



Norwegian University
of Life Sciences

Master's Thesis 2016, 60 ECTS
Department of International Environment
and Development Studies,
NORAGRIC

Staying Alive: Understanding Violent Life Choices of the 'Pesetas' in Honduras

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Declaration

I, Elisabeth Leidland, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

The president together with his accomplices are fucking our people,
they are stealing, they are killing,
and in the marginalized barrios the people are dying, yes.
They are stealing the tax money,
they fly first class trips to have fun in Europe.
Where does the money come from?
From the poor who works, working their ass off all day long,
and return to their houses soaked in sweat,
and those innocent children that sleep in cardboard houses that are made of plastic.
He [the president] doesn't care how they sleep, how they live or if they eat,
and the national congress have turned into a den of thieves,
the reason for my protest.
I don't want them to be offended.
They have also discriminated the tattooed small kids like me [gang members].
They have already discriminated us and they want to see us locked up,
and the coat of arms clearly says that I am free and sovereign,
I don't know what they propose, but they want to finish us,
they calcined 104 in the San Pedro Sula Prison when they burned.
This is not bullshit it's real, but they stood quietly, Maduro and the society.

Lyrics by a *peseta*

El presidente junto con sus secuaces están jodiendo a nuestra gente,
están robando, están matando,
y en los barrios marginados la gente se está muriendo, simón.
Se están robando los impuestos,
van en vuelos de primera a pijinear a Europa.
¿De dónde salen los billetes?
De los pobres que laboran, trabajando echando pija sol a sol,
y regresan a sus casas empapados de sudor,
y aquellos niños inocentes que duermen en casas de cartón que son de nylon.
A él [presidente] no le interesa como duermen, como viven o si comen,
y el congreso nacional lo han convertido en una cueva de ladrones,
al motivo de mi protesta.
Yo no quiero que se ofendan.
También han discriminado los chavalitos tatuados como yo.
Ya nos han discriminado y nos quieren ver encerrados,
y el escudo claro dice que yo soy libre y soberano,
yo no sé qué se proponen, pero quieren acabarnos,
calcinaron 104 en el presidio Sampedrano cuando se quemaron.
Esto no es paja esto es real, pero se quedó quedito Maduro y la sociedad.

Original lyrics by a *peseta*

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I wish to extend my gratitude to the people who are at the center of this thesis; the *pesetas*. I very much admire the strength and trust they showed sharing their stories, experiences and perceptions, while knowing it could put their lives in danger. Also, a sincere thanks to the other informants; families living in gang exposed areas, social workers, priests and public figures, for sharing their knowledge and understandings of the current situation of the gangs and marginalized youth. I am forever thankful to all informants, without their contributions this thesis would not have been possible.

I would like to extend a special thanks to my supervisor, Esben Leifsen, for giving me the opportunity and freedom to pursue my interests of conducting research on gangs. Thank you for the invaluable guidance, support, and advise throughout the master process. I also owe my thanks to Sarahi for being understanding, patient, and helpful while assisting me during my fieldwork. I am grateful for the many hours and days she spent helping me facilitating and transcribing interviews, and for the many insightful discussions we had. I would like to express my gratitude to Carla who opened doors for me that allowed me to get in contact with the *pesetas*, and for sharing valuable insights about their situation.

Thanks to my Honduran friends for all the memorable moments and conversations that thought me much of what I know about the Honduran culture and everyday life. Thanks to Øyvind and Kirsten, whom I lived with during my stay in Honduras, for always encouraging me to continue my work. A sincere thanks to Øyvind, for always taking time to listen to me in moments of doubt, and for the many discussions that have contributed to forming my thesis. Also, thanks to Yujin, Øyvind, and Einar for proofreading my thesis, and for all the constructive input they have given me.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for always believing in me. I have very much appreciated the support they have showed me throughout my studies.

Abstract

Since the gang culture emerged in Honduras more than two decades ago, the official discourse has hold marginalized youth and gang members responsible for the prevalence of violence in the Honduran society. The portrayal of them as the main perpetrators of violence have led them to become the prime targets of repressive security measures, and ultimately allowed for their lived realities of victimization to be omitted from the official discourse, while the lived realities of the former gang members, the *pesetas*, have been silenced all together.

This thesis goes beyond the general perception and examines the lived realities of marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas*. It shows how they in the course of their lifetime move along a continuum of violence, constantly shifting between being victims and perpetrators of violence. The study uses the concepts of ‘dehumanization’ and ‘social death’ to show how the structural constraints of having limited opportunities of a worthy life, and not being recognized as fully human affect the marginalized youth’ choice to take a violent life chance. It reveals the interplay between their structural suffering and victimization, and their active choice to resist oppression and to claim a position and a voice in the society.

This study shows that violence is an important characteristic in the construction of subjectivity, and the main mechanism to reclaim a sense of humanness and respect for marginalized youth. Furthermore, it illustrates how joining a gang can be an active choice to stay alive socially and physically by escaping social marginalization and family negligence, in addition to generating a meaningful life. As gang members, however, they are still as much subjected to being victims as perpetrators of violence, and while they are able to reclaim a sense of humanness, they continue to be dehumanized.

Lastly, the study reveals that becoming a *peseta* is to return to the path of social death characterized by insecurity, marginality, and exclusion. Even when the *pesetas* have a desire to change, they are often forced to reenter the violent life as a mean to survive.

The marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas* continuously move between a violent life chance and the social death in a constant struggle to stay alive.

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List of names

- Enrique** – *Peseta*, whose life story is told in this thesis.
- Antonio** – *Peseta*, whose life story is told in this thesis.
- Jorge** – *Peseta*, whose life story is told in this thesis.
- Pedro** – *Peseta*, whose story is told in this thesis.
- Sarahi** – My assistant throughout my fieldwork. She has a long experience working with children in different part of the country.

- Carla** – Social worker who works with *pesetas*, and in general with prevention of violence and rehabilitation.
- Alicia** – Social worker who has worked with gangs and with prevention of violence.
- José** – Social worker who works at a rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol addiction.
- Astrid** – Social worker who works at a rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol addiction.
- Juan** – University professor.
- Mario** – High ranked military officer.
- Marvin** – Priest.
- Daniel** – Priest.
- Jesús** – A father who used to live in a gang controlled area, but was forced to leave by the gangs.
- Erica** – A mother who used to live in a gang controlled area, but was forced to leave by the gangs.
- Oscar and Sofia** – A family who lives with threats from the gangs in a gang controlled area.
- Carlos** – A leader of a *banda* in Santa Cruz.

Glossary of terms

Banda	– An organized criminal group. The <i>bandas</i> generally specialize in certain activities including <i>sicariato</i> , drug trafficking, and extortion. A membership is often considered an employment opportunity, and the relationship between members are primarily economical.
Barrio	– Neighborhood.
Carnal	– Gang member and friend.
Carracos	– Marihuana cigarettes.
Casas locas	– Private houses belonging to gangs, where the gang members gather to have parties. In recent years these have become a place where gangs torture and kill people.
Chimba	– Homemade firearms used by the gangs.
Clika	– A subgroup of a gang.
Element	– Gang member.
Gang (sp.: pandilla/mara)	– An organized violent group, which in this thesis mainly includes <i>MS</i> and <i>Pandilla 18</i> . The majority of the members are youth. In contrast to a <i>banda</i> , the gangs consider their members as family, and there exist a strong brotherhood between them.
Homie	– Gang member.
Ley Antimara	– Anti-gang law implemented in 2003 that criminalizes all gang activities.
Limpieza	– When the gang kills fellow gang members that have made fatal errors.
Loco	– Friend or gang member.
Luz verde	– ‘Green light’. The ‘green light’ is given to a gang member that breaks a gang rule, and signifies that his own gang wants to kill him.
Mara	– Gang.
Meeting	– A gathering for the gang members with the purpose of discussing gang related issues including planning missions and, under certain circumstances, killing fellow gang members who have broken gang rules.
MS/ Mara Salvatrucha/ MS13/ 13	– <i>MS</i> is one of the largest gangs in Honduras. <i>MS</i> was established in El Salvador, but developed to what it is today in the US. In Honduras, <i>MS</i> emerged in the 1990s.
Paisa	– Imprisoned ordinary delinquents. Generally, the <i>pesetas</i> join the <i>paisas</i> in prison for security.

- Pandilla 18/ 18/ Barrio 18/
18th street gang – *Pandilla 18* is one of the largest gangs in Honduras. It was established in the US in the 1960s and emerged in Honduras in the 1990s.
- Peseta – Former gang member.
- Puntero – A person that guard the entrance of a gang controlled area, and inform the gang members when the police or other unwanted people enter the neighborhood. The *punteros* are often children or youths who are about to the enter the gang, but it can also be a gang member or sympathizers living in the gang controlled area.
- Resistol – Glue.
- Resistoleros – People that sniff glue.
- Rifé/rifas – The act of provoking another person or group, which generally begins by showing gang hand signs and always end with a fight.
- Sicario – A hitman (person).
- Sicariato – The profession as a hitman.
- Tercero – A person ranked third in the gang, who generally is responsible for executing missions with other gang members.

Introduction

“I just pray to God [...] that when they kill me, He gives me five seconds to ask for His forgiveness”, said Enrique with resignation and sadness as the interview began. “I have too many enemies now”. Enrique was in his thirties, a well-dressed man, with a cautious appearance. He was also a *peseta*, a former gang member. The two tears under his right eye were the last visible marks of his previous life, as he had erased and covered up the rest of his tattoos. Enrique spent 15 years as an active gang member, many of them as the neighborhood’s third ranked leader, responsible for planning and executing missions targeting his rival gang and others which had unsettled business with his gang.

Seven years ago, Enrique was forced to leave his gang because he made several errors, mistakes which, by gang rules, were punished with death. As a *peseta*, Enrique lived in constant danger, being persecuted by his former gang, rival gang, and the police. He had a desire to change, and to live a normal life as an ‘honorable’ member of the society by working and earning money legally, but his former life eventually caught up with him.

In the four months I knew Enrique his life changed immensely, from having a temporary job to becoming a member of a criminal group, a *banda*. As a *peseta*, he was vulnerable to recruitment, due to exclusion, insecurity, and poverty. Enrique sought refuge with the *banda*, who offered him a certain degree of security and a way to earn money. Soon after he joined the *banda*, however, Enrique killed a man, and subsequently found himself persecuted by the family of the man he assassinated. As a result, Enrique was once again forced into hiding to ensure his survival.

The last time I talked to Enrique, he was terrified and tired as he knew he was facing death soon. His only desire was to have some time to spend with his family and to reconcile with God. A mere two weeks after our last encounter, Enrique was found beaten to death, in a black plastic bag, dumped in a road ditch, a common way for gangs to kill deserters. Whether he was killed by his former gang or the people persecuting him is still unknown.

The same day as Enrique was found dead, another corps was discovered nearby, also in a black plastic bag. In Honduras, violent deaths like these have become a daily occurrence and are barely noticed by most bystanders, especially when the people involved are marginalized youth,

gang members, and *pesetas*. For the last 20 years, the official discourse has held gangs responsible for the insecurity and violence, and as a result, the government has implemented various repressive policies and laws criminalizing gang activities. These oppressive actions targeting the gangs, and indirectly the marginalized youth and *pesetas*, dehumanize them and facilitate the acceptance of using violence against them, to the extent that killing them is applauded. I came to realize, during my fieldwork that the *pesetas* throughout their lives, are just as much victims as they are perpetrators in a ‘continuum of violence’ (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004),

Objective and research questions

The overall objective of this study is to examine the lived realities of the *pesetas*, from their childhood to their present, to gain an insight into their individual and collective experiences, understandings, and meanings of violence. By telling the life stories of Enrique, Jorge, and Antonio this research specifically aims to analyze the following research questions:

1. How do the *pesetas*, in the course of their lifetime, move along a ‘continuum of violence’, shifting between being victims and perpetrators of violence?
2. What are the main factors that motivate marginalized children and youth to join gangs and how are these related to structural processes in the Honduran society?
3. To what extent is violence important to the formation of individual and collective subjectivities, and how does a violent subjectivity affect the ability to resist the experienced oppression?
4. How does the overall societal perception of marginalized children and youth, gang members and *pesetas* affect their life choices?

The next section gives a short overview over the historical and contemporary processes of violence in Honduras, creating a foundation to better understand the current situation of the marginalized children and youth, gang members, and *pesetas* in relation to violence.

Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs

It is sad to pass by a place where there is a murder. [...] But after seeing it so many times, [...] at one point you become insensitive. It is natural to see a murder here in Honduras.

