



Beyond money, power, and masculinity: Toward an analytical perspective on recruitment to Mexican drug trafficking organizations

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journals.sagepub.com/home/iss**Piotr A Chomczyński**

Center for Data Analysis, Modeling and Computational Sciences, The Sociology of Art Department, University of Lodz, Poland

Roger Guy 

Department of Criminal Justice, State University of New York at Oswego, USA

Elena Azaola

Center for Advanced Studies and Research in Social Anthropology, México

Abstract

Mexican drug trafficking organizations have experienced rapid attrition resulting in a continual need for personnel since 2006. However, the process by which these criminal organizations absorb new members remains obscure. In this article, we report on the social context of recruitment and motivational pathways into Mexican drug trafficking organizations through in-depth interviews with current and former cartel members ($N=79$). We find that recruits are motivated by aspirations of financial success and notions of masculinity, but also influenced by attachment to social groups and jointly shared experiences that we term a *collective trajectory*. We argue that individual decisions to join criminal organizations are viewed in collective terms, or being connected with members of their immediate social group. We conclude with the applications of challenges of collective trajectory for sociological criminology.

Keywords

Collective trajectory, drug trafficking organizations, Mexico, organized crime, recruitment

Corresponding author:

Roger Guy, Department of Criminal Justice, State University of New York at Oswego, 7060 New York 104, Oswego, NY 13126, USA.

Email: roger.guy@oswego.edu

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs)¹ have had a continual need for personnel driven by an escalation of inter-cartel violence, and competition over drug distribution points commonly known as *plazas* (Astorga and Shirk, 2010; Moreno and Urteaga, 2019; Pereyra, 2012; Ríos, 2013; Chomczyński and Guy, 2021; Chomczyński and Clark, 2022). This conflict with rival DTOs created an insatiable demand for new members through overt methods (e.g. paper flyers, graffiti, social media, and charity) in the neighborhood (Astorga and Shirk, 2010; Buscaglia, 2015; Correa-Cabrera, 2017; Guerra, 2020; Niño and Calderón, 2020). Research also suggests that recruitment into criminal organizations is influenced by social relations, but the specific factors leading to involvement are more obscure (Calderoni et al., 2020). This article attempts to shed light on recruiting through the personal experiences of current and former members of Mexican DTOs that began during field observations in communities characterized by high levels of organized crime. The findings that we present are exploratory, and intended to allow scholars and observers to better theorize recruitment and membership in DTOs, and possibly criminal organizations in the Global South more broadly. Our interviews suggest that the pathway to membership in criminal organizations is a multifaceted process involving the prurient and material interests of a recruit as well as the importance they attributed to group membership. Our participants' perspective is an experiential one drawing on varied years as a member, recruiter, or person of contact for a cartel.

We begin with a brief survey of the literature surrounding recruitment to gangs and organized crime, and suggest the need to further examine recruitment within the context of Mexican and Latin American criminal organizations specifically. Following a discussion of the methods of data collection and analysis, we present initial findings that examine the motivation to work for a DTO through literature highlighting the financial incentives, masculine empowerment, and the emotional appeal of being a *narco* among impoverished youth. We then advance an argument that early experiences with criminality among intimate groups are reinforced in by membership in criminal organizations. We term this the *collective trajectory* (CT) and locate it in group experiences and the cultural significance of collectivism in Mexico (Gomez and Taylor, 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010). This explanatory proposition captures the subjective meanings that DTO members attach to their recruitment experiences, and the social and cultural importance of group life in structuring criminal opportunities. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities that CT poses in future criminological research.

Assessing the literature

Researchers in sociology and criminology have made important strides in understanding gangs and delinquency in classic and contemporary literature (Akers, 1998; Bucerius, 2014, 2017; Cloward, 1959; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hagedorn, 1994; Hirschi, 1969; Miller, 1958; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943; Yablonsky, 1959; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Warr, 2002). More recent quantitative studies have stressed the discrete risk factors associated with gang

membership, and selection of individuals based on a propensity and inclination toward delinquency (Carson and Esbensen, 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Hill et al., 1999; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Lahey et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003, 1993). Studies of gangs outside the United States have generally supported the selection model of Thornberry et al. (1993) to explain gang membership (Drummond et al., 2019; Petrus, 2021). However, this approach has been criticized on the basis of ‘determinism and individual reductionism’ (Densley, 2012: 11) leaving room for more inductive approaches to understanding recruitment. The idea that there are social-based inclinations and propensities was a useful conception in analyzing our interviews, because it hints at an interactive recruitment pathway toward DTO membership.

