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*accounting for drug trafficking violence in Mexico***

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**POVERTY, GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN THE NARRATIVES OF FORMER NARCOS: ACCOUNTING
FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING VIOLENCE IN MEXICO**

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ABSTRACT

Dominant scholarly approaches to drug trafficking violence (DTV) in Mexico generally explain its onset and escalation by focusing on one of four issues: a) the democratisation process in the 1990s and 2000s; b) the systemic corruption of the judicial and legislative institutions; c) a weak rule of law across the country; and d) the 'war on drugs' launched by former president Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). These approaches, however, fail to account for the discursive conditions that enable the perpetrators to engage in DTV. This thesis, therefore, proposes a new critical approach to our understanding of DTV by examining the life stories of thirty-three former narcos collected in Mexico between October 2014 and January 2015. Using a discourse analytical approach, I identify a set of meaning production regularities, uncovered through detailed interviews, which I conceptualise as *narco discourse*. In this discourse, informed by a neoliberal ethos, poverty is understood as a fixed condition, 'poor people have no future' and have 'nothing to lose'. Under this logic, the 'only' way for them to enjoy life is to engage in illegal activities conceived as '*la vida fácil*' [the easy life] which guarantee them '*dinero fácil*' [easy money]. The narco discourse also produces the idea that '*un hombre de verdad*' [a true man] embodies the normative characteristics of *machismo*. This masculinity, in turn, justifies male violence as 'necessary' in order to 'survive' in contexts of poverty. These three intertwined discourses of poverty, masculinity and violence enable the construction of DTV in instrumental terms, e.g. as '*un negocio*' [a business'], as something 'exciting' and even as a source of empowerment. In this way, I demonstrate how DTV is discursively made possible by and for former narcos. This is a starting point for rethinking DTV not only as the result of corruption, or failed policies, but also as the product of the interplay between pre-existing social conditions and discourses produced and reproduced by perpetrators of DTV.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: DATE:.....

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“In Mexico, the violence that has appeared during the last...years is not an element that has developed overnight. What has happened is that “the usual violence” has come to a blend, within an adequate and proper context, with the irruption of international organized crime” (Oehmichen-Bazán, 2013: 243)

“If you ask me, all this violence [drug trafficking violence] is not different from other things I have lived. Today is drugs but tomorrow will be something else” (Canastas, interview 2014)

1. Introduction

In this thesis I analyse the life stories of thirty-three men who used to work in the drug trafficking business and self-identified as narcos. Using a discourse theoretic approach, I identified a set of regularities which produce a similar logic in participants’ interviews which I conceptualise as *narco discourse*. This study therefore seeks to answer how the narco discourse enables practices of DTV such as torture, kidnapping and murder. This discourse is mainly informed by intertwined discourses of poverty, gender and violence which produce certain regimes of ‘truth’ and, in doing so, discursively enable practices of drug trafficking violence (DTV). In the narco discourse poverty is understood as a fixed condition, ‘poor people have no future’ and have ‘nothing to lose’. Under this logic, the ‘only way for them to enjoy life is to engage in illegal activities conceived as *‘la vida fácil’* [the easy life], which guarantee them *‘dinero fácil’* [easy money]. The narco discourse also produces the idea that *‘un hombre de verdad’* [a true man] embodies the normative characteristics of *machismo*. This masculinity, in turn, justifies, and normalises, violence as ‘necessary’ in order to ‘survive’ in contexts of poverty. I argue that these three intertwined discourses of poverty, masculinity and violence, enable the discursive construction of DTV as a business, as an enjoyable practice, as a hobby and, ultimately, as a source of empowerment. In this way, my thesis provides a deeper insight into the discursive conditions of possibility of practices of DTV and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of DTV in Mexico. This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted in the North of Mexico from October 2014 to January 2015.

In developing a new perspective, this thesis makes three contributions to existing knowledge. First, it provides first-hand data regarding perpetrators’ perspectives about their engagement in practices of DTV. In this sense, while most of the literature addressing this subject matter is based on secondary sources, my study offers an empirically grounded contribution to our understanding of DTV. Second, equally important, my research demonstrates the arbitrary and discursive nature of DTV which is a starting point for rethinking DTV not only as the result of corruption, or failed policies, as mainstream approaches suggest, but also as a discursive construction. In this regard, my research does not provide an argument for a particular cause of DTV. Rather, my analysis contributes with a holistic

framework for how we may think about DTV by shedding light on how the interplay of pre-existing social conditions, and the discourses produced and reproduced by participants, enable practices of DTV. Finally, this study provides an empirical contribution to both current literature on DTV, drug policy makers, and public policy makers in Mexico.

This chapter is organised as follows. I begin by sharing my personal experiences regarding DTV which prompted my academic interest in investigating this subject matter. Next, I provide a brief context of DTV in Mexico. Then, I discuss the rationale for using the concept of 'drug trafficking violence' instead of other terms used in the literature such as 'drug violence' or 'drug-related violence'. This is followed by a review of two bodies of literature which I have identified as 'mainstream' and 'critical' approaches to the study of DTV. The former is referred as 'mainstream' since they engage in and reproduce the state discourse on DTV. The latter, in contrast, expose and contest such discourses. The final section presents an overview of the organisation of the thesis.

1.1 My personal interest in DTV

My academic interest in studying drug trafficking violence (DTV) emerged out of a passionate conversation I had with a Brazilian lecturer seven years ago, when I started my master's degree in 2012. She asked me my opinion about the war on drugs launched by former president of Mexico Felipe Calderón. My response was simple and evidently subjective: "I hate that man and his war on drugs!" I explained to her how much my life had changed since he deployed the military to the streets and that, indeed, one of the main reasons why I was studying abroad was the insecurity and high level of violence in Mexico. As my lecturer asked me to provide more details about how my life had changed and why I 'hated that man' so much, I told her the following stories.

In 2010 I decided that I wanted to pursue an academic career. As I started looking for positions in Mexico that would allow me to develop as a scholar, I came to the realisation that because of the drug trafficking violence that had spread almost all over the country, I did not feel safe moving anywhere within it. That is why in 2011, I decided to study a master's degree abroad. My main motivation drew on my feelings of fear and frustration regarding drug trafficking violence in my hometown, Saltillo, Coahuila. I was twenty-six years old and felt imprisoned in my own house. I was not able to enjoy my free time because there were no safe places to go. Most of the bars and small business had shut down because narcos from the Zetas Cartel were blackmailing businesses to the point of bankruptcy in exchange for protection against their attacks. To make matters worse, I did not even want to go to the few venues left. I did not feel safe anywhere at any time. Shootings in plain daylight, in residential areas or busy avenues, had become a regular occurrence in Saltillo and I felt helpless as the paranoia of 'narco violence' began to spread.

These feelings intensified over the years when several friends and family members were directly affected by DTV. One of my friends was caught in the midst of a shootout between narcos and the military. Fortunately, she didn't

get hurt. Nevertheless, her son became traumatised due to the intensity of the event. Since that day, he gets very anxious with loud noises such as the blender, fireworks or any other loud and sudden sound. Soon after, my father also got caught in the middle of a shootout. Fortunately, he managed to drive home, but only after suffering a massive panic attack. He was shaking and covered in sweat when he narrated what happened. Again, it was a confrontation between the military and the narcos. As expected, the narcos did not care about hurting civilians, but the big surprise was that the military did not care either. On another occasion, my two sisters had a similar experience. However, they were not able to remove themselves from the scene, so they had to witness the whole confrontation. Fortunately, again, no civilians got hurt but, understandably, it took them several weeks to recover from that experience.

Then, it was my turn: one Saturday afternoon, when I was on my way to the cinema, I saw two hanging bodies from a pedestrian bridge. Although I was aware of the sadistic way in which drug cartels disposed of their victims' tortured bodies, it was the first time that I saw it right there, in front of me. I looked around and traffic was normal. Nobody stopped. I thought of the possibility of calling the police to alert them, but I felt scared. Suddenly, my hands were sweaty, and my heart was pounding fast. My first impulse was to go back home. I later found out that the police did not remove the bodies because there was a banner attached to them warning that that is what happened to the police snitches and the same would happen to those who took away their bodies.

My last direct encounter with DTV happened on a Tuesday morning in the facilities of the university in which I worked for five years. I heard the shots as if they were fireworks. The principal immediately ordered us to shut all doors and ask students to remain inside until further notice. Since I was part of the staff trained to deal with emergencies, I was asked to check the hallways, so nobody was left outside. Once the shooting stopped I went out to double check that the hallways were clear. I was in the fifth floor and saw first-hand how two policemen shoot the narcos' empty truck and then they shot into an empty lot next to the street. I felt angry. The police knew they were next to a university with over a thousand students. The narcos had left half an hour before: why would they shoot the truck? Why would they shoot the empty lot? Why on earth did they not think about the panic they were unnecessarily creating inside the classrooms?

When I finished telling this story, my lecturer suggested I channel all my anger and frustration through my master's thesis. In my thesis I focused on analysing the state policies and agencies behind the war on drugs launched in 2006 by Felipe Calderón. This showed me there was a considerable gap in the literature: there were few empirical studies on DTV. Also, I became aware of the urgency of the issue of DTV in Mexico as I explain below.

1.2 Introducing Drug Trafficking Violence in Mexico

Drug trafficking violence (DTV) in Mexico has been an important headline in national and international newspapers since the 1980s when the Mexican drug cartels began smuggling drugs for Colombian cartels to the United States (Astorga, 2005). Nevertheless, it was not until former president Felipe Calderón-Hinojosa (2006-2012) launched a frontal 'war on drugs' that violence skyrocketed quantitatively (Aguilar, 2011; Sonja and Celorio, 2011) and qualitatively (Celaya, 2009; Bunker, 2010; Lantz, 2016). In quantitative terms, the number of drug-related homicides reached disturbing figures, surpassing the killing rates in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same period of time (Felbab-Brown, 2014: 4). By the end of Calderón's term (2012) at least 120,000 drug-related deaths were reported (Proceso, 2013; Hernández, 2013; Cruz et al., 2013). Under the current presidency of Enrique Peña-Nieto (2012-2018) the number of drug-related deaths continues to increase. From 2012 to 2017, there have been at least 116,000 murders and it is expected that, at the end of his administration, the total toll will be even higher than during Calderón's administration (Calderón et al., 2018: 4).

As Bunker (2010) and Ovalle (2010) point out, numbers are just the tip of the iceberg: what is worrying is how cruel and sadistic DTV has become since the war on drugs began and how it has affected the social fabric in Mexico (Turati, 2011; Beittel, 2013; Edmonds-Poli, 2013). Nowadays it is not enough to kill the enemy, as drug cartels used to do in the 80s and 90s when Mexican drug lords considered themselves as 'men of honour' (e.g. they did not kill children, women or civilians) based on the Italian mafia's ethics code (Sánchez, 2009). Now, drug cartels want their enemies to suffer and want the society to witness their suffering by exposing their tortured or maimed bodies in public areas. Their message is addressed to both the government and the general public. Since 2004, battles for turf between drug cartels had turned merciless against anybody: the government, rival cartels, journalists or civilians who interfere in their business. Hanging bodies from pedestrian bridges, throwing human heads into public squares or uploading videos in the web torturing members of rival cartels have become the common way to send the message of how far they are willing to go in order to defend their 'plaza' [turf].

Clearly, in order to understand how these violent practices are made possible, it is important to gain an insight into the perpetrators' understanding of DTV. However, even though narcos play a key role in the production and reproduction of DTV, few academic studies account for their views. Most scholarship examines secondary sources such as policy documents, newspapers or politicians' speeches. Other studies address DTV from a cultural perspective, examining cultural expressions related to drug trafficking such as *narco-corridos* (songs), narco-novels, films, and their classic outfits, which are considered as iconic elements of the narco-culture. Alternatively, other studies attempt to explain the onset and causes of DTV by applying economic or criminological models in order to understand, and even predict, narcos' decision making process. These studies, although making relevant contributions in their respective areas, leave one key question unanswered: how do narcos themselves understand their engagement in practices of DTV? If we are to understand the complexity of DTV, we need to address this

question, not by predicting or assuming how they think, but rather by including their narratives as part of our understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, this thesis analyses narcos' narratives on DTV not only as response to a gap in the literature. More significantly, my research responds to the urgent need to investigate DTV from a different perspective that allows understanding this phenomenon in a more comprehensive way.

1.3 Drug trafficking violence: a conceptual discussion

The subject matter of this dissertation is *drug trafficking violence* (DTV). I use this concept to refer to violent practices which narcos engage with as part of their job within the illegal business of drug trafficking. These include, but are not exclusive to, practices of torture, kidnapping and murder. Also, the concept makes reference to: a) violence resulting from fights within and between cartels, b) violence resulting from state-cartel fighting, c) violence resulting from confrontations between cartels and the civilian population, and d) violence resulting from drug smuggling and drug dealing. Most scholarship, however, uses related, yet different, concepts to refer to this type of violence(s). The most common terms used in the literature are: 'drug-related violence', 'drug violence', 'narco-violence', 'cartel-related violence', 'drug war violence', and 'organized-crime-related violence' (Heinle, et al., 2012; Calderón et al., 2018).

To date, several of these terms are used interchangeably when referring to violence associated to the drug trafficking business. This is perhaps because there is no definition in the Mexican legal system to classify and monitor violence in the country (Calderón et al., 2018: 49). Since the Constitution categorises homicides into two broad categories – intentional homicide [*homicidio doloso*] and unintentional manslaughter ([*homicidio culposo*, – there is not reliable data regarding drug trafficking homicides, disappearances or cases of torture, because these categories are not officially recognised and separated by the Mexican government¹. Therefore, stemming from this loophole, there is no consistency in the concepts used to refer to what I have defined as DTV.

The choice of using the concept of DTV comes from my attempt to both, distance my research from mainstream approaches on DTV, and problematise the use of other concepts. The main reason for not using these terms is because they are misleading and reproduce the global drug prohibition discourse (Herschinger, 2015). In the case of the concepts of 'drug violence' and 'drug-related violence', they fail to make adequate reference to violence resulting from drug trafficking. This is because, by definition, drug violence and drug-related violence make reference to violence related to drugs, that is, violence that results from drug abuse or drug addiction. Therefore, since this violence should be addressed as a health issue rather than a crime, I see these two concepts as inadequate to refer to the type of violence my research seeks to address. The concepts 'narco violence', 'drug cartel violence',

¹ More attention should be drawn as well to the fact that other relevant categories are not included in the Mexican constitution such as gender-related murders (femicides) or homophobic murders.

'organized-crime-violence', or 'the war on drugs violence', prove also problematic since they reproduce state discourses. Using these terms, therefore, not only implies an uncritical acceptance of the global drug prohibition discourse, but also the reproduction of diverse interests and power relations at play.

By problematising the use of these concepts, I refer to "the strategy [that] carries with it an intrinsically ethical connotation, as it seeks to show that dominant discursive constructions are contingent and political, rather than necessary" (Howarth, 2000: 135). In this sense, I suggest that all the concepts mentioned above are, indeed, political as they implicitly invoke the 'drugs as a threat' discourse promoted by the United States. Specifically, since the 1961 UN Single Convention, drugs and drug trafficking organisations have been conceived as the enemy and as an "existential threat" which requires "extraordinary measures" (Crick, 2012: 407). This is the dominant discourse that informs the global drug prohibition regime and thereby legitimises the international 'war on drugs' which, through its basis in the rhetoric of conflict, reproduces the dichotomy of 'us' (i.e. society and government) vs 'them' (drug traffickers) (Buzan, Waeber and de Wilde, 1998).

Drug trafficking violence is mainly conceptualised in dominant discourses as 'narco violence', and as the 'war on drugs'. As discussed earlier, these terms are problematic for two main reasons. On the one hand, the construction of DTV as 'narco violence' conceals the fact that violence is produced not only by narcos but also by state agencies. 'Narco violence' is constructed as *their* violence, as if the state agencies were not also involved in the production and reproduction of DTV. This, in turn, also implies a double standard position regarding violence, as DTV is illegitimate and condemned *only* when it is perpetrated by narcos. Informed by the notion of the state monopoly of force, dominant discourses produce the idea that state violence is 'legitimate violence', and the deaths caused by state agencies are referred to as 'collateral damage' (Ovalle, 2010b). However, when violence is perpetrated by drug cartels, DTV is constructed as sadistic, cruel and unacceptable, and the resulting deaths are portrayed as narcos' fault, as opposed to collateral damage. This double standard is made possible thanks to what Cabañas (2014: 6) calls "a kind of political linguistics", where, for example, the word 'violence' is never used to refer to state actions.

Different terms are used by journalists, scholars and policy makers in reference to violence associated with drug trafficking or drug traffickers. The terms used the most in the scholarship are 'drug violence', 'narco violence' and 'war on drugs violence'. Also, some scholars from the United States have referred to it as 'narco-terrorism', merging the 'threats' of the American war on terror and the war on drugs (Björnehed, 2004; Celaya-Pacheco, 2009). I have argued that these concepts are problematic because they reproduce dominant discourses, which, in turn, establish and normalise power relationships. At the international level, the 'war on drugs' entails a clear power relationship between the countries in which drugs are cultivated, which are constructed as 'them', and those countries into which drugs are smuggled, which are constructed as 'us'. At a domestic level, dominant discourses reproduce this logic by positioning narcos and drug users as outsiders. Hence the terms 'drug violence' and the 'war on drugs' reproduce this logic by linking violence exclusively to drug cartels and narcos. In doing so, they conceal the fact that the state,

and other actors, such as politicians and international banks, amongst others, are also part of the chain of drug trafficking and, therefore, are also responsible for DTV.

As I have shown, the existing terms employed in the literature to refer to violence related to drug trafficking or drug traffickers prove inadequate and misleading. In strict terms, the most suitable concept to define this type of violence would be global prohibition paradigm violence (GPPV). By using this term, it would become clear that violence related to drug trafficking is not caused by an abstract enemy, such as drugs or by outsider enemies such as drug traffickers. If one used the concept of GPPV the nature of the 'problem' constructed by dominant discourses would be brought to light. This concept would also have the benefit of bringing forward the power relations established by those promoting this paradigm, namely the U.S.

Yet, for the purposes of this study, I refer to any type of violence related to drug trafficking and drug traffickers as 'drug trafficking violence' (DTV) because it engages and responds to current literature addressing this subject matter. I use the term 'drug trafficking violence' in an attempt to bring to the fore that violence is not caused by the material object 'drugs', but rather by the global prohibition paradigm. In the following section, I situate my overall argument in the context of what I have identified as mainstream and critical literature on DTV.

1.4 Literature Review²

In this section, I discuss the main scholarly contributions to the subject of DTV which are here categorised into two groups mainstream approaches, and critical approaches. There is a myriad of insightful studies addressing DTV from several disciplines, including anthropology, economics, criminology, psychology, sociology and, of course, political science and policy studies. However, for the purposes of this research, I only offer a review of those studies which aim to explain the onset and increase of DTV in Mexico and, given the discursive analytical approach of this research, I also include scholarship which explicitly challenges the dominant discourse on DTV.

The first group, herein named mainstream approaches, addresses DTV from different disciplines following a top-down approach that engages with and reproduces dominant discourses of DTV. The second body of literature analysed contests dominant discourses, taken-for-granted assumptions and myths about drug trafficking, narcotics and DTV, herein referred to as critical approaches. Overall, these two types of studies provide important insights into the study of DTV in Mexico. On the one hand, mainstream approaches offer relevant information about the ways in which endemic corruption in the country, despite the militarisation of public security, have contributed to the increasing of DTV. On the other hand, critical approaches highlight the relevance of both the structural and contextual factors of DTV. They defend the importance of considering how dominant discourses on DTV have

² This section draws on my master's thesis: Garcia, K. (2013) "The Cognitive Capacity and Infrastructural Power of the Mexican state during Felipe Calderon's administration: coping with the despotic war on drugs, Newcastle University.

permeated its popular representations, as well as those of narcos and drug trafficking. Before proceeding to review the literature, it is necessary to establish what is understood as the dominant discourse on DTV.

As explained above, the dominant discourse on DTV draws on the securitisation of drugs, which constructs drugs as a global 'existential threat' to mankind or the 'global Self' (Crick, 2012; Buzan et al., 1998). Consequently, led by the U.S., this discourse justifies 'extraordinary measures', such as the 'the war on drugs' as a measure to combat the 'threat' of drugs (Crick, 2012: 407). This logic is reproduced in the state discourse in Mexico, where drugs are linked to danger and, consequently, drug trafficking is constructed as a 'threat' to society. Under this view, the war on drugs is legitimised through a paternalistic discourse which positions the Mexican state as the only legitimate actor able to 'protect' society from the 'evils of drugs' (Balderas-Domínguez, 2012). In this way, the dominant discourse portrays narcos as the 'other', as an alien "who are very different from 'us', "the law abiding" citizens" (Edwards and Gill, 2002: 252). This construction, consequently, produces a manichean portrayal of narcos as the 'bad guys' and civilians and the state as the 'good guys', which is a "key rhetorical recourse for... keeping the speaker at a discursively and morally safe distance" (Esch, 2014: 168). This construction, in turn, has the effect of emotionally detaching those positioned as 'us' from 'them'. Therefore, since narcos are 'the enemy', the law abiding citizens hardly question narcos' faith and even justify gruesome violence, such as the dismembering, beheadings and murder of narcos (Ovalle, 2010b). In this way, by producing and perpetuating the logic of 'us' and 'them', the dominant discourse establishes and enhances the state power, which implies its 'legitimate' use and monopoly of violence and, in so doing, the persecution, torture and death of narcos, is justified. This, in turn, also conceals the fact that there are multiple actors involved in the so-called war on drugs, from corrupt politicians, political parties, accountants, architects and even international banks, to state institutions, such as the military and the police (Esch, 2014).

Overall, the dominant discourse on DTV produces the discursive conditions that allow mainstream scholarship to justify violent practices that otherwise would be highly unpopular. By linking 'drugs' to 'threat' and, in turn to 'crime', this discourse produces two kinds of subjects: on the one hand, the law-abiding citizens and the state who constitute 'us'; and, on the other hand, the 'outlaw' individuals who are positioned as 'the other' and pose a 'threat' to 'us'. Not surprisingly, the dominant discourse also reproduces the notion of the state monopoly on violence, which automatically justifies, and at some points even conceals, the violent actions undertaken by the state (Carlos, 2014).

1.4.1 Mainstream approaches to the study of drug trafficking violence

Mainstream approaches generally account for the onset and increase of DTV from a state-centred focus. That is, they draw on the premise that DTV is better explained by examining the drawbacks of state policies, analysing the role that state corruption or the weak rule of law play in the spread of DTV, and, of course, by scrutinising the war on drugs launched in 2006 by former president Felipe Calderón. These approaches, however, overlook the other side of the conflict, i.e. narcos, and assume that they are part of a monolithic group, who, at best, are conceived as rational actors motivated by economic gains. Also, these studies reproduce the state discourse discussed above which alienates narcos from society by portraying them as ‘the other’. This, in turn, reproduces the idea that narcos live and operate outside the limits of the state and, thereby, limits our understanding of this phenomenon, and constrains the identification and development of effective policies to minimise DTV. This literature generally explains DTV as the result of: a) the democratisation process in Mexico; b) the ‘war on drugs’ launched in 2006; and c) the global prohibition paradigm.

DTV as the result of the democratisation process in Mexico

This body of literature concentrates on examining how DTV increased along with the democratisation process and the subsequent decentralisation of decision-making power across different levels of government (local, state, federal). The democratisation process started in the 1990s but consolidated in 2000, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party [Partido Revolucionario Institucional] (PRI) lost the presidential elections to National Action Party [Partido Acción Nacional], after PRI’s seventy-year-long one-party rule (Chabat, 2002). Drawing on economic and criminology frameworks, scholars agree that DTV was contained since, in the 1980s and 1990s, drug cartels were protected by the government, which had the function of mediator between drug cartels (Ríos, 2012; Dell, 2015; Widner et al.; Pereyra, 2012; Astorga and Shirk, 2010). Under PRI governments, since the party controlled the three levels of government, drug cartels only had to bribe central authorities in order to obtain protection. However, when the PRI lost the executive power in 2000, drug cartels had to secure their interests by training and arming themselves in order to protect, defend or fight for turf against rival cartels. When power decentralisation took place, criminals had to negotiate with different authorities, turning corruption into ‘a multiple-bribe game’ (Ríos, 2012; Pereyra, 2012). In other words, when the decision-making power was dispersed across different levels of government, corruption became more expensive for drug cartels.

Conversely, other studies suggest that the unprecedented violence in Mexico is not the result of an increase in institutional corruption across different levels of government, but rather a rational choice made by politicians (Osorio, 2013; Williams, 2009). Their main argument is that under a democratic system, political actors are motivated to fight crime as they may obtain political benefits from cracking down on drug cartels, especially when their

legitimacy is threatened. Osorio (2013) argues that, contrary to government expectations, violence does not decrease by fighting criminals who control key areas since the main territories for smuggling drugs, such as the U.S.A.-Mexico border states, will always be disputed by drug cartels. If the military attacks and defeats a drug cartel, the power vacuum left by the defeated drug cartel will soon be filled by another one but not before a violent confrontation against competing cartels for that turf takes place. In the same line of thought, Williams (2009) conceptualises the increase of DTV as 'transitional violence' that resulted from the break down of the tacit pacts between the PRI governments and drug trade organisations. Williams (2009), however, warns that transitional violence is just one of the many pieces of the DTV puzzle and that more variables should also be analysed. For example, the "ready availability both of powerful weapons and those who know how to use them [i.e. former military men such as the zetas]" (2009: 2) as well as the splintering of drug trade organisations and the geostrategic position of the Mexican border with the United States.

While these accounts contribute to our understanding of the unprecedented escalation of drug trafficking violence since the 2000s; they fail to account for drug traffickers' and of drug cartels' motives to engage in such violence. Ríos (2012) and Osorio (2013), for example, overestimate the state and state servants' rational actions as if DTV depended exclusively on the government's policies or politicians' private agendas. Therefore, one of the main drawbacks of these approaches is that they reduce DTV to an abstract fight between the state and drug trade organisations.

A large body of scholarly literature has concentrated on analysing how drug cartels have assumed *de facto* control over some territories in the country leading to one of the most recurrent questions, during Calderon's administration, (was) is Mexico a failed state? Most scholars agree that, as a result of the decentresalisation process during the 2000s, some territories in Mexico do show symptoms of failure (Celaya, 2009; Grayson, 2011; Pereyra, 2012; Duncan, 2014; Buscaglia, 2011; Wright, 2011; Felbab-Brown, 2014; Beittel, 2013; Pérez, 2013; Correa-Cabrera, 2012). As Grayson points out, the situation is so precarious in some regions in Mexico, that these are openly declared as the possession of drug cartels where "impunity, extortion, protection money, kidnapping and, in general, crime has become pervasive" (2011: 271). Other group of scholars suggest that, whereas there is not enough evidence to prove that Mexico is a failed state, there is no question regarding the high levels of impunity in the country, only seven percent of crimes in Mexico go to trial which means that over ninety percent of crimes go unpunished (Widner et al., 2010: 105). Therefore, they argue, it is unlikely that the high levels of DTV would decrease in this context of impunity (Ríos, 2011; Grayson, 2011; Duncan, 2014).

These approaches contribute to elucidate how institutional corruption, a weak rule of law and the empowerment of drug trade organisations are seriously challenging the Mexican state. However, there are two problematic aspects in these studies. First, they reinforce the U.S. discourse about DTV in Mexico which portrays Mexico as a 'failed state'. In this way, this discourse legitimises U.S. economic paternalism, justifying its further involvement in internal Mexican affairs. Second, in reproducing the idea that Mexico is a weak state, which is institutionally unable to

confront the violence of drug cartels, this body of literature also reproduces the dominant discourse of U.S. paternalism which, in turn, legitimises the so-called war on drugs.

DTV as the result of the war on drugs launched in 2006

A second body of literature focuses its attention on analysing how DTV increased as a response of drug cartels to the war on drugs launched by former president Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). Most scholars agree that, in general terms, the war on drugs could have been avoided and that, overall, it was a failure (Sonja and Celorio, 2011; Pereyra, 2012; Casas, 2010; Guerrero, 2011; Collins 2018; Pereyra, 2012; Barra and Joloy, 2011). This is evident, they argue, when the total tally of drug-related homicides, the increasing human rights abuses, and the number of kidnappings and disappearances are compared to the quantity of drugs seized and the number of narcos killed or captured .

Eduardo Guerrero (2011) undertook one of the most comprehensive studies of Calderón's security strategies. His conclusions highlight that although the federal government had effectively broken up the main drug cartels, this strategy resulted in an exponential increase and spread of DTV throughout the Mexican territory and Central America. Guerrero explains that since drug cartels suffered severe casualties, they had to move to different geographical zones where they could expand their business as their hitherto territories were being disputed among several other cartels. Similarly, Sonja and Celorio (2011) contend that Calderón's war on drugs was, in fact, the main trigger for the escalation of DTV. They argue that Calderón launched the war on drugs with the main purpose of legitimising his contested triumph in the presidential elections in 2006. According to them, the war on drugs was not an urgent matter but rather a political instrument to legitimate Calderón's government.

On the other hand, in Calderón's defence, some academics (Aguilar, 2011; Beittel 2013; Chabat, 2010; McGee, 2013) agree that he had 'no other choice' than to challenge drug cartels with all the military capacity of the state. Chabat (2010) argues that Calderón had to choose between 'the bad and the worst'. That is, between tolerating or negotiating with drug cartels or opposing them. Although Chabat (2010) does not clarify which option should have been favoured, he concludes that the militarisation of public security was inevitable because of the widely spread institutional corruption within the police forces. In turn, Beittel (2013) acknowledges that Calderón's security policies were successful in the sense that they did undermine drug cartels' firepower and logistic capacity. He concludes that the militarisation of public security was effective at least in Ciudad Juarez where: "...in February 2009...the Mexican military took over all the local law enforcement functions and the running of the prisons of the border city [and as a result] the murder rate in Ciudad Juarez finally began to fall". Likewise, Aguilar (2011) claims that Calderón's state policies and specifically the militarisation of public security was a 'necessary evil' given endemic corruption across the country's judicial institutions. Thus, for these scholars, the militarisation of public security was inevitable, necessary and even theoretically justified. Nicole McGee (2013) analysed the war on drugs through the theory of Realism concluding that, at least from a theoretical perspective, Calderón's military campaign is acceptable as "the

Mexican government...was provoked by the drug trafficking organisations' violence and rise to power. In order to protect themselves, they were forced to deploy the military as a power play" (McGee, 2013: 3).

Alternatively, within this body of literature, other scholars rightly draw the debate's attention to the side effects of war on drugs (Quiñones; 2009; Casas, 2010; González, 2009; Barra and Joloy, 2011; Edmonds-Poli, 2013). They agree that the militarisation of public security was having negative effects on civil society as the military was not only triggering more violent confrontations in the streets, but it is also violating Human Rights in a systematic way. Furthermore, they emphasize that the main problem of the war on drugs was that it was not addressed to attack the real problems in Mexico such as institutional corruption and poverty, which these academics point to as the breeding ground to swell the ranks of drug cartels. They also agree that the networks and the cognitive capacity of drug cartels were far more powerful than Calderón's administration. Consequently, they all warn about the necessity of adapting state security policies to on-going events and unexpected eventualities in order to avoid unnecessary dangers for citizens. More significantly, they also draw attention to the systematic violation of Human Rights by the police forces and the military and reflect on possible measures to protect civilians security and integrity. Nevertheless, their suggestions to improve citizens' security are abstract and somehow obvious. For instance, many academics (Buscaglia, 2011; Watt and Zepeda, 2012; Pereyra, 2012; Grayson, 2011), advocate for more accountability, transparency in the police forces or more commitment from politicians to protect citizens' Human Rights. While it is true that combating corruption is and should be one of the top priorities for the Mexican government; it is also true that the perpetrators' perspectives are as relevant as the state's. In addition, in keeping with the previous narratives of the democratisation process as a key factor to increase DTV; these studies assume that drug cartels are a homogeneous group, which is misleading as it is well established that, indeed, the increasing of DTV responded to the splintering of drug cartels (Dickinson, 2011; Mercille, 2011).

In the case of scholarship justifying the war on drugs as a 'necessary evil' the implications are far more problematic. These studies reproduce the dominant discourse which portrays narcos as the 'enemy' which, in turn, legitimises the war on drugs and establishes a categorical 'truth': "the war is necessary" (Balderas-Domínguez, 2012). Since dominant discourses construct the production and sale of drugs as an illegal activity, the logical response to the 'threat' of drug trafficking is law enforcement and a militarised crackdown on drug cartels. Since narcos and drug cartels are depicted as 'extremely dangerous', 'sadistic' and 'bloodthirsty', it becomes 'necessary' and even 'common sense' to engage in violent actions such as the war on drugs (Chabat, 2010, Aguilar 2011, McGee 2013). Also, this scholarship reproduces the dominant discourse that the 'only' way to defeat drug cartels is through violence. These studies suggest that, in response to the serious danger posed by drug cartels, the Mexican government had 'no other choice' than to challenge them with all of the military capacity of the state (Aguilar, 2011; Beittel, 2009; Chabat, 2010; McGee, 2013). This claim that the government had 'no other choice' than militarising public security, despite the fact that there were and there are, indeed, other choices, implies at least two significant effects. First, it dismisses other alternatives to militarisation, such as substituting "three major components of the drug war: localized,

pragmatic controls to replace drug prohibition laws; valid information to replace anti-drug propaganda; and social innovations to replace bureaucratized drug treatment” (Alexander, 1990: 1). Second, it normalises the death of the ‘other’ and justifies the death of civilians.

A recurrent metaphor used in the state discourse is reproduced by mainstream literature, which claims that the militarisation of public security in Mexico was ‘a necessary evil’. This metaphor makes reference to the casualties, or collateral damage, caused by the confrontations between the military and drug cartels. This idea is justified by these scholars, who argue that the ‘only way’ to protect the population is by attacking drug cartels and ‘eliminating’ (a euphemism for killing) drug kingpins. In this way, the dominant discourses produce two types of subjects: those whose death is regrettable (i.e. civilians) and those whose death is disposable (i.e. narcos) (Ovalle, 2010b).

DTV as the result of global drug prohibition paradigm

Recent scholarship draws attention to the side effects of the Calderón’s war on drugs and the security strategy of President Enrique Peña-Nieto’s (2012-2018) administration (Felbab-Brown, 2014; Buscaglia, 2013; Edmonds-Poli, 2013; Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Ribando-Seelke, 2013). Scholars agree that the militarisation of public security that began with Calderón’s war on drugs, continues to have negative effects on civil society as the police forces and the military are not only triggering more violent confrontations in the streets, but they are also increasing the violation of human rights in a systematic way (Ribando-Seelke, 2013). They emphasize that one of the main shortcomings of the war on drugs and the current security policy towards drug trade organisations is that it does not address the crucial problems in Mexico such as institutional corruption and poverty (Watt and Zepeda, 2012; Pereyra, 2012; Grayson, 2011; Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Felbab-Brown, 2014).

Therefore, in response to the increasingly violent effects of the war on drugs in Mexico, there is a growing body of literature suggesting moving away from the prohibitionist paradigm, and in favour of regulating, decriminalising or legalising drugs (Powell, et al., 2012; Collins, 2018). Academics in favour of legalisation argue that if drugs are legalised the prices would drop, and cartels’ revenues would consequently decrease as well. Nevertheless, some voices have risen against this argument, although not necessarily against legalisation, claiming that drug cartels have diversified their businesses and do not rely exclusively on drug trafficking but also on other illicit business such as human and arms trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and piracy among others (Dickinson, 2011; Global Commission on Drugs, 2014). As a result, it is contended that violence would not decrease substantively because drug cartels would still have important revenues from the other illicit businesses.

In the same line of thought, other scholars highlight that legalising drugs in Mexico would not decrease DTV in the country because the Mexican drug cartels’ revenues come mainly from the United States’ market (Moreno Sánchez, 2015). Guajardo et al. show that in the year 2011, between seventy-six and seventy-nine percent of drug cartels’

income came from the American market and between seventy-nine and eighty-six percent of their total income resulted from the sales of marijuana and cocaine (2014: 145). In addition, they argue, Mexico does not have a drug consumption problem as only 2.6 percent of the population are drug users (Guajardo, Villasana, & Cárdenas, 2014). Consequently, the debate over the legalisation of drugs in Mexico as a potential solution for decreasing DTV is futile. Similarly, Buscaglia (2013) and González (2014) warn about the importance of contextualising the debate. The legalisation or decriminalisation of drugs in Mexico would not be as straight forward as it was in Uruguay, as the Mexican State does not possess the same strength and capacity to regulate the pharmaceutical industry as Uruguay does.

It is noteworthy to highlight that, although researchers in this area do not include in their debate the perpetrators' perspectives, most of them acknowledge the relevance of the socio-economic conditions in which most drug traffickers live. Pereyra (2012) and Duncan (2014), for instance, note that young poor males are the most vulnerable group to be coopted by drug cartels. Due to the fact that drug cartels suffer everyday casualties; they need a quick source of labour which they find within street gangs. Thus, the traditional violence related to drug cartels has evolved by incorporating street gangs' violence; which is more intense and difficult to control as young gang members have specialised knowledge on their neighborhoods and allow drug cartels to personalise crime according to each target (Guzmán-Facundo, et al., 2011). Yet, even though there is an acknowledgment that there is a key correlation between young males, gangs and DTV, this connections remain unexplored by academics. To date, as Campbell (2005) suggests, this gap in the literature may be the result of the violence and danger associated with it and that is why "[there is] far less ethnographic literature on drug trafficking than there is on drug consumption" (Campbell, 2005: 326). In this regard, my research not only addresses this methodological lacuna in the literature but also sheds light on how gang violence, intertwined with discourses of poverty and machismo, is linked to DTV in the narratives of former narcos.

Together, these studies provide a basis for understanding the wider context and macro forces at play in the cases of concern for this study. However, these narratives prove inadequate to advance our understanding of DTV as they systematically overlook the perpetrators' perspectives. In addition, these accounts uncritically reproduce the state discourse. In doing so, they also reproduce the legitimating logic which justifies, and more significantly, perpetuates DTV. In this sense, the main flaw of mainstream approaches is to take as unproblematic the very existence of DTV. My research, in contrast, does problematise the possibility of DTV by examining the discursive conditions that allowed former narcos to engage in DTV.

1.4.2 Critical approaches to the study of drug trafficking violence

I consider critical approaches to DTV as those studies which move away from the state focus approach and have as a common denominator a critical perspective towards dominant discourses on drug trafficking, drug traffickers and drug trafficking violence. This body of literature is the most relevant to my research as it directly informs my analysis and the theoretical/methodological perspective of my thesis. Collectively, these studies outline a critical role of both structural and contextual factors in the production and reproduction of DTV. Crucially, some of these studies challenge dominant discourses by examining how they have permeated popular representations of narcos and DTV. They contest the normalisation of meanings and representations of DTV by asking simple, yet infrequently asked questions about dominant discourses. For example, when politicians or state officials declare “we are going to defeat the enemy”, critical literatures ask: who is ‘we’?; what does ‘defeating’ mean?; who is ‘the enemy’?; and where does ‘the enemy’ come from? Furthermore, these studies do not adhere to the rhetoric of the ‘war on drugs’ that legitimises the use of violence by the state. Therefore, in critical approaches, DTV is not analysed through the rigid dichotomies that this rethoric entails, such as: winning-losing, friends-enemies, life-death, us-them. Instead, they focus on understanding the multiple contexts and dimensions of DTV reminding us that Mexico has a past before the war on drugs (i.e. DTV, and other types of violence, existed long before the the launch of the war on drugs).

Critical approaches to DTV encompass a wide range of fields which in this section are organised as follows. I start by reviewing what I consider the most relevant critical journalistic accounts regarding DTV. Although journalism is not usually considered as part of the academic literature, it is included in this review due to the lack of academic scholarship examining the perpetrators’ perspectives without engaging in and reproducing state discourses. Next, I discuss the literature which explains the increase of DTV in the context of the neoliberalisation process in Mexico during the 90s. Then I present what I see as counter-hegemonic literature, which is the closest to my own theoretical approach to DTV. Next, I discuss two academic studies which engaged in examining DTV from the perpetrators’ perspective. Finally, I provide a brief discussion on recent scholarship addressing the relationship between street gangs, poverty and violence. This body of literature is relevant for this research as it provides a general background to the analysis of the narco discourse.

DTV in critical journalistic accounts

Critical journalistic accounts share a similar approach in reporting DTV which, in contrast to uncritical journalism, does not engage with either the state’s manichean discourse that portrays society and narcos as an ‘us’ versus ‘them’, nor with the popular myths that purvey gloryfying images of powerful narcos. These accounts report collective and individual experiences about DTV which mainstream approaches, at best, refer to in an abstract and impersonal way. In this subsection, I discuss what I consider the most relevant journalistic accounts which address three themes

relevant to my research: a) understanding DTV through the lens of narcos, b) understanding DTV from a micro-level perspective, and c) understanding narcos are part of the society.

To date, investigative journalists have contributed to bringing to light the stories that neither the government, nor the mainstream approaches acknowledge (Vulliamy, 2010; Turati, 2011; Ravelo, 2011; Hernández, 2012, Osorno, 2013; Bowden, 2010; Corchado, 2013). In this sense, as Connell suggests, the novelistic style of some of these works is perhaps “the most forceful way to present a troubled reality” (2014: 221). In this sense, these accounts offer us a unique perspective of individuals involved in DTV and provide a context to understand their social reality by narrating their everyday life struggles.

In Marcela Turati’s book *Fuego Cruzado* [Crossfire] (2011) she reveals the life stories of victims and victimisers of the war on drugs in Mexico. Turati (2011) reflects on the underlying structural factors that contribute to young people’s engagement in violence, and the normalisation of DTV. Also, she warns about the major flaws of the Mexican judicial system and how young men are neglected by both the state and their families: “Some [young men] go to trial by themselves, their families, if they have any, are not in the room... Some of them were brought up as savage animals, with no orientation from adults, they act by their primary impulse.” (Turati, 2011: 111). For the purposes of my research, what I found more relevant in Turati’s journalistic investigation is her interviews of young perpetrators. In particular, some of the quotes she includes from her interviews are very similar to mine. For instance, she recounts what young drug dealers tell a state official about how they feel when they kill a person: “Nothing- they feel nothing. Don’t you feel bad when you see a person falling down before your eyes? – We don’t see someone falling down we just see money falling down” (Turati, 2011: 110. My translation). Turati’s narratives, and her outstanding fieldwork, are definitely an invaluable contribution to the documentation of DTV from the perpetrators’ perspective. However, without undermining this important contribution to critical journalism; from an academic perspective, Turati’s narratives are mainly descriptive and factual.

In a similar fashion, Vulliamy’s book *Amexica* (2010) compiles several stories that he collected in a four-month trip along the U.S-Mexico border, which he considers to be the battlefield of both the American and the Mexican war on drugs. Vulliamy interviewed policemen, drug users, catholic priests, prostitutes, housewives, funeral service workers, children, musicians, journalists, social workers, among many others, who narrate what they saw, how they felt and what they thought about the violence that was becoming part of their daily lives. For example, a story narrated by a priest who ran a shelter for children is worthy of mention in relation to the gender order at that time, in that area: “Father Roberto...tells me: ‘When I first came here, I was doing many children’s funerals, children who had died after accidents at home - well, I say accidents, I mean they were killed by their stepfathers-rapeing them and killing them. I found that in order to have a lover, a woman had to agree to this choice: kill the child or lose the man.’” (2010: 117). Although this and the remainder of the stories narrated in this book are anecdotal, comprising a

snapshot of the everyday life of the people he interviewed; the main contribution of Vulliamy's book is that he touches on topics that are barely addressed or questioned by mainstream approaches, such as the everyday horrors of domestic violence, rape, femicides, drug abuse, drug trafficking, prostitution and abuse of authority. For this reason I consider this particular work relevant to my research as it provides a context of the everyday struggles of those living in conditions poverty, which is very similar to those narrated by the participants of my research.

For their part, Ricardo Ravelo (2011), Anabel Hernández (2012) and Diego Osorno (2013), provide alternative narratives to the key issues analysed by mainstream scholarship including endemic corruption and causes and effects of the war on drugs. These journalists denounce and document institutional corruption, money laundering, the connections between high rank politicians, military and policemen with dominant drug cartels, such as the Sinaloa cartel (Hernández ,2012; Osorno, 2013) and the Zetas cartel (Ravelo, 2011). The main contribution of these journalistic accounts, similar to the work of Turati and Vulliamy, is that the authors challenge hegemonic discourses by demystifying drug lords and drug trafficking. They suggest that narcos, the state, the police, the military and civil society co-exist within the same social, economic and political system. Crucially, these narratives do not portray DTV as a phenomenon generated by 'outsiders' in an 'outside context'. Rather, they narrate the different ways in which drug trafficking, narcos and the state in Mexico are all located within the state structures.

Overall, these journalistic accounts provide alternative narratives to mainstream approaches by keeping track of everyday stories about DTV, and by stripping DTV from the myths that dominant discourses generate in order to justify and legitimate the state's actions. Nevertheless, these narratives are descriptive, anecdotal and lack the rigour of academic analysis. Consequently, further systematic research, as proposed in my study, is needed in order to understand, beyond its face value, the accounts of those who have been involved in the production and reproduction of practices of DTV.

DTV in the context of the neoliberalism

A considerable amount of literature has been published addressing the relationship between poverty, neoliberal reforms and the growth and consolidation of drug trafficking in Mexico. It addresses how drug trafficking and the subsequent empowerment of drug cartels grew parallel to implementation of neoliberal reforms in Mexico. Although this body of literature does not engage directly with DTV, it is worth discussing its main arguments because it assists in contextualising the narratives of the participants in this research. A number of studies analyse how and to what extent Mexico has been affected by the neoliberal reforms that materialised with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into force in 1994 (Marez, 2004, Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Watt and Zepeda, 2012; Carlos, 2014; Laurell, 2015; Solís-González, 2013; Medrano, 2013; Moreno Sánchez, 2015; Cruz-Sierra, 2014; Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares, 2007; Valencia Triana, 2012; Sánchez, 2009; Malkin, 2001).

