

# Traces and Sediments of Organized Violence in Biographical Narratives in Mexico

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## 1 Introduction

For almost half a century, biographical research has flourished and become professionalized in countries such as France, Germany, Mexico or the USA.<sup>1</sup> This holds for methods, as well as for topics studied. Individual biographical narratives are objects of analysis and theory, but family and group contexts are also included in methodology and methods. Today, specific terms like biographical trajectory, change of social status, biographical turning point, cohort of same event, and narrated versus experienced life story are common parts of the toolbox in life course research – be it a more quantitative trajectory approach or a more qualitative biographical approach. Gender-sensitive and comparative perspectives are well established, and approaches to transnationalization of life courses have been developed.

Nevertheless, there still are research desiderata. There is not much systematic comparison of variations in life course dynamics in different countries or cultures. And there are only a few studies on life courses in the context of protracted organized violence, especially in the case of (forced) migration. The latter mainly concentrate on World War II (Rosenthal 1991, 2002). We have fewer insights into more recent

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<sup>1</sup> For Europe, see e.g. Bertaux/Kohli 1984; for Mexico Balán/Browning/Jelín 1973; for the USA Elder/Caspi 1990.

forms of organized violence as a crucial environment of life courses. Little research exists related to the Balkan wars (e.g. Grün 2009), the Hutu-Tutsi conflict (e.g. Malkki 1995), or more recent settings of organized violence (on sub-Saharan Africa, see e.g. Bogner/Rosenthal/Schmiereck 2017; on Yezidi women in the Iraq war, Murad/Krajeski 2017 and Jorgow in this volume).

In all of these cases, organized violence is strongly related to (forced) migration (Pries 2018). Organized violence originates or fuels migration, especially in the form of internally displaced persons and international refugees. The more recent refugee movements from the Middle East to Europe are an example. But organized violence is also important during trajectories of (forced) migration and even in the context of migrants' arrival at a new place (Pries 2019). When it comes to analyzing organized violence in more detail, migration dynamics are at play in many cases as causative factors. Islamist terrorists, who were 'unemployed' in Afghanistan, migrated to new hotspots of organized violence in Iraq or in Africa (Hafez 2008). In Central America, some children of families who were forced to emigrate from El Salvador or Guatemala to the USA during the military regimes in the 1960s to 1980s, returned as part of organized violent gangs like the *Maras*.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we concentrate on the interrelations between organized violence and (forced) migration as they condensate in biographical narratives of Mexican migrants. Mexico is an interesting case for several reasons. First, as a country of transit from Central America and other places to the USA, Mexico concentrates high volumes and a broad range of types of migration. Second, in these migration movements and in certain regions of Mexico itself, organized violence is a substantial part of everyday life. We first discuss the concepts of organized violence and forced migration in its possible interrelations and summarize some corresponding findings of empirical research (section 2). We then present biographical testimonies in respect of Mexican everyday life in which organized violence is of crucial significance (section 3). In a next step, we demonstrate the complex intertwining of (forced) migration and organized violence as it unfolds in the biographical narration of a young Mexican migrant (section 4). Finally, we draw some conclusions and make some suggestions for further research (section 5).

## 2 Forced Migration, Organized Violence, and Biographies

Forced migration is of increasing relevance. For 2018, the UNHCR counted some 75 million 'people of concern' in the world. This includes more than 41 million internally displaced persons (accounting for 55% of all people of concern), more than 20 million refugees who left their country of origin for fear of persecution (representing 27%), as well as some 14 million stateless persons, official asylum seekers,

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<sup>2</sup> On the *Maras* as a product of complex forced migration and organized violence processes between Central America, Mexico and the USA, see e.g. Valenzuela Arce/Natera-Dominguez/Reguillo Cruz 2013.

returnees and others of concern (UNHCR 2019a: 4). In absolute and in relative terms (as share of the world population), these were the highest numbers ever (UNHCR 2019b: 5 f., 35). Additionally, more than 29 million persons were looking for international protection as refugees and asylum seekers (*ibid.*: 2). As forced migration is not just a short time challenge for these persons, but often a trajectory of several years, it leaves its traces in peoples' biographies. And forced migrants are almost always confronted with organized violence.