Despite the similarities, there are a number of obstacles to applying a ‘gang approach’ to recruitment of proletariat members of criminal organizations from Latin America. For example, while there is some work on transnational street-level criminal organizations (Hazen and Rodgers, 2014), Fraser and Hagedorn (2018: 22) caution that the term *gang* ‘. . . does not easily map onto these groups’, and argue for a deductive approach grounded in their structural context. Conceived in this manner, gangs are distinct conceptions used to analyze deviant social groups in American and European cities rather than in the global context of Latin America. We also concluded from our survey of the literature that large criminal organizations such as DTOs are distinctively different from gangs as far as the intricacies of recruitment go. Some research suggests that recruitment in criminal organizations is influenced by existing social relations among members and recruits (Calderoni et al., 2020; Kemp et al., 2020), and other studies characterize the addition of new members as a function of organization change or expansion (Jones, 2018; Niño and Calderón, 2020; Rodgers, 2016).

In the Border region, Latin America, Campbell (2009) examined the personal histories of drug traffickers in Juárez and El Paso, and found that most drug traffickers were primarily motivated by financial gain and economic survival. Examining the Michoacán region where multiple DTOs operate, Maldonado Aranda (2018) found that their intersecting interests create a social context for the drug business that links financial incentives to the recruitment to immigrants. Additional research has grown recently to include an extensive study of drug trafficking using interviews with former narco-traffickers in Mexico by Garcia-Reyes (2018). Her work is an invaluable contribution to understanding the lives of those involved in drug trafficking and the interplay between organized crime, adolescent culture, and structural inequality. Among other things, she found that poverty and street masculinity engendered a quest for the ‘easy life’ [*la vida fácil*] through what she conceived as a *narco discourse* partially consisting of a logic that the poor have little future and nothing to lose that has motivational implications for criminal behavior (Garcia-Reyes, 2018: 1). Much like Gamlin and Hawkes (2017) she drew parallels to violence, masculinity, and financial achievement among the impoverished of Mexico. Additional work that was important for this article is a recent examination of members and non-members of criminal organizations by Villegas (2020: 344) who found support for the view that criminal activity fulfilled aspirations for success among economically marginalized males in *Ciudad Juárez*. For participants in her study, organized crime was an alternative path of achieving ‘a good life’ much like legitimate economic pursuits. This literature led us to question whether our participants were motivated by

existing conceptions of masculinity, narco identity, and financial gain assumed to be derived by DTO membership. We also sought to determine whether intermediaries played a role in facilitating recruitment, and whether common group experiences had any effect on the propensity to become involved in cartel work. In doing, so we hope to contribute to the nascent movement in criminology calling for research in the Global South (Carrington et al., 2016, 2019; Pereda, 2022) to add to traditional criminological perspectives on organized crime.

Data and methods of analysis

Gaining access to members of DTOs to interview presented unique challenges; especially in the local settings in which they operate, or correctional facilities. Chomczyński was fortunate enough to have conducted 9 months of ethnographic research on street level drug trafficking in the Mexico City neighborhoods of Tepito, Iztapalapa, and Tacubaya (Chomczyński et al., 2019). Known for their high crime rates, these communities provided an entry point to obtain referrals to interview members of DTOs. Through this previous work, Chomczyński developed a relationship with an intermediary (Miguel) who was well-positioned to facilitate contact with current and former cartel members as a quasi-spiritual leader and well known among members of communities that we studied. His assistance was indispensable in initially laying the groundwork for local assistance, and allaying suspicion among inhabitants who tended to distrust outsiders (Jenkins, 2015). During the course of our relationship, he expended considerable social capital supporting our research goals, which frequently involved negotiations with actors in the midst of ongoing criminal activity. Our first breakthrough came when he arranged an invitation for Chomczyński to accompany a group of convicted drug traffickers to Chalma, an important religious shrine in Mexico. While conscious of the potential danger involved, the opportunity was pivotal in building mutual trust through a 'display of symbolic attachment' by participating in important activities with potential research participants (Stoddart, 1986: 109–113). This pilgrimage also provided serendipitous occasions for discussions, opportunities to record interviews and obtain additional referrals.

Chomczyński conducted our interviews between 2015 and 2016 in the communities that we studied, ($N=22$) and in then inside prisons² ($N=42$). Participants were former or current DTO members accused of organized crime (*delincuencia organizada*).³ After initial analysis, he returned to Mexico in 2019 and 2020 to collect follow-up data, record additional interviews with inmates ($N=15$), and consult with professionals and academics in the field ($N=17$) who served as subject experts. Throughout this research, we were assisted by members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs),⁴ and prison officials who helped to identify participants in correctional facilities. They also assisted in clarifying our research aims to detainees and explained the consent process. We selected inmates in the following manner: (1) a pool that was selected by correctional officials based on the offense and willingness to participate, (2) referrals by other inmates similar to snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Crewe, 2021), and (3) suggestions from non-profit organizations involved in prisoner rights. Similar to Garcia-Reyes (2018), we employed an open-ended questionnaire that was intended to generate data about recruitment and involvement in organized crime that allowed us to selectively

