

Tears, Trauma and Suicide: Everyday Violence among Street Youth in Puebla, Mexico¹

GARETH A. JONES AND ELSA HERRERA

*Department of Geography & Environment, London School of
Economics, UK*

SARAH THOMAS DE BENÍTEZ

Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics, UK

Despite considerable ethnographic research with young people in street situations and a growing interest in violence, little attention has been paid to suicide. The occurrence of suicide is a dramatic event that reveals weaknesses in support systems established by governments and civil society organisations, as well as perceived failings of friends. While an interest in suicide usually considers cause, in this paper we explore effect. How does the death of a member of a tightly knit group of street youth affect others and what does the suicide tell us about their identification with death more generally? Research for the paper was part of an in-depth study of identities among street youth in Mexico.

Keywords: suicide, street youth, religion, Santa Muerte, Mexico.

Introduction

Worldwide, thousands of people are killed each year from vigilante beatings, police repression, gang violence and war, yet a more prevalent 'cause of death' is suicide. Over one million people die each year from 'self-directed violence', as the World Health Organization (WHO) defines suicide, or nearly twice those who die from homicide and more than twice those who die in wars. Although in most societies suicide rates increase with age cohort, in recent years, there has been evidence of suicide as an increasingly youthful phenomenon, including in Latin America where the number and rate of suicide

1 Research for this paper was conducted with ESRC grant RES 148-25-0050 as part of the Identities and Social Action programme.

deaths for young people has increased sharply over the past decade (Weaver and Maddaleno, 1999; De Souza, de Souza Minayo and Malaquias, 2002; WHO, 2002).

From the time of Emile Durkheim's *On Suicide* in 1897, understanding suicide has tended to rely on quantitative analyses to identify causal pattern.² In more contemporary terms, the focus has been upon predisposition or 'risk' (Dube et al., 2001; Stockard and O'Brien, 2002; Dorais and Lajeunesse, 2004; Figley and Nash, 2006). Beyond a few 'survivor' biographies, however, there are few ethnographic accounts of suicide (Gaines, 1998; Kidd, 2004).³ The reluctance of ethnographers to engage with suicide as a theme might seem at odds with the advantages of a methodology that allows for sensitive issues to be uncovered at a pace determined by the research subject, and under conditions where empathetic engagement is likely to be important. Nevertheless, ethnography faces a number of difficulties. Research subjects may be reluctant to talk about feelings associated with trauma and may fear that 'opening up' will reinforce a perception of suicidal ideation as a 'blemish on the character' (Goffman, 1963). For researchers, meanwhile, even in professions that come into contact with suicide on a regular basis, the knowledge that someone has thought about or attempted to take their life can undermine the confidence to engage in open-ended conversation (Jamison, 2000).

In this article, we take a different approach, prompted by thinking about suicide as a form of violence defined by Riches as 'an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses' (1986: 8, cited in Whitehead, 2004a). This definition draws upon the idea of witness and therefore to some degree of interpretive meaning. Specifically, the article outlines how a group of street youth in Puebla talked about, legitimated and problematised suicide following the death of a friend. We wish, therefore, to relate suicide as one form of violence to cultural expression and performance and suggest that an attention to violence in relation to individual experiences, and to the meanings, emotions and identities of people intimately involved with a suicide, is important. As Whitehead has argued:

there have been few attempts to map how cultural conceptions of violence are used discursively to amplify and extend the cultural force of violent acts or how those acts themselves can generate a shared idiom of meaning for violent death – and this discursive amplification is precisely what is meant by the 'poetics' of violent practice. (2004b: 6)

Although we are uneasy with the term 'poetics' and prefer the idea of performance, we nonetheless suggest that suicide is infused with cultural meaning, invokes a series of activities that assert individual and group identity through an idiom of appropriate

-
- 2 Durkheim (2006 [1897]) showed that suicide was present in all societies and could not therefore be reduced to simple cultural attributes, but stemmed from a lack of group identification and moral regulation, displayed as anomie and egoism, and resultant from the rise of what he called 'organic solidarity'.
 - 3 By contrast, studies of death through 'popular' rituals and relations to national identity are legion, especially for Mexico, though again suicide is barely mentioned (Lomnitz-Adler, 2005; Norget, 2005).

behaviour, and thereby give legitimacy to an act that others may determine to be 'wrong'.

In discussing suicide as performance, we are trying to show how the effects of suicide might be a response to a broader range of feelings and identifications. Indeed, the study on which this article is based was principally interested with understanding how street youth construct identities and how far these ascriptions are 'stable' and extend beyond categories such as age, gender or work to include their ideas on and involvement with music, styles of language and dress, and religion. The research aimed to capture the voices and actions of young people through 'street ethnography', mostly 'hanging out' in markets and crossroads, and participating in football matches, parties and political meetings depending upon invitation. We did not expect to study suicide. Rather, suicide became a part of the research when a member of the participant group killed himself, an event that we could not ignore as it affected group dynamics and related directly to identities. With hindsight, the omission of suicide from a research project on identities seems incredible, but our lack of preparation also dissolved some of the subject-researcher power, obliging us to listen and observe with little preconception of what we might learn.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first, we provide a brief review of available data on suicide in Mexico, noting how suicide has become a cause of concern nationally. We contrast this with the minimal attention afforded to suicide in research with street children and youth, despite considerable interest in violence. We express our unease that street youth are seen as resilient, without taking into account suicide, ideation and its conditions. In the second section, we outline the circumstances surrounding the suicide of Carlos and describe how his death provoked a series of performances by others in the research group from which they extracted considerable social legitimacy. The third section aims to show how the meanings of suicide and the performances subsequent to Carlos's death might be understood. In particular, we elaborate the group's understandings of suicide in the context of their daily dealings with death and religion.