Astrid, social worker¹

In Honduras, murders have become an embedded part of everyday life. On a daily basis one hears about murders, attempts of murder, and violent actions in newspapers, television or even encounter dead bodies on the street. During the 2000s, the homicide rate increased immensely, reaching 86.5 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012. Since then, according to the official statistics, the homicide rate has decreased to 60 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 (Observatorio de la Violencia 2016). However, there are strong indications that these numbers are fabricated². The majority of homicides are of youth, the group with the greatest risk of becoming both perpetrators and victims of violence. The homicide rate reveals that 65.7 percent of the people killed in 2015 were aged 0-34, of which 49.1 percent were youths aged 15-29. Over 90 percent were male (Observatorio de la Violencia 2016).

During my fieldwork in Honduras, I discussed the prevalence of violence with several people working at a rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol addiction and they unanimously agreed that killing is a natural occurrence in Honduras, and a common way to resolve problems. José³, one of the social worker asserted that “There are many factors [for murder], [...] it is difficult to say, well, why this murder occurred; [whether it is] because of jealousy, on request, extortion, or because it is linked to drug trafficking”⁴.

Violence is generally measured and presented as a statistical number, such as homicide rate, sexual abuse rate, and femicide rate. However, these numbers are solely the visible effect of physical violence. Violence is also invisible, it can be symbolic, structural, political, and different forms of everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). Structural violence has its origin in historical, political, and economic processes that have generated inequality,

¹ Social worker, working at a rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol addiction. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

² Juan, University professor. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

³ José, social worker at a rehabilitation center drug and alcohol addiction. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

⁴ José, social worker at a rehabilitation center drug and alcohol addiction. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

poverty, social exclusion, normalization of violence and other structures that reduce the life chances of individuals in the lower strata. In the rest of this section, I will present the historical background of violence in Honduras, and how it has become the bedrock in the Honduran society. Thereafter, I will present the development of the two most prevalent gangs, *MS* and *Pandilla 18*, and how they have come to obtain their position and voice in the country through the use of violence.

Historical state violence

To gain a better understanding of the prevalence of violence and its multiple reasons, links, and manifestations, as well as how it emerges, evolves, and reproduces itself, it is pivotal to recognize the historical structural processes that underpins the current violent climate. Honduras has a long history of exploitation, domination, and instability that can be traced back to the colonial period. After the independence in 1821, the creole elite that came to power continued this domination and exploitation, which was further maintained by the US presence that gained momentum at the beginning of the twentieth century (Barahona 2014; Euraque 1996).

After the independence in 1821, a Central American nation was established, which the creole elite tried to form and consolidate as a state to make sure of its existence (Euraque 1996). However, the nation, that Honduras was a part of between 1821-1838, was short lived due to absence of political consensus. Consequently, this generated long-lasting political instability and a climate of violence. From 1824 till the end of the century, Honduras was subjected to 98 changes in its government, hindering the process of establishing a central state. During this time, 213 civil war actions were registered (Euraque 1996; Posas & Del Cid 1983). These events contributed to the formation of a relationship between politics and violence (Posas & Del Cid 1983).

The creole elite founded the Honduran state on the premise of social and political exclusion of the people, a residue of the colonial domination. As a consequence, the elite had limited support in the creation of the state, generating antagonism and a lack of a national identity (Barahona 2014). The use of violence, therefore, remained an important instrument for the creole elite for two reasons: first, as an instrument to create a more powerful central state, and second, as an instrument to gain power over the people through submission and obedience. The centrality of violence to obtain and maintain political power caused the politically engaged elite to become

the main perpetrators of violence during the second half of the nineteenth century (Barahona 2014).

Political instability and violence defined the state formation process until 1876, a period where civil wars were frequent, causing short-lived presidencies and unconstitutional seizing of political power (Bowman 2002; Euraque 1996). In 1876, Honduras implemented liberal reforms, as several other Central American countries did during the 1870s, which induced increased stability until the beginning of the twentieth century (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). The liberal reforms, was a modernization project of the nation that promoted social development by encouraging entry to the global market (Posas & Del Cid 1983). Social laws and policies were developed, however, it was not successfully implemented at a national level, mainly due to the influence of the US intervention (Euraque 1996).

The US presence and power in Honduras expanded during the early twentieth century, as the liberal reforms facilitated agricultural export leading to the rise of Honduras as a ‘banana republic’ (Euraque 1996). The two US banana companies Cuyamel Fruit and United Fruit emerged as influential actors and became directly involved in national politics (Bowman 2002). This strengthening of the US hegemony was a major factor causing ‘aborted liberalism’ in Honduras, resulting from unsuccessful implementation of liberal reforms, that generated an environment of political popularization of traditional authoritarian governments (Mahoney, 2001). Between 1900 and 1932 political instability continued leading to civil wars and other violent actions due to the oppressive authoritarian leaderships (Euraque 1996).

Political stability was not achieved until Tiburcio Carías came to power in 1933, a dictator that led the country for 16 years. He actively used repressive authoritarian means such as exiling enemies and murdering protestors (Weaver 1994 cited in Bowman 2002), and he formed strong relations with economic powers in the country—the land elite, the US and the United Fruit Company—to achieve stability and power (Barahona 2005; Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). Though the Carías dictatorship ended in 1949, the relations he established when he was a dictator formed a basis for the emergence of a military dictatorship in the sixties and seventies (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013).

At the beginning of the 1950s, however, Honduras underwent a short period of social development which gave peasants, students, and laborers the opportunity to organize, and led to the strengthening of the state apparatus (Argueta 1990 cited in Bowman 2002). Nevertheless,

in 1954, the situation changed due to three separate events that facilitated the emergence of a military dictatorship. First, an over two months long strike took place among banana company workers that subsequently spread to several other sectors. During the strike, the US actively engaged in the process of solving it, due to the sector's economic importance to the US, and the fear of a communist advancement. Ultimately, the strike was settled through both incentives and repressive actions, as well as through the spread of US anticommunist propaganda labelling the strikers as communists and supporters of the Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz (Euraque 1996). The second event was when the Honduran government granted permission for the US to prepare for the ousting of Jacobo Árbenz on Honduran soil. Last, and perhaps the most important factor which led to the creation of a powerful Honduran military was the signing of the bilateral agreement between Honduras and the US, which declared that the US would provide military training to the Honduran military as a means to fight the communist threat (Bowman 2002).

Honduras was of high geopolitical importance for the US during the Cold War, and the US used their solid alliance with the Honduran government to push for militarization in Honduras in an attempt to halt the spread of the communist threat in the region (Bowman 2002). Two years after the bilateral treaty was signed, the former weakly institutionalized and rather powerless Honduran military had become strong and powerful, and was able to seize the political power. The military governed for a year, before Ramón Villeda Morales became president between 1957 and 1963. During his presidency the military still held great power. Villeda Morales was ousted in 1963, which marked the beginning of a near 20 year military governance that ended in 1982 (Bowman 2002).

The militarization of the state and ousting of the president generated demonstrations to oppose the actions of the military that used repressive tactics and violence to create order (Bowman 2002). From the fifties to the seventies various coups were attempted, and state sponsored violence was common. The military dictatorship also formed alliances with the Honduran land elite and the US, consolidating their power at the expense of the popular masses, which ultimately generated increased societal inequality (Posas & Del Cid 1983).

In 1982, the military stepped down and seemingly welcomed a democratic process in Honduras, but it still had great influential power and remained an active part in the decision-making processes. The military engaged in the ongoing counterinsurgency against the communists and were actively involved in violating human rights. The Honduran government used dirty war

tactics such as death squads, torture, execution, and blackmailing of civilians, which were considered acceptable security instruments (Ruhl 1996). The intelligence battalion 3-16, was a prominent death squad during the 1980s, otherwise known as the ‘the lost decade’, composed of US trained elite soldiers who were responsible for disappearances and killings. The main targets were students, Sandinistas, political activists, unionists, and peasant leaders that were considered leftists and thus considered to be communist threats (Center for Justice and International Law & Human Rights Watch/Americas 1994).

-The military elite that emerged as a result of the dictatorship gained power during the Cold War, an era in which violence became generally accepted as a legitimate instrument to protect the country. This created favorable conditions for widespread impunity, violations of human rights, and criminal behavior among the Honduran military (Bowman 2002). When president Carlos Reina decided to abolish obligatory military service during his presidency (1994-1998), the military accused him of trying to reduce its power, and the military actively tried to have the president killed to prevent the plans to pass (Ruhl 1996).

During the post-Cold War period, a merchant elite emerged as a powerful political actor in the wake of the implementation of neoliberal policies. This merchant elite, comprising mainly of Palestinian immigrants, arose in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of pro-immigration politics (Foroohar 2011). The Palestinians began with commerce on arrival and quickly emerged as a merchant elite having control over much of export-import in various industries (Foroohar 2011). Yet, they did not achieve political power before the 1990s due to exclusion from the society by their own choice and because the Hondurans generally had a negative attitude towards them (Euraque 1996; Kerssen 2013). Within the last two decades, however, the merchant elite has gained more political power and economic wealth. Currently, the ‘10 families’, the majority of which are of Palestinian decedents, have power and control over the wealth in Honduras (Kerssen 2013). The concentration of the wealth and power in the hands of few has led to increased poverty and class differences which may partly serve as a reason for the rise of violent actions carried out by the general Honduran as a mean to survive⁵.

⁵ Personal communication - Mario, high ranked military officer, 29.06.2015; Juan, university professor, 30.06.2015; José, social worker at a rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol addiction, 30.06.2015.

Organized crime

Alongside the prevalence of state violence, organized crime has strengthened its hold in Honduras the last 40 years (Bunck & Fowler 2012). Since the 1970s, Honduras has functioned as a transit country for drug traffic, due to the country's favorable geographic position, high poverty levels, high unemployment rates, widespread corruption, impunity, and weak institutions. The geographic conditions of large areas with low population density and weak state border control facilitate undetected entry and departure of illegal goods by land, sea, and air (Bunck & Fowler 2012; Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). Moreover, low social development, exclusion, and a young population have made youth exposed to recruitment to the drug traffic.

Ramón Matta, a notable Honduran drug lord in the seventies and eighties, was an important contributor to the rise of drug traffic in Honduras. He worked closely with various Mexican and Colombian cartels and was considered one of the most influential drug lords in the eighties, supplying "perhaps one third of all the cocaine consumed in the United States" (Scott & Marshall 1998, p. 42). In Honduras, Matta established alliances with the military to facilitate shipments through Honduras and to turn the country into the main transit point for drug traffic between Colombia and the US (Schulz & Schulz 1994).

The close relationship between organized crime and the military have contributed to the intensification of widespread acts of violence, corruption, and intimidation in the twenty-first century. Military officers, politicians, and the police are linked to the drug traffic through bribes, intimidation, and killings. Yet, few reports on drug related crimes surface because people fear the consequences of reporting such crimes. In addition, they are aware that the majority of drug traffickers, and powerful actors will not be persecuted or convicted, due to the widespread impunity in the Honduran society (Bunck & Fowler 2012).

Newer processes of structural violence

Since the 1990s, violent actions and killings have intensified in Honduras. In the wake of the counterinsurgency, there has been an abundance of weapons circulating within the country, which has allowed some criminal organizations to gain a larger arsenal than the state⁶. In addition, when the counterinsurgency ended, former active army personnel became unemployed, and the state was unprepared to reintegrate them into the society. As a result, many

⁶ Juan, University professor. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

joined drug cartels, gangs, and other violent groups⁷. Finally, in the nineties, the US initiated an extensive deportation program of criminal immigrants to Central America. Many of the youths that returned to Honduras were unfamiliar with the country, and chose to join gangs for a sense of belonging and safety, which contributed to the proliferation of gang memberships (see section ‘Development of gang in Honduras’).

Another factor that contributed to the climate of violence was hurricane Mitch in 1998, which had devastating effects on the social and economic development, reinforcing the extreme poverty, inequality, and exclusion already existing in Honduras. The hurricane left thousands dead, destroyed livelihoods and homes, and led to forced displacement of many thousands in the aftermath. This deepened the economic crisis for many people, making them vulnerable to delinquency, organized crime, and gangs (ECLAC 1999). As violence increased in the public realm, the authorities blamed the gangs for the civil unrest. As a result, various repressive laws criminalizing all gang activity were implemented, making violence yet again an ‘acceptable’ instrument towards improving national security. In the aftermath, the number of street children and alleged gang members suffering extrajudicial killings by the police and death squads increased⁸ (Casa Alianza Honduras 2014; 2015; Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). To this date death squads still exist in several cities in Honduras, including in Santa Cruz.⁹ (Lakhani 2016; Tjaden & Alder 2016; United States Department of State s.a.).

The last decade, the state violence has intensified in Honduras, especially after the 2009 coup d’état. The coup occurred after president Zelaya ordered a non-binding referendum regarding a possible rewrite of the constitution. Opponents of the coup asserted that the referendum was an unconstitutional act, and claimed that it was an attempt to enable presidential reelection. The proponents, on the other hand, asserted that the coup was a result of president Zelaya’s turn to the left, and the implementation of various populist policies such as increasing the minimum wage, free school enrollment, and new land reforms (Kerssen 2013; Meyer 2010).

