

**An Illegal Job? Critical Analysis of the Discourse on Drug Trafficking  
in Young People from Mexicali, Baja California**

**¿Un trabajo ilegal? Análisis crítico del discurso sobre el narcotráfico  
en jóvenes de Mexicali, Baja California**

Anel Hortensia Gómez San Luis<sup>1</sup> and Ariagor Manuel Almanza Avendaño<sup>2</sup>

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of discourses on drug trafficking made by young people from Mexicali, Baja California. Drug trafficking generates various ethical positions that encompass its acceptance, rejection, or ambivalence. The construction of their discourses is influenced by speeches produced by the government and entertainment media and by the degree of closeness to drug trafficking in everyday life. Discussion groups were held, and critical discourse analysis was carried out. Discourses about drug trafficking have implications for the incorporation of young people into the activity and its normalization in local contexts. It is recommended to research personal processes that promote the rejection of drug trafficking at an individual level, despite pragmatic acceptance that normalizes it in the community.

*Keywords:* 1. drug trafficking, 2. discourse, 3. youth, 4. northern Mexico, 5. Mexicali, Baja California.

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca contribuir a la comprensión de discursos sobre el narcotráfico construidos por jóvenes de Mexicali, Baja California. El narcotráfico genera diversos posicionamientos éticos que abarcan su aceptación, rechazo o ambivalencia. La construcción de sus discursos es influida por discursos producidos desde el gobierno y los medios de entretenimiento, así como por el grado de cercanía con el narcotráfico en la vida cotidiana. Se realizaron grupos de discusión y se llevó a cabo un análisis crítico del discurso. Los discursos acerca del narcotráfico tienen implicaciones para la incorporación de los jóvenes en esta actividad, así como su normalización en los contextos locales. Se recomienda indagar en los procesos personales que promueven el rechazo del narcotráfico a nivel individual, a pesar de la aceptación pragmática que normaliza la actividad en la comunidad.

*Palabras clave:* 1. narcotráfico, 2. discurso, 3. jóvenes, 4. norte de México, 5. Mexicali, Baja California.

Received: February 7, 2020

Approved: June 12, 2020

Online publication: March 15, 2021

<sup>1</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico, [agomez82@uabc.edu.mx](mailto:agomez82@uabc.edu.mx), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9846-5046>

<sup>2</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico, [almanzaa@uabc.edu.mx](mailto:almanzaa@uabc.edu.mx), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7240-6163>



## INTRODUCTION

The notion of narco-state refers to a scenario in which government institutions lead drug-trafficking activities or collude with drug traffickers, the structure of the global licit economy is taken advantage of, while segments of society are economically benefited by these activities. The relationship between traffickers, State representatives and civil society may be consensual or not, and even symbioses and mutual benefits may develop between the various actors. Mexico is a state that produces, transports and demands illicit drugs, characterized by large-scale corruption of public officials, being violent toward opposers of drug-trafficking activities and a high degree of influence from the economy linked to illegal-drug trafficking on the legal economy (Rexton, 2016). A coopted reconfiguration of the State is under way; a process in which a group of public and non-public actors sharing common interests resort to multiple strategies to use the resources of the State for their own benefit with the least risk of criminal punishment. All of which restricts the functioning of the institutions (Flores, 2013).

There is neither relationship of exteriority between the organizations linked to drug trafficking and the State, nor with the communities where they operate. It even surpasses Nation-State borders and is conceived as a transnational network to produce, transport and commercialize illegal drugs (Ovalle, 2006); as well, in this network, people, money, objects for consumption and information circulate. The network instrumentally appropriates the territories in order to economically exploit them, as disseminated in the media or declared in press releases. Simultaneously, these networks strive to symbolically establish themselves in the localities by means of aesthetic investments, affectivity, customs and building identities. Drug trafficking has been linked to the theatricalization of success, opulence, anonymity, risk, the cult of fast money and instrumentalizing violence (Ovalle, 2011). Córdova (2007) considers that it has produced a particular transgressive ideological system with its own scale of values, regulations and behavioral models. The mass media and entertainment industry have both facilitated the reproduction, promotion and acceptance of this ideological system.

By contrast, the official discourse on organized crime refers to associations linked to drug trafficking. Escalante (2012) argues that this discourse is neither neutral nor objective, but produced in an imaginary dimension. A *standard knowledge* regarding organized crime is thus devised, which is characterized by the use of special vocabulary and stereotyped explanatory resources to account for their activities, stances and relationships with authorities and also their conflicts. This official discourse offers a homogeneous image of organized crime, which disregards the local particularities and hides the relationships established with state institutions.

In the narrative of this image, reproduced in mass media, organized crime comprises separate and recognizable social groups, exclusively engaged in committing crimes, integrated into stable organizations whose members are orderly deployed throughout the

territories. It is assumed that such organizations have clearly defined borders, there are identification processes between their members, hierarchical structures and well-defined functions. These organizations have an entrepreneurial nature and multinational interests, and resort to violence with instrumental ends; as well, they may diversify their criminal activities. In addition to coordinating to commit crimes, they may control territories, organize local delinquents and even perform governmental roles. Likewise, violence is explained as a product of the actions of the *cartels* fighting one another to control the localities (*plazas*), while victims are reduced to anonymity and associated to crime.

Zavala (2018) affirms that the State creates a structure of meanings with the political purpose of hiding. The notion of *cartel* is a symbolism (a literary device) that obscures the influence of the official power on the flows of drug traffic and also, at once, is the single explanation for violence as a product of the *conflict between cartels*; it mystifies the impact of the disciplinary strategies of the State on citizen casualties, displacements and the breakdown of social fabric. This author proposes to redefine the notion of locality (*plaza*) as a place for the concurrence of diverse actors, organizations and institutions that involve alliances among politicians, military, police, entrepreneurs and traffickers, which vie for the control of the local clandestine economies by the State.