(Researching) Suicide and Youth in Mexico

According to the WHO, suicide may be under-reported globally by as much as 40 per cent (WHO, 2002). Our research from Puebla suggests that under-reporting in Mexico may be even higher because of a number of cultural and social limitations. Most obviously, the Catholic Church considers suicide a sin (Avilés Fabila, 1993).⁴ According to one informant, in order to avoid embarrassment, a 'sudden' death among higher income groups is likely to be recorded as a heart attack. Detecting suicide is also made difficult by its manner. Traffic accident, for example, is the most frequent cause of death for 10–19 year olds in Mexico, yet running into traffic is also mentioned as a

4 By undoing the work of God, suicide is considered tantamount to murder, the fate of Judas associating suicide with dishonour. We thank Benigno Romano Romano, chair of the Consejo Estatal Contra las Adicciones, for this insight.

common form of suicide in studies from the USA. Similar ambiguities exist in the case of electrocution or overdose. Suspicion of a 'violent death', moreover, as suicide is defined legally in Mexico, leads to an investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office to ascertain whether the death was 'assisted', encouraging doctors to record possible suicides as accidents.

These problems notwithstanding, there are concerns in Mexico about increases in the suicide rate which, officially, rose from less than two deaths per 100,000 between 1960 and 1981 to 2.2 in 1990, 3.1 in 1995, and 6.5 in 2004 (Secretaría de Salud, 2006). While still significantly below *recorded* levels for the USA and Europe, the national government recently claimed that over the past fifteen years Mexico had the sixth fastest growth rate for suicide in the world (Secretaría de Salud, 2006). Data for Puebla are inadequate for comparison, but show a clear increase in the number of recorded suicides. In 2003, the Public Prosecutor's Office recorded 61, rising to 100 in 2004, 123 in 2005, 192 in 2006 and 46 in the first two months of 2007. This trend prompted the usually sober *La Jornada de Oriente* (Proal, 2005) (5 December 2005) to note that Puebla had more suicides than Mexico City in 2005. Concern has been expressed also that between 1970 and 2000, suicide rates for 15–29 year olds more than doubled, with 3,200 15–25 year olds committing suicide by 2005 and making suicide the third most significant cause of death among 15–19 year old males (Puentes-Rosas, López-Nieto and Martínez-Monroy, 2004; Sánchez, 2005; Tuñón Pablos and Bobadilla Bernal, 2005). In response, state governments have adopted a range of initiatives to combat the 'problem'.⁵

Research shows that street-involved youth are especially 'at risk', presenting high suicidal ideation, a greater number of suicide attempts and higher success rates than the general population, controlling for age (Noto, Nappo, Galduroz, Mattei and Carlini, 1997; Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth and Watters, 1998; Kidd and Carroll, 2007). We are, of course, accustomed to accounts of street youth in Latin America encountering violence (Hecht, 1998; Godoy, 1999; Rizzini and Butler, 2003; Thomas de Benítez, 2008). But they may also present high mortality rates and risk of suicide. Drug dependency and alcohol abuse are extensive, disease is prevalent and studies record lower body-mass indices, psychological disorders and evidence of self-harm (Inciardi and Surratt, 1998; D'Abreu, Mullis and Cook, 1999; Rizzini and Butler, 2003; Herrera, Jones and Thomas de Benítez, forthcoming). Given this context, it is remarkable that suicide is not more prominent in the literature.

One explanation might be keenness to identify the resilience of street youth so as to challenge notions of passive victimhood. From this perspective, street involvement can be understood as a rational response to situations demonstrably worse at home or in institutions (D'Abreu, Mullis and Cook, 1999; Panter-Brick, 2002). We agree that young people are active agents creating their own social worlds, but note that neither resilience nor capability arguments (see Sen, 1993; Thomas de Benítez, 2008) have

5 In Puebla, a Consultative Committee for the Prevention and Attention to IntraFamily Violence and Suicide was established in 2006 to coordinate services, including a helpline, two mobile units to provide medical, psychological and legal advice, and workshops to train government employees in dealing with adolescent suicide.

been made with specific regard to suicide. The undisclosed tension is how far the strategies and 'steeling effects' that get street youth through daily life may also be signs of stress, risk and coping with suicidal ideation personally or among peers.

To distinguish how street life interacts with ideas of suicide is, therefore, more than a matter of uncovering cause but should consider effect and how street youth understand, live with and perhaps legitimate suicide and suicidal thoughts. Such an interest raises important methodological issues concerning how young people define and interpret their subjective experiences and requires researchers to listen to, and follow up on, the hints, prompts or events surrounding a subject that everyone might find traumatic to articulate. This article offers a tentative account of how one young person's suicide forced us to become alert to a series of group social dynamics that we might otherwise have missed. Having decided to follow up on the events following the suicide and gather the opinions of those affected, however, we were aware of the need to tread carefully. Indeed, many of the conversations and interviews mentioned in this article were only possible many months after the suicide that is central to our narrative took place for, although the participants exhibited no obvious indications of trauma, they were clearly ill at ease talking about suicide. In almost 400 hours of contact with the participant group, ideas on suicide and death emerged only slowly, and often in ways that we had not originally predicted.

In one sense, therefore, this article is about our coming to terms with suicide as a research topic for which we were unprepared and the difficulties of uncovering views from people whose lives are cut across by violence of various kinds. In a more direct sense, this article deals with the social construction of suicide. Prominent in this construction is how street-involved youths' discussion of suicide and death is performed within 'normative' moral codes, in sometimes contradictory ways around religion (Gigengack, 1994). Our participants are shown coming to terms with suicide as both unacceptable from a religious viewpoint, but acceptable in so much as suicide must be dealt with as a relatively common act and feeling. By treating suicide as any other death, the aftermath of a suicide becomes an opportunity to reaffirm the group's social identities, a chance to exhibit their understanding of behaviour codes, including of respect and duty and hence inclusion.

