

Values, Perceptions, Conceptions, and Peacebuilding: A Qualitative Study in a Mexico City Neighborhood

Mauricio Meschoulam

Abstract

Mexico is not a country at peace. Organized crime and its related violence have increased since 2006 in several areas of the territory affecting the population's sentiments on peace. Using a social constructivist approach, this case study explores the process involving the social construction of values, perceptions, and conceptions in regard to organized criminal violence and peace possibilities in Mexico. This study employs semi-structured interviews of 15 residents from a neighborhood in Mexico City. Findings show that the process of social construction is primarily based on individual experiences and observations, being reinforced by daily conversations. Residents have constructed their perceptions that the basic causes of criminal violence are rooted in the structures of the political and economic system, which, if correctly addressed, would foster peace. Besides offering future lines for research, this study informs policymakers of the need to design local policies focused on mediating structural and systemic transformations.

Introduction

Despite the Mexican government's fight to restore stability and institutional bureaucratic rule, organized crime and its related violence have increased over the past few years (Guerrero, 2011). This is a cause of peacelessness in the country. Violent conditions have influenced public opinion and perceptions of the population (Consulta Mitofsky, 2010; 2011). Applying the conceptual framework of social constructivism, some of the key elements of peacelessness might rest deep inside the values that social actors construct (Assmann, 2008; Fagan, 2010; Stenmark, 2009). This study addresses a gap existing in research related to peacebuilding in Mexico, as it considers the formation of perceptions and conceptions about organized criminal violence and the possibility for peace within the country. The study seeks to find out how the residents of a particular neighborhood in Mexico City socially construct their ideas about the current state of violence, the role of the government and criminal organizations, and the possibilities for peaceful coexistence.

The general perception about the Mexican government and its efficiency in the fight against criminal organizations is very poor (Buendía & Laredo, 2010; Consulta Mitofsky, 2010, 2011). But how are those perceptions socially constructed? What is the role of the mass media or other factors such as the oral conversation in the construction of those perceptions? The objective of this study is to understand the process through which these types of conceptions are socially constructed, and the extent to which that process has an impact on the values of peace among interviewees living in the target neighborhood.

Knowing more about such a process may have direct implications for a public policy related to peacebuilding. One assumption is that the condition of peace involves not only the absence of violence, but also the absence of the *fear* of violence (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2013). In a country whose citizenship is affected by fear and terror, peace is not realizable unless such feelings are properly addressed. Understanding more about the process through which perceptions and sentiments such as fear or terror are formed may help policymakers in their decision-making. Similarly, knowing more about how peace is socially constructed among citizens is important for both leaders and policymakers (Gawerc, 2006), as it would assist them in more pro-active policy design that helps to build harmony, social cohesion, and integration within communities.

This article starts by examining the problem of violence in Mexico and exploring the conceptual framework upon which this qualitative study is based. The methodology utilized to collect and analyze data will be addressed, as will the findings.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Mexico is rated 133th out of the 162 nations measured by the Global Peace Index for absence of violence and fear of violence, among other factors (IEP, 2013). After its historical struggle for stability, from 1930 to 2006 Mexico had almost 8 decades of apparent calm and safe coexistence within its borders. Underlying that apparent peace, however, were the structural conditions of peacelessness (Alger, 1987). In particular, drug cartels and criminal organizations became more powerful with the passive and active consent of the single ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI] (Snyder & Duran, 2009). Once the PRI left office, the way opened for full democratic development, social liberties, and freedom of expression. Unfortunately, the decentralization of power also brought with it the advance of criminal organizations. The first non-PRI president, Vicente Fox, chose to tackle this issue in a limited way (Chabat, 2010). From 2006 until 2012, President Calderon launched a frontal war against the organized crime cartels, and the cartels fought back. As a result, there is a generalized state of violence in many areas of the country (Guerrero, 2011). Preliminary findings indicate that the impact of violence has had a negative effect on the population's perceptions, attitudes, and conduct (Consulta Mitofsky, 2010, 2011; Meschoulam, 2012). More research is needed to understand what tools could be used to revert adverse social consequences.

Applying a social constructivist framework (Assmann, 2008; Fagan, 2010; Stenmark, 2009), this study begins with the assumption that realities, as we know them, such as violence or peace, or the possibility to transform them, do not come naturally, but are socially constructed within societies or groups. Perceptions and conceptions are two distinct cognitive processes. Perceptions initially come from the sensorial experiences with the environment and form the basis for how visual-spatial representations are organized (Suwa, 2003). Conceptions are how those perceptions are interpreted. In other words, a perception is how a person regards certain context, and a conception is how that person thinks (Ellis, Taylor, & Drury, 2007). Research

indicates that sometimes previous conceptions or knowledge can guide or determine perceptions of reality (Conception and perception of ambiguous figures, 2011; Halberstadt, Winkielman, Niedenthal, & Dalle, 2009). A social constructivist approach would argue that such previous knowledge is the product of socially agreed-on understandings and considerations (Fagan, 2010).

Following constructivist discussions in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and education, Schneider and Ingram (1993) explain that policy design is the product of underlying assumptions, values, norms, rationales, social understandings, and shared knowledge about realities within human groups. The shared meanings inform and influence policy issues and design. Understanding social construction about how humans interpret their surroundings and the world has resulted in the formation of rules, norms, laws, and identities, and has an impact upon policy issues, design and acceptance. According to Schneider and Sidney (2009), further empirical research should assess the process through which social constructs are formed and how they may affect understandings, assumptions, norms and rules, and ultimately, policy concerns. This last aspect is critical for this study.