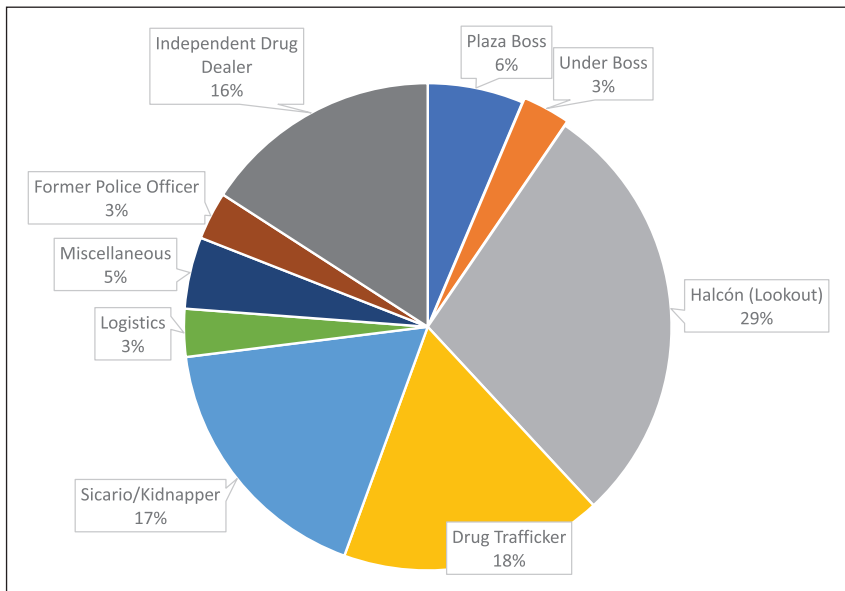


Figure 1. Position in the organization.

focus on specific events and processes, life stories, and sensitive topics (Atkinson, 2002; Noaks and Wincup, 2004; Silverman, 2011). In addition, the use of biographical interviews facilitated discussion of our subjects' experiences leading up to recruitment, and participating in DTO activities. The length of interviews varied from 40 minutes and interviews were given with consent of the inmates and permission of human subjects' boards. The names used in our research are pseudonyms, and when necessary, the length and content of the quotations were restricted to protect the interviewees from being identified (Saunders et al., 2014). Questions were administered in Spanish, and then translated and transcribed into English. All data are stored in a private password-protected folder and only used for the purpose of our research.

Our participants (Figure 1) were exclusively males who, by their own admission, originated from impoverished rural and urban communities with a continual presence of organized crime. Their ages ranged between 15 and 67 years with varying roles in an organization. Our subjects consisted of 4 plaza bosses [overseers of drug trafficking in a geographic area], 2 under bosses, 22 halcónes (lookouts), 14 traffickers/smugglers, 12 sicarios (hitmen) and/or kidnappers, 2 logistics/supply specialists, 3 performing miscellaneous work (buying cars, delivering food), 2 former police officers who would not disclose their role in the organization, 10 independent drug dealers who used a DTO as a supplier, and 8 other associates. While not reported in the findings, and not the topic of questioning, we observed no distinguishable differences in their experiences with respect to their age, or incarceration status. Although generally in their teens, our subjects had difficulty recalling the exact year of criminal onset, or when they were recruited to a DTO. Part of this was complicated by the fact that our participants were exposed to

criminal activity at an early age by observing or helping significant others (e.g. assisting a parent in drug packaging or sales); something they did not classify in criminal terms. However, it was clear from their biographies that the transition from petty crime to DTO affiliation occurred in their teens.

We used the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that is essential in grounded theory to identify emerging patterns and categories in our raw data. This practice also allowed us to generate and enrich the properties of categories based on engaging the narrative conflict of experts in the field, and participants (Cobb, 2016). We drew analytical categories from recurrent patterns identified in our participants' narratives. The principles of theoretical saturation guided the parameters of data collection and analysis (Saunders et al., 2018; Chomczyński, 2018). When we observed that new data did not enrich the categories (e.g. recruitment process, CT) they were saturated enough to stop collecting and analyzing additional data. As with previous research, we also employed a thematic reading of the material with the use of Atlas Ti (Miles et al., 2014). We generated key categories inductively through open and selective coding of ($N=96$) interviews informed by the principles of grounded theory, and illustrated by quotations in the article (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Konopásek, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We then re-read the transcripts multiple times to identify meaningful patterns in the data, and compare them. We used a coding paradigm to explore properties and categories as well as to be analytically sensitive to the broader context, intervening conditions, interactions, and factors affecting the recruitment process (e.g. the role of family, recruiters, friends, criminal past, and/or social setting in the recruitment process as a core category) (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Initial analysis: Trafficking in money, power, and masculinity

We found that our research supports previous work discussed in our review of the literature. Before we note our specific findings, we wish to point out that, as a general process, recruiting did not occur in the traditional sense of the word.⁵ Rather, it resembled a more gradual assimilation into cartel activities through an intermediary that began with a long-term presence of organized crime in the neighborhood. Organized criminality and corruption were inescapable according to our subjects. Added to this is the tendency for organized crime to come together with corrupt structures of the state to create symbiotic conditions that were conducive to the erosion of social control and normalization of crime and deviance (Lupsha, 1996; Maldonado Aranda, 2018). The process began smoothly, however, with an individual appeal of prurient interests and the perception of lucrative financial gain. The existence of criminal organizations had a practical and symbolic effect on the inhabitants. Because of their omnipresence, exposure to criminal activity occurred at an early age, sometimes through intimate groups, families, and later directly through criminal organizations. This is consistent with findings among aboriginal gangs in Canada (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Our participants were saturated with a social environment of drug trafficking, organized crime, and corruption often as children. Because DTOs were conceived as a symbol of power that often eclipsed legitimate social institutions with social control functions (e.g. public schools and law enforcement).