These studies suggest that the neoliberal policies, in particular NAFTA, have had severe negative socio-economic effects on the working class in Mexico. These effects, in combination with other political and cultural factors, led to

the consolidation of drug trade organisations in Mexico (Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Watt and Zepeda, 2012). Sánchez (2009) explains that the establishment of drug trade organisations arose as the result of the dramatic decrease in government subsidies to small businesses. Thousands of peasants found themselves unemployed, with limited or no education at all, and with families to support. Maldonado-Aranda (2012) adds that poor agriculturists were the most affected by the economic adjustments made by the government and, consequently, the most vulnerable to be lured by the drug trade organisations that were in process of formation at the time. Ultimately, as Malkin rightly points out, the business of drug trafficking follows the same economic logic of other industries which was established and reinforced by "... neoliberal policies, which reward entrepreneurial solutions" (2001:120). This entrepreneurial logic is found in the narco discourse and plays a key role in the discursive construction of DTV (see Chapter 7, section 7.1).

Scholars agree that in the absence of employment vis-à-vis extreme poverty, thousands of peasants along the Pacific Coast in Mexico (Sinaloa and neighbouring states) chose to join drug trafficking as their only alternative to survive (Watt and Zepeda, 2012; Sánchez, 2009, Marez, 2004; Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Laurell, 2015). However, although these studies make a strong case of how the negative effects of NAFTA is linked to the involvement of several poor peasants in drug trafficking; my research provides a different perspective. As I show in chapter 4, the narco discourse constructs narcos' involvement in drug trafficking as their 'only' way to maximise their present, rather than as their 'only' way to survive. This is precisely one of the drawbacks of these accounts. They *assume* that perpetrators are victims of their circumstances (i.e. poverty) which, of course, might be the case in multiple scenarios. However, as my study shows, there are other (discursive) conditions that allow perpetrators to engage in practices of DTV.

Howard Campbell (2011) adds that another determining variable for drug trade organisations becoming the main economic opportunity for unemployed youth, was that illegal emigration to the United States became more difficult during the 1990s. Consequently, as the unemployment rates increased, and the possibilities of emigration were constrained throughout the 1990s, the influence and power of Mexican drug cartels grew as narcos capitalised upon the adverse consequences of the neoliberal reforms (Watt and Zepeda, 2012). In other words, drug cartels significantly benefitted from the shortage of employment, and the surplus of unskilled labour force which Marez (2004) calls 'narcocapital'. Therefore, as a result of the state shrinking policies, this literature suggests, drug cartels' power was enhanced by the power vacuum left by the government in the poorest regions of Mexico. In this sense, Maldonado-Aranda (2012) underscores how drug trade organisations not only took over the territories abandoned by the state but they also appropriated the state's neoliberal discourse of flexibility, competitiveness, and individual effort.

Assessing the consequences of the neoliberal reforms, a number of scholars have pointed out how social conditions of poverty, lack of opportunities and an insufficient education infrastructure have played a role in the increase and consolidation of drug trafficking and DTV (Freeman and Sierra, 2005; Vilalta, 2012; Gómez and Merino, 2012). In 2005, just before the declaration of the war on drugs in Mexico, Freeman and Sierra warned that DTV would not decrease unless the Mexican government attacked the underlying causes of drug trafficking:

More than half of Mexico's 100 million people are so poor they cannot meet their own basic needs. Twenty-four million Mexicans, most of them in rural areas, are considered "extremely poor" –so impoverished they are unable to adequately feed themselves. For the one fourth of Mexico's population in such desperate conditions, harvesting marijuana and poppy crops is one of the only means of survival (2005: 296)

Unfortunately, the panorama in Mexico has not changed. Even if the most conservative statistics are considered, Mexico has at least thirty million people living in poverty and thirty million surviving in extreme poverty (INEGI, 2017). These conditions of poverty and extreme poverty, Gómez and Merino (2012) suggest, are one of the two triggers for the 'perfect storm' of DTV. The second trigger, they argue, is children and young people doing 'nothing'. That is, they neither study nor work [*jóvenes que ni estudian ni trabajan*] ('ninis') which is explained, in part, by the insufficient coverage of the education system and the excessive unemployment in Mexico. Drawing on this information and guided by the question of who are the main participants of DTV, Gómez and Merino (2012) found, through statistical analysis, that there is a direct correlation between DTV and being a man aged between 19 and 24 years old and being unemployed. Arguably, as the number of ninis increases, it is expected that more children and young men would be recruited by drug trade organisations if the government does not enact structural reforms to avoid it (Gómez and Merino, 2012).

Alternatively, Vilalta (2012) explains the current situation of violence in Mexico through the theory of institutional anomie (see Messner and Rosenfeld, 2009). His main argument is that violence results from the fatal combination of a society in crisis. Mexico is a money orientated society in which at least sixty percent of the population lives in conditions of poverty. This, in combination with weak social institutions and prevailing impunity across the country, has led to violence and delinquency. To prove this hypothesis, Vilalta analysed state available statistics, from 1997 to 2010, of all the people that have been prosecuted for drug-related crimes. His study revealed that 88.8 percent of people prosecuted for crimes related to drug trafficking were young men between 18 and 34 years old (Vilalta, 2012: 38).

Overall, these studies provide critical insights into the production and reproduction of DTV in Mexico. In particular, Vilalta's contribution along with that from Gómez and Merino (2012) are relevant for my research. Given that there are no reliable analytical studies provided by the government, these academic studies are key for identifying the sociodemographic composition of the main participants in DTV. However, given the scope of their analysis, these studies fail to provide insights into the possible implications of their findings.

DTV in counter-hegemonic literature

A growing body of academic literature has recently turned to question hegemonic discourses about the so-called war on drugs and the global drug prohibition regime as a socially constructed phenomena (Herschinger, 2015; Crick, 2012; Grayson, 2008; Edwards and Gill, 2002; Borda-Guzmán, 2001; Balderas-Domínguez, 2012; Campbell, 2012;

Marez, 2004, Ovalle, 2010b; Wright, 2011; Escalante-Gonzalbo, 2012; Correa-Cabrera, 2012). Counter-hegemonic literature warns about how the construction of illicit drugs as an 'existential threat' justifies 'a particular 'governmentality' "with its own 'regime of truth' about the nature, causes and remedies for crime" (Edwards and Gill, 2002: 247). This regime has key implications as it creates particular power relations towards different actors such as drug users, drug addicts and drug traffickers who are positioned as 'outsiders' and targeted by security policies. In addition, this literature identifies and unpacks the myths about drug cartels which are mainly informed by the mass media and popular narco-culture (Zavala, 2014; Cabañas, 2014; Esch, 2014).

There is a consensus among these scholars that the war on drugs discourse was constructed by the United States government in the 1970s in order to legitimate its violent incursions in several countries around the world. More recently, in the case of Mexico, the U.S. has constructed a new discourse portraying the country as a "... "chaotic", "unruly", "failing state" [which] has provided justification for direct U.S. military intervention especially along the border ... and legitimized the penetration of U.S. capital interests in Mexico at the expense of Mexico's own economy..." (Carlos, 2014: 54-55). What is more concerning, is that this discourse has served as a smoke screen to detract attention from urgent problems such as poverty and extreme inequality that are largely caused, Carlos purports to show, by the U.S. economic imperialism and capitalism.

Similarly, Balderas-Domínguez (2012) contends that the extension of the U.S. war on drugs in Mexico also imports the paternalistic discourse which positions the Mexican state as the only legitimate actor who can 'protect' society from the 'evils' of drugs. The Mexican government, during Calderón's administration, appropriated this discourse, which is epitomised in a television broadcast launched in 2007: "we [the government] are combating drug cartels in order to prevent drugs to harm your children" (Balderas-Domínguez). An emerging question from this state broadcast that is not considered by Balderas-Domínguez but raised by Ovalle (2010b) is: what does the government mean by 'we'? who are 'they'? Ovalle (2010b) and Zavala (2014) suggest that the Mexican state's discourse portrays narcos as the 'others' as 'aliens' to society with two main objectives. First, by representing narcos as 'outsiders' the citizens do not question their faith: if narcos are the 'enemy' why would citizens care if they are mutilated, tortured, disappeared or murdered? (Ovalle, 2010b). Second, Zavala suggests that narcos are a threat "relegated to the discursive exteriority—outside the border-of the power and the reason of the State"(2014: 342). In other words, by representing narcos as 'they' the government distances its construction of them from the state structures.

Furthermore, by portraying narcos as an external enemy, the Mexican state legitimises DTV using war rhetoric through the construction of a 'categorical truth': that the war is 'necessary'. Ovalle (2010b) concludes that DTV in Mexico is normalised by the state discourse on war as violence, and that this is an expected outcome from a war which legitimates mass killings, sustains impunity and all forms of violence including torture. Consequently, Ovalle (2010b) suggests that the first step for a critical approach to DTV is to acknowledge all participants as human beings: they are someone's son, daughter, husband, wife, uncle, father, mother, aunt or friend. My research engages with this critical approach by examining participants' narratives from different subject positions: as sons, as gang

members, as men, as informal workers and as consumers. In chapter 4 I show how, from the consumer subject position, participants reaffirm themselves as part of the consumerist culture which allows him to exist and to be, even if flimsily, equal to the others.

Within counter-hegemonic literature there is an increasing attention to the cultural expressions, i.e. the narco-culture, regarding the customs and habits of drug traffickers. Recently, most studies focus on how the narco-culture has evolved. In general, scholars agree that narco-culture has changed over the last decades reflecting not only drug lords' way of life and political behaviour but also the Mexican society's reality (Astorga, 2005; Campbell, 2012; Córdova, 2011; Valenzuela, 2003; Sánchez, 2009; Duncan, 2014; Maihold and Sauter, 2012). Accordingly, the relationship between poverty-inequality and narco-culture has been investigated by many researchers. The anthropologist Howard Campbell (2012) suggests that narco-culture is the response of drug cartels to the state's criminalising discourse and the consequence of low social interaction which certain regions of Mexico experience. Curtis Marez (2004) and Duncan (2014) concur with Campbell, suggesting that the Mexican state creates and perpetuates a criminalising discourse that portrays the poor and marginalised as inherently criminal. As a consequence, this *a priori* conception has permeated Mexican society, reinforcing the criminalisation of the powerless, which in fact can be considered as one of the main triggers of the narco-culture among poor people and one possible explanation of its popularity.

Anthropologists and sociologists analyse discourses and codes transmitted through narco-corridos (popular songs) and narco-films that frequently relate astonishing tales of how drug lords fight, make money and evade national and international police, portraying them as national heroes (Astorga, 1995; Maihold and Sauter, 2012; Grillo, 2011; Marez, 2004; Sánchez, 2009). In this regard, Oswaldo Zavala (2014) advocates for avoiding the mythification of drug lords and their 'fantastic kingdoms' as informed by popular narco-culture and reinforced by mainstream mass media (Zavala, 2014: 342). He examines a body of texts, novels, films, songs and conceptual art that he calls 'narconarratives' which, he argues, are uncritically reproducing the state discourse that reinforces the idea that narcos are an 'external' threat to civil society and the government. Thus cancelling any possible critique of the government's responsibility for DTV and drug trafficking. Zavala convincingly argues that, in the majority of artistic expressions of narco-culture, DTV is:

...organised by the pre-established conditions of hegemonic discourse in order to corroborate the reality of the drug trade that has been enunciated by the State. As a result, the reality of the drug trade always emerges as the *same* in journalism, academic research, and cultural productions that seek to represent it (2014: 348)

These uncritical narratives also reproduce discourses which portray machismo as exclusive to the world of drug trafficking. In doing so, they conceal the fact that machismo is part of a wider culture and that, indeed, machismo is also embedded in the state discourse as demonstrated by gender scholars (Frías-Martínez, 2008; Walker, 2005; Valencia Triana, 2012; Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares, 2007; Jiménez-Guzmán, 2007). For instance, in her analysis

of the Mexican state discourse in 2011, Melissa Wright examined how the state justified and normalised violence against female victims through a gendered discourse. She argues that the discourse of the Mexican government regarding femicides consisted of presenting the murder and dumping of women's bodies as normal because the victims exposed themselves in public areas. Also, in the case of prostitutes they are blamed for provoking men with the idea of having sex for money. In this way the state normalised this violence basing its case on patriarchal notions of normality: that is, 'normal' women do not expose themselves in the streets, 'normal' women stay at home where they are safe. Thus, the state's discourse was that if women remained at home, then they had nothing to worry about. Hence, instead of investigating and prosecuting the murder, the state started a campaign for families to keep track of their female members' whereabouts, reinforcing the notion of the patriarchs' responsibility to protect 'their' women instead of the state. In addition, as Wright (2011) argues, this discourse portrays violence against women as 'inevitable' and 'normal' in order to weaken public sympathy for the victims "...and thereby to dilute the public pressure to prioritise women's safety" (2011: 714).

In the same fashion, the federal government has justified DTV by arguing that most of the deaths have been of drug traffickers or kidnappers, which would be a 'sign' that the government is 'winning' the war on drugs. In this sense, the state discourse reproduces traditional masculinities constructed in terms of men's ability to exert violence and domination, particularly through the use of physical force. Drawing on this logic, the success of the war on drugs is measured on the quantity and quality of military equipment, numbers of drug traffickers captured or eliminated (i.e. killed) and the volume of drug seizures. Therefore, according to the state discourse, the increase of violence perversely reflects the increasing power of the state.

DTV from the narcos' perspectives

There are few academic studies which focus their attention on the perpetrators' perspective in order to understand DTV in Mexico. In fact, there are only two, to my knowledge, which engage in interviewing narcos. The most relevant, for being the closest to the focus of my research, is the analysis presented by the U.S. anthropologist Howard Campbell (2009) in his book, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*. In this book, Campbell aims

...to break the academic silence and apply an anthropological lens to a much-neglected topic...[his] study explores in detail the personal histories and careers of various people involved on both sides of the drug war. Based on deep access to the drug trafficking world, [the] ethnography examines border narco-trafficking through the eyes, and in the words, of firsthand participants...These portraits put a human face on issues that are often handled sensationally by news media or shrouded in gossip, myth, and stereotype (2009: 2)

I agree with Campbell. More than ten years after his book was published, academic literature is still silent on how DTV is understood from the narcos' perspective. More importantly, I also agree in that, unfortunately, the urgency and the severity of the issues related to DTV are often diluted under sensationalist or cartoonists accounts of DTV in Mexico. Hence, there is a need for serious and reliable studies which do not engage in reproducing myths or dominant discourses on DTV.

In general, Campbell's (2009) ethnographic study is an excellent source to advance our understanding of how, from a micro-level perspective, drug trafficking and DTV have become part of the everyday reality in the nineteen oral histories he presents in his book. Ten of those stories are narrated by drug traffickers, including women who share their experiences of being a female drug trafficker in a 'man's world'. Before presenting each story, Campbell provides us with a short contextual background from each case, which proves a very helpful way not only to introduce his interviewees, but also to point out the police corruption, domestic violence and everyday troubles the interviewees face on a regular basis. Furthermore, the advantage of presenting each story in detail is that it allows the reader to understand each life story from several angles, including the family relationships. For example, he dedicates a whole chapter of his book on presenting the story of 'La Nacha the heroin queen of Juárez'. La Nacha controlled the drug business from the 1920s to the 1970s in a working-class neighbourhood on the border region of El Paso-Juarez. After her death, one of her sons inherited her small drug empire and connections and, in turn, his son, Nacha's grandson, is now the manager of his father's business (2009: 40-46). The rest of the stories include street dealers, an undercover agent, a policeman, a border patrol agent and journalist.

Unquestionably, these stories provide fine-grained data which most of academic scholarship on DTV often overlooks. However, although Campbell (2009) discusses the political and economic frameworks which inform his study, the life stories are presented in a rather journalistic way. Again, although the stories are nicely written, there is no systematic analysis which brings the diverse life stories together. Moreover, there is no methodological discussion which is crucial in ethnographic studies. There is no account of how the interviews were taken, if they were recorded, transcribed and/or translated. More significantly, from an ethical perspective, there is no discussion about what the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees was. The latter is of paramount importance considering that the power relationships that a research of this nature entails, especially if we take into account that the researcher is a white man from the United States interviewing Mexicans.

The second academic study which addresses DTV from the perpetrators' perspective was conducted by the Mexican sociologist Lilian Paola Ovalle (2010a). In her journal article, '*The social representation of drug trafficking like laborer option*', she presents the findings of field research conducted in Mexico and Colombia during December 2008. In stark contrast to other qualitative analysis offered by this scholar (Ovalle, 2005, Ovalle 2010b), this investigation fails to provide a compelling argument mainly because its stated aims are not achieved. The aim of the article is to shed light "on the processes that have helped consolidate [DTV] practices as viable labour options" (2010a: 92). Ovalle (2010a) conducted fifteen interviews, six with Colombian citizens and nine with Mexican citizens. This is the first

flaw of this study as Ovalle (2010b) provides a rather simplistic justification for interviewing Colombian and Mexican individuals. She argues that, although they belong to different cultural contexts, they share a commonality “namely the fact that for more than three decades they have become epicenters of drug trafficking” (2010a: 92). While it is true that Colombia and Mexico share some similar features regarding the onset and development of drug cartels; there are far more differences than commonalities (see Paul, et al., 2014).

Therefore, the justification provided for interviewing Colombian and Mexican narcos is highly questionable. In addition, there is no discussion about how and under what logic participants were invited to participate in the research. There is only a brief comment in the introduction mentioning that during fieldwork in December 2008, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with subjects who were linked to drug trafficking, twelve of them being men and three women. In the body of the article Ovalle (2010a), analyses participants’ responses regarding different topics including how they understand the concepts of occupation and profession, and if they consider drug trafficking as an occupation. This would have been an interesting discussion if the presentation of the answers and analytical arguments were presented in a more logical way. Overall, a major disappointment of this study is that it seems that the author intended to analyse in quantitative terms the data she conducted qualitatively. Therefore, the analysis is seriously flawed as she constantly refers to percentages of the people surveyed. Moreover, even though she clarifies that the analysis is not subjected to static representativity, she does on several occasions include figures showing the percentages of the surveys which is at best highly confusing if not somewhat contradictory. Given the multiple inconsistencies in this study, the lack of a coherent theoretical and methodological framework, together with the fact that the conclusions reproduce commonplaces regarding drug trafficking and narcos; I do not consider this study as a valuable contribution to the study of DTV from the perpetrators’ perspective.

Overall, as I have shown in this section, the perpetrators’ perspectives remain a highly unexplored angle of the multifaceted phenomenon of DTV in Mexico. My study therefore brings to the fore the narratives of thirty-three men who self-identified as narcos. In doing so, this study sheds light on how the interplay of the pre-existing social conditions of these men and wider discourses of poverty, gender and violence discursively enable practices of drug trafficking violence.

DTV in context: street gangs and violence

Besides their identity as former narcos, most research participants self-identified as former member of street gangs [*pandillas*] which, as I discuss in chapters 4 and 6, is conceived as one of the most important sources of identity in the narco discourse. Equally important, the narco discourse links street gangs to everyday violence, drug misuse, criminality and even murder. Therefore, considering the key role that street gangs play in the narco discourse, this last section offers a brief overview of relevant scholarship addressing street gang violence in Latin America. This literature, mostly from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, provide key insights regarding the relationship

between poverty, masculinities and street gangs, which serves as a background to situate and understand the pre-existing social conditions of research participants.

The literature on street gangs in Latin America, mostly based on ethnographic research in poor neighbourhoods in this region, has highlighted the relationship between street gangs and violence (Arzate et al., 2010; Bourgois, 2003; Baird, 2012; Guzmán-Facundo et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2007; Jones, 2013; Oehmichen-Bazán, 2013; Jones and Rodgers, 2011; Rodgers and Baird, 2016; Rodgers, 2006; Quintero and Estrada, 1998; Barker, 2005; Reguillo, 2005; Reguillo, 2012). Such attention is not surprising considering that Latin America is one of the most violent regions in the world. Indeed, Jones and Rodgers (2011) go so far as to claim that street gangs are the major threat to democracy in Latin America following the end of the Cold War. In a similar line of thought, Barker (2005) warns of the importance of studying street gangs because “data on violence suggest young men in the Americas...are more likely to kill other men, and to be killed, than in the rest of the world” (2005: 58). Based on this data, scholars have focused their research on identifying the distinctive cultural elements of the Latin American culture that allow, or even encourage, this violent behaviour. Despite the different approaches adopted by these studies, and the diverse countries of origin; most scholars agree that the interplay between contexts of poverty, high levels of inequality and toxic masculinities plays a key role in the creation and recreation of street gangs and, hence, is one of the major sources of violence in the region.

In general, scholars have focused on analysing the different types of masculinities that are produced and reproduced in contexts of poverty. In particular, there is a large amount of ethnographic research which studies the power dynamics and the particular rules established in poor neighbourhoods (Baird, 2012; Quintero and Estrada, 1998; Cerbino, 2004; Reguillo, 2012; de la O and Flores, 2012; Cruz-Sierra, 2014; Guzmán-Facundo et al., 2011). Adam Baird, who carried out ethnographic fieldwork in poor neighbourhoods in Medellín Colombia, suggests that, in order to have a better grasp on gang violence, or violence in general, it is necessary to understand masculinities: “male youths are disposed...to reproduce the prevailing versions of masculinity they are exposed to growing up...” (2012: 182). In this regard, it is clear that *machismo* is the hegemonic masculine identity that still permeates in the region and, consequently, a key thread to follow in the understanding of violence in Latin America. In sum, according to Baird, at the top of the male hierarchy are the gang leaders who “...become strong symbols of male success, the standard bearers of masculinity for boys and young men, becoming localised models of hegemonic masculinity” (2012: 33). Crucially, one of the key characteristics of this hegemonic masculinity is the performance of violence, and in some cases engaging in criminal activities, in order to establish and preserve their reputation as men. The compensation for performing this masculinity include gaining respect, dignity, money and social status within their neighbourhoods which, as Baird (2012) points out, becomes their most important, if not the only, sphere of influence.

This scholarship also highlights that in order to understand violence in contexts of poverty, one must acknowledge that we are not addressing a monolithic issue (i.e. gang violence), but rather a ‘spiral of violence’ (i.e. domestic

violence, gender violence, gang violence and drug related violence) (de la O and Flores Ávila, 2012). Azaola argues that these types of violence “have existed from a long time ago [which have been]...tolerated and even ignored, in combination with other factors, they have fueled the current levels of violence” (2012: 13). Clearly, then, gang violence is recognised as a neglected issue which results of a vicious cycle nurtured by the interplay of structural and domestic violence. Arzate et al. (2010:529) refer to this cycle as a causal chain, or an equation where poverty + dysfunctional family school dropout + drug misuse + premature marriages + domestic violence = gang violence. Reguillo (2012) suggests, gang violence has become so normalised that young men in poor neighbourhoods is a synonym for violence and criminality. Another type of violence that is brought to light by this body of literature is the increasing rates of suicide amongst the young population. In their street ethnography on suicide, in the state of Puebla, Mexico, Jones et al. (2007), draw attention to the high-levels and different types of violence that young boys and youths are exposed to in contexts of poverty. Not surprisingly, in contexts where domestic and street violence are part of the everyday life of young boys and youths, “death is ... a prominent feature of daily life” (2007: 470). In this sense, death is not only normalised but also, to different degrees, aspirational.

Interestingly, this body of literature, which is not directly related to DTV, addresses the most relevant issues that are also highlighted in the narco discourse. That is, the importance of the street gang as a main source of identity, and as an entry point to alcoholism, drug misuse, vandalism and, ultimately, murder. Yet, the links between poverty, street gangs, masculinities and drug trafficking remain unexplored. This dissertation addresses and reflects upon such links by shedding light on how the interplay of poverty, masculinities, domestic and street gang violence, and the discourses produced by participants, enable practices of DTV.

1.5 Thesis overview

My thesis is formed of eight chapters. The second chapter discusses how, through an approach informed by the principles of grounded theory, the framework of this research emerged inductively during fieldwork conducted in the facilities of the rehabilitation centre Cristo Vive. This chapter also accounts for the ethnographic methods, participant observation and life story interviews, which constitute the focus of this research. In chapter three, I discuss the main principles of discourse analysis that inform my examination of participants' narratives. In this chapter I also explain my conceptualisation of the narco discourse and the narco subject and then I move on to discuss the set of analytical strategies of presupposition, predication and subject positioning which I employ in the following empirical chapters.

Chapters four to seven comprise the empirical elements, which are organised as follows. In chapter four I focus on analysing how the narco discourse regarding poverty is constructed drawing mainly on a neoliberal ethos. This, in turn, enables the logic of the '*la vida fácil*' [the easy life] which is the trope recurrently employed in the narco discourse in reference to drug trafficking. In the following chapter, I examine how the narco discourse constructs gender and how such construction reproduces the logic of '*un hombre de verdad*' [a true man] which stems from the culture of machismo in Mexico. In chapter six, I analyse how, drawing on the logic of the 'easy life' and the 'true man', the narco discourse conceives violence as something 'natural'. Chapter seven provides a discussion on how, informed by these three logics, the narco discourse enables the construction of practices of DTV as a) a business, b) as the terms and conditions of working in the business of drug trafficking, c) as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment, and finally d) as a religious practice. Chapter eight offers an overview of the main arguments and contributions of this research; it provides some suggestions for policy making and ideas for further research, and a final personal reflection.

Content warning: the empirical chapters contain quotes from participants of this research narrating gruesome practices of torture and murder.

CHAPTER 2 FIELDWORK IN MEXICO AND DATA GENERATION: AN INDUCTIVE APPROACH

“We have a problem which cannot be solved using statistics... [drug trafficking violence in Mexico] demands of us other types of analysis. We need in-depth reflections that do not destroy through violence what has been engendered by violence” (Reguillo, 2005: 84. My translation)

2. Introduction

As I have shown in the previous chapter, there is a lack of empirical studies on drug trafficking violence (DTV) that allow us to have a better grasp of this complex phenomenon from the perpetrators’ perspective. This study therefore investigated DTV from an ethnographic approach to gain insights into how this phenomenon is understood by individuals immersed in it.

In this chapter I present and explain the different stages of the data generation process upon which this study is based. Such processes followed an inductive approach; therefore, the organisation of this chapter reproduces the exploratory and chronological logic of the way in which this research developed. I begin by discussing the grounded theory framework which informed my research design and the entire process of data generation. Then, I discuss the rationale for choosing my hometown as the location for my fieldwork and, more specifically, the rehab centre Cristo Vive. In the third section I discuss how the focus of this research emerged inductively through conversations with former narcos. In the fourth section I explain why I chose the ethnographic methods of participant observation and life story interviews. Then I move on to explain how the main themes of poverty, gender and violence emerged out of a systematic analysis in the final stage of my field research. Next, I describe the ethical considerations observed before, during and after fieldwork. Finally, I reflect upon the main methodological and emotional challenges of researching DTV, my positionality and other matters of self-reflexivity. This chapter is only concerned with the methodology of data generation, the next chapter addresses the main principles of discourse theory that inform my data analysis, as well as the analytical strategies which I employ to examine participants’ narratives.

2.1 The research framework: grounded theory

In the early stages of my PhD, when I decided to conduct fieldwork in Mexico, I deliberately chose an inductive methodological approach with the main purpose of letting participants direct the course of my investigation. With this in mind, I chose a grounded theory approach which provided me with a flexible, yet rigorous, methodology to collect data. From this approach, the main analytical categories are not drawn from an *a priori* theory but rather on recurrent patterns identified in participants’ narratives.

Grounded Theory was originally developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). In this book they suggested that quantitative, or positivist, approaches to social research did not offer researchers appropriate tools to investigate and analyse social phenomena. Their main argument was that social sciences needed a new methodology that allowed researchers to move from data to theory in order to generate new theories. These theories, they claimed, would yield more contextualised and substantial data since they emerged, or were 'grounded', in data.

Since its origins in 1967, the grounded theory methodology has undergone several changes and it has taken different forms (Charmaz, 2006:130). In particular, Glaser and Strauss have modified their individual approaches to their original grounded theory. The main difference in these two approaches is that

[t]he Glaserian grounded theory approach adopts an ontological position of critical realism in answering questions regarding the nature of reality and what can be understood about that reality...[whereas] the Straussian approach... is positioned in pragmatic relativism that says 'fact' is restricted in the established consensus of a particular period, a consensus that is founded in multiple outlooks regarding a certain phenomenon (Howard-Payne, 2016:46)

In terms of data generation, my research was informed by Strauss (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) but more significantly by Kathy Charmaz' constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2008, 2014). In Charmaz' perspective, grounded theory refers to "both the research product and the analytic method of producing it" (2008:397). That is, grounded theory entails both, a set of strategies to collect and analyse data as well as the theory itself which is 'grounded' or emerges from data. Charmaz' most important contribution to grounded theory is complementing the original set of principles guidelines suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with social constructivist insights. This means that constructivist grounded theory "sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (Charmaz, 2006: 131). Adopting this view, a constructionist grounded theory approach is concerned with how participants construct meanings and acknowledges the relevance of the context (time, place and culture) in which the research took place. Also, it draws on the assumption that "both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed" (Charmaz, 2006:131). This approach, therefore, also advocates for the methodological relevance of a rigorous exercise of self-reflexivity throughout the whole research process.

As a method, grounded theory begins with an inductive approach to data generation which allows researchers to explore and identify participants' most relevant social constructions. This means, that generation of data

...relies on comparative analysis, involves simultaneous data collection and analysis, and includes strategies for refining the emerging analytic categories. Yet grounded theory is iterative, comparative process means successively focusing data collection to develop your emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2017:299)

Drawing on this flexible framework to generate data, I designed my research fieldwork to follow three stages. The first stage, October 2014, would entail familiarising myself with the rehab centre, gatekeepers and potential participants. In this sense, it is important to note that at this point I did not have a research question. Having as a guide the broad topic of drug trafficking violence, and informed by the principles of grounded theory, the objective of immersing myself into the daily life in this centre was precisely to let the focus of my research emerge from participants themselves. The second stage, November and December 2014, once I identified the broad research question, I would then conduct life story interviews. In the third stage, January 2015, I would begin to analyse and organise all data I collected in the previous months.

2.2 Fieldwork location and the research setting Cristo Vive

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter of this study, the first and most important considerations to choose the location to conduct fieldwork which was based on ensuring my safety as a researcher. I decided to do my field research in my hometown, the city of Saltillo, capital of the northern state Coahuila (see map 1), which I found the safest, and one of the most adequate places to conduct fieldwork for four reasons. First, the state of Coahuila has been one of the Mexican state's most affected by drug trafficking violence (DTV) since the war on drugs was launched in 2006. Therefore, it was a relevant territory in terms of my research topic. Second, I was already familiar with the city. Third, for safety reasons, doing fieldwork in my home town would help me to minimise emotional and physical risks, by having family and friends who would help and support me in case of contingencies during fieldwork. Finally, I was already familiar with the potential venues to do my research.

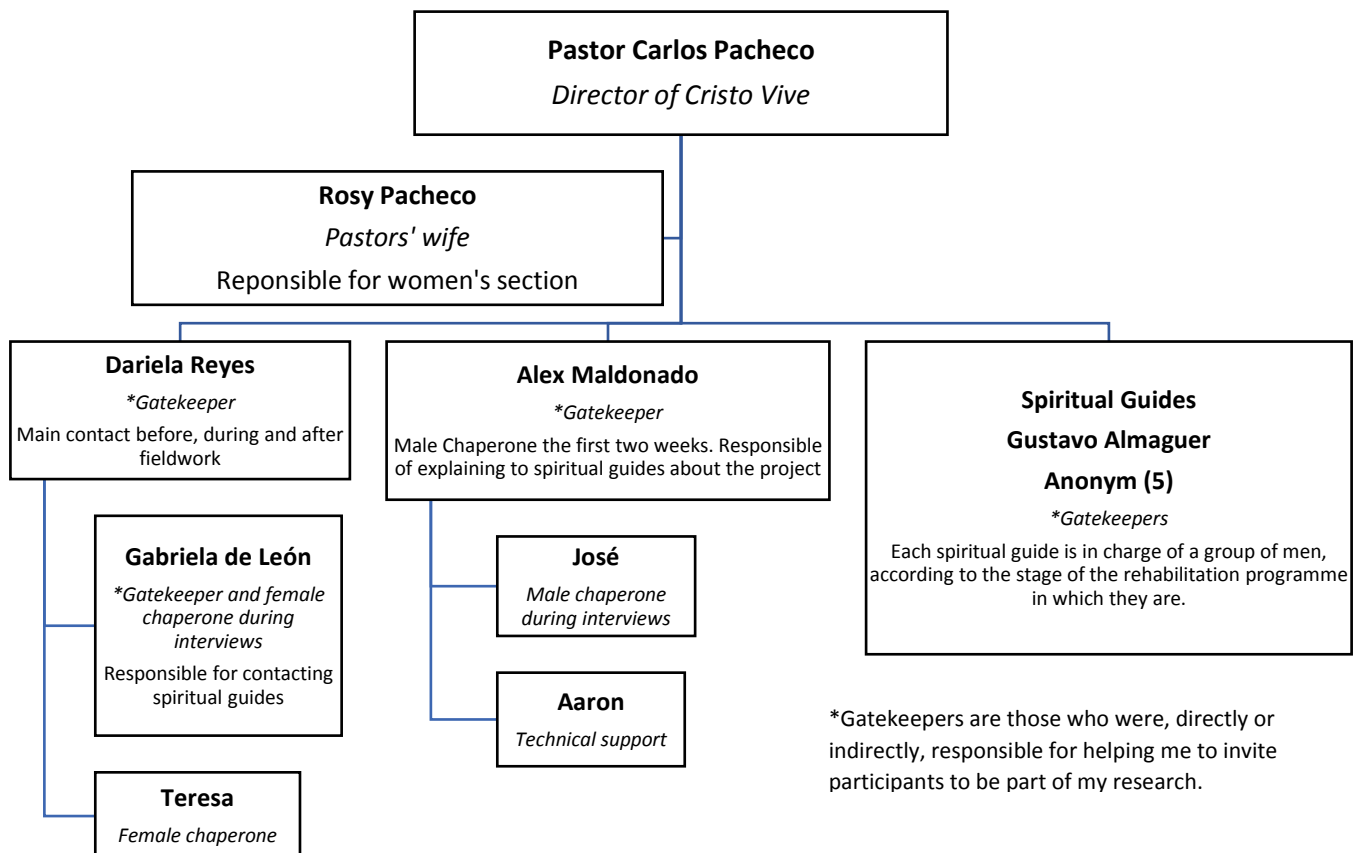
Map 1



Source: heritageartstexas.com

In January 2014, with the aim of finding a place where I could interact with individuals involved in or affected by DTV, I contemplated three options to conduct fieldwork in Saltillo. First, the Federal Rehabilitation Centre where adult drug addicts are directed to by the state. Second, the Centre of Social Adaptation of young people with violent behaviour which is run by the local government. Finally, the Christian rehabilitation centre Cristo Vive for drug addicts and alcoholics. The latter was chosen in preference to the other options because it had a larger population, around seven hundred residents and, more importantly, I chose this rehab centre because it provided me with the safest conditions to conduct my research. In contrast to the other two options, Cristo Vive offered me personal protection at all times if I did my research within their premises. When I initially contacted the staff in Cristo Vive, they suggested that I was accompanied by at least one female chaperone. This commitment was reassuring for me and played a key role in my decision to conduct my fieldwork within their premises. They clarified that the house was quite strict with safety measures and that I would have to comply with those safety measures as well. For example, one of the most important ones would be that nobody in the house is allowed to be on his or her own. All residents, and visitors alike, are always in the company of one or two chaperones allocated by pastors in charge of each section. In my case, the person in charge of my safety and my main gatekeeper, was the pastor's niece, Dariela Reyes who works as the personal secretary of Rosy Pacheco, the pastor's wife (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Another significant reason why I chose to do my research in Cristo Vive is because I was already familiar with the house and their activities. One of the ways in which the rehab centre raises money to offer shelter and food to all residents is by selling *burritos* in the streets. This is practically the hallmark of the rehab centre. If you ask people in Saltillo about ‘the guys selling burritos’, referred to in Cristo Vive as *burreros*, we all know who they are and what they do. Every day, the male residents go out in pairs, with cool-boxes filled with burritos that the female residents have prepared for them (See pictures 7 and 8). This activity serves the double purpose of raising money for the house and sharing their testimonies about how God has changed their lives. Each pair is allocated an area of the city and there is where they sell their burritos. They all wear the same uniform, blue jeans and the Cristo Vive t-shirt. Usually, they sell burritos door to door or at traffic lights. When they approach people, *burreros* self-identify as residents of Cristo Vive and openly acknowledge that: a) they are former drug addicts, or alcoholics, b) Cristo Vive is helping them in their rehab process and c) that by buying burritos people can help the rehab centre to carry on helping drug addicts and alcoholics. In my case, I was a recurrent customer of those *burreros* since I was in university. Every time I bought my pulled pork burritos the two men selling them to me would share their testimony about how God changed their lives, so I was already aware of *burreros* being ex drug addicts.

About Cristo Vive

Cristo Vive is a Christian rehab centre, self-designated as a ‘rescue house’ [*casa de rescate*] for people suffering from drug addiction, alcoholism and other issues such as depression. It was founded on 7th of March 1999 by Pastor Carlos Pacheco, a former alcoholic who decided to change his life and to help others to overcome alcoholic or drug dependence (Cristo Vive, 2014). In total, the house has hosted over twenty thousand people. Every year, they usually host over seven hundred residents who are given shelter and food for free for three to twelve months. The house also hosts religious events throughout the week (see picture 5). On Sunday, the house is visited by three thousand adults and eight hundred children, mostly comprised of the residents’ families. Because the house had a rapid and positive impact on the rehabilitation of addicts, other rehab centres were opened across Mexico. To date, there are seventeen Cristo Vive rescue houses in Mexico and one in San Salvador, El Salvador. Each of them is guided and managed by a couple, following the example of Carlos Pacheco and his wife, Rosy de Pacheco.

Cristo Vive’s rehab programme, called ‘transforming lives’ [*transformando vidas*], consists of an intensive programme treatment. In the first month residents are emotionally and physically treated in order to overcome their addiction, in addition to receiving bible lessons with the stated purpose of recovering the residents’ self-esteem. After this induction period, and according to the personal development of each individual, residents are assigned an ‘occupational task’ overseen by senior residents who live in the house and became volunteers after their own recovery. Occupational tasks include teaching them crafts such as carpentry and mechanics. The main purpose of

teaching residents a craft, is to help them to reintegrate into society as useful and productive citizens (Cristo Vive, 2014).

I got in touch with Cristo Vive in December 2013. I sent an e-mail to Gustavo Almaguer (see Figure 1), introducing myself and a providing summary of my research project, and my credentials. It was through Pastor Almaguer that I got the permission to conduct my research in Cristo Vive. Then, I was put in contact with the pastor's wife Rosy Pacheco who let me know that her niece, Dariela Reyes, would be in contact with me to help me organise all the details about my fieldwork.

In August 2014, once I established contact with Dariela Reyes see Figure 1), we agreed on the dates in which I would conduct my fieldwork, from October 2014 to January 2015. The length of the fieldwork was determined to allow approximately one month for familiarising myself with the rehab centre activities and participants, and three months for conducting interviews and organise data.

Cristo Vive's facilities



Picture 1: Playground



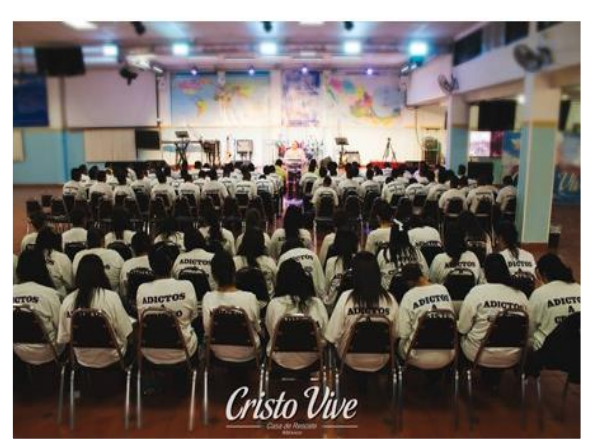
Picture 2. Dining room



Picture 3: Women and children dormitories



Picture 4: Volunteers in *Cristo Vive*



Picture 5: Auditorium



Picture 6: Bible class



Picture 7: *Cristo Vive* kitchen



Picture 8: Residents on their way to sell burritos

2.3 The emerging focus of this research: the narcos' perspectives on DTV

Equipped with the flexible tools provided by grounded theory, I started my fieldwork with a broad idea: exploring drug trafficking violence (DTV) from an empirical perspective. Therefore, following my original research design, I dedicated the first stage of my fieldwork, October 2014, to familiarising myself with the rehab centre, gatekeepers and potential participants. To this end, I attended several of the activities organised in the rehab centre and spent the rest of the day talking to people introduced to me by the gatekeepers. As part of this immersion process, I taught English to children and teenagers in the centre in a voluntary capacity. This group was selected by my gatekeepers from a wider group of children and young people who take lessons on a regular basis in the rehab centre. The English lessons took place on Monday to Friday, from eleven to twelve in the afternoon. After my class, my idea was to engage in participant observation which I planned would take place by immersing myself in different activities organised by the house. This is what I *planned to do*. In practice, participant observation meant that I spent most of my free time in the rehab centre seated on a bench.

For safety reasons, I was not allowed to wander the site on my own or talk to residents in the house unsupervised. When my chaperones were not able to be with me, they asked me to remain seated on a bench outside the Pastor's house, which was the safest place for me to be unattended. When I was not in a service, a meeting, or having a meal with my chaperones, I was seated in what became my informal interview spot for the following weeks. It was at this early stage of my fieldwork that I incidentally spoke to several men who used to work in drug trafficking. One day, Alex, one my gatekeepers, brought Canastas, later one of my interviewees, to 'my bench'. Like everybody in the rehab centre, Canastas was happy to share his testimony of how God saved him from a life of drug addiction and suffering. I listened to him politely, but it was not until he mentioned that he was part of a drug cartel that he caught my attention. We sat talking for almost two hours as he recounted the details of his life. The next day I had a similar experience. This time I was having a cup of coffee at the cafeteria when Dariela, my other gatekeeper, introduced me to Facundo, who also became one of my interviewees in the following months. He shared his testimony with me. He also worked in drug trafficking. In short, during the following weeks I had the opportunity to speak to several men who formerly worked for drug cartels.

After three weeks of informally talking to former narcos, I saw similar patterns in their narratives about drug trafficking violence (DTV). Towards the end of the first month of fieldwork, I reflected on my experiences up to that point using my personal diary and daily fieldwork notes. In the latter, I found notes and questions that I wrote when I was talking to a fifteen-year-old teenager. I wrote that I was very intrigued because he mentioned that in his neighbourhood it was very common that young boys became drug dealers. In a different field note, I wrote that another teenager mentioned to me that he worked for a drug cartel as a spy. There were other similar stories, and in my field notes I had written: "how on earth do young people join drug cartels after seeing all the gruesome deaths

that drug dealers are exposed to?” (17th October 2014). The stories of the adult men who had talked to me, meant that this question was no longer rhetorical, but the focus of my investigation of DTV. In this way, the focus of this research emerged. In the subsequent months, guided by a broad question of how do former narcos’ narratives produce and reproduce DTV, I commenced conducting life story interviews.

2.3.1 About Participants

Research participants were invited to participate in my project if they met the following criteria. First, participants were required to be Mexican male adults. Given that during the first month of my fieldwork I only spoke to male participants who self-identified as former narcos; and, given that the male population in the house was twice as large as the female population, I decided to interview only men. Second, participants were required to have participated in activities related to drug trafficking. Finally, to minimise participants’ emotional distress and to secure my physical safety, participants were also selected based upon a minimum stay of a year or more in the rehabilitation centre and were directly nominated by their spiritual guide. I explain this further in section 2.5 when I discuss ethical considerations.

There were no other inclusion criteria to participate in my project. However, most participants shared similar characteristics that I disclose here to provide the reader with more information about them, and in order to contextualise their narratives. Not surprisingly, since I conducted my research in a rehab centre, all participants acknowledged to once being addicted to one or more of the following drugs: heroin, cocaine, crack, marijuana and pills. The average years of education among participants was seven years, which means that most of them only completed elementary school. In terms of social status, twenty-eight participants, out of thirty-three, self-identified as poor or extremely poor before engaging in drug trafficking activities. Twenty-six experienced domestic violence and twenty-five had divorced or separated parents.

Participants’ jobs within drug trafficking is also an important characteristic to disclose in order to contextualise their narratives. Twenty participants self-identified as dealers. This job entailed selling drugs in the streets or in hidden shops called *‘tienditas’* [little shops]. In addition, depending on their hierarchy, dealers were also in charge of other dealers, which implied engagement in violent activities such as corporal punishments for dealers who stole merchandise or money. Next, nine participants self-identified as hitmen. This meant that their main job in the drug trafficking industry was murdering individuals as directed by their bosses. Two participants identified their main job as human traffickers, known in Spanish as *‘coyotes’*. Their main job was to smuggle people and drugs into the United States. In addition, once in the U.S.A., their job was to distribute drugs among the cartel’s American partners. Finally, one participant identified himself as a chauffeur and another as a bodyguard [*escolta*]. The main job of the former was to transport drugs within Mexican territory. For the latter’s main job was to be the bodyguard of a *comandante* (major) of the cartel (See Appendix 3).

2.4 Ethnographic methods of data generation

2.4.1 Participant observation

Participant observation implies the researcher being “engaged in regular interaction with people and participants in their daily lives” (Bryman, 2004: 301). In the context of my project, participant observation involved ‘hanging out’ in the rehab centre, being involved in different activities throughout my research fieldwork and, most of the time, being seated on my bench. My bench was located at the entrance of the rehab centre, and next to the dining room, which made me quite visible to all the residents who came in and out. This provided me with an excellent opportunity to meet different people and, as I explained above, this is the way in which I met my participants.