The Research Questions

This study has been guided by central research question: What is the process by which values, perceptions, and conceptions about the current state of organized criminal violence and peace possibilities for Mexico are socially constructed among 15 interviewees of a specific neighborhood in the capital of the country? The study also explores the role that the government and criminal organizations have played in the perception of these interviewees regarding organized criminal violence, peace possibilities for Mexico, the role of mass media, and conversation in the process of social construction.

Methodology

Setting

The research was conducted in a neighborhood inside Mexico City, Federal District (DF). In this DF, nearly 7,000 federal crimes and 163,000 common law offenses are committed annually (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública [SNSP], 2010). The homicide rate of 8 per 100,000 inhabitants is considered low when compared to more violent areas of the country. In 2011, other cities in Mexico and the U.S. had the following homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants: Acapulco (128), Monterrey (40), Veracruz (60), Juarez (148), New Orleans (57), Baltimore (31), Detroit (48) (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal [CCSPJP], 2011). The municipality in which the research took place experienced 28,000 common law offenses in 2010, 15% of the DF. This is significant considering that this municipality has less than 6% of the inhabitants of Mexico City. This is still a much lower rate than other violent areas of the country (SNSP, 2010). The target neighborhood is considered to be one of the most secure locations in that municipality (SNSP, 2010). It

should be noted that information about the crimes under federal jurisdiction was not available.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 15 participants to represent the target neighborhood demographics. Of the 31,000 inhabitants in the neighborhood, 53.38% are females and 46.62% are males. The neighborhood age composition is 11.3% between 18 to 24 years of age, 53.6% from 25 to 64 years of age, and 10.3% people 65 years old or older (SNSP,2010). Of the 15 participants, 54% (8) were female, 46% (7) were male, 14.6% (2) were between 18 to 24 years of age, 70.8% (11) were between 25 to 64 years of age, and 13.4% (2) were 65 years old or older. Participants included two community leaders, two teachers, two local business owners, two parents, and seven citizens in other forms of employment. Procedures for contacting, recruiting, and conducting the research with participants were approved by Walden University Institutional Review Board (Approval number 03-08-13-0154608).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of 15 individual face to face interviews, conducted in Spanish, the native language of the participants. A semi structured interview protocol was used with some variations introduced to elicit additional details or ensure that each participant adequately addressed the interview questions. In addition to digital recordings, notes and signal elements about the interviews and the neighborhood environment were logged manually. The researcher's feelings and observations were noted so as to control for researcher bias (Janesick, 2004).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and loaded into *NVivo* qualitative data analysis software for codification and analysis. As data was encoded, pre-existing themes were applied. Words, sentences or entire paragraphs of the interview were selected and encoded with the purpose of discovering patterns and repetitions in the participants' responses. When a new theme emerged, a new category was created to encode that piece of the discourse. *The* software allowed the researcher to include a piece of the participant's responses into two or more categories if required, which was common during this data analysis. Some of the themes reached saturation quickly as they were common among all participants. Other themes received only a few mentions. With each interview, more themes emerged and were added to the existing ones. By the conclusion of the first six interviews, the majority of the emerging themes had appeared, and the rest of the interviews consisted of repetition of those themes. Table 1 provides a complete listing of the themes and coded elements that emerged from the interviews.

The pre-existing categories were derived from the conceptual framework of social constructivism (Assmann, 2008; Fagan, 2010; Stenmark, 2009), and from the

peacebuilding concepts of Galtung (1985, 2003, 2008) and Alger (1987, 1991). These initial categories were: Family social construction, Education and learning social construction, Religious social construction, Mass Media social construction (Newspapers, Television, Radio, Movies, Social Media Facebook, Social Media Twitter, Social Media Other, Internet Websites, Internet Blogs, Other), oral conversation social construction, Public spaces interaction social construction, Structural peace conception, Structural violence conception, and Grassroots peacebuilding conception. Some of these categories were used by the participants frequently, while some emerged only a few times during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

Member checking was conducted with each participant in order to confirm the patterns that were found in the data analysis. After all the data was analyzed and results were obtained, participants were contacted and consulted for feedback about those results. All participants confirmed the patterns noted in the results.

Transferability

The results of this research are not immediately transferable. The findings speak to the experiences of certain participants who live in a specific neighborhood in Mexico City. Nevertheless, the methodology is being replicated in other parts of Mexico City and the country. This may lead to data that would allow for contrasting with cases around the territory.

Results

The results of this study indicate that the most frequently occurring themes for participants underscored *Experience and Personal Observation*, *Structural Peace Conceptions*, and *Oral Conversation*, each theme having been mentioned by all participants. *Structural Violence*, *Corruption*, and the various ways the *Media* impacts daily life were also frequently mentioned by most participants. Table 1 provides a general overview of the frequencies for each coded thematic category, and the number of participants who mentioned that category. The top six categories will be discussed in more detail although there is overlap with some of the other categories.