Becoming a Statistic: The Death of Carlos⁶

On 19 April 2006, Elsa went to the Hidalgo market to meet with one of our research participant groups. Consisting of over twenty people, at the core is Doña Conchita, mother of Alvaro who has an eighteen-month-old son with Amparo, and an extended group of Alfonso and Estela, Lucio, Ramón and Nacho. They spend most of the day to one side of the market where there is some shade and some stone walls to sit on, and from where they can observe the traders and earn money washing the windscreens of passing cars, buses and vans. The group spends a lot of time sitting around, sometimes in barely suppressed boredom; joking and arguing, and getting into scraps with

6 With the exception of Carlos, all other names in this article are pseudonyms.

the drunks who also frequent the area. By early evening, the group disperses, some to Doña Conchita's house, or to rented rooms in *colonias*, partners' houses or to sleep rough.

On arrival at the market, Elsa found the group reading that day's *El Sol de Puebla*. The headline read 'Suicides reach 51' and was followed by a photo of a man lying across an unmade bed (Viveros, 2006). The body was wearing torn jeans, white trainers without socks and a black t-shirt, the victim's hands lying limp across his body, his face obscured from view. The picture was clearly taken only a few hours after the subject's death. A caption noted that 'Using a sheet, Carlos López aged 22 committed suicide in his house in the Colonia Barranca Honda'. The article described the circumstances of Carlos's death from the viewpoint of his sixteen-year-old-partner, Marisol, according to whom Carlos was 'a very aggressive person who, the majority of the time, if he wasn't taking drugs, was drunk'. The article continued that Carlos and Marisol had been involved in a discussion after which Carlos had gone to his room and hung himself sometime in the early morning. In the *El Sol* version, the body was discovered by two of Marisol's cousins who had gone to the house to invite Carlos to have a cigarette. Finding the door blocked by a sofa and gas tank they realised that something was wrong. When the municipal police arrived they were able to confirm Carlos's suicide and the body was later taken by the Prosecutor's Office for autopsy.

Despite the detail, the newspaper recorded Carlos's death in an indifferent manner. Indeed, in some senses Carlos is virtually anonymous in a text written through Marisol that offers few details about Carlos other than that he used drugs and alcohol, and had, apparently, a tendency towards violence. The obscurity of Carlos's face shields from view his most recognisable feature, a series of hand-made tattoos, one of which is in the shape of a tear and provided his nickname, *El Lágrima*. Ignoring personal details, the article concentrates on the mundane, informing the reader in the final line that the case has been logged by the Prosecutor's Office as File 172/2006/EH/2. For the Hidalgo group, the article was confirmation of what they had already heard from a minibus driver who had told Fabio that Carlos had killed himself.

Carlos had been a part of the group for over three years, earning money from cleaning windscreens and as a clown singing on the buses. As the third '*compañero*' to die in the past few months, Carlos's death led to discussions about the fatalism of daily life and the streets as a place for those 'who could survive'. Although it was difficult to glean information at such a sensitive time, Carlos's death inevitably formed the focal point of conversations for the next few days. These initial conversations attempted to pin down the exact details of Carlos's death, who was responsible and what the role of the group should be. There was agreement that Carlos had had an argument with Marisol, and that, drunk and drugged, he had left and killed himself. Amparo mentioned that the argument was over a possible infidelity by Marisol, but she also confirmed that Carlos had become addicted to crack with the assumption that he may have had psychotic moments, hastening his decision. Rodrigo, who said that Carlos was his godson, contested this version, claiming to have met Carlos shortly before his death, when he seemed fine. Later, however, Rodrigo commented that Carlos's life had been 'pretty shit' lately. It struck us just how few of these conversations were expressed emotionally. Although some attempts were made to think of how Carlos's death might

have been foretold through his recent actions or state of mind, there was both a sense that talking about Carlos was extremely difficult, forcing conversations to be cut off, and that this was just one more death among many and little would come from dwelling upon its significance. Amparo, for example, recounted that when she arrived at the market, alone, four years earlier, Carlos was one of the first people she met, but she told us that she had promised not to cry when thinking of him. In the emotional turmoil of the moment, this comment seemed like a remarkable exhibition of resilience. But as we learned some months afterwards, this show of self-control had deeper origins, which could not be revealed while the drama surrounding Carlos's death was unfolding.

There was some controversy within the group as to who should look after Carlos's body. For some, this duty should pass to Marisol, but for others, it should be his mother or his first partner with whom he had two children. It was eventually agreed that the 'right' belonged to Marisol, as she knew what he ate and what he 'took' (that is, drugs). Having apparently arrived at a view on an issue beyond their control, the group began to prepare for their own role. Prompted by Amparo, the group went to Carlos's house in order to stand vigil over the body (*velación*), a role for which they had purchased wreaths. On arriving at the house, however, they were told the body was still at the Prosecutor's Office in the city centre, but, on arrival at this office, they were informed that the body was now at the house of Marisol's aunt in Colonia Cleotilde Torres, near the Hidalgo market. On finding the house, the group's persistence was rewarded by the discovery that only Carlos's brother was standing vigil and that there were no flowers. The group quickly rectified the situation by placing wreaths around the casket.