Under the *de facto* regime, political repression was prevalent in the form of intimidation, murders, and kidnapping, and the violent acts conducted by the gangs and organized crime increased. Drug trafficking strengthened its presence in Honduras as cartels began operating

⁷ Mario, high ranked military officer. Personal communication 29.06.2015.

⁸ *Peseta*, personal communication, 20.04.2015.

⁹ Marvin, priest, Personal communication 05.03.2015.

freely in the country, partly because the international community had cut the funding given towards the war against organized crimes, as a mean to economically and politically pressure the *de facto* government (Bosworth 2011). The organized crime's rising influence in Honduran territories is evident as Mexican cartels such as Sinaloa and Zeta currently have expanded their operations to Honduras.

After the coup d'état, Honduras has undergone a process of militarization, that built on a platform that supports combat and accepts the extermination of critical voices and violent groups. The state and media have formed and reinforce the belief that the Hondurans are a violent people, which facilitate the legitimation of a 'politic of death'¹⁰ (Phillips 2015). One action has been to create a military police, which currently are present in the streets in the major cities. Initially, many people were positive to this creation, hoping that the new military police, unlike the corrupt and violent national police, would actually protect them. Ultimately, however, even the military police have proven to be corrupt, to the extent that they witness killings without trying to stop them¹¹.

Furthermore, the militarization has turned children and youth into a direct target for repressive actions. In the last few years, the official murder rate of youth has increased and a rising number of murders have gone undocumented (Observatorio de la Violencia 2016). The children and youth are also target of prevention programs such as 'the guardians of the Fatherland'¹² which officially aim to train children and youth to "strengthen their moral and spiritual values and [to] protect their homeland" (Aguilar 2014). The program is instructed by the military, allowing the military to expand its influence and control into social institutions including schools, family, and the church, institutions that are traditionally considered as responsible for providing training in moral and spiritual values.(Phillips 2015).

Some suspect that the repressive actions targeting the youth is an attempt to eliminate future activists and critics, and to create fear and submission (Phillips 2015). The history of violence and control seem to reemerge through the militarization process, where the Honduran elites yet again utilize violence as an instrument to achieve political power and material wealth, by obtaining control over state institutions, which facilitates the process of concealing

¹⁰ Alicia, social worker. Personal communication 24.04.2015.

¹¹ Sarahi, assistant. Personal communication.

¹² In Spanish: 'Guardianes de la Patria'.

institutionalization of violence (Barahona 2014). Together, organized crime, the military, and political collaborators have strengthened the usage of violence through impunity, corruption, and intimidation as means to gain power and market. Consequently, it has led to the normalization of violence, creating a climate of social dissolution and mistrust among Hondurans and further generating values of fear, vengeance, and hatred.

Even though both organized crime and the state are active perpetrators of violence, youth gangs have been held responsible for the majority of the violence. The next section looks at the development of gangs, and their current role in the Honduran society.

Development of gangs in Honduras

The responsibility for the rampant violence, rising murder rates, and the widespread use of intimidation, characterizing the contemporary Honduran society are largely ascribed to the two most prominent gangs in the country; *MS* (also known as 13, Mara Salvatrucha and MS13) and *Pandilla 18* (also known as Barrio 18, 18, and the 18th street gang) (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). These gangs emerged in Central America in the nineties, fueled by the return of an extensive number of criminal, and undocumented immigrants from the US, some of whom brought with them the US gang culture (USAID 2006). With the introduction of *Pandilla 18* and *MS* in Honduras many pre-existing and less organized youth gangs joined these more sophisticated and organized gangs (Jütersonke, Muggah & Rodgers 2009).

The gang culture in Honduras first emerged in the sixties and seventies as loosely organized non-violent group of friends in schools (UNDP 2003). Violence did not become an integrated part of gang life until the eighties, and it was not until the nineties that violence became the trademark of the gangs (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010). Violent gang activities, prior to this, extended to use of knife and petty thefts. As the gangs became better organized and more sophisticated, violent activities evolved to the use of weapon, violent robberies, and killings of rival gang members and security guards¹³ (Mateo 2011).

Alongside the emerging violent gang culture, neoliberal policies were introduced in Honduras as a mean to reduce the economic difficulties in the country. In 1990, the structural adjustment program was implemented, which for a limited period had a positive effect on the Honduran economy. However, the program came with strict requirements, including a demand to reform

¹³ *Peseta*, personal communication, 11.05.2015.

the fiscal policy, to reduce the budget for public and social services, and to implement free-market policies. The free-market policies promoted the creation of free economic zones for outsourced industry, which, in addition to the existing labor laws, flexible salaries, and the privatization of social services, created conditions of increased class difference, poverty, inequality, and exclusion (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). Consequently, many youths emigrated to the US for economic opportunities, while others joined gangs (Andrade-Eekhoff 2005 cited in Savenije 2009). The lack of opportunities and social exclusion greatly affected the life of the youth, and inevitably led them to become vulnerable to violence, both as victims and perpetrators.

Other factors that evoked favorable conditions for violence and the establishment and growth of gangs, were the prevalence of widespread corruption, and weak institutions (Mateo 2011). These factors facilitated gang operations, as bribery and infiltration in state institutions are common gang tactics to gain power. In the case of Honduras, many believe that the abolishment of mandatory military services created the proliferation of violent gangs, in addition to the enactment of a youth penalty code which the juridical system was not able to handle (Mateo 2011). It may be that voluntary military services facilitated gang recruitment, but in terms of violence, the military was known to actively use force and violence against the youth joining the military¹⁴.

The implementation of strict US deportation policies in the nineties contributed to the export of the Latino gang culture. *MS* and *Pandilla 18*, the two most prominent gangs in Honduras, were originally established in El Salvador and the US respectively, but both evolved and gained their current position in Los Angeles between the 1960s and 1990s (UNODC 2007). *Pandilla 18* was formed in the sixties by Latino youths, the majority of which were Mexicans, as a reaction to extensive badgering and exclusion by existing gangs (Valdez 2011). In the seventies and eighties, a wave of Salvadorian immigrants arrived in the US fleeing from violence and repression (Rodgers, Muggah & Stevenson 2009). At arrival many of these immigrants struggled to integrate into the Latino community and the everyday life in Los Angeles, which made them easy targets for crime and violence. Consequently, many Salvadorian youths joined *Pandilla 18* for protection and a sense of belonging, and subsequently *MS* when youth with ties to the El Salvadorian gang *La Mara* established the first *clikas*¹⁵ in the US between 1985 and

¹⁴ Alicia, social worker. Personal communication 24.04.2015.

¹⁵ Subgroup of the gang.

1988. By the early nineties, *MS* had become influential in the streets of Los Angeles, through their involvement in drug traffic, extortions, and killings, and *Pandilla 18* had also achieved influence to the extent that they had gained a reputation of being ruthless and very violent (Valdez 2011).

When the gangs turned more violent, gun fights became a common way to settle disagreements, and where once age and knowledge were used to evaluate the value of a gang member, violence and fear emerged as the new determinants for respect within the gangs (Valdez 2011). These new traits of respect gave youth the possibility to become recognized, and obtain power. This was otherwise difficult in the authoritarian culture, where youth usually are considered as individuals with lesser social worth than adults, and therefore are expected to be obedient, and submissive to authority figures. As violence became institutionalized within the gangs, fear and intimidation emerged as important instruments to gain control over territories and to silence the people. When a fellow gang member was killed, or someone talked, violent revenge became prevalent as a mean to reinforce the existing fear¹⁶.

The gangs' use of violence and intimidation was widespread among *MS* and *Pandilla 18* when they formed and strengthened their hold in Honduras. As a result, they were quickly held accountable for the increasing murder rates and more visible violence. By 2001, the authorities backed by the media's coverage of gang violence, which some argues was disproportionate to the actual levels of gang crimes (Andino 2006), had popularized a national security narrative based on repression and combat that primarily targeted the gangs. Scapegoating these gangs made it easier to gain public support to implement various policies and laws that directly oppressed the gangs (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010).

From 2002, when president Ricardo Maduro came to power, he implemented Zero Tolerance policies including the Blue Liberty Plan and the Anti-gang law as an attempt to reestablish national security (Garcia 2015; Gutiérrez Rivera 2010). Through the implementation of the Anti-gang law, all gang activities were criminalized, and penalties for gang members were increased. The law introduced the felony of 'illicit association' which legalized the incarceration of gang members based solely on their affiliation. Consequently, tattoos, clothing, and showing gang signs were sufficient reasons for incarceration. Furthermore, the Maduro administration removed the separation of roles between the military and police by implementing

¹⁶ *Pesetas*, personal communication 25.05.2015; and family father living in a gang controlled area 21.04.2015.

the Blue Liberty Plan that promoted joint military-police raids in neighborhood with presumed gang presence (Mateo 2011). Only a few years earlier, in 1998, the national police gained autonomy from the military and finalized the transition to a civilian-led Security Ministry (Call 2000).

The implementation of the repressive policies did not have the desired long-term effect of reducing violence. While murder rates decreased from 55.9 to 31.1 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2002 to 2004, these rates bounced back in the following years (OCAVI n.d. cited in Mateo 2011). The Anti-gang law led to a rise in incarcerations, which the prison system was not able to handle, leading to overcrowded prisons with a population of 164 per 100,000 inhabitants (Programa Estado de la Nación 2008). In prison, the incarceration of many gang members facilitated the reorganization of the gangs and strengthened their unity (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010).

The new policies also facilitated the return to the former climate of state repression and violence leading to what assembles a ‘social cleansing’ campaign against gang members and marginalized youth¹⁷ (Pine 2015). The ‘social cleansing’ process made the marginalized male youth especially vulnerable because they were scapegoated as those responsible for disseminating violence in the country and therefore considered to be deserving of dying. Their marginal position in the society facilitated a widespread societal acceptance of their elimination.

Since the implementation of the Anti-gang law, the use of violent actions and intimidation by the state, military, and police have increased, for instance in form of more widespread use of death squads (Carasik 2013). Intimidation, disappearances, and assassinations of gang members and marginalized youth have characterized this process, and the perpetrators generally go unpunished due to the widespread impunity (Mateo 2011). The police has also engaged in informal repressive activities including assassination and handing gang members over to extermination groups¹⁸ (Casa Alianza Honduras 2014).

These policies forced the gangs to change their way of operating, which led to stricter rules; they abandoned gang tattoos, use of gang signs, and use of gang clothing to avoid being identified by the police. Death became the only way to leave the gang and their activities

¹⁷ *Pesetas*, personal communication 20.04.2015, 11.05.2015.

¹⁸ *Pesetas*, personal communication 20.04.2015, 11.05.2015.

became less visible, changing from focusing mainly on territory disputes with rival gangs to earning money through *sicariato*¹⁹, drug traffic, and ‘war tax’²⁰. Currently, the gangs collect ‘war tax’ from businesses, public transport, and people they believe are wealthy in their neighborhood. Additionally, they are hired by drug traffickers and powerful people to kill middlemen or others they want gone. They have turned into well-structured powerful gangs with a national organizational structure²¹.

In recent years, increased interest has been given to whether *MS* and *Pandilla 18* have a transnational structure or work individually in each country they operate. Each gang comprises of local small groups, *clikas*, that are present in neighborhoods that may not directly related to an international structure. However, the globalization process has facilitated communication, joint activities, and help between *clikas* in different countries (Valdez 2011). In the case of Honduras, these gangs, especially *MS*, have a strong vertical leadership structure. The gang’s national leaders are incarcerated in Tamara and San Pedro Sula prison, and they are actively involved in the decision making process that governs the activity of their gang, both inside and outside the prison. In the streets the gangs are organized with leaders at the provincial, sectorial, and neighborhood level. Leaders at various levels communicate with the leaders in the US, whose role has been to provide help to the gangs and to contribute in some decision-making²².

The gangs can be classified into three generations: (1) loosely organized gangs, (2) gangs with a more defined leadership and businesslike structure, and (3) highly organized gangs that resemble more of a ‘criminal syndicate’ than that of a street gang (Franco 2008). While *Pandilla 18* fall under the second generation gangs, *MS* is considered by some to be in transition towards becoming a third generation gang (Wilson & Sullivan 2007). Though *MS* engage in similar activities as ‘criminal syndicates’, such as drug trafficking and human trafficking, *MS*’ involvement is more opportunistic in nature as these activities are far less extensive than for instance the mafia (Valdez 2011).

¹⁹ The profession as a hitman.

²⁰ Extortion.

²¹ *Pesetas*, personal communication 22.06.2015; and high ranking members of a governmental security organization, personal communications 12.05.2015.

²² *Pesetas*, personal communication 20.04.2015, 01.05.2015, 13.05.2015; and high ranking members of a governmental security organization, personal communications 12.05.2015.