Therefore, in the background of the *war of cartels*, there is a state of emergency, which besides controlling illegal economies, is trying to carry out *social cleansing*, grasping territories and supporting the economic interests of national and transnational private enterprises (Gledhill, 2017; Mastrogiovanni, 2016). In spite of the official discourse, which typifies the members of organizations linked to drug trafficking as criminals alien to the State, the social interaction and the degree of closeness of the inhabitants of the communities with such actors allow putting forward constructions that shape the affections and actions of the social groups and contest such discourse. Astorga (1995) considers that civil society develops a sort of ethical pragmatism regarding drug trafficking, which enables establishing a certain degree of tolerance and strategies to coexist and supposes an implicit decision pondering past and potential violence and the economic benefits. This way, the stigmatization promoted by the State might become an emblem, due to the traffickers' social recognition and economic influence on the localities.

In local contexts, a polyphony of discourses on illicit drug trafficking could take place; such discourses account for a number of ethical stances and strategies to approach the impact of those organizations on the communities (Padilla, 2012). According to Mendoza (2008), the networks to traffic illicit drugs not only have the capacity to transform local life, the communities might take up an active role in the appropriation and modification as well. Social groups valorize and develop forms to coexist with illegal drug trafficking; this way, mechanisms to control, reject or neutralize it appear. This valorization is noticed in the terms used for naming the actors and activities, and in the use of various discursive

4 An Illegal Job? Critical Analysis of the Discourse on Drug Trafficking...  
Gómez SanLuis, A. H. & Almanza Avendaño, A. M.

genres to speak of drug trafficking, which are associated to certain topics, styles, production rules and moral standards.

In a study carried out in a community in Sonora, in the north of Mexico, Mendoza (2008) found out that a pragmatical acceptance of drug trafficking prevails, for it is understood as a part of daily life or a *necessary evil*; moreover, there is an attraction to cultural expressions such as *narcocorridos*. There exist some essential elements that contribute to the moral assessment of drug trafficking: its construction as work, as it counteracts the illegality and impurity linked to the activity; the value given to the money earned this way, as it may be disqualified as *easy* or *dirty*; finally, the degree of dependence of illicit activities on the local economy, owing to labor precariousness. Similarly, the increase in drug consumption and violence in public spaces are elements that contribute to its social rejection.

In a study on inhabitants of Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, Reyes-Sosa, Larrañaga-Egilegor and Valencia-Gárate (2015) found out that drug trafficking is associated with other criminal offenses such as assassinations, shootings, kidnappings and corruption. Besides being associated to violence and insecurity, it entails addictions; at the same time, it is related to economic benefits, since the sale and commerce of illicit drugs is perceived as a job, in addition to generating wealth via money laundering. Another source of positive valorization is the one linked to a comfortable lifestyle, automobiles, luxurious goods and the availability of women. An ambivalent valorization of drug trafficking prevails; it fluctuates between the idealization of its benefits and a negative valorization owing to its consequences for the social fabric. For the authors above, the distance from drug dealing may affect the way it is valorized, as a positive valuation is expected from someone who is acquainted with a member of a drug-trafficking organization or receives direct or indirect benefits from the activity.

In another study with young university students in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, Ovalle (2007) found out there is indifference toward drug trafficking. That is to say, there is neither rejection nor approval for the activity in moral term. It is conceived as a business that meets a demand, and as an employment option, hence, they express it has to be legalized and perceive drug traffickers as unlawful entrepreneurs who carry out a high-risk activity. Moreover, students assume that drug trafficking is a public security problem with no solution, which remains because of the authorities' complicity.

Among the sectors studied by Ovalle (2007) there is a minority sector that satanizes drug trafficking, as they deem it a criminal network that sells illicit drugs perceived as a *poison*, functions by means of indiscriminate violence and is a *social cancer* that corrupts and disintegrates society. Its members are seen as criminals who perform an immoral activity. They express feelings of repulsion and fear of drug trafficking, and propose harsher penalties for its members. In another study carried out in three municipalities of Baja California, Ovalle (2010) worked with young men and women the author met in

recreational or educational centers, aged between 17 and 30 years, from various social strata and living in the selected municipalities. Most of the respondents from the municipality of Mexicali considered that drug trafficking had increased in their city (54%), wanted its networks to stop working (92%), though they perceived it was not possible (82%) because of the size of the networks, demand, social power and profitability, the social inequality that drives people to enter into drug trafficking, corruption and the fact that it has *rooted* into the cities over time.

Although drug trafficking is conceived as a risky, uncertain activity, in which liberty is lost, the respondents expressed that it is easy to become involved and it is built as an attractive employment option, for it has various economic benefits such as a higher income than lawful employment, time for leisure and recreation, access to diverse consumption goods, opportunities to travel, social recognition and support from a network of complicities with social power.

An indicator that drug trafficking has not been fully built as a public security problem in the municipality of Mexicali is that the *Consejo Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública de Baja California* [Civil Council of Public Security of Baja California] (2017) reported that citizens expressed concerns about becoming victims of a crime (95.6%), a relative becoming an addict (60.3%), economic stability at the household (40.3%) and to a lesser extent, domestic violence (6%). However, drug trafficking was not explicitly declared. Not only does the construction of drug trafficking as a public security problem entail its recognition as such, but also an attribution of responsibility regarding public security and taking a stance on the strategies to approach it (Gusfield, 2014; Kessler, 2009).

The aim of the present study is to understand the influence of the official discourse and the discourses on drug trafficking in the media on the way youths from the city of Mexicali, Baja California, build their own discourse on drug trafficking and take an ethical stance toward such discourse. The chosen group was composed of students from public secondary schools located in areas with high crime rates; this was because they are at a critical phase of their life cycle, when they may become exposed to the offer and consumption of drugs, and also to an early start in drug trafficking.

The relevance of carrying out the study in Mexicali is that it is a border municipality where, in spite of the historical trafficking of illicit drugs toward the US, internal consumption has gradually increased. Notwithstanding the above, neither have the levels of violence associated to drug trafficking reported for other places in the Mexican northern border been witnessed nor have militarization processes been deployed as strategies to combat violence.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

An interpretative study was undertaken from the tradition of critical discourse analysis. In this approach, the properties of the discourse associated to the expression,

confirmation, reproduction or contesting of the social powers of the dominant groups are revised. Social power implies control over other groups for their benefit; such control is exercised on the actions of others, and indirectly, by means of producing a public discourse on the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values or ideologies of the subjected individuals. Nevertheless, the subjects experience, interpret and represent the social structures in their daily interactions; that is to say, a mediation process takes place between the social structures and the discourse (van Dijk, 2009). Critical discourse analysis aims at explicitly disclosing the discourse strategies, recognizing the contextual factors in the interpretation and adopting a political place to research from (Pardo, 2013).