Table I. Categories Coded in order of Frequency of Occurrence

Categories Coded	Frequency of occurrence during the interviews (f)	Number of participants who mentioned the theme at least once
Experience and personal observation	111	15
Structural Peace conception (Peace	96	15

possibility lies upon structural factors)		
Oral Conversation	79	15
Structural violence conception	64	14
Corruption	54	12
Mass Media: Printed	38	13
Grassroots peace conception	34	9
Experience someone close	31	11
Government not succeeding, not efficient, or negligent	30	12
Mass Media: Distrust (Participant mentions she does not trust the media)	30	12
Family social construction	29	9
Mass Media: TV	26	9
Principles and values as components of peace	26	6
Education and learning social construction	24	10
Education as a peacebuilding factor, education investment	23	11
Lack of family care or lack of parents' care	22	7
Distrust of government	19	7
Participation, engagement as citizens in public issues	18	7
Ambition (wanting always more as a cause for OC)	17	8
Situation deteriorating	17	7
Mass Media: Little or very little (I do have contact with mass media but very little)	16	11
Mass Media in general	16	10
One specific experience (Participant relates one specific experienced that greatly impacted her perceptions or conceptions)	16	10
Tough approach to OC/ we should not negotiate	15	7

Mass Media: Radio	14	8
Excessive violence (high impact violence or terrorist tactics)	12	10
Fear or terror	12	7
Mass Media: Music or Cultural programs	11	8
Mass Media: They exhibit too violent images or notes	11	6
Peace understood as links and relations	11	6
Peace understood as respect or absence of violence/ not “messing” with one another	11	8
Peace is possible	11	10
Social media	11	6
Loss of values	10	6
Organized Crime (OC) too powerful	10	7
Internet social construction	9	6
Mass Media: Not Interesting	9	5
Mass Media: I used to watch (read/listen) them, but not anymore	9	5
Mexico is not peaceful	9	8
Inner peace	7	3
Peace understood as tranquility, calmness	7	5
Mexico is peaceful	6	3
Security forces out in the streets produce me stress or impact my perceptions	6	2
Frustration, Impotence	5	3
Experience at work	5	4
Lack of social interaction, lack of links	5	4
Mexicans are naturally violent	5	3
Peace not related to poverty underdevelopment	5	5
Books social construction	4	2
Cultural social construction	4	3
Mexicans are naturally peaceful	4	3
Mexico City is less violent	4	2

than states		
OC normalized (OC is part of Mexican life)	4	2
Public spaces interaction social construction	4	3
Long time problem (Participant believe violence is a long time problem)	3	3
Mass Media: Movies	3	3
Peace is not possible or too difficult	3	2
OC is an international problem	2	1
Internet blogs social construction	2	2
Mexico or Mexicans are passive (do not act or engage)	2	2
Old age social construction	2	2
Religion social construction	2	1
Mass Media: Analysis programs are interesting	1	1
OC is not violent/lives in peace within communities	1	1
Social or political meetings social construction	1	1

Overview of Frequencies

Many themes were used by participants or emerged from the interviews. Saturation occurred for only some of the thematic categories:

Experience and Personal Observation received the most frequent mention throughout all 15 interviews (f=111). Participants expressed their life experience or observation of what they perceive as the main source of their personal construction of perceptions and conceptions about organized criminal violence and peace.

Basically, my opinion is derived from my personal experience, not from the TV, the radio or the newspapers (Interview Participant 05, personal communication, April 9, 2013).

Each day we see and learn about this kind of characters [the kingpins]. We even see it in this neighborhood; every now and then we see the drug retailers at schools, but nobody speaks out. On this matter, I am practically speaking over my personal experience; nobody stops a patrol

and says 'hey there is a guy on bike selling drugs'. We are afraid or indifferent (Interview Participant 06, personal communication, April 12, 2013).

Structural peace conception - For all 15 participants the belief was that the government should be addressing structural factors such as fostering economic growth, diminishing poverty and inequality, promoting democracy and transparency, among others, in order to build peace for the future. The need to invest specifically in education emerged as a theme among 11 of the participants ($f = 23$). Many of the participants appeared to gauge this as very difficult as they believed that government corruption is one of the main reasons criminal organizations succeed. A quote to exemplify this:

The penitentiaries are not enough; there are a lot of people there. Those prisons will turn into a hell. Who would have thought these places would actually prepare them for crime? Do we really have to begin a war in order for this people to disappear? It is very difficult. The government has to invest a lot in the brain production: education, employment, better distribution of the income in the country (Interview Participant 04, personal communication, April 8, 2013).

This is related to two other topics that were discussed by participants: *structural violence* ($f=64$), and *corruption* ($f=54$):

I don't know. What if the government is the organized crime itself? I think there is a thin line between the easy [illegal way] and the governmental way (Interview Participant 14, personal communication, May 2, 2013).

Many natives commented what I have said: that there is governmental protection to the drug lords, about the corruption and so forth (Interview Participant 05, personal communication, April 9, 2013).

Oral conversation - Participants used their daily conversation as a source of information, and therefore as a social constructor of perceptions, opinions, and ideas. All 15 participants mentioned this category often ($f=79$). Oral conversation was viewed by the participants to be more important than the impact of mass media.

[We talk about this] with everyone; there is no family talk in which we don't talk about such things: that the organized crime did this and that. With colleagues, since I have some friends that moved to Morelos state, Reynosa and so forth, and each time they come for a visit they always talk about these topics (Interview Participant 12, personal communication, April 26, 2013).

Participants stated that the *experiences of people close to them* impacted their views as well (f=31).

Every client talks about non-satisfaction. My clients with a job say they are just surviving, that they have to work all day and stuff like that. On the other hand, the ones without a job are desperate. Many clients with a family tell me their own experiences: they had been robbed, even kidnapped. I have a client whose recovery from a beating has taken over six months (Interview Participant15, personal communication, May 7, 2013).

The categories of *Experience and observation* (f=111) and *Oral conversation* (f=79) were noted much more often than the use of mass media as social constructors of values, perceptions, and conceptions. *Printed media* such as newspapers or magazines (f=38); *TV* (f=26), and *Radio* (f=14), received less frequent mentions. Distrust of mass media was expressed by 12 of the participants (f=30). Even though some of the participants did have contact with the news, they distrust what they watch or listen, especially when they personally experienced something different in the streets.