The rest of my fieldwork, November, December 2014 and January 2015, participant observation meant being involved in the daily life of the rehab centre and engagement in some of the activities they organised. I attended the rehab centre on a working week schedule, from Monday to Friday, usually from 11:00 am to 7:30 pm. I taught English to a group of children, whose parents lived in the house, from eleven to twelve and then I had the rest of the day to conduct my interviews. The interviews were scheduled according to participants’ availability. Some of them worked outside the house so we had to wait for them to come back to the centre. Others worked within the rehab centre but had to ask permission of their spiritual guides. Hence, I did not have a fixed interview schedule. There were some days I had no interviews, some others I would have two or three per day. Interestingly, the lack of fixed interview schedules proved to be a great opportunity for me to engage in participant observation. There were many days in which I had to ‘kill some time’ as my gatekeepers used to say. This meant for me the opportunity to explore and gain different observational perspectives from different areas in the house. From the dining area, the temple where they would congregate every Tuesday, to the hallways where I conversed on ad hoc basis with different groups of men and women.

I also spent considerable time in the women’s dormitory where my female gatekeepers requested I remain when a chaperone was unavailable. I also had the opportunity to visit the different working areas where residents spent most of their time: the kitchen, carpenter’s workshop, the children’s playground, the library, the bookshop, the small printing house, the cafeteria, the choir room, the pastor’s office, the hairdresser, the production room. In short, the only area of the house that was out of bounds, was the men’s dormitory, in accordance with policy of the centre.

2.4.2 Life story interviews

Gathering life story interviews, which are sometimes referred to interchangeably as life history interviews, is a qualitative method that focuses on generating data through interviewing a person about his or her entire life (Atkinson, 2002: 125). This type of interview requires interviewees to narrate their lives as they remember it in a

coherent way. In this type of interview, the researcher is better described as a collaborator, together with the interviewee, in the open-ended process of constructing the interviewee's life story. The researcher's role is to guide the interviewee in the process of telling his or her life (Atkinson, 2002: 126). To achieve this goal, the researcher's main job is to design a questionnaire that addresses the most relevant aspects of participants' lives informing the research question.

Life story interviews were the main method of data generation for three reasons. First, because participants were already familiar in sharing a condensed version of their life stories. When they spoke to me for the first time, during my 'bench' time, they narrated their experiences as a life story. They began by narrating their childhood of poverty, domestic violence and drug addictions. Next, they spoke about how they grew up in pain in those conditions and, finally, they shared how their lives changed after arriving at the rehab centre.

Second, this method was chosen because it proved to be the most adequate to address such a sensitive topic. Given the delicate nature of the subject, it would have been insensitive, and arguably counterproductive, to ask participants to narrate their experiences of DTV directly. However, through the life story method, this potential discomfort is minimised since participants were given the opportunity to provide context to their narratives. This, in turn, allowed participants and myself, to establish a good rapport before touching upon other sensitive topics such as their involvement in drug trafficking. In fact, I did notice how participants were visibly more relaxed as the interview progressed. For example, in some cases, before we started the interview, participants advised me that they would not answer any questions regarding drug cartels and other particularities. I responded that the purpose of my research was to understand the phenomenon of DTV from a holistic perspective and, therefore, I was not interested in names, cities nor, for that matter, any particular detail besides their own views. Interestingly, the same participants who showed some initial distrust before we commenced the interviews, were the ones who consistently provided the richest interviews. In this regard, I strongly believe that the fact that we did not address the topic of their involvement in drug trafficking until the latter half of the interview, ensured participants felt more relaxed in sharing their experiences. In addition, this method also offered participants emotional benefits such as "...purging or releasing, certain burden and validating personal experience" (Atkinson, 2002: 127).

Finally, this method was chosen because it enables the gathering of information from a holistic perspective. When I spoke to participants for the first time, when they narrated their experiences of domestic violence and gang violence, it became clear to me that, in order to have a better grasp of how participants understood their involvement in practices of DTV; it is necessary to include, as part of the analysis, the background knowledge that informs the way participants understand the world in general.

Interview questionnaire

I designed a semi-structured interview questionnaire in response to the main themes I identified while informally speaking to potential participants. As the result of my 'bench' conversations with former narcos, I identified three

main characteristics of participants' narratives about their lives. They followed a chronological order in their testimonies: they first spoke about their lives before becoming drug addicts, then they narrated the many sufferings they went through as drug addicts. Finally, they spoke about their rehabilitation process and their experience in the rehab centre Cristo Vive. Therefore, I designed the interview following this same logic, dividing the interviews into three sections: first addressing participants' childhood, then progressing to what the participants referred to as "*la vida fácil*" [the easy life] meaning their involvement in drug trafficking and other illegal activities, subsequently concluding with their rehabilitation process. Overall, the interviews addressed multiple topics including: a) family background; b) socio-economic conditions; c) drug and alcohol abuse; d) personal relationships; e) cultural constructs such as respect, dignity and machismo; and e) religion and spirituality.

The decision to divide the interview into these three sections not only responded to the inductive nature of my project but also achieved a key purpose. Since research participants were evidently influenced by a religious discourse, I decided to structure the interview in a way in which they had an opportunity to talk about their religious experience separately from their experiences of DTV. The purpose of dividing the interview in this way was to keep apart, as much as possible, participants' narratives on DTV from their religious narratives. With this in mind, before commencing each interview, I explained to participants that the interview would be divided into the three sections explained above. I emphasised that they would have all the time they required to share their experiences of the rehab centre at the end of the interview when we talked about their rehabilitation process. I also explained to them, that I was equally interested in their life experiences *before* their religious engagement.

For safety reasons, all interviews took place within the premises of Cristo Vive where at least one male gatekeeper was present and one female gatekeeper remained outside the interview room at all times (see picture 9). Prior to the interviews, participants received a detailed explanation of the project. I introduced myself and explained in simple terms the purposes of my research. After I explained the main objectives of the study to participants, they were also informed about their rights if they decided to participate in the project. I then proceeded to read the consent form out loud which included, among other information, the following rights: a) they had the right to ask questions about the research and the research objectives before, during and after the interview; b) they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any point and without providing any explanation; and c) anonymity would be granted by giving them pseudonyms. Once participants were informed of their rights, they were supplied with a copy of the consent form and were asked to read and sign it. On obtaining written informed consent from participants, the interviews commenced.

As it might be expected from an open-ended process, the interviews' length fluctuated, typically ranging between one and four hours. This, of course, impacted on the depth of description, or thickness, of participants' narratives. This does not mean, however, that shorter interviews were less valuable or relevant to my study. On the contrary, shorter interviews frequently offered more concise answers, very useful in identifying the main themes in participants' narratives. For example, one participant spent almost twenty minutes describing his experiences and

feelings towards his gang. Conversely, another participant simply replied to my question by saying that the gang was like his family. The latter actually became one of my initial categories, 'Gang as a family', in essence, the type of relationship that the former described in laborious detail.



Picture 9. This picture was taken prior to an interview in the room where interviews usually took place in November 2014. Gatekeepers, from left to right: Gabriela, Aaron and Alex.

Drawing on the concept of *theoretical sampling*, I conducted thirty-three interviews because it was after this number of interviews that *theoretical saturation* was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1968; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Theoretical sampling is an alternative non-probability sampling³ strategy proposed by grounded theory which is “concerned with the refinement of ideas, rather than boosting sample size” (Bryman, 2004: 519). In other words, theoretical sampling refers to the iterative process of data generation in which the researcher goes back and forth between empirical data and emerging concepts and categories (Vromen, 2010). This ongoing process continues until theoretical saturation is achieved. This means that one stops doing interviews when: “(a) No new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 212). In the context of my research this meant that the number of participants was chosen in terms of sampling relevant categories and concepts, rather than sampling people, in order to answer my research question.

³ This type of sampling “is essentially an umbrella term to capture all forms of sampling that are not conducted according to the canons of probability sampling” (Bryman, 2004:100). That is, non-statistical sampling strategies.

All interviews were transcribed in Spanish upon my return to Bristol. Since interviews addressed several topics that are not necessarily related to my research (e.g. their rehabilitation process in the rehabilitation centre), I did not transcribe them in their totality.

2.4.3 Preliminary analysis: poverty, gender and violence as main themes

In the final stage of my fieldwork I started a preliminary analysis of the interviews. As the result of a systematic analysis of my data, I identified the main three themes in participants' narratives: poverty, gender and violence. This entailed an iterative back-and-forth analysis within and across the interviews' transcripts. For example, quotes like: "I was always hungry", "I had to steal blankets in winter", "my house was made of tin roof", "I lived in the streets" were grouped under the category of *poverty*. References to gender such as: "we [men] are unfaithful because we are like animals", "I obviously wanted to cry but I couldn't in front of them [men in the gang]" and, "women are vulnerable", were grouped under the category of *gender*. Finally, quotes related to violence such as: "every time our gangs fought there was at least one man seriously hurt, at least one stabbed guy, or sometimes dead men", or, "I was very aggressive at school and that is why they expelled me" and, "I was so violent that sometimes I even punched myself", were grouped under the category of *violence*. This is a rather sketchy example of the first analytical stage, but it serves to explain in general terms how poverty, gender and violence emerged during the first analytical step. It was during this stage that I realised that more than as themes, poverty, gender and violence are better understood as the main discourses informing participants narratives of DTV. Consequently, I decided to modify my research design and instead of working on advancing a grounded theory, I would rather conduct a discursive analysis in order to gain a better understanding of how participants' narratives enabled practices of DTV. I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

2.5 Ethical and safety considerations

In accordance with the ethical considerations observed by the University of Bristol, all research participants were given a hard copy of the participant information sheet (Appendix 1) and the written consent form (Appendix 2). These forms included the following: a) all the necessary information about my academic identity; b) the general purposes of my research explained in plain Spanish; c) the implications of participating in my research project; d) participants' rights; and e) an explicit clause guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I issued a copy of the written consent form to Pastor Pacheco, the general director of Cristo Vive. He agreed to the terms and conditions stipulated in my consent form but requested that I, in return, sign a consent form written by one of the volunteers of Cristo Vive. In this document, I agreed that I would not use whatever information I collected during my fieldwork for non-academic purposes. Once the permission to conduct the interviews was granted, and in order to dissipate all doubts about the nature, purposes and implications of my

research project, I convened a special meeting with gatekeepers, Alex and Dariela, to explain in detail the content of the consent form. I handed a copy to each of them and I read it aloud, as I would later do before interviewing participants. Once finished, I made sure that both understood exactly what I meant in each paragraph and, more importantly, I made sure they understood that participation in the study was voluntary. Given the strict hierarchical organisation of the rehab centre, I wished to ensure that gatekeepers did not compel or unduly influence potential participants to be a part of my study. Fortunately, I did not have to explain the latter any further as they let me know that this was an important point for them as well.

In order to protect participants' identities, I assigned each a pseudonym (see Appendix 3). Once I had the list with all the pseudonyms, participants' real names were deleted from all my research material with the exception of my field notes and consent forms which are securely stored. To ensure complete anonymity, I made sure to provide pseudonyms that are unrelated to their real names or nicknames. For example, if the participant's name was John, I assigned a pseudonym that did not begin with 'J'. If the participant's nickname was 'the professor', I did not assign this participant an occupational nickname. Additionally, all personal characteristics that might inadvertently disclose their identity, such as the names of their gangs, individual cartel membership, and the like, are not displayed anywhere in this thesis. If some of this information was part of a quote relevant to my analysis, I slightly modified it to conceal personal data. For instance, if one of the relevant quotes included the participants' job, I changed it for a broadly similar one, so the fundamental idea of the quote is preserved but without revealing an essential characteristic that might help to identify him. In order to provide the context of participants' general characteristics, I have included figures of participants in Appendix 4.

Regarding safety considerations, a main advantage of conducting interviews in Cristo Vive was that emotional risk for both participants and myself was inherently minimised. This is, partly, due to the religious nature of the rehab centre. Participants in my research had emotional support from their spiritual guides, as well as Pastor Pacheco, before and after the interviews. In addition, following the advice of my gatekeepers, I agreed to add two further qualification criteria for potential participants to be part of my project. These were: a) a minimum of twelve months of uninterrupted residence in the house and, b) an explicit recommendation from their spiritual guides. These two additional criteria both served a twofold purpose of excluding potential participants who would be still emotionally vulnerable and minimising the risk for myself of interviewing former narcos who could potentially still have recent connections with their cartels.

Another key strategy for minimising emotional risk for participants, once they agreed to be part of the study, emerged inadvertently from the interview design. As already explained, I structured the interview into three sections reproducing a similar logic to that participants intuitively followed when informally shared their testimonies during our initial conversations. In hindsight, even though I did not plan it with this specific purpose, the last section of the interview played a key role in helping participants and myself to detach from the sadness and gruesome details of the previous two sections. The final section participants narrated their rehabilitation process and how they found

happiness, inner peace and a life purpose in the rehab centre. In this manner, both participants and I finished the interview with a more positive and uplifted spirit.

In terms of reducing emotional and safety risks for myself, there were two main strategies that played a key role in minimising my emotional and physical risk. The first and most important was selection of a well-established rehab centre. As explained previously, I chose Cristo Vive because it has a robust reputation in my hometown and because it provided me with robust safety strategies to reduce risks to the minimum. For example, following the rules of the house, I was allocated at least one chaperone to be with me *all times*. At that time, this safety measure seemed exaggerated and, sometimes, I even felt constrained and emotionally exhausted because I was never on my own. Being accompanied by chaperones all the time required a significant emotional effort because I had to engage in frequent conversations about religion with my different chaperones. This posed a problem for me not because these casual conversations aimed to convert me to Christianity. Rather, because I do not share some of their moral standards and, therefore, I had to be very careful in what I said. One day, for instance, when I was waiting at my bench, one of the residents approached me. He enquired if I was a Christian and I said no. He then took his bible out and read to me one of the verses in which it is stated that those who do not believe shall go to hell. When he finished, he asked me: do you want to know more about the word of God? I replied that I appreciated his kindness but that I was agnostic and that I would rather not talk about religion. He got clearly upset and told me that if I did not convert to Christianity, I would carry on being “the daughter of Satan”. On a regular basis, I would also have to listen to subtler invitations from my chaperones to join their Christian community. These conversations were extremely exhausting for me because I had to use all my energy to be polite without being unfaithful to my own values and beliefs. For example, they asked me to join a demonstration against gay marriage. At that moment I did not know whether to be honest and say that I was actually in favour of gay marriage or just make up a polite excuse why I could not go. Situations like this required a lot of emotional energy which, in retrospect, helped in minimising higher emotional risks. By being constantly worried about being respectful and polite with my chaperones and residents of the house, I barely had time to contemplate the gruesome content of my interviews.

Despite these reservations, overall it was very helpful that I was never left alone and that I had several distractions that allowed me to detach from the disturbing data I was collecting. Once again, even though I did not plan it, taking part in some of the activities in the house served as an excellent strategy to detach from my data. For example, one of my chaperones was in charge of organising the Christmas party, so I spent some time working on Christmas decorations and got to enjoy some Christmas food as well. I even got to attend some of the women’s weekly meetings where I met several of the wives of my participants and other women who lived in the house as volunteers.

The second strategy to minimise my own emotional and physical risks was conducting fieldwork in my hometown. I already mentioned that I chose my hometown for practical purposes (i.e. familiarity with the city, having friends and family nearby in case of an emergency). However, this is more than just a logical advantage when one is researching a sensitive topic such as DTV. Being a native of the city where I conducted my fieldwork, gave me a vantage point so

I knew which areas of the city were more dangerous, which public transport was safe enough and, more importantly, what words, names and behaviours to avoid. This last point is extremely relevant in the case of such a big and diverse country such as Mexico. What can be said and done in one region could potentially be offensive in another one, especially when discussing drug cartels and DTV. For this reason, it was crucial that I be familiar with the location where I conducted my fieldwork. Finally, but no less important, the advantage of doing fieldwork in my hometown included having my family and friends as an emotional support. During the four months of my fieldwork, I lived with my parents which made my fieldwork experience less distressing and even pleasant at some points such as Christmas.

These two strategies proved very helpful in reducing the inherent emotional and physical risks of conducting fieldwork. In this sense, I can say that I had a very safe and rewarding field research. However, the type of research I conducted entailed additional emotional risks that I did not foresee. As Atkinson (2002) rightly points out “[I]t is impossible to anticipate what a life story interview will be like, not so much the form it will take, but the power of the experience itself” (2002:126). In my case, I experienced the ‘power of the experience’ long after I came back from my fieldwork.

2.6 Self-reflexivity

In this section I present a reflexive exercise which aims to provide the reader with contextual and personal reflections about the conditions in which I collected and analysed my data. I also offer some insights regarding the emotional implications of interviewing former narcos. This section aims to provide a background which allows the reader to assess how, and to what extent, the context of my fieldwork and my positionality played a role in the research process. With this aim in mind, I consider it is important to discuss two subjects which shed light on such contextual factors. I first discuss my positionality and personal relationship with research participants and then, I reflect upon the methodological and emotional challenges of working with sensitive and violent data.

2.6.1 Positionality and relationship to research participants

An important element of an exercise of self-reflexivity is revealing and discussing the researcher’s positionality: age, gender, race, class, nationality and other personal characteristics that may have had an impact on the research process (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). In terms of gender, I do think that the fact that I am a woman had a positive impact on participants. I truly believe that this helped participants to be more open about their emotions, and to feel less threatened. For this reason, I consider my gender ensured participants felt less pressured, as opposed to being interviewed by a male researcher. That said, I do have to bring to the fore that the gender difference might have had some impact on how participants spoke about specific issues such as sexual violence or rape. Several participants hinted that they engaged in sexual violence, but they were not as explicit in this regard as they were, for example,

with their engagement in other crimes and acts violence. In this sense, if the interviewer was a man, they may have extended their narratives on rape or other forms of sexual violence.

In relation to class, I did feel that that gatekeepers had the image of me as a 'rich girl'. I gained this impression from some of the comments and questions they would ask me during lunch or other daily activities. For example, on one occasion one of them said: "I know this is not the type of food you are used to eat but we offer this humble meal with all our heart" (Fieldnotes, October 2014). Some of the participants even believed I was from England, one of them asked me: "do you miss your country?" (Fieldnotes, October 2014). This and other similar questions made me realise how little information they had about me, as to believe that I was from England, regardless of my native accent and physical features.

In terms of race or ethnicity, although I generally self-identify as mestiza, in the context of my research, and with the aim of bringing to the fore all aspects of my positionality that may had an impact on my relationship with participants, I would consider myself to be Mexican white. By white I do not mean the traditional white, Anglo, Saxon, protestant, but rather as a way to acknowledge that given my physical features, in the context of Mexico, I am not a subject of racism (see Moreno, 2012). In this sense, I can say that some of my participants may be subjects of racism in Mexico given that they have a darker skin colour. I am unsure, however, whether this aspect of my positionality had a positive or negative impact on my participants. What I did notice, worth drawing attention to, is that I was, indeed, considered a special guest in the rehabilitation centre. As such, I had some privileges. From something as mundane such as having access to free coffee or tea, which residents had to pay for, to having access to the centre's audio and recording equipment. Also, I had the privilege of being accompanied by Dariela Reyes and Alex Maldonado who occupy high positions in the rehab centre hierarchy. In other words, I was associated with the elite of Cristo Vive.

In terms of religion, I consider myself agnostic, but I was brought up Catholic. Both my parents and two sisters are practising Catholics and when I go to Mexico, I do attend mass on Sundays and participate in other religious events such as christenings and holy communions with my family. I consider this part of my positionality did play an important role in establishing a good rapport with my gatekeepers and participants. Although the rehab centre is openly against Catholic practices, or any other religion, it is true that there are several similarities between Catholicism and the branch of Christianity professed in Cristo Vive. This allowed me to have a better grasp of participants' narratives of religious experiences and reflections. However, as agnostic, my fieldwork in Cristo Vive posed a significant personal challenge. During the first months of my fieldwork, the greatest challenge for me was to remain as polite as possible when my gatekeepers or other residents talked about their beliefs. As I explained earlier, in situations like the one in which they asked me to join the march against gay marriage. I usually felt exhausted because I could not help having an internal dilemma: should I be completely honest and let them know exactly what I believe, or, was it better that I did not say anything, so as not to offend them with my views? After a couple of weeks of struggling with this ethical issue, I decided to be honest if they directly asked me my opinion, which they did. I, consequently, had to make use of all my diplomatic skills so I could politely state my opinion

without offending my research participants. As I discussed in the previous sections, this was an exhausting exercise for me but, in retrospect, I appreciate that much of my energy was channelled towards this issue and not into the content of my interviews, which is evidently distressing.

Overall, I developed a friendly relationship with my gatekeepers. I spent most of my day with Gabriela de León (Gaby), one of my chaperones. She was also responsible for scheduling my interviews, she was the female chaperone waiting outside the interview room and helped me to bring refreshments to participants. In short, Gaby was my right arm. We spent so much time together that we became friends. Something similar happened with Dariela, my main gatekeeper, whom I continue to keep in touch with. I did not spend as much time with her, but we still shared many evenings together in which we established a gratifying relationship that lasts until today. With the rest of my gatekeepers I also established affable relationships, although not as close or enduring as those maintained with Gaby and Dariela.

With my interviewees I also established a familiar relationship not in terms of a friendship but rather by virtue of regular contact. As I mentioned previously, I would spend most of the day at the rehab centre, so I would see participants while waiting in the common areas, which was the majority of the time. Because during the first month I spoke informally with some participants, they would be more relaxed given that they knew me from before. In some other cases, I had to do the interviews over different days because some of the participants had to interrupt the interviews due to their jobs in the house. In general, I got to know most of the participants outside the interview context and I even met their partners and their children. Although I did not speak to them beyond common courtesy, I nevertheless became increasingly familiar with them, the familiarity that one gets with the everyday contact. One of them was the doorman who I would see every time I arrived and left the house. Other participants were also around the house due to their daily jobs, so I would say hello and good bye to them every day.

2.6.2 The methodological and emotional challenges of working with violent data

Given the violent nature of my research topic, I was, of course, aware of the potential emotional risks of working with violent data. Having reviewed relevant literature on researchers' self-care before undertaking my field research, I was aware of the kind of emotional reactions researchers usually exhibit in response to sensitive or violent topics including: "[...] 'burnout' 'feeling phony', 'guilt' and 'self blame'." (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009: 70). As a result, other related symptoms emerged such as physical exhaustion caused by disturbed sleep, experiencing anxiety, having gastro intestinal problems and ultimately experiencing depression. (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009: 71-73). Therefore, before I went to Mexico, I designed practical strategies and actions to cope with emotional distress during my fieldwork. For example, I planned to engage with activities that would help to release stress such as going to the gym at least twice a week. Also, if necessary, I would contact a local therapist in order to receive professional

help in case of feeling anxious or depressed. Finally, I would 'switch off' from fieldwork during the weekends so I could detach regularly from the content of my interviews.

Fortunately, as I have explained, given the particularities of the venue where I conducted my fieldwork, I did not feel uncomfortable or disturbed at any point during the four months of my field research. Because of all the factors that I explained in the ethics section, I did not feel threatened by participants or emotionally disturbed at that point. Perhaps because I focused my attention upon making sure participants were comfortable and emotionally safe, I did not have the time or energy to dwell on my own emotions. Since most of them cried during the interviews, I had to stop the interviews frequently, so they could have a brief respite. In fact, on a few occasions, it would be necessary to have an extended break, so participants could collect themselves and continue with the interview. This in turn allowed me to detach from the content of my interviews, I did not feel emotionally distressed.

It was not until I commenced transcribing my interviews, upon my return to the UK, that I became truly aware of the gruesome nature and emotional toll of the interviews. In hindsight, I recognise that the conditions in which I undertook this task were not the most favourable. Since I wanted to finish the transcriptions as soon as possible, I dedicated my time exclusively to work on them. I even started working from home because I did not want any distractions. As I was transcribing almost word by word it took me almost a week to do one interview because most of them were at least an hour long. The longest interview, and one of the most tragic ones, is almost five hours long. Although I had listened to the interviews at least six times each before doing the transcriptions, the conditions in which I did them was very different. This time I was on my own. I did not have to worry about participants or my gatekeepers anymore. I had no distractions and my full attention was dedicated to listening to the interviews. Within a short period of starting the transcriptions I began to feel emotionally disturbed.

Once on my own transcribing the interviews, I got to know participants on a personal level which, in turn, made me feel extremely distressed. This time, without the pressure of making notes, recording the interviews properly or making sure that participants were comfortable, I was able to acquire a fuller grasp of how challenging and tragic their lives were. It was heart-breaking to listen to some of their traumatic childhood stories and impossible to fully detach oneself from the subject matter. Many of them were physically abused and had to beg for food in the streets when they were children. One participant narrated in detail how he was treated like an animal, he was tied to a bed, and his parents burned his hands just for amusement. Many of them were beaten almost to death by their parents and some of them were abandoned in the streets. I know that most of my participants wished to kill their fathers because they could not bear how they beat their mothers every night. I know that they would soil themselves every night out of fear. I know they still suffer for their childhood memories. I know that one of them still suffers when thinking about the pain he caused his victims and their families. When I was transcribing these stories, I could hear participants crying which prompted a visceral reaction in myself whereby I could not help but feel great emotional distress.

I also felt extremely disturbed by the narratives concerning torture and other gruesome activities. Perhaps because I am already somewhat desensitised to narratives of violence, participants' accounts of murder did not affect me to the same extreme. However, those principally focussed on torture and the methods applied to dispose of bodies had a significant impact on my emotional wellbeing. Almost half of my participants were directly involved in such practices, so I have extensive material that addresses these harrowing subjects. For example, some of them oversaw disposing the bodies or literally disappearing them. One of them even told me that part of their job was precisely coming up with new macabre ways of disappearing bodies. The multiple ways in which this is achieved is reprehensible, from forcing individuals still alive through tree shredding machines, and feeding animals with the remains, to dissolving them in acid. The ones that impacted me the most are those which involve innocent civilians and children. One participant, for instance, explained to me that as part of their cult to the holy death, they were asked to sacrifice babies and children. As a result, they would kidnap children in the streets and new-borns from the hospitals. They would subsequently engage in a ritual torture and mutilation of babies and children whilst still alive, the graphic details of which abound throughout the hours of recorded interviews. These gruesome details, I did not ask to know but, of course, they were part of participants' experiences of DTV.

As a result of dedicating my time exclusively to the task of transcriptions, I suffered some emotional issues which, on reflection, I could have avoided. I could have minimised this emotional impact by combining doing the transcriptions and other tasks that would help me to detach from the interviews, such as working on the theoretical chapter. I could have also tried to do the transcriptions in my office or public spaces instead of the solitude of my home. This is an important learning experience that I believe can be helpful to other researchers investigating sensitive or violent topics.

In addition to the emotional challenges I faced while and after doing the transcriptions, I must also acknowledge other type of emotions I experienced during the interviews. Based on my field notes, during my interviews I saw participants with compassion, not because they were narcos but because they survived a rather cruel childhood. Even though I completely disagree with and condemn their crimes, I still see them with some sympathy. Perhaps because I met them as reformed men, and as part of a religious community, in contrast to their previous lives; I cannot imagine them doing those things they narrated. Every time I think about what they did I think to myself: what if I was one of them? I do not know how it is to be like them. In this sense, as Kimberly Theidon suggests, when we work in "ethically vexed contexts" and with complex participants, such as perpetrators, our "tidy moral binaries" are completely blurred (2014:2). Ultimately, as a researcher it is not my job to judge my participants, and as a person I can only feel sorry for them. That being said, I did not, and I do not feel 'seduced' or 'persuaded' by their criminal personalities as Nordstrom and Robben (1995) warn in their book entitled *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture*.

Having said this, I do not believe that my emotions have played a direct role in my analysis. However, I leave that judgment to the reader. What is clear is that my research has had a profound and lasting impact on me. This is not

to put myself in a position of a 'victim' of my data. On the contrary, I have learned valuable lessons as an individual and as a researcher. My intention in bringing my personal experience to light is to be transparent about all the key aspects of my research process.

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has described and explained the research process I followed in order to generate the data upon which my research is based. Since the focus of my project emerged inductively during my fieldwork, I organised the chapter following the chronological order in which I designed and conducted my fieldwork. Therefore, I began by explaining how my field research was guided by the main principles of grounded theory and I discussed the flexible methodological tools it provides to generate data. Next, I explained the reasons why I chose my hometown and Cristo Vive as the location for my fieldwork. I chose my hometown mainly for safety reasons, as I would be close to my family and friends in case of any type of eventuality. Also, because my hometown is one of the cities that has been more affected by DTV. In regard of the rehab centre, I chose the facilities of Cristo Vive for two reasons. First, because it has a large population including, women, men, children and young people who, in different ways, had been exposed to or involved in DTV. Second, I chose this rehabilitation centre because it offered me the best conditions to conduct my fieldwork. Next, I explained how, guided by the principles of grounded theory, the focus of my research emerged inductively when I incidentally spoke to a group of former narcos.

In the fourth section I discussed why I chose the ethnographic methods of participant observation and life story interviews in order to generate data for my project. Participant observation took place in different forms. From engaging in activities organised in the rehab centre, teaching English to a group of children on a regular basis, to 'hanging out' with my gatekeepers between my interviews. Then I moved on to explain why I chose the method of life story interviews as the main method of data generation. I explained that this particular method was the most suitable to interview participants because were already familiar with this type of narrative. Second, this method was also useful for establishing a good rapport between research participants and myself. Furthermore, life story interviews allowed me to collect richer and more holistic data regarding DTV.

In the final sections I discussed the ethical and safety considerations I observed during and after my fieldwork. I highlighted that in order to protect participants' identities, I assigned them with a pseudonym and that this thesis does not disclose any personal characteristic that may reveal participants' identity. In the last section of this chapter, I reflected upon how my positionality such as gender, class, ethnicity and religion may had had an influence on my research participants. Also, I discussed the type of relationship I established during my fieldwork with my gatekeepers and interviews. Finally, I offered a discussion of the methodological and emotional challenges of working with sensitive and violent data.

The following chapter elaborates on discourse analysis and the analytical strategies I employ to examine participants narratives.

CHAPTER 3 DATA ANALYSIS: A DISCOURSE THEORETIC APPROACH

“Discourse provides meaning, cues and signals that make violence possible, rational and legitimate (or alternatively, impossible, irrational or illegitimate) within a particular context”
(Jackson and Dexter, 2014: 6)

3. Introduction

In the preceding chapter I explained how, guided by the principles of grounded theory, the framework of this study emerged inductively, and established that this study draws on the analysis of the thirty-three life story interviews gathered during fieldwork. In this chapter, I present the discourse theoretic approach that informs my analysis of the narco discourse which I investigate in the former narcos' life story interviews. As I explain later in this chapter, the 'narco discourse' is understood here as both: a) a set of regularities found across narcos' narratives and b) the particular knowledge, or 'truths', produced and reproduced in such narratives. Based on this conceptualisation my thesis seeks to unpack how practices of drug trafficking violence (DTV), such as murder, kidnapping, and torture, are *discursively* enabled in the narco discourse.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section I discuss the discourse theoretic approach that inform my analysis. Then, I explain what is understood as the 'narco discourse' and as the 'narco subject'. This is followed by a discussion of the three wider discourses that inform the narco discourse: poverty, gender and violence. The final section provides a detailed account for the three analytical strategies I deploy in the examination of the narco discourse: presupposition, predication and subject positioning.

3.1 Discourse theoretic approach

A discourse theoretic approach begins with a constructivist ontological position that entails a particular conception of 'reality' which, in turn, informs implicit and explicit assumptions about what the world is, and what the best ways are to generate knowledge about it. In this view, 'reality' is socially constructed. The material world does not 'objectively' have or express meaning outside discourse. Instead, meaning is rather constructed by social actors through discourses which are usually but not necessarily linguistic (Milliken, 1999). Hence, my research departs from this premise, there is no pre-existing or objective 'reality'. This claim does not imply that material reality does not exist. Social constructivists do not deny that there is a material reality outside discourse: “[o]f course earthquakes occur, and their occurrence is independent of consciousness; but it is their construction in discourse that determines whether they are 'movements of tectonic plates' or manifestations of 'the wrath of the god'” (Purvis and Hunt, 1993:

492). In the context of this research, for example, whether practices of DTV are conceived as a 'business', as a 'sin', as 'empowerment' or as 'crime' is determined within discourse. Therefore, a key aim in my analysis of the narco discourse, is to identify and unpack the meanings produced and reproduced in this discourse.

Drawing on poststructuralist conceptions, I understand of discourse as a set of regularities and as a form of knowledge. In the former, discourse is a group of related statements and relationships which shape particular discursive practices. Discursive practices are understood "as the process through which social 'reality' comes into being" (Doty, 1993: 303), or, in other words, the practices *of* discourse (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014: 174). Essentially, discourse is determined by time and space in a given society (Foucault, 1972: 117-182). That is, discourses are historically contingent and consequently, changeable (Milliken, 1999). Thus, what constitutes a dominant discourse today may not be the same tomorrow. In this sense, discourses are never complete and always open to change. As a form of knowledge, discourse defines the statements that can be considered to be 'true' or 'false'. Discourse constitutes what is possible to say within what is regarded as true, or untrue, rather than a reflection of 'reality' (Foucault, 1972: 224). In this way, discourse produces 'truth' which is accepted in a given society, in a particular time and space. To put it in other words, discourses provide justification for actions which promote certain ways of thinking, being and acting towards the world (Hall, 1985). That is not to say, however, that discourses are 'truth' but rather that they obtain such status through repetition and discursive practices (Doty, 1996).

Central to my analysis is the conception of discourses as productive. Discourse is the product and productive of relations of power, in line with specific social, cultural and political forces (Foucault, 1972). In this context, power is not understood as something that is held by social actors (e.g. politicians) or institutions (e.g. the state), nor, for that matter, as something necessarily negative or oppressive. Power is rather a field of force relations which "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body..." (Foucault, 1980: 119). It is in this field of force relations that subjects, objects and their relationships are constituted and, consequently, "everything we can see or conceive of is a product of power relations" (Shepherd, 2008: 22). That is, it is through power that the conditions of possibility for the meaning of the social are produced. Thus, the claim that discourses are the product of and productive of power entails the acknowledgement of the inextricable relation between power and knowledge and the embedded relations of power which produce meaningful subjects and objects. In so doing, power and discourse, create certain possibilities while excluding others (Doty, 1993).

In contrast to humanist approaches which conceive the subject as a "thinking, knowing, speaking subject" (Foucault, 1972: 55); a discourse theoretic approach draws on the idea that subjects "...can be thought of as positions within particular discourses, intelligible only with reference to a specific set of categories, concepts and practices" (Doty, 1993: 303). In this view, the subject is a position according to different discourses. For example, in the case of traditional discourses on family, the subject 'father' is a position attributed with certain meanings of male characteristics such as being 'heterosexual', 'authoritative' and 'rational' (among many others), and practices such

as 'working 'and being the family's only and legitimate 'breadwinner'. In this case, the position of 'father', as with any other position, is considered as an empty one which can be occupied by any individual. In this manner, discourses constitute subjects in discourse.

The way in which subject positions are created involves a process of interpellation which is defined as "a dual process whereby identities or subject-positions are created, and concrete individuals are 'hailed' into" them (Weldes, 1996: 287). That is, interpellation means simultaneously the creation of particular identities and, the process through which individuals come to identify with these identities. For instance, if a child says 'father' and the adult replies, this adult is being interpellated with the identity of 'father', to which certain characteristics are attributed and particular behaviours are expected. In this case, the individual who is hailed into the subject position of the 'father', not only identifies himself with this identity; more importantly, he enables and normalises the (power) relations and interests entailed in discourses on family.

In addition to the understanding of subjects as constituted in discourse, my research also conceives the subject as decentred (Foucault 1972). By decentred I refer to the idea that individuals do not have one single or fixed identity "as there is a plurality of positions with which human beings can identify, an individual can have a number of different subject positions" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 115). Thus, the individual constantly shifts from one position to another according to different discourses. At church, for example, the individual's identity is 'Christian', at elections a 'voter', at the supermarket a 'client' and in the family a 'son' a 'brother' and a 'father'. In the context of the narco discourse, the main subject position from which participants speak from is that of the 'narco'. However, there are other relevant positions that the narco subject speaks from, when discussing his childhood his identity shifts to 'son', when talking about gangs as a 'gang member' or, when addressing gender relations, he positions himself as a 'man'. In this sense, I relate the concept of identity to the "*identification* with a subject position in a discursive structure" (Jørgensen and Philips, 2002: 43, italics in original). This implies the understanding that identity is contingent, just as discourse is, and that identities are produced, resisted and negotiated within discourse. In other words, there are no *essential* identities. There is no natural 'male' or 'female' identities, for example, but social constructions of what those positions must be like. There is no essential meaning of what 'narco' is but rather the discursive construction of what this subject position entails within a particular discourse. In short, the only certainties regarding identities, or subject positions, are that: a) they are socially constructed; b) they are constituted in discourse and; c) they are temporarily fixed and always open to transformations.

Finally, in a poststructuralist discourse theoretic approach, discourse encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 107). Therefore, discourse is not limited to language. For instance, in the context of my research, the ideas, actions and policies produced by state discourse on drug trafficking and DTV can be considered as part of the same discourse. The dominant discourse on drugs consists of a set of statements about

drugs being 'bad for children', narcos as being 'bad people', as well as, a particular set of practices such as the 'militarisation of public security' and the launch of the war on drugs. Thus, language and actions are both constitutive elements of discourses since they only obtain their meaning, and make sense, within discourse. Therefore, non-linguistic practices and objects constitute discourses in the same way as linguistic practices.

3.2 The narco discourse and the narco subject

After explaining the discursive theoretic approach, this section explains what is understood as the narco discourse and the narco subject. As elaborated in chapter 1, there is a dominant discourse on DTV produced by the U.S. which has been openly appropriated by the Mexican state since 2006. There is also a mass media discourse which generally either glorifies or conceives drug traffickers as monsters (Esch, 2014; Ovalle, 2005). From an academic perspective, there is no single discourse regarding the onset and the causes of the skyrocketing of DTV in Mexico. Broadly speaking, there are two bodies of literature which either reproduce (i.e. mainstream approaches) or contest (critical approaches) dominant discourses on DTV. However, to date, few attention has been given to identify and analyse the narco discourse as produced and reproduced by those individuals who assumed themselves as 'narcos'. That is, the dominant discourse has been exhaustively examined in order to understand the discursive conditions that enable the U.S., and in this case, the Mexican state to legitimise and sustain the so-called war on drugs. Nonetheless, the literature is still silent regarding the 'narco discourse': what are the discursive conditions that allow the production and reproduction of practices of DTV?

This study proposes a new critical approach to our understanding of DTV by identifying and analysing how the narco discourse is produced and reproduced in the narratives of the thirty-three former narcos interviewed for this project. Informed by the discourse theoretic approach outlined above, I conceptualise the narco discourse as the set of meaning production regularities which I identified in the narratives of participants of this research. I see these regularities, and the logic they produce, as an indicative of a particular discourse, i.e. the 'narco' discourse, in the former narcos' life story interviews. Additionally, drawing on the Foucauldian conception of a discourse as knowledge, such as the 'clinical discourse', I also use the term narco discourse in relation to the group of statements producing 'truths' (i.e. knowledge) which construct narcos' social reality. From this perspective, the narco discourse is understood as a form of knowledge which so far has been neglected in academic literature.

Crucially, in relation to the dominant discourse, the narco discourse can be understood as a 'subjugated knowledge' which has been "...disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition of scientificity" (Foucault, 1980: 81-82). That is, the knowledge produced in the narco discourse, has been systematically ignored by both dominant discourses and mainstream approaches to DTV. That is, most of the things we know, the way we think about narcos, is generally

subjected to the ideas produced by dominant discourses on DTV. Again, given the key role that narcos play in the production and reproduction of DTV, we, social scientists, cannot continue ignoring the (subjugated) knowledge produced by narcos.

Furthermore, my understanding of the narco discourse as a set of regularities and as a form of (subjugated) knowledge has a significant analytical implication. My analytical approach "...obviates the need for recourse to the interiority of a conscious, meaning-giving subject, either in terms of psychological and cognitive characteristics of individuals or...social collectivities" (Doty, 1993: 302). This refers back to the poststructuralist conception of the subject discussed previously. The narco subject is the effect of and constituted in discourse. In the case of the narco discourse, this entails the understanding that its productive nature discussed above does not necessarily depend on or coincide with participants' motivations or perceptions. Whether participants consciously try to portray DTV in a particular way, or if they try to justify their involvement in it, is not relevant to my investigation. My analysis is rather concerned in examining how the particular set of regularities I identified in their narratives, come into play in the production of meanings and knowledge and how these enable practices of DTV.

I refer to the thirty-three participants who I interviewed during my fieldwork as the narco subject. This, however, should not be confused with a single individual participant. As Doty points out, "[a]n individual may have multiple subjectivities. Similarly, there may be multiple physical individuals that constitute a single subject." (1993: 309-310). In the context of my research, the thirty-three participants constitute the single subject 'narco'. This is a key concept I recurrently use in the empirical chapters. For example, I refer to how individuals who identify themselves as narcos are interpellated by traditional discourses of gender, or how the narco subject is produced as a 'free agent' as opposed to victim of his circumstances. In these instances, I am referring to the regularities shared by the thirty-three participants who self-identified as narcos.

What is essential is that the narco discourse, as any other discourse, produces and reproduces different subject positions. It is important to highlight this point since one of the main drawbacks of mainstream approaches reproducing dominant discourses on DTV, and sensationalist mass media accounts, is that individuals identified as narcos are reduced to one of their many subject positions. This is precisely the reason our understanding of DTV is still limited to theoretical conceptions of the narco subject as a rational decision maker, the narco subject as a victim of his circumstances, or, the narco subject as 'the other', a psychopath or a monster. The critical approach I propose in this study, does acknowledge the multiplicity of identities, or subject positions, that integrate the narco subject in the narco discourse. This comprehensive view allows to identify and understand the key role that each subject position plays in the way in which the narco subject is understood and his involvement in practices of DTV.

Having established the meaning of the 'narco discourse' and the 'narco subject', it is worth clarifying the rationale for choosing the word 'narco'. I decided to use this word for two reasons. First, the word 'narco'⁴, as a noun, is used by participants to self-identify as such. Second, I chose the word 'narco', as an adjective, to describe and emphasise the origin of the discourse analysed in this research, as opposed, for instance, to the state discourse on drugs. That said, I clarify that I do not endorse the use of the word 'narco' in a judgemental or in a reductionist way (i.e. reducing interviewees to one of their many identities). Nor, for that matter, in a pejorative way, to contribute in the reproduction of discourses portraying narcos as 'the other'.

3.3 The wider discourses informing the narco discourse: poverty, gender and violence

Having established what is understood as the narco subject and the narco discourse, in this section I discuss how the main discourses informing the narco discourse emerged. As I explained in the preceding chapter, poverty, gender and violence emerged as the main themes out of a systematic examination which entailed a back-and-forth analysis within and across participants' interviews. After the first preliminary analysis, I inductively identified ten themes: 1) Domestic violence, 2) machismo, 3) gang violence, 4) poverty, 5) narco rituals, 6) narco culture, 7) consumerism, 8) depoliticization, 9) suicidal thoughts and 10) torture. After examining the interviews two more times, during the last step of the preliminary analysis, these themes were reorganised as follows: domestic violence, male violence and machismo were included in the broader theme 'gender'. As for narco culture, depoliticization and consumerism were added to the theme 'poverty'. Finally, gang violence, torture, suicidal thoughts, narco rituals were added to the theme 'violence'. This reorganisation responded to the emerging three logics that I identified as the main guiding threads, the skeleton, across former narcos' narratives. That is, beyond the particularities of each life story interview, all narratives drew upon a set of regularities in relation to poverty, gender and violence. Therefore, in response to the emerging regularities found in the narratives, it became evident that a discourse theoretic approach was the most suitable to examine and make sense of my data.

Poverty, gender and violence are therefore recognised as the wider discourses, which map on pre-existing discourses in the Mexican society, that inform the narco discourse. These three discourses are intertwined and work together in participants' narratives, however, for analytical purposes, I examine them separately in order to unpack how each of them works in the narco discourse. Therefore, the empirical chapters (4, 5,6) are organised around these discourses.

⁴ The word 'narco' is the shorthand of *narcotraficante* [drug trafficker] in Spanish. In Mexico is used to refer to individuals involved in the illegal business of drug trafficking (See Astorga,1995). In other countries of Latin America, however, they are known differently. For example, in Colombia they are called '*traquetos*' (See Ovalle, 2010a).

3.4 Analytical strategies: presupposition, predication and subject positioning

In this section I discuss the three analytical strategies that I employ in the examination of how poverty, gender and violence work in the narco discourse. I adopt three analytical strategies, or textual mechanisms, these are: presuppositions, predication and subject positioning (Doty, 1993). These strategies, allow me get at *how* narcos' social reality is constructed and *how* such construction enables practices of drug trafficking violence (DTV).

The first analytical strategy I employ is *presuppositions*. As Doty points out, statements “rarely speak for themselves” (1993: 306). Each statement carries a background knowledge, or presuppositions, which are considered to be ‘true’. This background knowledge implies the existence of subjects and objects which produce particular ‘truths’. In other words, these presuppositions constitute social ‘reality’, the taken-for-granted, which help social actors to make sense of their world. Hence, the first step in my analysis is finding the key presuppositions in the narco discourse by interrogating my data in two ways: a) what does the narco discourse take for granted? And, subsequently: b) what are the ‘truths’ implied? In answering these questions, my aim is to unpack “...the operative principles, the logic constituting the “deep structure”” of the narco discourse (Doty, 1993: 312). For example, in relation to poverty, let’s consider the following statement from participants’ narratives: “You know that you were born poor and that your children will be poor as well. That is the way it is. There is nothing you can do about it”. This implies at least three presuppositions. First, poverty is inherited: you are born poor and, therefore, your children will be poor. Second, poor people cannot do anything to avoid being poor: ‘there is nothing you can do about it’. Third, since poverty is inherited and there is nothing you can do to avoid being poor, it follows that poverty will always exist. In this example, the presuppositions can be considered as the ‘truths’ which inform the narco subject’s social reality: poor people who are born in poverty are doomed to die in it: “that is the way it is”.