- Social Worker: They [juveniles] come from places full of crime, and criminal families.
- Interviewer: Like where?
- Social Worker: Tepito, for example or from Iztapalapa. [. . .] Many of their families are involved in some criminal activity, the father, the uncle, the cousin.
- Interviewer: What kinds of criminal activities?
- Social Worker: Drug trafficking, homicides, robbery, kidnapping.

In other interviews, it was apparent that the family was often the initial point of contact with illicit activity that led to involvement with organized crime as the passage from the interview the social worker illustrated. As such, our findings support Calderoni et al. (2020) that our social embeddedness near criminality generates positive views of membership in criminal organizations.

Later in adolescence, our subjects stated that they encountered members of DTOs who facilitated their entry into a criminal organization. When asked they referred to the individual as a sort of bridge to the DTO rather than a recruiter in the strict sense of the word. This is why we conceived of the role as an intermediary. In most cases, this took place in informal settings among criminal novices who viewed a DTO as a vehicle or extension of illicit activities in which they were already engaged to various degrees. Frequently novices were unaffiliated street criminals and gangbangers who drew the attention of a DTO member seeking new members for the organization, or as subcontractors. Rodrigo, a member of the Sinaloa Cartel subcontracted criminal activities, and recruited members from neighborhood gangs. They [recruiters] ‘watch the kids who are stealing and to see which ones are good at it’. ‘We get members from *pandillas* [gangs] also. We observe how they talk, look, and act. If they have something that we need, we make them an offer’. The only condition is evidence of what they can offer to the cartel and how it can be used in their criminal activities. Javier was serving time for homicide and robbery with a long criminal history. He discussed his perspective as a long time insider of a DTO. ‘When you are a member [of a cartel] you know what type of people would be useful for the boss. If you notice someone that might be valuable you try to get him’. Raul was a neighborhood informant who observed the growth of organized crime in Mexico City, and the effect it had on small-time criminals, often in the same family, who were absorbed by larger organizations through successful operations.

People with a common history, relatives, or close friends that grew up together create a criminal group and get involved in small-time robberies. Eventually, they increase their power and influence through more profitable and dangerous crimes like drug dealing, kidnapping, extortion, or hijacking trucks. At this point, they get noticed by bigger organizations. (Raul)

His comments show how propinquity as well as the competency and success in criminal pursuits combine to draw groups into cartel work. When they are engaged in actively attracting members, recruiters convey messages that financial gain is a direct benefit of belonging to a criminal organization. The perception that organized crime is an avenue to the ‘good life’ is consistent with recent research that we noted above (Villegas, 2020).

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that cartels find a rich source of recruits among the poor where they ‘reportedly can pay teenagers \$5,000 for a single act of violence’ (Farwell and Arakelian, 2014: 45). Alberto echoed the appeal of organized crime for impoverished residents living in rural Mexico.

To recruit new members for the criminal organizations in places like Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Durango, and Sinaloa, leaders use trusted friends or family to run the operation. The reason is simple. They don’t have many options to survive or support a family. The first generation of these groups work as enforcers. This type of lifestyle has become normal for two or three generations.

While organized crime is viewed as an escape from poverty, it carries inherent risk and danger stemming from their often violence encounters with rivals. Recruiters get around the visceral trepidation of belonging to a DTO through their ostentatious displays of material wealth, power, and prowess, and smooth talking. For Pedro, who belonged to *La Familia Michoacana*, flash trumps fear in recruiting potential members. He expressed the importance of leveraging the opportunity for *easy money* when talking to them. ‘People are bedazzled by the luxuries, pretty women, fancy cars. Everyone wants to have the same things’. Guevara (2013: 140) noted that ‘Becoming a *narco* in the perception of juveniles may be the only viable way to get out of poverty for Mexico’s misfortunate youth’ (see also Campbell, 2009; Garcia-Reyes, 2018 and Villegas, 2020). Tepito inhabitant Jorge confirmed that ‘The kids from Tepito are attracted by all this cash, and they want to work for them (*La Unión de Tepito*) to have the same things’. A member of the *Los Ateos* cartel stated that ‘We all have a price, and we can be convinced with money’. DTOs offer new recruits the promise of financial success ordinarily unobtainable for the underclass (Grillo, 2013). Another associate of *La Familia Michoacana*, Alberto, linked the inherent power derived from financial gain that in the licit context is commonly accepted when he stated that, ‘money and power is the reason to work for a cartel’. Such values of achievement thought to be enviable in the abstract are used successfully in recruiting from the underclass. The bottom line is that cartels offer criminal associates what legitimate employment in Mexican society cannot. In the neighborhoods that we studied, meant that the door to the cartel always beckoned, and the path through is an easy one.