Only Rodrigo and Filadelfo, however, stayed for the *velación*, the rest leaving, marking a deviation from convention that, as we came to realise, typified their approach to religion. The group returned the following day to attend the mass said by a priest and attended only by some of Carlos's family and Marisol, and to join the funeral cortege to the municipal cemetery where Carlos was buried in a shared grave.⁷ On the ninth day after Carlos's death, the group went to the cemetery to pay their last respects (*la novena*). Everyone was very quiet. Doña Conchita, Amparo, Alvaro, Rodrigo and Marisol presented the wooden cross they had bought, an act that allowed them to consider themselves Carlos's godparents (*compadres de la cruz*). The solemnity of this role and its significance to the group's sense of its own identity was intensified by the fact that Carlos's mother was absent and had asked Marisol and the group to perform these final tasks. The cross itself bears the inscription 'In memory from his family and friends' and Carlos's name.

Performing these roles was not without substantial cost in terms of time and money, and strain on the dynamics of the group as well as on relations with others in the market. In order to retain their place at the traffic lights where they washed wind-screens, the group have to pay a street trader organisation, the *Unión Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes 28 de Octubre*, five pesos each per week and to join organised

⁷ Church practice allows priests to pray for the souls of suicide victims but they are not allowed to grant burial, a stricture that is broken regularly.

demonstrations when required. The funeral had cost \$3500 (\$US 320); the group went to the Union to request financial help but were turned down as Carlos had not been killed while at work. This decision prompted the group to break off relations for a short while, with the possibility that they might be removed from the market, until the Union requested that they rejoin. In the meantime, the group turned their attention to collecting money from minivan drivers, social contacts with whom they appeared to have strong and friendly relations. But these interactions also revealed the pressures of 'correct behaviour' and power relations within the group, as when an argument erupted over the accusation of Amparo and Doña Conchita that Fabio had used some of the money collected for the funeral for other things, although ultimately it transpired that Fabio had used the money honestly.

The group assessed their role following Carlos's death as having acted appropriately relative to social and religious obligations and under difficult circumstances. Through a series of performances, the group constructed a sense of self-respect that was reinforced over subsequent months in relation to the perceived shortcomings of others. In August, for example, we showed the group some photos taken over the previous months that included one of Carlos taken a few months before his death. The image of a full-faced Carlos with his nose almost in the camera lens was in stark contrast to the Carlos in the photos taken just before he died, which showed a sallow complexion, bedraggled hair and empty eyes. The fate of these photos became the subject of a heated debate. Diego proposed that the photos should be given to Marisol, but in agreeing with the suggestion, Amparo added that then 'we can see how much it pains her'. Despite having identified Marisol as the rightful person initially to look after the body, Amparo thought that she did not now merit the photos. According to Amparo and Doña Conchita, since the funeral, Marisol had been too quick to find new partners and had shown herself to be two-faced (*payasa*) by not stopping to talk with the group when passing by the market. By contrast, the group's participation at the *velación* and the *novena*, and the respectful tones in which they continued to talk of Carlos showed how they deserved the photos. Long after his death, Carlos was always referred to by Lucio as 'our deceased friend' (*el finadito Lágrimas*) and Alvaro, who was about to elaborate for us how he and Carlos were always getting into trouble, was cut off by Doña Conchita who reprimanded him not to 'badmouth our companion or he'll come and get you in the night'.

On other occasions, however, group members revealed the difficulties of fitting their emotions to the shared performance of socially and culturally appropriate behaviour. Having promised that she would not cry over Carlos, the photos prompted Amparo to recall the special occasions when she and Carlos were together such as a march at which they had held the banner. On seeing another photo showing the group with the *alebrijes*⁸ they had made at a government-run handicraft workshop, Amparo reflected that Carlos had never managed to finish his *alebrije*, a cross made from tin foil, and 'how out of everyone he has the saddest look, you can really see that now'. How deep these sentiments went, however, and how far they were contextual to the obligations

8 *Alebrijes* are papier-mâché over a wire frame and usually consist of fantastical creatures, brightly painted, that appear in dreams.

of a particular performance was revealed by a conversation with Amparo one year after Carlos's death. In talking with Elsa, she admitted to not feeling sad at Carlos's death as she had had a number of (unspecified) run-ins with him and that of all the people to have killed themselves recently she had been more deeply affected by the death of Mariano, also a clown, who had also hung himself. Unlike Carlos, however, the group had not learned of Mariano's death in time to attend the *velación* and they had a marginal role at the funeral organised by his family. The absence of a role deprived Amparo of a means to express her feelings for Mariano in a form dependent on social expectation.

These one-to-one encounters seemed to reveal a pathos that was less evident and sometimes, we suspect, consciously avoided in the group situations in which stoicism was valued. Stoicism also had its own highly gendered performances with Amparo, Estela and Doña Conchita's presentation of sadness at Carlos's death sometimes appearing to have been painted on. Caught off guard, some annoyance was evident. On one occasion, for example, the common refrain that Carlos was 'a poor thing' who, as Doña Conchita remarked, 'for better or for worse, is now at rest', elicited the response from Amparo that the poor are those left behind. Doña Conchita and Amparo seemed to agree, shifting the emphasis from Carlos, who should 'rest in peace', to their situation as the real victims. There was also a sense at such moments of the women in the group holding everything together materially, through their encouragement of the men to work (and therefore stop drug use temporarily), and the decisions about food and medicines, as well as at a more emotional level. As we gradually picked up, however, the idea of the women as the 'bearers' (*receptáculos*) of others' frustrations also had a darker side.

Everyday Violence and Visions of Death

For many in the group, Carlos's suicide represented the latest example of violence and death that formed an important element of everyday identity constructions. Stories of domestic violence, beatings and road traffic accidents were numerous, as were accounts of negligence and explicit abuse. Ramón, Roque, Rodrigo and Mateo began their lives on the street and were using drugs from eight to ten years of age. Doña Conchita's children, including Alvaro and Alfonso, were mistreated throughout childhood by their father, who forced them to steal. Estela's mother continues to use violence as a way to 'educate' her children and once held one son's head underwater to 'rinse away' his drug addiction. The majority of our participants bear scars, burns and stab wounds that date from the time of their childhood and have been added to since, the result of fights with gangs or relatives (see Herrera, Jones and Thomas de Benítez, forthcoming).