We understand organized violence as the use of physical force (such as detention, imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, armed robbery, reprisal attacks, rape, and murder) in a collective, continuing and organized way in order to achieve collective and/or corporate (organized) goals. Organized violence may relate to – legal or illegal, legitimate or illegitimate – state or state-sponsored use of physical force or to political, criminal or paramilitary groups as non-state-actors seeking economic, political, religious or ethnic legitimation (Melander/Pettersson/Themnér 2016: 727f.). Organized violence differs in its duration from 'simple' collective violence that occurs incidentally at a soccer match between rival fan clubs. It also varies from organized crime insofar as it appears in both legal and illegal forms. Scholars like Strazzari (2007) define organized violence as the confluence of political conflict, state underdevelopment, and organized crime, which together provoke civil wars. While such a definition is too specific, broadening the concept of organized violence to include any kind of structural or cultural violence (Galtung 1990) would complicate empirical research.

There is not space here to discuss more recent concepts of organized violence extensively. For our context and purpose it is crucial not to situate organized violence outside societal spaces, orders or regimes, but to treat it – like all kinds of organizations and networks – in its inextricable broad societal relations. This is particularly useful when dealing with forced migration. Scholarly research has not yet extensively incorporated these relations into its agenda. For example, qualitative studies in general, and in particular those employing ethnographic methods to explore the relationship between violence and migration, are scarce and, in respect of some regions (like the Middle East), all but absent. In the case of Africa, researchers have called for more complex understandings of the processes that shape violent conflicts, for example in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Carayannis 2003) or in Sudan (Grawert 2008). Yet such studies have not analyzed the relationships between organized violence and forced migratory patterns. Instead, the study of these relationships has focused on humanitarian crises and refugee flows into neighboring countries, such as Kenya, Tanzania, or the Congo, highlighting the importance of informal economies (Oka 2014) or differential impacts on local political conflicts (Whitaker 2003).

We have chosen to investigate organized violence in the biographical narratives of Mexican migrants because Latin America as a subcontinent has several centuries of experience with organized violence. This is due to colonialism and successful movements for national independence at the beginning of the 19th century – in

contrast to most African countries which ceased to be colonies and became formally independent states not before the mid-20th century. Organized violence not controlled by the state was the rule in Hacienda systems during colonialism; during the 19th century the fight for independence was often a long-lasting process between different violent groups; at the beginning of the 20th century social revolutions like in Mexico were accompanied by almost a decade of organized violent conflicts; the organized violence forged Colombian history during the whole 20th century, mainly known as “La Violencia”. Additionally, most Latin American countries have experienced either social revolutions (like Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela) or military coups and dictatorships (like Argentina, Chile, Brazil). The study of (organized) violence in Latin America is therefore relatively advanced (Arias/Goldstein 2010; Imbusch/Misse/Carrión 2011). In this context, Mexico is a specific case given the tradition of drug cartels and organized violence, a weak state with often corrupt security agencies, its closeness to the USA, and its corresponding character as a country of migration and transit (Koonings 2012; Rios Contreras 2014).

Why is this Mexican context of organized violence and forced migration important for biographical research? In most ‘classic’ biographical studies, periods of war, organized violence and forced migration are generally spoken about by interviewees as a specific period in the past that has ended, though the effects of traumatic experiences may still be observable. On the basis of interviews with victims and perpetrators of the Shoa, Rosenthal (2002: 230 f.) has identified five substantial mechanisms through which these experiences are marginalized and suppressed in biographical narrations. The first mechanism is to treat experiences of organized violence and murder as a family secret; this holds for both survivors and perpetrators of the Holocaust. The second mechanism, used by the Nazi culprits and their bystanders, is to assign guilt to others. The third mechanism, often used by survivors and the next or child generation, is to self-ascribe guilt. The fourth and fifth mechanism, observed in the case of children and grandchildren of perpetrators, is to fear being murdered, or at least to fear incurring the wrath of their guilty ancestors and to develop “extremely detailed fantasies relating to the undisclosed family history or family secrets” (ibid.: 231).