Recruiters also benefit from cultural conceptions associated with being a *narco* where power is an extension of the pecuniary success, and the infamous heads of criminal organizations are pervasive in narcoculture. Roberto, who was serving 6 years for drug trafficking in Reclusorio Norte prison, recalled attracting novices to DTOs. In his view, *narcocultura* [narcoculture] delivers on a promise of a life unobtainable to youth from impoverished families.

They [recruits] think that the bosses have power, ‘I want to be big like him. I’m going to grow up like him. He has everything’. You imagine the lifestyle you [will] have, you see people like El Chapo Guzmán, and you say, ‘when I grow up, I want to be like him’.

Pequeño recalled idolizing cartel leaders because they exuded the prestige and power embodied in *Narcocorridos* [ballads often glorifying cartel leaders *padrinos* and the *narco* lifestyle.] Pedro, a halcón (lookout) from *Los Alteos*, crime group related that

most of them [new members] are attracted by the *narcoculture* even in the country. You go to Sinaloa, and you ask a kid what he wants to be, and he says ‘*sicario*’. Why? They think they have the power. They have everything.

The association between a lucrative lifestyle to cartel work was rarely omitted in discussions with our subjects, and residents in the neighborhoods that we studied. Along with the promise of a higher economic status and social position come the concurrent benefits of prestige and privilege which fuels a recruits’ financial and status aspirations that initially appears beyond their capacity to accommodate their desires. Andres, a DTO member from Tepito stated, ‘There is never enough money. As soon as you earn it, you spend it’. Penurious youth are particularly susceptible to the promises of material wealth, status, and power seemingly unachievable by legitimate means in Mexican society. Over time, earning and spending is an endless cycle that leads to a gradual and deeper involvement with DTO work.

Finally, the financial success associated with being a *narco* fulfills cultural expectations of manhood in Latin America (Gamlin and Hawkes, 2017; Garcia-Reyes, 2018; Gutmann, 2007; Mirandé, 1997). Garcia-Reyes (2018) termed this *street masculinity* (see Quintero and Estrada, 1998) whereby financial independence is synonymous with manhood that emerges as part of a ‘narco discourse’ She argued that ‘un hombre de verdad’ [a true man] embodies the normative characteristics of machismo in a gendered hierarchy. This masculinity, in turn, justifies, and normalizes, violence [including that comprising narco-trafficking] as necessary for survival for the economically marginalized (Garcia-Reyes, 2018: 1). This view is shared by Gamlin and Hawkes (2017: 51) who link masculinity with violence in poverty ridden areas of Mexico. For them the ‘identities of many Mexican men who belong to criminal gangs are bound up with a “disobedient” form of masculinity that is driven by structural conditions of inequality’. In this way an errant form of masculinity is an emergent phenomenon embedded in economic marginalization.

Recruiters exploit their similar biographical experiences to tie existing cultural conceptions of [*street*] masculinity to cartel work. In sociological terms, they share an environmentally based empathy and a reciprocity of perspectives that they leverage in the recruiting process (Schütz, 1951, 1953). Their pitch to attract new members associates ‘being a man’ (*ser hombre*) by materially providing for a family with DTO membership. In this way, the appeal of belonging to a criminal organization goes beyond material and prurient interests by offering idealistic visions of masculinity and family stability. This appeals to impoverished youth who rarely have intact families as Manuel, a member of *La Familia Michoacana*, pointed out: ‘Most of the children work for a cartel because they don’t have families’. His statement implies that organized crime carries with it the fulfillment of emotional needs and material gain. In her study of organized crime members Villegas (2020) found that income support for the family was of primary importance as well as a motivating factor for viewing organized crime as a viable option for income as in Heriberto’s case. An active member of the Knights Templar cartel who was serving time for kidnapping, he was initially drawn to organized crime because his father was unable to support the family. He first worked in an armory run by Knights at 14 to contribute additional income for his family. Then he advanced to more risky activities on

their behalf. 'I met a person from the Knights Templar in the armory. He called me from Tijuana to do *a jale* (assist in a kidnapping). After a while he called me again to do a kidnapping in Zacatecas'. For Heriberto, supporting his family with additional income from organized crime fulfilled his expectations of manhood that were lacking in his own father, a rural peasant.