The second analytical strategy, or textual mechanism, I deploy in analysing the narco discourse is *predication*. This mechanism involves the examination of the particular qualities attached to subjects and objects through the use of “predicates, adverbs and adjectives that modify them” (Doty, 1993: 306). This is a key analytical strategy that allows me to pinpoint *how* the narco discourse constitutes different subjects and objects. For example, the subject ‘gang member’ is linked to characteristics such as ‘aggressive’, ‘brave’, ‘manhood’. In addition, predication refers to particular practices linked to subjects. Returning to the previous example, the subject ‘gang member’ is linked to practices like ‘street fights’, ‘drug addictions’ and ‘criminal activities’. Another example is how the men are linked to traditional characteristics such as ‘rationality’ and ‘strength’. Accordingly, adjectives like ‘emotional’ and ‘naïve’ are attached to the female subject.

Following Doty’s empirical analysis of predicates in a text corpus regarding U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines (1993:310), I include similar tables for predicates (i.e. adjectives, adverbs and verbs) and practices (i.e. behaviours, habits, rituals) that are attached to poverty, gender and violence, respectively. Each table shows

descriptive characteristics, qualities and capabilities attributed to different subjects, which I extracted from the interview transcripts. The inclusion of tables containing direct quotes from the interviews serves two purposes. First, they present in a clear and comprehensive way, the most relevant quotes supporting the analytical arguments I make in each empirical chapter. In other words, since it is impossible to include all quotes in the analytical sections, these tables provide the reader with additional quotes should they wish to see more of the raw data. Second, the predicates and practices listed in these tables assist my identification of what qualities and practices are taken for granted, as well as, what these subjects can do. To illustrate this textual mechanism, I continue with my previous example in relation to poverty. The narco discourse links 'poor boys' to practices such as 'drug addictions', being involved in 'gangs', 'thefts', 'street violence', 'school dropout' and 'casual jobs'. This cluster of predicates produces a subject who is constantly in touch with illegal practices (i.e. drug use and robbery), engages in violent practices (i.e. street fighting) and creates the subject positions of 'gang member', 'drug addicts', 'thieves' and 'informal workers'.

Finally, the third analytical strategy that I employ is *subject positioning*. That is, I look at *how* subjects are positioned "vis-à-vis one another by assigning them different degrees of agency" (Doty, 1993: 308), how subjects are related to objects and how objects are positioned in relation to each other. In employing this analytical strategy, I interrogate my data for what kind of subjects are created, what identities are constituted and how they related to each other. This allows me to identify the different ways in which the narco discourse positions subjects in relation to different areas such as family roles, gender, class and other relationships. For instance, in relation to gender, the narco discourse creates discursive spaces (i.e. concepts, metaphors or categories which create meaning) for subjects with characteristics that are traditionally defined as masculine (e.g. strong, aggressive or rational) and another kind of subject with characteristics that are traditionally defined as feminine (submissive, naïve or emotional). These subjects, male and female, are positioned *vis-à-vis* each other and are attributed different degrees of agency. In this case, the subject 'woman' is assigned less degree of agency when positioned *vis-à-vis* 'man'. Accordingly, the subject position of 'man' is situated in a higher position in the hierarchy constructed by traditional discourses of gender.

In addition to the three textual mechanisms of presupposition, predication and subject positioning, I also identify *chains of connotations* and the main *linguistic elements* in the narco discourse. Chains of connotation are defined as the linking of different terms or ideas which "come to connote one another and thereby to be welded into associative chains" (Hall in Weldes, 1996: 284). In other words, chains of connotations refer to a succession and linkage of specific linguistic elements. For instance, a recurrent chain of connotation in the narco discourse is the linking of 'poor boys' to 'drug addictions' to 'gangs' to 'street violence' and in turn to 'no future' and 'nothing to lose'.

I also identify the most relevant *linguistic elements*, or linguistic resources, produced in the narco discourse. Linguistic elements can be nouns, adjectives, analogies metaphors and tropes. (Weldes, 1996: 284). A trope refers is a recurrent theme or significant motifs. A metaphor is a "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied

to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable” (Oxford dictionary). In the previous example, the chain of connotation linking ‘poor boys’ to ‘drug addictions’ to ‘gangs and in turn to ‘no future’ and ‘nothing to lose’, leads to a key trope in the narco discourse, the ‘easy life’, which is evoked in the narco discourse in reference to work in the drug trafficking industry and other illegal activities. Note that these mechanisms also work together, and they inform each other. I address them separately only in order to pinpoint a) the ‘truths’ that are taken for granted in the narco discourse, b) how the narco discourse constructs poverty, gender and violence, and c) what subject positions are produced what power relationships are established in these constructions. Hence, the empirical chapters, from chapter four to chapter six, are organised around these three analytical strategies.

3.5 Conclusions

This chapter introduced the theoretic approach and the analytical strategies that inform my examination of the narco discourse. I began by discussing that, informed by a post-structural approach, I understand discourse as both, a set or meaning production regularities and, as knowledge which partially determines what is accepted as 'truth' and produces 'reality'. Then I discussed the relevance of the productive nature of discourse of my research. Discourses produce subjects and objects and, in doing so, they establish particular relationships among them. Next, I discussed how I conceptualise of the narco discourse and the narco subject. The narco discourse evokes simultaneously to the set of regularities I identified in participants' interview transcripts, and, as form of knowledge. In this regard, I argued that the narco subject produces a 'subjugated knowledge', which, so far, has been overlooked by mainstream approaches to DTV and policy makers. In this section I also explained that when I refer to the 'narco subject' I am not alluding to one research participant in specific but rather to the collective subject position of 'narco' produced in the narco discourse. In the third section, I explained how I identified the wider discourses of poverty, gender and violence as a result of a systematic analysis. Initially, working from an inductive approach, I identified ten main themes which, after a back-and-forth analysis, were narrowed to the broader themes of poverty, gender and violence. It was at this point that it became clear that these three themes produced a similar logic. Therefore, in response to these emerging regularities, it became clear that a discourse theoretic approach would prove more fruitful to examine the thirty-three life story interviews.

Finally, I presented the three analytical strategies that I employ in the examination of the narco discourse: presupposition, predication and subject positioning. Overall, these strategies, or textual mechanisms, allow me to unpack how the narco discourse produces a particular social 'reality' and 'truths' which underpin how the narco subject understand the world. Through the strategy of presupposition, we can unpick the background knowledge, the taken-for-granted in the narco discourse. Through the strategy of predication, i.e. identifying adjectives, adverbs and qualities, it is possible to identify how particular subjects and objects are constructed and what particular practices are attached to them. Finally, the textual mechanism of subject positioning, allows to identify which subject positions are produced in the narco discourse and how they are positioned in relation vis-à-vis other identities.

These three textual mechanisms, coupled with the discourse theoretic approached discussed above, allow me to explain how the narco discourse is informed by particular constructions which constitute certain attitudes and beliefs about the 'self' and the 'other' which, in turn, make practices of DTV possible. For example, the narco discourse articulates poverty as something 'natural', as a condition that 'inevitably' leads to 'drug addictions' and crime which, in turn, informs the idea that poor people have 'no future'. To cope with this 'inescapable' situation, since poor people have 'nothing to lose', practices of DTV are justified. This implies that the narco discourse is not created in a

vacuum. The narco discourse is not unique or exclusive to narcos. Rather, I set out to demonstrate in this dissertation, the narco discourse is constituted by intertwined discourses of poverty, gender and violence.

The following chapter addresses a) what the narco discourse takes for granted in relation to poverty, b) how poverty is discursively constructed in the narco discourse, and c) the subject positions produced in relation to poverty.

CHAPTER 4 THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF POVERTY: THE LOGIC OF THE 'EASY LIFE'

"Getting a job was not the issue, there were many of ways to get money without making so much effort... but I wanted more... I chose the easy life" (Cristian)

"There were plenty of jobs, but I wanted to be a narco because they earn more money. Just because of that. So, I decided to be a good drug trafficker to have more money" (Dionisio)

4 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse how poverty is constructed in the narco discourse. This analysis is grounded on the understanding of poverty as a social construction which does not imply that poverty as such does not exist, but rather that it has different meanings and, therefore, individuals may describe it and experience it in different ways. Accordingly, the main objective of this chapter is to unpack and analyse narcos' account of poverty.

The central argument of this chapter is that the narco discourse reproduces two different conceptions of poverty. On the one hand, it constructs poverty as a lack of basic needs. On the other hand, more significantly, drawing on a neoliberal ethos, the narco discourse conceives poverty as relative deprivation. This last concept defines poverty in terms of "feelings of "envy and injustice" ...emanating from perception of, for example, poverty or inequality *relative* to some reference group as opposed to a consequence of absolute poverty" (Stiles et al., 2000: 64). That is, a person who feels relatively deprived may not necessarily be poor in absolute terms (lack of basic necessities). Thus, the deprivation the individual feels arises from a self-perception of having a deficiency in *comparison* to some reference groups, or particular persons who possess what is *desired* (as opposed to needed) by this individual. As a result, he or she will develop "feelings of envy, injustice and low-self worth...[which] instigate the adoption of deviant patterns as attempts to forestall or assuage feeling or strain" (Stiles et al., 2000: 65). This concept of poverty as relative deprivation, together with implicit neoliberal values such as individualism, help us to understand the underlying logic of the 'easy life' (i.e. working in drug trafficking) as I discuss in this chapter.

Drawing on the three analytical strategies explained in chapter 3, participants' narratives are examined for presuppositions, subject positioning, and presupposition. These textual mechanisms work together, however, for analytical purposes I present them separately in order to elucidate the different ways in poverty is discursively constructed. Accordingly, the chapter is organised as follows. I begin by unpacking the presuppositions, the 'truths' that frame the narco discourse. Next, I identify the main subject positions produced in relation to poverty. Finally, building up on these presuppositions and subject positions, I discuss how poverty is constructed in the narco discourse through predication analysis and how this informs the logic of the 'easy life'. I discuss each in turn.

4.1 Presuppositions: what does the narco subject take for granted about poverty?

In this section I scrutinise the particular 'truths', the background knowledge produced in the narco discourse regarding poverty. As Doty (1993) rightfully points out, statements usually do not speak for themselves. All statements, even the simplest ones, imply a background knowledge, or presuppositions, that frame and give sense to those statements. Presuppositions is a key analytical strategy which allows us to identify the logic in the narco discourse, which, in turn, enables us to identify how the narco subject makes sense of the world. In this regard, there are three underlying presuppositions which inform the construction of poverty in the narco discourse. These are: a) poverty is natural, b) poverty inevitably leads to addictions and street gangs, and c) poor people have no future.

4.1.1 Poverty is natural

The narco discourse assumes that poverty is something natural, a condition that inevitably exists. Poverty is attributed either to bad luck: "somebody in the world has to be poor: right? I just had bad luck" (Ponciano), or to God's will: "I knew that I would grow up and die in poverty and I would question God: why me?" (Wilson). Consequently, since the narco discourse assumes that poverty is an inevitable condition, and nobody is responsible for it, it naturalises it. It is taken for granted that "somebody must to be poor" (Lamberto) and that "you cannot do anything to avoid it" (Tabo). These two assumptions are, indeed, expected from people living in poverty conditions, as the scholarship on poverty has shown (Lewis, 1966; Arzate, et al., 2010; Bayon, 2015; Rodríguez, 2004; Harper, 1996). What is relevant to highlight, however, is the what these assumptions entail. The conception of poverty as a natural condition implicitly reproduces the central values of neoliberalism: individual freedom, no state intervention and free market (Harvey, 2007: 5-6). In particular, the conception of poverty in the narco discourse emphasises poverty as an individual issue and disregard structural factors.

From this presupposition it follows that the narco subject is interpellated as an individual, as opposed to citizen for example, responsible for his own economic and social development: "I knew I was alone, if I wanted something, I would have to get it myself" (Rigoletto). In this sense, individuals are assumed to be responsible for their own wellbeing and for finding their own coping mechanisms for poverty. As Pancho explained: "in this world you are on your own, you have to find your own ways to go ahead and deal with your problems". Poverty, therefore, is constructed as an individual issue: its 'your problem', you are 'on your own' and 'you' have to find 'your own ways to go ahead'. This tacitly produces an apolitical and individualistic worldview. By apolitical and individualistic, I mean the ideological and political abandonment and the supremacy of the individual, in opposition to collective wellbeing. This worldview, in turn, produces needs, imposes hedonistic values, the cult of the personal, the legitimation of pleasure and the supremacy of the present (Lipovetsky, 2003). I discuss this further in section 4.3.

Therefore, as there is no social or political entity accountable for poverty, the narco discourse assumes that poor people are 'alone', marginalised from society, which is a double-edged sword for both the government and society. On the one hand, neither the state nor society are made responsible in helping the poor. On the other hand, neither the state nor society are recognised as a legitimate authority or as a genuine community. Therefore, the individualistic narco subject does not see himself as responsible or accountable to them. As Piochas explained: "I never questioned myself because it was not my problem. We all have problems, that person had the bad luck to be in our way. Yes, it was unfair, but it was not my business". The narco discourse takes for granted that poor people are on their own and that they are responsible for their own fate. Following this individualistic logic, it is assumed that, in the same way in which neither the state nor the society are responsible for supporting the most vulnerable groups, narcos are not responsible for their victims either. As Yuca said: "nah! I did not care about them [his victims] ...I did not know them, why would I care?".

In this way, in the same way that the narco subject accepts his bad luck of being poor, turns this logic into an argument to justify criminal behaviour: "in this world you cannot trust anybody, so you better take advantage of others while you can. If you do not screw others the others will screw you" (Rigoletto). In this quote, which epitomises the individualistic ethos all through the narratives, the narco discourse also takes for granted the law of survival of the fittest, which is conceived as a determining factor for survival. Cristian put it this way when he was asked about street violence: "In my neighbourhood we all knew the rules: you snooze; you lose; that was the law. You have to act tough and look after yourself because nobody else will do it for you". Similarly, Pato explained that in poor neighbourhoods "there is no mercy... If somebody has to cry: it better be you than me. And I survived you know". In other words, you cannot trust anybody but yourself.

4.1.2 Poverty leads to drug addictions and street gangs

The second presupposition that frames the narco discourse of poverty is that being a drug addict and a member of a street gang are inevitable consequences of living in poverty. Street gangs [*pandillas*] are articulated as essential to cope with violence in poor neighbourhoods: "that [street gangs] is what poor children and young boys do, it is the only way to survive street violence" (Piochas). Similarly, drug addictions are taken-for-granted: "When you grow up in a poor neighbourhood you already know that at some point you will become a drug addict" (Palomo). Although street gangs and drug addictions are not correlated in the narratives in the sense that one depends on the other, both are constructed as the main elements to survive in the 'jungle' (Palomo). While gangs are conceived as key in order to survive in contexts with high levels of insecurity such as low-income neighbourhoods: "in the neighbourhood there is no other option, you either join the gang or they will make your life miserable" (Chito). Drug addictions are thus associated as a coping mechanism to deal with gang violence: "they force you to do things you do not want to do, like hurting people you do not want to hurt and then you need drugs to forget about that. [So] you just wait to die of an overdose or be stabbed to death in one of the many fights" (Inmaculado). This conception

of drugs as a coping mechanism for poor young boys is interpreted in gender literature as the result of their incapability to cope with the challenges of poverty and the demands of hegemonic masculinities (see chapter 5). In this view, “the language of psychoactive/psychotropic drug users provides [powerless youths] a way to speak” (Viveros-Vigoya, 2001: 240)

Notably, the narco discourse conceives drugs and street gangs as one of the few sources of happiness and support that narcos during their childhood: “[drugs] made me happy, I forgot about the problems I had at home, I forgot that my Mum was a prostitute. [That] was happiness for me because the drugs world was a world without pain, where I was able to find love in my friends from the gang” (Ponciano). This is a recurrent idea evoked by the narco subject, drugs work as the antidote, albeit ephemeral, to all sorts of suffering and gangs are portrayed as ‘family’: “drugs help you to forget your suffering and your gang defends you from the people that want to hurt you, they are like your family” (Inmaculado). Therefore, gangs are not only constructed as a necessary to survive in poor neighbourhoods; more significantly, gangs provide a key source of identity to the narco subject. Since gang members [*pandilleros*] emerge in contexts of poverty, this identity is informed by shared emotions such as feeling frustrated and unhappy, and shared pleasures, such as smoking weed and sniffing glue in an abandoned house. Gangs and drug addictions are also constructed as source of violence and suffering. This will be developed further in chapter 7.

The issue of drug addictions and street gang violence in poor neighbourhoods does not come as a surprise as it has been widely discussed in the poverty and gender literature (Navarrete, 2012; Gómez and Merino, 2012; Bayon, 2015; Rodgers, 2006; Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares, 2007; Cruz-Sierra, 2014; Cerbino, 2004). However, it is a key presupposition in the narco discourse which produces a fatalistic view of life. That is, informed by the assumption that poor boys will eventually turn into drug addicts and gang members, the narco discourse produces the idea that drug addictions are the inevitable future for poor boys, who are doomed to die either from gang violence or from an overdose: “I always thought that my destiny was to die either because of an overdose or by a bullet” (Pancho). This fatalistic view of life also draws on the presupposition that poor people have no future as I discuss in the following section.

4.1.3 People like ‘us’ have no future

In addition to the presuppositions that poverty is natural, and that poverty leads to gangs and drug addictions, the narco discourse also reproduces traditional discourses of poverty which articulate poor people as inherently different from rich or middle-class people (Lister, 2004; Rodríguez, 2004). The underlying logic behind this idea is that poor people have little or nothing to lose because they have ‘no future’. The statement “people like *us* have no future”, which is recurrently evoked in the narco discourse, has two implications. First, it reproduces the binary ‘us’, the poor, ‘them’ the rich: “I knew I would never be one of *them* [rich people] because I was, and I will always be poor” (Ponciano). In a similar way in which the ‘war on drugs’ discourse produces subjects ‘within’ and ‘outside’ society, the poor are situated in the narco discourse as a separate group of people who share a common and fatal

destiny. The assumption, therefore, is that since poor boys tend to drop out of school at a young age, they have very little or no chance of getting a job within the formal economy: “who would hire us?... I did not even finish elementary school” (Dávila). Additionally, as they become drug addicts from an early age, there is no interest in any job that would imply giving up or decreasing drug use. Therefore, the statement “people like us have no future” means that poor people have no future within the formal or legal job market.

Second, poor boys and young men are portrayed as drug addicts, marginalised and ‘worthless’, which directly informs the meaning of ‘life’ and ‘death’ in the narco discourse: “When you are a drug addict, you see yourself as worthless, worse than rubbish. You don’t care about anything, not even your life because, who would care about a poor drug addict?” (Palomo). In this regard, the narco discourse reproduces the dominant discourse through which the Mexican government divides lives and deaths between those who are ‘worthy’ and those are ‘disposable’ (Ovalle, 2010b; Cabañas, 2014; Campbell, 2012). In this way, poor people’s lives are assumed to be disposable, and early death is not only accepted but also taken for granted: “when you see so many of your peers dying, in a fight, from an overdose, shot to death by the police or committing suicide, you just think this is also your future” (Tigre). In this way, the narco discourse normalises an early violent death and even suicide. Informed by the assumption that poor people have no future, coupled with the idea that the life of the poor is not worth living under such conditions of suffering (namely drug addiction and social exclusion), death is constructed as a relief from the many dangers and pains of living in a poor neighbourhood. As Ponciano said: “in this world [of poverty] your life is threatened from dawn to dusk. You are exposed to all kinds of dangers and at some point, you get tired. I didn’t try to kill myself, but I didn’t mind if I died”. Resignation to an early death, in turn, informs the narco subject’s discursive engagement in the ‘easy life’ (i.e. working in drug trafficking). Based on the acquiescence to an early death, the narco discourse produces the assumption of living in the present without thinking about the consequences in the future.

These three presuppositions, poverty is natural, poverty leads to drug addictions and street gangs and poor people have no future, constitute the background knowledge and the ‘truths’ that inform the social ‘reality’ of the narco subject. Informed by the conception of poverty as a fixed state, one can make sense of the idea so ingrained in the narco discourse that the poor are doomed to be poor: “you know that you were born poor and that your children will be poor as well. That is the way it is; there is nothing you can do about it” (Ponciano). Understood this way, poverty is an inherent condition which cannot be overcome. Therefore, the narco discourse portrays the poor as a marginalised group which is essentially different from other groups in society. That is, poverty is conceived as a social status from which people cannot escape: “it is like a tattoo: you cannot take it away” (Wilson).

4.2 Subject positioning: between agency and victimhood

The narco discourse also produces particular kinds of subjects which are positioned in a hierarchical arrangement by assigning them different degrees of agency. There are five guiding subject positions in relation to poverty: a) child, b) gang member [*pandillero*], c) informal worker and, d) narcos and e) consumers.

4.2.1 The narco subject as a child

The child was the first subject position to emerge in my life story interviews with former narcos. Children were constructed as vulnerable subjects, positioned below ‘working children’ or ‘children who belong to a street gang’. They were also positioned below women. That is, children are situated at the bottom of the hierarchical arrangement in the narco discourse. The child subject position has a cluster of attributes similar to the ones attributed to the female subject position (see chapter 5). That is, the child is portrayed as naïve, emotional, and most relevant in the narco discourse, physically weak. The child’s vulnerability results from his impossibility to defend himself from adults and older children:

All I remember is that I was afraid of my Dad and the gang members [*pandilleros*]. They were obviously taller and stronger than I was. They laughed at me and I would cry out of anger and frustration and promised myself that once I was big enough, I would beat them up so hard that they would beg for mercy. (Pato)

The child is also positioned as a victim of his own family when he suffers from hunger, domestic violence, negligence or bad treatments: “when I was a child, I was afraid of my dad because when he was drunk, he would beat my Mum up really bad” (Chito). Chufo said: “Some days we did not eat...some other days my mum would send us to beg in the streets”. Likewise, the child is constructed as a victim of older boys:

...the older boys took my sweets away, they stole from me, they yelled at me and I could not do anything. Another day two young boys attacked me, they robbed my stuff. They threatened me with a knife, they beat me up, they broke my mouth inside and they took my merchandise... (Jorge)

Children in poor neighborhoods are also conceived as the natural target of older boys who, as I discuss in the next two chapters, engage in street fights, bullying and even delinquency in order to perform their masculinity through violence.

4.2.2 The narco subject as a gang member [*pandillero*]

The identity of *pandillero* [gang member] is one of the most relevant subject positions in the narco discourse. As noted above, the gang is the social institution which provides the narco subject the most important, if not the only, source of genuine identity and sense of belonging. The narco discourse articulates the subject position of *pandillero* upon three main assumptions. First, gang members are usually children, between eight to fourteen years old, and young men, between fifteen and twenty-five years old. The oldest in the gang are the ones in charge of recruiting and teaching the youngest what ‘they need to know’: “I was one of the oldest in the gang. So, I used to teach the youngest how to sell newspapers in the street, how to do graffiti and all the stuff we used to do in the gang. We also

helped them with some money and we gave them drugs for free” (Cristian). Second, children join the gang for two reasons, either because gangs provide support and a feeling of belonging. Third, the gang becomes the main source of the children’s learning and identity: “the gang meant the world to us ... It was like our own family. We would fight to death to defend our turf from other gangs” (Ponciano). In chapter 5, I discuss this subject position from the gender perspective.

4.2.3 Informal Worker

The subject position of informal worker, linked to temporary jobs, is positioned at the same level as the gang member mainly because they are parallel to each other. That is, the gang member occasionally engaged in informal jobs. These jobs include washing cars, selling newspapers and other informal jobs. As an informal worker, the narco subject is articulated as a free agent and even as an entrepreneur, who can earn money in different ways: “I was very smart you know, I found a thousand ways to earn money” (Pato). The narco discourse thus constructs agency in terms of economic independence, or in the case of children as economic contribution to the sustenance of the household. However, although this position is endowed with some degree of agency this is lost in the development of drug addictions: “I was good at my job, they paid me good money, but you cannot last when you are a drug addict” (Rorro). Drug dependency, in turn, is linked to unemployment as drug users are segregated and stigmatised by society. As Peque explained: “Nobody wants to hire youngsters who do drugs. Even if you do not do it during working hours.”

The narco discourse also links workers to a certain degree of agency in the sense that informal jobs, did not require them to have a minimum education. Surprisingly, the narco discourse does not portray unemployment or lack of opportunities as the main reasons why narcos engaged in drug trafficking. More significantly, the narco discourse does not produce the narco subject as the subaltern who is ‘forced’ to work for drug cartels as most of the literature claims (Watt and Zepeda, 2012; Sánchez, 2009, Marez, 2004; Freeman and Sierra, 2005). As I discuss in section 4.3, the narco discourse rather portrays narcos as rational individuals who assess their options and *choose* to work in the drug trafficking upon formal or informal jobs. As Cristian puts it: “Getting a job was not the issue, there were many of ways to get money without making so much effort... but I wanted more... I chose the easy life”.

4.2.4 The narco subject as narco

The subject position of narco is situated almost at the top of the hierarchy. Drug traffickers, or narcos, are positioned as more autonomous than informal workers for two reasons. First, agency is associated with money. Therefore, the more money an individual has the more agency he has. Second, in this position individuals have access to unlimited quantities of drugs and weapons which are conceived as a significant advantage over the occasional worker and the gang member. In this sense, the narco is not constructed as an ordinary criminal but rather as an individual who is

respected and feared by peers and the wider society. As Preciado explained: “We all knew about the big bosses in the area, we all knew how powerful they were because we listened to *narco-corridos*. In the neighbourhood we all wanted to be like them, we wanted all the stuff they had: big trucks, big weapons and lots of beautiful women”.⁵ This confirms the important, however not determining role that narco-culture plays in informing and shaping narcos’ understandings of drug trafficking. In this sense, the narco discourse reproduces some stereotypes regarding narcos:

It was easy to recognise them [narcos] because they all show off their money. They wear expensive clothes, gold chains and they drive the most expensive trucks. They also carry big guns, and that was what I admired the most... I wanted that (Jaime)

Whereas the narco discourse does reproduce some of the myths produced by the mass media and uncritical narco-culture products (e.g. narcos’ wearing expensive brand clothes, having big trucks, and narcos ‘always’ surrounded by several women); it also brings to light an aspect of narcos’ lives that is rarely addressed. That is, the role that drug addiction plays in the everyday life of drug traffickers. In contrast to the dominant representations of drug traffickers in the traditional literature, the narco discourse provides a key nuance to the myth of drug traffickers as rich and powerful:

It is a curse [drugs] because it is impossible for a man working in drug trafficking not to consume his own product ... It is true that you earn a lot of money but what nobody knows is that you do not see that money because you spend it all on addictions, drugs, women, alcohol, gambling. (Piochas)

Therefore, the narco discourse brings to light how this position is subjected to all sorts of addictions which ultimately, balance out the big sums of money they have access to.

4.2.5 The narco subject as a consumer

This subject position is not referred to as such in the narco discourse. However, it is implied and, indeed, emerges from the interplay of the background knowledge regarding poverty and the logic of the ‘easy life’ (see 4.3). The narco subject inserts himself in society by positioning himself as a consumer. From this position, he is not an ‘outsider’ anymore, there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’. In contrast to the previous four subject positions from which the narco subject speaks, the implied consumer position allows him to be part of ‘them’. As Lipovetsky suggests (2006), when other paths to social recognition fail, consumerism imposes itself as, arguably, the only way that would allow the marginalised to liberalise themselves from the social disdain and the feeling of self-depreciation. In this sense, the narco subject reaffirms himself when he engages in consumerist practices or when he wears a renowned brand. This does not mean, as the narco-literature suggests, that the main or only objective of the narco subject is to show off how rich they are or how superior they, consumerism is rather a practice that provides the narco subject a feeling of equality and belonging: “I had the same things that *they had* [rich people] so I felt would *be able to be like them*”

⁵ Narco corridos are Northern Mexican ballads about drug trafficking and famous drug lords

(Piochas). In this sense, consumerism is a compensating practice that allows the narco subject to close the inequality gap. This logic explains how the narco discourse of poverty situates the consumer above all other subject positions as well as the values that it promotes. The narco subject does it as his only way to exist and to be recognised by this society. Underpinned by this idea the logic of the 'easy life' emerges as I discuss next.

4.3 Predication: how is poverty constructed in the narco discourse?

Building on the preceding analysis of presuppositions and subject positioning, in this final section I examine how poverty is constructed in the narco discourse through predication analysis. As explained in chapter 3, predicate analysis focuses on identifying how verbs, adverbs and adjectives are linked to certain nouns (e.g. the adjective 'easy' to the noun 'life'). In addition, this analytical strategy also looks for practices attached to subject positions (e.g. drug addiction to boys, alcoholism to men, or domestic violence to fathers). Since the narco discourse of poverty follows a manifold logic that works in relation to the subject positions from which narcos speak; and, in order to provide the reader with additional data, I include a table which is divided into five columns which correspond to the subject positions discussed above, which are central to the organising of the poverty discourse. These are, children, drug addicts and gang members, workers, drug traffickers and consumers).

Table 4 (p. 72-76), shows the predicates and practices that narcos use when speaking about poverty. For analytical purposes, it is not possible to include all quotes regarding poverty within the narrative. Therefore, this table has been included to reproduce all relevant quotes underpinning my analysis throughout the remainder of this chapter. The predicates and practices that do not have quotation marks indicate that the idea was not a direct quote from the interviews. That is, common ideas were expressed by several narcos but with different words; I therefore paraphrased the idea expressed by most of them (e.g. I wrote 'Money made me happy' to encompass different versions of that same idea). The quotes that are followed by several narcos' initials are those that were taken literally from one interview, but whose ideas were echoed by other narcos in other words, so I chose the one that expressed them in the clearest way. The predicates and practices are translated from the original transcription in Spanish and the initials in brackets refer to the initials of the pseudonym that was assigned to each of them.

Table 4 Predicates and practices in relation to poverty

Narcos as children	Narcos as drug addicts and gang members	Narcos as workers in legal or informal jobs	Narcos as consumers	Narcos as Narcos
<p>Money made me happy (DF, YUC, IN, PAL, PON, JAI, RIG, CR, DIO, BAL, TAB, PIO, CHU, LAT, KV, DAV, WIL, TIG, CHI, PEQ, PIT, PAN, MEM, JG)</p>	<p>“the gang was like my family, my mates [<i>compas</i>] from the gang did not betrayed me and it was the only source of affection I had when growing up” (PAL, CR, PON, PAL, PIO, RR)</p>	<p>“I used to earn good money in a legal job” (DF, RR, PT, CHI, PIT, AL, FUS, PAC, WIL, CAN, DIO, KV, CR)</p>	<p>“[since] I am not taking anything to my grave and if they catch me, they will take everything away. My goal was to live every day as it was the last one, I did not pinch pennies when it came to enjoy myself: [I used to buy] the best trucks, the best wines [and had] the most beautiful women”. (JAI)</p>	<p>The cartel offered me the job because I was clever, I was a leader, I was a fighter, I was disciplined, I was responsible and loyal I was brave (YUC, CAN, PT, MEM, JAI, FUS, PON, DIO, RIG, KV, PIO, PT, CAN, FC, RR, JG)</p>
<p>“We used to live in a very small wooden house, no running water, no cement floor, more than 8 people sleeping in the same room” (DF)</p>	<p>“There is no option, you have to join a gang if you want to survive. Your gang not only teaches you how to fight, it will also defend you and even die for you if necessary. The only problem is that they expect the same from you” (KV)</p>	<p>“I lost my job [in a supermarket] because I could not last more than three hours without smoking mariguana [...] and the manager never liked me anyway because of my <i>cholo</i> style”. (BAL)</p>	<p>“Money means power, the power to buy the government and intimidate people” (DIO, CAN)</p>	<p>I worked with them because I wanted to be respected, to be feared (CAN, PT, FC, RIG, DIO, BAL, KV, RR, JG, Mi)</p>
<p>We were a very poor family, we used to starve (PIO, LAT, PIT, PAN, JAI, PT, CR, PON, RIG)</p>	<p>“I lost my job [in a supermarket] because I could not last more than three hours without smoking mariguana [...] and the manager never liked me anyway because of my <i>cholo</i> style”</p>	<p>“There were many ways to get money without making so much effort, but I liked the easy life” CR, PIO, DF, RR, FUS, PAC, CHI, JAI, PT, DIO, CAN, AL, IN, BAL, KV,</p>	<p>“I also used to recruit young boys to work for us, we use to lure them with beautiful women, money and cars” (CAN)</p>	<p>I worked with them because I wanted easy access to drugs (FUS, IN, PAL, PON, JAI, RIG, CR, BAL, PAC, YUC, EA, CHU, LAT, KV, WIL, PIT, PAN, RR, AL)</p>
<p>“I grew up in a very poor neighbourhood full of drug addicts and alcoholics. To me smoking weed was something normal” (PT, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, BAL, YUC, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, DF, KV, PT, DAV, WIL, TIG, PEQ, PIT, PAN, RR, AC, BI)</p>	<p>“Money was not enough [working in a legal job] because I needed to buy drugs” (YUC, DF, RR, FUS, IN, PAL, JAI, CR, BAL, AL, PAN, DAV)</p>	<p>“I did not like working but I did like the easy money” (JAI, YUC, DF, RR, DAV)</p>	<p>“We used to tell the boys do you want to be a ‘nobody’? In this world without money you are nobody” (CAN)</p>	<p>“I didn’t like that job [killing people] but it was good money and that was all I wanted” (PIO)</p>
<p>“I used to ask for food door by door along with my mother. [in my neighbourhood] kids use to smell glue in empty cans they picked up from the rubbish, [...]</p>	<p>“As a drug addict you don’t care about anything else than getting your daily doses of drugs, tomorrow is another day. What is</p>	<p>“My first job [as a child] was working in the streets selling newspapers, washing cars”</p>	<p>“Kidnappings was an extra, I did it for my wife because she wanted to have more money. She was always competing with her sister: who had the</p>	<p>“I started working as a drug trafficker just for fun, I liked feeling the adrenaline and traveling to different cities” (CAN)</p>

sometimes they were so hungry they used to eat the glue and the same with thinner" (PT)	important for a drug addict is the present". (KV)	(IN, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, PT, DAV, WIL, TIG, PIT, PAN, PAL, BAL, KV, CAN, RR, PEQ, BIG, TIG, DF)	best truck, the best house, the best mobile [...]" (PT)	
"Somebody in the world has to be poor [...] I just had bad luck" (PON)	"I did not care about the others. You know in Mexico we have a saying: If somebody should cry, it better be you than me. That was my only thought. And I survived you know" (PIO)	"I knew I was alone, if I wanted something, I would have to get it myself" (RIG, CR, DIO, BAL, YUC, EA, PIO, LAT, KV, PT, DAV, WIL, PIT, PAN, PAN, JAI)	"when I bought things, I felt good, people treated me nicely" (BIG)	"I formally started in drug trafficking by chance, as part of the security team of one of the main <i>comandante</i> , he trusted me to guard his home" (CAN)
"When I was a child, I was not ashamed of anything because my Mum taught to beg for food and shelter but later, I did feel ashamed of being a homeless" (PT)	"I always thought that my destiny was to die either because of an overdose or by a bullet". (PAN)	"I was kicked out from the army because I was a problem, I was part of a team that they used to call 'the slag' because we were the worst elements of the army" (CAN)	"As soon as I collected the money, I bought very expensive car and brand clothes" (JAI)	"My job was to distribute cocaine in the country, administrate drug dealers in the city, collect the money and kidnap people who did not want to pay or collaborate with us" (CAN)
"I knew that I would grow and die in poverty and I used to question God: why me?" (LAT, JAI)	"drugs help you to forget your suffering and your gang defends from the ones that want to hurt you, they are like your family". (IN)	"When I turned 11 I got a job in a flea market selling second hand clothes. I used to get good money, but I wanted more" (PT)	"I did not like tacky clothes, I liked good brands, Levi's, Nike, gold necklaces, 'luiguiton' the one with the L and the V" (JAI)	"He offered me a 3 years training and a very good job in exchange of my life: no family, no kids, no life" (FC)
"Me and my siblings starved during our childhood, we used to spend entire days without eating... our home was a small shack by the sea" (JAI)	"but they [members of the gang] force you to do things you do not want to do, like hurting people you do not want to hurt and then you need drugs to forget about that. [So] you just wait to die of an overdose or be stabbed to death in one of the many fights". (IN)	"I was very smart you know, I found a thousand ways to earn money, I was not naïve, I knew money did not grow on trees, I knew whatever I wanted, whatever, I had to work for it" (PT)	"I used to spend a lot of money on gold and luxury trucks" (DIO)	"you are in a nice restaurant one day, surrounded by beautiful women and important people but the next day you may wake up in a dungeon and maybe you will not even wake up the next morning" (PON, JAI, CR, YUC, PIO)
"You know that you were born poor and that your children will be poor as well, that is the way it is there is nothing you can do about it. If you do not have education, you will not get a good job. What can you expect when you only finished elementary school? Nothing! You have nothing!" (PON)	"in this world [of poverty] your life is threatened from dawn to dusk. You are exposed to all kinds of dangers and at some point, you get tired. I didn't try to kill myself, but I did not mind if I died". (PON)	"All the money that I had in my hands, no matter how much, I used to spend it in drugs" (RR, DF, IN, PON, JAI, DIO, BAL, YUC, PIO, CAN, PIT, PAN, AL)	I just wanted good stuff. The best TVs, the best car, the best video games. All the things we always wanted but that we were too poor to have. (YUC)	"I knew I would go out from jail one day. That was my incentive: to go out and retrieve my territory" (DIO)
"I experienced, since I was very young, that money moves people, people and the	"Even though I had everything a man wishes, I was not happy because I depended so much on	"I was recruited in the point in which I used to buy marijuana and	"I was not that poor, but you are always wondering how it would feel to have all those	"We saw ourselves like Robin Hoods, we took money from the rich [through kidnapping] to give to the poor, that is: our kids" (PIO)

government in particular can be easily corrupted" (FC)	drugs" (CAN, PIO, DIO, PAC, PT, FC, AL)	cocaine, I was a regular costumer" (FC)	things that you see others have [...] I thought that money would make me feel happy" (DIO)	
People like us have no future (IN, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, PT, DAV, WIL, TIG, PIT, PAN, PAL, BAL, KV, CAN, RR, PEQ, BIG, TIG, DF)	I used to do drugs to forget about my reality (domestic violence, poverty, suffering) (FUS, IN, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, AL, YUC, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, KV, DAV, WIL, TIG, FC, RR)	"A man in a very expensive truck told the dealer to give me free drugs" (FC)	I used to see all the things other people had and that I had always wanted, and I felt mad because I used to think that I deserved those things too (RIG)	"It was easy because it was, they paid us 500 dollars for crossing 4 or 5 kilos of marijuana and we could not make that money with a month's salary" (DIO)
"I was poor, my friends were poor, my children will be poor" (PAL)	"I thought that my destiny was to die either because of an overdose or killed by a bullet" (IN, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, YUC, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, DF, KV, DAV, WIL, CAN, TIG, PAN, RR, MEM)	"I used to compare myself against my neighbours and other people I saw. They had nice cars, good houses, big TVs" [...] (IN, PAL, PON, JAI, CR, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, PT, DAV, WIL, TIG, PIT, PAN, PAL, BAL, KV, CAN, RR, PEQ, BIG, TIG, DF)	"if I had nothing to lose and they [drug cartels] were offering that much money I thought that it was ok, why not? My main objective was to enjoy the present and they offered me that possibility" (RR)	"More than a job we used to offer them [boys] protection and training to work with arms and that knowledge translates to money" (CAN)
"When you grow up in a poor neighbourhood you already know that at some point you will become a drug addict" (PAL, PON, JAI, CR, BAL, YUC, EA, PIO, CHU, LAT, DF, KV, DAV, WIL, TIG, PAN, RR, MEM, JG, BIG)	"I was very intelligent when I was in school [...] they even offered me a scholarship to study Mechanical engineering, but I started doing crack and I quit school" (BAL)	"I used to work for both sides, the good and the bad [the government and the narcotics,] that at the end were the same thing" (DIO)	"There were plenty of jobs, but I wanted to be a drug trafficker because they earn more money. Just because of that. So, I decided to be a good drug trafficker to have more money. In my times more than luxuries we wanted power. Money gives you power. You can buy the police and intimidate politicians" (DIO)	"When we realised that the people, we used to work for were not paying us enough we created our own business. First, we used to borrow the weapons and then, with the profits, we were able to buy them." (DIO)
"That [gangs] is what poor children and young boys do, it is the only way to survive street violence" (PIO, RR, CR, KV, TIG, PIT, PAN, PAL, JAI, YUC, PT, IN, PAL, PON, BAL, DAV, DF)	"I did not want to be part of the gang, but I had no other choice than joining them because otherwise they would have kept beating me up and stealing my money" (DF)	"I was good at my job, they paid me good money, but you cannot last when you are a drug addict" (RR, DF, CAN)	If I had nothing to lose and they were offering that much money I thought that it was ok, why not? (YUC)	"In the drug trafficking business, there is a lot of envy and jealousy, there is always someone who wants your position and you will always want the position of those above you" (CAN, DIO, RIG)
"In my neighbourhood, we all knew the rules: you snooze you lose, that was the law. You have to act tough and look after yourself because nobody else will do it for you" (CR)	"[drugs] made me happy, I used to forget the problems I had at home, I used to forget that my Mum was a prostitute [and that] was happiness for me because to me the drugs' world it was a world without pain where I was	"When you are a drug addict it's inevitable to fall into the temptation of working in drug trafficking because drugs are all you care about, it is all you know" (RR, DF, YUC, FC, WIL, KV, BAL, PAL)	"When your life is lost already, and they offer you the money you cannot make through other means, drug trafficking is a good bet (TIG)	"We did not know what to do with our money, you do not know how to invest it and you could not spend that money on Christmas or new years' eve with your family" (CAN)

	able to find love in my friends from the gang” (PON)			
“I never thought about my future because I did not have one that is why I did not care if they [other gangs] killed me” (CR)	“In fights my only thought was: if somebody has to cry: it better be you than me. And I survived you know” (PT)	“When I was 14 I was already in control of my life, I did what I wanted to do” (PT)	“Money fixes everything. When you have money, you can do whatever you want. You can buy new clothes and very nice stuff and people would treat nicely. They don’t care about how you got the money. They just know you have money and that is enough to be popular (DF)	“I was the one who asked the cartel to work for them. It was not only for the money, I wanted people to respect me, to fear me the same way they were afraid of those men” (PT)
“I knew I would be never one of them [rich people] because I was, and I will always be poor, it is like a tattoo, you cannot take it away” (WIL)	“I had to stop working in drug trafficking because I was a drug addict, and quitting that stuff is impossible to leave” (CAN, PIO, JAI, RIG, CR, DIO, BAL, PT, DAV, WIL, DAV, RR)	“Getting a job was not the issue, there were many of ways to get money without making so much effort... but I wanted more... I chose the easy life” (CR)	“I’m not going to deny it. I did enjoy having lots of good stuff. When one is poor and suddenly you have lots of money, you feel the king of the world. Every time I bought something new, every time I got home with a new TV or a new video game, I felt really good. I felt like a normal husband, like the people you see on TV” (PAL)	“I knew that I would eventually be murdered or end up in the trunk of a rival’s car”. (DF)
“I grew up in a family of drug traffickers so selling drugs was part of my life since I was a child” (RIG, BIG)	This thing [drugs] is like a curse, it’s like an evil pact because the more you have the more you want: the more you want, the deeper you fall” (EA)	“I never liked working, I did not like doing anything, actually, I did not know how work in anything” (PIO, DAV, PEQ, BIG, PAL, TIG, MEM)		“When I joined the cartel, they told us, once you are in you run the risk to die every day of your life, so I was ready to die. (DIO)
“When I was a boy I wanted to be the best delinquent, the most famous and the richest” (RIG, DAV, PT, CR, DIO)	“I started with the easy access drugs, marijuana, thinner and glue. Every day after school my friends and I would gather in an abandoned house and get stoned. I started with the hard drugs [crack and heroine] when I joined the cartel” (CHU)	“Because of that [growing up in the mountains] harvesting and selling marijuana was normal” (MEM)		“I never thought about the consequences, why would I? If they arrested me it would be the same [drug cartels still operate within and control jails], if they killed me that was ok, even better, I would stop suffering” (JAI)
“[As a boy] You are alone, your world is your neighbourhood and your family, if you have one” (PIO, YUC, PAL, PON, CR, DAV)	“I was one of the oldest in the gang. So, I used to teach the youngest how to sell newspapers in the street, how to do graffiti and all the stuff we used to do in the gang. We also helped them with some money and we gave them drugs for free [...]”. (CR)	“I started washing cars in a car wash, but they fired me because they found out I did drugs...then I found a job washing cars for narcos and that is how I met them” (PEQ)		“In this job, there are no holidays, no Christmas, no birthday parties” (FC, DF, CAN, DIO, RIG)

<p>"All I remember is that I was afraid of my Dad and the gang members (pandilleros). They were obviously taller and stronger than me. They used to laugh at me and I used to cry out of anger and frustration and promised myself that once I was big enough I would beat them up so hard that they would beg for mercy" (PT, YUC, JAI, PON, CR)</p>	<p>"The gang meant the world to us [...] It was like our own family. We would fight to death in order to defend our turf from other gangs." (PON)</p>	<p>"I used to like it [working in the streets] because I started to earn money, I used to bring fifty to one hundred pesos to my home and I used to think: I do not need my father, I can work, and I can give money to my mother, I started to gain independence" (DAV)</p>	<p>To us drugs meant power. We had something people wanted. I used to pay for my hair cut with marijuana ... I wanted to pay everything with Marijuana (YUC)</p>
<p>As a kid you don't know what you are doing but the oldest boys in the gang tell you that you will feel better if you do it [smoke marijuana] and it was true. We did feel happier, at least for a moment" (PAL)</p>	<p>"It is normal ...when you see so many of your peers dying, in a fight, from an overdose, shot death by the police or even by suicide, you just think this also your future" (TIG)</p>		<p>"I got out from that cartel because they did not pay me enough and I went to work for the contrary one" (YUC)</p>
<p>"In my home town we were used to see narcos walking in the streets. It was easy to recognised them because they all show off their money. They wear expensive clothes, gold chains and they drive the most expensive trucks. They also carry big guns, and that was I admired the most. I also wanted to carry guns. I wanted to be feared and respected" (JAI)</p>	<p>[...] it is a curse [drugs] because it is impossible for a man working in drug trafficking not to consume his own product [...]. It is true that you earn a lot of money but what nobody knows is that you do not see that money because you spend it all in addictions, drugs, women, alcohol, gambling (PIO)</p>		<p>"I knew this would happened [being in jail] but I was not prepared for it. But once it happened I did overcome my fear and became prouder of myself because I was in jail" (DIO)</p>
	<p>It was not unusual for us...when you see so many of your peers dying, in a fight, from an overdose, shot to death by the police or through suicide, you just think this is also your future" (TIG)</p>		<p>"if I had nothing to lose and they [drug cartels] were offering that much money I thought that it was ok, why not? My main objective was to enjoy the present and they offered me that possibility" (DF)</p>
			<p>"We used to tell the boys do you want to be a 'nobody'? In this world without money you are nobody" (CAN)</p>

4.3.1 The twofold articulation of poverty: lack of basic needs vs relative deprivation

The most salient feature of the narco discourse regarding poverty is that it is articulated in different ways depending on the subject position from which the narco subject speaks. From the child subject position, the narco discourse articulates poverty in terms of lack of basic needs, such as food and shelter: “we lived in a very small wooden house, no running water, no cement floor, more than eight people sleeping in the same room” (Difos). From this position, poverty is linked to ‘starving’. As Piochas said: “I and my siblings starved during our childhood, we would spend entire days without eating”. It is also attached to addictions: “I grew up in a very poor neighbourhood full of drug addicts and alcoholics” (Pato). However, from the subject positions of workers, narcos and consumers, poverty is defined in terms of relative deprivation as defined in the introduction of this chapter (Stiles et al., 2000). That is, poverty is articulated as the lack of material objects, such as TVs, cars or brand name clothes, that the narco subject did not have but considered he was entitled to have: “I compared myself against my neighbours and other people I saw. They had nice cars, good houses, big TVs” (Inmaculado). Chito said: “I saw all the things that people had and I thought to myself: why do they have those things and I don’t?”. The narco discourse thus shifts back and forth from conceptions of poverty in terms of a lack of basic needs and poverty defined as relative deprivation.