Compared to such biographical narratives and the role of organized violence in them, the case of narrated biographies in Mexico (and probably other Latin American countries) is different, as we will show. In this context, organized violence is experienced not as a completely extraordinary and limited event or period, but as a substantial and normal part of everyday life. Migration – even if not declared as refugee or forced migration – is often motivated by security considerations or simply the desire to flee organized violence (Rios Contreras 2014). Before presenting the biographical narration of a Mexican migrant, we will sketch the historical and societal context of organized *narco* violence as an enduring and crucial part of all organized violence in Mexico.

### 3 Organized *Narco* Violence in Everyday Life in Mexico

In an attempt to characterize and explain organized violence in the context of Mexican drug trafficking, Williams (2012) differentiates this kind of violence from terrorism and from political insurgency. While “the essence of terrorism is the indiscriminate killing of innocent people for political purposes” (ibid.: 261), the violence in Mexican drug contexts is neither indiscriminate nor simply for political purposes. Williams also rejects the notion of political insurgency, because in some cases there is a high degree of cooperation or at least tolerance vis-à-vis state agencies. The author proposes a three-level pyramid, arguing “that the violence is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon with a variety of different rationales and motivations.” (ibid.: 262 f.). For Williams, drug-related violence in the Mexican context is first and foremost a highly strategic, rationalist and functionalist endeavor. “At the base of the pyramid is the notion of drug-related violence as the medium of rational strategic competition in a highly lucrative illicit market” (ibid.: 263). While at this level violence is used and controlled top-down, at the second level violence occurs as decentralized, diffuse and not well-ordered by a clear hierarchy. At this level, fragmentation and intra-organizational conflicts, or anarchic battles in one and the same broader cartel or network prevail. “Not only is there a high degree of autonomy and independence at lower levels, but this can also take on its own momentum” (ibid.: 269).

As the third level of the pyramid, Williams describes a certain culture and dynamics of epidemic and anomic violence without any clear and rational logic. “It appears that in northern Mexico and increasingly at other locations in the country, so-called drug-related violence has become a way of life with little purpose beyond the empowerment of those who engage in it and no real links to a rational business strategy” (ibid.: 273). In contrast to Williams’s hierarchical top-down model (2012), where rational collective actors and business-like organizations seem the main driver for organized violence, we follow a bottom-up approach and prioritize the level of everyday life where organized violence is experienced. After a short outline of the history of organized *narco* violence in Mexico (3.1), its varied forms and its presence in different life spheres are presented (3.2).

#### 3.1 Short History of Organized *Narco* Violence in Mexico

The planting and trafficking of narcotics, poppy plants to produce opium and marijuana, started in Mexico at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the northern and north-eastern highlands of the country, the *Sierra Madre Occidental*. During the Mexican revolution (1910–1934), drug production and trafficking were carried out by local *narcos* who had to follow the orders of the regional revolutionary leaders. The consequent fights over control of the drug business were part of the fight for power between local leaders and the military, representing the central government. During World War II the drug trade into the U.S. boomed, satisfying the need of the U.S. army to

supply their troops in combat (Valdés Castellanos 2013: 91 f.). The poppy plantations grew considerably in size in the highlands of the northern states of Chihuahua, Durango and Sinaloa. In the 1960s and 1970s local drug producers were no longer under the command of politicians and the military. Rather, they were partners. During the 1970s, the U.S. invested millions of U.S. dollars in the Mexican antidrug campaign, collaborating with the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), Mexico's authoritarian ruling party. In 1977 *Operation Condor* was launched to eradicate the drug plantations in the highland regions of the states Chihuahua, Durango and Sinaloa. More than 10,000 soldiers searched the countryside for drugs, burning millions of square meters of illicit plantations, and at the same time committing a number of human rights violations and abuses of power (Valdez Cárdenas 2012b: 34 f.). The targets of this organized violence, perceived as legal and legitimized by the 'war on drugs', were the peasants in historically marginalized rural areas like Sinaloa, who were opponents of the PRI government (Teague 2019: 12).