The respondents were female and male adolescents, students in public secondary schools in the metropolitan zone of the municipality of Mexicali. For a broader diversity as regards the geographic location of the schools, these were selected from various areas around the city (north, south, east, west) within neighborhoods belonging to third and fourth quartiles in terms of incidence of crime over the last five years. The authorities of each school were visited in order to present the research project that supports this article and were asked to participate in the study. On the whole, schools were willing to participate, however the principal in one of them refused to partake owing to the subject under study; whereas in other school, it was decided to cancel fieldwork because there were no privacy conditions for the respondents.

Once the authorization was given by the institutions, an appointment was made to have the discussion groups. The principals or deputies in each school instructed prefects, teachers or tutors to help the researchers make groups of five to seven students to participate in the study. School staff called for the voluntary participation of men and women from first to third grades. Once their participation was confirmed, they were taken to the place where the study was conducted; depending on the availability in each education center, it was a classroom, the library or a multi-purpose room. When the students reached the place, the researchers introduced themselves, explained the project, conditions for participation and read together the informed consent, which included the recording of the conversations. It was also established that no names will be asked in order to maintain anonymity, and that the respondents were free to participate or withdraw from the discussion group at any time. Although the school authorities or parents had granted their consent, it was deemed necessary that the final consent depended on the students, who approved their own participation via the informed consent.

A total of eight schools participated; a discussion group was held in each of them. The groups were mixed, i.e., there were men and women. The discussions lasted at least 40 minutes and one hour at most. Fieldwork was developed between June 2018 and January 2019. In total, the groups comprised 54 students; 26 men and 28 women, aged between 13 and 15 years, with an average age of 13.83 years. The discussion groups were conducted by the authors of this article, psychologists and researchers experienced in qualitative investigation of topics such as drug trafficking, insecurity, enforced

disappearance and community violence. Usually, Anel Gómez conducted the discussion, while Ariagor Almanza served as support and observer, he intervened only when it was necessary to clarify any information or an emergent topic to discuss arose.

In order to facilitate the discussion, a topic guide was produced covering the following: places where they find out, observe or listen to information related to drug trafficking; their conception and valorization, and in their opinion, the reasons to become part of it; the way it is organized, the degree of proximity to their daily lives, as well as its impact on their localities. The sessions of discussion groups were recorded for later transcription and analysis.

The texts that came out underwent a critical discourse analysis with a view to identifying the influence of governmental and entertainment-industry discourses on the respondents' argumentations, in addition to exploring the existence of emerging discourses based on the way drug trafficking expresses in the locality. Especially, attention was paid to the properties of the story such as use of vocabulary, descriptions, literary devices and argumentative structures (van Dijk, 2009). Such analysis was independently carried out by both authors, who at the end of this analysis for each group discussed about the categories they found; if these agreed or were complementary, they were included in the final analysis. When the categories did not match, the relevance of including or rejecting them was discussed and a decision was made in this regard. Thereby, the authors carried out a process to triangulate the analysis and only the categories with coincidences were maintained (Flick, 2014).

## NOTIONS ON DRUG TRAFFICKING

The youths who partook of the study build drug trafficking as an object from the interaction between various sources. News programs are an important information source; the respondents access them on the radio, newspapers, television and Internet, and particularly, social media, for instance, Youtube channels. Another main source is entertainment programs such as TV series, soap operas or films dealing with topics related with drug trafficking, which they consume on digital platforms or cable TV.

To a lesser extent, the respondents expressed finding out about drug trafficking from what they pick up on the street, which includes everyday conversations with close people or rumors they hear in their neighborhoods. This implies that in the construction of social knowledge on drug trafficking, the secondary-school students have to mediate between the official discourses on the media, the discourses expressed by the entertainment industry and the local ones reproduced in their communities.

Drug trafficking is an object with multiple meanings and for the participants in this study being part of this activity means *living in risk*. Even if drug trafficking is partially considered as a threat in risk society, the respondents refer that entering into a particular social world, a risk is taken up intentionally. Belonging to drug trafficking represents a

rupture or transformation because they assume that life expectancy may be cut short and recognize the possibility of dying. They consider that those involved in drug trafficking live in fear, not only of the enemies from rival organizations, but because they have to be careful at all times so as not to be arrested by authorities.

Entering into this social world is perceived as irreversible, for “there is no turning back” because of the need to keep the activities, relationships and organization from external prying eyes. “Living in risk” opposes to leading a “quiet life” in which there are no activities that imply the use of firearms, no violent conflicts with other groups, no vigilance or persecution by the police or the army, and the activity may be changed freely. The personal costs perceived by the respondents could be an element that contributes to dissuade youths from entering into the world of drug trafficking.

It is a business which you can't quit... they'll tell you: “we're offering you a job, but if you play foul, well... you're going down” (male respondent, group 7; face-to-face communication, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

It is not living, it is being at greater risk... you make money and all, but you also have to think that you can be killed or the police may come... they can harm you or your family (female respondent, group 8, face-to-face communication, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

For the interviewed students, people involved in drug trafficking not only “live in risk”, but also simultaneously become “threatening” individuals, as they violently occupy the public space, either by conspicuously carrying guns or swearing when they address others by insulting or threatening them if a conflict arises or as a way to prevent their activities from being revealed.

The respondents expressed “leaving them be” as a precautionary measure in views of preventing harm. In their imaginaries, there seems to exist a contradiction between the figure that is averse to risk, that engages in activities linked to drug trafficking discreetly, caring for anonymity, and the other figure that violently burst into the public space boasting about their position of power, which gives meaning to the stereotype and criminalization of figures such as *cholos* or poor marginalized young people. According to the respondents, it seems as though people involved in drug trafficking were in a dilemma between visibility and invisibility, between noise and silence.