The articulation of poverty in terms of basic needs is informed by the three main presuppositions discussed in section 4.1: poverty is normal, associated to drug addictions and means that poor people have no future. From the gang member position, drugs are linked to poverty as the ‘only’ way to cope with and forget the adverse conditions of poverty: “Doing drugs is what we did to forget about problems. It was the only way we had to feel happy” (Pitufo). I address the assumption that poor men are doomed to cope with addictions and violence in chapter 6.

Poverty is also linked to different types of violence and with self-deprecating feelings. For instance, domestic violence is constructed as a condition inherent to poverty: “I never questioned why my Dad beat us. I thought it was normal because all my friends in the neighbourhood were beaten too” (Chito). As discussed above, gang violence is also normalised and articulated as ‘necessary’ in order to survive in poor neighbourhoods: “In this world [poverty], you have to engage in violence if you want to remain alive” (Ponciano). Experiences of domestic violence and gang violence are, in turn, associated with feelings of suffering, frustration and hopelessness, which leads to the idea that poor people’s lives are worthless: “You don’t care about anything, not even your life because you have nothing. There is no tomorrow for us” (Palomo). Poverty is thus constructed as a condition that makes poor people inherently different from other social groups: “I knew I would be never one of them [rich people] because I was, and I will always be poor, it is like a tattoo, you cannot take it away” (Wilson). In doing so, the narco discourse naturalises power relationships between the rich and the poor and justifies drug addictions and violence in poor neighbourhoods (see chapter 6).

Conversely, from the worker and drug trafficker subject positions, the narco discourse constructs a free subject who has the agency to decide over his destiny, and who, despite coming from poor or extremely poor backgrounds, believes he is entitled to have the luxuries that rich people have. From these positions, the articulation of poverty relates to needs and aspirations produced by the neoliberal discourses. That is, there is a big gap between what the narco subject is able to obtain through legal means and his short-term goals. There is no middle ground, there are no references of access to a middle-class position but rather aspirations to have the expensive goods rich people have: “I did not like tacky clothes, I liked good brands, Levi’s, Nike, gold necklaces, luiguiton [sic], the one with the L and the V” (Jaime). In this quote, there is no reference to basic needs and not even to commodities that would allow the narco subject to have a better quality of life such as living in a less dangerous neighbourhood. This is an example of how the narco subject appropriates the logic and the demands of the consumerist culture which creates ‘needs’, such as brand clothes, and consumerism as the means to achieve happiness and pleasure (Žižek, 2005). In this manner, the narco subject reaffirms himself as part of the consumerist culture which allows him to exist and to be, even if flimsily, equal to the others.

The construction of poverty in terms of relative deprivation, is one of the main differences between how poverty is conceived by narcos and how it is interpreted in the literature. The narco discourse does not evoke lack of opportunities, extreme poverty or unemployment as the main reasons to engage in DTV. Instead, the narco discourse portrays narcos’ engagement in drug trafficking as a rational choice made by free agents. As discussed in chapter 1, mainstream approaches claim that because of the neoliberal reforms implemented in Mexico since the end of the 80s, young poor men have been pushed to work for drug cartels, as their ‘only’ alternative to survive (Freeman and Sierra, 2005; Maldonado-Aranda, 2012; Marez, 2004). There is, in fact, strong evidence that shows that farmers in Mexico have been seriously affected by NAFTA and that farmers have been forced to work for drug cartels in some regions (Laurell, 2015; Maldonado-Aranda, 2012). However, the narco discourse constructs narcos’ engagement in drug trafficking in a different way. The narco discourse explains narcos’ involvement in drug trafficking as their ‘only way to maximise their present’ in opposition to their ‘only way to survive’ as most of the literature suggests. I will return to this point in chapter 7 when I discuss how poverty, gender and violence discursively enable practices of DTV.

In sum, the narco discourse articulates poverty in two opposing ways depending on the subject position the narco subject speaks from. On the one hand, poverty is articulated in terms of lack of basic needs when he speaks from the child subject position. On the other hand, from the worker, consumer or narco subject positions, the narco subject is conceived a free agent whose basic needs are covered but whose consumerist needs are not. The narco discourse draws on the latter to explain narcos involvement in DTV which is referred as ‘the easy life’.

4.3.2 The articulation of 'la vida fácil' [the easy life]

Narcos recurrently use the phrase '*la vida fácil*' [the easy life] to refer to working in drug trafficking or any other illicit activity. The idea of drug trafficking as an 'easy life' raises at least two questions. First, why would they describe a job that implied, in varying degrees, being hunted by the military and the police, being in jail, being tortured and ultimately being killed, as 'easy'? And: if that is the 'easy life', what is the 'hard' life? I suggest that the answer to those questions is grounded in the presuppositions discussed earlier: poverty is natural, it inevitably leads to gangs and drug addictions which means that poor boys have no future.

The 'easy life' is a trope that evokes a quick, hedonist and disposable life. The 'easy life' is a logic that draws on the assumption that poor people have 'nothing to lose' because they 'have no future'. Therefore, since the future is uncertain, the narco discourse produces the idea that the 'only' alternative to cope with poverty is maximising the present through consumerism: "I am not taking anything to my grave and if they catch me, they will take everything away. My goal was to live every day as if was the last. I did not pinch pennies when it came to enjoy myself: [I bought] the best trucks, the best wines [and had] the most beautiful women" (Jaime). In line with the principles of neoliberalism, having money is portrayed by the narco discourse as an end on its own: "The point was to have lots of money!" (Piochas). Accordingly, success is measured by wealth and the possession of material objects. This conception of individual success does not come as a surprise in a money-oriented society such as Mexico (Vilalta, 2012). In this sense, the narco discourse confirms that one of the main appeals of drug trafficking is the illusion that, by engaging in the same practices of the neoliberal society, the narco subject would be recognised by the society that marginalises him. As Canastas explained, when he recruited people to work for him asked them "do you want to be a nobody? In this world without money you are nobody". Similarly, Bidegaray explained: "when I bought things, I felt good, people treated me nicely".

Drawing on the 'easy life' logic, the narco discourse understands happiness as momentary. It recognises that the flip side of the 'easy life' is either 'death' or 'jail'. As Difos put it, "it is either jail or ending up in the trunk of a rival's car". The 'easy life', therefore, entails an early death which does not leave room for plans in the long run (e.g. having a family life, saving money). Consequently, the narco discourse produces the idea that money must be spent as quickly as possible because in the business of drug trafficking: "one day you are in a nice restaurant, surrounded by beautiful women and important people, but the next day you may wake up in a dungeon" (Ponciano).

The 'easy life' trope also evokes a life that is already familiar to narcos and that does not pose major additional threats to their lives than they ones they already had. It draws on narcos' previous experiences with drugs, gangs and other practices associated with suffering. Narcos grew up in violent neighbourhoods and most of them suffered from domestic violence. As I will discuss in chapter 6, as gang members, narcos participated in street violence and criminal activities on a regular basis. Thus, risking their lives and their freedom for large sums of money is not seen as problematic: "I never thought about the consequences. Why would I? If they arrested me it would be the same [because] drug cartels still operate within and control jails, if they killed me that was ok,

even better, I would stop suffering” (Jaime). As for risking narcos’ lives, the reasoning goes back to the presupposition that life is disposable and there is no future, consequently: “when your life is lost already, and they offer you the money you cannot make through other means, drug trafficking is a good bet” (Tigre). This contrasting logic in the narco discourse is recurrently evoked. On the one hand, the narco subject is mainly conceived in self-devaluating terms: “I was nobody”, “who would care about a drug addict?”, “I was nothing”. However, grounded on the idea that there is ‘nothing to lose’ and the conception of death as a ‘relief’; the narco subject is indirectly empowered by the strength of those who have no fear of dying.

Although the narco discourse does not explicitly refer to the ‘hard life’, there are two main ideas that enable us to imply what the narco subject sees as the hard life. First, a hard life means working within the legal market, which means earning little money for long shifts of work: “working as a builder did not pay off. You spent the whole day under the sun for the minimum wage. With that money I could not even pay for my family’s daily food... and I almost broke my back” (Dávila). In contrast, the ‘easy life’ is easy because there are no educational requirements to have a job within drug trafficking. It is easy because you get money as quickly as you get the job. The hard life means working long shifts for a minimum wage which hardly covers workers’ basic needs, such as food, health and housing (Reyes-Zaga, 2013). Second, the hard life also means enduring drug addictions which offset the economic benefits of the easy life: “All the money that I had in my hands, no matter how much, I spent it on drugs” (Piochas). Similarly, Davos explained: “I lost a lot of weight. I was very skinny. I had money to buy whatever I wanted. At some point, I had money to buy a house in an expensive neighbourhood if I wanted but I preferred to spend it all on drugs”.

The implications of the hard life, in addition to the presuppositions of poverty as something natural, which leads to gang violence and drug addiction, and the assumption that poor boys have no future, allow us to have a better grasp of the logic of the ‘easy life’. The narco discourse assumes that living under poor conditions already exposes narcos to some of the risks that the easy life entails (i.e. risking their freedom and their lives). Consequently, there is no substantial difference between the easy and the hard life in terms of the risks they pose in at least two ways.

First, living in a poor neighbourhood already implied a high risk of being physically injured and potentially killed. Second, as members of street gangs, narcos already ran the risk of going to prison as the assumption is that all gangs, without exceptions, engage in criminal activities. Therefore, these assumptions inform the idea that there is very little to lose if they engage in drug trafficking, which in return, would provide them with the resources to maximise the present and enjoy the pleasures of the easy life, even if it is just temporarily.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an examination of the first discursive building block of the narco discourse which is central to the understanding of how the narco discourse enables practices of DTV. Through a discourse theoretic approach, I analysed how poverty is constructed in the narco discourse. In order to make sense of this construction, I began by presenting the three main presuppositions, the background knowledge, that is implied in the narco discourse regarding poverty. I argued that there are three main assumptions in the narco discourse. First, it is taken for granted that poverty is 'natural' which, in turn, reproduces traditional conceptions of poverty which portray the poor as inherently different from other social groups. In doing so, the narco discourse normalises power relations between 'rich' and 'poor' people. Second, the narco discourse assumes that poor children will 'inevitably' become drug addicts and join street gangs. Consequently, the third presupposition is that poor boys have 'no future' which leads to the belief that they have little or 'nothing to lose'

The narco discourse constructs poverty in two ways depending on the subject position from which the narco subject speaks. On the one hand, from the child subject position, poverty is conceived as the lack of basic needs such as food, shelter and health. On the other hand, when the narco subject speaks from other subject positions such as informal worker or as a consumer, poverty is constructed as relative deprivation. That is, poverty is understood as perceptions of inequality *relative* to particular groups rather than as a lack of basic needs. In this sense, relative deprivation is associated more to feelings of envy or injustice perceived by those who self-identified as deprived. This conception produces the idea that the 'only' way to enjoy a life with 'no future' is through: a) 'having lots of money', b) maximising the present, c) enjoying the present through practices of consumerism, particularly doing drugs amongst other pleasures.

In this way, the logic of the 'easy life', i.e. working in the drug trafficking business, emerges as the *only* way to earn the money that narcos *want*, in order to sustain their pleasures, rather than as the 'only' way to survive, as most of the studies claim. The easy life can be understood as a quick, hedonistic and a disposable life in opposition to a long-suffering hard life. Ultimately, because the assumption in the narco discourse is that poor people have no future and have nothing to lose, happiness is associated with the easy money that is only available through drug trafficking. The logic of the 'easy life' is thus one of the key constructions that help us to make sense of how drug trafficking and DTV are conceived as a viable and appealing 'business' as I discuss in chapter 7.

In the next chapter I focus on the examination of gender which the second discursive building block of the narco discourse. I argue that construction of gender in the narco discourse draws on traditional discourse on gender, in particular on values stemming from the culture of machismo that still pervades in Mexican society.

CHAPTER 5 THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER: THE LOGIC OF THE 'TRUE MAN'

"I was brought up with the idea that a *true man* who is a man is not a faggot: a man does not hug or kiss another man." (Pato)

"Machismo is everything to us, there is no other option for us. There is no other logic for us. We are born and raised in this culture." (Piochas)

5 Introduction

In this chapter I examine how gender is constructed in the narco discourse. Gender is understood as the social construction of men's and women's identities which establishes and mediates relations among them (Goertz and Mazur, 2008: 1). In so doing, gender relations produce and reproduce differences and inequalities between men and women. Such differences vary depending on historical and socio-economic contexts and significant nuances occur when other sources of identity such as class and race⁶ are acknowledged within analysis (Jiménez-Guzmán, 2007; Hooper, 2001). The central argument of this chapter is that the narco discourse is heavily influenced by gendered discourses stemming from the culture of *machismo* in Mexico. Also, and of equal importance, the narco discourse acknowledges that the demands of machismo are socially constructed and recognises that men are not born being brave, violent, thoughtless or emotionless.

Machismo is a social construct that establishes relationships based on a set of rigid dichotomies (feminine and masculine) privileging 'manly' behaviours usually attributed to the figure of the 'macho' man. This figure embodies archetypal male attitudes that emphasise the 'cult of virility', which is understood as exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence (Stevens, 1965: 848). *Machismo* also entails ideological and behavioural traits which privilege "... hyper masculine aspects of male orientations [such as] fearlessness, control, dominance, sexual prowess and aggression..." (Quintero and Estrada, 1998: 149-150). These characteristics, however, are not assumed to be essential to men.

The chapter is organised following a similar logic as the previous chapter. I start by discussing the background beliefs in relation to gender which inform the narco subject's reality. Next, I examine the predicates and practices linked to men and women in narco discourse. Finally, I identify what type of identities are produced in the narco discourse through the textual mechanism of subject positioning.

5.1 Presuppositions: What does the narco subject take for granted about gender?

There are five underlying presuppositions which inform the construction of gender in the narco discourse. The first presupposition is that men and women are essentially different. The second is the assumption that only

⁶ As participants of this research did not identify themselves as part of any ethnic group and because I did not identify race or ethnicity to play a role in the narco discourse, I do not integrate this source of identity.

men are can hold positions of authority. The third presupposition is that men can be emotionally vulnerable. The fourth presupposition is that men are and *should* be heterosexual. Finally, the narco discourse takes for granted that the neighbourhood [el barrio] is the only public space available to poor men.

5.1.1 Men and women are *essentially* different

The most salient feature of the narco discourse regarding gender is that women's identities are essentialised whereas men's identities are recognised as socially constructed. That is, women's identities and relationships with the world are assumed to be fixed traits mirroring traditional gender discourses embedded in the Mexican society (see Frías-Martínez, 2008). However, men's identities and relationships with the world are articulated as more complex and flexible. For example, the female identity is constructed as 'vulnerable' and 'naïve': "women are not like men. They are not as evil as us. They are vulnerable, they are naïve, they believe everything that men say" (Inmaculado). The male identity, in contrast, is not essentialised. Men are not essentially brave, though or violent. In this sense, the narco discourse recognises that male identities are, indeed, a social construction. Women are assumed to be born *being* 'vulnerable' and 'naïve'. I discuss this further in this section. Conversely, men are assumed to *learn* to be 'brave', 'tough' or 'violent'.

In this regard, the narco discourse reproduces traditional patriarchal stereotypes of women and gender relations. It is inconceivable that women behave or think in the same way as men: "women are naïve and weak, that is why men should protect them. [Because of that] they are used by men in drug trafficking" (Pato). The phrase 'that is why men should protect them' not only represents women as child-like subjects but also positions men as superior to women by implying the moral duty of men to 'protect' vulnerable and naïve women: "Men are proud...women are emotional" (Canastas). Following this logic, Pato explained the main difference between men and women as he saw it: "[men] have more possibilities, women are just too weak and naïve.". In this way, the narco discourse takes for granted that men are rational, strong and independent subjects while women who are represented as emotional, vulnerable and dependent subjects.

Unsurprisingly, women's identities are constructed revolving around their roles as wives and mothers. The narco discourse, thus reproduces the Mexican stereotype that a woman's main identity is as a mother: "raising a family is a woman's job. Women are born to have children. Men are not. Men just want to have fun" (Pancho). Accordingly, the narco discourse assumes that the private space belongs to women and young children whereas the public sphere belongs to older boys and adult men: "The women's world is their homes" (Balente). Eduardo said: "We (men) are the ones who have to go out and risk our lives". Rorro summarises this logic: "This is the way it works: women stay at home, clean the house, take care of the children and do women's stuff". In this way, private spaces, such as home, are constructed as essentially female whereas public spaces, such as 'the streets' are constructed as the space reserved for men.

5.1.2 Only men can hold positions of authority

The second presupposition in relation to gender relations is that only men can hold positions of authority, in particular, in the context of the family. Drawing on patriarchal discourses, the figure of the father is constructed as the legitimate head of the family, which endorses the family as the “the site of male power and female submission” (Collier, 1998: 149). As Fausto said: “The head of the family is *obviously* the father. My mother was a good mother, but a boy needs discipline that *only* the father can impose”. Male authority in the narco discourse is thus assumed to be natural and legitimate. Even when men do not comply with the traditional role of being the breadwinners, and even if they are absent, the paternal figure is granted moral authority over the family. This implies that women cannot be considered as the head of the family or hold authority over children, even if they are the main carers of the family: “Although my father was an alcoholic, we knew that he was the boss in the house. My mum, bless her, tried to raise us on her own [but] we needed a father figure” (Jaime). What is more telling in this quote is the expression ‘bless her’, used by Jaime to highlight that his mum’s attempts to raise him and his siblings on her own were inevitably in vain because they needed a *male* authority figure. This also implies a patronising conception which belittles the mother’s work in raising children on her own.

From the assumption that only men can embody authority, specifically in the context of the family, it follows that children without a father will ‘obviously’ misbehave since there is no male authority to impose discipline on them. As Cristian explained: “My grandmother and my mother had to put up with my violent attitude because my father was gone. I did not have a figure of authority”. Similarly, Alan said:

I grew up without a father...my mum and my grandparents were very good to me, but I still needed a father...I think that is why I was so violent, and that is why I started doing drugs so young. It was the same with my friends from the gang, we did not have a father, so we ended up doing bad things

The presupposition that only men can embody authority has been widely studied (Hooper, 2001; Gutman, 2007; Cerbino, 2004; Kimmel, et al., 2005). In criminology studies, for example, there is a large body of literature that associates the absence of the father with young boys’ criminal behaviours (Agoff, Herera, & Castro, 2007). This has implicitly reproduced and validated the patriarchal discourse that the paternal figure is indispensable for the proper upbringing of children:

What is required is ‘constant vigilance and tireless attention’ from the the father, who is understood to be the ‘only really effective restraining presence on young males’. It is in short, through the disciplining, controlling and rendering subject to appropriate paternal authority of boys that no less than the family itself is to be ‘saved’. (Collier, 1998: 131)

This traditional discourse has a particular resonance in the analysis of the narco discourse which endows the figure of the father a key role in the narco subject’s involvement in justifies drug addiction, alcoholism, gang violence and ultimately criminal activities such as DTV. I return to this point in chapter 6 when I discuss how the narco discourse naturalises violence.

5.1.3 Men can be emotionally vulnerable

Another fundamental presupposition in the narco discourse is the idea that men can be emotionally vulnerable. However, men *cannot* show emotions, such as fear or compassion, in public. Emotions are associated with vulnerability which is, in turn, linked to the risk of being injured and even killed. As Pancho said: “you cannot show any sign of fear, they [gang members] are like dogs, they smell fear. If they know you are scared, you are screwed...you can end up dead”. Similarly, Balente explained: “They [the rival gang] cannot see you are vulnerable...To me, the most important thing was to show them I was not a coward because one can respect the guys who fight and lose, but nobody respects the guys who run away”. Cowardice is thus more than a matter of reputation, cowardice in the narco discourse is linked to death: “[my father] taught me to be aggressive and violent. He told me I could not be a coward. He told me I rather see you in jail than dead” (Dionisio).

Drawing on the assumption that a ‘true man’ does not avoid or run away from fights, even if there is little chance of winning, the narco discourse assumes that it is better to lose as a brave man because that will send the message that you are not afraid: “My gang would target the ones who avoided beatings. We knew they were afraid...and fear is the worst thing in our world ...That is why it is good to be the one who starts the fights, so you show that you are not afraid of them” (Rigoletto). The narco discourse, therefore, associates cowardice and vulnerability to risking one’s life. Aggressiveness and violence, on the other hand, are linked to survival: “My father made me fight against older boys. He told me: if you don’t defend yourself, I will hit you. If they [gangs] hit you and I know that you did not fight back, the beating that you didn’t give them I will give it to you. It does not matter that they are stronger than you. If you run away it will be worse” (Pato).

What is noteworthy, is the assumption that men can also embody traditional female traits. Men can cry, men can be afraid and be vulnerable, however, these emotions can only be deployed in private spaces: “When I was drunk, I cried because I felt lonely; I felt very sad and bitter. I would go to my grandmother’s house and I would kneel and hug her. I told her, I am not a bad guy, granny” (Dionisio). Similarly, Paco acknowledges that man’s feelings cannot be exposed in public: “Of course I never showed how sad I was, [but] I cried every night [in the bedroom] thinking about my girlfriend and my baby”. The consequence of showing feelings or emotions in public is increased vulnerability and, as discussed earlier, vulnerability jeopardises survival in the neighbourhood: “of course we were sad and miserable, but we would never let the others see it...If they saw we were afraid or sad, they would take advantage of that and in just one night you would lose your territory” (Rorro). Likewise, Palomo said: “we all knew we were dying inside, but you have to pretend that nothing can hurt you ... In the streets there is no mercy. Nobody would respect you if you are a wimp...so I cried on my own. At home, when nobody would see me”. In this way the narco discourse clearly distinguishes between the social constructed male characteristics that men adopt in order to survive, such as being violent and aggressive, and those characteristics that can only be displayed at home such as being sad or affectionate:

There are so many gangs in the streets that you have to really excel to control your turf, so we made sure they were afraid of us...That is why we had lots of tattoos and baggie clothes like *cholos*. We wanted people to know we were

bad...At home I was a normal son. I would hug my mum and tell her 'I love you'.
But in the streets, I was the worst of all. (Yuca)

As shown in the quotes above, the narco discourse associates men's feelings with private spaces such as the 'bedroom' or the grandmother's house where nobody could see them. Conversely, public spaces, such as the streets, are articulated as the stage where the narco subject *performs* masculinity. I discuss this further section 5.2.1. where I discuss street masculinity.

5.1.4 Men are and *should be* heterosexual

The final presupposition regarding gender in the narco discourse is that men are and *should be* heterosexual. In terms of sexuality, the underlying assumption is that, in contrast to 'naïve' and 'emotional' women, men are like animals who are driven by their instincts. As Jaime said: "Men are like dogs. We only care about sex. That is the reality". This 'reality', in fact, is not exclusive to the narco discourse as this belief is one of the most iconic ideas in traditional discourses of gender. As Collier points out, men all over the world have benefited from this essentialised view, men have traditionally been considered barbarians who "are innately brutish driven by sexual imperatives" (1998: 129). Through this logic, the narco discourse produces a male subject who is incapable of resisting his sexual drive and thereby justifies promiscuous behaviour by naturalising men's 'need' to have sexual relationships with several women: "I did love my wife and I respected her as if she was my mother. She was a good woman. But...I still had other girls in my life. But those were only for sex." (Difos). Similarly, Paco said: "I was obviously unfaithful because I had to travel a lot ... and a man has needs".

Men's heterosexuality is the only aspect of men's identity that the narco discourse essentialise. In fact, men's sexual performance is assumed to be one of the most important aspects defining what how 'macho' a man is. As Jaime said: "I was an exceptional lover. I was, as people say in the streets, a good macho...I liked pleasing my women". Establishing and preserving a good reputation as a good lover is, therefore, of paramount importance. In this sense, the use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine and some pills, is justified in order to enhance sexual performance: "I started to do cocaine because one of my girls told me that it was for having more pleasurable sex, so I did it because a man has a reputation to keep" (Piochas). Likewise, Memo explained: "My friends told me that if I smoked weed, I would be better in bed so that was one more incentive for me to smoke marijuana...I wanted to be the best lover". What is evident is that the underlying purpose of being a good lover is to compete with other men, rather than be popular with women: "I took *tachas* [pills] ...that gave me confidence to be with many girls, and that made feel good because I knew the girls would tell everybody in the neighbourhood". Hence, sexual performance is key to the performance of masculinity which in turn, can be understood as another arena in which men struggle for power with other men. The narco discourse, therefore, reproduces traditional discourses of gender which suggest "masculine identity is embodied in the genitals and is articulated with sexuality and power" (Ramirez in Kimmel et al., 2005: 119)

Any deviation from the heterosexual relationships is articulated as abnormal in the narco discourse. Homosexuality is conceived to be shameful and as an insult to a man's reputation. As Memo said:

Since childhood we would consider homosexuals to be the worst of all. Nobody wanted to be associated with them. That is why we strived so hard to let people know that we were not faggots by being promiscuous and aggressive. You know ... all those things that define a man

The narco discourse associates homosexuals to female behaviours and attitudes. For example, Cristian said: "I was a professional hair stylist. In general, people would not believe that a gang man like me, full of tattoos, would have this job because it is usually women or homosexuals who do it". Pato said: "I was brought up with the idea that a true man who is a man is not a faggot: a man does not hug or kiss another man". More significantly, the narco discourse assumes that if men do not engage in violent or aggressive behaviours they would be regarded as homosexuals: "I did not like fighting against other gangs, but I had to do it, otherwise they call you chicken or faggot" (Pequeño).

Masculinities studies suggest that one of the reasons why traditional discourses of gender stigmatise homosexuality is because homosexuals adopt and perform what is conceived as female traits (Kimmel, et al., 2005; Connell, 1995; Viveros-Vigoya, 2001; Gutman, 2007). As the construction of the traditional male identity is principally based on the rejection of female characteristics (Itulua-Abumere, 2013: 43), homosexuality is considered as an aberration since homosexual men are understood to reject their privileged gender and take up the subordinated gender. In the case of the narco discourse, it is expected that men demonstrate their manhood by picking on the less powerful, and homosexuals are, along with women children and old men, positioned as one of these weak groups. In this sense, gender relations are understood to be unequal and the means through which men take advantage of 'weak' 'vulnerable' and 'dependent' women.

5.1.5 The neighbourhood [*el barrio*], is the only public space available for poor men

The neighbourhood [*el barrio*], or the streets [*las calles*] as it is also referred as in the narco discourse, acquires at least three meanings in the narco discourse. First, it is portrayed as the 'only' place available for poor boys and young men. Lamberto, for instance, explains how he ended up in the streets because he could not tolerate domestic violence any more: "I was so fed up with the situation in my house that I looked for some peace in the streets. As a kid, you do not know where to go. The only place for us is the neighbourhood." Rorro even refers to it as his 'home': "The neighbourhood becomes your home, your turf. The only place where you can really be more or less happy". In this way, the neighbourhood is constructed as the poor boys' refuge, as a second and perhaps a better home, and the gang is articulated as their chosen 'family'. As Eduardo comments: "...the streets become our home and the gang members become our family because the home that is supposed to be our home is hell, and the family who is supposed to be family is evil." Palomo portrays the gang as his 'only source of affection': "The gang was like my family. My mates [*compas*] from the gang would not betray me and it was the only source of affection I had when growing up". Inmaculado associates the gang to the family but more in terms of protection: "...your gang defends you from the ones that want to hurt you, they are like your family".

Similarly, Wilson explains that he felt protected because he was part of a gang: “The gang was like our family, they were older than us and they told us: we will take care of you, if anybody tries to hurt you, we will defend you”.

Gangs, however, require its members to engage in violent activities even if they do not want to participate. In this sense, gangs are portrayed as an unavoidable alliance for poor boys and young men. As Kevin explains: “There is no option, you have to join a gang if you want to survive. Your gang not only teaches you how to fight, it will also defend you and even die for you if necessary. The only problem is that they expect the same from you”. Piochas said: “That [gangs] is what poor children and young boys do, it is the only way to survive street violence”. Chufo narrates that he joined the gang in the spirit of resignation: “When I moved to a new neighbourhood, I had to join the gang. Every time I went to the shop to buy groceries, they robbed my money and threatened me with a knife. So, I decided to join them because I thought that if I did not, they would carry on stealing and beating me up. And it was ok, once you are part of them.”

The second meaning of the neighbourhood is constructed as men’s territory. The narco discourse portrays the neighbourhood the disfranchised men’s world, there is nothing and nobody beyond those borders. As Piochas said: “[as a poor boy] You are alone, your world is your neighbourhood...”. Abandoned houses, streams, the train tracks and every corner of every street are conceived as part of a gang’s territory, which must be defended from other men (gangs) in neighbouring areas. This is a key construction in the narco discourse that justifies narcos’ engagement in gang violence. In this regard, Baird makes an interesting analogy which has resonance in the narco discourse: “...four blocks...become the youth’s nation state” (2012: 33). The meaning of the neighbourhood constructed in the narco discourse can certainly be compared as poor men’s ‘nation state’.

Accordingly, children and young men are articulated as soldiers whose self-assigned mission is defending the neighbourhood’s borders from potential invaders. Difos, for example, explained that the gang has to defend their territory from outsiders and if possible, to control other neighbourhoods, by force where necessary: “We [the gang] wanted respect, we did not want the other gangs to enter our neighbourhood. We wanted them to be afraid of us. We wanted control over their territory. There were some neighbourhoods that would surrender and join our gang but there were others that did not want to give up their turf. On some occasions people were killed with ice picks and even with guns”.

Finally, the neighbourhood means identity in the narco discourse. Before becoming narcos, participants self-identified as gang members [*pandilleros*] above other identities such as workers, students or fathers. For example, Piochas narrates that when he was young: “I would introduce myself as pit bull because our gang was called the crazy pit bulls”. Chufo said: “I felt proud of being part of my gang. I even got a tattoo with our name: ‘los chuchos’”. Inmaculado explained that because of the gang he felt: “...part of a group. I did not go to school, as I was extremely poor. The gang for me was everything, my family, my support, it was a part of myself”. Understood in this light, one can understand how meaningful the neighbourhood is in the narco discourse and why some narcos were even willing to give their lives for it. As Ponciano stated: “We would fight to the death in order to defend our turf from other gangs”. The violent implications of gangs are addressed in chapter 6.

5.2 Subject positioning: The gender hierarchy in the narco discourse

Gender works in a similar way to poverty in the narco discourse in that it also positions boys, girls, men and women in a hierarchical arrangement by assigning them different degrees of agency. For example, girls are implicitly positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy as they embody the physical (their sexualised bodies) and emotional vulnerability of children that would make them more susceptible to young boys and men's sexual attacks. By contrast, although boys are considered weak and vulnerable during early childhood, they are positioned higher in the hierarchy as soon as they start working or, for that matter, when they are not economically dependent. As explained in chapter 4, working children are considered to be more independent. This independency, in turn, makes them more masculine. As Pato explained: "I started working when I was five years old...at that age I was already a man, like many other kids my age in the neighbourhood". In this sense, gender in the narco discourse follows a straightforward logic by which subjects are positioned in a gender hierarchy according to the perspective of street masculinity. That is, street masculinity is the centre from which other gendered identities flow. Therefore, having street masculinity as the centre of identity construction, there are four guiding subject positions related to gender: a) son, b) mother, c) wife, d) women as sexual objects. The last two subject positions are addressed in the same section because the logic and the implications their positioning is very similar.

5.2.1 Son

This subject position is situated at the bottom of the gender hierarchy since they are assigned a low degree of agency *vis-à-vis* older boys and adult men. The highest vulnerability from the son subject position is constructed in relation to the 'father': "I was so afraid of my dad that I used to pee myself when he arrived drunk. He slammed the door, yelled at everybody and started hitting people, including my mother" (Rorro). Pato also narrates how he was a victim of his father's violent behaviour: "My dad hated me. He told me that because of me he had to get married to my mum...he hit me so hard that I ended up in the hospital three times". The son's vulnerability lies on the son's impossibility to defend their mothers from their own fathers: "My dad beat my mum really bad, he got home very drunk and high. I saw how he hit my mother and I felt bad because I was not able to help her because I was too short. He was so much stronger than us...I started to feel very frustrated and full of anger" (Lamberto). The same logic is evoked by Piochas: "I saw how my mum cried because of him, I started to get very frustrated. I felt desperate because I was too weak and short to fight against my dad. I was just too little". The confrontational positioning between 'son' and 'father' produce a particular state of affairs in the narco discourse with significant implications. Building up on the presupposition that the father is the only figure of authority, coupled with domestic violence, the narco discourse justifies the narco subject engagement in violent practices, drug addiction and ultimately in DTV: "I wanted people to respect me... but mostly my father...that is why I got into *el narco*. I wanted to show him how powerful I was and to make him pay for making me and siblings suffer" (Kevin). From this confrontation emerges a key element in the narco discourse, the idea of killing the father. I discuss this further in chapter 6.

5.2.2 Mother

Women's subject positions revolve around their relationships with men and children. In the narco discourse women are positioned as mothers, wives or sex objects. As expected, the 'mother' is assigned a low degree of agency. In general terms the subject position of the mother is conceived as a victim of the 'father'. In this regard, what makes her as vulnerable as the 'son' to the 'father' is her physical weakness: "my Mum could not defend against my dad. He was a very strong man and with a very bad temper...so she tried not to piss him off, but her attempts were in vain because he would hit her anyway" (Dionisio). Likewise, Difos said: "I thought it was unfair that my stepfather beat my mum up as if she was a man. He was very violent and punched her in the face with a closed fist as if he was fighting against another man". What is noticeable is that the domestic violence is condemned when is perpetrated by the father but accepted and almost justified when is the mother who engages in domestic violence. For example, Yuca said: "my parents used to beat me and my brothers a lot. They used to hit us with anything they found, tubes, cables, belts, rocks...anything". However, despite being abused by both parents, Yuca was only resentful of his father because his mother was "...under a lot of pressure, she was probably so frustrated that she channelled all that frustration on us ...my father was a strong man, so I knew I had to wait to grow up to take revenge. I was waiting to grow up, so I could kill him". In this case, female domestic violence is constructed as a sign of emotional outburst such as desperation and frustration, as opposed to a sign of physical strength or even as power over the children as male domestic violence is portrayed in the narco discourse.

Drawing on the construction of women as dependent, docile and naïve, the narco discourse positions the 'mother' at almost the same level of 'son' even if she engages in domestic violence in a similar way as the 'father' does. Female domestic violence is constructed and justified either as the result of women's suffering of verbal and physical abuse by their partners or as their way to educate children. That is the case of Pancho, who justifies his mother's violent behaviour because she was also a victim of domestic violence herself and because of her frustration: "[she] released her anger against us and she looked for any excuse to hit us". Rigoletto explained that because her mother suffered domestic violence, she gave vent to her anger with him: "[she] burned my hands, hit me with cables, and tied me to the bed like an animal". However, he does not judge her because she was also suffering from domestic violence herself: "She was also a victim of my father. I don't judge her". In this way, the mother subject position is endowed with a low level of agency and, even though female domestic violence is acknowledged, such violence is constructed as an emotional reaction such as desperation and frustration. Conversely, male domestic violence is constructed as a sign of authority and domination.

It is worth noting that this conception of female violence is not unique to the narco discourse, or, for that matter, exclusive to traditional discourses of gender. As Carney et al. (2007) indicate, women's victimhood is so sedimented that few scholars have challenged this stereotype. However, there are significant empirical studies that suggest that

Contrary to early socio-political explanations, which proposed that women's use of aggression reflected primarily, or solely, self-defence strategies in response to

male initiated abuse, women are known to commit unilateral abuse... Furthermore, female domestic violence offenders share many of the same characteristics as male offenders, including similar motives and psycho-social characteristics (prior aggression, substance use, personality disturbance, etc.). Research comparing familial risk factors for intimate abuse also indicates greater similarities than differences for men and women who use abuse in relationships (e.g. witnessing interparental abuse, physical abuse by a caregiver) (Carney et al., 2007: 113-114).

Overall, in their roles as mothers, women are depicted as self-sacrificing in order to provide for their children: “my mum was a prostitute...she sacrificed a lot for us. She had to feed four children” (Ponciano). And even submissive: “my mum was a saint. She put up with my dad’s infidelity, she would help him undress when he was too drunk to do it himself. After all the bad things he did to us she told us that we had to respect him because he was our father and that she had to respect him as well because he was her husband before the eyes of God” (Chufu).

5.2.3 Wife and sexual objects

The wife is positioned almost at the bottom, just above children and in parallel to the mother, in the gender hierarchy. Like the subject position of the mother, the wife is mainly conceived as dependent of the husband. In their roles as wives, women are portrayed to be ‘docile’ and passive companions to men: “my wife did everything I said. She never complained or questioned my authority. She was a very docile woman” (Inmaculado). Similarly, Paco said: “she was always there for me. She even moved from her home town to be near to me when they moved me to another prison”.

Women who are not mothers, wives or sisters are portrayed as potential sexual objects. As Canastas said: “men only respect their mothers, sisters and wives the rest are a target for men.” This is perhaps the gender construction that is deeply rooted not only on traditional gender discourses but more significantly, on an understanding of women as merchandise: “I was a pimp... women were a product to me. I recruited them according to what market was asking for: tall, skinny, blond, red heads...it was a business...” (Anonymous). In relation to the role of women in the drug trafficking business, women serve as a ‘bait’ to attract new male recruits or as way to distract or defeat the enemy. As Kevin said: “We used young beautiful women to lure young boys to us. A boy will never resist a pretty girl, with a good car and with money. It was obvious that they would fall into the trap. And they did. They got in the car with the girl and they brought them to us” (Canastas). Women’s agency is, therefore, attributed to their beauty and their sexualised bodies which is used by men to lure other men. As Pato explicitly said: “In drug trafficking the role of women is to lure men. [In fact] it was a woman who made me worship the holy death. The comandante hired her to make me fall into the trap”. Also, in the context of the gang warfare, Chufu said: “[My girlfriend] lived in the neighbourhood next to ours so she was probably a trap from them [another gang]. I had to break up with her because my friends said she was a Trojan horse”.

Once again, the conception of women as victims, dependent subjects or sexual object, does not come as a surprise in a country where machismo is deeply rooted⁷. In an analysis of how gender is represented in the news media in Mexico, Magrath Walker, observed that even the newspapers that are considered as progressive, reproduce traditional stereotypes about women. For example, in an article reporting on women who serve as mules to smuggle drugs into the U.S.A, they are “referenced throughout as docile homemakers who have been duped into criminal activity. Once detained, they are not portrayed as malicious criminals, but as victims acted upon by men.” (2005: 104).

There is only one reference in the narco discourse about women in a different subject position. Women are positioned as *sicarias* [hit-women] working in the drug trafficking business. However, even when positioned as a murderer, women are linked to their roles as self-sacrificing mothers: “I worked with sicarias. They would do the same as the men, they kidnapped and killed people too...but of course these women got into the business because they were in love or because they needed the money to sustain their families” (Tigre). Again, even when women engage in the same criminal and violent activities as men do; the narco discourse rules out the possibility that *sicarias* engaged in practices of DTV for the *same* reasons as *sicarios*. In this regard, the underlying presupposition that women cannot behave or think like men is very clear.

5.3 Predication: How does the narco discourse construct masculinity and femininity?

In this section, I discuss how gender and gender identities are constructed through predication analysis. This helps us to understand how the narco discourse constructs gender relations and how female and male subjects are allowed or expected to behave.

Table 5 provides a summary of the predicates and practices that I have identified as being linked to men and to women in the narco discourse. For space reasons and given that the full content of the testimonials is not as directly relevant for my analysis as it was in the previous chapter, the predication table does not contain full quotes from the interviews. However, what is of greatest relevance to my analysis is the identification of the most frequent verbs and adjectives linked to men and women in the narco discourse. Therefore, table 5 is divided into six categories that correspond to characteristics attributed to men and women in relation to: a) body, b) emotions, c) behaviour, d) sex, e) morality and f) ideal qualities.

Table 5 Predicates and practices constituting gender identities in the narco discourse

Predicates and practices regarding:	A man:	A woman:
Body	-Is strong -Is tall	-Is weak -Is delicate

⁷ For a detailed discussion of contemporary machismo in Mexico see Valencia (2015).

Emotions	-Is proud -Is afraid of other men -Is rational -Only shows feelings in private -Cries in private	-Is vulnerable -Is emotional -Is naïve -Is irrational -Is romantic
Behaviour	-Is aggressive and violent in order to survive -Engages in fights -Controls women and weaker men - Is a heavy drinker -Can be a drug addict - Is independent from women but dependent on drugs and/or alcohol	-Is docile -Is obedient -Is dependant -Is vain -Is shallow
Sex	-Is heterosexual -Is promiscuous -Is seductive	-Is heterosexual -Is faithful to her partner (if not she is considered a whore) -Is subjected to men's desires
Morality	-Must be brave -Is loyal to the gang -Defends the honour of the neighbourhood	-Is morally superior to men (in their roles as mothers and wives)
Ideals	-Has money, but he is not necessarily the breadwinner -'Has' the most beautiful women -Is a responsible father	-Is a dutiful wife -Self-sacrificing mother -In their role as 'lovers' a woman has: a voluptuous body, provocative but submissive attitude to fulfil men's sexual desires.

In the following subsections I discuss how female and male identities are produced in the narco discourse. I start by analysing the construction of femininity. Next, introduce the privileged masculinity in the narco discourse which I refer as street masculinity. Finally, I discuss the logic of the 'true man'.

5.3.1 The construction of femininity

As discussed in section 5.1, the narco discourse essentialises female characteristics (see table 5). Amongst other attributes women are mainly constructed as subjects economically 'dependent on men': "My wife did not like what I was doing but she had no other choice. We had three children and she needed me to sustain them ..." (Difos). Similarly, Barrientos said: "When my girlfriend found out [about drug trafficking] she asked me to leave the house but after a while she asked me to come back. Since then she and her parents knew about it and they did not care because I gave them a lot of money. I was the one providing for the whole family". The narco discourse conceives women as highly dependent and with little or no agency. Women's dependence is also articulated based on the presupposition that women are 'shallow' and 'vain' subjects who are deprived from the agency that the narco discourse endows to men: "Kidnappings was an extra, I did it for my wife because she wanted to have more money... She was very vain" (Pato). Similarly, Lamberto refers to his wife as dependent on him to have what she wanted: "...my wife wanted me to give her the stuff she could not have before. She wanted good clothes, shoes, bags... all the stuff that women like".

Women in these quotes are positioned as greedy but still passive and dependent subjects *vis-à-vis* men, who are articulated as the independent subject who has the means and economic possibilities that women do not have. In addition, women's dependence is emotional: "my mum, like many other women, could not leave my dad because she depended on him. He did not earn that much money, but she said that at least we had a roof above our heads. I told her many times to run away, that I would provide for her, but she did not want to. She was too

in love with my dad I think” (Chito). The construction of women as dependent subjects achieves two purposes. First, it highlights the men are economically independent which is linked to their roles as breadwinners. This, in turn, is associated to the possibility to be the authority in the house. Second, as Viveros-Vigoya (2001) suggests, the ‘true man’ “must present and image of themselves free from social ties, in particular from those with women” (2001:242). Thus, the construction of women as dependent serves to highlight the ‘manly’ qualities of the ‘true man’.