After the violent incidents and in the absence of substantial funding to create alternative income sources for those who had cultivated drug crops, hundreds of thousands migrated to the nearby urban centers. The drug kingpins did the same. At the end of the 1970s, in Guadalajara, capital of the state of Jalisco, they laid the foundation for what are today the most powerful drug cartels in Mexico (Valdez Cárdenas 2012b: 36). The Guadalajara cartel and its successor organizations not only trafficked their own products into the U.S. but soon also partnered with the Colombian cartels on the smuggling of cocaine. At the beginning of the 2000s, as a result of the U.S. fight against drug trafficking in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1980s and 1990s, Mexico finally found itself in the center of the drug trade into the U.S. The year 2000 also marked a major political shift with the election of a new president, Vicente Fox, who stood as candidate for the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN). During the 71 years of PRI rule, the government officials and criminal drug organizations had developed close connections. In the context of political reforms and the replacement of corrupt officials, violence committed by the drug cartels increased and the government responded by employing military forces. While the number of arrests was high, the crackdown caused an inter-cartel war over disputed territory and an increase in drug-related murder. During the mandate of Felipe Calderón (PAN, 2006–2012), the 'war on drugs' intensified with the deployment of more than 45,000 soldiers on Mexico's streets. The number of casualties among civilians, politicians, and military and police personnel, as well as *narcos*, increased. The militarization of the conflict led to additional funding of 1.6 billion U.S. dollars from the U.S. through the *Mérida Initiative* (Feldmann 2012: 42 f.). The violent conflict has furthermore been fueled by the smuggling of heavy weaponry from the U.S. into Mexico, the counter flow of the drugs being sent north. Under the mandates of Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI, 2012–2018) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (since 2018), the death toll has continued to rise. Between 2000 and 2019 Mexico officially registered more than 350,000 homicides (Instituto Igarapé 2019) and current figures show around 338,000 internally displaced persons due to conflict and violence

(IDMC 2019). In 2019, Mexico registered the murder record, with almost 35,000 killed. At the same time, the number of municipalities with zero homicides reached a new low in 2017 with only 30 percent of all the municipalities in the country not being affected (Calderón et al 2019; Williams 2012: 259). In 2019, 37,000 people were officially registered as having disappeared and around 26,000 human corpses were unidentified (Wilkinson 2019). The recent analysis by the *National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security* (ENVIPE) shows that more than one third of the interviewed households have at least one victim of a criminal offense and more than 90 percent of the crimes experienced have not been denounced or no official investigation was started (INEGI 2019). In the general perception, official law enforcement bodies are highly corrupt, which explains why these figures are so high and why the clearance rate for drug-related crimes remains very low.

All this creates a climate of everyday violence and impunity that in some areas has led to the shifting of legitimate governance from the state to criminal organizations (Williams 2012: 262). Additionally, since 2013 anti-drug-cartel militias have rapidly expanded. The so-called *narcocultura* contributes to the legitimacy of organized *narco* violence. Examples of it are the numerous Hollywood movies, interviews with drug kingpins, *narco* television series, telenovelas and the popularity of the musical subgenre *narcocorridos*, in the U.S. as well as in Mexico.

### 3.2 Forms of Organized *Narco* Violence and Its Traces in Different Spheres of Life

To show how various forms of organized *narco* violence are experienced by different actors in a variety of life spheres and everyday life settings, in the following subsections we present the testimonies of men, women and children – either as (potential) aggressors or as victims of *narco* violence – which were collected and published by the investigative journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas between 2012 and 2015.<sup>3</sup> Even if Valdez Cárdenas mainly reported on the northern Mexican states of Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua and Sonora, similar testimonies can be found all over the country and across all segments of the population. Most of Valdez Cárdenas' case descriptions are not extensive biographies. They are focused on the violent events and their consequences, and include either the life paths that lead to these or a short previous life history. The applied content analysis mainly focused on the experiences of violence and assigned them to the different life spheres and everyday settings that were described.

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<sup>3</sup> Valdez Cárdenas himself was shot dead on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in front of his office. His death was linked to his numerous investigations on *narco* violence in Mexico. See also Pansters 2012 and Valenzuela Arce et al. 2013.

*Forms of Organized Violence*

Valdez Cárdenas and his interview partners describe different forms of organized *narco* violence. The most prominent expression of it is the shootout, often in public spaces, no matter the time of the day, between rival gang members, members of criminal organizations and police and military personnel, or as the planned assassination of a specific person. Among the victims are persons with public influence such as politicians or journalists. The use of heavy weapons like assault rifles or grenades in public spaces often leaves uninvolved bystanders injured or dead.