MS and *Pandilla 18* have power and control in various neighborhoods in several cities in Honduras, but it is difficult to estimate the current number of gang members, especially now that the gang operations are more hidden. Nevertheless, the estimates vary between 50,000 to 305,000 in Central America, and in Honduras between 4,600 to 115,000 gang members (Andino 2006; La Prensa 2015c; USAID 2006). These numbers largely depend on how a gang member is defined, as there are some who are not firmly integrated, but answers to the gang, including sympathizers and potential members in their trial period.

In this thesis, a ‘gang’ should be understood as an organized violent group which mainly includes the two most prevalent gangs; *MS* and *Pandilla 18*. The majority of its members are youths with a “family”-like relationship between them. A ‘*banda*’ should be understood as an organized criminal group that base its practice mainly on earning money, and its activities include *sicariato*, drug traffic, and extortion.

The prevalence and normality of violence affects the children and youth in several ways. In the next section I will proceed by reviewing their current lived realities.

Children and youth

I was working with a [...] 15-year-old girl. Her mother was killed by the gang, [...] her brother is the third ranked leader in the gang, [...] and the other brother is an ordinary gang member, and she is the woman of some of the gang members. She came to the church and she had cut her vein. I felt so sorry for her, a physically beautiful girl, but destroyed interiorly, and I said [to myself], how unbelievable, what are we doing with the youth?

*Daniel, priest*²³

This girl’s experiences are unfortunately not unique, as many young Hondurans have family members or relatives that are involved with gangs and parents that have suffered a violent death. In 2010, more than 200,000 minors, nearly six percent of the population between 0 and 17, had lost either one or both parents largely as a result of homicides, accidents and illness, of these, nearly 82 percent had lost their father (INE 2010). Many children also grow up with only one parent or with relatives, because their parents are either unable to take care of them, emigrate to the US for employment or their relationship breaks. Currently, 45 percent of children born

²³ Daniel, a priest, personal communication 14.05.2015.

in Honduras are children of single mothers (Fumero 2014). Growing up with one or none of the parents have many implications, one in which is a higher risk of being subjects of extreme poverty and social exclusion. Single parents are often forced to leave their children alone while at work, which, in turn, make the unsupervised children more vulnerable to violence and recruitment by gangs and other criminal groups.

Indeed, on a daily basis, children and youth are exposed to violence, as they are common victims of homicides, sexual violence, and political oppression, making them the main sufferers of violence. In the last five years, over 18,000 children and youth between 0 and 30 have been killed, many of which were arbitrary in nature (Casa Alianza Honduras 2015; IUDPAS 2015). Males are the main victims and perpetrators of homicides, which constitute to 92 percent and 97.5 percent respectively (Castellanos s.a.). For males, the age group between 25 and 29 experience most homicides with a rate of 234 per 100,000, while the highest female murder rate was 22 per 100,000 for the age group 30 to 34 (Observatorio de la Violencia 2016).

Aside from the youths' involvement in violent actions as both victims and perpetrators, what more can be told about them? The youth, defined as individuals aged 10 to 29, represents 54 percent of the population (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013; INE 2013). Youth are a rather invisible and poorly studied group, and with the exceptions of studies related to violent youth gangs and deviant actions, limited attention has been given to them (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). They are generally acknowledged as a uniform group, which neglects the existence of diverse subjectivities and identities among them (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). The formation of subjectivities is greatly affected by one's social class, which determines to a certain extent the future possibility of an individual.

In Honduras, poverty, unemployment, low educational levels, and social and political exclusion are prevalent, and are factors that promote youth violence. In 2014, 62.6 percent of the population lived in poverty, of which 39.7 lived in extreme poverty (INE 2014). The greatest number of poor was youth under the age of 25 (Monzón 2015). In recent years, poverty and exclusion have worsened as it has become more difficult to obtain employment, while those who are employed are often underemployed or underpaid. The official national unemployment rate is 3.9 percent, however, the actual number is much higher. Moreover, the vulnerable employment rate is 53.3 percent of the total number employed (UNDP 2015). For youths aged 15 to 24, 41.4 percent of the youth do not have employment nor go to school, making them more vulnerable to join gangs or *bandas* (UNDP 2015). The lack of economic opportunities

hinders young men to live up to their expected gender roles as the provider of the family, and this can generate low self-esteem and economic difficulties. Consequently, men often resort to violence as a mean to manage frustration and to gain power in a rather hopeless situation (Cleaver 2002; Mankowski & Maton 2010). Some youth choose to engage in drug trafficking and *sicariato* as an occupational strategy to survive, which allow them to provide for their families²⁴.

Another consequence of economic hardship and insecurity has been increasing emigration, mainly to the US. Since 2009, the number of children and youth traveling without an adult have drastically escalated. In the period October 2013 to September 2014, 18,244 children and youth between 0 and 17 arrived unaccompanied to the US (U.S Department of Homeland Security 2016). The majority leave for the US in hope of employment, as the general perception is that there exist opportunities there. Many have family or friends that work in the US and send remittances back to Honduras. Currently, remittances have become an important part of the national economy, which in 2013 constituted 16.4 percent of the country's GNP (Banco Central de Honduras 2014).

There is limited political interest to enforce social policies to prevent the proliferation of youth joining gangs or *bandas*, as the authorities disregard the youth as an important demographic group. Laws exists, but the authorities lack the enforcement and commitment to improve the fundamental necessities of children and youth²⁵. For instance, in the context of education, the law asserts that the primary education is obligatory and the public school system is free. Yet, the matriculation coverage for primary education declined from 91.9 percent in 2006 to 80 percent in 2013 (Programa Estado de la nación 2014). Even though the public schools are supposed to be free, students often have to pay for their uniforms, guards, books, and other study related expenses, which many cannot afford. In addition, the reduction in matriculation is also affected by factors including poor educational facilities, shortage of teachers, insecurity, and children who have to work²⁶ (Radio Progreso 2015).

The secondary education coverage is in an even poorer state, with a matriculation rate of 34.3 percent in 2013 (Programa Estado de la nación 2014). This means that over two third of the

²⁴ Marvin, priest, personal communication 05.03.2015.

²⁵ Prosecutor in cases with children and adolescent offenders, personal communication, 16.06.2015.

²⁶ Alicia, social worker, personal communication 24.04.2015.

youth are excluded from secondary education, mainly due to lack of educational facilities and high costs²⁷. The exclusion of the poor is worse at the university level, where only 1 per 100 of the poorest attend university compared to 26 per 100 of the wealthiest (UNDP 2009). In recent years, education has become of lesser importance for many youth, and many lack the motivation to attend school, as higher education does not necessarily increase the chances for employment. Additionally, the schools are no longer the main site of social participation and identity construction (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013), and instead, are increasingly turning into an insecure place for students. For instance, between 2010 and 2014, 936 students from primary school to university were assassinated (IUDPAS 2015). Currently, many secondary schools (7th to 12th grade) have also become new recruitment sites used by the gangs and criminal groups, in addition to being sites where extortion, drug sales, and child prostitution are prevalent²⁸ (La Prensa 2015a).

In addition to the issues of education, Honduran youth, especially the marginalized, are excluded from health services. Honduras is one of the countries in Central America with the greatest number of HIV/AIDS infected population, of which youth aged 15 to 29 accounts for the majority (UNDP 2009). Another prevalent health related issue among female youth is early pregnancies. In 2013, 26 percent of the young girls in Honduras gave birth before the age of 18 (UNFPA 2013). Youth pregnancy is related to socioeconomic circumstances and low educational levels, however, many girls are also subject to sexual abuse by family members or close relatives. 90 percent of sexual abuses are conducted by family members, and 98 percent of the perpetrators are male abusing females, generally under the age of 18 (Panting 2015). According to the youth pregnancies clinic at the UNAH university hospital in the capital Tegucigalpa, 33 percent of the pregnant girls that come for medical control have suffered sexual abuse (Torres 2014).

The authorities have also actively engaged in the exclusion and marginalization of youth through the implementation of various policies, such as the National Security Doctrine²⁹. Implemented in the 1980s as an instrument to control insurgents, this doctrine criminalized formal associations, including peasant unions and youth organizations, because they were considered to be a threat to the formation of democracy. During the early nineties, most of the

²⁷ Juan, University professor. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

²⁸ Sarahi, working with children, personal communication.

²⁹ In Spanish: *Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional*.

restriction were removed, except for the student organizations, which were illegal until 1996 (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013).

This is not to say that attempts have not been made to improve the livelihood of children and youth. The democratization process of the 80s led to the implementation of institutions and policies based on international conventions for protection of human rights, including children and youth rights (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). In 1996, the Childhood and Adolescence Act³⁰ was enacted to improve the rights of children and youth, and in 2006, the law for the Integral Development of Youth³¹ was adopted. This law acknowledged the youth as a demographically important group (La Gaceta 2006) and delineates both youth's rights and obligations, and the government's responsibilities with respect to youth' health, education, and participation in the society.

Many of the laws protecting children and youths, however, are contested by some to be too protective³². The prevalent authoritarian value system, based on an expectation that children and youth should obey and submit to authority, contradicts with the rights given to children and youth. There is a general acceptance in the Honduran society that violence and intimidation are legitimate mechanisms to use in child rearing to uphold the authority's respect. Some believe the laws are too liberal and hinder disciplinal actions, such as the use of physical punishment, which cause children and youth to become less fearful towards authorities (Fumero 2014). However, contested or not, many of the laws regarding youth rights remains solely on paper or are enforced only when it suits the authorities, thus reinforcing the exclusion and marginalization of children and youth³³.

The preceding sections 'Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs' and 'Childhood and youth' have given an overview over the historical and current processes of violence, and the development of the violent gang culture. Additionally, it has explored the position of children and youth in the Honduran society and the structural processes affecting them. I will proceed on to the theoretical framework which will underpin the analysis.

³⁰ In Spanish: *Código de la niñez y adolescencia*.

³¹ In Spanish: *Ley Marco para el Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud*.

³² José, social worker at a rehabilitation center drug and alcohol addiction. Personal communication 30.06.2015.

³³ Prosecutor in cases with children and adolescent offenders, personal communication, 16.06.2015.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

More than twenty years have passed since the violent youth gangs emerged as a central actor in the marginalized urban neighborhoods in Central America. As the violent youth gangs proliferated, so did the scholarly attention, which had previously shown limited interest in the youth and their subjectivities (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). The media and the authorities, through their exclusive focus on the deviant actions and wrongdoing of the youth, created a public narrative of youth, especially the marginalized, as ‘violent’ and ‘dangerous’, identifying them as the ‘others’ and ‘new enemies’ responsible for the increase in violence (Reguillo 1997; Sunkel 2005).

The research on gangs in Central America have primarily focused on the existing narrative of youth gangs as ‘violent’ and as ‘a threat’, focusing its attention on national and regional security issues, including the impact of implementing *Iron Fist* policies in the region and the evolvement of more sophisticated gang operations and organizational structure (Arana 2005; Bruneau, Dammert & Skinner 2011; Hernández & González 2012; Jütersonke, Muggah & Rodgers 2009; Savenije 2006; USAID 2006). In addition to studying gangs from a security perspective, a general focal point has been gang violence, the socioeconomic and historical causes of youth gangs, and the youth’s reasons to join the gangs (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES et al. 2001; 2004; Rodgers, Muggah & Stevenson 2009; Savenije 2009). In the case of Honduras, the limited existing research on gangs corresponds with the regional focal points, which include the effects of state security measures and changing territorial strategies (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010; 2013), the underlying causes leading youth to join gangs, and gangs’ changing operational structure and use of violence (ERIC 2005; InSight Crime 2015; Mateo 2011; PNPRRS 2011).

The majority of existing research focuses on the collective violent characteristics of gangs, which lead to a general identification of gangs as a uniform group. This facilitates the continuation of the general portrayal of gang members as perpetrators, and silence their own victimization as marginalized youths and gang members, thereby neglecting the gang members’ individual subjectivity; their embodied experiences, beliefs, sense of self, and agency (Pine 2015). As a result, a person’s individual voice is often silenced in the public discourse, which reinforce the stigma and violence experienced by him.

ERIC (2005) conducted one of few comprehensive studies on the gang phenomena in Honduras in the beginning of the 2000s, which, to a greater extent, focuses on gang members’ individual

experiences. It examines the prevalence of youth violence and the political and socioeconomic factors that underpin the current situation marginalized youth and gang members live under. The study shows that public policies have contributed to the marginalization and discrimination of vulnerable youth, and have led gangs to become enclosed in a circle of violence. It uncovers a dual role of the gang members as both victims and perpetrators of violence. However, as with most of the existing literature on gangs in Honduras, this study does little in recognizing individual meanings and perceptions of violence among marginalized youth and gang members, and the importance of violence in the construction of individual subjectivity.

Pine (2015), however, in her analysis of violence, alcoholism, and outsourced industry in Honduras, shows that violence has become a central attribute in the formation of subjectivities, and national identity in Honduras. In her analysis, she draws on Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization of symbolic violence to explain the current prevalence and importance of violence in the Honduran society. Symbolic violence can be defined as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004, p. 273). In other words, it is the internalization of the societal power relations, where the suppressed render their domination valid by blaming themselves for their dominated position. (Bourdieu 1977; Bourgois 2008).