We need a better way to get the information. I don't like to ingest trash, which is why I turned the TV and the radio off (Interview Participant 10, personal communication, April 19, 2013).

I believe none of the traditional media are neutral. Some are sold out to the government, the majority; or the others that are quite leftists and want to sell the idea that things are dramatically wrong, but they are not neutral either. I recently saw my Facebook, and I saw a receipt showing how the Ministry of the Interior is paying a bribe of over 400,000 pesos to [Joaquín] López Dóriga [a famous *Televisa* anchorman]. The check is in Facebook, it has the date of May 3 2012. How can I believe in what the media say? (Interview participant 08, personal communication, April 16, 2013)

Some participants said that the mass media exhibit too violent images or notes (f=11).

For example, lately I was reading a note in a newspaper –I don't remember its name- which showed a person beheaded. What a bad taste to show off those images in the newspaper, I didn't like it (Interview participant 05, personal communication, April 9, 2013).

The fact of watching constant expressions of violence on TV psychologically affects any person. I believe the media incepts anger purposively and many other useless things. That is why to me a TV

news programs is futile (Interview participant 11, personal communication, April 23, 2013)

Many participants stated they no longer used mass media because it has, in their opinion, become less interesting or not as credible as other sources. Others stated that they still have contact but they do not necessary mold their values, perceptions, or conceptions from what they receive from mass media:

Not anymore. I used to read newspapers every day; I even used to get my subscription to some newspapers, but in the end I realized that the worst way to begin a day was by reading the news. Because most of the times the news only shows bad things, they are full of tragedy and menace: corrupt politicians, wars and so forth. That is why I seldom read the newspapers (Interview participant 13, personal communication, April 30, 2013).

Only participants below 40 years old noted that they used the Internet (f=9) or social networks such as Facebook or Twitter (f=11) for information sources. They expressed that they trusted these more than the TV or the radio.

In the society we can find better information, better food. I work at my local level, we organize debate rounds. I use social networks; the social media are also an alternative to look for other things (Interview participant 10, personal communication, April 19, 2013).

Some participants mentioned the use of excessive violence by criminal organizations, or the use of terrorist tactics (f=12). This was raised by 10 of the 15 participants. Seven participants stated at least once that they felt afraid or terrorized.

They [criminal organizations] influence the society when they -besides having fights among themselves for territory-, want to go beyond with their cruelty by performing extreme violence. This, obviously, has an effect in the society. They transmit the internal violence –among cartels- to the population in general (Interview participant 15, personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Some of the emerging themes were not mentioned frequently, but are noted in Table I. The results of this study indicate that if a participant's own experience, through a single incident, observation, or contact with crime as in a personal robbery, tells her or him that there is violence occurring in their streets and their surroundings, then a perception of peacelessness begins to build in her or his awareness. This personal experience does not have to necessarily be the result of direct contact with the organized crime related violence, but with a particular incident that is perceived as part of the social norm. After that, the person talks about their experience with their neighbors, friends, family members or coworkers, and a social construction forms as the product of that interaction that creates the perception of a violent situation. Thus, 12 of the 15 participants feel Mexico is not a peaceful country.

No, Mexico is not peaceful. Because each day besides watching the violence at the TV or hearing it in the radio, I hear it from very close people, and, well, we have experienced violence near my house or at my business. I believe nowadays Mexico is not peaceful at all (Interview participant 07, personal communication, April 15, 2013).

It is interesting to note that 10 of the 15 participants believe that peace for Mexico is possible. This peace would have to be built from the grassroots (f=34), and from structural factors (f=96) such as investment in education (f=23), eliminating structural violence (f=64), and combating corruption (f=54).

Of course it is [possible to have peace in Mexico]. We need to get involved in our affairs as a society; peaceful participation. I don't know why sometimes social participation is interpreted as anarchy. I belong to a group which supports the self-sustaining economy, the low consumption, the local organization and so forth (Interview participant 10, personal communication, April 19, 2013).

This research does not point to any significant variation among participants of different age, gender, or profession, in regard to the most frequently mentioned themes. *Experience and personal observation, Structural peace conception, Oral conversation, Structural violence conceptions, and Corruption*, remain among the most frequently mentioned themes by participants regardless of gender, age, or profession. Minor variations in other less frequently occurring categories appeared, and would have to be the subject of a future research to verify significance.

Discussion of Findings

Results indicate that for the 15 participants of this study, the social construction of values, perceptions, and conceptions about organized criminal violence and peace possibilities for Mexico is a complex process. It forms primarily through individual experiences and observations, and is deeply nurtured by daily conversation with family, friends, coworkers, clients, neighbors, and acquaintances. This process includes to a much lesser degree some elements that originate in the mass media, or for those participants below 40 years of age, through the Internet and social media. The role of these media-related social constructors, nevertheless, is not as important as the perceptions and conceptions built on the lived experiences of the participants or on conversations with their associates.

It appears that participants voiced a shared understanding about organized criminal violence as being a condition that was created and fostered within the structure of the economic and political system. The majority of participants believed that poverty, underdevelopment, and inequality, aided by a deep corruption in which the government is perceived to colluding with criminal organizations by tolerating

their businesses, formed the roots of peacelessness. In the participants' views, only addressing these structural factors will foster long term peace.