The kidnapping of people, so-called *levantones*, occurs in a similar manner. People are abducted in front of their houses or at work, they are taken out of their car in the city traffic, or they are hired under a false premise to work, for example in agriculture, and then forced to work against their will. If the dead bodies, which are often mutilated, do not turn up, these people are described as missing. The search for them and the “death that does not end”<sup>4</sup> (Valdez Cárdenas 2012a: 68) marks the lives of their family members. Their hope to find them alive derives from cases in which people were forcefully recruited to work on drug plantations or the drug business infrastructure, where a ransom was paid and they could leave, or where they were freed or could escape. The astonishingly high number of missing persons and unidentified bodies is also a result of corruption in the judicial system. Official investigations that go on for years without producing a result motivate people to search on their own; they may get in touch with criminal organizations to help them, join protest movements, or even get killed during their endeavors. Valdez Cárdenas also describes cases in which police and military units themselves carry out assassinations, torture and other serious crimes, independently or as service providers.

During the different periods of organized *narco* violence in Mexico, with varying alliances among cartels, private businesses and state actors, the competing cartels diversified their income. Nowadays, they are involved in not only the drug business, but also human trafficking, abduction, extortion and the trafficking of fuel and food. In certain cases, the new business models and alliances have led to a restructuring of the organization and a shift in task priorities. In areas where the young men, often from poor families, recruited as killers are taken off the payrolls, ‘independent’ robberies and other violent crimes increase. This in turn leads to the liquidation of the now redundant former employees. Especially stealing fuel involves many young men and children who spend their earnings on alcohol and drugs, and very fast become victims of violence themselves.

One result of the extreme violence is forced migration from rural areas where disputes over drug plantations and the sovereignty over trafficking territories push people into the urban centers. Having lost their rural livelihoods, many seek the support of family members, or are forced to live an anonymous and precarious life in fear of being discovered by the *narcos*.

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<sup>4</sup> All translations from Spanish into English are by the authors.



The generally perceived cooperation of government officials with criminal organizations, and the often insufficient economic, social and psychological assistance given to the victims, paired with the institutional discrimination of indigenous groups, for example, have helped create a climate of impunity and a feeling of powerlessness in the victims, who often surrender to the organized *narco* violence.

### *Life Spheres Where Organized Violence Is Experienced*

*Family:* The injuring, killing or disappearance of family members who were targeted for being involved in illicit activities or for any other reason, who were victims of an identity confusion, or who were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, has a severe impact on the lives of individual family members and the organization of family life. In cases where the victim was the main provider, responsibility for assuring the family's livelihood has to be redistributed. Valdez Cárdenas documents cases of homelessness, and of people being forced into extremely precarious economic activities, such as prostitution. He also tells of families that have moved to other cities or areas of the country out of fear, or that want to migrate to the U.S. They then often separate and have to start "from less than zero" (Valdez Cárdenas 2015: 159 ff.). Affected families often have to undergo psychological and/or medical treatment for many years, and the search for economic and psychosocial support can become life-determining, especially in low-resource families. With official assistance often being insufficient, they depend on their own support networks or non-state actors. To economic exhaustion comes emotional suffering. Grief that leads to depression, feelings of guilt or of being left alone, and often the impossibility of talking about what has occurred, makes the coping process long and difficult. When family members have disappeared, it is hard to resume everyday routines. Finding them, dead or alive, means "to be able to rest" (Valdez Cárdenas 2015: 61) and to embark on a new project, to have a future. The deep mistrust of legal institutions makes some people continue their search, even after they have been informed of the death of the disappeared person. Some overcome their feeling of powerlessness and their frustration over impunity by giving sense to their lives through the search for their loved ones and the quest for justice. They are driven by the apparent collusion of public servants and organized crime, and the scandalous low clearance rates for these crimes. In self-organized protest movements all over Mexico, people find protection, hope and the power to continue their lives, even though they themselves have to fear abduction or death. In Valdez Cárdenas' *Huérfanos del Narco* (Orphans of the Narco) (2015), he describes how the children of people who have been killed or who have disappeared suffer not only the psychological consequences, but also stigmatization and discrimination in school. Their school performance drops significantly and educational paths get disrupted. When families are in fear of further violence or engaged in an economic struggle, "the priority is to survive not education" (Valdez Cárdenas 2015: 105).