According to Bourdieu (1977), this domination is an integrated part of an individual's embodied "system of durable, transposable dispositions" (p. 72), the *habitus*. The *habitus* is a product of the dialectic and iterative relationship between the internalized social structures and individual and collective experiences, which ultimately affects how an individual thinks, feels, and acts within the social world. He asserts that the dominated generally do not recognize symbolic violence for what it is, because it is internalized and invisible. This misrecognition, as Bourdieu calls it, is a result of internalized historical social structures which lead to the unconscious acceptance of the dominator's value system that underpins the formation of current power relations and social class differences (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004). Pine (2015) bases her analysis on symbolic violence to show how violence has become a centrally integrated characteristic of an individual's *habitus*. She thus enters the field of the meaning and understanding of violence. However, though some of her focus is on the marginalized youth, limited attention is given to the gang members' experiences of violence, and the *pesetas* are left out altogether.

In this thesis, I build further on Pine (2015) and Bourdieu (1977), as I examine the *peseta*'s individual experiences, meanings, and perceptions of violence, including their importance in the construction of individual subjectivity. In contrast to Pine (2015), who analyzes the general importance of violence in the society, I focus specifically on *pesetas*' experiences and meanings of violence throughout their lives. I apply the concept of a 'violence continuum'—violence as operating along a continuum where various categories of violence overlap and reinforce each other to form a persistent cycle of violence—to illustrate how the *pesetas* throughout their lives continually move between being victims and perpetrators of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The 'violence continuum' includes, but is not limited to, direct political violence, structural violence, everyday violence, and symbolic violence, categories of violence that affect the lived realities of the marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas* (Bourgois 2004).

As 'violence' is a multifaceted concept, it is important to clarify its use in this thesis. 'Violence' should be understood as a concept with multiple meanings that "can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004, p. 2). It ranges from macro-level structures, such as neoliberalism to internalized submission and self-blame for experienced sexual abuse or inability to act in accordance with the expected masculine gender role (Cleaver 2002). Violence is thus more than physical—homicides, assault and abuse—it is also structural, which facilitates the process of dehumanization, and it is individual in form of attacks on personhood and self-worth (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004).

According to Pine (2015), violence is omnipresent in the Honduran society, in the form of direct political violence where official authorities engage in physical violence and terror against the people as inactive bystanders or as active perpetrators. Moreover, the majority of Hondurans are victims to structural violence—the preventable denial of the basic human necessities (Galtung 1990)—which lead to marginality and increased risk of early death. The structural violence, "violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004, p. 1), is a result of historical oppression and inequality, and is usually not recognized for its real nature and it turns into a normality, a part of everyday life.

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) assert that the normalization of structural violence creates a basis for its translation into everyday violence, evolving from a macro-level violence to the individual everyday experience of violence that is "interpersonal, domestic and delinquent"

(Bourgois 2004, p. 426). According to Scheper-Hughes (1992), everyday violence is generally invisible as it is embedded in social structures and misrecognized as something acceptable because the victims are considered responsible for their own lived realities. For instance, the high mortality rate among Honduran youth, especially the marginalized, can be recognized as a form of everyday violence that is accepted as a normality, as they are blamed for the increasing insecurity in the society.

Often, however, in killings of marginalized children and youth, the youths themselves are both the victims and the perpetrators. Stephens (1995), in her analysis of childhoods, suggests that marginalized children are not only 'at risk', but also 'the risk', as they are both subjected to being abused and killed, and being the abusers and killers. Children as victims and perpetrators of violence diverge from the socially and historically constructed idea of childhood as a safe time of innocence and carefreeness, which derive from Western thoughts and ideas of what childhood should be, and has been imposed on other parts of the world as a result of the Western symbolic power (Stephens 1995). This, however, does not correspond to the lived realities of many Honduran children, who are born into a violent environment where violence has become an acceptable instrument to gain position in the society. This reveals that "different discursive practices produce different childhoods, each and which are 'real' within their own regime of truth" (Prout & James 1997, p. 26). The existing discursive practices facilitate the acceptance of eliminating certain groups of children (e.g. gang members, and street children), while others become "controlled, reshaped and harnessed to changing social ends" (Stephens 1995, p. 13).

Furthermore, discursive practices allow the marginalized children and youth, and gang members to be scapegoated for the prevalence of violence, while the *pesetas* are silenced from the public discourse. Stephens (1995) shows that the current discursive practices is greatly affected by history, in addition to social and cultural behavior, which ultimately underpins the existing power relations and influence an individual's everyday life and actions. The marginalized children and youth, gang members, and *pesetas*, however, also act within their predicament because the discursive practices are not only an instrument that produces power, but it is also an impediment and undermining force that creates a basis for resistance (Stephens 1995).

This relationship between power and resistance, structure and agency, underline my analysis to show how violence is both an important part of the subjectivity and the social structures. There is an ongoing debate relating to the nature of the relationship between structures and agency,

which ultimately comes down to one side that consider the structures as the determining factor of how a social actor thinks and acts, and the other side that consider that the social actors are able to act independent of the social structures and value systems in the society (James & James 2012). Giddens (1979) positions himself between these two stances, asserting that agency and structure are interconnected concepts, that cannot be separated. He argues for a middle stance where both agency and structure should be considered equally important. According to Giddens (1979) “social structures provide the means through which people act, but the form these structures take is the result of their actions” (James & James 2012, p. 4). Thus, to him, social actors, through their actions, are able to change the prevalent structures. However, some argue that the importance of history is neglected with such a view, as structures are generally able to withstand attempts of change and the fact that the historical structures constrain the social actors’ ability to act (James & James 2012). I position myself within the dialectic relationship between agency and structure, while, at the same times, recognizing the constraining factors of history. I consider an actor to be shaped and restrained by existing structures, while he at the same time reshapes and reproduces the same structures that restrain him.

I apply the concepts of ‘social death’ and ‘dehumanization’ in this thesis as a mean to explain why violence is of great importance to many marginalized youth. Hage (2003) defines social death as “a situation where there is a quasi-complete absence of possibilities of a worthy life” in his analysis of Palestinian suicide bombers. He suggests that the suicide bombers are a consequences of the social conditions they live in, including their marginality, experience of dehumanization, and the dominating power the Israelis hold over the Palestinians. I relate this to Honduras, where many marginalized youth is not only socially excluded and often left to themselves due to family negligence, but also identified as being violent and the main perpetrators of violence.

The social death is not only characterized by the structural confinement that impedes an individual to achieve his social needs (e.g. social recognition, respect, compassion, employment, and food), but it is also the action of socially negating an individual from becoming a man. Vigh (2006) in his study on marginalized young men in Bissau, Africa, shows how a violent life chance can be recognized as an opportunity to elude the social death. He states that a violent life chance can become a way of socially navigating lived realities, which enables young men to act and to reclaim a position in their own predicament. Even if this is related to another historical, social, and structural context, I find it useful to better understand

the marginalized youth reasons for joining gangs. For many marginalized youth, the violent life in a gang can be an active choice to reclaim social recognition, humanness, and respect, which they otherwise are denied, and this can give them a meaning and purpose to life.

According to Bourdieu (2000, p. 240), “The social world gives what is rarest, recognition, consideration, in other words, quite simply, reasons for being. It is capable of giving meaning to life, and to death itself, by consecrating it as the supreme sacrifice”. He believes that the main instrument to gain social meaningfulness is the society, however, the society does not necessarily grant it to everyone. He asserts that “one of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and of reasons for living,” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 241). Bourgois (2003) shows through his ethnographic account of social marginalization in East Harlem in inner-city America, how the struggle of respect lead some to distance themselves from legal job opportunities, and rather enter a life of crime and selling drugs. He illustrates how a violent life of selling crack becomes an alternative socialization where they can reclaim respect, meaningfulness, and thus gain social recognition (Bourgois 2003). I relate this to the gangs, which is an alternative socialization, creating spaces where the marginalized children and youth can reclaim what many of them are denied in the society at large, including love, compassion, trust, respect, and social recognition (Stephens 1995).

In this thesis, I link the experience of not being socially recognized and being considered as lesser than human to Biehl’s (2013) conceptualization of ‘zones of social abandonment’. In his study of an asylum in Brazil, Biehl shows how certain groups of unwanted people, including the mentally ill and homeless, are left to die a socially authorized death, a death that is not necessarily immediately physical, but first social (Biehl 2013). I came to recognize these zones in more general terms, applying it to the experienced realities of the marginalized children and youth, gang members, and *pesetas*, who are generally denied a meaningful life, because of their lived marginality and are ultimately left alone on a path to a social and physical death. These zones uncover the lived realities that otherwise are silenced in the public discourse, which are a consequence of, and outside the limits of formal governance (Biehl 2013). This lead the marginalized children and youth to become disposable (NACLA 1994) and to the emergence of a sense of indifference towards them, facilitating the social acceptance of their death.

I also adopt Haslam’s (2006) conceptualization of dehumanization as a mean to analyze the lived realities of violence. Haslam asserts that, for dehumanization to find place, a person’s

humanness must be denied in some way. He suggests that there are two senses of humanness: human uniqueness and human nature. The former relates to attributes that make humans different from animals, such as moral sensibility, rationality, maturity, civility and refinement, while the latter is attributes that distinguish humans from objects and machines, such as agency, depth, emotional responsiveness, cognitive openness, and interpersonal warmth. Being denied human uniqueness leads to what is called animalistic dehumanization, where the dehumanized are recognized as amoral, irrational, childlike, coarse, and lacking culture, while those who are denied human nature suffer mechanic dehumanization and are considered to be rigid, inert, cold, superficial, and lack agency (Haslam 2006).

I agree with Haslam (2014), who suggests that dehumanization should be recognized as an inclusive term encompassing very subtle to more explicit forms of humanness denial. This includes more subtle actions such as one group's judgement of which emotions another group can and cannot hold, to actions where the dehumanizer is conscious about his action of targeting certain groups by, for instance, comparing them to animals (Haslam 2006). Thus, dehumanization has many forms: it can be discursive in nature, such as when certain groups and individuals are verbally abused, or when their voice are silenced in the official discourse. It can also be physical ranging from various forms of abuse to for instance the refusal of eye contact (Bain, Vaes & Leyens 2014). In this thesis I refer to dehumanization as a general term that encompass both denial of human uniqueness and human nature, and I generally do not specifically distinguish the form the dehumanization take.

As I present the lived reality of violence among the *pesetas*, I run the risk of contributing to 'pornography of violence', the act of glorifying violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). Describing individual experiences of violence can ultimately end up undermining the critique against violence and lead to further humiliation and dehumanization of the studied group. As such, violence is a tricky subject to explore and write about. Even so, I believe, as Bourgois (2008) argues, that it would be more problematic to ignore the existence of violence than being afraid of risking the glorification of it.

Methodology

Since the first time I visited Honduras, 10 years ago, I have had a desire to learn more about the prevalence and accepted normality of violence in the Honduran society, and more specifically, about gangs and the role of violence within the gang culture. Despite my interest, I have to

admit that as I began preparing for my thesis I was hesitant to conduct research on gangs due to security concerns. After much thought, however, I decided to go forth with the study. As I delved into this topic, I knew security had to be a top priority and the basis of how I would approach my fieldwork. This was the main reason why I chose to only interview *pesetas*, since active gang members are often unreliable and rather invisible in the public realm, which makes it difficult and less secure to interview them.

The choice of interviewing *pesetas*, gradually made me change my original thesis topic as I recognized the dual roles in which the *pesetas* live throughout their lives: as perpetrators and victims of violence, having a voice and being voiceless, and being visible and invisible. At first, I found myself in a position reinforcing the *pesetas*' experienced stigmatization and voiceless life situation, as I underpinned their experienced denial of a voice by not recognizing their current situation. My choice to interview *pesetas* was solely based on accessibility and the fact that they were the 'safest' way to obtain the desired information, which initially was about their lived realities as marginalized youth and gang members. It was not until I had nearly completed my fieldwork that I realized how I went along with the 'public story' and reinforced the exclusion experienced by the *pesetas*. As I realized it, I changed my thesis topic to examine the *pesetas*' lived realities of violence, from their childhood to the present, and furthermore to examine the meanings given to violence, and its importance in escaping the social death and experienced dehumanization.