Furthermore, participants felt that true peace would have to be something that is experienced and lived in the street and in their neighborhood, and that would include social cohesion and participation. Participants seem to value what they watch, read, or listen to, as presented by the mass media, less than what they see with their own eyes, or what they are told by someone they trust. Participants below 40 years old tended to use social media as alternative sources of information to traditional media, and they seem to assign a higher degree of trustworthiness to a YouTube video, rather than to a national broadcast news personality.

Although the findings are limited to a very specific area inside Mexico City, the pattern of repetitions indicates that there might be an initial tendency showing that people are prone to disbelieve any data that collides with the own experience and observation. Some participants seemed to form their perceptions through one single but meaningful event such as a direct robbery or having personally witnessed some beheaded bodies. The strength of their own experiences seems to carry enormous weight in how they construct their understanding about what is taking place in the entire country.

Once that experience is internalized by the person, it is reinforced by the social communication in daily life, with family, at work, or in the streets. In this communication process, participants share what they have experienced and also receive the experiences of others or the hearsay about situations taking place inside or outside the neighborhood. It is through the oral conversation process, and not through contact with mass media, that the participants of this study arrived at conclusions about the causes of organized criminal violence, the possibilities for how the country might build peace for the future, the role of the government, and the role of criminal organizations. These findings may have implications for different policy formation and implementation arenas.

Theoretical Discussion

Among the 15 participants interviewed, the perception-building process is primarily a combination of personal experiences with oral communication, assisted to a lesser extent by other elements such as the media. Once the individual experiences take place, language becomes essential in joining the interpsychological and the intrapsychological activity (Vigotsky, 1986). Frawley (1997) noted that the internalization process is not a simple copy of the outside signs or understandings, but a process leading to the construction of an inner plane. This individual inner plane, as this study appears to support, is an essential piece of the social interaction that happens in the daily life of the neighborhood researched. It is important to note that the inner plane is not only the product of the individual's experience, but is also the result of the bi- and multidirectional communication that occurs before and after the individual's experience.

Three elements seem to take place in this complex process: (a) Personal experience and observation, (b) Other peoples' inputs about the individual's experiences and observations, or the experiences and observations of others, and (c)

The individuals' communication outputs to their counterparts about what they experience and see, and regarding the thoughts provoked by the interaction with others. How has this process impacted upon values, perceptions and conceptions about organized criminal violence and peace possibilities among the 15 participants of this research?

The interviews and analysis of data indicate that the most discussed themes by participants are connected to structural factors related to violence and peace. In their view, violence is not only direct aggression to human beings, but it includes other kinds of factors that damage people, such as corruption or lack of opportunities and inequality. This is not dissimilar to the conclusions that many scholars have arrived at (Alger, 1987; Galtung, 1985). These 15 participants seemed to form their conceptions not through studying the subject, but through individual experiences, observations, and oral conversations. Participants arrived at certain conclusions: peace is possible, but only if structural conditions are adequately addressed. Investment in education, promoting economic growth, reducing inequalities, and fostering opportunities, are other factors explicitly discussed by participants in this study. The need for building links, active participation, and promoting peace from the grassroots, a concept addressed by Alger (1987), were some of the repeated patterns during the interviews as well. The fact that these themes reached saturation suggests that policymakers should pay attention to them.

The role of mass media in relation to the circumstances under which Mexico is currently living is a final important theme addressed by the participants. As research in various countries indicates, some participants appear to have entered a phase of evasion of violence due to media exposure (Brandon & Silke, 2007). This might be the result of mass media causing the individual to experience added stress such that they might be choosing not to turn on the TV or not read newspapers (Meschoulam, 2012). Other participants simply do not trust what the traditional mass media says.

If confirmed by further research conducted in more neighborhoods and other parts of the country, these patterns would show that the connection between mass media and audiences is starting to disintegrate. This might mean that the mass media are less important social constructors of values, conceptions and perceptions on topics such as organized criminal violence and peace possibilities. If this is the case, it would confirm previous findings by Brandon and Silke (2007), Cho, Boyle, Keum, Shevy, Mcleod, Shah, and Pan (2003), and Paton and Violanti (2007). This provides one more potential application of the present research related to the study of peace journalism or the place of the media in peacebuilding.

Implications for policymaking

If the role of experience and conversation as the most powerful social constructors are true for a relatively calm and nonviolent neighborhood, it might be assumed that such an assessment would also be present in places where the daily experiences of inhabitants involve gun shootings, beheaded bodies hanging on bridges, continual assaults and extortion to local businesses, and kidnappings, among other violent events. The first implication of the present study is that there is a need to conduct

more research of this type. Future research to verify the transferability of these results, however, might be conducted concurrently with some of the following suggestions, as they may be deeply valued by Mexican society.

National security and law enforcement strategies should be accompanied by peacebuilding programs directed locally. These programs would have a focus on improving sustainable growth with human development, improving salaries and employment conditions, health, education, democracy, respect for human rights, combating corruption and enhancement of transparency and accountability, respect for the rule of law, justice and social cohesion.

The measures that follow are provided in response to the findings of this study. They are directed towards concentrating on peace at the structural and experiential level. The purpose of these suggestions is to address what the participants of this study referred as their main social constructors: experience, observation, and daily conversation, as connected to structural and grassroots peacebuilding.