Beyond, money, power, and masculinity: The CT

Thus far our findings and analysis supports recent research in Mexico emphasizing the financial and cultural rewards that attract young males to criminal organizations (Garcia-Reyes, 2018; Villegas, 2020). However, we also found that our participants were apt to view their future options of joining a DTO as inextricably linked to those around them. In this section, we expand our analysis to draw upon experiences from our interviews that indicate that organized crime offers intangible benefits that are rooted in group life. While the pecuniary conceptions of success were important to our subjects, we also found that the collective experience being attached to intimate groups was also involved in understanding the willingness to join a DTO. We learned that group connectedness was an added factor that influenced our subjects' perception of the opportunities for membership. The notion that one's path toward criminality is tied to significant others supports previous research (Chomczyński et al., 2019; Chomczyński and Guy, 2021) suggesting that intimate, personal, and face-to-face social relations characteristic of kin and friends were antecedents to participating in low-level drug dealing in Mexico City. Our interviews offered additional insight for understanding recruitment because they support the idea that a common pool of group experiences created an inclination to accept an offer to join a DTO. In short, their desire to remain attached to their immediate group narrowed their options and those around them.

For these reasons, we advance an additional dimension to recruitment that we term the CT. We derive this from the sociological concept of an *expected trajectory* whereby patients in palliative care settings gradually developed a view of their future as they became cognizant of how their social world would be gradually reordered (Fagerhaugh and Strauss, 1977). From interacting with medical personnel and family members, patients were able to anticipate the progression of their illness (Hallenbeck, 2003) that is similar to how our participants envisioned a future with a DTO. However, while Fagerhaugh and Strauss place emphasis on an individuals' developing view, we see this expectation arising *collectively* as a socially constructed phenomenon composed of shared long-term group experiences and biographies that transcends individual experience alone (Strauss, 1995). Taken together, this CT explains how similar social constructions of *reality* fall into a pattern that is tied to the importance of group membership alluded to in recent criminological research noted by some recently.

... in the context of limited resources, constrained social and geographical mobility, territorial spaces became imbued with meaning through individual and collective memory. This progressively informed both personal and collective identities, embedded in, and reinforced by, the relationships which developed there. (Weaver and Fraser, 2021: 9)

Our argument is further bolstered by the assumption that Mexican DTOs exist and operate in a more collectivistic society than criminal organizations in Western countries such as the United States (Gomez and Taylor, 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010; Maldonado Aranda, 2013). Our position is that collectivism facilitates recruitment because novices (1) view their future as tied to groups to which they have strong social ties, (2) associate their destiny with that of an immediate group, and (3) share biographical similarities with those who recruit them. The importance of collectivism in social life that emerged in our interviews coupled with the tendency of our subjects to envision their future through those in their immediate social group, or view it subsumed within it suggests an explanation beyond the descriptive elements in our data. Therefore, our participants interpreted the individual opportunity to work with DTO through a collective lens and as a natural progression of the group around them (Strauss, 1995). Therefore, it is our position that cartels reinforce collectivism through in-group identification, and relational ties that we explain below (Moule et al., 2003).

Recruiters exploit collectivism by portraying the transition to a criminal organization as a logical step in the trajectory of those around them with whom they share a common past. A 47-year-old cartel member explained that ‘They [recruiters] know our situation and know what to do’. His comment that recruiters *know what to do* alludes to their use of intersubjective and instrumental empathy (Harrington, 2000; Schütz, 1953; Chomczyński and Guy, 2021) in selecting messages that reinforce the appeal for group belonging. His words also point at general recruitment tactics that are successfully used for newcomers having similar experiences. At times both [recruiter and recruit] shared nearly identical backgrounds with one another on which to base the option of DTO membership (Garfinkel, 1967; Harrington, 2000; Schütz, 1953). Recruits are receptive to a recruiter’s message because it tends to reinforce how they anticipate their future (and those around them) to play out. Rodolfo, a former member of CJNG, as well as other interviewees, recalled that his contact with the organization used familiar language that he accepted and understood. The recruiter drew from his own experience to empathize with his current situation and biographical profile. ‘He [the recruiter] spoke to me in a calm voice. He got me involved by convincing me that I wouldn’t experience the problems that I have today’. In this context, their affiliation with a criminal organization has been foreshadowed by those around them as well as those seeking new members from which they took direction. The aptitude for attracting new members was not lost on a correctional official that we interviewed who was aware of the demeanor necessary for replenishing their ranks. In distinguishing the behavior of DTO members inside the facility he noted that ‘. . . on the other hand, cartel leaders are very charming, manipulative and with good manners. They know how to win your trust’. This makes it easy for recruiters to traffic in, and relate to, the aspirations of a novice perpetrator whether they are actively seeking new members or are approached by the youth themselves. In doing so, they appeal to a particular segment of a well-known population from the same neighborhoods who are inclined to accept cartel work because of a *mental preparation* from those around them. Recruiters draw upon personal experiences to employ a shared perspective regarding the desire for exiting poverty, fulfilling expectations of manhood, and more importantly linking DTO membership to group affiliation.

Based on common biographical experiences, lifestyles, and worldviews, intermediaries acting in the recruiting role, employed a strategy of appeal to new members.