When I present the life stories of the *pesetas* and their experiences of violence, I stand at risk of reproducing and reinforcing existing stereotypes and hostilities, which may consequently lead to further dehumanization and resentment directed towards them. My greatest concern is that the presentations of the *pesetas*' experiences and perceptions of violence can be misinterpreted, and thus strengthen the already existing negative stereotypes of marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas* in the public discourse. I believe, however, that the existing societal hostility towards these groups should not silence their experienced agony and abolition, nor should it prevent describing their brutal reality in form of their own narrations. I will not diminish the descriptions of their suffering based on the fear of reinforcing the negative stereotypes, because if I do, I would also position myself as a collaborator to their experienced suppression and voicelessness (Bourgois 2003; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

I chose to use a qualitative research strategy to examine the *pesetas* lived experiences of violence. This strategy allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the research topic and

its complexities, through detailed inquiries from the *pesetas*, as well as contextual insight from the authorities, social workers, and exposed families. Interviewing various groups in the society gave a more complex understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized youths, gang members, and *pesetas*. The qualitative research methods also enabled a more flexible approach to my study, which allowed me to personalize interviews to obtain the desired information. Moreover, it made it possible to uncover the *pesetas*' position as a silenced and utterly stigmatized group, and to reveal the dehumanizing and silencing effect of the generalized focus on the collective rather than the individual.

The ontological position in this thesis is *social constructivism*, which maintains that the perceived reality is socially constructed. This implies that facts, meanings, and perceptions are constructed and continually revised through social interactions and relationships. In contrast to the ontological position of objectivism, which suggests that the social categories and social actors exist independently from each other, the social constructivist perspective implies that the perceived reality is the product of an individual's understandings and depictions of what he come to know as the reality (Bryman 2012). This means that a researcher's presentation of a reality is just one interpretation of that reality, not a definite one.

This ontological stance is compatible with my epistemological position as a *critical realist*. Critical realists recognize that knowledge is a result of subjective interpretations of the social reality, and that these interpretations are affected by generally unobservable structures (e.g. power structures, historical structures) (Bryman 2012). It is necessary to uncover these structures to better understand the causes of observable events (e.g. high youth murder rates, prevalence of violence and gangs), and to enable changes to the lived experiences of violence, marginality, and stigmatization. The fact that the structures are not necessarily observable contradicts with the empirical position of the positivist epistemology (Bryman 2012). By refusing an empirical stance, it is not possible to depict the actual reality, however, by using terms that subsequently are socially constructed, one can seek to represent the reality as close to the actuality as possible.

Research design

This study is based on an ethnographic research design. The ethnographic approach “involves immersion within, and investigation of, a culture or social world” (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough et al. 2004, p. 56) where “the researcher attends to the rich generation of meanings by social

actors, as a consequence of various structures and decisions made by individuals” (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough et al. 2004, p. 56). This design was suitable because it allowed for flexibility, and the possibility to constantly adapt the study during my fieldwork, which was necessary due to the difficulties of getting access to the study population, and the changing security circumstances. Moreover, it allowed me to adjust my research to emergent hidden realities “of the relatively unknown, perhaps oppressed and ignored, insiders of a given social group” (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough et al. 2004, p. 57), which are neglected or unknown to the general public and researchers.

The *pesetas*’ lived experiences of violence and their understanding and meaning of violence was not my initial research topic, but it emerged as a result of conducting life history interviews with several *pesetas*. My initial plan was to examine the representation of marginalized youth and gang members in the public discourse, and to explore the way in which the implementation of repressive measures targeting the gangs affect their operational structure and use of violence. In that regard, I considered the possibility to interview active gang members, which I quickly dismissed following discussion with several social workers and due to rising tension in gang controlled areas, prior to, and during my fieldwork. Consequently, I only conducted life history interviews with *pesetas*, which gave an insight into their life long exposure to various types of violence living in marginality. As a result, the *pesetas*, a group I initially had not paid any attention to, turned into the main focal point of my research.

The ethnographic approach was useful to this study for several reasons; first, living in Honduras for a year allowed me to immerse in the culture and thus gain insight into the normality and acceptance of violence in everyday life. This gave me an increased understanding of why violence is prevalent among marginalized youths, gang members, and *pesetas*. Second, it also made it possible for me to recognize cultural nuances and specific behavior, values, and beliefs among Hondurans and the gangs (Creswell 2012). These cultural values and behaviors are essential in the attempt to understand the meanings the *pesetas* give to various types of violence throughout their lives. Third, I was able to gain a comprehensive insight into the intrinsic relationship between structure and agency, examining social processes that affect the life of the *pesetas* and ultimately corroborate and reproduce violence.

An ethnographic design is generally based on the researcher immersing himself with the study group over an extended period and taking part in their everyday life (Bryman 2012). In this study, this was not feasible, because the majority of the *pesetas* were imprisoned, while the rest

were hiding and lived under constant insecurity. Spending time in prison as researchers over a long period of time would not only have been unsafe for my assistant and me, but would also jeopardized the inmates that collaborated with us. Therefore, I opted for an observer-as-participant role, which meant that the fieldwork was mainly based on interviews and limited observations of the study population (Bryman 2012). During the year I lived in Honduras, however, I gained considerable insight into cultural behavior and beliefs among marginalized youth as I regularly interacted with marginalized youth through voluntary work. I worked and lived within and close to gang controlled areas, consequently I observed them sometimes, and heard stories about their violent actions and changing behavior on a regular basis, and thus learned more about people's perception of the gangs.

As a result of the limited possibility of direct observation of the *pesetas*, I adopted a life history approach when I interviewed them, which gave me an in-depth insight into their lived experiences of violence. Critics of the life history approach argue that this type of research give too much emphasis on the subjective realities and positionality (Kohler-Riessman 2000). I, however, believe that life histories are valuable sources of data that provide insight into an individual's experiences and understandings of the social world. It also enables examination of the intrinsic relationship between social structures and individual agency, which ultimately affects and forms the life of a person. Through the life history approach the *pesetas* are given a voice and a possibility to tell their personal life stories, but also a platform to reflect over and discuss how the social, political and economic relations within the society have affected and still affects their life choices. Consequently, it can reveal links between macro and micro processes that produce and reproduce violence within the Honduran society.

The life histories are essentially subjective as they are the stories of an individual's life, and the narrator is often the sole witness of the narrated story. Many of these stories, however, can indirectly be verified against other sources, not necessarily to confirm the exact experiences, but to see whether it is a common experience in the society or within a gang. I used various data collection techniques as a mean to prevent bias and increase validity of the obtained data (Berg & Lune 2012). Firstly, I interviewed 14 *pesetas* that were both imprisoned and not. This way, I was able to access various individual perceptions and perspectives within the same group and to identify similarities between their stories, especially in case of the collective understanding and meaning of violence within the gangs. In addition, I also interviewed several actors in the society including social workers, official authorities, and victimized families living in gang

controlled areas, to get a comprehensive overview of general perceptions, and different perspectives of these groups. I have also utilized secondary data sources including newspapers, documents, and existing academic literature to complement my findings and thus create greater validity of the study (Berg & Lune 2012). As this study focuses on individual stories, it was not conducted with the desire to generalize it to a larger population, nor to indicate that the *pesetas* are a uniform group. It is rather aiming towards giving a voice to a voiceless and hidden population, and to tell the stories of some *pesetas*, of their individual and collective experience of marginality and stigmatization which is generally ignored in the public realm.

Methods of data collection

When I decided to conduct research on gangs, I knew from the beginning that I had limited possibilities to prepare for the fieldwork prior to entering the field. Before I arrived, I did not have any contacts that worked with, or were directly involved with gangs. Fortunately, I had a few months in Honduras before the interview process began. During this time, I came in contact with Sarahi, who have worked most of her adult life with marginalized children and youth. She eventually assisted me throughout my fieldwork and was pivotal in the process of recruiting informants. Her connections facilitated access to many informants, which otherwise would have been difficult due to the general societal mistrust and insecurity. The fact that the informants trusted Sarahi and she was present during the interviews may have made it easier for them to participate and answer the questions honestly. By myself it would have been especially challenging to recruit families and *pesetas*, due to the general suspicion towards unknown people, and the fear of being killed as a result of sharing sensitive information.

The recruitment process relied on a *non-probability approach* due to the limited accessibility to informants and to reduce unsafe situations for the informants and the researchers. The *non-probability approach* allows for an emergent sample size, and the selection of informants based on availability, which was crucial to this study (Bryman 2012). It was unsuitable to use a *probability approach* because it was impossible to identify a representative sample as many subjects are 'hidden' and chose to stay silent due to the danger of talking. As this study is based on life histories, I am not looking to obtain a representative sample nor to generalize to a larger population, rather, my desire is to get an insight into individuals' stories and experiences of violence.

During the course of my fieldwork, I used various *non-probability sampling strategies* including convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. In the early stage, convenience sampling was utilized as the informants were recruited based on availability (Berg & Lune 2012). These preliminary interviews were conducted with social workers³⁴ and priests, who at the time were working or had worked with active gang members and *pesetas*. It was during these interviews I formed the connections that granted me access to the *pesetas*. The fact that the social workers that introduced Sarahi and me were trusted among the *pesetas*, helped us to quickly gain their trust, which otherwise would have been difficult.

I conducted a total of 47 interviews in the period between March and June 2015, of which the majority were conducted in the city of Santa Cruz. All the interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for a more flexible interview process, permitting continuous adaptation of the interviews throughout the fieldwork. For instance, I was able to ask follow-up questions to clarify ambiguities and to delve deeper into emergent stories of the informants (Bryman 2012). This was especially important in the case of the *pesetas*, as I conducted life history interviews with them.

The life history interviews focused on the *pesetas*' personal life stories and experiences of violence. I carried out 26 life history interviews with 14 *pesetas*, of whom 12 were interviewed twice. Two *pesetas* did not participate in a second interview because they were not able to, or chose not to participate. I used *snowball sampling* to recruit the *pesetas*, as several informants assisted in recruiting new participants. *Snowball sampling* was chosen because it facilitated accessing the hidden population, in addition, it was a safer technique, as the existing informants recruited acquaintances that they trusted (Berg & Lune 2012). The interviews followed a chronological path starting with the respondent's childhood with a focus on the upbringing, relations with others, and experiences of violence. The interview then continued with questions about their involvement in gangs, their reasons for joining, and life within the gang. It concluded with questions about their current life as *pesetas*, of insecurity, opportunities, and experiences of violence. I only interview male *pesetas*, however, since the gang population currently comprise of a large number of females, it would have been insightful and interesting to include a female perspective. Unfortunately, as the female *pesetas* are even less accessible than the

³⁴ The two social workers that I had preliminary interview with, worked independently with marginalized people and former gang members, and were not with any institutions.

males, I was unable to do that. Even so, I do not consider this a limitation to my thesis, as I focus on subjective experiences and individual life stories.

I also interviewed various civil society actors and people exposed to gang violence: families that lived in gang controlled areas, social workers, priests, a coordinator of a prevention program, child services, a university professor, public prosecutors, and high ranked officials in different sectors of the security establishment. I interviewed these actors as a means to get a more comprehensive understanding of the current public perceptions and representation of marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas*, and to gain insight into the normalization and general acceptance of violence. The public prosecutors were chosen based on a *purposive sampling strategy*, and were selected based on their specific knowledge of marginalized children and youth, gangs, and *pesetas* (Berg & Lune 2012). The majority of these interviews were individual, while a few were group sessions.

Each interview lasted between 25 minutes to two hours, and most of them were recorded. Recording the interviews was of great help to me, as I had limited knowledge of ‘Street Spanish’ and at times struggled to understand the informants when they spoke in a fast pace. Some of the informants also had some difficulties understanding me. Consequently, to facilitate the interview process and increase comprehension for the informants as well as for myself, Sarahi conducted all the interviews, while I took notes and asked follow-up questions where I found it necessary. Some interviews were transcribed during the fieldwork by me, with assistance from Sarahi, as a mean to identify emergent new questions that could be included in the follow-up interviews.

The interviews were conducted in various sites; prison, private homes, restaurants, offices and churches. These sites were chosen together with the informant, based on safety and assurances of confidentiality. In prison, there was limited private space to conducted the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, we were given permission to use a small room situated within another room, which was suitable to avoid too much attention. Furthermore, two inmates assisted me during my time in prison, by sitting outside the outer door ensuring that no one entered. In the case of public officials, the interviews were generally carried out in their offices. Several of the public officials were quite suspicious of Sarahi and me, to the extent that we were once accused of being spies sent from other parts of the government to check up on them.

Lastly, when it comes to secondary data, I examined an extensive number of written texts on marginalized youth, gangs, and to a lesser extent the *pesetas*. This includes government documents and laws (both directed at children, youth, and gangs), newspaper articles, books, and journal articles. The secondary data was used as a complementary resource to the collected primary data, to validate my results, and to gain a better understanding of the historical aspect of the current role of violence in the society and the prevalence of gangs.

Ethical considerations

It is pivotal to continuously consider the ethics during the course of any research, especially when conducting research within a violent or dangerous setting where participation can have potentially harmful outcomes. In such occasions, it is important to maintain a foundation of precautionary measures to minimize the potential risks to the informants and researchers involved. As this research examined a population that are exposed to act of violence, or engaged in illegal activities, their participation could have fatal consequences to them, since it is prohibited to share information. Consequently, gaining knowledge can also increase the risks for the researchers.