1. *Local diagnosis and policies.* The results of this study indicated that participants assign a high value to what they directly experience and observe in their surroundings (f=111). Any action designed to impact citizens in their neighborhood vicinity might be deeply appreciated by people. According to Morse (2004), local policies should be assessed with a consideration of the nature and size of communities. The purpose of such actions is to improve relationships and collaboration within specific areas so that communities are empowered, and people think less individualistically and more in societal terms. This would build upon community strengths, encourage people to work together, practice democracy at a local level, and create local leaders for the future. In other words, issues, diagnosis, and solutions must be assessed locally.
2. *Local education programs.* Participants mentioned structural factors (f=96), and specifically, the need of education policies (f=23) as relevant aspects of peacebuilding. Collaboration projects between the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors, with the national education institutes such as Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) or the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) for the betterment of local schools and colleges, would be positively viewed by citizens. The purpose of these partnerships would be that students receive a quality education in their own areas. This may include incentives such as local scholarship programs so that students could afford to travel to receive an education from a national or international institution. This would be done with the commitment from the student that they return and apply their new knowledge in their neighborhood.
3. *Neighborhood activities.* Participants mentioned the need to promote grassroots peace policies (f=34), and the need to participate in communities (f=18), as potential factors for peacebuilding. Adequately planned neighborhood activities intended to empower communities may help in this direction. These may include gender inclusive sports programs (Nanayakkara, Culpan, & McChesney, 2010; Reid, 2006; SDC, 2005;

Wright, 2009), bicycle tours, public concerts, arts and crafts workshops. In addition, local public forums were suggested where people could express their ideas and feelings to public officials or representatives.

4. *Development of local commercial areas.* Promoting the development of commercial areas in neighborhoods. These ventures would be culturally sensitive and encourage people to get out and interact with each other. This would also help increase the peace experience, the most frequent theme during the interviews (f=111), as well as promote participation and links (f=18). This recommendation might be implemented through market places, popular exhibitions of food, dances, or creating conditions for the investment in cafés, restaurants, and businesses. The key element is promoting links and interaction between neighbors.
5. *Peace policing.* Participants from this research continually refer to personal experiences (f=111), and conversation (f=79) as the most important social constructors. Some interviewees mentioned that security forces in the streets become a stressful factor to them (f=6), which is corroborated by the PTSD study conducted in 2012 on Mexican citizens (Meschoulam, 2012). Peace policing with the purpose of enhancing the links of citizenship with their security forces might prove helpful. An example of such a policy was conducted in Brazil with the Pacifying Police Units (Turati, 2012). Specifically trained for this purpose, policemen and women helped provide a sense of security in the neighborhood without becoming a stressful factor. This police presence established a sense of credibility, closeness, and connection with people. Their function was not stopping criminal organizations or preventing crime from occurring, but in serving as a dissuasive factor that did not collide with society by becoming a stressor or a source of suspicion. According to the evidence, the neighborhood inhabitants must perceive a diminished crime rate in their surroundings in order to experience the possibility of peace. This local policy does not collide with regional or national strategies, but enhances them.
6. *Local teamwork promotion.* Fostering teamwork at the neighborhoods, local schools, and local businesses might also prove beneficial. Teamwork training can be provided by the state, by scholars, or by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This can then be extrapolated by developing actions for the benefit of the neighborhood such as remodeling a building, a park, or the public square.
7. *Crisis intervention strategies.* Participants noted the need for building more grassroots local activities (f=34) and participation in public issues (f=18). Conversely, they noted the sense of fear or terror (f=12), as well as the impact from excessive violence at the streets (f=12). The neighbors must organize to develop prevention, intervention, and postvention plans for the event of violent crisis at the local level (James, 2004). This can also be aided by the state, by scholars, or by NGOs that have experience on the topic. It would include designing and applying specific measures in the event of a violent incident. As this study indicates, a common crime event

might be as stressful to inhabitants as a high impact incident. The community is then organized by teams and leaders that become active as the crisis erupts and provide psychological triage as needed, and intervention strategies so that the impact of a violent event at the local level is diminished (James, 2004).

8. *Mass media-community dialogue.* Participants indicated that there is a high degree of distrust in mass media (f=30). Moreover, some stated that they used to have contact with media but not anymore (f=9). The mass media such as newspapers, TV, and radio, need to conduct their own market research to understand why some people are developing deep anti-media conceptions and perceptions.
9. *Peace journalism.* To help advance peace, violent events must be treated as it has been covered by the thinking of several authors in peace journalism (Galtung, Lynch, & McGoldrick, 2006). Focusing only on the violence in the incident tends to result in stressing the audience (Cho et al., 2003). Without telling untruths or omitting or disguising important information about the event, the focus of media coverage must also address the underlying factors behind the incident. Some of these structures might be structural causes or issues that may provoke such incidents in the future. The media should also include an assessment of potential solutions to those issues. This helps audiences focus on areas other than the violence of the incident.
10. *Analysis TV or radio shows.* The above noted strategies are assisted by special TV and radio shows that deeply analyze current events. These shows should be perceived by the audience as effectively balanced in terms of opinion and ideas, and should be conducted in a way that captivates the viewer or listener. Peace is fostered not by promoting certain political views or postures, but by assisting in a democratic dialogue on the issues that are crucial for the country. Different views are expressed, opinions and policies are contrasted, but in the end, the media is discussing peace, not the violence that obstructs it.

Recommendations for Research

This study opens doors for more qualitative and quantitative research. The results suggest that similar patterns might be encountered in more areas of Mexico. Therefore, more case studies similar to this one, could be conducted either inside big cities such as Mexico City, in different neighborhoods, or in small towns or places throughout Mexico (all which is now in process). There is no reason that the method used in this study could not be replicated in other countries as well. Data collected could be aggregated and might demonstrate whether experience, observation, and conversation remain the main social constructors at other violent locations, or whether the citizenship living in such areas suggest a less structural approach towards peacebuilding, with more punitive or hard line responses in regards to organized crime. Replicating studies as this one in different parts of the world, could shed more light as to what kind of relationship is being established between mass media and their

audiences, as well as exploring the actual impact that the mass media has upon the social construction of values, perceptions, and conceptions in the present era.