Drawing from these common attributes, they communicated a vision of success through cartel membership that appealed to newcomers already mentally inclined to join. The collectivistic character of group relations predisposes individuals to accept a position in a cartel since they see this as a natural progression of those around them. This also highlights the importance of trajectories being 'structured by conditional chains of events that one cannot avoid without high costs . . . and a loss of control over one's life circumstances' (Riemann and Schütze, 1991: 337). Because of their early exposure to organized crime, a recruit is mentally prepared to enter a DTO; they are also motivated through criminal in-group affiliation to remain as this exchange with Pablo illustrates.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to say about your lifestyle?

Pablo: Even though I have always been interested in this kind of life, I would like to change.

Interviewer: You would like to change?

Pablo: Yes, but it's extremely difficult. Once you enter this world it is very difficult to get out.

Interviewer: Maybe a part of you wants to quit, but another more realistic part tells you this is going to be very difficult because of your background?

Pablo: Yes I would like to change for my kids, but it's very difficult. We all came in together.

The *difficulty* expressed by Pablo was more complex than the physical danger of departing a cartel just as the risk of entering one initially. Extricating themselves also meant severing ties with a group that conferred their identity and fulfilled expectations for success. In addition, their exit means entering a *liminal state* characterized as being adrift and separated from one's group affiliation, and possibly forfeiting their role as provider. In Pablo's case, the status of father and ties to his children buffered the transitory state of being unaffiliated with the cartel (a group to which he has social bonds) were he to depart. For others like Luis, who left the organization after his brother was killed, the future outside severed his connection with the cartel, and group attachment. When we met him he was an unhooded street person who was unaffiliated with any group, including his family.

Our rivals killed my brother, Omar. You see, he didn't want to stay by himself. Right now, I'm out of the organization living here [gesturing to the street] but they will never leave me in peace. I know that they are going to kill me.

Pablo and Luis illustrate an important dimension of the CT, namely that it is a one-way process. The same factors that facilitate recruitment act as an inhibiting mechanism for exiting criminal organizations. The risk of retribution from the cartel makes desistance possible only if a member is willing to undertake complete self-ostracism from intimate groups, which is against the current of collectivism. Therefore, we argue that this added cost, beyond the inevitable physical harm to self, family, or friends is an added impediment to desistance that is not addressed in contemporary criminology.

Conclusion and discussion

Mexican DTOs face a continual need to recruit front-line personnel because of the frequent and violent encounters with rivals, and skirmishes with the military and law enforcement (Pantoja, 2020; Santamaria, 2015). Yet few researchers have attempted to examine recruitment experiences with members of these organizations. Our findings support previous research linking participation in organized crime to preexisting notions of success that fulfill cultural conceptions of masculinity and achievement (Garcia-Reyes, 2018; Villegas, 2020). These findings point to structural inequality and illicit opportunities as concomitant social conditions that increase the momentum and appeal of organized crime as a vehicle to success (Bourgois, 1995; Emmerich, 2011; Gamlin and Hawkes, 2017; Hagedorn, 1994; MacCoun and Reuter, 1992; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009; Venkatesh and Levitt, 2000). Not only were our interviewees impoverished, they resided in neighborhoods that were characterized by the omnipresence of organized crime and the absence of legitimate economic opportunities. The background and knowledge that comprised their *reality* was that of a narrowed (and perhaps logical) path composed of ‘subjects and objects’ that produce discrete ‘truths’ of those around them (Garcia-Reyes, 2018: 58). Because of their similar social backgrounds and biographical experiences, recruiters directly appeal to the material and prurient aspirations of the disadvantaged by equating pleasurable experiences (e.g. social prestige, material success, and masculinity) with a DTO. In doing so, recruiters offer cartel life/being a narco as a solution to their quotidian problems by synchronizing their aspirations with a tangible opportunity to realize them.

In going beyond existing literature, we have shown that recruiting is a dynamic process between individuals with similar backgrounds that hinges on the primacy of group life and the importance of collectivism. The recruiting process becomes a medium of exchange that embodies the subjective meanings that recruits attach to their present and future situations that is simultaneously linked to their immediate social group that comprises a CT. This additional analytical dimension is based on the centrality of collectivism in Latin America culture (Gomez and Taylor, 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010), and sensitizes an individual to accept work with a criminal organization because they are able to envision their future as being connected to their immediate social group. This goes beyond previous explanations of *peer influence attenuating self-control* (Warr, 2002). The common biographies of our subjects were important because they allow for a mental platform of shared meanings (Garfinkel, 1967; Riemann and Schütze, 1991; Schütz, 1953) that the recruiter exploits to identify cartel work as a legitimate option for employment. Recruiters use a reciprocity of perspectives in an instrumental way to create communication and appealing messages to draw members into organized crime through messages that are suited to a recruit’s desire for group belonging. In this way, novice criminals view the progression toward DTO membership as an inevitable and logical progression based on those around them. Therefore, CT is useful in explaining social contexts of decisions made by recruits that are primarily applicable to members of underclass communities affected by the long-term presence of organized crime.