Not surprisingly, women are constructed as essentially vulnerable. Such vulnerability relies on their assumed docility, physical weakness and innocence which makes them subject to men’s sexual desires: “...women were always there for us. They wanted to please us, maybe because they wanted protection because in this business they are very exposed to very bad things. So, they would pay me with sex” (Inmaculado). Jaime said: “I used to beat women up as well. I slapped them, pulled them by the hair. I had the idea that if women don’t do what the man wants [in bed] you can hit her. My girlfriend was very easy going, very docile, so she always forgave me and accepted my desires”. Furthermore, women are conceived as victims of their gender. That is, their vulnerability is constructed drawing on the ‘incontrollable’ men’s sexual drive. As Ponciano said: “We [men] have it easier but a woman in this world [poor neighbourhood] is like a little mouse in a house full of cats”. Drawing on the presupposition that women are essentially different from men, the narco discourse also conceives women as emotional subjects who are driven by their emotions, which makes them easy to ‘manipulate’: “All boys know that girls are very romantic, you just need to tell them what they want to hear ... that is how we manipulate them” (Yuca).

5.3.2 Street Masculinity

In their study of drug users in a US-Mexico border community, Quintero and Estrada define the concept of street masculinity as entailing “...a set of ideologies and behaviours that includes a variety of values and social orientations relating to drug use, aggression and survival strategies” (1998: 151). As the narco discourse displays similar characteristics, I take up Quintero and Estrada’s concept to refer to what I have identified as the privileged masculinity in the narco discourse. This, in turn, is influenced by the ideals of *machismo*, which is the hegemonic masculinity that still prevails in Mexican social and political institutions (Frías-Martínez, 2008; Wright, 2011; Valencia, 2014).

Masculinities are understood as patterns of practices by which men, predominately, and women, engage that position (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). There are several types of masculinities which usually, although not exclusively, are embodied by men. That is, masculinities are not equivalent to men in biological terms as women may adopt masculine behaviours in certain contexts. Therefore, as masculinities are socially constructed, they are susceptible to change over time and space (Coles, 2009). A hegemonic masculinity is a particular set of practices (including role expectations and/or identities) by a group of men that “inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Carrigan et al., 1987: 92). This position of power and wealth, however, is only achievable

through social and cultural institutions and legitimised by what Connell calls the 'patriarchal dividend': "Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command" (1995:82). Hegemonic masculinities are mobilised at a structural level through culture that accepts them as the legitimate paradigm of gender relations and then performed in everyday life.

Street masculinity can be considered a marginalised masculinity which is understood as that that is subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005: 80). This is not to say that street masculinity privileged in the narco discourse does not benefit from the patriarchal dividend. As Connell and Messerschmitt highlight, "[m]ost non-hegemonic masculinities are also complicit masculinities as they receive the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance" (2005: 832). As discussed in section 5.1, the narco discourse does reproduce the patriarchal dividend in the sense that men are conceived as superior to women in general terms. Street masculinity, however, entails certain particularities that differentiate it from other masculinities.

In Table 5, I highlighted in bold the male characteristics which are exclusive to street masculinity. For example, engaging in fights, being extremely aggressive, being violent, engaging in criminal practices, being an alcoholic and a drug addict. Clearly, these practices are not exclusive to the narco subject. What I mean is that these are the characteristics and attributes that are expected from men in the narco discourse. While in other types of masculinities violent behaviour might be conceived as a prerogative of men in especial circumstances, the narco discourse enhances them as essential male behaviours on a regular basis. In this sense the notion of masculinity in the narco discourse is not only produced in contrast to what is understood as femininity but also in contrast to masculinity of middle and upper-class men.

For example, a man in Mexico from a middle or upper-class background may share some of the characteristics shown in Table 5 (e.g. male heterosexuality, promiscuity and aggressiveness) but would not endorse or engage in violent practices such as gang fights, sexual violence or murder. As Anderson and Umberson (2001) point out "[a]lthough men of diverse socioeconomic standing valorize fistfights between men...the extent to which they participate in these confrontations varies by social context. Privileged young men are more often able to avoid participation in social situations that require physical violence against other men than are men who reside in poor neighborhoods" (2001: 372). Therefore, the particularity of street masculinity draws on the everyday engagement in violent practices which in turn are conceived as necessary to survive in the neighbourhood:

There is no other option for us. There is no other logic for us. We are born and raised in this culture. And even if we wanted to do things differently, I think nobody would survive in the streets without engaging in these practices...Life in poor neighbourhoods is like a jungle. You cannot be weak, you cannot be nice or gentle. You show mercy and the others will eat you alive (Piochas)

Not surprisingly, street masculinity is portrayed as produced and reproduced in social institutions such as the family and local communities. Male figures such as fathers, uncles, grandfathers or stepfathers are the ones in charge of teaching a boy how to be 'a true man': "[my father taught me] that a true man has to defend himself, a man has to fight, a man is not a faggot, he does not cry, he does not scream, a man doesn't avoid beatings" (Pato). Failing to comply with these values would translate into a failed manhood (e.g. being homosexual): "my

dad taught me to defend myself, to fight back if somebody did something to me...If I did not fight back, I would be regarded as a faggot” (Dávila). In this way, the narco discourse justifies men’s engagement in violent behaviour in order to perform masculinity but more importantly, as I discuss further in chapter 6, in order to survive in the ‘jungle’ (i.e. poor neighbourhoods).

What seems fundamental in the construction of manhood in the narco discourse is the capacity of men to inspire ‘fear’ and ‘respect’. As Facundo said, when he was a child, he admired a narco because “...he was fearless and because everybody respected him, even the police”. Likewise, Cristian explained: “When I was a kid, I wanted to be a soldier or a boxer. I wanted to be someone with authority”. Once again, ‘authority’ and physical strength are linked to the ideal manhood: “I wanted to be a soldier, because people respect them...I thought soldiers were like Rambo, that they were indestructible” (Difos). These quotes clearly show the significance of ‘fear’ and ‘respect’ in the construction of masculinity in the narco discourse which are not only related to survival but also held up as aspirational ideals. Also, it is noteworthy how these quotes link the same qualities to narcos, boxers and soldiers. This makes sense if we see this link in the light of the demands of machismo which is hegemonic masculinity that still pervades in Mexican society (Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares, 2007; Frías-Martínez, 2008; Gómez-Solórzano, 2007; Jiménez-Guzmán, 2007; Valencia, 2015).

Essentially, street masculinity provides disfranchised men who “have lost most of the patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 1995: 116), the opportunity to resolve this failure by turning their conditions of marginality into an opportunity to enhance their manhood through regular displays of violence. The *barrio* [neighbourhood] provides the social space where such displays of violence take place and is constructed as the main stage where the narco subject performs and negotiates his masculinity. Since the narco subject does not have access to public spaces that middle and the upper-class men can access, such as offices, banks or parliament buildings; the neighbourhood constitutes the main space where the narco subject is socialised. More importantly, the neighbourhood is the space that organises power relationships and it is where codes and meanings are constructed and, ultimately, it is the main source of identity for young poor men.

That is, the neighbourhood is constituted as the most important socialising space in the everyday lives of boys and young male adults. This is where power relations and meanings are constructed and negotiated: “your world is your gang and you are in the gang. That is why you do everything to impress your mates. I would do more drugs, start more fights or whatever I needed to do” (Ponciano). The relevance of the neighbourhoods lies on this space as the main source of identity for boys and young males: “The gang was everything to us, we would do anything for the gang... I was not Rorro anymore I was a red lion [name of the gang]” (Rorro). In particular, as other studies on gangs have shown (Cruz-Sierra: 2014; Rodgers and Baird, 2016; Cerbino, 2004; Guzmán-Facundo, et al., 2011), narcos’ relationship to the neighbourhoods and gangs provide their identity/alterity. Gangs shape their physical and symbolic space regarding the others. For example, their identity as part of a gang which implies their rivalry against other gangs. In a material sense, the territory represents the stage to male physical strength. This is where turf fights take place which, in turn, symbolises the male power and control over the whole territory. Therefore, *pandilleros* not only fight for the control of the territory but also for proving their virility, their physical strength which translates in moral rewards such as respect and authority in the

neighbourhood. That is, the meaning of being a young man is obtained simultaneously by engaging in different practices of violence. I discuss these violent practices in the next chapter.

5.3.3 The logic of '*un hombre de verdad*' [a true man]

A dominant trope in the narco discourse is the idea of 'a true man' (*un hombre de verdad*) referring to a man who embodies the ideal male traits. As shown in table 5, the narco discourse articulates the male subject as physically and emotionally 'strong', 'proud', 'rational', 'aggressive', 'promiscuous', 'seductive, and 'brave'. The male subject is expected, or allowed, to be a heavy drinker, and/or drug addict, a womaniser and, of course, the 'true man' is heterosexual as discussed earlier. The adjective 'true' which evokes legitimacy, implies that those who do not comply with these demands are not true men and therefore excluded from the benefits of the patriarchal dividend.

In line with the demands of the culture of machismo, the narco discourse links the identity of the 'true man' to his ability to have several women and to have money: "when I was young my dad was my hero because I used to see him with a lot of women, with money, in bars, good cars, he was a thief and never got caught. I saw him like a champion" (Eduardo). Cristian also explained his admiration for a narco who 'had' four women: "I met him [the narco] because I used to sell him flowers for his four women. Every week he would send a huge bouquet to each of them." In this quote, women are conceived as part of a man's possessions. 'Having' a beautiful woman is symbolically important in the same way that it is important to have luxury cars and expensive designer clothes: "We saw them [narcos] as super men. They had the best trucks and cars...The police would not mess with them...and I do not know where they found their women, but they were amazingly beautiful...any man's dream come true". In this way, women and money are articulated in the narco discourse as men's possessions. Hence, the more of both a man has, the manlier [*más macho*] he will be.

The construction of the 'true man' is also associated with practices such as drinking alcohol and doing drugs from an early age. Drinking alcohol, as several studies on masculinity in Latin America report, is "an inherent part of the male role" (Brandes, 2006: 153). In the Mexican context, male drinking is an expected behaviour regardless of socio-economic status, and it is an essential part of all social events such as weddings, christenings, parties, and family reunions. These are essential social practices for bonding amongst men in Mexico:

Mexican men demonstrate friendship through drink...Throughout Mexico, when boys are young and prohibited from imbibing alcohol, they often play at being drinking buddies. Girls never play this game. As teenagers or newlyweds forming friendships, men sometimes say to another, "We'll have to get drunk together sometime?!" It would be highly unusual for a woman to make such a statement (Brandes, 2006: 155)

Informed by this particular culture of drinking, the narco discourse endows alcohol and drugs an even more important role in the lives of young boys and men. Alcohol and drugs are not only conceived as bonding practices but more importantly as a way to cope with poverty. Therefore, it is a practice that is encouraged from an early age, so boys become 'true men': "My dad offered me beer when I was a child because he said that the man who

is a man has to drink, so I used to drink with him and my uncles..." (Palomo). Similarly, Ponciano said: "My dad told me that he was my friend. He shared drugs with me or sent me to the shop to buy them. He taught me how to smoke marijuana when I was seven or eight years old". And Rorro: "My dad forced us to drink when we were children. I did not like beer back then, but it made me feel like a true man. I saw my father drunk every weekend, so I assumed that is what a man was meant to do". Eduardo explained that in his case, because he did not have a father or older brother it was "The older boys [who] teach you to smoke and drink. That is how we felt we were becoming men". Thus, becoming a 'true man' for narco subject entails engaging in practices of heavy drinking and doing drugs: "A true man, a good macho [*un buen macho*] drinks a lot...at the beginning you do drugs to show you are brave, [to show] that you are a man" (Kevin).

With the exception of the heteronormativity, the narco discourse implicitly recognises that the ideals of the 'true man' are socially constructed. Therefore, the narco discourse displays contradictory statements regarding the ideals of street masculinity. This contradiction is mostly evoked when the narco subject speaks from the son subject position discussed above. As a child, the narco subject learned to admire and benefit from aggressive, competitive, promiscuous and violent behaviours. However, there is also an acknowledgement of discomfort when such behaviours are displayed in their own households. For example, Difos said: "I admired my father because he was a very strong man. He did not take any insult from anyone. He would have a lot of fights, and he was like a super hero to me". However, Difos also pointed out that he suffered when his dad beat up his mum "to the point that the neighbours thought that he would drive her crazy for all the beating". There is a similar tension in the narrative of Rorro: "my Mum, bless her, she could not defend herself or her children because my dad was so violent that she was rendered speechless in front of him. She was traumatised...That's why I hated him so much". However, from the husband subject position, Rorro also engaged in domestic violence himself: "At the beginning I wasn't violent but after some time I became as violent as my dad was".

The contradictions between the male ideal traits and men's everyday experiences can be explained as the "... complex interplay between young men's agency and social structure in their identity formation..." (Greig, 2009:70). Scholars agree that the contradictions between the male ideal traits and men's everyday experiences can be understood as the price that men have to pay for benefitting from some of the patriarchal dividend (Viveros-Vigoya, 2001; Zapata, 2001; Maihold and Sauter, 2012; Gómez-Solórzano, 2007; Gutman, 2007; Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares, 2007; Cruz-Sierra, 2014). Seen in this light, the contradictory ways in which the narco subject conceives his own violence vis-à-vis the father's violence, can be understood as the tension created by the social construction of the 'true man' imposed on them during childhood and the cultural suppression of 'feminine' emotions.

This is a significant nuance regarding gender in the narco discourse. Although it clearly reproduces the traditional machismo values prevalent in the Mexican culture, the narco discourse implicitly challenges the social construction of the 'true man' by recognising that: a) masculinity is, indeed, constructed which means that masculinities (i.e. the way in which men behave) can be different, and b) by acknowledging the contradictions between what the feelings and behaviours men *learn* to do versus feelings and behaviours men experiment; the narco discourse implicitly denaturalises the logic of the 'true man'.

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter provided an examination of the second discursive building block of the narco discourse which, together with poverty and violence, is central to answering how the narco discourse enables practices of DTV. Through a discourse theoretic approach, this chapter showed how the narco discourse reproduces gender stereotypes stemming from the culture of machismo. Women are conceived as a monolithic group who share the same traditional female characteristics (i.e. being emotional, naïve, economically dependent on men). In contrast, men are produced as a diverse group of individuals who *should* engage with the demands of machismo. However, men are not born being fearless, brave or emotionless. In this sense, the narco discourse recognises that masculinities are socially constructed; hence, men are not essentially aggressive, emotionless or violent. However, men *should* comply with the demands of street masculinity in order to survive in poor neighbourhoods. Street masculinity radicalises and enhances violent and aggressive male qualities and puts them at the centre of the male identity. The narco discourse constructs the male identity as an ongoing process that is learned in the household and performed in the streets.

The logic of the 'true man', therefore, reflects the main traits enhanced by the street masculinity. That is, men have to be strong', 'proud', 'rational', 'aggressive', 'promiscuous', 'seductive, and 'brave'. Furthermore, the 'true man' is expected to engage in 'manly' practices such as heavy drinking, street fights, doing drugs and, given that the 'true man' is assumed to be heterosexual, having several women. However, I argued that the narco discourse also provides a significant nuance to the logic of the 'true man' which is contested when the narco subject speaks from the child subject position. That is, while violent behaviour is accepted and assumed as a 'necessary' trait for poor men, male violence is contested when it is deployed against the mother. In addition to the logic of the 'easy life', the logic of the 'true man' enables us to make sense of how practices of DTV are constructed as a source of empowerment and even as an object of desire.

In the next chapter I turn my attention to the third and last building block of the narco discourse. I examine how violence is constructed in the narco discourse as something 'natural' and 'necessary' in contexts of poverty. I also identify the different types of violence highlighted in the narco discourse such as domestic violence, gang violence, prison violence and self-inflicted violence.

CHAPTER 6 THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF VIOLENCE: THE LOGIC OF 'NATURAL' VIOLENCE IN THE 'JUNGLE'

"I felt nothing. I had no feelings. Violence for me was something natural" (Rigoletto)

"Life in poor neighbourhoods is like a jungle. You cannot be weak, you cannot be nice or gentle. You show mercy and the others will eat you alive" (Piochas)

6 Introduction

The preceding two chapters examined the first two building blocks that constitute the narco discourse. In chapter 4, I examined how poverty is constructed in the narco discourse drawing on a neoliberal ethos. I argued that, in contrast to most of the scholarship on DTV which suggests that narcos join drug cartels as their 'only' way to survive, the narco discourse does not evoke poverty (in terms of lack of basic needs) as a reason to engage in drug trafficking. Instead, the narco discourse articulates drug trafficking as the 'easy life', as their 'only' way to earn large sums of money which would allow them to maximise their present. Then, in chapter 5, I examined how the narco discourse reproduces traditional discourses on gender stemming from the culture of *machismo* in Mexico. I demonstrated that although the narco discourse draws heavily on this discourse, there are some significant nuances. The most relevant for this analysis is that the narco discourse does not take for granted that men are essentially 'aggressive' or 'emotionless'; these 'male' characteristics are recognised as socially constructed. Therefore, the logic of the 'true man' in the narco discourse is constructed as a guide of ideal male attributes, as opposed to essential qualities, that men *have to* comply with in order to be regarded as such.

In this last empirical chapter, I examine how violence is constructed in the narco discourse. I acknowledge that 'violence' is an elusive concept with different meanings, and therefore "defies easy categorisation. It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic" (Sheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 2). For the purposes of this chapter, violence is understood as practices of "force, assault, or the infliction of pain ... [and] assaults of personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim" (Sheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 1). The central argument of this chapter is that violence is embedded in contexts of poverty.

The chapter is organised in a similar manner to the preceding two chapters. I begin by presenting the background knowledge that underpins the construction of violence in the narco discourse as something that is 'normal' in contexts of poverty. Then I explore how drug addiction and drug violence are assumed to be 'destiny' for poor boys, given the conditions of poverty and acknowledging the demands of the street masculinity. Next, I focus on analysing the subject position of the father. Finally, I discuss the different types of violence that emerge in the narco discourse: a) gang violence; c) prison violence; and d) self-inflicted violence.

6.1 Presuppositions: what does the narco subject take for granted regarding violence?

There are three guiding presuppositions that inform the construction of violence as something 'natural' in contexts of poverty, and as a practice that is 'necessary' for survival in the neighbourhood: first, becoming 'a man' means to become violent, second, that violence is a response to the law of the fittest that prevails in the 'jungle' (neighbourhood), and finally, that violence is an expected result of drug addiction.

6.1.1 To be a man means to become violent

In chapter 5 I showed how violence is mainly constructed as a means to perform street masculinity. I argued that, although the narco discourse reproduces traditional gender stereotypes, it does not essentialise male violence or traits that are usually attributed to men such as aggressiveness, toughness and fearlessness. Instead, the narco discourse conceives of male violence as a taught behaviour that is recognised not only as a male privilege but also as a practice necessary to survive in poor neighbourhoods. These two presuppositions, violence as a male prerogative and as a vital self-defence mechanism, are the fundamental assumptions upon which the narco discourse constructs violence. In short, according to the narco discourse, to be a man means *to become violent*.

Violence against women, in particular, is assumed to be something that boys learn at home. Ponciano, for instance, explains that he grew up thinking that men can and should hit women because this is what he witnessed in his neighborhood and because this is what his father taught him: "My dad told me, while he was beating my mum: look, so you know how the world works" (I discuss domestic violence in detail in section 6.2). 'This world' can be interpreted as one of poverty, alcoholism and drug addiction as discussed in chapter 4, and is mainly portrayed as a place where suffering and threats to life are an everyday occurrence. As Ponciano himself elaborated: "in this world, your life is threatened from dawn to dusk. You are exposed to all kinds of dangers". Significantly, in this 'world', male violence is assumed to be a 'normal' practice, in terms of regularity. Male violence is not questioned because it is so ingrained in the local community that it is taken for granted: "I never questioned my dad's violent behaviour...To me it was just normal to see men being abusive and violent because that is what I saw in the neighbourhood as well" (Difos). Similarly, Peque explains that even though he did not like it, he also understood male violence as 'normal': "I did not like it [his father beating his mother] but I thought that it was normal. [I thought] that all dads were like this because my uncles were the same and my friends' fathers did the same. So, I thought that was the way things worked".

By assuming that male violence is something inherent to narcos' 'world', or is simply 'how things work', the narco discourse implies that there are no alternatives to violent behaviour: that is, it goes unquestioned. Consequently, alternative scenarios where violence is not used as a means to perform masculinity, or to channel feelings of anger or frustration, are rendered unimaginable. Violence is thus assumed to be the 'only' way to

cope with the multiple dangers which men are exposed to when living in conditions of poverty, and as the legitimate way to be considered a 'true man'. These assumptions have been extensively explored by wider literature on gang violence which suggests that boys living in contexts of poverty "...learn that violence is the way to resolve conflicts, are often not exposed to other ways of resolving conflicts and, in turn, use the violence they learned in their homes to resolve conflicts outside their homes...In other words boys who use violence may have shorter fuses and see the world as a mostly hostile place" (Barker, 2005: 62). The notion of a 'hostile' world has a particular resonance in the narco discourse as it is assumed that: 'you are alone in this world', the world is 'like a jungle', 'if you do not screw others, the others will screw you'. Therefore, violence is the 'only' way to survive in this context portrayed in terms of the survival of the fittest.

The narco discourse also assumes that violence is a practice initially learned and taught for the purpose of self-protection. The father, or other paternal figures such as uncles, brothers or even gang leaders, teach boys how to become violent to defend themselves from their peers and rival gangs. As Jorge explained, "My uncle taught me to fight because older boys in my neighbourhood were bullying me. One day, after school, they ganged up on me... I got really hurt so my uncle told me to fight back... he taught me all the dirty tricks... pure violence". The underlying assumption is that sooner or later boys will be confronted by older boys and rival gangs. Such exposure is conceived as one of the main threats, after domestic violence, poor children have to cope with. This exposure is thus conceived as the main reason why poor boys 'have to' to engage in violence. For example, Bidegaray narrates that his eldest brother told him that he had 'no escape' so he trained him to fight: "My brother taught me all sorts of tricks to harm the other boys. He first taught me to fight with a fist and then to use a knife, or any other sharp object, to attack and to do the most harm possible in the least time". Similarly, Peque said: "I learned to be like that [aggressive and violent] in the streets... there is no way you can escape from that. You have to fight either at school or in the streets". In this way male violence is assumed to be something normal and regular in *el barrio*. As Ponciano put it: "it is just how this world works ... you have to find the way to survive in the neighbourhood".

6.1.2 Violence is necessary to survive in poor neighbourhoods

The second presupposition in the narco discourse is that violence is necessary in order to survive in the neighbourhood (also referred to as 'the jungle'). As Bidegaray explains, "This is the jungle, you have to be aggressive... It is the law of the fittest". The tropes of the neighbourhood as a 'jungle' and the 'law of the fittest', are recurrently evoked in the narco discourse in relation to men's vulnerability to other men in the neighbourhood. This vulnerability is constructed in terms of being physically hurt on a regular basis. As Ponciano said: "you cannot have a rest in the neighbourhood, every day there is a fight". Similarly, Palomo explained: "in my neighbourhood we all knew the rules. It was like a jungle; you snooze, you lose. That was the law". Daily threats to life are thus assumed to be a 'rule' of the 'jungle', and consequently, boys and young men in poor neighbourhoods have no other choice than 'becoming' violent. In this way, by assuming that men have to adapt to the law of the fittest, the narco discourse also underscores the relevance of resilience in the poor contexts. As Evans and Reid point out, "resilience is premised upon the ability of the vulnerable subject to continually re-

emerge from the conditions from its ongoing emergency... [this subject] must disavow any belief in the possibility to secure itself and accept, instead, an understanding of life as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which are said to be outside its control" (2013: 85-87). This is explained further by Jorge: "when I was a kid, I was a victim of violence from older boys, they took advantage of the fact that I was alone. I honestly was not a violent kid, I liked doing things peacefully, but I had to become even more violent than them. You have to do it if you want to survive in the streets".

In this context, the notions of respect and power are linked to survival in the narco discourse. In contrast with men in the middle or upper classes, whose vulnerability to other men would likely translate into a struggle over economic or symbolic resources of power (Jiménez-Guzmán, 2007), the struggle for power in the 'jungle' translates to physical confrontations. Therefore, the notion of respect in the narco discourse is constructed as a feeling stemming from fear, rather than as a deep admiration for someone. For example, Canastas explained that one of the objectives of joining a gang was to obtain respect through fear: "I wanted to be respected, to be feared...I wanted people looking at me and thinking that I am a dangerous man". Similarly, Jaime links having a gun to being feared, and being feared to being respected: "Having a gun made me feel good because people respected me, they feared me". Respect, in turn, is associated with power: "I was the one who asked the cartel to work for them. It was not only for the money, I wanted people to respect me, to fear me and recognise how powerful I was" (Pato). Power is also conceived in terms of having power over other people, for example, Dionisio said: "I wanted people to say: 'this man is really dangerous'. I wanted them to say: 'look at that man he is really powerful'. I wanted respect. I did not care about the money because anybody can have money. I wanted the power to say who lives and who does not". Rigoletto also refers to power as the ability to influence other's behaviour: "I wanted power. I wanted people, including the politicians, to know me and to do what I said".

The association of respect, fear and power in the narco discourse can be explained as narcos' response to feeling socially excluded and emasculated. As Barker points out: "A 'bad boy' instils fear and wields power ... Young men who cannot get attention for other qualities or achieve identity through other means may find that being a 'tough guy' is better than going unnoticed" (2005: 64). In this sense, the narco discourse portrays gang affiliations as the social group which provides children and young men with the opportunity to gain respect and power through fear. As Wilson explained: "The oldest boys said that we had to assault people with violence because that would make us feel superior. We caused panic and we dressed in a way that people would be scared of us, like using very baggy clothes and having lots of tattoos". Ultimately, to be 'feared' and engage in violence is, as Valencia (2014) points out, the only tool that poor men have for empowerment in order to survive but also to stand out in a society that has made them invisible: I return to this point in chapter 7.

6.1.3 Violence results from drug addictions

Another fundamental presupposition in the narco discourse is that certain drugs lead to violent behavior, for example, Alan explained: "I got more violent with cocaine, because you feel unsettled and paranoid". Pato

claimed that under the influence of cocaine he felt “unbeatable. I liked feeling the adrenaline and I looked for trouble. I would go out and pick a fight. I punched guys, molested women. I was a terror”. Similarly, Rorro said that “Drugs made me crazy... I remember one afternoon that I was high [*en la loquera*] my friends told me that the other gang was nearby. I went on my own and picked a fight. I was so angry that I knocked down three guys with my bare hands. Then I kicked them so hard that my friends had to stop me because the guys were already unconscious”. Paco even referred to himself as a ‘monster’ when he was under the influence of drugs: “I combined all the drugs you can imagine. I had no boundaries, I was high all night just doing really bad things... I became a monster”. The main drugs associated with violent effects are cocaine, crack cocaine, pills, and heroin, while marijuana is portrayed as a drug that made them feel happy and relaxed. Davos explains the different effects: “Marijuana made me feel good in myself. I felt at peace and it made me enjoy my days... with cocaine I didn’t sleep, I did not get drunk, with cocaine I had the courage to do anything...”. Tabo also expressed that marijuana is a drug that is mostly used for recreation: “We liked the effects of marijuana because you feel so good, so happy. We could spend entire days smoking and listening to music. We felt happy”.

The narco discourse also assumes that drug addiction is a condition that renders narcos helpless, and that becoming clean is beyond their willpower. Ponciano explained that he could have earned a decent living working in the legal market but because he was addicted to crack cocaine, he could not last long in legal jobs: “I did know how to work different crafts but my drug addictions were stronger than me”. Kevin also portrays his drug addiction as something that, although unpleasant at some points, he could nevertheless not leave: “I became addicted to crack when I was fourteen years old. From that moment on, I did not care about anything else ... crack was hell because you hallucinate and become paranoid, but I could not leave it”. Wilson explained that his addiction was such that he even disrespected what he loved most in life: “It was such an addiction that I injected myself in front of my daughter. My brother in law and I also smoked in front of her”.

The assumption that drug addiction leads to violent behaviour (coupled with the idea that drug addiction renders individuals helpless) justifies individuals’ engagement in different types of crime such as theft: “We would do anything to get more drugs. We usually robbed little shops, or people on their way back from work. I even robbed my own mother” (Dávila). Similarly, Cristian, said: “We robbed rich houses. We started by just stealing copper, then we focused on rich people. At some point we also assaulted trucks”. Likewise, Eduardo explained: “In my gang we preferred to do cocaine first and then pills ... in my case it was not a good idea because sometimes I did not even remember what I had done the night before. Once I woke up in jail and I did not even know why I was there” (Tabo). Gang violence is also represented as linked with addictive behaviour: “usually we would gather in an abandoned house, share drugs and then look for troubles with rival gangs” (Pancho).

Ultimately, drug addiction is associated with death. As Kevin put it: “We [gang] knew we would die being drug addicts, we were resigned to that”. Ponciano, for example, explained that his addiction was such that he put himself and his clients at risk several times: “I used the same needle to inject all my customers: prostitutes, homosexuals and other homeless like me.” He also commented that, because of his addiction he was willing to do whatever it took to get his dose: “My addiction was such that, one day when my needle got blocked, I burned it to unblock it and I injected myself like that, with the needle red hot, and it burned my veins, but I did not care”.

Pitufo said: “I injected myself at least eight times a day. Sometimes I mixed heroin, cocaine and pills. I did not eat, I was very skinny. At that time, I ended up living in abandoned houses, I was all dirty and scruffy. I begged for food in the streets.” I discuss drug addiction as self-inflicted violence in section 6.3.

The link between drugs, gang violence and crime in Latin America has been widely studied by scholarship addressing gang violence in this region (Guzmán-Facundo et al., 2011; Baird, 2012; Jones, 2006; Rodgers, 2006; Reyes-Zaga, 2014; Barker, 2005). What is surprising, and rather paradoxical, is that there is little attention to drug addictions in scholarship addressing the war on drugs or DTV in general (Bergman, 2012; Oehmichen-Bazán, 2013; Azaola, 2012). Since the biggest market for Mexican drug cartels is the U.S., scholarship focuses on drug addiction in the U.S. market and overlooks the Mexican market (Aguilar, 2011; Beittel, 2013; Caballero et al., 2010; Casas, 2010; Celaya, 2009; Chabat, 2010; Dickinson, 2011; Ríos, 2012).

6.2 Subject positioning: the ‘father’ and domestic violence

Given the central role that the figure of the father plays in the narco discourse, in this section I focus on examining the different ways in which the subject position of the ‘father’ is linked to violence. The most common predicates associated with the father are ‘fear’, ‘anger’, ‘sadness’ and ‘desperation’, and the most common practices associated to him are domestic violence, drug addiction and alcoholism (see Table 6). Drawing on this association, the subject positions of the son and the mother are situated as victims of the father. In this sense, the father is positioned as the main cause of pain in the narco subject’s life: “It is still very painful to remember my childhood. When I was a kid I lived in fear because, when my father was drunk, which was almost every day, he beat up my mum and my siblings real bad” (Tabo). Piochas narrated a similar situation: “My dad was extremely violent, especially with my mum. He was drunk most of the time and that is when he hit me and my mum”. As discussed in the previous chapter, the son is positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy given his physical weakness. This is recurrently brought to light in the narco discourse as one of the most frustrating feelings for the narco subject. As Lamberto explained: “He beat her up really bad and I was not able to help her because I was too little. I would just hide underneath the bed and watch the man hit my mum”. Pancho explained how frustrating it was for him witnessing his dad beating his mum and being unable to intervene: “We watched how my dad hit my mum as if she was a man, leaving her bleeding on the floor. We tried to help her, but my dad easily pushed us away”. Dionisio even claimed that his first and only memory of his father is of him hitting his mother: “The only memory I have from my dad is when he beat my mum up. It is the very first memory of my childhood – I remember how he would hit her in the face, he dragged her on the floor and threatened her with a knife”. In this way, the father is linked to domestic violence, which is conceived in the narco discourse as the origins of the narco subject’s violent behaviour.

There is an implicit causal claim in the narco discourse which associates violence exercised by the father with young boys’ violent behavior. As Eduardo explained:

My dad was a very violent man ... Because of that I grew up full of bitterness and resentment. I was not able to forget how frustrated I felt for not being able to help my mother...That anger and that frustration were my fuel to engage in violence and crime.

This idea is one of the most recurrent in the narco discourse. The father is positioned in antagonistic terms *vis-à-vis* the son who is unable to defend the mother. As a result, boys engage in gang and drug addiction, and the father is made responsible for the son's violent behaviour: "I never forgave him for what he did, and that anger made me do horrible stuff to people". Similarly, Palomo claimed that the 'worst' of all pains for him was to watch his mother being beaten by his father, and this was one that he was never able to recover from: "all the horrible things my dad did to my mum in front of us. I hated him, and I hated myself for not being able to help my mother ... so all my hate, all my frustration from those days I channelled towards others. I thought about my dad when I was punching other guys."

The subject position of the father is central in the narco discourse as it is constantly evoked when narcos talk about any type of violence. When Yuca, for instance, talked about his job torturing people he mentioned his father's violent behaviour again and implicitly made a link to his sadism: "I did like making people suffer. I laughed at them when they screamed. I told them: why are you screaming? Enjoy the party! That is what my dad told us when he hit us". Other narcos make less explicit, but still causal, claims linking domestic violence to violent behaviour, for example, Alan explained: "I think I learned all that hate and violence at home". Paco said: "I am not sure, but I think that I would have been a different person if my father was different". Piochas implied that when children join the gang they are already used to violence: "Violence is learned at home ... we [children] all had the same problem in our homes: violent fathers and beaten mums".

What seems fundamental is that the paternal figure plays a key role in the narco discourse in relation to violence: this has two aspects. First, domestic violence is consistently portrayed as the most 'painful' and 'frustrating' experience in narcos' lives. This construction is surprising considering that, as I show in next chapter, the narco subject engages in several violent practices, some of which are extremely sadistic. Violence attributed to the father, in particular violence against the mother, is recurrently evoked as the most painful and traumatic for the narco subject. For example, in the case of Jaime, he explained that the most difficult experience for him watching his mother being abused by his own father: "he was extremely violent, especially when he was drunk. He called my mum fucking bitch... He would pull her hair and drag her around the house. It was normal that my mum had a black eye". Jaime explains that it was very frustrating for him that his mother did not abandon his father even after she lost a baby because "my father was a very jealous man, and he thought that the baby was not his, so he kicked my mum's belly ... he left her bleeding on the floor and she obviously lost the baby in that very moment". Further in the interview, when Jaime talks about his job as a hitman, and as prisoner, he explained that he tried to make other people pay for what his father did to his mother:

I was bloodthirsty. I liked making men suffer. I did not like killing, I liked watching them scream. I enjoyed taking their scalps off when they were still alive... Even when I was in prison, I had to hit people and if I was on my own I hit my own head against the wall, I cut myself with anything I found that could be sharpened. *I was sick of violence. That is what my dad left me.*

Jaime's narrative is echoed, to different degrees, in the majority of the narratives. Associating the father with domestic violence and feelings of extreme pain and frustration makes possible a recurrent idea in the narco discourse: killing the father.

6.2.1 The fantasy of patricide

A recurrent theme in narcos' narratives is the fantasy of patricide. Twenty-eight participants, out of thirty-three, acknowledged their desire to kill their fathers at some point in their lives. This fantasy plays a key role in the narco discourse as it is repeatedly evoked when narcos explain their involvement in violent acts. Some narcos mentioned it as a transient feeling that went away once they grew up, but others construct it as their main objective in life, while others refer to this fantasy as their main motivation to work in the drug trafficking business. For example, Rorro said, "[when I was a kid] I did not have illusions, or plans for the future, *my only thought was killing my father* when I grew up. I planned to kill him while he was asleep or burning him alive and throwing him onto the road". Facundo also saw his life goal as finding and killing his father: "*My only goal in life was to kill my father... I wanted to kill my father because he abandoned us*". Further in the interview, when Facundo narrates his experiences of DTV he refers back to his feelings about his father: "When I saw those men torturing other men *I wanted to inflict the same type of pain on my dad*. Because of him I suffered a lot, so I wanted him to suffer as well." Similarly, Ponciano mentioned how he would daydream about killing his father:

I remember that my uncle took me to the trail to see how they killed the cows. I saw how they took the skin off them, how they took the guts out. I enjoyed watching all that and I asked my uncle to let me kill the cows myself... I felt good when I cut the cow's throat because I imagined I was doing it to my dad ... *when I saw the blood running, I imagined I was killing my father. I laughed and said: this is what you deserve you fucking dog!*

Ponciano, in common with the other narcos who acknowledged a desire to kill their father, did not carry out his fantasy even though he had ample opportunity to do so: "One day I saw my father lying on the floor. He was drunk. I took my knife out and put it on his throat. My friends tried to stop me, but I told them that if they intervened, I wouldn't sell them drugs anymore. I couldn't kill him. I started crying". Similarly, Facundo explains that he could not kill his father, even though he spent at least five years hunting for him:

If I wanted, I could have had him killed. I had dozens of hitmen working for me. If I wanted it, they could have brought him to me, so I could see him suffering under torture. But I could not do it ... I saw his little daughter, my half-sister, and she reminded me of my own childhood... so I told him: make sure you stay away from me. If I ever see you again, I will kill you.

Rorro also declined his opportunity to murder his father: "I could not kill him. I just threatened to cut him into pieces if he messed with me, my siblings or my mum". Piochas said: "When I was sixteen, I was already famous in the neighbourhood. Everybody knew that I was the most violent *cholo* in the neighbourhood. Older men feared me, and I know that rival gangs respected my territory just because they were afraid of me... but even knowing all that and having the capacity to *achieve my goal of killing my father*, I could not do it. I hated him so much, but I just could not do it." Palomo said: "*When I hit somebody, I imagined that person was my dad ... I*

think that is why I was so violent, because I imagined that all those guys were my father ...but when the cartel offered me the possibility to kill him, I said no. I did want him dead, I did want him to suffer as he made us suffer but ... I never did it, even though I had all the resources to do it.”

In this way, the narco discourse brings to the fore the importance of the figure of the father and how experiences of domestic violence played a key role in the narco subject’s further engagement in different types of violence, as I discuss next.

6.3 Predication: what are the main types of violence in the narco discourse?

In this final section I examine the types of violence, in addition to DTV, that emerge in the narco discourse. These are: gang violence, prison violence and finally self-inflicted violence. Table 6 (p.109-113) sets out the most relevant quotes regarding these three types of violence and domestic violence. The purpose of including this table, as it was the case in chapter 4, is to provide the reader with access to the additional data I draw upon in my analysis. Furthermore, the purpose of presenting the table with this raw data is to provide a summary of the quotes in relation to the different types of violence in the narco discourse, in an accessible form.

Table 6 Predicates and practices in relation to violence

Domestic Violence	Gang Violence	Prison Violence	Self-inflicted violence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I remember being beaten and mistreated by my dad. He beaten my mum up so much... I tried to defend her, but I was too small. I became very violent, I began beating my wife up out of jealousy. (Inmaculado) • I was really violent, I did not care that my partner saw me doing drugs. One day she had enough and came back to her family's home because I was very mean and violent (Inmaculado) • One day I got really angry because I saw him [stepfather] on top of my mum beating her up and mum was already unconscious. I took a knife from the kitchen and stabbed him, but he did not die. (Difos) • Another day I stabbed him [stepfather] with a screwdriver. I tried to kill him many times, but I could not. He always came back though, asking for forgiveness and my mother would not leave him, no matter what I said. (Difos) • I felt bad because I would see my wife bleeding on the floor, crying.... I would have flashback from my mum and... I felt bad because I remember how I suffered when my step father beaten my mother, but I could stop doing drugs. I was a drug addict. (Difos) • My dad was very violent. I wanted to defend my mum and I even got ready every night, I would keep a knife in my pocket just in case. My parents argued a lot because my dad had another woman. (Paco) • I remember that when I was little my father was very violent. He would insult me and my mother. He was a very jealous man. Because of that we had to move out and we went to live with my 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a party we saw a guy from the rival gang. We beat him up really bad. It was me who took a broom's stick and took one of his eyes out. (Canastas) • I felt satisfaction when I hurt other guys. I would vent my anger and I did not feel bad afterwards. So, I started being more violent because I thought it was the best way to channel that anger. (Inmaculado) • When I was a kid, I was a victim of violence from older boys, because those boys, because they were also children, took advantage that I was alone. I honestly was not a violent kid, I liked doing things in peace but from that moment on that I started to suffer from violence I started to see things in a different way. (Jorge) • The other boys laughed at me because they saw my hands dirty because I worked as shoe-shiny boy, I sold newspapers, I sold sweets in the streets and the boys and girls who saw me from the bus's window laughed at me and I cried and cried. That is why I became so violent (Jorge) • In the streets older boys took my sweets away, they stole from me, they yelled at me and I could not do anything. One day two young boys attacked me, they robbed my stuff. They threatened me with a knife, they beat me up, they broke my mouth inside and they took my merchandise. I felt very frustrated and I cried and cried. That is why I became so violent. (Jorge) • I was always on drugs when I went to school. I took my knives with me, so I would regularly have fights. I fought almost every day. I won most of the times and I was surprised about my own violence because I beat bigger boys. At some point they gang up on me, they threw stones at me, so I used my knife and hurt at least three men. That is what I always did, first I beat them up and then I would stab them. That is why I did not come back to school. (Jorge) • The worst fight for me was with two guys from a rival gang. They crashed a beer bottle on my head. They kicked me once I was on the floor and the rest I do not know. I woke up in the hospital. They told my mum that I would probably lose one of my eyes or my sight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was really hard because I had to fight every day. It was in prison where I met all kinds of people. (Inmaculado) • It is hard because you have to fight every day, it is exhausting because you cannot even sleep (Difos) • I was three years in jail and my cartel did not defend me, but I met more narcos in there and even more powerful, so I decided to stay in prison. I did not want a normal life anymore. Drug cartels at that time was like the army, not like now, they had the best equipment and intelligence services. I was proud of that. (Paco) • Once I started a riot in jail because they wanted to steel a present I had for my mother. I beat up a lot and I tried to strangle one of them...they almost burn me alive, but I managed to find the shower and of the leaders defended me. He was a top narco, as we way. From that moment on I became his assistant (Paco) • When I was in jail I started working with the same carte from inside. There were people already waiting form there, men and women. They knew 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life had no sense to me. I never understood why I was in this world (Pitufo) • I tried to hang myself, but the rope broke. I wanted to kill myself because I felt very lonely. I had no future, no purpose in life... I did not want to suffer any more.: I tried to commit suicide when I was seventeen years old. Life had no sense for me, my life was only fights, violence, jail. (Cristian) • "I wanted to die. I failed as a son, as a husband, I could not have a family ... but I did not have the courage to commit suicide. What I did was to inject myself with a lot of cocaine to die from an overdose. Once I tried to cut my veins with a can of beer, but it didn't work (Wilson) • When you are a drug addict, you see yourself as worthless, worse than rubbish. You don't care about anything, not even your life because, who would care about a poor drug addict? (Palomo) • We did not see ourselves as [gangsters] in the future. We saw ourselves as drug addicts who did not have a future, we never thought we would do something good in life. We thought that we would die of an overdose because we saw our friends dying because of that. So, I thought that was my only future • "I never thought about living a different life because that is how I grew up. I just wanted to end my

