affective lives of the young participants. The context has exerted a significant effect on the construction of their identities, but these identities are not homogeneous nor an automatic reproduction of the dominant social discourses and practices. Instead, they entail a relational complementarity that includes concordance, but also discrepancy and the development of different types of participation and positions.

Violence has been present for a long time in the different contexts where young people socialize. However, over the past decade, the traditional forms of socialization among peers, with the family, with adults, and the general social organizations have been disrupted over the past decade in the region, and young people have become the most representative victims.

In western Juárez, violence is a structural and structuring element of the social reality that affects young people in the region directly. Violence has facilitated the murder of

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young men and their entry into the criminal world, forced displacements, exacerbated drug use, and distance from affective relationships. Violence also results in dropping out of school, early incorporation into the workplace, problems in the couple, and early parenthood. All these social practices are part of the identity construction processes of young men from the west of Ciudad Juárez.

Given the different contexts of violence, young people respond pragmatically by constructing identities that allow them to safeguard their integrity and to remain part of the social context. Frequently, these elaborations are conflicting, forced, and sudden, as well as painful due to the damage produced by violence and the motivations behind it. Due to their intensity, these experiences are often traumatic, and they are strongly supported by the context of impunity and illegality and by a gender ideology that maintains traditional and stereotyped views of what a man should be: the fearless one who looks danger in the eye, who never cracks nor wimps out, who confronts anything even if his life is at risk.

These young men were also observed to assume an active position in the face of the phenomenon of violence and to develop different identity resistance actions that allow them to partially, temporally, or contextually preserve some of their constituent elements, adjusting them to the limitations imposed by the context. These strategies include change of residence, anticipated entry into the labor market (especially to *the maquila),* self-regulation of social practices and their transfer to closed and safe spaces, the use of information technology to establish social bonds, participation in community groups, the development of sports or artistic activities, or severe drug use.

Even though young people resist, transform, or develop new identities in response to exacerbated violence contexts, such elaborations are related with their previous identities. These identities are articulated by virtue of their status as a young men in which gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and young age converge in a dimension built by history and by culture, that is, these young are attached to the prevailing ideologies of domination and control in the region. This social context facilitates incursions into drug trafficking or gang activity, explosive consumption of drugs, fighting, or artistic elaborations that promote the submission and humiliation of others.

Violence is also present in how women are classified by men, in homophobic attitudes, in the exercise of sexuality, in the construction of life projects based on the role of suppliers when they become parents, in their care for others as family “heads,” as well as in their difficulty to verbalize emotional needs and look after themselves.

Finally, studying the identity construction processes of young men in the western part of Ciudad Juárez increases our knowledge about its complex social reality and its associated identities. This knowledge is a common good that makes a socio-identity transformation possible, especially among young people, as active participants in the construction of their identities and social reality whose voices can be heard and resignified by others.

Translator: Miguel Rios

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