Drug trafficking is considered to be linked to corruption, though there are various stances about the degree of State complicity. Engaging in activities associated to drug trafficking requires protection from politicians and cooptation of institutions via the funding of political campaigns or *buying* law-enforcement agencies, such as the military or police. This relationship is characterized by a pact between members of drug trafficking and State representatives, in which their corresponding boundaries are clearly defined, though it is not specified if these relationships are horizontal or vertical.



Conversely, a sector of the respondents deems these boundaries blurry, for they state that both are “part of an enterprise” or “are the same”. This element entails an undercover legitimization of drug trafficking by the State that contradicts the official discourse, points at the participation of entrepreneurs, politicians and high-level civil servants and undermines the confidence on the institutions to deal with the social costs of drug trafficking or to promote other forms of social mobility among the population: “they bought the military which later helped them, they revealed the routes with no checkpoints... they give them money so that they can go through” (female respondent, group 6; January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019). While another respondent stated: “in drug trafficking there are also many people from high-level politics” (female respondent, group 7; face-to-face communication, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

Another meaning of the youths for drug trafficking is that which conceptualizes it as an “expanding” economic activity. It is conceived as an industry or enterprise that gradually grows, which expresses as an increase in capital, the globalization of drug trafficking and a continuous incorporation of people into this unlawful activity. Such expansion connotes a dispersion in the localities, as well as the image of an activity that cannot be stopped and continually regenerates despite their leaders are apprehended or killed. Thereby, in the youths’ imaginary, drug trafficking is built as a public capitalist enterprise mainly focused on distribution and commercialization of illicit drugs, which has adapted to globalization and resorts to co-opting the state and violence in the public space as mechanisms to foster its expansion:

[drug trafficking is] a business that can make a lot of money, but if you say something you or you family may die (female respondent, group 2; face-to-face communication, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

A consequence of drug trafficking is “harm to consumers”. The respondents expressed that it affects communities because of the increase in consumption among youths and adults and the development of addictions; a sector of respondents even referred to drugs as a “venom”. The idea of venom allows stirring an ambivalence feeling for drug trafficking: it is an enterprise or business that needs to co-opt the State, though at once it implies risk for its members, violent exhibitions in public and private spaces, as well as health damage. The ambivalence also expresses in the moral stance before drug trafficking.

### MORAL DILEMMAS REGARDING DRUG TRAFFICKING

The youths who participated had opposing stances regarding the moral valuation of drug trafficking. They largely stated it is “bad” owing to a number of reasons. As for the juridical aspect, they are aware that it is an unlawful activity. In labor terms, they conceive it as an inadequate or dishonest way of making money, even mentioned as an activity to make “easy money”, with which they referred it implies a lower investment of time,

personal effort and academic training in order to obtain a revenue that is usually higher than that from formal employment.

As previously mentioned, this negative valuation is supported on the belief that drug trafficking makes it easy to take drugs and develop addictions, increases violence and deaths associated to drug trafficking, and on the concern that it turns into an antisocial role model for children. It is worth mentioning that for their part, the respondents considered that drug trafficking is perceived as “bad” in anticipation to the individual consequences for its members, e.g., apprehension or murder. This negative valorization of drug trafficking is another element that may influence on the decision of the students to enter the activity:

It would be better if it didn't exist because people wouldn't consume, they wouldn't harm themselves; then if you distributed you wouldn't do harm, even though it is their decision to consume... think about it, if you were the boss, if you weren't in this, and none else were, no one would know about drugs or consume them, then you also are partly to blame (female respondent, group 2; face-to-face communication, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

By contrast, a small group of respondents considered drug trafficking “good”, for they think it generates social benefits such as helping people in poverty allowing their economic survival. In like manner, this small group tried to neutralize the health care costs related to the increase in consumption and addictions arguing that drugs may have medicinal effects or else, that people individually decide to take drugs, they are not forced by drug traffickers.

A third group takes an intermediate or neutral stance, as they express that drug trafficking cannot be deemed good or bad, but “something normal”. That is to say, in the local context, drug trafficking is an activity that has merged into social and economic relationships. This stance toward drug trafficking expresses its naturalization in daily life and the fact that not only is it covertly legitimized by the State, but also by community members.

Well, I do not see it as something bad, it is not that you're hurting everyone else's life because people... they want to [consume] (male respondent, group 2; face-to-face communication, July 11, 2018).

A crucial aspect in the moral valuation of drug trafficking is the youths' stance regarding its typification as an activity. A group of the respondents consider it is a job or a business; an element that also adds to its normalization and legitimizes it as a route for social mobility and economic survival. However, other group considers it an illegal activity or as a way of making “risky” money.

Some of the respondents resorted to an expression that evinces the ambivalence and uncertainty regarding the sort of activity, as they mark it as an “unlawful job”. In the respondents' opinion, an element that may foster the youths' incorporation into drug

trafficking is taking up a pragmatic stance that promotes economic survival disregarding the social costs or its unlawful nature, particularly in contexts where the State stealthily legitimizes the activity and there is ambivalence toward it in the communities:

The bosses introduce you to people in the business and they teach you. If they see you're capable and don't get cold feet, they are more confident in you and give you more work and money (male respondent, group 4; face-to-face communication, June 15, 2018).

Involvement in drug trafficking has moral implications for the youths not only because it is a violation to the social norms of the locality, but because it is perceived as the result of an individual decision. In addition to the desire for "easy money", stepping into the world of drug trafficking is understood from various dispositions in the subjects, for example, one may be raising status, for they perceive they want to have power, fame, respect, be feared, "be noticeable", be able to "get women" and lead "a lavish life style".

The respondents also refer to the presence of a pathology, or diversion, characterized by ambition, lack of ethical behavior, pleasure in exercising violence, or being "psychopaths". Addictions are another reason why individuals might join and remain in drug trafficking, as it facilitates access to psychoactive substances: "you make money fast, while in a regular job it takes very long to save money" (male respondent, group 3, face-to-face communication, June 24, 2018). Moreover, in one of the respondents' words "the life style, the money, the power, the action, the risks, the luxuries are attractive" (male respondent, group 5; face-to-face communication, January 10, 2019).