The development of a quantitative instrument based on the aggregated response data from multiple cases could be utilized to determine the impact of demographic aspects of the population. This type of research might provide a larger photograph, which could be more persuasive for media representatives or policymakers as to the need to foster measures such as the ones recommended above.

Conclusion

This study is about peacebuilding for a specific country which for decades has experienced a deeply-rooted structural violence. After years of deaths and struggle, there are some realities to confront. Mexico is not a country at peace, nor is it yet on the road to building peace. Part of the problem lies in the fact that there is not enough research on the topic of peacebuilding. This research is based on a conceptual framework that was adapted to a concrete space and time. The use of the qualitative approach proved adequate as an initial step for participants to speak out about their feelings and ideas.

Experience, observation, and daily conversation came out as the most important social construction factors among participants of this research who expressed their deep concern about the government strategies and the need to address structural factors for peacebuilding. Galtung (1985) explained that peace is not only the absence of violence. The participants in this study teach us something else to confirm that. Peace is not something that is located in books, or idealized by gods, angels, or ethereal philosophers. Peace is something to be experienced on a daily basis, something to be lived and observed in our surroundings. Peace is not isolating the violent ones, but fostering conditions to integrate the society, to build links and relationships; peace is talking to one another, collaborating, participating, and erasing the lines that keep us apart.

References

- Agoff, Carolina, Cristina Herrera, and Roberto Castro. 2007. "Violence: A qualitative study in Mexico. The weakness of family ties and their perpetuating effects on gender". *Violence Against Women*, No.13, pp. 1206-1220.
- Alger, Chadwick F. 1987. "A Grassroots approach to life in peace self-determination in overcoming peacelessness". *Security Dialogue*, No. 18, pp. 375-391.
- Alger, Chadwick F. 1990. "Grass-roots perspectives on global policies for development". *Journal of Peace Research*, No.27, pp. 155- 168.
- Assmann, Aleida. 2008. "Transformations between history and memory". *Social Research*, Vol. 75, No. 1, pp. 49-72.
- Bongar, Bruce; Lisa M Brown, Larry E Beutler, James N Breckenridge, and Philip G Zimbardo (eds). 2007. *Psychology of terrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brandon, Susan and Andrew Silke. 2007. "Near- and long term psychological effects