<p>grandparents. Because of that I was very unhappy and full of anger against my dad. (Eduardo)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I was a child, I was afraid of my dad because when he was drunk, he would beat my mum up really bad (Chito) • My dad was extremely aggressive. He would call my mum bloody bitch (Jaime) • My mum was always beaten, purple eye, swollen lips. My dad would grab her by the hair and drag her around. He would even kick her in the belly when she was pregnant. (Jaime) • My dad would punch me with closed fists and I was very little. I tried to cover my face, my head because he would beat me up so hard that sometimes I ended up in the hospital. (Jaime) • I thought that one day I would find my mother dead because of my father's beatings. My mother said that she wanted to kill him because she was fed up of him. (Jaime) • One day my father burned her hair because everybody said she had such a beautiful hair. I used to tell my mum, leave that man, I would not even call him father. If you want, I steal, if you want I steal drugs but leave that man. I told her, one day I will kill him, and we eat him in a stew. (Jaime) • My father was an alcoholic and my mother was a prostitute. I saw my father drunk beating my mother up and beating my siblings. (Pancho) • In many occasions I would see how he hit my mum. He would drag her on the floor and beat her up as if she was a man. Sometimes he would leave her unconscious on the floor. We tried to help but my father was stronger than us, so he would easily put us away. (Pancho) 	<p>and because I was in comma for a week, they said would never be the same again. (Jorge)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every time our gangs fought there was at least one man seriously hurt, at least one stabbed guy, or sometimes dead men. I was lucky, I only got beat up but never stabbed. (Balente) • We would tie them up and kick them, we would use sticks as well to hit them...we were full of anger. We threw cement blocks to their heads. We did not know how bad we were, but we could not realise because we were under the influence of drugs. (Balente) • I became addict to gang fights. I was not afraid of being beat up. I felt adrenaline with fights...(Kevins) • I became very violent with drugs; the whole neighbourhood was afraid of me. When I came back to do cocaine, I started doing more crimes, I spend a month without sleeping, without eating, without having a shower. I just did dugs... at this point I did not care about anything I just wanted revenge. I want to make my enemies suffer. (Kevins) • I started fighting at school because my friends laughed at my grandmother because she collected cardboard in the streets (Bidegaray) • -We [the gang] wanted respect, we did not want the other gangs to enter our neighbourhood. We wanted them to be afraid of us. We wanted control over their territory. There were some neighbourhoods that would surrender and join our gang but there were others that did not want to give up their turf. In some occasions people were killed with ice picks. In our gang some were killed with weapons. (Difos) • The rival gang took one of my mates. As soon as they told me that they had him I ran in his help. I did not think about it, I shot the man who was beating my mate with a bat...In that moment I could not control my anger. I just shot him" (Difos) • I was near to death...they stabbed me five times. It was a vendetta. I beat up one of their gang, so they came back for revenge. They took me like a football ball. They deformed my head, they dislocated my shoulder. I heard when they said kill him! And at some point, I felt really cold, I guess because I was losing a lot of blood. I turned around and I saw my friend, he was worse than me. He had an eye sticking out, his ear almost detached and he was stabbed twice. (Fausto) 	<p>everything about my job outside...they asked me if I wanted to stay with them or to join the rival cartel and I chose to stay with them (Tigre)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wanted to die after six years in prison, dealing with merciless men, rapists, sicarios, drug traffickers. They sold even more drugs inside and they killed each other between them. The stabbed each other, they smashed their skulls with tubes. (Jaime) • I became very aggressive in jail. If got angry and I did not channel my anger I suffered from migraines. [as an ex-army man] I was trained to destroy, assault, slaughter. They gave me more drugs to control the migraines, but I opened many windows, I was a monster (Paco) • When I got in jail, they threw me in a cell with all the guys from the rival gang. I got really scared because there were a lot and there was nobody to defend me. But they told me that inside the prison the rules changed. One of them told me: forget about the streets, here we are like a family, we are one united neighbourhood. Here we do not fight our turf but our lives (Piochas) 	<p>life because I did not like it. I did not ask to be alive" (Rigoletto)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We did not have a family, we were lost in the world of drugs. We thought that if they killed us, we had nothing to lose" (Tigre) • "I thought that I was born to do this [drugs] so I would die of it as well (Davos) • "I tried to kill myself by an overdose... I ended up twice in the hospital because of cocaine overdose (Davos) • "I injected him and when I was about to inject myself, he put a knife on my throat and told me to inject him again or he would cut my throat... When I finished, he tried to stand up, but his eyes turned backwards and fell dead next to me. I tried to save him, but I couldn't. He died of an overdose" (Ponciano) • It was normal that they [gangsters] died of an overdose. We did not care. We threw their bodies into the stream or in a landfill (Rorro) • In one of those days that I was very drunk, I took my gun and pulled the trigger. I do not what happened, but it did not fire the bullet" (Inmaculado) • When I was 17 years old, I tried to commit suicide for the first time. I found my life meaningless. I lived surrounded by conflict and violence, jail, crimes and drugs. (Jorge) • I was so fed up of my life that I would hit my self against the wall, I would scream and cry. I wanted my heart to stop. (Jorge) • When I was 19 years old, I hit rock bottom. I was so tired. Once I
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When my father beat my mother up my brothers and I would defend her. We would throw him anything we could because he was bigger and stronger than all of us. We would even take my mother out of the house, so the neighbours saw what my father was doing to her. (Yuca) • My dad would beat us up with everything he found, with tubes, with a plank... with everything! Especially if we brought bad notes from school. Sometimes he would hit us with cables or with a belt, on the legs, on the back, even on the head. (Yuca) • My dad was extremely violent, especially with my mother. He was very strict. He was an alcoholic. I do not remember seeing him sober. He would hit me for nothing and beat my mum up when she told him to stop drinking. (Piochas) • I was very violent with my wife. I would beat her up until leaving unconscious. I had my dad's bad temper. I would vent by beating her up, I had so much anger that sometimes I would hit myself. (Piochas) • My father was very violent, he was the founder of a very violent Street gang. They did drugs and committed lots of crimes (Rorro) • My dad would beat us up a lot. My mum said that once he beat me up so hard that I fainted. He would kick me on my back. If I got home late, he would burst in anger. I was so scared of him that I would soil myself (Rorro) • My dad would get very aggressive when he did not have his drugs. When he was on drugs, he was ok. (Tabo) • In the army they teach us to be violent, that is why so many of us would beat up our wives. They teach you to be tough and arrogant. (Tabo) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We stole stereos, assaulted people for money. When I was 19 I was in jail for drug possession. (Pitufo) • The purpose was to make a mess, we would seek fight with the rival gangs. We would take one from the rival gang and beat him up. We were mean, we wanted to make the most damage possible" (Santo) • What I liked the most was to beat people up. I liked seeing the blood, I liked crashing their teeth and taker their scalps off. (Jaime) • The other gang, including my oldest brother, came to my home, hit me and subjected me. The ganged up on me, they took me by the arms and by the feet and kick me, spit on me. That was every day until I got tired of the beatings. I joined the rival gang and because they were older and bigger than the others, they mopped the floor with them. My brother ended up naked, beat up and tied to a post lamp (Yuca) • After coming out of jail I gained a reputation of being dangerous. I think men become prouder when they come out of jail because you managed to come out alive, not hurt or even because you did not commit suicide as many guys do. Because of that, one feels braver... in a way I gained more authority and I imposed new rules in the neighbourhood. After that, I started to be tougher and more violent. (Piochas) • [on Christmas] I would spend the day on drugs, we used to go to the rival neighbourhoods and look for fights, we fired shots in the air to vent our anger, we also shot the members of rival gangs. For us that was the perfect time to vent our anger against the enemy because the police were not around. (Rorro) • -at night, once we finished doing drugs, we came out and look for victims (Wilson) • The oldest boys said that we had to assault people with violence because that would make us feel superior. We caused panic and we dressed in a way that people would be scared of us, like using very baggy clothes and having lots of tattoos (Wilson) • [I was very violent] because of what I saw. I saw that my dad beat people, so I wanted to imitate what he did (Ponciano) • When I was twelve years old, I was already a violent. I remember that I mistreated younger children, I took always their stuff, their money and their toys. I told them gore stories, so they would be afraid of me. I lied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the beginning I was very scared because it was place where they had the worst criminals...they threatened me since the very day I arrived: let's see if you are as macho as you said. Now we are going to see if you really are who you say you are" (Ponciano) • I happened to be with a drug dealer who sold heroine. I was precisely running away from that stuff, so I got even more addicted because life in jail is very hard" (Ponciano) • In prison I learned more delinquency. I hanged out with thieves and bad people. People think one goes to jail to reform oneself but not. It is like a school where you learned more crime". (Ponciano) • It was in prison where I realised that I was not as bad as I thought. I met me who were truly crazy. They opened my mind to do more sinister things. In jail you learn to survive rather than to excel ... in prison you live the day because you do not know if you are going to live the next (Rigoletto) • There are always fights, arguments, deaths, wounded. In jail it is very similar as it is outside. There are rival gangs fighting for controlling something in the prison. 	<p>tried to hang myself, but it did not work. That is when I became a drug addict. I realised that drugs would work to cover my pain. (Balente)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That night I was on drugs, when I got home I saw my wife's frustration. I felt helpless that I was not able to change. My children were there as well, and I thought to myself: I should better kill myself, so my wife stops suffering. So, I went to the bathroom and cut my veins with a knife. (Difos). • [when I was in jail] I swallowed a razor, but it only cut my throat a little bit. I started to spit blood and that is when the guards realised what I did. I tried to beat them, I was like crazy. I did not want to live any more. I would try to commit suicide at least once a month, I would find whatever object and turn into a weapon (Jaime) • When I came out of jail I did not care about anything, I did not want to live any more. I thought of killing somebody so they would kill me as well. (Jaime). • I tried to kill myself three times. The first one I cut my veins, but my brother found me and took me to the hospital. The other two times I tried to hang myself. (Pancho) • Besides abusing drugs, I started fights hoping that in one of them I would get killed (Rorro). • I did no try commit suicide, but I would get involved in trouble so somebody else would kill me (Diosnio)
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I remember lots of violent scenes. I remember my father beating my mum up, even when she was pregnant with my sister. I would hide behind the couch and watch him crying (Ponciano) • My dad told me, while he was beaten up my mother: this I show life works. So, I grew up thinking that life was like that. Sometimes I tried to help my mother, I took a knife to defend my mother and kill my father, but I was a child. My dad easily put me way and told me to understand that that how life worked. You can say he was a machista. (Ponciano). • The only memory I have from my father is when he was beating up my mum. I remember that my father would beat my mum up and then threat her with a knife. This is the first image I have from my childhood. This memory is my very first memory. Like if you open a book this would be the first page. (Dionisio) • For months I planned to kill my wife to get my daughter's custody. (Dionisio) • When my dad found out that my mother sold his drugs, he got really mad. He beat her up and asked her why he took his things. She told him that because she needed money to give us food. (Chufu) • I was very afraid of my dad. I always thought that when I grew up, I would take revenge. I felt so frustrated, so angry and helpless because I could not hit him back. When I saw narcos in the streets I thought: one day I will be like them, so my father respects me. I felt worse when he hit my mother because she was good, she always defended me when he beat me up. (Chufu) • My father was in the military, so he was a very violent man (Pato) • He would grab my mother by the hair and drag her on the floor. He would 	<p>to them, so they would be afraid of me. I told them I killed people describing how I used to kill the animals in the ranch. I told them that I stabbed them and took their guts out...and I told them that I would do that to them if they did not do what I wanted, and you can say that that is how I formed my gang (Ponciano)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I stabbed a lot of guys. I did not know if they died or not but I thought: I hope that dog dies, because they were from rival gangs, but most of the times they survived and they denounced me. The police chased me, but they could not get me because I bribed the comandante. We had to give him money every month. We had a sort of free pass to commit crimes without being prosecuted. <u>Ponciano</u> • The rival gang killed my girlfriend by mistake. We had a fight in a nightclub, we beat them up and won the fight.... when we were coming out of the club a car pulled over in front of us and open fired. They wanted to kill me, but they shot my girlfriend. They murdered her right there. I wanted to die. (Ponciano) • We were poor boys, we did not have fancy weapons. In those days, we would only have a knife, a stick, or anything sharp so we would be ready to fight against the rival gangs. (Davila) • I started with the tattoos when I joined the gang. I was fifteen years old when I started doing drugs and doing crimes. I ended up in jail many times. At the beginning it was difficult, but one gets used to and I came in and out of prison very easily. (Davila) • We robbed houses, only small ones. We stole jewellery, mobiles and TVs so we could buy more drugs. That is what the gang teaches you. The leader of my gang told us: whatever you can steal, steal it! If you need to use force, use it! (Chufu) • I lived in one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods. We stole, assaulted bus drivers, people in the streets, ladies. We did very bad things...(Lamberto) • To join the gang, you have to pass a test. You have to fight against other boys and prove that you are brave. There are other things you have to do as well in order to probe that they can trust in you. That is, that you will not be telling others what the gang does. - (Palomo) • When I moved to a new neighbourhood, I had to join the gang. Every time I went to the shop to buy 	<p>You have to join one of them. One has to choose the strongest and if not join the one who is competing against the strongest. (Rigoletto)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In prison you have everything you want. Drugs, money, alcohol, women, whatever you had outside you could have it inside. (Rigoletto) • Because I met men who had big businesses outside. I got involved in the bad life after I came out of jail. I had several offers to work and I chose the best (Rigoletto) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I tried to commit suicide, but the gun did not work (Pato) • I was really depressed. Nobody wanted to be with me, I was a mess. One night I remember that I took lots of pills with alcohol, I wanted to die (Palomo)
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<p>beat me up so much that I ended up in the hospital. I WOULDA mi madre la agarraba de los pelos y la maltrataba y el me golpeaba a tal grado que yo iba a parar al hospital. Yo iba a dar a una clínica, venían las patrullas a la casa, me recogían todo golpeado, todo sangrado y ahí otra vez era cliente del DIF (Pato)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• my father beat my mother almost every night, he came home drunk and high...I watched how he beat my Mum up and I could not help because I was too little and because I was too afraid of him. I used to hide from him... I hated him (Palomo)	<p>groceries, they robbed my money and threatened me with a knife. So, I decided to join them because I thought that if I did not, they would carry on stealing and beating me up. And it was ok, once you are part of them. (Chufo)</p>		
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6.3.1 Gang Violence

After domestic violence, the most relevant form of violence evoked in the narco discourse is gang violence. In chapter 4, I established the relevance of the gang in terms of self-identity [*pandillero*] for the narco subject, and in chapter 5 I discussed how the gang [*pandilla*] is constituted as the social institution in which the narco subject is able to perform street masculinity. In this section, I focus on how gang violence in the narco discourse shifts from being represented as a self-defence, in contexts of poverty, to what seems to be intentional and gratuitous use of force against other men (gangs) who are constructed as 'enemies'.

In general, gang violence is understood within the narco discourse as the result of conflicts between gangs, but also as violence resulting from engaging in criminal activities. As Kevin explains, violence and crime are inherent to the *pandillero's* life: "We liked smashing windows, provoking fights between gangs ... Our life was stealing, doing drugs, hanging out on street corners looking for trouble until dawn". Similarly, Peque explained that the purpose of the gang was "...to make a mess, we would seek fights with the rival gangs. We were mean, we wanted to do the most damage possible". Lamberto also acknowledges that being a gang member implied being involved in crime, fights and even murders: "We stole, assaulted bus drivers, people in the streets, ladies. We did very bad things... we looked for trouble in another neighbourhood. Our purpose was to eliminate our rivals". Not surprisingly, gang violence is also portrayed as life-threatening for those involved: "Every time our gangs fought, there was at least one man seriously hurt, at least one got stabbed and sometimes men died" (Kevin).

Gang violence is articulated in the narco discourse as both lethal and cruel. Canastas, for example, narrates how his gang tortured members of rival gangs: "We beat him up really bad. I was the one who grabbed a broomstick and took one of his eyes out." Similarly, Dionisio acknowledges that his gang was one of the bloodiest in his community: "We would tie them up and kick them, we would also hit them with sticks and throw cement blocks at their heads". Cristian narrates how he almost died when he was caught by a rival gang: "They smashed a beer bottle over my head. They kicked me once I was on the floor and the rest I do not know. I woke up in the hospital. They told my mum that I would probably lose one of my eyes or my sight and, because I was in a coma for a week, they said that if I woke up I would never be the same". Yuca also narrates how he was a victim of humiliating and violent treatment by a rival gang: "They tied me to a post completely naked and kicked me several times. One of them burned me with a cigarette and the others threw stones at me".

Gang violence is also associated with engaging in different levels of criminality ranging from misdemeanor (e.g. street fights, vandalism, public intoxication and possession of drugs) to felonies (e.g. murder, robbery, and burglary, among others). As discussed in section 6.1, regardless of the type, the narco discourse justifies crime as a means to obtain money to buy drugs. As Wilson explained: "[the gang] stole cars, mobiles, everything. Every night we looked for victims. We sold everything and bought drugs which we distributed among us." Likewise, Chufu also associates crime with drugs: "We robbed houses, only small ones. We stole jewellery, mobiles and TVs so we could buy more drugs. That is what the gang teaches you." Kevin explicitly acknowledges that they did not need this money, and that his gang engaged in all types of crimes because they wanted to buy more

drugs: “We stole cars not because we needed money but because we wanted more drugs. We used to exchange the stolen cars for drugs”. The narco discourse links drug addictions to violence as well as violence used to obtain them, contributing to narcos’ feelings of being ‘worthless’ and powerless which are associated to their decision to engage in drug violence.

6.3.2 Prison violence

Another type of violence in the narco discourse is that of the prison: twenty-nine out of the thirty-three research participants had been in prison more than once. The narco discourse depicts prison violence as more extreme than gang violence in the streets. Rigoletto explained that he learned more violence and torture in prison than in any other place: “It was in prison where I realised that I was not as bad as I thought. I met those who were truly crazy. They opened my mind to more sinister things”. Rigoletto also claims that prisons are the prime recruiting ground for drug cartels because those with the most power are seeking men to work in the drug business. In his case, he said that he “was recruited in jail...I had several offers to work and I chose the best [cartel]”. Ponciano also portrays prisons as a ‘school of crime’: “In prison I learned more delinquency. I was hanging out with thieves and bad people. People think you go to jail to reform but no, it is like a school where you learn more crime”. Notably, the narco discourse also highlights corruption and impunity within the prison system: “When I was in jail I started working with the same cartel from inside. There were people already waiting there. They knew everything about my job outside... they asked me if I wanted to stay with them or to join the rival cartel and I chose to stay with them” (Tigre). Paco even praised one of the drug cartels working in prison: “I felt proud of working with them. They had the best intelligence system. They knew exactly what was going on outside and they of course controlled what happened inside; from the guards by their cells to the distribution of drugs on the other side of the country”.

The narco discourse also highlights how, because of corruption, prisons are not only infiltrated by drug cartels, but they have also converted them into ‘hotels’, as Difos elaborated: “With money and power you can live like a king, just as if you were in a five-star hotel”. Memo also narrated that he enjoyed most of the pleasures he had outside whilst imprisoned: “We had television, a fridge, drugs, alcohol, women. We even had our own parties and sometimes famous bands played live for us inside the prison”. Rigoletto tells a similar story: “In prison you have everything you want. Drugs, money, alcohol, women, whatever you had outside you could have it inside.” However, it is also acknowledged that this is the privilege of those who have money or some influence inside or outside of prison.

All narcos narrate how hard it was being in prison, including those with money and privileges. Difos explained that prison is hard for everybody, regardless of who you were, because you have to either defend yourself or defend your privileges, in both cases you have to “fight every day, it is exhausting because you cannot even sleep. Those with no money fight for survival and those with status fight to keep it, so nobody is at peace”. Similarly, Inmaculado said: “It was really hard because I had to fight every day. It was in prison where I met all kinds of people and you have to adapt to all sorts of perversions”. None of the narcos explicitly mention sexual

abuse but it is implied. For example, Inmaculado used the word 'perversions' to refer to rape. Jaime even describes prison as 'hell': "I wanted to die after six years in prison, dealing with merciless men, rapists, hitmen, and drug traffickers. They sold even more drugs inside and they killed each other. They stabbed each other, they smashed their skulls in with sticks. It was hell". Paco narrated how he was almost killed in a riot: "Once I started a riot in jail because they wanted to steal a present I had for my mother. I beat up many and I tried to strangle one of them ... they almost burned me alive, but I managed to find the shower and one of the narco leaders defended me".

In the narco discourse, prison dynamics are explained in a similar way to the dynamics in neighbourhoods where different gangs fight for control. As Rigoletto says: "Jail is very similar to the outside. There are rival gangs fighting for control of the prison. You have to join one of them. One has to choose the strongest and if not, you join the one who is competing against the strongest." Ponciano explains that the experience in prison is somehow similar to what you experience when you join a gang and implicitly explains how violence in both spaces is reproduced: "When a new guy arrived we had to beat him up so they would respect us... we blindfolded them and took them to an empty room and we started beating them up. They screamed, they cried out of pain and frustration because we tied them up as well. We threatened that if they said something, we would kill them. We beat them up until they begged for mercy. I told them: don't cry, don't yell dude! I went through this and you will do it as well". Piochas narrates his experience when he arrived in prison for the first time: "I was very afraid when I knew I would spend months in jail. I know what men do to the new ones. I think it is one of the times I had been most scared in my life." Piochas also explained that when he was released from prison, he felt very proud of himself because: "I managed to get out of jail without being injured or even just from surviving it because a lot of men cannot stand the pressure of being in jail and they kill themselves". Jaime acknowledged that he tried to commit suicide several times in custody: "I could not stand it anymore, so I cut my veins with a fork, but I was taken to the hospital immediately. Then I tried to cut myself again with a can I stole from the kitchen, but they found me again. And like that I tried many times, but I was not lucky". What is most telling in Jaime's quote is that he considered being dead as being 'lucky'.

6.3.3 Self-inflicted violence and suicide

The last type of violence that emerges in the narco discourse is self-inflicted violence and suicide. The meaning of the latter in the narco discourse resonates with the conception established by ethnographers Gareth A. Jones et al. (2007). They understand suicide as a form of violence which is seen as legitimate by members of youth gangs. Despite being a social taboo, mainly because it is considered as a sin by the Catholic church, suicide is still conceived as an option amongst children and youth in context of poverty (Jones et al., 2007: 464).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the narcos' world is represented as a hostile place and life is depicted as meaningless. This is a prevalent idea in the narco discourse, as Pitufo expressed: "Life had no sense to me. I never understood why I was in this world". Suicide is thus constructed as a way to escape from suffering. As Cristian explained: "I tried to hang myself, but the rope broke. I wanted to kill myself because I felt very lonely. I had no future, no purpose in life... I did not want to suffer any more". Cristian also makes reference to a

meaningless life: “I tried to commit suicide when I was seventeen years old. Life had no sense for me, my life was only fights, violence, jail”. Suicidal thoughts are evoked by all narcos who portray death as the only way to escape from a world of suffering and purposeless life. Wilson even refers to suicide as an act of ‘courage’: “I wanted to die. I failed as a son, as a husband, I could not have a family ... but I did not have the courage to commit suicide. What I did was to inject myself with a lot of cocaine to die from an overdose. Once I tried to cut my veins with a can of beer, but it didn’t work”.

When narcos talk about their lives, and those of poor boys and men in general, they assume that because of their condition of being poor and their drug addictions, they are ‘worthless’. As Palomo expressed: “When you are a drug addict, you see yourself as worthless, worse than rubbish. You don’t care about anything, not even your life because, who would care about a poor drug addict?”. Similarly, Pancho’s quote also shows a high level of self-depreciation: “We did not see ourselves as [gangsters] in the future. We saw ourselves as drug addicts who did not have a future, we never thought we would do something good in life. We thought that we would die of an overdose because we saw our friends dying because of that. So, I thought that was my only future”. Rigoletto justifies suicide because he could not see any other way of escaping from a life he did not want: “I never thought about living a different life because that is how I grew up. I just wanted to end my life because I did not like it. I did not ask to be alive”. Tigre explains that neither his friends in the drug cartel nor himself cared about dying because they had nothing to lose: “We did not have a family, we were lost in the world of drugs. We thought that if they killed us, we had nothing to lose”.

The narco discourse not only normalises drug addiction in poor neighbourhoods but also normalises death from an overdose. As Davos puts it: “I thought that I was born to do this [drugs] so I would die of it as well”. Ponciano narrates how one his best friends died from an overdose in front of him: “I injected him and when I was about to inject myself, he put a knife on my throat and told me to inject him again or he would cut my throat...When I finished, he tried to stand up, but his eyes turned backwards and fell dead next to me. I tried to save him, but I couldn’t. He died of an overdose”. Davos even tried to kill himself with an overdose: “I tried to kill myself by an overdose... I ended up twice in the hospital because of cocaine overdose”. Rorro explicitly said that an overdose was ‘normal’: “It was normal that they [gangsters] died of an overdose. We did not care. We threw their bodies into the stream or in a landfill”. Ponciano, confessed that his addiction was such that he decided to go to prison so he could have some months of detox but “...the problem was that drugs flow even more in prison! When I handed myself in I did it because I wanted to run away from heroin and guess what? They put me in the same cell as a heroin dealer”.

The prominence of self-harm practices and suicide attempts in the narco discourse are not surprising. As Jones et al. suggest “...street-involved youth are especially ‘at risk’, presenting high suicidal ideation, a greater number of suicide attempts and higher success rates than the general population...” (2007:465) Considering that most participants lived under conditions of poverty, the normalisation of an early death and suicide are thus expected, as the literature on street violence in Latin American has established (Cerbino, 2004; Guzmán-Facundo et al, 2011; Baird, 2012; Rodgers D. , 2006). What is relevant in the context of this research, is that suicide is yet another type of violence, together with domestic violence, gang violence, prison violence, which narcos are

exposed to from an early age. I argue that the exposure to different types of violence is a key theme in the narco discuse which, in turn, enables the discursive construction of DTV.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an examination of the third discursive building block of the narco discourse. Drawing on a discourse theoretic approach, I showed how violence is constructed in gendered terms. As shown in chapter 5, traditional male attributes such as being 'aggressive' 'violent' or 'emotionless' are acknowledged in the narco discourse as socially constructed. However, it is assumed and naturalised that men in poor neighbourhoods sooner or later *become* violent. From this presupposition it follows that violence is necessary to survive in poor neighbourhoods frequently referred to as 'the jungle'. In addition, violent behaviour is also expected as a consequence of using and abusing certain types of drugs.

In terms of violence, the subject position of the 'father' and experiences of domestic violence play a central role in the narco discourse. The narco discourse constructs the father's violence and abuse against the mother as one of the most painful experiences in the narco subject's life. These experiences, in turn, are recurrently evoked as the origins of narcos' violent behaviour. In other words, there is a causal claim in the narco discourse linking the narco subject's violent behaviour, practices of DTV and experiences of domestic violence.

There are three other types of violence relevant to the narco discourse. After domestic violence, gang violence is constructed in the narco discourse as one of the most significant in terms of its regularity but also as one of the most lethal and cruel. In fact, as discussed in chapter 4 and 5, the narco discourse assumes that young men will die as a result of a gang fight. Another important type of violence recognised in the narco discourse is prison violence, which is constructed in very similar terms as gang violence. Men in prison have to join a gang and constantly fight for the control of the prison or simply to survive. Finally, self-inflicted violence is also highlighted in narco discourse which I interpret as a form of resistance from the narco subject. Death is constructed as a 'relief' or as an 'escape' from a life not worth living refers back to the logic of the 'easy life' discussed in chapter 4.

In the next chapter I draw together the three discursive building blocks of the narco discourse: the logic of the 'easy life', the logic of the 'true man' and the logic of violence as 'natural' and 'necessary', in order to answer how the narco discourse enables practices of DTV. I argue that drawing on these three intertwined discourses, enables the discursive construction of DTV as a business, as empowerment and even as an object of desire.

CHAPTER 7 DRUG TRAFFICKING VIOLENCE: FROM BUSINESS TO EMPOWERMENT

“Would you question a butcher for killing pigs or chickens? No! You do not question him because it is his job. The same with us. Our job was killing people” (anonymous)

“I wanted respect and I wanted power. In my arrogance, I raised my hands and yelled: I am the master of the world” (Rigoletto)

7 Introduction

In this final chapter, I draw on the analysis developed thus far in chapters 4, 5 and 6, in order to show how DTV is constructed in the narco discourse. The central argument of this chapter is that, informed by the logics of the ‘easy life’, the ‘true man’, and the logic of violence as ‘natural’ and ‘necessary’, practices of DTV are discursively made possible in four ways: a) as a business, b) as the terms and conditions of working in this business, c) as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment, and finally, d) as a religious practice. I argue that the first two constructions are made possible through the logic of the ‘easy life’. In line with the neoliberal ethos discussed in chapter 4, DTV as a business, and as terms and conditions of working in the business of drug trafficking, DTV is constructed as something impersonal and unemotional. The last two constructions of DTV, however, respond to different logics. In contrast to the first two constructions, DTV as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment and DTV as a religious cult is, indeed, something personal, it provides pleasurable adrenaline and it even serves religious purposes. In this regard, these constructions can be understood through the logics of the ‘true man’ and the logic of violence as something ‘natural’ and ‘necessary’.

The chapter is organised around each of the constructions of DTV. I start by discussing how DTV is articulated as a ‘business’. The terms used in the narco discourse to refer to drug trafficking are ‘*el narco*’, which is the shorthand for *narcotráfico* [drug trafficking] in Spanish, and ‘*este negocio*’ [this business]. These terms are used interchangeably to connote both drug trafficking as a business and the different codes of violence that are implicit due to the illegality of such a business. There is a chain of connotation linking DTV to ‘job’, ‘workers’ and in turn to ‘torture’, ‘kidnapping’ and ‘murder’ as practices that narcos usually engage with as part of the business. Next, I analyse how, stemming from the articulation of DTV as a “business”, DTV is also constructed as the terms and conditions of working in *el narco*. Under this conception, DTV is linked to the rules of working in ‘this business’ and, in turn to ‘beatings’, ‘torture’ and ‘murder’ as a ‘fair’ currency ‘to pay for mistakes’ within cartels and as a way to convey a message to rival cartels. I then move on to the construction of DTV as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment. Practices of ‘torture’, ‘violence’ and ‘murder’ are linked to feelings of ‘joy’, ‘excitement’, ‘adrenaline’ and ‘power’. Finally, I discuss how practices of mutilation, torture and murder are linked to religious rituals such as the cult of the holy death. Note that given the sensitive nature of the data discussed in this chapter, such as participants’ explicit engagement in practices of torture and murder; most of the quotes are anonymised to ensure full confidentiality to participants.

7.1 DTV as a business

Drug trafficking is articulated in the narco discourse as ‘any other business’ (Dionisio) that requires workers to have qualities such as leadership and courage and to be ‘disciplined’, ‘clever’ and ‘loyal’. Accordingly, drug trafficking is also normalised as just like any other occupation [*oficio*]: “Cultivating and smuggling drugs was an occupation that I learned and performed like the best gardener” (Rigoletto). Working in drug trafficking is also constructed as a possibility for career progression, which entails narcos’ possession of attributes that are usually required and praised in legal careers, such as ‘acquisitiveness’, ‘loyalty’, ‘courage’ and ‘efficiency’. In this regard, drug trafficking, as a business, provides individuals with similar possibilities to other jobs. For example, drug trafficking provides them with the possibility of becoming subjects of knowledge: ‘I learned’, ‘I was trained’, ‘I was taught’. As it was the case with Yuca and other research participants: “I was trained in a ranch to use fire arms”; “I was trained to be a sniper” (Dionisio), “I learned how to be aggressive” (Pato), “I was trained for three years. Each year you learn something different...like in a school” (anonymous).

The conception of drug trafficking as ‘any other business’ is not something new and it has been widely studied by mainstream and critical literatures (Aguilar, 2014; Cruz, et al., 2013; Dell, 2015; Osorio, 2013; Rios, 2012; Solís-González, 2013). What is noteworthy, however, is that drug trafficking violence (DTV) is also understood as part of ‘this business’. Drug trafficking is constructed as a ‘job’ [*trabajo*] that provides workers [*trabajadores*] with the opportunity to work in different areas according to their personal skills: “...from distribution to recruiting. At the beginning my job was selling drugs, collecting money from other dealers and kidnapping [*levantar*] people” (Canastas). What seems odd in this quote is that selling drugs, distributing drugs and kidnapping people are equally constructed as a ‘job’. The main difference between legal jobs and drug trafficking is that in the drug trafficking business workers are also required to be “...able to do whatever it takes to do the job. The bosses want efficient people that get the job done. If you need to kill, torture, make people disappear, bribe politicians, kill mayors who do not want to cooperate: you do it!” (anonymous).

In constructing DTV as a ‘normal’ business the narco discourse also recurrently compares narcos’ violence to that of the military or the police, and it even evokes militaristic terms such as ‘major’ [*comandante*], ‘intelligence squads’, ‘deserters’, ‘martial discipline’ and qualities such as ‘loyalty’, ‘courage’ and ‘stoicism’. As Facundo said: “to me it was a normal job, like the job of a military man or a cop...we were also trained under a martial discipline”. In this quote, not only is DTV normalised but, more significantly, the narco subject is positioned vis-a-vis the military and the police. Law enforcement individuals and narcos are portrayed as actors performing similar roles with few differences. As explained by a narco who worked for ‘both sides’, as a police officer and as a narco: “the only difference was that when you work for the government we were backed up by a warrant” (anonymous). That is, violence produced by state actors and narcos is essentially the same with the ‘only’ difference being that the military and the police are legitimised by law. As Tabo explains: “The military does the same or even worse things than we did in the cartel. They also torture people, they also kidnap people... That is their job and many of them, like us, did not like it but they had to do it because it was their job. Same with us,

but we did not have the uniform". Thus, DTV and the violence produced by state institutions are understood in the narco discourse as two sides of the same coin.

The concept of the DTV 'business' in the narco discourse entails the main principles of capitalism, such as the law of supply and demand, as well as logistics and management strategies such as recruitment, efficiency and productivity. Due to the 'high demand', the drug business is constructed as a "twenty-four seven job. There is no Christmas or holidays for us" (Canastas). Drug trafficking is constructed as an unrelenting business, which implies a high demand for employees: "we were always recruiting because there are never enough hands in this business" (anonymous). Recruitment is constantly evoked in the narco discourse, not only as an area comparable with human resources in an enterprise but also as a key process for cartels considering that an imperative of the business is to kill those employees who either betray or steal from the cartel. As one narco put it, part of the job of those recruiting people is also to eradicate the 'rats', 'traitors' or drug addicts who "...jeopardised the stability of the business or betrayed the bosses" (anonymous).

The narco discourse assumes that employees, especially those at 'the base' of the pyramid, are casual workers, which leads to a high turnover of personnel and therefore a need for constant replenishment through recruitment: "We knew that our base [street dealers] was not reliable and that most of our hitmen would sooner or later end up either in jail or shot dead" (anonymous). Casual workers, those who are not part of the 'payroll' [*nómina*] are thus assumed to be disposable: "...we did not care too much about them because we knew there were many more where they came from" (anonymous). In this quote, 'where they came from' means from poor neighbourhoods where this narco used to recruit little boys and teenagers. As Canastas put it, evoking the 'easy life' logic: "poor neighbourhoods proved the best places to recruit because poor boys always desire what they cannot afford: the best trainers, TVs, cars, gold chains, money. I would just come and ask: who wants to make easy money?"

There is, however, a higher stratum of workers who are considered less disposable depending upon the position they occupy within the hierarchy of the drug cartel and how specialised they are. For example, those closer to individuals positioned at the highest levels of the hierarchy are chosen more carefully: "I was chosen to protect the commandant because I already know how to use weapons. They knew I was in the military, so they would not have to train me. That is why they chose me to protect one of the most important men in the cartel" (anonymous). In this regard, 'training' and 'teaching', as well as 'disposable' personnel, are recurrently evoked in the narco discourse as part of the process of sustaining the business. Teaching is constructed mainly in terms of mentoring: "Sometimes, according to the abilities of the new guy, he would have to be taught by one of the older ones. We would not leave a young boy on his own" (anonymous). Interestingly, the training for some narcos implied a similar routine to that of the military. One narco, for example, was trained, along with five other teenagers, in "how to charge [arms], how to use them in a moving vehicle, how to position ourselves and how to shoot. They [the shooting instructors] put lambs at a certain distance and we had to shoot them in particular areas of their body so we could practice our aim".

The narco discourse also evokes a bespoke business terminology, which entails not only a division of labour but also the affirmation of murder, abduction and torture as part of the services provided by narcos. That said, not all narcos engage in the same violent practices. As stated, there is a clear division of labour, which dictates the type of activities that each position entails. For example, “stakes [*estacas*] were the ones in charge of collecting the money [*cuota*] and abducting [*levantar*] people” (anonymous). In contrast to hitmen, *estacas* do not make money principally out of murdering, torturing or kidnapping people. Their job description mainly entails collecting money. In this sense, *estacas* are expected to engage in violent practices only as a means to an end, ensuring that they collect the money “without missing a peso” (Canastas). Therefore, as one of the narcos put it, the job description of *estacas* would imply that individuals need to have both accountancy skills as well as the temper and ability to “abduct, beat and torture people if necessary” (anonymous). In the case of bodyguards, their job is to defend particular individuals within the cartel. In contrast to *estacas* and hitmen, they are not expected to use violence in any context apart from defending the person they are guarding.

In terms of practices of torture, kidnapping and murder, there is an underlying pragmatic logic which produces DTV as a business. The narco discourse constructs the practice of torture and the disposal of bodies as regular activities within the business, which, as with other activities in drug trafficking, are designed to optimise time and resources. The disposal of bodies, for instance, was explained with a time optimising logic: “...we piled the bodies during the week, because we had to drive them far away from the city...On the weekends we drove our trucks full of bodies... and like that every weekend” (anonymous). The disposal of bodies is also constructed in strategic terms to save time and resources: “some of them were not even dead so it was part of the punishment...we did not have to spend more time torturing them” (anonymous). In this case, the narco discourse evokes a cost-effectiveness rationale. In order to avoid the human and economic costs of transporting them, the victims’ bodies were piled in a warehouse. At the end of the working week, on Fridays and Saturdays, the driver’s job was to transport the bodies from the place of execution or torture, to the ranch located at the outskirts of the city. In the second quote, there is a similar logic of optimising resources. Instead of paying somebody to torture somebody for hours, or even days, narcos torture individuals to a point at which they remain alive but are unable to move: “...you mutilated them for a couple of hours and then threw them into the pile, so they spent their last moments surrounded by body limbs and dead people. That saved us lots of time” (anonymous). In this way, DTV is rationalised and understood as part of the ‘business’ and as one of them explained it, ‘nothing personal’.

The articulation of murder, kidnapping and torture as a ‘job’ in the drug trafficking business is grounded in the logic of the ‘easy life’ discussed in chapter 4, and the understanding of violence as something normal discussed in chapter 6. In this framework of thinking, one can understand that the narco subject is positioned as a ‘worker’ who, informed by neoliberal values, responds to the increasing demand for labour in the drug trafficking business. I interpret this business logic, epitomised in the statement ‘whatever it takes to do the job’, as the result of what Sayak Valencia (2012) defines as slasher capitalism.

Slasher capitalism is the exacerbated neoliberal economic model that, in contexts of poverty such as Mexico, causes extreme violence (Valencia, 2012). In turn, this economic model gives rise to the logic of the criminal

entrepreneur (Saviano, 2008: 128), which normalises violent dystopic practices, such as murdering, torturing people and smuggling drugs, as acceptable jobs. As one narco put it: “Would you question a butcher for killing pigs or chickens? No! You do not question him because it is his job. The same with us. Our job was killing people”. In this statement, the narco subject is positioned as a worker whose job is as ordinary as that of the butcher. As a result, murder is normalised and articulated as an everyday practice equivalent to the butchery trade⁸, and murder is stripped of any ethical, moral or legal considerations and reduced to any other ‘job’. In this way, the narco discourse not only normalises DTV, it constructs it as something that, as any other occupation, would be done regardless of who works in the business: “It has to be done” (Paco); “If it was not me, somebody else would have done it” (Difos). Not surprisingly, the narco subject is desensitised to murder and the suffering of others: “When I killed people I felt nothing” (anonymous). Similarly, another narco said: “I honestly felt nothing. I had no compassion for my victims”. DTV is, indeed, part of the ‘job’: “I knew that somebody had to do that job [murder and disposal of bodies]” (anonymous). In this manner, practices of DTV are conceived as mundane or ‘normal’ practices in ‘this business’.

7.2. DTV as the terms and conditions in “this business”

Before discussing how the narco discourse constructs DTV as terms and conditions (i.e. the rules) of working in the business of drug trafficking, it is necessary to contextualise this. In narco discourse, the ‘terms and conditions’ or working in ‘this business’, are what scholarship on the subject refers to as violence resulting from inter- and intra-cartel fighting (Chindea, 2014). Although such violence has been registered before the launch of the war on drugs in 2006, its public display is a relatively new phenomenon (Ovalle, 2010b; Lantz, 2016). During the 1980s and 1990s, and at the beginning of the millennium, violent confrontations between and within drug cartels were confined to remote areas outside the cities, the countryside or a minority of cities along the U.S. border (Aguilar, México 2014: Narco para principiantes, 2014). However, since the launch of the war on drugs in 2006, the communication process and the levels of rivalry between drug cartels have changed dramatically (Lantz, 2016). As a result of the state’s militarised crackdown on drug cartels, narcos responded with new ways of conveying messages to society, the government and rival cartels. By 2008, public displays of “battered human heads, some thrown into plazas or placed on car rooftops”, bodies hanging from meat hooks, and “video-postings of torture and beheadings on YouTube, became part of drug cartels’ modus operandi” (González, 2009: 69).

La familia michoacana, a drug cartel that originated in the state of Michoacán in 2006, was the first cartel to use *corpse messaging*. This is defined as handwritten messages that drug cartels leave on dead bodies: “usually it involves a mutilated body, or a pile of bodies, or just a head, and a handwritten sign, for example “talk too much”, “so that they learn to respect”, or “you get what you deserve”” (Finnegan, 2010). Sometimes the message is the body itself. For instance:

⁸ This should not be considered as indicating that animal slaughtering is or should be regarded as unproblematic. However, in this context it serves to highlight how the narco discourse compares murder, which is typified as a crime under the law, and animal slaughter for food, which is not only legal but still widely socially accepted in Mexican society.

'dedos' are those victims found with their index finger cut, which means they were most likely killed for alerting the authorities...those found with their tongues cut out were likely executed for the same reason. Men who have sexual relations with cartel members' girlfriends are often found castrated with their testicles stuffed into their mouths (Lantz, 2016:261)

This type of messaging within and between cartels is the terms and conditions, or the acknowledged code, that narcos adhere to when accepting to work in the business of drug trafficking. The meaning of the gruesome ways in which drug cartels torture and expose their victims' bodies can be regarded as symbolic. Drug cartels have adapted to the 'war on drugs' by increasing the level of violence because they are not willing to give away what they have reached over the last two decades: power, status and money (Bunker et al., 2010). The new discourse of war and violence has produced a new tragic and unique lexicon in regard to describing drug trafficking crimes: "*encajuelado*: put body in car trunk; *encobijado*: body wrapped in blanket; *entambado*: body put in drum; *pozoleado* (also *guisado*) body in acid bath" (Bunker et al., 2010: 146). This is part of the lexicon evoked in the construction of DTV as the terms and conditions of working in 'el narco'.

DTV as terms and conditions is constructed in two different but related ways. First, DTV is used as a deterrent and to convey a message to cartel employees. Violent practices, such as torture, beatings and, ultimately, cruel murders, are portrayed in the narco discourse as the legitimate currency with which people involved in drug trafficking pay for mistakes, treason and theft: "we would put their hands in sulfuric acid when they stole from us because for us it was not fair that after trusting them with the money they betrayed us" (anonymous). Similarly, another narco explained: "we would hit them [*tablazos*], torture on the fingers, apply electric shocks. We would break each finger with tweezers, so the others understood that in this business this is how you pay for your mistakes" (anonymous). If the offense was too serious, such as stealing big sums of money and running away, or swapping drug cartels, then: "they would end up *pozoleados* or *entambados*" (anonymous).

At first glance, one may find it hard to understand why these forms of corporal or capital punishment are deemed 'necessary', would it not be enough to make the 'employees' pay for their debt or, at least, avoid crippling them for life? This rationale, however, misses two key points. First, drug cartels work illegally. Therefore, in the absence of bureaucracies that would allow for the control of 'employees', drug cartels resort to violence in order to impose discipline on them. (Bergman, 2012). Furthermore, as Rotella (2012) explains, to outsiders DTV might seem "frenzied and murky" but for the participants "the violence had very specific codes and objectives, a logic all its own. The choice of the victim, the method and the location were all calculated to make a statement ...It all has meaning. It is like a language" (in Williams, 2012:266). This type of violence can certainly be understood as a 'symbolic language'. However, considering the relevance and the regularity of gang violence highlighted in the narco discourse, one can also understand this violence as an extension of the violence that the narco subject is already used to engaging with on a regular basis. As I explained in chapters 5 and 6, the narco subject engages in violent practices as a way to perform street masculinity which is also understood as the 'only' way to survive in poor neighbourhoods. Hence, I interpret this violence as an extension of the gang warfare which is highlighted in the narco discourse but so far ignored in the literature studying DTV in Mexico.

Those who betray or steal from the cartel are dehumanised and portrayed as ‘rats’ who must pay with a gruesome death for their ‘betrayal’: “the rats stink. If you let one survive, then the others will come and when you least expect it you have a rats’ nest... we would make the rats suffer, we mutilated them slowly, torture them or behead them and put their heads where the others saw it” (anonymous). Similarly, other narcos refer to snitches as ‘cockroaches’ or ‘pigs’: “...the cockroaches are the snitches who told the police all the information about our security houses, bank accounts and gave the names of the bosses... that was high treason and that is why we had no mercy” (anonymous). Another narco said: “we would take them to the ranch where we thought they belonged. To us they were a bunch of dirty pigs, so we would slaughter them as such”. As it has been widely analysed in violence studies, dehumanising the victims is an essential element used by perpetrators in order to undertake inhuman murders (Ovalle, 2010b, Cavarero, 2009). In this sense, the tropes ‘rats’, ‘cockroaches’ and ‘pigs’ are not an innocent coincidence but rather a discursive element, often evoked in contexts of ethnic wars, and reproduced in the narco discourse. Alternatively, seen through the lens of the criminal entrepreneur, these acts of violence can be understood as serving “a regulatory purpose as part of a larger system of social control” within drug cartels “instead of being mere haphazard expressions of monstrosity” (Lantz, 2016: 254).

In addition to DTV as a way to convey a message for employees within the same cartel, DTV as terms and conditions is also referred as a way to convey a message to other cartels: “we chopped the bodies up into little pieces, put them in black bin bags and threw the bag in front of their family’s house. We always left a message [*pancarta*] stating why they died and why the cartel killed them... other times we just left them *encajuelados* in a family’s car” (anonymous). In this sense, DTV as terms and conditions can be understood as expressive violence; it is a type of violence that does not have an economic objective, as is the case in DTV as a business, but rather seeks to make a statement. That is, as discussed above, violence itself, through the victims’ tortured bodies, serves to send whatever message the perpetrators want to convey to rival cartels. As one narco put it:

between cartels it is a different story. There is always a competition between who can do more than the other. If they kill one of our men, we would kill two of them. But not just kill them and that is it! We would make sure that their bodies were found by their bosses when they least expected it. In one occasion, I sent two gift boxes [containing the limbs and the heads of two men] to the boss of the rival cartel just when he was coming out of his daughter’s holy communion. It was unfair for the poor family but that was the idea. You mess with us, we will screw you up twice! (anonymous)

In this quote one can appreciate the difference between DTV as a business, and DTV as a way to convey a message to drug cartels. It is clearly stated that ‘between cartels it is a different story’ in reference to other types of violence that narcos engage in. As Williams put it:

Even what initially appears to be senseless and gratuitous violence has its own logic and rationale. From this perspective, many of the beheadings, which have become commonplace since 2006, and other grotesque actions such as disfiguring corpses or hanging them from bridges, can be understood as a rational part of a strategic competition designed to intimidate rivals. In effect, the drug trafficking organisations are using what in military parlance is called “strategic communications” (2012: 266)

Ultimately, death is also part of the terms and conditions, or the ground rules, of working in the business of drug trafficking. That is, death is normalised as an exchange currency, as a pact that is signed when accepting work in drug trafficking: “when you get in this business you know the deal, you can die at any moment” (Canastas). Murder, torture and abduction are articulated as the order of things in the business of drug trafficking: “this is how it works, you murder those who do not pay the bribe we ask [*cuota*], those who betray the cartel, those who give information to other cartels. You torture people to obtain information from them or to make them pay for mistakes they made” (anonymous). In this sense, death and torture are accepted as way to pay debts or mistakes in drug trafficking: “I was sure they would kill me because I stole a lot of drugs. I knew how things worked...I told them, I understand, I myself did it many times” (anonymous). This is not to say, however, that the narco subject is produced in the narco discourse as a fearless individual. I discuss this further in section 7.4 when I examine the cult of the holy death.