Death is also a prominent feature of daily life. Mateo recalled living in abandoned buildings where people had died, mostly from drug overdose or alcoholism, some of whom he knew well. To die young or old seemed irrelevant. Few could recall anyone they knew who had died in old age, perhaps remarkably, as life expectancy in Mexico is around 72 years, from uncles dead in their 20s to new-born siblings and many friends

for whom overdose, alcohol related illness, suicide or car crash were all mentioned. A particularly striking revelation, however, was that suicide, or *quitarse la vida*, as many participants called it, had been contemplated by our participants. Before Carlos's death, nobody had offered this information to us, but in subsequent conversations many revealed suicide ideation. Framing the risk of suicide in the context of appropriate behaviour by noting that Marisol had been at fault for leaving Carlos alone after an argument, Doña Conchita commented that the 'correct' approach that she recommends to Amparo whenever she and Alvaro have a fight is never to leave him alone in case of his 'doing something stupid'. It later transpired that Alvaro had tried to kill himself on two occasions due to what he claimed initially was his drug addiction but was convinced not to by his mother and by Amparo, his partner. When Elsa asked Alvaro to explain the circumstances of his suicidal thoughts, he responded:

Alvaro: What happened is that I was very bored, more than anything, as I've said before, due to problems with my family and the drug addiction. Well, how do you say, my brothers told me that I wasn't their brother, and I wandered in the street and lots of things happened to me. When I was walking around some guys took the money that I earned. ... Sometimes people got angry and treated me if I were crazy, and I got bored, I got bored. Twice I was going to jump from the bridge at the bus depot.

Elsa: You were ... perhaps drugged?

Alvaro: No, clearheaded. At that time, we were friends, me and [Amparo] were friends. She helped me, on two occasions she helped, above all when I was going to kill myself. And I thank her because this is the most that anyone has ever helped me, sometimes we've had bad stuff, at others no. Sometimes I ask her forgiveness because I think we should live happily and not always fighting.

Amparo talked Alvaro down from the bridge. In subsequent conversations, we learned that Roque, Mateo, Guillermo and Rodrigo had all considered suicide. For Rodrigo, this followed the (possible) suicide of a friend, which he revealed during a conversation when asked about the hardest thing to have happened to him:

Rodrigo: The hardest is to see one of my friends on drugs jump from a bridge.

Elsa: He jumped from the bridge? How? He was drugged with ...?

Rodrigo: He was taking a glue that we call *chemo*. He jumped from, from a footbridge. We were above the bridge. We were sniffing and the kid, who knows if he was hallucinating but he jumped. I had to leave him there because we were taking drugs together, and if they'd seen me they'd have carted me off ... He was one of the kids who had been on the street with me three, close to three, three years together ... We were as thick as thieves.

Behind a tough streetwise image and a decade later, Rodrigo is still affected by the death of his friend. According to Rodrigo, after the suicide he became involved in crime and less than a year later he was in prison serving a four-and-a-half-year sentence for armed assault with a pistol.

Roque had also thought of killing himself. He described how he could not work because of a cold. His girlfriend had advised rest, a condition that had clearly frustrated him, forcing him to 'stay, stay, stay' and lose money:

Roque: When I don't have money I get desperate. I say: 'I don't have money and I don't know what to do.' There are times, [when] I want to kill myself but [then] I say, 'what for?' I say: 'If God sent me to suffer, if God wants things to be like that, why should I take my life?' He knows when [our] time is up. I tell you, isn't life great? Because imagine when the accident happened to me I almost died, but for some reason I didn't. And God says 'you will recover, keep on going'. I have thought about it and I made a promise [to my partner] just this week, from now on, no more vice and keep going.

Elsa: A promise that you made with yourself?

Roque: I made it to them both [Meche and their unborn baby].

Elsa: But you promised yourself and to God?

Roque's account reveals how suicidal ideation is related to a religious moral framework, in this case sufficient to convince Roque that his sins were evidence of his unworthiness to take a decision as profound as ending his life. Again, too, the conversation with Roque exposed the importance of gender roles.⁹ The males in the group possessed greater suicidal ideation, feelings that were converted into attempts, whereas the women never mentioned suicide as a personal thought. What we had previously interpreted as stoicism gradually appeared to be one part of a role performed by the women. Within the group, the relationships offered self-esteem and temporary protection from suicide, especially when reinforced by pressure to realise the duties of parenthood and reduce drug use. While habitual drug use formed a key component of male identity, and is often mentioned as offering an escape from day-to-day realities, including we suspect an occasional hallucinatory state that removes ideation in the short run, drug use fomented the depressions and relationship breakdowns that enhanced feelings of suicide. The women's 'strength' as well as their verbal prompts supported the male members' attempts to leave drugs and control suicidal thoughts.

In an echo of Durkheim, the discussions also suggested that religious integration serves as protection against suicide. The group frequently exhibited their faith during

9 Globally, the suicide rate for men is nearly twice that of women and in Mexico men are nearly five times more likely to be the suicide victim (WHO, 2002; Tuñón Pablos and Bobadilla Bernal, 2005).

conversation, talked at length about recent or forthcoming pilgrimages, were observed bowing before religious altars on the street and crammed the spaces where they slept with religious iconography. On visiting Doña Conchita's two-room house we counted three altars and the photo of Carlos's house in *El Sol* showed a framed image of the Virgin of Guadalupe at the entrance. During a conversation, Alvaro made this direct reference to a connection between suicide and religion:

It is a punishment from God. We are dead, we did it. Because look, let me talk about me. I am a drug addict. I am looking to die alone. There are many people who cannot handle their problems. What do we do? Many jump in front of cars. Many kill themselves alone with shards of glass or a knife, or they die from alcohol, they forget everything. We do it because God says 'today you are coming with me'. But he knows when. God does not tell us, 'you know what, hang yourself' or 'you know what, throw yourself onto the freeway, or you know, kill yourself with drugs'. On the contrary, he says 'Face up to your problems'. That is when we are reborn with love ... We don't notice how little by little we are alive. Even those that don't drink, smoke or take drugs, they have sin ...