- of exposure to terrorist attacks”. In Bongar, Bruce; Lisa M Brown, Larry E Beutler, James N Breckenridge & Philip G Zimbardo (eds) *Psychology of terrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Buendía & Laredo Public Opinion Firm. 2010. “Encuesta trimestral nacional Noviembre 2010. Combate al narcotráfico” <http://www.buendiaylaredo.com/publicaciones/132/GUERRA_vs_NARCO.pdf> Accessed August 14, 2013.
- Chabat, Jorge. 2010. “Combating drugs in Mexico under Calderon: The inevitable war”. *Documentos de trabajo del CIDE*, No. 205, pp.1-24.
- Cho, Jaeho, Michael P Boyle, Heejo Keum, Mark D Shevy, Douglas M Mcleod, Dhavan V Shah, and Zhongdang Pan. 2003. “Media, Terrorism, and Emotionality: Emotional Differences in Media Context and Public Reactions to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks”. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 309-327.
- “Conception and Perception of Ambiguous Figures”. 2011. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. 76, No. 1, pp. 87-104.
- Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal, AC. (CCSPJP). 2012. “San Pedro Sula, otra vez primer lugar mundial la ciudad más violenta del mundo; Juárez, la segunda [San Pedro Sula, once more the world’s most violent city; Juárez, in second place]”. <<http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/biblioteca/finish/5-prensa/145-san-pedro-sula-honduras-la-ciudad-mas-violenta-del-mundo-juarez-la-segunda/0>> Accessed February 15, 2013.
- Consulta Mitofsky. 2010. “Encuesta nacional sobre la percepción de seguridad ciudadana en México (MUCD) Encuesta nacional en viviendas.” [National Survey on Perception of Citizen Safety in Mexico. National survey conducted in homes]. <<http://www.consulta.mx/Estudio.aspx?Estudio=percepcion-seguridadmx-2010>> Accessed February 25, 2012.
- Consulta Mitofsky. 2011. “Encuesta nacional sobre la percepción de seguridad ciudadana en México (MUCD) Encuesta nacional en viviendas.” [National Survey on Perception of Citizen Safety in Mexico. National survey conducted in homes]. <<http://consulta.mx/web/index.php/estudios/mexico-opina/366-encuesta-nacional-sobre-la-percepcion-de-seguridad-ciudadana-en-mexico-mucd>> Accessed February 25, 2012.
- Ellis, Robert A, Charlotte E Taylor, and Helen Drury. 2007. “Learning science through writing: associations with prior conceptions of writing and perceptions of a writing program”. *Higher Education Research & Development*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 297-311.
- Enríquez, Rocío. 2002. “Women and survival strategies in poor urban contexts: A case study from Guadalajara, Mexico”. *Journal of Developing Societies*, No. 18, pp. 81-97.
- Escalante, Fernando. 2011. “Homicidios 2008-2009. La muerte tiene permiso” [Homicides 2008-2009. Death has license]. *Nexos en línea*. <<http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=1943189>> Accessed January 3, 2013.
- Fagan, Melinda B. 2010. “Social construction revisited: Epistemology and scientific practice”. *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 77, No. 1, pp. 92-116.
- Frawley, William. 1997. *Vygotsky and cognitive science: Language and the unification of the social and computational mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Freud, Sigmund. 1929/2005. *Civilization and its discontents*. Buckinghamshire, England: Chrysoma Associated Ltd.
- Galtung, Johan. 1985. "Twenty-five years of peace research: Ten challenges and some responses". *Journal of Peace Research*, No. 22, pp. 141-158.
- Galtung, Johan. 2003. *Trascender y transformar*. Mexico City: Editorial Quimera, UNAM.
- Galtung, Johan. 2008. *50 Years: 100 peace & conflict perspectives*. Mexico City: Transcend University Press.
- Galtung, Johan, Jake Lynch, and Annabel Mc. Goldrick. 2006. *Reporteando conflictos. Una introducción al periodismo de paz*. Puebla: Montiel & Soriano Editores.
- Gawerc, Michelle I. 2006. "Peace-building: Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives". *Peace & Change*. Vol. 31, No. 4, October, pp 435-478.
- Guerrero, Eduardo. 2011. "La raíz de la violencia" [The root of violence]. *Nexos en línea*. <<http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099328>> Accessed June 15, 2011.
- Halberstadt, Jamin; Piotr Winkielman, Paula M Niedenthal, and Nathalie Dalle. 2009. "Emotional conception: How embodied emotion concepts guide perception and facial action". *Psychological Science* (Wiley-Blackwell), Vol. 20, No. 10, pp. 1254-1261.
- Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP). 2013. "Global Peace Index" <<http://economicsandpeace.org/research/iep-indices-data/global-peace-index>> Accessed September 14, 2013.
- James, Richard K. 2008. *Crisis intervention strategies* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Janesick, Valerie J. 2004. *"Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Merino, José. 2011. "Los operativos conjuntos y la tasa de homicidios: Una medición". [The joint operatives and the homicides rate: A quantification.] *Nexos en línea*. <<http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099329>> Accessed June 15, 2011.
- Meschoulam, Mauricio. 2012. Violencia y efectos psicosociales: el estudio [Violence and Psychosocial Effects: The Study]. *El Universal*. <<http://www.eluniversalmas.com.mx/editoriales/2012/03/57482.php>> Accessed September 23, 2013.
- Miller, Mike. 2010. Alinsky for the Left: The Politics of Community Organizing. *Dissent*. Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 43-49.
- Morin, Edgar. 1999. *Los siete saberes para la educación del futuro* [The seven knowledges for the future education]. Paris: UNESCO.
- Morse, Suzanne W. 2004. *Smart communities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass ed.
- Nanayakkara, Samantha, Ian Culpan & Jane McChesney. 2010. "Peace building and peacekeeping through sport in Asia: mission impossible?" The 4th Oceanic Conference on International Studies (OCIS IV). Auckland, N.Z: OCIS
- Öberg, Magnus, Frida Möller and Peter Wallensteen. 2009. "Early conflict prevention in ethnic crises, 1990-98: A new dataset". *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, No. 26, pp. 67- 91. DOI: 10.1177/0738894208097667.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc
- Paton, Douglas and John M Violanti. 2007. "Terrorism stress risk assessment and

- management". In Bongar, Bruce, Lisa M Brown, Larry E Beutler, James N Breckenridge, and Philip G Zimbardo (eds) *Psychology of terrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perea, Carlos Mario. 2008. "El frio del miedo: Violencia y cultura en México" [The fear's cold: Violence and culture in Mexico]. *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, No. 81, pp. 17-43.
- Reid, Heather. 2006. "Olympic Sport and lessons for Peace". *Journal of the philosophy of sport*, Vol. 33, No.2, pp. 205-214
- Rivera, Ramón. 2004. *Educación ambiental y autogestión local. Historia de la colonia* [Environmental education and local self-management. History of the Colony]. Mexico: Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades, UNAM <<http://www.tuobra.unam.mx/publicadas/040501140831.html>> Accessed September 25, 2013.
- Schneider, Anne and Helen Ingram. 1993. "The social construction of target populations". *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 2, pp. 334-46.
- Schneider, Anne and Sidney Mara. 2009. "What is next for policy design and social construction theory?" *The Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 103-119
- Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP). 2010. "Información de seguridad pública". <<http://portal.secretariadoejecutivosnsp.gob.mx/?page=informaciond-de-seguridad-publica>> Accessed July 27, 2011
- Snyder, Richard and Angélica Durán. 2009. "Drugs, violence, and state-sponsored protection rackets in Mexico and Colombia". *Colombia Intemacional*, No.70, pp. 61-91. Brown University.
- Stenmark, Mikael. 2009. "Three theories of human nature". *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 894-920.
- Suwa, Masaki. 2003. "Constructive perception: Coordinating perception and conception toward acts of problem-finding in a creative experience". *Japanese Psychological Research*, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp. 221-234.
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). 2005. *Sports for development and peace*. Zurich, Switzerland: SDC
- Turati, Marcela. 2012. "El milagro brasileño anticrimen" [The brazilian anti-crime miracle]. *Proceso*, No. 1845, March, 2012, <<http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=300755>> Accessed September 25, 2013.
- Vygotsky, Lev.1986. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Wright, Ryan Ward. 2009. "Understanding the role of sport for development in community capacity building in a refugee camp in Tanzania". A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research for the Degree of Master of Science in the College of Kinesiology, Saskatoon, CA: University of Saskatchewan