To reduce possible risks, Berg and Lune (2012) assert that one must address the “issues of harm, consent, privacy and confidentiality” (p.61) to ensure the informants’ safety, and to protect them from potential harm. To ensure my ethical obligations to the participants, I submitted my research proposal and a written protocol to the Norwegian Centre for Research data (NSD). NSD approved my planned research in compliance with the ethical considerations of voluntary participation and minimization of possible risks of harm.

Throughout the recruiting process, I consistently stressed the fact that participation in the study was voluntary, and that the informants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, I made sure to assert various times that the informants were free to not answer questions, which I found necessary due to the sensitivity of the topic and because some questions may bring up difficult and forgotten memories.

When researching the *pesetas*’ personal life histories of violence and gang relations entail a necessity of entering sensitive topics, such as gaining information about individual experiences of violence, illegal activities, and murders. These personal narrations may give insight into their lived realities, but, at the same time, may have undesirable effects causing physical,

psychological or economic harm due to the sensitivity of the topic (Berg & Lune 2012). Therefore, I continually considered the potential risks in regards to the potential benefits throughout my fieldwork and writing process, to make sure that harmful outcomes were minimized and the informants' and researchers' safety were prioritized. Consequently, I chose not to carry out several interviews due to safety reasons including when Sarahi and I had to enter certain conflictive neighborhoods or were not able to locate a safe site to conduct the interviews.

Another essential issue related to the interview process is the importance of establishing a relationship based on respect and trust between the informants and the researchers, which can make it easier for the informant to talk about sensitive topics. Achieving trust can be challenging in a country like Honduras, where societal mistrust is prevalent. However, as most of the informants were recruited with the assistance of Sarahi and other informants, this facilitated the process. Trust was also built through the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. These two ethical principles are necessary to ensure that the informant suffers limited harm. It was difficult to uphold complete confidentiality in prison since the interviews were carried out within the prison, and thus made it possible for other inmates to observe who was talking to us. To minimize our visibility and attention towards the informants, we spent the entire time in prison in one building, and had a trusted inmate assist us with the recruitment as he knew who to trust and who were *pesetas*. This way, only a limited number of people knew the true purpose of our visits.

All interviews began by informing about my role as a researcher and giving the informants information regarding the research and their roles in this study. The informed consent document was read by the informants or by me, and Sarahi then summarized the main points to make sure that they understood. In research, informed consent is essential to ensure that the informants are well informed and not deceived into participating (Berg & Lune 2012). The consent was given orally to protect the informants from potential harmful situations, which a written consent could have caused if the documentation was disclosed for some reason. Additionally, some had limited reading and writing skills, which made it necessary to use oral consent.

Even though we informed all participants about the study prior to any interview, several informants, mainly the *pesetas*, asked us various times during the interviews about the study's purpose. This might indicate that they did not completely understand the information given to them about the study and the purpose of their participation. However, it is more likely that the

fear of telling their stories due to the potential harmful and legal consequences if it was revealed generated the necessity to reconfirm the use of the information, as several asked specifically whether answering certain questions could have consequences for them. Furthermore, it may also be a result of the extended use of narcotics that, as several of the *pesetas* pointed out, made them forget easily. In a few cases, while interviewing families and social workers, new informants entered the room during the interviews and thus were not given complete information about the study and did not give us informed consent. As such, I chose to omit one informant's responses from the study.

I realized after completing the interview process that the informants were not directly informed about all potential risks and benefits of the participation through the informed consent form. But we usually had a conversation about the risks before the interview began, and the informants themselves presented potential harmful consequences of participating. In case of the benefits of conducting this research, I informed about the importance it could have in increasing the knowledge of the lived realities of violence in Honduras. A *peseta* emphasized this, when he made sure that we would come for a second interview, as he wanted to talk about some lived realities of the *pesetas* that he believed the 'world' should know about. In regards to economic benefits, I followed a rather strict policy, and I only compensated one informant for loss of working days. Participating in the study should not cause economic harm to the informant, and since it was dangerous for him to do the interview at night, the only option was to conduct the interviews during the day and compensate him for the time. I also felt it necessary to avoid economic benefits as some could choose to participate only to be paid, even if they, in reality, did not want to participate. Such instances could have harmful consequences for both the participants as well as negative effects on the resulting data.

The majority of the interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the informant. Some were skeptical of being tape recorded due to fear that the information would end up in wrong hands; in such cases the interviews were not recorded. In prison, for instance, some of the informants were afraid that the information could reach the prison Director, even after assurances that the Prison Director had granted permission to carry out recorded interviews and guaranteed confidentiality. Others did not allow recording due to their occupation, or turned the recorder off when they wished to talk about sensitive subjects. Even though some of the informants may have been careful with their words, recording have been of great help and a necessity to me due to my limited understanding of 'Street Spanish'.

The informants' privacy has been managed with utmost respect. The informants are not identified with names, nor where they come from, and personal information that may identify them has been excluded. Furthermore, I constructed the key informants presented in the analysis out of various informants, as a way to reduce the possibility for any of them to be identified. To further ensure anonymity, the city of Santa Cruz is fictive, but based on an existing city. In the case of state officials, professor, and informants from organizations, their specific job titles have been omitted even in cases where I believe it could have strengthened my argument. The interviews and collected data have been stored with password protection where only I have had access.

Methods of analysis

Throughout the course of the research process, I followed a flexible strategy where ideas were continually revised as new information and aspects emerged (Berg & Lune 2012). Consequently, from the start of the fieldwork through the analysis process, the structure and focal point of the thesis changed. At the end of the fieldwork, I realized that I unwittingly had assumed the position that neglected the *pesetas*. Fortunately, I had conducted life history interviews with the *pesetas* about their life experience which revealed new insights into their experiences and meanings of violence and their current voiceless situation.

After I changed the research topic, it was natural that their personal stories became the center of the analysis. The personal narratives are not only a description of a person's actions within the social world, but can also give indications of how the person feels being a part of that exact story. It can reveal events that are unwilled and undesirable for the informant, while the informant at the same time is the main actor behind it (Mattingly 1998).

Whereas some interviews were described during the time I was interviewing, the majority of them were transcribed afterwards. It proved to be a time-consuming process, even more so than I had expected. I transcribed the interviews myself, with some assistance from Sarahi and another assistant, and as I am not a native Spanish speaker it took longer to transcribe. But transcribing the interviews myself was useful as I became familiar with the informants' stories and perceptions, which facilitated the process of identifying common themes in the data material. When I had familiarized myself with the transcripts I conducted a preliminary coding focusing on emergent codes, which I thereafter systematized into themes, before I identified

sub-categories within each of them. Finally, it is worth noting that I have translated all data and quotes used in this analysis myself.

Thesis structure

In the preceding introductory chapter, I introduced the contextual background of violence in the Honduran society and the current situation of children and youth. I then continued presenting the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpin my analysis and the methodology I apply. The main section of my thesis is divided into three parts, where each part represents a separate period in a *pesetas'* life: (1) life prior to entering the gang, (2) life as a gang member, and (3) life after leaving the gang. Throughout the thesis, the importance of violence in constructing individual and collective of subjectivity is presented, in addition to the meanings given to violence.

Part 1 analyzes major structural processes that affects children and youth's choice to join a gang, including normalization of violence, family negligence, and social marginality. The analysis focuses, to a great extent, on the processes of social death and dehumanization to explain how a violent life chance can become an opportunity to stay alive.

Part 2 examines how a violent life and joining gangs can be an active choice to reclaim a sense of humanness, respect, and power in an otherwise deprived situation. Furthermore, it also examines to what extent the gang members are still subjected to dehumanization after entering the gang.

Part 3 analyzes the reasons and consequences for gang members to leave the gang, and presents the lived realities of insecurity and how reentering a violent life can be the only way to survive socially and physically. This part further examines the reentrance to the path of social death and the experienced dehumanization.

Lastly, I end with some concluding remarks that summarize the findings and relate it to current events in the Honduran society.

Key Informants

The main findings in this study is presented through the stories of three key informants, which illustrates the major trends. The three key informants, Enrique, Jorge, and Antonio, are fictive, and based on the life stories of several *pesetas*. This was a conscious choice to ensure the safety and anonymity of the informants. I also present several other informants occasionally, where I have changed their names and sometimes omitted the exact job title to uphold anonymity. In this section, I present the three key informants as a mean to give the reader a better understanding of their background story.

Enrique

Enrique was in his thirties, he had a cautious appearance and was very interested in telling his story. He was the only of the three key informants that was not incarcerated. I came in contact with him through another informant. Enrique grew up in a marginalized neighborhood. Until he was 13, he lived a normal life and had a good relationship with his family. When he was 13 the gang, *MS*, came to his neighborhood, and he joined the gang together with all of his friends. He was a gang member for 15 years and during that time he became the third ranked leader in the neighborhood. Seven years ago, he made a fatal mistake by asking for permission to leave the gang, which is against the rules. As a result, he received the death penalty from his gang, and has since then lived a life of insecurity. Enrique had a desire to work and be a part of the society, but was not able to, due to the lived insecurity and marginality. The first time I met him, he had a job, however, he lost it and ended up joining a *banda* as a means to gain protection and financial security.

Antonio

I met Antonio during my visits in prison. He was in his thirties, he was very attentive and energetic. Antonio grew up in a gang controlled area, and had several family members that were connected with the gang. He decided to leave his home when he was eight years old, because his parents did not take care of him properly, as they were drug addicts and his father used to abuse his mother. Antonio found love and care in the streets, where he stayed for four years. After four years, he returned to his parents to ask for a second chance, but was rejected. This led him to go wetback³⁵ to the US when he was 15 years old to find economic opportunities,

³⁵ Wetback; to immigrate illegally to the US.

but ultimately led him to become a gang member in *MS*. A few years after he became a gang member, he was deported back to Honduras, and upon his return he became the leader of the gang in his neighborhood. He decided to leave the gang three years ago, around the same time as he became incarcerated, but his gang did not know. The last time I talked to him, he was to be released three months later, and he was scared that his gang would be waiting for him to kill him. Antonio hoped that he would be able to take care of his children when he got out, and have a job, but knew that he would have to be hidden.

Jorge

Jorge was in his twenties and he was attentive and helpful. He assisted me during the interviews in prison by recruiting informants and making sure that no one entered the interviews. Jorge grew up in an area with a lot of gangs. When he was nine years he was sexually abused by his uncle, and when he told his mom that raised him she rejected him by telling him that she was not his mom. This, in addition to being bullied, made him choose to enter a gang, *Pandilla 18*, as they respected him and took care of him. At the age of nine, he killed a person to enter the gang. Entering the gang allowed him to seek revenge over his uncle and allowed him to make other people suffer to avoid his own suffering. During his time in the gang, he was an ordinary gang member with a lot of respect. Ten years ago, when Jorge was 19, he left the gang after he made a mistake that got him blacklisted by his own gang. Jorge continually struggled between a desire to change and a desire of revenge.

Part 1

A voiceless childhood

After living in Honduras for some time, I found myself unwittingly accepting the killings of marginalized children and youth as normal. One day, as I was driving to the grocery store, I decided to take a shortcut onto a dirt road. As I drove down a small hill, I spotted a police car blocking the road ahead of me. ‘Another murder’, I thought to myself, before I put the car in reverse, more preoccupied by the fact that I had to reenter the main road backing up a hill, than by the murdered person found right in front of me. At the time, I had lived in Honduras nearly nine months, during a time in which I had passed murder sites several times, and generally heard of murders daily. When I parked my car outside the grocery store I could still see the police car in the corner of my eye, I was curious of what had happened, but did not give it much more thought than that. It was just another murder.

Later that day, I found out that the victim was a 13-year-old boy that had been found dismembered in a black plastic bag, most likely killed by a gang. I had unconsciously deemed his death as ordinary. It was not until I came back to Norway that I realized how normalized killings had become to me. In fact, after living in Honduras for a year, I was more surprised by days without killings, than by days with multiple killings. Like many Hondurans, I too passed murder sites without giving it much thought and I too learned how to distinguish the sound of gunshots from fireworks. Violence became a normality to me too. In retrospect, I am unsettled by my sensitization to the daily killings of the poor and youth, and that I deemed it as normal and expected. I came to realize that my rapid change in perception was necessary to be able to live a ‘normal’ life in a society torn by violence. However, I also realized that by accepting this as normal, I too, engaged in reinforcing the public discourse that dehumanize and scapegoat children, youth, and the poor, which ultimately underpin the acceptance of their elimination.

Santa Cruz

The murder of the 13-year-old boy brought my thoughts back to Enrique, who was also found killed in a plastic bag. Enrique grew up in a marginalized neighborhood not far from where the 13-year-old boy was found, on the outskirts of the Santa Cruz, the city where I conducted my fieldwork. Santa Cruz is a marginalized city situated on the northern coast of Honduras, that,

during the last two decades, has transformed into one of the most violent cities in the country due to increased presence of drug trafficking, *bandas*, and gangs.