In accounts of women who have been involved in a relationship with a member of a criminal organization, these life phases are marked by an increased, but highly fragile, material wealth that depends exclusively on the man's performance in illicit and violent activities. In the case of separation, or after the death of their partner, their struggle to make ends meet is often accompanied by the fear of having to pay the debts of their deceased partner. Some accounts highlight the combination of complicity, enjoyment of power and luxury goods, and dependency on the partner, while suffering from intrafamilial violence. They "have been used to living well at the expense of these beatings" (Valdez Cárdenas 2012b: 106), and even after separation from their partner they have been unable to leave the milieu.

*Friends:* Valdez Cárdenas' stories imply that in certain cities and regions almost everyone has had some kind of contact with violent groups during their life course and many have "good friends as well as bad friends" (Valdez Cárdenas 2014: 180). Through 'bad friends' men and women are recruited for growing drugs, as killers or drug traffickers, out of pure necessity, or because it seems a legitimate means to live the admired lifestyle so often glorified in the expressions of *narco culture*. These same friends are the ones who punish newcomers and their families if things do not work out. The ever growing number of young people who join the *narco* business makes it likely that in certain areas it is old childhood friends from school or the neighborhood who are the ones involved in violent acts, maybe even including the killing of a family member. To threaten someone with violence has even become part of the humoristic repertoire.

*Work:* Certain groups of professionals are more likely to be affected by organized violence than others. This is obviously the case for law enforcement personnel, as well as politicians. While there is widespread corruption in these state entities, they are regularly exposed to violence, they are victims of murder attempts, arbitrary disciplinary measures or dismissals, and they cannot trust their colleagues or supervisors. Being a police officer at the frontline is "dangerous and thankless. ... They pretend to pay you and you pretend to work" (Valdez Cárdenas 2014: 133). A similarly dangerous profession is journalism. Mexico has witnessed the horrific killings of many investigative journalists and is ranked as one of the deadliest countries for the media in general. Valdez Cárdenas also describes cities like Culiacan, Ciudad Juarez and others where private businesses do not function without paying local criminal groups for their 'protection'. In the cultural sector he points out the business surrounding beauty contests, and his interview partners describe how a beauty queen's career is hardly imaginable without the support of some *narco*. Players of traditional Mexican music are affected in a similar manner. For members of a *Mariachi* band, who are very much present in the public sphere and play at public and private events, it seems almost impossible not to get into contact with the drug business and the violence that comes with it. They experience violent outbursts during celebrations, and they are hired by, or compose songs for, a specific group, which

earns them the enmity of other groups. A musician who wants to get out of this trap often has to change his profession. But not only musicians are forced out of their professions. Using the example of a taxi driver who was shot during his working hours, Valdez Cárdenas shows the difficulties resulting from trauma because of violent experiences and the impossibility of continuing in the same working sphere (Valdez Cárdenas 2012b: 56).

*Leisure time, everyday life violence:* Even in spaces reserved for recreation, where people come to rest from everyday routines and struggles, one can become a victim or be a witness of violence. Those affected then tend to avoid these spaces, which restricts their freedom of movement, and alters their habits and social practices. In basically any Mexican everyday life situation, violence is potentially present:

It could be a matter of passion, any kind of debt, a public accusation in the media, a strict entrepreneurial and lawful matter, a bad grade in an educational institution. But also a misunderstanding, a greeting, a look you give a woman, a conflict in traffic – an accident, cutting someone off, the use of the horn or the high beams –, or a problem with your neighbor (Valdez Cárdenas 2015: 42 f.).

This contributes to the vicious cycle in which everyday violence is reacted to by resorting to and becoming part of organized *narco* violence.

#### 4 The Case of Eduardo: Organized Violence in Biographical Narratives in Mexico

The following case is an example of how organized violence as a day-to-day experience can serve as a context for migration trajectories and as a causative factor of migration. It is also an example of how everyday experiences of organized violence continuously impact a person's biography. Eduardo was born in Mexico in 1983. After being deported from the U.S. 13 years ago, because of his criminal activities and membership in a gang, he now works as an English teacher for a private university in Mexico City. The interview with Eduardo took place during an exploratory field study in Mexico City in 2018, which served as preparation for a research project on experiences of organized violence that influence migration trajectories of migrants in Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Melanie Wieschalla contacted Eduardo through an organization for returned migrants in Mexico. Eduardo was interviewed by Melanie Wieschalla in a place of his choosing, which was an empty office in one of his former workplaces. The interview was conducted in English, interspersed with Spanish termini relating to Mexico's education system. It followed the procedures of biographical-narrative interviewing and analysis, according to Rosenthal (2014).