The responsibility of the subject for enrolling into drug trafficking is attenuated by the influence of the social environment. Their participation may be normalized if relatives have been part of this activity or have lived in communities where they regularly interact with drug traffickers, take up their beliefs and customs, and notice the economic benefits from their activity. At once, they affirm that in certain circumstances people may be threatened or coerced to start trafficking drugs, which reduces their responsibility regarding the election: "some look for people with needs to take hold of them that way because they know they need money" (male participant, group 1; face-to-face communication June 7, 2018). "Because of lack of money, economic problems; which is the most common" (female respondent, group 2, face-to-face communication, June 11, 2018).

Youths pinpointed economic issues as a central element to understand drug trafficking. According to the respondents, the election of this path for social mobility may be linked to personal dispositions such as making "easy money", raise their status or "ambition" without strictly relating them to a specific socioeconomic level. Simultaneously, they refer the influence of structural violence when they suggest that people take up such activity out of "necessity"; a term with which they refer to living in poverty and labor precariousness.

According to the respondents, such contextual limitations affect the possibility to find other means for economic survival, both personal and familial, though they do not fully explain why certain individuals in similar conditions choose not to incorporate into drug trafficking: “they begin to sell because they find it easy to get money that way, they find it easier dealing than working” (female respondent, group 8; face-to-face communication, January 15, 2019).

Therefore, entering drug trafficking appears as an ambivalent object that entails the resolution of various dilemmas: is it a job or a crime? Is it a good or bad activity? Is it personally decided or structurally defined? The youths’ standpoints suggest that the answer to these questions will be nuanced by the degree of closeness and identification with drug trafficking, options for economic survival and the legitimation of the activity by the State and community.

#### *The imagined organization of drug trafficking*

Students build a notion regarding the operations of drug trafficking, what sort of functions the members carry out involve, the patterns to start trafficking and the personal requirements for a potential member. This imaginary is mainly produced on the basis of the explicit and implicit messages in governmental discourses, the entertainment industry and their personal experience of the consequences of drug trafficking in their community.

The majority of respondents assumes that in order to be part of drug trafficking some “leverage is needed”; that is to say, entering implies a previous contact derived from a personal close tie, or someone else’s, with a boss or a member with a lower rank in the organization. Another way to start is by invitation or “recruitment” by drug traffickers. A small group of respondents mentioned the possibility of “asking for a job” in the places where drugs are sold, e.g., “stores” or “pushers”. Thereby, there are various viewpoints on its organization: as a secretive group that incorporates new members from confidence bonds, as a “firm” that conducts an informal “recruitment” process or that can take applicants in at sale points: “if someone wants to get into they go to bad places and looks for people to make a connection in the business” (male participant, group 4; face-to-face communication, June 15, 2018).

There is a number of requirements to belong to drug trafficking; the main one to enter and remain is “being reliable”, for discretion, loyalty and commitment to the “boss” are expected. Another characteristic is “being made of stone”, which refers to being courageous, being in control in dangerous situation, and even “being heartless” in order to kill. Finally, they expressed the importance of being “resourceful” in terms of firearms, outwitting their enemies, strategic thinking, knowledge of the roads, concealing and selling drugs. In this way, it is from these characteristics that they build the profile of a drug trafficker, which comprehends relational, affective and practical aspects: “that *vato*

is made of stone”, that is to say, he’s been hardened” (male respondent, group 7; face-to-face communication, January 14, 2019).

Inside drug-trafficking organization, the respondents identified a series of actors. Most frequently they mentioned dealers, who carry out their activities on the street, in houses and night clubs. There is a myriad of terms to refer to them both legal (drug retailers) and colloquial (dealers or pushers); it is worth pointing out that some convey a heavier stigmatization (“*tecolines*”).<sup>3</sup> Another relevant actor is the distributor, in charge of sending, moving, delivering or picking up the “merchandise”.

One might say that *tecolines* are like little ants; they are at the bottom because they went too low... they are the lackeys, little people in charge of distributing (male respondent, group 8; face-to-face communication, January 15, 2019).

Then, the respondents identified the bosses, in charge of conducting or managing the organization; one group considers they are the initiators of the “enterprise”. According to the students, other actors or people involved in drug trafficking are *sicarios* (hitmen), who are in charge of killing or threatening; they are also called “killers” or “gunmen”. Watchmen protect the members from any attack from rival organizations or from being persecuted by security forces, either providing information or keeping the members from attacks, or resorting to firearms as defense; they are referred to as “bodyguards”, “guards”, “carers” or “pointers”. The liminal actors in the world of drug trafficking are those “who give protection”, that is to say, actors who facilitate or co-operate with the activities, though they belong to governmental institutions such as police officers, military, informers, politicians or government officials. There is a number of stances among the respondents as whether these actors are external agents or if they belong in drug-trafficking organizations.

By means of generic or unspecific terms, allusions were made to other actors with the organization that are usually less visible, e.g., “trustworthy people”, including the boss’s “right-hand man”, “partners”, or people in high positions, but under the boss; other generic term used was “employee”, which concurs with the construction of drug trafficking as a job.

Moreover, the participants also used terms such as “helpers”, “assistants” or “workers” to refer to lower-rank actors with no specialized activity. A relevant aspect is that among the groups, the terms utilized to refer to people engaged in drug trafficking indicate that it is a male-dominated activity.

The producers of drugs, who either grow them or make them in laboratories, are considered part of the criminal organizations; they are called by many names such as “manufacturer”, “cooks”, “chemists” or “the sowers”. To distribute drugs, “packers” may

---

<sup>3</sup> The word *tecolín* is a localism to refer to people who take drugs, have deteriorated health and low socioeconomic level, who steal or beg for money to buy drugs.

be needed; they arrange drugs in packages or bags for transport and wholesale. The respondents think that as an organization, drug trafficking carries out the entire production, distribution, protection and wholesale process. A group of them underscored the relevance of clients to understand the permanence and expansion of drug trafficking, though they are commonly seen as external agents. It is worth mentioning that one side of the organization omitted by the students was money laundering.

The activities that are undertaken by the imagined drug trafficking organization may be typified. In a manner analogue to firms considered legal, in the organization there are activities of production, distribution and sale of the “product” as well as coordination of the processes, which requires planning and control of the members who participate in them. Unlike lawful enterprises, in drug trafficking there is traffic or “passing” of drugs through international borders using various means of transport such as cars, ships and planes, “mules” or clandestine tunnels.