Later in the same conversation, Alvaro was insistent that he would 'swear' his faith to the Virgin, meaning that he would desist from drug taking so as to be worthy enough to baptise his son, and that they can both 'be happy at least for a while'. In numerous conversations, Alvaro and others expressed with considerable lucidity their obligations to children, to partners and to God, and seemed to be aware that performing roles as good fathers, 'husbands', friends and Christians was vital to their personal survival.

But, these roles masked or were in contradiction with other performances, marked by the resumption of drug taking and behaviours that threatened relationships. As such we have a strong sense of Alvaro, and others, seeking to resolve the tensions between their lifestyles and their and society's moral and religious codes. The specific instance of Carlos's death provided one such opportunity, briefly, that allowed the performances and discussions to construct a suicide as any other death. While it was known that Carlos killed himself, and it is unlikely that he was baptised or went to mass, his death was treated as any other death, not only by the group, but also by the priest. The manner of his death might also be interpreted as conforming to a normalised view that instead of placing suicide outside the religious compass actually served to condone it. Suicide in Mexico is predominantly achieved by hanging: 170 of the 192 recorded suicide victims in Puebla during 2006 hung themselves. According to one interviewee, hanging is both culturally and socially significant in Mexico, relating to the admission of sin (the Judas icon) and the fate exacted on traitors and suspected criminals (the *linchamiento*) (interview with Benigno Romano Romano, 2007). Hanging, therefore, marks an accepted form of death for an 'outsider' and, for Carlos, a means of protest (*reclamo*) against the rejection of society.

Given the multiple ways in which meanings could be extracted from suicide, we were surprised that the group made no efforts to commemorate Carlos's death during

the Day of the Dead (*Todos Santos*, 1–2 November), when people make a special effort to remember those who have died in the previous year. To some extent, our expectations may have been wrapped in the essentialised trope of the ‘morbid Mexican’, who treats death with humour and spectacle as matter of course (Brandes, 2003). Yet the omission of commemoration is at odds with the earlier performances that appeared to treat the suicide as any other death within a cultural framework and from which the group extracted considerable social legitimacy for their role. Not commemorating Carlos’s death on *Todos Santos*, not even with a visit to his grave, seemed to contradict the meanings of these earlier performances, especially as lit candles were put out at the home of Doña Conchita for two sons who died in childbirth many years before. When asked about the omission, Doña Conchita explained rather abruptly that there was no money for flowers. Deeper down, however, there was a sense of having ‘done enough’ in relation to Carlos, especially as in the weeks leading to *Todos Santos* (and for some months after), a number of relationships broke down, one child was sent to a non-governmental organisation (NGO) residential programme, and eventually Alvaro, Alfonso and Lucio went to rehabilitation centres, in Alvaro’s case not of his own free will.

Nevertheless, by the first anniversary of Carlos’s death (*cabo del año*), Alvaro, Alfonso and Lucio had returned, partnerships had been reformed and relations generally seemed more stable. Even so, when asked by Marisol for the group to visit the cemetery, only Rodrigo and Filadelfo went, some of the group giving a token sum for flowers and candles instead. Social tensions with Marisol appeared to have won out over the commitments to religion and to the godparent roles that were previously described with such pride. The group had drawn some strength from treating a suicide within normalised codes of death that even involved the Catholic Church, setting out their appropriate behaviour as an identity marker. Now, this performance was dropped once it no longer seemed useful and had become a chore.

Instead, the group had other ways of thinking about death and especially suicide that drew from everyday imaginaries. Vasco, for example, recalled for us how he had seen death twice in the form of a headless horseman and Mateo said he was used to the presence of ghosts and knew how to get rid of them through prayers and curses.¹⁰ A prominent everyday imaginary is the *Santísima Muerte*, the Saint of Death, a syncretic figure represented as a skeleton shrouded in a cloak holding a scythe, banned by the official church.¹¹ When Elsa and Gareth first met the Hidalgo group, everyone was huddled around Moises in animated discussion, admiring a framed image of *La Santa Muerte*. The image was quickly placed in a tree for safety while people went off to clean windcreens and talk with us. Later, we noticed that Doña Conchita had a

10 Intriguingly, Mexico’s best known ghost/siren, La Llorena, is a murderer (of her children) and a suicide, and is believed to prey on lone men under the influence of alcohol or who are being unfaithful.

11 Santa Muerte is commonly associated with drug dealers, prisoners, sex workers, and people abandoned by the state. Santa Muerte ceremonies in Mexico City attract thousands of followers, but most believers in Puebla restrict their adoration to the private sphere.

pendent around her neck with an image of the Santa Muerte and many of the boys wore t-shirts with her image. Vasco told us of a prayer that he uses regularly to communicate with the Santa Muerte:

With my body I beg you to free me from all evil and all saints. No [more] fighting, no playing around, no more stealing from others or listening to the bad things they teach me. I beg you for all favours until the last day, hour and until the moment the Divine Majesty asks me to appear before his presence. In the name of the Father, of the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Alvaro too revealed how he communicates with the Santa Muerte, directly and in dreams:

Look, death is ... how do you say it? It has significance. For example, we believe in the Santísima Muerte. Why? God died, remember what he said: 'the dead shall be brought back to life'. So we believe in death because in some cases we have asked for it, from those who are dead or whom the dead believe in too. For example, I have my Santísimas Muertes. What do we do then? Well, before I ask anything from her I ask God, then afterward I ask her. Two or three times I have dreamt of Santísima Muerte, that is, there is the good and the bad. The good is the Golden one, the Red Santísima. The Golden one is for money, the Red is for love, the White is the same, for love. The Black is not anything like this. The first three do not ask anything in exchange but the Black does, because in order to ask for a person to change one must give something back. A person that I love a lot ... someone in my family, my kid. If I ask for a lot of money, maybe \$70,000 (about \$US6,400), she asks me to reform. She sets the date and that's it. Let's say, I ask for over \$40,000, when such and such a person dies, she brings it. Meanwhile the others (the Gold, Red and White) will oppose her. ... sometimes the Gold and the Black fight.

Twice I've dreamt of The Virgin [the Santa Muerte]. Once I was drunk. I was with my friends, and suddenly I began to sleep. I dreamt of her, she was a woman that was completely golden and she told me that I didn't have to be laying there, that I needed to stand up and go home, that my family was waiting for me. So she gave me money, she said: 'I'm not asking you for anything in exchange, I just want you to stand up and go.' At that moment, I felt a person carry me and I remember the person took me home, to the wooden door. Suddenly, when I arrived there, I fell asleep again and like smoke she disappeared ... Moreover, those things are asked in dreams and by prayer. We cannot promise just anything because there are things that we will not do. For example, there are some guys that believe in the Santísima Muerte, they promise things and do not carry them out. That is why sometimes the Santa Muerte gets angry ... So when

we have a soda we give her one too. We eat sweets and we give the Santa Muerte some too. When we drink, the same, there is a glass for her. We offer candles; we try to keep the altar in order.¹²

Alvaro describes the Santa Muerte as a kind of ‘back-up’ to God (‘before I ask anything from her I ask God, then afterward her’), but the absence of doctrinal religiosity surrounding Santa Muerte seemed to appeal to Alvaro and others who can project worries onto and communicate with her in ways of their choosing. Although worship of the Santa Muerte has its own special prayers and rituals, unlike conventional Catholicism there is no expected practice. Unofficial, edgy, less judgemental (best not to make her angry) the Santa Muerte suggests a lack of absolutes and ‘power’ is more evenly distributed. In return for the small daily offerings, the Santa Muerte promises financial or material rewards almost immediately (‘She sets the date and that’s it’) while the penances such as desisting from drug use bring individual benefit and further personalise the relationship. A key attribute of the Santa Muerte is the offer of protection, against bad luck or hurt caused by others, and as a saint that gives insight to a world of death, the Santa Muerte offers empathy and protection to people with feelings of suicide. In Alvaro’s account, incorporating a dream with an almost near-death quality to it, the Santa Muerte is both understanding and tells him to go back home: indeed, he describes how he was carried by her to his door. For a young drug addict and father with suicidal ideation, the Santa Muerte provides an outlet for daily frustrations and fears, and provides Alvaro with a make-do performance and a prop to bolster resilience.

Conclusion

The person around whom this article revolves is dead. Carlos’s death brought to our attention a subject that has received little coverage in research on street youth, despite the salience of the topic to our understanding of resilience, vulnerability and violence. Although suited in many ways to ethnographic study, suicide presents particular challenges, concerning how and when people reveal ideation or explain an event. In our case, Carlos’s suicide took place while our relationship with the group at the Hidalgo market was incipient and we were cautious about discussing sensitive subjects, let alone suicide. Nevertheless, we found ourselves gaining insights about daily life through conversations about someone who, for whatever reason, found his life intolerable. Had we known Carlos better, some of our understanding would be sharper, but also, perhaps, his suicide would have been less unsettling. We were certainly in no position to make judgements about why he killed himself, and we have tried to avoid making any such assumptions in this article. The Hidalgo group members were also reluctant to talk about Carlos or their own experiences of suicidal ideation for some time. In part,

12 Alvaro refers to the Santa Muerte as four saints. The Black saint is used for wishing bad luck on others, for protection against spells and curses and for materialistic requests that may require penance.

this reticence was a relief as we could not offer much support if discussions had revealed deeper traumas, and participants' prior contacts with psychologists through government agencies and civil society organisations had not been successful, making referrals for psychological support difficult to negotiate.

Nonetheless, observations, short conversations and interviews made numerous references to death, violence and suicide over the weeks, sometimes in relation to group dynamics and topics such as religion that we were interested in following up, making it obvious that we could not explore youth identities without knowing more about suicide. It was also clear that a suicide that had initially seemed like a one-off event was understood by the group in relation to wider issues of social relationships, religious belief, gender roles and wider experiences of violence. Among the Hidalgo group, thoughts on death and suicide seemed to be traumatic yet, at the same time, mundane. Experiencing violence in the domestic sphere from a young age and, later, on the street, where they receive verbal and physical abuse, experience feelings of mistrust and spend time in juvenile detention or prison, suicide did not always present as a foolish option (*insensato*). Exposure to violence worked to bind the group and to educate members about how to treat death, to be resilient in the same way that dodging traffic, taking drugs and beating others is important to the group's members 'fitting in'. The group's response to Carlos's suicide was just one more way in which they sought to convert a transgression into something more acceptable, if not to legitimate suicide per se, then at least to represent a *compañero's* demise as a 'good death' and hence validate briefly their social role. We realised only slowly that suicide was widely experienced, despite available statistics suggesting low prevalence in Mexico, and feelings of suicide were frequent for some. The performance, therefore, masked their vulnerability. Suicide and suicidal ideation were given a halo of normality, one more part of a constant struggle with visions and attitudes towards life that jump between feelings of valuelessness and a search for pleasure and significance.