*Eduardo's Life Course*

Eduardo was invited to tell his whole life story with a special focus on his migration trajectory. The main narrative largely followed a chronological order with some segments recounting the stories of friends and relatives. The narrative begins in the late 1980s when his father's participation in a robbery in his hometown in central Mexico prompted his family's migration to California. First his father, then his mother with his younger brother, and lastly himself with an aunt and uncle crossed the border to California. Regarding his childhood, Eduardo concentrates his narrative on his father's probable involvement in criminal activity and the frequent presence of the police in their neighborhood. His father's arrest and his violent behavior towards Eduardo's mother caused his parents to separate and his mother to move to Minnesota in the mid-1990s. The possibility of Eduardo becoming involved with gangs in their neighborhood in California also motivated his mother to move. His involvement with a gang in Minnesota, and the following years marked by violent encounters with other rival gangs, as well as frequent contacts with law enforcement officers, occupy a considerable part of the main narration, which covers the period from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.

Eduardo says that the reason he started to carry a gun was because he was shot and wounded when he was 17 years old. This event is the start of a period he considers violent compared to other phases in his life. He witnessed one of his friends being fatally shot, and violent confrontations, in which people were killed, between his gang and antagonistic gangs. In the early 2000s, the police broke the local gangs up by arresting or deporting their members, including members of Eduardo's gang, who were mainly of Mexican descent. His imprisonment from 2003 to 2006 marks this phase of his life. Here Eduardo identifies a significant change in his biography because while in prison he attended counseling, group therapy, parenting courses, and anger management programs, among other programs and courses. In 2006, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported him to Mexico for being both undocumented and charged with various crimes committed in the U.S. On arriving in Mexico, he started working on his grandfather's fields, but was soon arrested for violent assault. Since he could not find suitable work, and was becoming entangled in criminal activities, his mother suggested he should seek further education. During this time, an English teacher helped Eduardo to become an accredited English teacher himself. In 2010 he moved to Mexico City, having become involved in violent confrontations in his hometown, and because he was attracted by the prospects of higher wages in the capital. In his account of the past seven years of his life, he focuses on his work and his development as a teacher and father, his family, and children. Violent experiences are still dispersed in the last years covered in his narrative, which includes stories that Eduardo had heard from other former gang members who had been deported to Mexico. Finding themselves without work and qualifications, some engaged in informal work, while others took part in criminal activities again and experienced fatal injuries or arrests that led to long prison sentences

in Mexico. In contrast to his narrative about his time in Mexico, which focuses on his family life, when talking about his time in Minnesota, his experiences of violence overshadow family-related narratives.

While his time in Minnesota and his experiences of violence are described in narrative units, the use of argumentation starts with his time in prison and continues with his life in Mexico. Here there is a biographical action scheme. Eduardo interprets this retrospectively as a time of decision-making in respect of whether to end or continue his activities as a gang member. In view of the narrator's migration from the U.S. to Mexico, he thus identifies his three years in confinement as a turning point, a "180° change" in the "dead-end prison", and his deportation to Mexico as giving him a "new start in life". Nevertheless, Eduardo's contact with former gang members in Mexico who had also been deported, and his involvement in criminal activities, indicate that his experience of organized violence and his socialization in the U.S. had left sediments in his life which he could not ignore completely. Today Eduardo is trying to encourage other friends and acquaintances, former gang members, to become English teachers as he has done, showing a continuous preoccupation with his past.