Owing to its illegal nature, measures are needed to protect the product, carrying out production, distribution and sale, and also to protect the members against rival groups or being arrested by security forces. Another particular activity in the world of drug trafficking is murder, which may be realized in the face of a conflict, as punishment for revealing information, losing “merchandise” or debts; there are even murders of witnesses of illicit activities that may turn them in to the authorities.

Violence can also be exercised to take over the territory where it is intended to operate. Some respondents added that there is diversification of criminal activities such as extortion, kidnapping, gunrunning or human trafficking.

The students largely alluded to instrumental violence within a context of low confidence in order to carry on trafficking drugs, mainly exercised against actors involved in such activity. To a lower extent, the respondents refer to the instrumental violence that expresses in high-impact crimes to diversify their profits, with an action range that encompasses individuals not involved in drug trafficking. In the participants’ discourses, neither are violence against citizens nor prompted by the internal control of the organization nor criminal diversification mentioned.

#### *The presence of drug trafficking in daily life*

Not only is the youths’ construction of drug trafficking based on governmental discourses or from the entertainment industry, but is also produced from what they watch and listen in the localities. In all the groups it was mentioned that drug trafficking was present in their daily life, though some stated they considered that in theirs it was not, or at least, they were not aware of.

It may be considered that there exist various degrees of closeness between the interviewed youths and drug trafficking. Some said they had an indirect relationship, for

they identified close people such as relatives, godparents, friends, partners or acquaintances as “narcos” and higher-rank bosses, or else, as sellers, or people who “pass drugs” into the US.

There were some who mentioned more direct relationships, as they had been offered to sell or had sold drugs. They expressed a more distant relationship when they mentioned that in the locality there were “people with the narco”, whereas some respondents mentioned having no direct or indirect contact with members of drug trafficking whatsoever:

I was just there on the street I was offered this payment if I sold a package and I accepted. It was dangerous, the first time you feel as if you’re getting caught, but every time you do it, you lose fear (male respondent, group 4; face-to-face communication, June 15, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that in certain groups another sort of indirect relationship was expressed, for they were acquainted with people who were considered consumers:

There are many stores in my neighborhood, everyone gets there to buy drugs, my friends go there, my family knows them all, I know where and who sells and also who consumes (male respondent, group 6; face-to-face communication, January 14, 2019).

Therefore, in their opinion the youths stated that an indirect link with drug trafficking permeates daily life, particularly noticeable in sales and consumption. Although they consider that a lot of actors participate in drug trafficking, they mainly know the sellers, called “pushers” or “dealers”, consumers and to a lesser extent, the “distributors”.

On the other hand, there were very few mentions of “those who kill”, the so called “*sicarios*”; they referred there were “*cholos*” in their communities in charge of killing and were part of drug trafficking. The “bosses” were mentioned fewer times, which indicates the respondents mainly keep an indirect relationship with the most visible and lowest ranking part of drug trafficking. The places where drugs are sold are mainly “dealers” and “stores”, followed by public spaces, i.e., streets or parks, and events such as private parties. There were conflicting stances on sale at schools, some groups mentioned it was carried out inside or around, while most of the groups stated it did not occur, or else, they said they were not aware of:

You can find all of them in my neighborhood, from bosses to consumers, but there are more consumers. Bosses are noticed because they live luxuriously: their cars, they way they dress and walk, their women, they have a lot, and [because] no one tells them a word (male respondent, group 5; face-to-face communication, January 10, 2019).

Right in the heart, here, in Mexicali, and in other places you can find drugs... they just go somewhere with drugs and wherever the drugs are the little ants go and sell them (male respondent, group 8; face-to-face communication, January 15, 2019).

They consider that in their communities the main participants of drug trafficking are young and adult men, while women and children are so to a lesser extent.

In spaces for socializing such as parties, the respondents perceive that drug trafficking members are known for “boasting”, being ostentatious in the way they talk, walk or dress, in the cars they drive or in showing their photographs with luxury cars or weapons on social media. Likewise, drug traffickers may seem intimidating because they have bodyguards or people avoid them.

Another sector of the respondents expresses a different image of the people involved in drug trafficking. These individuals are seemed “normal”, as they have no remarkable appearance, they are discreet, and even close to them, they are among their friends, school mates or acquaintances. Thereby, the respondents distinguish between an invisible, an average citizen, and “silent” expression of drug traffickers who want to go unnoticed:

The one in charge is just a face with no name, it is assumed that nobody knows, and if no one knows, he goes like that because he’s just a man and no one knows he’s in the business (male respondent, group 2; face-to-face communication, June 11, 2018).

Another distinction refers to the social status of traffickers in the locality. One way to publicly identify them is because they are people who “live large”, which has a number of connotations such as showing economic power, wearing expensive clothing brands, owning large homes and luxury cars, or “having women”. For the interviewed students there is a shadow of doubt on the origin of the fortunes, since economic prosperity may have been attained abruptly and cannot be explained by the employment, profession or legal occupation of the suspected drug trafficker.

Conversely, the respondents consider that in their community there are actors with a lower status and a higher marginalization degree who also take part in drug trafficking, especially selling drugs, for instance, “*cholos*”, “*tecolines*” and “vagrants”. This distinction is relevant, since by considering there are people who “live well” in drug trafficking, it becomes an option for social mobility and raising status, which entails the risk that it turns into an aspirational activity. At once, this option has moral implications in the community, as it is perceived as wellbeing from illegality and lack of effort:

He needed money and now he’s like he has a new car, a nice house and all. It is a drastic change in short time (male respondent, group 7; face-to-face communication, January 14, 2019).

The respondents state that the presence of drug trafficking has consequences for the community. The main one is related to public insecurity because they consider that several violent events have to do with drug trafficking, namely: shootings, murders or “massacres”, burning of houses of those who owe them money, take people forcibly in pick-up trucks or disappearances of women.

Another way in which, according to the interviewees, drug trafficking affects public security is the presence of people with drug-consumption problems on the street, who



might harm them when under the effects of a psychoactive substance, they are worried about being mugged or robbed to buy drugs. Insecurity also becomes not going to places where drugs are sold or consumed, for example, parks:

There are shootings and the holes in the wall remain... the shootings are because of treasons, snitchers or people who want to leave the business (female respondent, group 3; face-to-face communication, June 14, 2018).