Ultimately, there is an assumption of a common awareness of the conditions of engagement and interaction in drug trafficking. The construction of DTV as terms and conditions, is the underlying rationality that explains what otherwise would be understood as illegal, immoral or even unthinkable (i.e. torture, kidnapping and murder). The logic of the narco discourse dictates that there is ‘no mercy’ because the rules, or the ‘deal’, are unequivocal and subjects are made responsible for their fate: “I did not have mercy on those that I tortured because I thought that they were there for a reason. I thought that it was their fault because they knew what they were doing” (anonymous). Interestingly, there is a sense of reciprocity: “...why would they have mercy on me if I did not have it with others?” Another narco said: “When I was kidnapped, I thought that they were going to kill me because I never hesitated to kill a person...To me it was just simply my turn. I killed a lot of people and now it was my turn to be murdered”. The pact in the business of drug trafficking is as simple as it is macabre. As a narco explained, in relation to practices of torture and mutilation: “we do it to them, and maybe somebody will do it to us”. This is the price for enjoying the benefits of the ‘easy life’ discussed in chapter 4. As Jaime put it: “working in this business is risky. No doubt about it but nothing in this world is free. We all have to pay a price. I thought that it was worth it, I would die in a horrible way but I was also having the best life I could have”. For other narcos, however, DTV provided them with non economic gains which are conceived as of equal importance as money and material gains.

7.3 DTV as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment

DTV is also constructed as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment in the narco discourse. Practices of DTV are constructed as something that provides excitement: “I liked having fire arms, beating people, insulting people and humiliating them...it was exciting” (Rigoletto). Another narco said: “torturing people got me really excited, that was my passion”. Torture is likewise articulated as a practice that empowers the narco subject, which, in turn, provides them with ‘pleasure’. This pleasure is constituted as the opportunity to inflict pain on other subjects and to have control over their bodies. Inflicting pain on others, in turn, is linked to ‘power’: “I liked hearing the screams. It was music to my ears. It made me feel powerful” (anonymous). DTV is even conceived as a hobby and as something that provides subjects with high ‘adrenaline’: “My hobby was releasing

adrenaline by shooting things and people. I liked hearing the screams. Sometimes we would go to a small town and shoot in the air. We would laugh out loud at how people cried and got scared” (Dionisio). In this quote, shooting people and scaring people is linked to releasing adrenaline, which implies that there is a sadistic satisfaction to be gained from people’s fear. Similarly, DTV is recurrently linked to ‘happiness’: “The first time I hit a man I liked it. I felt that I was releasing all my anger and I wanted more... [violence] made me feel happy” (anonymous).

Furthermore, stemming from the sense of power that DTV provides, ‘revenge’ is conceived as a perk of working in ‘el narco’: “When they had just joined the cartel, we [the bosses] asked them: who do you want us to kidnap [*levantar*]? We would go for that person, so the new guy would take revenge and if they wanted it to kill him. We told them, “if that makes you happy then kill him!” (anonymous). DTV was also constructed as something ‘addictive’: “The more you see the more you get used to it and the more you want” (Difos). Rigoletto explicitly put it this way: “I was so addicted to violence that sometimes I hit myself”. And Yuca as well: “I was the classic man looking for a fight. Once you start in this business violence becomes like an addiction”. In this way, DTV is constructed as a source self-empowerment through intimidation and ‘fear’, which are conceived as a source of ‘respect’: “I wanted people to be afraid of me, I wanted them to respect me” (Rigoletto). Pato explained: “I was the one who asked the narcos to give me the job. I saw how people feared them and I wanted to be feared as well. I wanted respect”. Again, I interpret this construction of DTV as an extension, or as the escalation of gang violence which is also constructed in the narco discourse as a practice that empowers young men. What is essential, in both cases, is the understanding of ‘respect’ in terms of ‘fear’.

Because DTV is often described as gratuitous and heinous (Lantz, 2016; Ovalle, 2010b), DTV as a source of adrenaline, happiness or excitement, is perhaps less intelligible than the previous conceptions of it as a ‘business’ and as ‘terms and conditions’. However, as I noted earlier, practices of violence are not something new to the narco subject. In fact, as I discussed in chapter 6, violence is constructed as something ‘natural’, something occurring on a regular basis in the ‘jungle’. Also, if we try to understand DTV as a source of adrenaline through an ethical or moral prism, then DTV is unnecessary and sadistic. As opposed to the construction of DTV in instrumental terms, as a business and as the terms and conditions of working in this business, DTV as a source of excitement, adrenaline or empowerment is the end rather than the means. This refers back to the logic of the ‘easy life’ which entails not only the possibility to obtain material object but also the opportunity to gain nonmaterial things such as respect, that were not available through other means: “I worked with them because I wanted to be respected, to be feared” (Tigre). Similarly, Rigoletto said: “I wanted respect and I wanted power. In my arrogance, I raised my hands and yelled: I am the master of the world”. This type of violence gives rise to the logic of necro-empowerment.

Necro-empowerment is a process that transforms conditions of vulnerability or subalternity into the possibility of self-determination, power and agency (Valencia, 2012: 84). These processes are framed and informed by the economic model of slasher capitalism discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Hence, these processes of empowerment are based on dystopic practices such as torture, murder and kidnapping, which are not only conceived as profitable but also as a source of empowerment. As Williams points out, this type of violence also

serves as a “channel for self-definition and self-assertion: *killing provides a sense of power* for those who are alienated and disenfranchised and does so whether it is purposeful or purposeless” (Williams, 2012: 273, emphasis added). In this sense, DTV as a source of excitement and adrenaline is not gratuitous, it has the purpose of empowering the narco subject.

7.4 DTV as a religious practice

Overall, as discussed above, practices of DTV are constructed in secular terms in the narco discourse. However, certain violent practices that are constructed in religious terms can also be considered as DTV since they are linked to specific drug cartels and to the business of drug trafficking. In this section I discuss ritualistic practices that involve torture and mutilation as offerings in exchange for narcos’ protection. In particular, the narco discourse associates these practices with a religion, also referred to as a cult, known as the holy death. These practices are linked to ‘rituals’, to ‘offerings’ and to ‘sacrifices’ which, in turn, enable ‘torture’, ‘mutilations’, ‘decapitations’ and ‘murder’ as a trade-off for ‘protection’.

Since the 1980s there are different cults that have been associated with particular drug cartels. For example the cult to San Malverde is linked to the cartel of Sinaloa, San Judas Tadeo is considered the saint of drug traffickers, and the cult to the holy death is associated to the Zetas cartel (Maihold and Sauter, 2012; Astorga 1995, Sánchez, 2009; Bunker et al., 2010; Córdova, 2011; Edberg, 2004). The narco discourse only highlights the cult of the holy death which can be described as

a set of ritual practices offered on behalf a supernatural personification of death. The personification is female, probably because the Spanish word for death, muerte, is feminine and possibly also because this personification is a sort of counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe...The origin of the cult is uncertain; it has only been expanding recently. The cult appears to be closely associated with crime, criminals, and those whose lives are directly affected by crime (Freese, 2005: 1)

The holy death is referred as both a religion and as a cult in the narco discourse. However, given the particular meaning attached to it, the holy death is better understood as a cult which refers to “a group of individuals whose beliefs and/or practices are unorthodox or extreme in nature...” (Bunker et al., 2010).

The cult to the holy death is constructed in the narco discourse as a metaphysical source of protection against evil and a painful death. Different religious practices and cults are articulated as a source of protection: “I think that we did it for protection because we wanted to feel that we were protected by something superior. Every time we committed a crime we offered it to her in exchange for protection” (anonymous). In this manner, the narco discourse justifies narcos’ engagement in different rituals which involve torture, mutilation, animal slaughter and murder. The cult of the holy death entails symbolic practices in order to ensure money, justice, protection and safety, in addition to practices of mutilation, torture and murder:

We drew a star. A pentagon, a five points star and in each point, you must put a figure of the holy death. You light up candles of different colours: gold for money, green for justice, white is life and black is for protection and safety...You light up the candles and then you can start doing your rituals with animals and then with people. We must spill human blood in order to make a pact with Satan and to make a pact with the holy death. (anonymous)

According to the narco discourse, the holy death requires blood, torture and murder in exchange for protection. This positions the narco subject as a passive and helpless subject vis-à-vis a paranormal entity: “we had to do what the holy death asked you to do. You hear voices when you make the pact, and the death or the devil tell you what they want: ‘bring me the blood of a child a certain age, or a blond baby” (Anonym). In this quote the phrase ‘we had to’ implies obligation, the desires of the holy death are assumed to be unquestionable, rendering the narco subject helpless and, therefore, not responsible for the violence carried out in her name.

In contrast to the self-responsibility acknowledged by the narco subject regarding other types of DTV, the violence linked to the holy death is articulated in terms of duty rather than in terms of pleasure or business. The cult to the holy death is explicitly associated with “a satanic cult. You commit to worship the holy death above all. At the beginning you just put an altar, candles, some food and flowers but later on you are forced to kill people” (anonymous). Again, the narco subject distances himself from the actions that the holy death ‘forced’ him to do. Following a dogmatic logic, the desires, rituals and violent requests attributed to the supernatural entity referred to either as the holy death or Satan, are taken for granted under the assumption that ‘the holy death claims death’ (anonymous). Drawing upon this logic, the narco discourse justifies actions that otherwise would have been conceived as problematic, even in the business of drug trafficking. For example: “the holy death asks you to kill your own friend and even if you don’t want to, you have to kill him because if it’s not him it’s you” (anonymous). In this quote, there is an implication that in any other circumstance the speaking subject would not kill a friend. However, the desires of the holy death are constructed as unquestionable. Murdering a friend is justified because otherwise their own life would have been in danger: “you cannot question the holy death, you cannot question Satan because your life is in their hands” (anonymous). In contrast to the rational and pragmatic logic through which the narco discourse explains and justifies torture and murder as part of a business, as a way to re-pay a debt or even as a pure source of adrenaline; violence linked to the holy death is constructed as a ‘tribute’: “you have to offer tributes to the holy death. That is, you have to offer them lives” (anonymous).

Even though the logic and justification for violence linked to the rituals of the holy death and DTV are set apart; the practices of torture, mutilation and disappearing of bodies are very similar in both cases. The only difference is the symbolic meaning attached to each of them. For example, the decapitation of bodies, as a form of torture by chopping the person’s head off when they are still alive, is portrayed as one the common ways to seal a pact with the holy death: “we would chop their heads off and put the blood in a wine glass” (anonymous). The meaning of decapitating people is different when this practice is linked to drug trafficking as a business: “decapitating people was one of the ways we preferred to kill people because it was quick, and we would use the head to send a message” (anonymous). In this quote, beheading people is linked to a technique of murder that both saves time and serves the purpose of sending a message.

In a similar way in which money is considered too little to pay honour or economic debts in drug trafficking, death is not enough to please the holy death:

cruelty is related to worshipping the holy death. The cult not only forces you to kill people but also to make them suffer. It is not the same to put a person into the acid as it is to hook him to a chain and lower him little by little and listen to his agony (anonymous).

Again, the supernatural entity is made responsible for the cruelty with which narcos torture and murder their victims. Murders and torture are constantly portrayed in ritualistic terms 'tribute', 'worship', and 'offer': "we mutilated people at parties, it was a way to worship the holy death and offer them to her" (anonymous). Moreover, engagement with the holy death justifies narcos' sadistic behaviour: "After I made the pact with the holy death I was more bloodthirsty, more sadistic and paranoid" (anonymous). The narco subject is, therefore, positioned as helpless to what is represented as the holy death's desires: "I once killed a person and I did not know how. My friends said that I stood up and I shot the man in the head and that their body guards did not do anything." (anonymous). In this way, the narco subject is not only made oblivious to his own actions but implicitly situated as a victim of the holy death's 'supernatural powers'. Thus, an effect of worshipping the holy death is that "...you become more sadistic. You come up with new ideas of how to make people suffer slowly. We used to put men alive into a tree shredder and with the resulting mince we would feed the lions we stole from a circus" (anonymous).

The narco discourse repetitively articulates worship to the holy death as a duty, as something imposed on narcos, especially those belonging to a particular cartel: "To me all those things were normal because it is what we used to do in our cartel" (anonymous). In this quote, the cult to the holy death is normalised as part of the identity of being a member of this cartel. Other narcos, however, conceived this cult as an imposition from the cartel:

I was forced to worship the holy death. I did not want to do it at the beginning, but they told me I had to worship her. They asked me to draw a tattoo, but I did not accept. It was a woman who introduced me to it. We were in the bedroom and she made me say a prayer that she had on her back as a tattoo. I had a supernatural experience. When I finished the prayer, the windows smashed, the light bulbs burned out and her face started to distort (anonymous)

In the above quote, the holy death is endowed with supernatural powers which, in turn, justifies the narco subject's involvement in this cult. The emphasis of the 'supernatural' natural powers of the holy death is a way to respond to those who would question the veracity of the cult and, consequently, question his own actions such as abducting babies in public hospitals to offer (i.e. murder) them to the holy death. In this way, by establishing the veracity of the holy death's supernatural powers, the narco discourse practices of torture and murder are framed as a means to appease the holy death and disavow personal accountability:

We had different techniques to torture people. We used tweezers to take their teeth out, we removed their toes and fingers with tweezers, we hung them by their feet and put their heads in water, we applied electric shocks. We took their eyes out with a spoon. We offered all that suffering from our enemies to the holy death. (anonymous)

This construction of DTV brings to light the main assumptions of the narco discourse. The world is understood as a hostile place, where survival of the fittest prevails and where the life of the poor is considered as disposable; the cult to the holy death can be understood as a response, or as a resistance, to the condition of vulnerability of the narco subject. The terms and conditions are, indeed, acknowledged by the narco subject. However, as one of the narcos said: “the main point was to have a proper death. I just wanted that my mum had a corpse to bury”. What is more telling about the cult of the holy death is that, besides the gruesome and highly problematic practices in which narcos engage with, the purpose of these rituals is not to have a good life but rather to have a dignified death. As discussed in the previous chapters, the meaning of life in the narco discourse is attached to ‘suffering’ and constructed as ‘meaningless’. Conversely, the meaning of ‘death’ is linked to ‘relief’ and constructed as an escape of what is seen as ‘worthless’ life.

7.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I showed how practices of DTV are discursively enabled in the narco discourse in four ways. First, drawing on the logic of the 'easy life', practices of DTV are constructed as a business and as the terms and conditions of working in the business of drug trafficking. I argued that violent practices are conceived in the narco discourse as something impersonal since it is part of the 'job'. In this sense, the narco subject is positioned as a criminal entrepreneur who, in the exacerbated neoliberal economic model that prevails in Mexico, or as Valencia (2012) calls slasher capitalism, responds to the demand of a dystopic market. In this sense, informed by the 'easy life' logic, DTV is normalised and, as any other business, it requires employees with entrepreneurial qualities such as discipline and efficiency.

Practices of DTV are also constructed as the terms and conditions, or the ground rules, of working in the business of drug trafficking. The underlying logic of this construction is very similar to the logic of violence as 'natural' and 'necessary' as explained in chapter 6. It is assumed that the way to deal with conflicts or disputes between or within cartels is through gruesome violence. The different ways in which drug cartels torture and dispose of the bodies of their victims, either their own employees or those of rival cartels, can be understood as a symbolic language through which drug cartels convey messages to either prevent their employees from stealing or betraying the cartel, or to show rival cartels their power. Alternatively, I argued, we can understand this type of violence, or symbolic language, as an extension of the gang warfare that prevails in poor neighbourhoods.

The narco discourse also constructs DTV as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment. In contrast to the previous two constructions in which DTV is constructed as impersonal, as a punishment or even as a symbolic language in the business of drug trafficking; in this case DTV provides the narco subject a source of pleasure and power. In this sense, practices of DTV are conceived as the possibility to transform the conditions of vulnerability of the narco subject into self-determination and agency. Finally, practices of DTV are also linked to a cult to the holy death. This cult involves practices of beheading, mutilation of both animals and human beings as an offering to the holy death. The main purpose of this cult is to ensure protection and, above all, a dignified death.

8. CONCLUSIONS

“People think we are different, but we are not. We feel the same. I know the stuff we did isn’t right but that does not mean we do not suffer as well” (Difos)

In the light of the lack of academic studies engaged in studying the perpetrators perspective and, in response to the urgent need to provide a more comprehensive understanding of drug trafficking violence in Mexico, this thesis set out to examine how practices of DTV are discursively made possible by and for narcos. Guided by a discourse theoretic approach, I have shown that practices of DTV are constructed in four ways: a) as a business, b) as the terms and conditions of working in the business of drug trafficking, c) as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment, and finally, d) as a religious practice. I argued that these constructions of DTV are enabled in the narco discourse through intertwined discourses of poverty, gender and violence.

The first discursive building block of the narco discourse is poverty which, as I have demonstrated in chapter 4, draws mainly on the construction of poverty in terms of relative deprivation, as opposed to poverty as the lack of basic needs which is typically assumed in the literature addressing DTV in Mexico. The narco discourse takes for granted that poverty, as a lack of basic needs, is a ‘natural’ and ‘fixed’ condition. Such condition frequently leads to drug addiction and the engagement of poor boys and youngsters in street gangs, who eventually drop out of school. Therefore, it is taken for granted that poor boys ‘have no future’ in the legal labour market. In this sense, the narco discourse reproduces traditional discourses of poverty which portray the poor as ‘the other’ and the dichotomy evoked by the Mexican state discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The poor are, indeed, constructed as essentially different from the rest of the society.

From this understanding of poverty the logic of the ‘easy life’ emerges. This trope refers to working in the business of drug trafficking. This is one of the most prevalent constructions in the narco discourse which entails a very different understanding of narcos’ engagement in drug trafficking and DTV. In contrast to most of the literature addressing DTV in Mexico, the narco subject does not evoke his engagement in the ‘easy life’ as his ‘only’ way to survive but rather as his ‘only’ way to gain access to material goods and privileges which he believes he is entitled to as much as the rest of society. In this way, in the context of a money-oriented society such as Mexico, the logic of the ‘easy life’ not only entails having access to expensive brand clothes and luxurious cars. The ‘easy life’ provides the narco subject with the opportunity to be part of ‘them’ (the affluent middle class and beyond). What is remarkable is that the narco discourse highlights that there were an abundance of job opportunities available in the informal market that would have provided the narco subject with an ample if not extravagant living. However, narcos’ involvement in DTV is constructed in the narco discourse as a ‘choice’. In this regard, the narco is positioned as a free subject who chooses to live a short and hedonistic life which entails a significant risk of ending in imprisonment or worse a gruesome death. This is the price of the ‘easy life’ which

is conceived as worth it if it provides the narco subject the opportunity to gain prosperity and give some meaning and purpose to his life, even if this is fleeting.

The second building block of the narco discourse is gender. I argued that the narco discourse reproduces traditional discourses of gender, especially on the construction of masculinity that stems from the culture of machismo that prevails in Mexico. What is fundamental in the narco discourse is the understanding that men are not *essentially* violent, brave or emotionless. In contexts such as poor neighbourhoods, men are raised to be violent, to exhibit bravery and are expected to suppress their emotions. In contrast women's identities are, indeed, essentialised in the narco discourse. Women are assumed to be naturally vulnerable and dependent on men. Interestingly, men can behave or adopt characteristics that are understood as feminine, such as showing emotions such as, crying or show feelings of fear or pain. These emotions, however, are allowed in private spaces only. Public spaces such as the neighbourhood are thus constructed as manly areas where men have to perform and perpetuate the roles of 'true men'. In this regard, the privileged masculinity in the narco discourse is the street masculinity. This masculinity draws on machismo ideals and enhances particular behaviours such as drug addiction, aggression and violent survival strategies which are conceived as key to not only subsisting but also prospering in poor neighbourhoods. This is a relevant aspect highlighted in the narco discourse which little studies have paid significant attention to in the understanding of the production and reproduction of DTV.

Central to the understanding of the logic of the 'true man', and the way in which masculinity is constructed in the narco discourse, is the contradictions entailed within this logic. As I discussed in chapter 5, although the narco subject recognises and accepts the demands of street masculinity, such as in reproducing the idea that male promiscuous behaviour and voracious sexual appetite is 'natural' given the 'uncontrollable' sex drive in men, there is clear tension when the narco subject speaks of domestic violence a common accompaniment to such a mind-set. In particular, male commissioned domestic violence is constructed as a situation that triggered feelings of frustration, helplessness and unbearable pain which is constructed as one of the main sources of enduring pain for the narco subject. In this way, I argue that in this context the narco discourse implicitly contest male violence, in contrast to the parallel construction of violence as 'natural' and 'necessary' as I discussed in chapter 6.

The third discursive building block of the narco discourse intertwines the main presuppositions of poverty and gender. In general, the narco discourse constructs male violence as something 'natural' and 'necessary' in order to survive in poor neighbourhoods which are recurrently referred to as 'the jungle'. One of the main assumptions of the narco discourse is that poor boys are in constant danger. Given their physical weakness, children are regularly exposed to being verbally and physically bullied by older boys. The neighbourhood is constructed as 'the jungle' where survival of the fittest prevails. In response to this everyday exposure, children and young men revert to two main coping mechanisms. First, poor boys join street gangs not only because this social group provides them with a sense of identity. Initially, children join them in order to have the protection of the gang. The second coping mechanism is taking drugs. Drug use is constructed in the narco discourse as an escape from the constant and pervasive threats which abound in the 'jungle'. Using drugs, however, is mainly constructed in terms of drug abuse which, in turn, leads to violence. Drugs, such as cocaine, crack and pills, are linked to violent

behaviours and engagement in criminal activities such as theft, vandalism and, eventually, drug trafficking. What is essential is that both, street gangs and drug abuse are inexorably linked to death. The narco discourse takes for granted that young men can die either from an overdose, stabbed or shot to death by rival gangs.

The most significant type of violence highlighted in the narco discourse is domestic violence. This is associated with the subject position of the father evoked as one of the main causes why the narco subject engaged in DTV. As discussed in chapter 6, there is a recurrent theme across narcos' narratives relating violent practices and the fantasy of killing their father. In this sense, the narco subject engaged in violent practices, as part of the gang and later as drug traffickers as a way to channel their feelings of anger and frustration against their fathers. Notably, however, once the narco subject is in the position to harm or kill his father he declines this opportunity. However, practices of torture and murder are still carried out as way to indirectly take revenge against the figure of the father by proxy.

After domestic violence, the narco discourse recognises three types of violence: gang violence, prison violence and self-inflicted violence. As mentioned before, gang violence is constructed as 'natural' in poor neighbourhoods. Street masculinity precisely responds to the key role that gang violence plays in the everyday life of young men in poor neighbourhoods. The performance of masculinity therefore entails engaging in regular gang warfare. In this sense, gang violence is constructed in different ways, from self-defence to what seems to be gratuitous and cruel violence against rival gangs. Crucially, the logic of the latter is also replicated and amplified in the construction of DTV against rival cartels. Gang violence includes practices of torture and humiliation of rival gang members and ultimately it also involves murder. Prison violence is constructed in similar terms to gang violence. The context of the 'jungle' is therefore replicated in prison where men are impelled to join, or create, a gang in order to have some protection from other men. In some cases, instead of gangs, their groups are established by members of drug cartels. Prison violence is constructed in the narco discourse as even more extreme than urban gang violence. The narco discourse brings to light the high levels of corruption of the prison system and how drug cartels continue to operate and flourish, and in some cases how they are in de facto control of particular prisons. In fact, as one of the narcos put it, it is in prison where men learn to be more violent. Finally, self-inflicted violence and attempted suicide are recurrently evoked in the narco discourse as the culmination of and an ultimate expression of resistance against the other forms of violence identified. In the context of the 'jungle', life is conceived as 'worthless' and 'meaningless'. The meaning of death is therefore constructed as a final 'escape' to a life of constant suffering. In this sense, life as constructed in the narco discourse is futile and valueless.

The central contribution of this thesis is, to first and foremost provide a detailed and systematic analysis of each discourse illuminating how they enable practices of DTV. In the following sections, I discuss other significant and tangible contributions of this study.

8.1 Methodological contribution

One of the main contributions of this research is to have provided an original set of data which accounts for narcos' perspectives a much neglected area of research. As I have shown in chapter 1, there is a considerable gap in the literature regarding the perpetrators' perspectives in relation to drug trafficking violence (DTV). Considering the sensitive nature of this topic, this gap is not surprising and is in fact understandable but not justified if we are to develop a true understanding of DTV. That said, as I have discussed in chapter 2, there are, indeed, ways to address this gap without jeopardising the researcher's and participants' physical safety. One of them, as in the case of the present study, is to interview former narcos who have undergone a complete rehabilitation process and who still receive emotional support. In this regard, further research exploring narcos' perspectives can be undertaken in the facilities of one of the twelve rehabilitation centres of Cristo Vive (or equivalent) in different cities in Mexico.

Equally important, this study has offered a unique mixed methods approach to the investigation of drug trafficking violence in Mexico. That is, I employed ethnographic methods to generate data and a discursive theoretic approach to analyse the data generated during fieldwork. In contrast to most scholarship addressing this subject matter, this thesis did not start with *a priori* conceptions or ideas regarding DTV or narcos. As I discussed in chapter 2, my research followed an inductive approach which allowed participants to guide discussions, speaking about what they considered relevant. In this way, guided by the principles of grounded theory, the focus of this thesis emerged from data. Using the qualitative life story interviews proved a fruitful method to both establish an effective rapport with participants and allow participants to speak freely about their experiences of DTV. Bearing in mind that interviews addressed extremely emotional and sensitive issues, it was also very helpful that interviews were organised in such way that participants had the opportunity to share their experiences of how their lives of suffering and crime changed drastically after they finished their rehabilitation process in Cristo Vive.

Finally, this empirical study of DTV adds to the increasing body of literature addressing 'emotions work' and self-care strategies for researchers investigating sensitive and violent topics. As I explained in the self-reflexivity section, the task of transcribing my interviews proved not only time consuming but also emotionally exhausting. Therefore, I suggest qualitative researchers consider that self-care strategies should be observed as a priority not only during fieldwork but also in the process of analysing data, particularly when this entails long processes of transcription and translation. In addition, I also recommend maintaining a self-reflexivity diary in which researchers keep a record of emotions and reactions to their own data, not only in order to be transparent and accountable about our emotions but more significantly in order to identify exactly what, amongst all the possible topics addressed in the research, causes a more emotional reaction. Identifying what topics prove more upsetting would later help when identifying ways to cope with and minimise emotional distress in the future.

8.2 Recommendations for policy making

The contribution of this research also lies in providing a new critical framework for how we may think of drug trafficking violence (DTV). This thesis brings to the fore a holistic framework which sheds light on how practices of DTV are enabled, produced and reproduced in discourse. The value of embracing a discourse theoretic

approach is that it elucidates the specific ways in which DTV is discursively constructed. Hence, this thesis offers a new understanding of DTV which opens the debate for more effective ways to tackle and prevent DTV in Mexico. That is, violence should be also understood as a social construction. In this sense, the main findings of this thesis can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at: a) addressing drug addictions as a health issue b) demystifying the ideals of the 'true man' c) tackling gang violence in poor neighbourhoods. I discuss each in turn.

An underlying assumption of the narco discourse is that poor children and young men would 'inevitably' become drug addicts. Drug addictions, in turn, are linked to diverse violent practices as I have shown in the empirical chapters. However, paradoxically, tackling and preventing drug addictions is not considered as key in preventing and tackling DTV. Therefore, in the light of the key role attributed in the narco discourse to drug addictions, this study suggests that greater efforts should be made in order to help children and young men suffering from drug dependency. This suggestion should not be understood in terms of reproducing the dominant discourse and the unattainable goal of a world free of drugs. On the contrary, this paradigm reinforces the social stigma imposed on drug addicts which is clearly appropriated by the narco subject. In the light of the findings of this research, it would make an important difference if drug abuse is socially recognised as a health issue.

Another area which is thus far overlooked in drug policy making is the production and reproduction of *male* violence, especially in the context of poverty. As I have shown in this study, although male violence is not naturalised, it is conceived as necessary to survive in poor neighbourhoods. Therefore, more attention must be paid in the construction of masculinities in Mexico. In particular, a policy targeted to desmitify the logic of the 'true man' is needed in poor neighbourhoods. In addition, and of equal relevance, this policy should be designed in parallel with a policy addressed to prevent and minimise domestic violence. As I discussed in chapter 6, domestic violence is conceived as a key experience that triggered and justified the narco subject's violent behaviour and engagement in criminal activities, including drug trafficking.

Finally, related to the previous recommendation, I suggest policy makers focus on addressing gang violence. In fact, more attention should be given to the particular social role that gangs play in the life of children and young men. In this sense, I suggest policies not only focusing on preventing or tackling gang violence but also policies that encourage the creation of less violent gangs. For example, reinforcing policies and government programmes that enable young males to channel their energy and frustrations on less violent activities such as playing sports, providing them with safe environments where they can produce graffiti which can be seen and recognised as a form of art. Also, I suggest that, at a local level, policies address the particular ways in which local gangs and those susceptible to membership of such can be encouraged to spend their free time in non-aggressive activities. For example, in the North of Mexico, there is a style of music which is known as 'Colombian style'. This can be also used as a way to channel gang's rivalry in a non-violent manner, by organising and providing safe spaces where youths can engage with erstwhile rivals and break down barriers of division between youths whose interactions are otherwise characterised only by violence. Some of the research participants suggested that these type of events are organised informally by gangs but usually ends in confrontation, which is not surprising considering their being orchestrated as another theatre of conflict between gangs absent of security safeguards

or for that matter any aspiration for rapprochement. Therefore, this and other local policies present an opportunity to co-opt initiatives formulated by the youths themselves to promote reconciliation and mutual understanding or at a minimum provide a forum for resolution of grievances and management of conflict other than through the perpetual cycle of street violence which may in time help in reducing gang violence.

Overall, the recommendation for policy makers is to focus on targeting the underlying discourses of machismo and street masculinities that prevail in poor neighbourhoods as well as consistently providing gangs safe spaces and activities through which young men can constructively channel their energy, spend their free time and even cultivate and enhance their artistic talents such that an alternative life can be seen to be not only attainable but desirable. Such recommendations are not particularly novel nor ground breaking nor intended to be but reflect to a large extent prevailing strategies of NGOs and some governments throughout the world to prevent or minimise youth violence in a sustainable manner through addressing the root causes. However, the contribution of this thesis is to provide an abundance of first hand evidence and analysis borne from the narratives of the narco themselves that a genuine political will and investment in such interventions self-evidently offer the most viable and sustainable opportunity to arrest this phenomenon and turn the tide on the pervasive climate of violence and fear which has persisted under policy to date.

8.3 Recommendations for future research

In terms of the dual conception of poverty evoked in the narco discourse, poverty as a lack of needs and poverty in terms of relative deprivation, fundamental questions raised by this study are how and at what point has poverty turned into relative deprivation? What factors contributed to such understanding? One of the surprising findings of the narco discourse is that unemployment is not evoked by the narco subject as a reason to engage in drug trafficking as it is mainly assumed in most of the literature. In this regard, a further study could explore the type of jobs that poor children and young men find in the informal economy. This study could potentially yield relevant data to develop more effective economic policies that would allow these individuals to develop their entrepreneurial potential.

In light of the key role that the narco discourse attributed to machismo and the performance of street masculinities, further research is needed on exploring how gangs are linked to the business of drug trafficking. There is a large number of studies addressing poverty and gang violence, however the literature remains silent on the association of gangs and DTV. In general terms, regarding machismo in Mexico, further ethnographic studies are needed in order to explore and identify new meanings of being a man in Mexico in the twenty-first century. The most iconic studies of masculinities in Mexico were conducted in the 1960s by the sociologist Oscar Lewis and subsequently in the 1990s by anthropologist Matthew Gutmann. Therefore, there is a need to conduct new ethnographic research in order to identify how and in what ways masculinities are being constructed in Mexico. In particular, further research about how masculinities are performed by middle- and upper-class men and how this cascades to the narco subject. Furthermore, in relation to the performance of masculinities, there is also a need for new studies exploring fatherhood in Mexico. A key question raised by this research is why and

how the figure of the father is still considered as the head of the family even though the role of the breadwinner is now shared, or sometimes only held by the mother.

8.4 Final reflection

One of the initial reasons to conduct this empirical research was to challenge dominant discourses, the 'common sense', and the claimed 'truths' regarding DTV in Mexico that so far have caused incalculable damage to the social fabric. The so-called war on drugs, and the current drug prohibition paradigm led by the U.S., has cost millions of dollars and countless lives in Mexico. Critical literature in DTV, which is the body of literature this thesis adds to, has clearly demonstrated from different disciplines and approaches that the 'war on drugs' only begets more violence. What is more alarming is that mainstream approaches still reproduce and justify the U.S. discourse. In this sense, I strongly believe that it is our responsibility, as academics, to assist policy makers, NGOs and human rights activists to have a more comprehensive understanding of such a complex topic to provide the necessary tools to develop sustainable preventative strategies.

Through this research, I hope to encourage critical interpretations of drug trafficking violence in Mexico and provide the foundations for further research addressing the perpetrators' perspectives. As Grayson (2008) points out, the only way to achieve political transformation is by changing the way we think which constitutes the discourses upon which we base our socio-political activity. In providing a new critical approach, this thesis provides the basis for moving away from policies and militaristic strategies, and the analytical arguments to continue challenging the dominant discourse on DTV. More significantly, this thesis offers the perspective of 'the other' who, as Piochas said: "... *temenos mucho que decir, la cosa es que nadie quiere hablar con nosotros*" [we have a lot of things to say, the thing is nobody wants to talk to us]". Let this research amplify such voices, not in an attempt to glorify or justify narcos' practices of violence, but rather as attempt to acknowledge narcos' subjugated knowledge which, as I have shown in this study, provide key insights into how to prevent DTV in Mexico and similar contexts where neoliberalism has substituted the welfare state, where the logic of the 'true man' prevails and where violence is socially accepted as a practice 'necessary' to survive.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet

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Hoja de información sobre el proyecto de doctorado: ‘Percepciones y valores de niños y jóvenes en México’

¿Quién realiza esta investigación?

- La presente investigación es llevada a cabo por la candidata a doctorado Karina García, quien actualmente se encuentra estudiando en el área de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de Bristol en Inglaterra.
- El proyecto de doctorado es financiado por el Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT).

¿Qué propósito tiene el estudio de investigación en Cristo Vive?

- El propósito principal de este estudio es explorar, entender y analizar las percepciones, valores y experiencias de jóvenes que estuvieron expuestos al uso de drogas, alcoholismo y violencia.
- La casa de rehabilitación de *Cristo Vive* fue elegida debido a que alberga personas de todas las edades lo cual es necesario para el presente estudio. Además, la casa fue elegida gracias a su gran reputación y excelente prestigio a nivel nacional e internacional.

¿Qué derechos tienen los participantes?

La participación en este proyecto es completamente voluntaria y los participantes tendrán derecho a:

- 1) Hacer todas las preguntas que consideren necesarias antes de aceptar ser parte del proyecto.
- 2) No contestar preguntas si participan en entrevistas o historias de vida si no quieren.
- 3) Retirarse de cualquier actividad sin explicar los motivos de su salida y sin ninguna consecuencia negativa.
- 4) Pedir no ser audio o video grabados durante las actividades en las que participan.

¿Cómo se registrará la información para esta investigación?

La mayoría de las actividades serán audio-grabadas por la investigadora. En el caso de las entrevistas e historias de vida, los participantes pueden elegir no ser grabados si así lo desean.

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Independientemente de las grabaciones de audio y video, la investigadora tomará notas a mano que una vez transcritas en computadora, se destruirán en un lugar seguro.

¿Qué uso se le dará a la información recolectada en las actividades antes mencionadas?

Toda la información recolectada en este proyecto será utilizada para fines académicos. El principal uso que se dará a la información recabada será para la tesis de doctorado de la investigadora Karina García.

Además, la investigadora podrá utilizar la información recolectada para escribir artículos académicos, como material de análisis para conferencias académicas o pláticas dirigidas al público en general.

¿Qué medidas de seguridad se utilizarán para proteger la identidad de los participantes?

Los nombres y otros datos de identificación personal de los participantes no serán revelados bajo ninguna circunstancia.

La investigadora usará la información recolectada durante el trabajo de campo sin mencionar nombres específicos sobre quién o quienes proporcionaron dicha información.

Para asegurar la completa anonimidad de los participantes, la investigadora asignará seudónimos para identificarlos sin revelar su verdadera identidad.

¿Qué beneficios tienen los participantes si deciden ser parte del proyecto de investigación?

- No hay remuneración económica ni en especie para aquellos que deseen participar. Sin embargo, el gran beneficio para los participantes será que tendrán la oportunidad de expresar sus ideas y sentimientos libremente. Es decir, la investigadora les dará el espacio y la voz para que sus ideas, temores y sugerencias se den a conocer a través de su tesis doctoral.
- El principal propósito de esta investigación es dar voz a los jóvenes para que sus perspectivas sean tomadas en cuenta, al menos en el ámbito académico. Por lo tanto, el mayor beneficio será para la comunidad de niños y jóvenes del país en un futuro.

Appendix 2: Consent form

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i. Por favor coloca tu **nombre o firma**, en caso de tenerla, en el recuadro al lado de cada afirmación **si estás de acuerdo** con ella. En caso de **NO** estar de acuerdo con alguna afirmación escribe la frase: **"No doy consentimiento"**.

- 1. Estoy de acuerdo en participar en la actividad "Historia de vida":
- 2. Estoy de acuerdo en que mi entrevista sea video grabada:
- 3. En caso de que mi testimonio sea video grabado, doy consentimiento para que el video sea reproducido sin que mi rostro sea distorsionado:

ii. Por favor coloca una cruz en el recuadro al lado de cada afirmación si estás de acuerdo con ella:

- 4. Entiendo que mi participación es voluntaria. Es decir:
 - a) Puedo rechazar la invitación a participar sin ninguna consecuencia adversa.
 - b) Puedo interrumpir la entrevista de "historia de vida" en cualquier momento sin que se me pregunten las razones de mi decisión de retirarme.
 - c) Puedo no responder a preguntas que me haga la investigadora, sin que me pregunte la razón porque no quiero responder o participar.
- 5. Entiendo que en si doy mi consentimiento para que mi testimonio sea video grabado, la investigadora podrá utilizar este material con fines académicos y de investigación general sin que mis datos personales sean revelados.
- 6. Entiendo que si doy mi consentimiento para que mi testimonio sea reproducido con mi rostro distorsionado la investigadora podrá, igualmente, utilizar este material con fines académicos y de investigación general sin que mi rostro y mis datos personales sean revelados.

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[Redacted]
Nombre del participante

[Redacted]
Firma

20 Nov 14
Fecha

Karina García
Nombre del investigador

[Redacted]
Firma
[Redacted]

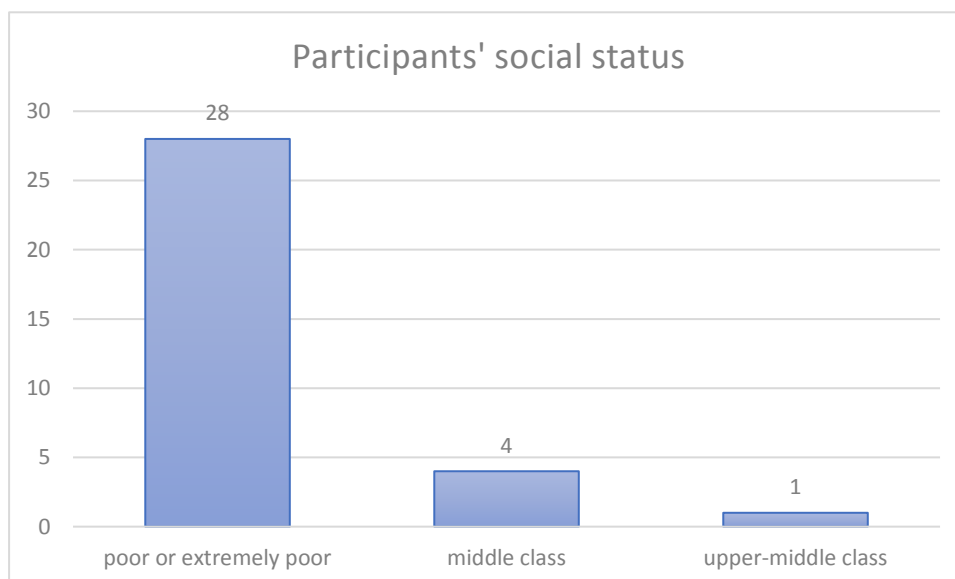
20 Nov 14
Fecha

No.	Initials	Pseudonym
1	AL	Alan
2	BAL	Balente
3	BIG	Bidegaray
4	CAN	Canastas
5	CHI	Chito
6	CHU	Chufu
7	CRI	Cristian
8	DAV	Dávila
9	DF	Difos
10	DIO	Dionisio
11	EA	Eduardo
12	FC	Facundo
13	FUS	Fausto
14	IN	Inmaculado
15	JAI	Jaime
16	JG	Jorge
17	KV	Kevin
18	LAT	Lamberto
19	MEM	Memo
20	PAC	Paco
21	PAL	Palomo
22	PAN	Pancho
23	PEQ	Peque
24	PIO	Piochas
25	PIT	Pitufo
26	PON	Ponciano
27	PT	Pato
28	RIG	Rigoleta
29	ROR	Rorro
30	TAB	Tabo
31	TIG	Tigre
32	WIL	Wilson
33	YUC	Yuca

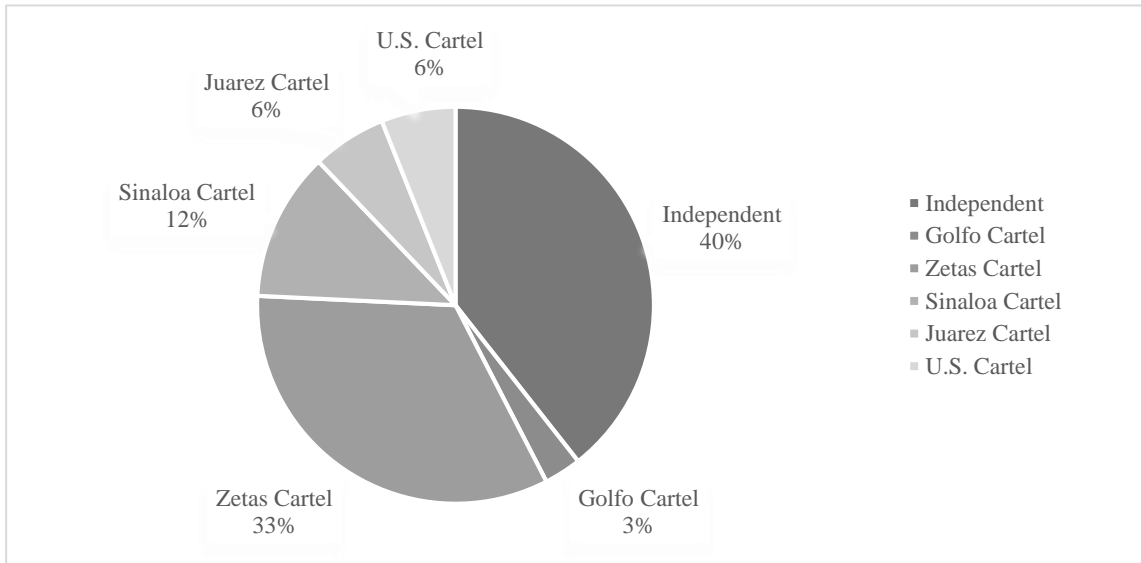
Appendix 4: General characteristics of participants

Participants' socio-demographics.

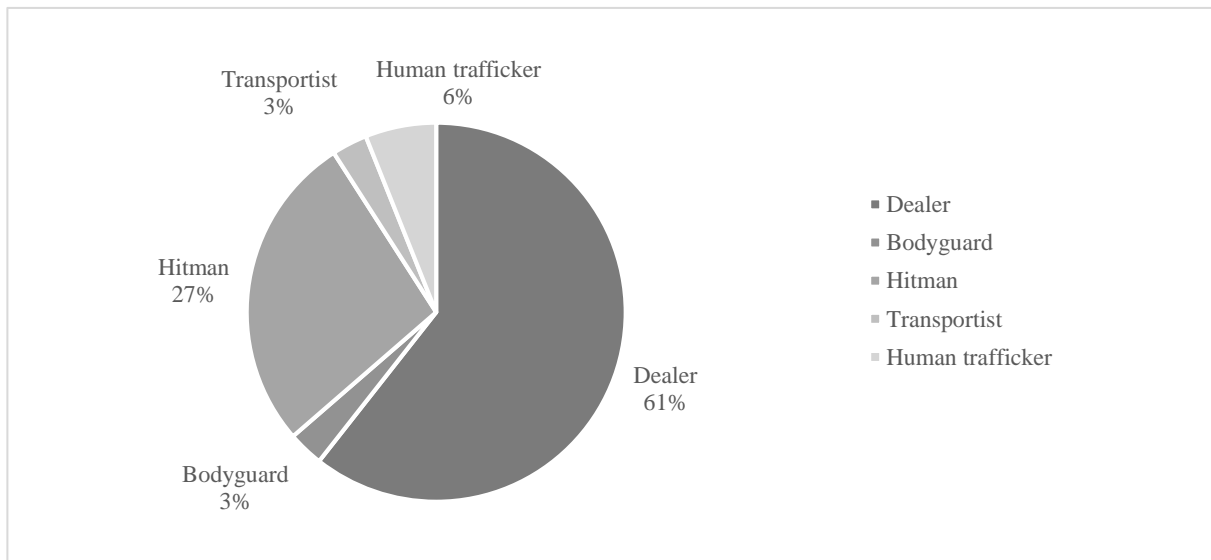
	Age	School years
Min	18 years	0 years
Max	44 years	12 years
Average	31.1 years	7.2 years



Participants' membership to drug cartels.⁹



Participants' main activity within drug trafficking.



⁹ Participants who did not want to reveal their membership to a particular drug cartel were classified as 'independent'.

Participants' Origin.