References

- Avilés Fabila, R. (1993) *Réquiem por un suicida*. Librerías Prodhufi: Madrid.
- Brandes, S. (2003) 'Is There a Mexican View of Death?'. *Ethos* 31(1): 127–144.
- D'Abreu, R. C., Mullis, A. K. and Cook, L. R. (1999) 'The Resiliency of Street Children in Brazil'. *Dolescente* 34(136): 745–751.
- De Souza, E. R., de Souza Minayo, M. C. and Malaquias, J. V. (2002) 'Suicide among Young People in Selected Brazilian Capitals'. *Caderno Saúde Pública* 18(3): 673–683.
- Dorais, M. and Lajeunesse, S. L. (2004) *Dead Boys Can't Dance: Sexual Orientation, Masculinity, and Suicide*. McGill-Queen's University Press: Quebec.
- Dube, S. R., Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Chapman, D. P., Williamson, D. F. and Giles, W. H. (2001) 'Childhood Abuse, Household Dysfunction, and the Risk of Attempted Suicide Throughout the Life Span: Findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study'. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 286(24): 3089–3096.
- Durkheim, E. (2006 [1897]) *On Suicide*. Penguin: London.
- Figley, C. R. and Nash, W. P. (eds) (2006) *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research and Management*. Routledge: London.
- Gaines, D. (1998) *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

- Gigengack, R. (1994) 'Social Practices of Juvenile Survival and Mortality: Child Care Arrangements in Mexico City'. *Community Development Journal* 29(4): 380–393.
- Godoy, A. S. (1999) "'Our Right is the Right to Be Killed": Making Rights Real on the Streets of Guatemala'. *Childhood* 6: 423–442.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs.
- Hecht, T. (1998) *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Herrera, E., Jones, G. A. and Thomas de Benítez, S. (forthcoming) 'Bodies on the Line: Identity Markers among Mexican Street Youth'. *Children's Geographies*.
- Inciardi, J. and Surratt, H. (1998) 'Children in the Streets of Brazil: Drug Use, Crime, Violence, and HIV Risks'. *Substance Use and Misuse* 33: 1461–1480.
- Jamison, K. R. (2000) *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*. Vintage Books: New York.
- Kidd, S. A. (2004) "'The Walls were Closing in and We were Trapped": A Qualitative Analysis of Street Youth Suicide'. *Youth and Society* 36: 30–55.
- Kidd, S. A. and Carroll, M. R. (2007) 'Coping and Suicidality among Homeless Youth'. *Journal of Adolescence* 30(2): 283–296.
- Lomnitz-Adler, C. (2005) *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. Zone Books: New York.
- Molnar, B. E., Shade, S. B., Kral, A. H., Booth, R. E. and Watters, J. K. (1998) 'Suicidal Behaviour and Sexual/Physical Abuse among Street Youth'. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22(3): 213–222.
- Norget, K. (2005) *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Noto, A., Nappo, S., Galduroz, J., Mattei, R. and Carlini, E. (1997) 'Use of Drugs among Street Children in Brazil'. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 29: 85–92.
- Panter-Brick, C. (2002) 'Street Children, Human Rights and Public Health'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 147–171.
- Proal, Juan Pablo (2005) 'En Puebla, los suicidios superan a los del DF en 2004'. *La Jornada de Oriente*, 5 December.
- Puentes-Rosas, E., López-Nieto, L. and Martínez-Monroy, T. (2004) 'La mortalidad por suicidios: México 1990–2001'. *Pan American Journal of Public Health* 16(2): 102–109.
- Riches, D. (1986) *The Anthropology of Violence*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rizzini, I. and Butler, U. M. (2003) 'Life Trajectories of Children and Adolescents Living on the Streets of Rio de Janeiro'. *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1). [WWW document]. URL <http://colorado.edu/journals/cye> [accessed 28 June 2007].
- Sánchez, Cinthya (2005) 'Trastornos mentales, riesgo mortal para los jóvenes', *El Universal*, 18 November, p. 2.
- Secretaría de Salud (2006) *Informe nacional sobre violencia y Salud*. Secretaría de Salud: México City.
- Sen, A. (1993) 'Capability and Well-Being', in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds) *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 30–53.
- Stockard, J. and O'Brien, R. M. (2002) 'Cohort Effects on Suicide Rates: International Variations'. *American Sociological Review* 67(6): 854–872.
- Thomas de Benítez, S. (2008) *Square Holes for Round Pegs? Social Policy Processes and "Street" Children's Experiences: A Case Study in Puebla City, Mexico*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics, London.
- Tuñón Pablos, E. and Bobadilla Bernal, D. J. (2005) 'Mortalidad en varones jóvenes de México'. *Estudios Sociales* 13(26): 68–84.
- Viveros, Ozair (2006) 'Los suicidios llegan a 51'. *El Sol de Puebla*, 19 April, Section 2a, p. 1.
- Weaver, K. and Maddaleno, M. (1999) 'Youth Violence in Latin America: Current Situation and Violence Prevention Strategies'. *Pan American Journal of Public Health* 5 (4–5): 338–343.

- Whitehead, N. L. (2004a) 'On the Poetics of Violence', in N. L. Whitehead (ed.) *Violence*. School of American Research Press: Sante Fe, 55–77.
- Whitehead, N. L. (2004b) 'Introduction: Cultures, Conflicts and the Poetics of Violent Practice', in N. L. Whitehead (ed.) *Violence*. School of American Research Press: Sante Fe, 3–24.
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2002) *World Report on Violence and Health*. WHO: Geneva.

Interviews

- Romano Romano, Psic. Benigno (2007) Chair of the Consejo Estatal Contra las Adicciones, March, Puebla.