They take so much that they may harm other people... it gets unsafer, they do drugs, make a mess, they harass people... talk to lampposts and hug them (female respondent, group 4; face-to-face communication, June 15, 2018).

For the respondents, a relevant consequence for the image of their community is that seeing people doing drugs in public places becomes a common sight and even there are neighborhoods where derelict houses are turned into shooting galleries (drug houses). The development of addiction is linked to the increase in consumption, which is noticed in the consumers' deterioration, they lose money, ask economic help to buy drugs or "resort to stealing". Such deterioration may increase up to see them "drugged on the street", they become "vagrants" or "loonies", referring to the emergence of mental health disorders. Adding to the above, problems associated to consumption have consequences for the relatives when they end up as domestic violence.

People spend all their money and need to steal to get more drugs; the body asks more and more, it generates an addiction... people don't want to go anymore [to the neighborhood] because they say they are all addicts there (male respondent, group 4; face-to-face communication, June 15, 2018).

At home, in the block in the back a man comes out when he's drugged... comes out fighting who knows what, with the wind, I don't know (female respondent, group 8; face-to-face communication, January 15, 2019).

Another consequence is the deterioration of the urban image, since owing to the sale and consumption of drugs and the aforementioned insecurity problems as well, a notion of the neighborhoods as dangerous places to visit is built. In turn, the use of recreational spaces such as parks reduces and poverty increases when residents invest their economic resources on drugs.

Some youths pointed out that when their neighbors are listed as "dangerous", police operations may increase and they can break into people's houses to apprehend individuals. It is worth underscoring that an important number of youths did not identify any consequence from the presence of drug trafficking in their locality.

Around the place I live, in the back of my house there is another house with a Six [convenience store], some people meet next to it. A bunch of addicts and they smoke there (female respondent, group 5; face-to-face communication, January 10, 2019).

You're afraid of going out at night because of this, a group of people meets at the corner and you're afraid to go there... because they do drugs and intoxicated they may do you harm or else (female respondent, group 8; face-to-face communication, January 15, 2019).

In daily life drug trafficking poses a differenced risk for women, who concern about harassment by drug users and express fear of what these individuals may do them “harm”. Notwithstanding some groups of students did not identify consequences of drug traffic in the community, others referred its impact, expressed little concern for it, as in the phrase “concerning, though not to lose sleep”.

The interviewees consider that participating in the organization, taking drugs or become linked to users may affect them. A normalization of drug trafficking has taken place, it has integrated into everydayness and it is common to meet people involved in the activity who travel in the city or partake of the community life as “regular people”.

Drug trafficking is already something normal, all the people know it exists, and as long as you’re not involved, well, you don’t care (male respondent, group 3; face-to-face communication, June 14, 2018).

Another reason to consider that drug trafficking is not a problem as concerning is that “it is not noticed” in the city. The respondents argued that this is due to discretion, for it is not easy to relate with drug trafficking members or check who “is the business”. Moreover, they perceive decreasing violence linked to drug trafficking in the community as compared with other places in the country in terms of shootings, presence of sicarios, military checkpoints, the army on the streets, public messages from the crime through banners or the exhibition of mutilated and dismembered bodies on the street, the publication of violent events by the media, or not knowing the names of the drug traffickers.

The students expressed that in the locality drug trafficking operates “undercover”, or tries to hide from the citizens, who are mainly exposed to the surface, i.e., the activities of sellers and consumers. Finally, they assume that in the city, drug trafficking is “contained” because of a number of assumptions: it is a “neutral”, “passage”, or “leisure” city that does not belong to a “cartel”; no drug is grown; and it is at the border with a small city in the United States with a low drug demand:

It would be concerning if people took too much and there were shootings, but this is no land of narcos. They have their territories, but this is not a narco territory (male respondent, group 3; face-to-face communication, June 14, 2018).

A small group of the interviewed students does not conceive drug trafficking as a public security issue that needs to be addressed, for they assume that “it is not going to end” and nothing can be done about it, adding to the risks it implies in terms of security. Some participants proposed the legalization of certain substances such as marijuana, since they state that a prohibition increases the desire to consume, that its legalization has started in the US or they perceive that in quotidian life everyone behaves as though “it had been already legalized”.

Conversely, other youths put forward strengthening programs for prevention of addictions, or place greater responsibility on the parents as regards prevention, due to the

need to increase parental supervision, discipline, emotional support, instill the importance of lawful employment and even that parents ask dealers not to sell drugs to their children. Likewise, they mentioned the need to strengthen public security to counteract the consequences of drug trafficking by either increasing municipal-police surveillance or resorting to militarization. Finally, references were made to furthering the habit of denouncing anonymously or launch prevention campaigns to dissuade people from joining organized crime:

It'll never end, even though you speak a lot about it, it will never end because it is an extremely large business in the world (male respondent, group 2; face-to-face communication, June 11, 2018).

I say that people who have consumed and have lost stuff because of that, they make the speeches so that those who consume see what may become of them, maybe they say this or that, and if they know someone who lived that, maybe they reflect a little (male respondent, group 6; face-to-face communication, January 14, 2019).

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Youths build discourses on drug trafficking from mediation between various discourses: the official one, that of the entertainment industry and the local discourses in their communities. Generally speaking, there exists ambivalence toward drug trafficking; in spite of being conceived as an unlawful enterprise that provides economic benefits, which entails social costs such as addictions as well as personal ones, e.g., living in constant danger. The decision of joining drug trafficking goes beyond a rational choice that comes from assessing the costs and benefits, as it also implies affectivities, moral stances, social links and contextual limitations.

Drug trafficking is a polemical object that imposes ethical dilemmas on the youths. In addition to the personal and social costs of the activity, it is rejected if it is conceived as illegal, associated to violence or “easy money”; though, it may be accepted by virtue of its economic benefits, particularly when it is constructed as a job and seen as a strategy for economic survival in contexts of labor precariousness or erosion of the social State.