In Spite of its analytical usefulness in explaining recruitment to criminal organizations, the concept of a CT poses challenges to researchers. Because it is rooted in the

primacy of Latin American collectivism, it is simultaneously identifiable and obscure when it comes to theory construction since it is a cultural characteristic having arguably positive attributes and outcomes that strengthen social institutions and practices. As such, CT becomes a sort of conundrum for sociological criminology. We believe that the pernicious effects of the CT are aberrant manifestations of the omnipresence of organized crime in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods in which it becomes an ideal setting for the expression of collectivism. At the same time, an argument can be made that the same underlying attributes of collectivism strengthen social institutions presumably important for social order and stability. Therefore, our findings might be viewed as a descriptive observation of the novel elements of recruitment in Mexico or Latin America rather than the beginnings of a theoretical approach to criminal behavior.

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ORCID iD

Roger Guy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2632-6933>

Notes

1. The use of the term ‘cartel’ is not always agreed upon; with some preferring DTO. However, our interviewees as well as literature in Spanish employed the term cartel. Therefore, we use these terms interchangeably throughout the article.
2. San Fernando, Centro Especializado para Adolescentes Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, Comunidad de Mujeres, Reclusorio Norte, and El Centro Federal de Readaptación Social (Cefereso) número 13, CPS ‘OAXACA’.
3. Los Zetas, Jalisco Nueva Generacion, Los Ojos, La Familia Michoacana, Knights Templar, Los Ateos, Milenio Cartel, Sinaloa Cartel, La Union de Tepito, and Beltrán Leiva of whom last three we had access using ethnographic methods.
4. We are grateful to *El Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos* (the National Human Rights Commission).
5. We chose the term recruiter to describe these individuals based on the analysis of our subjects’ use of the term and context of their initial entrance in a criminal organization, but they loosely fulfilled this role in the formal sense.

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Author biographies

Piotr A Chomczyński, PhD, is an Associate Professor, Center for Data Analysis, Modeling and Computational Sciences, The Sociology of Art Department, University of Lodz. He specializes in qualitative sociological research on violence and organized crime. He is a scholarship holder at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) where he conducted ethnographic research on organized crime. With the Comisión de Derechos Humanos assistance, he engaged in research

in correctional facilities in Mexico. Currently, he works on the Crime in Latin America (CRIMLA) project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. His research has appeared in *Justice Quarterly*, *Global Crime*, and the *British Journal of Criminology*.

Roger Guy, PhD, is Professor of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Oswego. His work has appeared in the *British Journal of Criminology*, *Journal of Drug Issues*, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *Current Sociology*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Victims and Offenders*, and *Federal Probation*.

Elena Azaola, PhD, is Professor Emeritus and former Senior Investigator at the Center for Advanced Studies and Research in Social Anthropology located in Mexico City. She has published more than 200 works in Mexico and other 15 countries in the area of juvenile and women's justice institutions, violent crime, and prisons.

Résumé

Les organisations de trafic de drogue (OTD) mexicaines connaissent depuis 2006 une réduction rapide de leurs effectifs, ce qui a entraîné un besoin constant de personnel. Cependant, les modalités suivant lesquelles ces organisations criminelles absorbent de nouveaux membres restent floues. Dans cet article, nous rendons compte du contexte social du recrutement et des trajectoires de motivation au sein des OTD mexicaines par le biais d'entretiens approfondis avec d'actuels et d'anciens membres des cartels (N=79). Nous constatons que les recrues sont motivées par des aspirations à la réussite financière et des notions de masculinité, mais qu'elles sont également influencées par l'attachement à des groupes sociaux et des expériences communes que nous appelons *trajectoire collective* (TC). Nous avançons que la décision individuelle des recrues de rejoindre une organisation criminelle est perçue en termes collectifs, c'est-à-dire en termes de liens avec les membres du groupe social le plus proche de la recrue. En conclusion, nous analysons les applications des défis que représente la TC pour la criminologie sociologique.

Mots-clés

crime organisé, Mexique, organisations de trafic de drogue, recrutement, trajectoire collective

Resumen

Las organizaciones de tráfico de drogas (OTD) mexicanas han experimentado una rápida pérdida de efectivos que ha resultado en una necesidad constante de personal desde 2006. Sin embargo, el proceso por el cual estas organizaciones criminales absorben nuevos miembros sigue siendo oscuro. En este artículo se analiza el contexto social del reclutamiento y las trayectorias de motivación en las OTD mexicanas a través de entrevistas en profundidad con miembros actuales y anteriores del cartel (N = 79). Se ha hallado que los reclutados están motivados por aspiraciones de prosperidad financiera y nociones de masculinidad, pero también están influenciados por el apego a grupos sociales y experiencias compartidas que denominamos *trayectoria colectiva* (TC). Se argumenta que las decisiones individuales de unirse a organizaciones criminales son vistas en términos colectivos, es decir, de estar conectado con miembros del grupo social inmediato. En las conclusiones se analizan las aplicaciones de los desafíos de la TC para la criminología sociológica.

Palabras clave

crimen organizado, México, organizaciones de tráfico de drogas, reclutamiento, trayectoria colectiva