#### *Experiences of Violence in Eduardo's Biography*

The life areas or phases that a narrator mentions in a biographical narrative depend on the culture, subculture, or milieu of the interviewee (Rosenthal 2014). A biography is, therefore, an interplay between a personal life story and collective stories with their rules, discourses, and frameworks. These collective frameworks are intricately interwoven in Eduardo's narration, influenced by his socialization into a specific environment and his gang involvement. A Mexican-American gang can be understood as such a framework. It is noticeable in the "violent stories" told by Eduardo, explaining how, why, and when violence occurs in street life (Lauger 2014). In the contexts of concentrated poverty and violence in which gangs develop, cultural frameworks adapted to these conditions also develop. Thus, early and continuous exposure to violence can produce a fatalistic worldview, as can be seen in Eduardo's argumentation when he comments on the time he became a father at fifteen years old: "I was not going to make it to eighteen I was not going to survive over eighteen years old the way I was livin' the way life was either I was going to jail or um or I was going to die I mean that was that was reality." This segment is framed in a description of the environment of his adolescence: "shootings and drugs marihuana uum sellin' marihuana at the time little fightin' here and there different people different gangs."

Eduardo himself denotes this environment as being one where violence was normalized or the "norm", which is accentuated by his recounting of stories about different types of violence, from organized to interpersonal, from injuries received to injuries caused, and even death. These stories in the context of a normalized experience of violence are also framed around status. Violence can produce admiration

among peers, as shown in Eduardo's story about him being known by members of other gangs for his frequent use of violence. He encounters the violence which he experienced in the U.S. in different forms in Mexico, for instance through the presence of cartels and their out-contracting, heightened interpersonal violence, and vigilante violence.

Experiences of violence structure biographical processes in the long term, since experiences of observing violence can have an ordering impact upon one's life story. Thus, the experiences themselves and their context-dependent patterns of interpretations influence each other (Bereswill 2018). In Eduardo's case, the experience of observing violence in his family and his neighborhood from his early childhood led him to take part in criminal activities at school, until he finally joined a gang at thirteen years of age. His arrest in the U.S. and deportation to Mexico, as well as the arrests and/or deaths of his companions and former gang members in Mexico and the U.S., can be regarded as having another ordering effect on Eduardo's life. Earlier experiences of and with violence structure Eduardo's biographical processes, as well as his interpretations of them. Thus, in a specific situation and historical context, violence was a biographical option for Eduardo, for instance during his youth in the U.S. By contrast, later experiences with violence, such as witnessing former gang members' trajectories in Mexico and the U.S., modify his interpretations and actions. These experiences made him consider whether to return to the U.S. and "go back to the old life" or whether to continue to participate in criminal acts in Mexico.

Thus, perceptions of violence are context- and interaction-dependent (Koloma Beck 2017). In this case, there is a context of everyday violence and involvement with gangs, where the perception of violence is linked to status and retaliation. In this biography, the narrator does not treat his experiences of organized violence as memories to be avoided or repressed, which is another form of biographical processing of such experiences, but as experiences to be remembered and expressed in specific contexts (Rosenthal 2003). Eduardo's life story provides an example of a biographical narrative in which migration processes show continuous experiences of organized violence, as a perpetrator, victim, and observer of violence (Koloma Beck 2017). Lastly, his experiences are experiences of day-to-day violence. While Eduardo witnesses and partakes in specific patterns of violence in the U.S., such as shoot-outs between rival gangs, his observations of organized violence, especially *narvo* violence, continue to influence his life story and thus his narrative.

## 5 Conclusions

In biographical narratives organized violence is not always a prominent topic. As mentioned above, there are several mechanisms that serve to marginalize this issue – in narrations as well as in biographical research. Where organized violence is treated, it often appears as an outstanding and special event in a person's biography. This applies to the majority of biographical studies related to forced migration. In

this article we have stressed the role of organized violence as an unquestioned part of everyday life. In the case of Mexico, the interrelations between organized violence and (forced) migration have existed for many generations. As we have shown, this condensates in biographical narratives of Mexican migrants. We argued that the relevant literature is rich in demonstrations of the complex societal embedding of organized violence and its interconnectedness with forced migration. We have presented the biographical narration of a Mexican migrant, in which organized violence is of crucial significance as part of his 'natural' everyday life. There still is much to do to understand the contexts in which organized violence is perceived as an extraordinary experience at a given moment in the life course, and when it is perceived (and perhaps accepted) as a normal and unquestioned element of everyday life. To understand and explain these elements will be crucial in order to reduce the levels of organized violence in societies.

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