An aspect that makes drug trafficking interesting for some youths is leading a life style linked to social status and luxury. Even if the relationship with drug trafficking seems ambivalent, it is necessary to make a distinction. At the level of public opinion, they may normalize or accept drug trafficking as a daily activity, yet at private level, they reject it as an employment option or as a strategy for social mobility. In terms of prevention, it is necessary to delve into the mechanisms and processes that promote rejection for drug trafficking at personal level.

In this historic concurrence, the legalization of sale of marijuana in the American State of California has raised questions in certain groups of youths about the possibilities for it

to be legally sold and distributed in Mexico as well as the normalization of its medicinal or recreational use. There is a need of addressing the possible changes in the symbolic construction of drug trafficking from drug legalization policies and their impact on border relations.

An important difference among the respondents' discourses is in the relationship they establish between drug trafficking and the State, for they mainly conceive there is an exteriority relationship between them, instead of a symbiosis. That so say, there is a distinction between drug trafficking and State, though relative. What takes place in one is interrelated with what takes place in the other, one changes after the other. The exteriority effect makes the change in one be a consequence of the contact or interaction with the other. The risk is that, in an extreme situation, the contact between them would be so intense that the interiority of each may disappear to become pure exteriority (Galindo, 1990).

A small group of the interviewed students mentioned the participation of State representatives in drug trafficking as agents that protect their activities. Thereby, it seems as if the influence of the official discourse maintains the separation between drug traffickers and members of the State, and in spite of the existence of corruption ties, an intensive participation of the State is not recognized in the control of illegal economy. What is more, the connection between the illegal economy of drug trafficking and the legal one, via money laundering, is not noticed.

From the access to governmental discourses that usually appeal to morality, and those of the entertainment industry, which make an apology of drug trafficking, the respondents are able to build an imagined organization of this activity. In daily life, however, not only do they mainly keep a indirect link with members of drug-trafficking organizations, but such contact is with the surface, or the most visible part of the organization, also with the lowest hierarchy: sellers and consumers. There is a stark contrast between the image of drug trafficking in other contexts and that built in the local context. From this contrast, it may be satanized, rejected, approved, normalized or remain an ambivalent object in the everyday life of the inhabitants of the community. It is worth underscoring that it is particularly and usually approved when it is conceived as a strategy for social mobility and economic survival and the violence related to drug trafficking does not affect the public space.

Socially normalizing drug trafficking in the communities has implications for their inhabitants, especially as regards insecurity or developing an addiction, and also the material and symbolic deterioration of the urban image of the neighborhoods. Pragmatically accepting it, as long as it is harmless for the individuals, inhibits the possibility of building new discourses in the face of drug trafficking, positions before the State and the creation of an agenda or proposals for courses of action to understand and address the social costs of illicit drug trafficking.

Translation: Luis Cejudo-Espinosa

## REFERENCES

- Astorga, L. A. (1995). *Mitología del “narcotraficante” en México*. Distrito Federal: Plaza y Valdés.
- Consejo Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública de Baja California. (2017). *Estudio de percepción ciudadana 2017*. Retrieved from <https://vivirsegurosbc.org/website/wp-content/uploads/Estudio-de-percepcion-2017.pdfm>
- Córdova, N. (2007). La subcultura del “narco”: La fuerza de la transgresión. *Cultura y representaciones sociales*, 2(3), 106-130.
- Escalante, F. (2012). *El crimen como realidad y representación: Contribución para una historia del presente*. Mexico: El Colegio de México.
- Flick, U. (2014). *La gestión de la calidad en investigación cualitativa* [Trans. C. B. Castellano y T. Martín]. Madrid: Morata.
- Flores, C. A. (2013). *Historias de polvo y sangre. Génesis y evolución del tráfico de drogas en el estado de Tamaulipas*. Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.
- Galindo, J. (1990). Cuando el dentro está afuera. Exterioridad e interioridad en la vida social. *Relaciones* 42, XI, 79-100.
- Gledhill, J. (2017). *La cara oculta de la inseguridad en México*. Mexico: Paidós.
- Gusfield, J. R. (2014). *La cultura de los problemas públicos. El mito del conductor alcoholizado versus la sociedad inocente*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo XXI.
- Kessler, G. (2009). *El sentimiento de inseguridad. Sociología del temor al delito*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Mastrogiovanni, F. (2016). *Ni vivos ni muertos. La desaparición forzada en México como estrategia de terror*. Mexico: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial.
- Mendoza, N. (2008). *Conversaciones del desierto. Cultura, moral y tráfico de drogas* (Colección estudiantil CIDE). Mexico: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE).
- Ovalle, L P. (2006). Las redes transnacionales del narcotráfico y su territorialización en Baja California. In E. Garduño (Coord.), *Cultura, agentes y representaciones sociales en Baja California* (pp. 205-231). Mexico: Porrúa/Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.
- Ovalle, L. P. (2007). *Entre la indiferencia y la satanización. Representaciones sociales del narcotráfico desde la perspectiva de los jóvenes universitarios en Tijuana*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.

Ovalle, L. P. (2010). Construcción social del narcotráfico como ocupación. *Revista CS*, (5), 92-122.

Ovalle, L. P. (2011). El impacto de las redes de narcotráfico en la vida cotidiana. In D. Piñera & J. Carrillo (Coords.), *Baja California a cien años de la revolución mexicana 1910-2010* (pp. 397-412). Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

Padilla, H. (2012). Ciudad Juárez: Militarización, discursos y paisajes. In S. Cruz (Coord.), *Vida, muerte y resistencia en Ciudad Juárez. Una aproximación desde la violencia, el género y la cultura*, (pp. 105-141). Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Juan Pablos Editor.

Pardo, N. G. (2013). *Cómo hacer análisis crítico del discurso. Una perspectiva latinoamericana*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Rexton, P. (2016). *Drug trafficking and international security (Peace and Security in the 21st Century)*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Reyes-Sosa, H., Larrañaga-Egilegor, M., & Valencia-Gárate, J. F. (2015). Dependencia representacional entre dos objetos sociales: El narcotráfico y la violencia. *Cultura y representaciones sociales*, 9(18), 162-186.

van Dijk, T. A. (2009). *Discurso y poder. Contribuciones a los estudios críticos del discurso*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Zavala, O. (2018). *Los cárteles no existen. Narcotráfico y cultura en México*. Barcelona: Malpaso.