MS and *Pandilla 18* emerged in Santa Cruz during the mid-nineties, when El Salvadorian, Honduran, and deported gang members from the US arrived to the city. They introduced the gang culture to children and youth in marginalized neighborhoods, and befriended them before they eventually joined the gangs. Towards the end of the nineties and early 2000s, a ‘bloody’ turf war developed between *MS* and *Pandilla 18* in Santa Cruz, which led to the death of many gang members. The intensity of the turf war, however, declined as the *Anti-gang law*³⁶ was implemented and gang activities became more hidden. The law gave the authorities the permission to incarcerate gang members based solely on their affiliation. Furthermore, the authorities began using death squads to kill gang members, which ultimately led to a more hostile relationship between the authorities and the gangs³⁷ (Carasik 2013).

Since the 2009 coup d’état³⁸, drug trafficking has become increasingly abundant in Santa Cruz. The city’s wide coastline, rivers, and closeness to the dense rain forest makes Santa Cruz an ideal route for the drug trade into the US. The dense rainforest makes it possible to build hidden landing strips for drug planes, while the many rivers facilitate transportation of drugs to the coast where it is further transported by sea. In recent years, the gangs have increasingly become involved in drug trafficking, due to the economic benefits and power that follows. Currently, gangs operate drug houses³⁹ and work as *sicarios*⁴⁰ for the region’s drug lords and for people with power. The majority of homicides in Santa Cruz today are related to *sicariato*, rather than the turf war between the gangs. However, the gangs often carry out these killings on behalf of drug lords and other people with power, who do not wish to get blood on their own hands.

In recent years, killings have thus turn into a normality in Santa Cruz, a natural part of everyday life. Killing criminals and marginalized youth are generally accepted, as many believe they deserve it. The increased homicide rates have also justified the militarization occurring in the

³⁶ See more in section “Development of gangs in Honduras”.

³⁷ *Pesetas*, personal communication 20.04.2015, 11.05.2015.

³⁸ See more in section “New processes of structural violence”.

³⁹ Houses where gangs sell drugs in their neighborhood.

⁴⁰ Hitmen.

city, which normalizes violence even more, and victimizes the marginalized, including the *pesetas*.

Normalization of violence

Several police trucks filled with armed military police passed Sarahi and me a few blocks away from where we had arranged to pick up Enrique. Since the creation of the military police in 2013, patrolling trucks with rifle-armed officers have become a regular sight in the streets of Santa Cruz, especially in marginalized neighborhoods, such as in the one where Enrique resided at the time of our first meeting. To avoid exposing himself for too long in the street, Enrique had asked us kindly to contact him when we were approaching the arranged meeting place. Even though he left the gang seven years ago, he still had to stay hidden, because his former gang, *Pandilla 18*, and the authorities were still on the look-out for him.

A couple blocks away from our planned meeting place, Sarahi called Enrique to let him know that we would arrive soon. He seemed anxious when he answered and asked various times for our exact location to make sure that we would arrive at the time we had agreed. A few minutes later, I saw Enrique at a distance, he seemed tense where he was standing, constantly looking over his shoulder to see if someone was watching him. ‘He is already dying’, I thought to myself. Much too clearly, the fear, insecurity, and humiliation was killing him interiorly long before he was deemed to face his physical death.

Enrique’s fear and nerves were not without reason, because *Pandilla 18* had a strong presence close to where he resided. A few blocks away, an entire wall was covered with ‘Pandilla 18’ and ‘18’ graffiti. In the same area, Sarahi and I had passed three gang recruits seated on a bench, watching closely the movement in the neighborhood and making sure that unwanted people and enemies did not enter.

Enrique seemed relieved as he stepped into the car, but his eyes were still filled with fear and his reality of insecurity and abandonment was clearly manifested in his tired face. He was awaiting the inescapable death. He did not know how and when, but he certainly knew that his physical death would catch up to him soon. He was already dying a slow social death, through the lack of opportunities, poverty, insecurity, and most of all, through the psychological terror of fear (Hage 2003). The fear of being found, of being tortured, and of being killed. His death

would go unnoticed by the majority and a few would celebrate it as a victory due to all the suffering and pain he had caused and for betraying his gang.

I watched Enrique as we stepped out of the car in front of the house where we were having the interview, and I thought to myself that if it had not been for the tears shaped tattoos under his right eye, I would not have thought for one second that he was a former gang member. The way he walked, acted, and talked did not bare any resemblance to a gang member. I learned later on, that the *pesetas* have to change their ‘gang behavior’ to avoid being subjected to more humiliation than they already are as *pesetas*. The house where the interview was held, we had to pass a large black gate with barbed wire on the top. The barbed wire extended around the entire house at the top of a two-and-a-half-meter tall brick wall. This form of security is a common sight in neighborhoods where people can afford it, and wealthy people even have guards at the house, body guards, and electrical fences.

Enrique smiled as he sat down in front of us and quietly began telling his story. For the most part he avoided eye contact, which I at first thought was out of shyness, but I later realized that it was out of respect. He seemed even more sleep deprived up close, as his eyes were bloodshot and distant, which I also learned was a result of drug use. Enrique explained that he was using cocaine to be able to relax and perhaps to forget for a while, or at least to take the edge of the pain and fear he was feeling:

I don’t [...] have a stable place to be. I [...] live a couple of days here, [and] a couple of days there, like that, well, I’m always out of place. [...] And there are times when I feel bad, like [...] the process that I’m going through right now, I feel bad [...] to not know [what will happen to me]. [...] So I can’t sleep, almost, I barely sleep. [...] Sometimes I think by going back and return to the bad habits over again that maybe the things will be wiped out, [but] it’s not like that.

“I’m always out of place” remained in my thoughts as Enrique continued telling his story. It made me think of the many similarities between the life stories of the *pesetas* I spoke to, and it became increasingly evident that the feeling of not belonging and of not being recognized as an equal human being was a recurring theme among most of them, especially during their childhood and as *pesetas*. The feeling of being out of place due to poverty, marginality, lack of opportunities, and insecurity made Enrique consider the possibility of going back to a violent life as means to stay alive. The gangs and *bandas* can provide what many marginalized children

and youth are deprived of; a family, a job, protection, respect, and economic resources. These can offer them an alternative life chance, and a way to escape the social death (Vigh 2006).

My mind of a child

When I was little [...] I wanted to become a *sicario*, I watched the movies, [...] and being in the streets I became that. [...] I remember that I dreamt of having money, being a thief, [and] steal. [I dreamt of] having a lot of money to give to the other kids that didn't have. I grew up like that, with my mind of a child. [...] I didn't know that I would turn into a junkie [and] an alcoholic.

“My mind of a child” echoed in my head, as Enrique continued describing how lack of information had led him to choose a violent life path. I came to consider “mind of a child” as the depiction of the lived reality of a child in Honduras. Indeed, several *pesetas* recognized childhood as a time of ignorance since children often have limited access to information as they are considered inferior and human of lesser worth. During my conversations with other *pesetas*, it was evident that the lack of information and parental advice led several of them to choose a path of violence. A violent lifestyle attracted them as it is normalized in the society (Pine 2015), and publicly portrayed as acceptable and even desirable instrument to gain power⁴¹, and more importantly, to gain respect.

Violence has become a part of everyday life (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013; Pine 2015). On a daily basis, one hears of violent deaths, and are witness to oppression and poverty. The routineness of the social machinery of death easily makes one blind and ignorant to the oppression and dehumanization experienced by the marginalized children and youth (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). In newspapers, entire sections are dedicated to crimes and homicides, where the majority of the homicides are marginalized youth often presented in full disclosure dead and bloody, while the youth taken into custody are lined up and photographed usually with two police officers on each side of them, with automatic weapons in their hands. During a conversation with José, an employee at a rehabilitation center for drug addicts, he called attention to the cultural alimentation of violence through the information given to the children and youth:

⁴¹ See more in section “Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs”.

The television aliment violence with the drug soap operas, [and] the media aliment violence with a lot of blood and a lot of murders. The truth is that some say: ‘Well, to succeed [...] I have to do something horrific’, and they even enjoy themselves when they do it, and [afterwards] it appears in the newspaper. [...] I mean, the Honduran culture in regards to the information is to aliment violence.

For the marginalized youth, the soap operas portray an alternative life to what they have, the ‘good’ life of the drug traffickers who gain respect and power through the use of violence (Pine 2015). These illustrate how drug traffickers are feared for being violent and carrying weapons, and how they earn money by smuggling and selling drugs and killing people. For some this can be a tempting alternative, while for others, it becomes a necessity to stay alive⁴².

The acceptance and normality of violence in the Honduran society should be seen as a result of both historical and contemporary events⁴³. Honduras has a long history of political violence going back to the colonial times, where the state has utilized repression and direct political violence as means to obtain and hold power and control. Until the 1970s, the powerful actors in Honduras held exclusive power over the exercise of violence, however, this changed as organized crime began operating in the country. Koonings and Krujit (1999) assert that a “democratization of violence” occurred in the wake of the democratization process in Latin America, which turned violence into an instrument of the masses, not only of the powerful actors.

The normalization of violence⁴⁴ is also a result of being embedded in the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) , brought on by the historical prevalence of violence and through continually being exposed to it (Pine 2015). As José asserted, “the Honduran culture in regards to the information is to aliment violence” through media, in everyday life, and within every social relation. For many marginalized children and youth, being violent can be the only way to gain respect and thus become recognized as an equal human being (Bourgois 2003). The principles of fear, intimidation, obedience, and dependence, have become internalized as a valid mechanism to

⁴² Marvin, priest, personal communication 05.03.2015; Mario, high ranked military officer, personal communication 29.06.2015.

⁴³ See more in section “Violence: Historical processes and the development of gangs”.

⁴⁴ See more in section “Violence: Historical processes and the development of gangs”.

obtain control and respect in every relation—interpersonal and intergroup, between the poor and the rich, between children and adults—and this have become an integrated part of institutions such as the family and the state. In these institutions, physical and psychological violence is actively utilized against children and youth, including beatings, humiliation, and exclusion, as mean to obtain respect⁴⁵. It is accepted as normal, as a part of the culture, and a necessity. But when the children and youth use violence to gain respect they are considered deviant, and as people that need to be locked up or eliminated. This reveals the symbolic violence experienced by marginalized children and youth due to their inferior position in the society (Bourdieu 1977).

The voiceless children and youth have become the losers in the struggle of power, as they are scapegoated for the prevalence of violence. Blaming them facilitate their dehumanization and thus makes it easier for an indifferent attitude towards the death corpses of youth filling the streets every day, and towards those children and youth who suffer sexual and physical abuses (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). By scapegoating the children and youth, they ultimately end up being blamed for violent actions where they themselves are the victims. For instance, some are given the blamed when they themselves are the victims of sexual abuse⁴⁶ and others are paid by powerful people to kill on their behalf⁴⁷.

As I listened to more childhood stories of the *pesetas*, a pattern of similarities revealed itself to me, of broken childhoods, where children had become disposable (NACLA 1994). Children are born into a world where they experience violence every day and are taught that through the use of violence they can gain power, respect, and recognition (Bourgois 2003). Becoming a gang member can be a subjective choice to stay alive, as a mean to become socially reborn in a violent environment, because the gangs can give a sense of belonging, friendship, security, and trust. For socially abandoned, marginalized youths who experience daily violence joining a gang may be unescapable as it may be the sole path to avoid the social death (Vigh 2006).

⁴⁵ Alicia, social worker. Personal communication 24.04.2015; Jesús, family father that lived in a gang controlled area, Personal communication 21.04.2015; José, social worker at a rehabilitation center drug and alcohol addiction, Personal communication 30.06.2015. See more in section ““Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs” and “Children and youth”.

⁴⁶ Jorge, *peseta*, personal communication 22.06.2015.

⁴⁷ Antonio, *peseta*, personal communication 11.05.2015.

Family negligence

I came to realize, through my conversations, observations, and everyday experiences in Honduras, that the family is one of the most violent social institution in the society. The general societal values of mistrust, revenge, and gaining respect through fear, have become an integrated part of family institution. It is currently commonplace for children and youth suffer interpersonal violence in forms of sexual abuses, beatings, and humiliation by parents and relatives⁴⁸. Beating children, humiliating them through name-calling and condemnation, as well as disposal of them (NACLA 1994), are accepted when they do not behave as expected by the authority figure in the family.

The implementation of several laws including the Childhood and Adolescence Act in 1996 and the law for the Integral Development of Youth in 2006 have improved children's and youth' rights⁴⁹, and led for instance to the prohibition of using physical punishment against children and youth. However, improving the children's rights have according to some had a negative impact on the upbringing as the children and youth become less afraid of the authorities (Fumero 2014). Several of those I spoke to, including Jesús, a family father, believed that these laws are too protective. "Why are there so many delinquents in the family?" Jesús asked us rhetorically,

If you punish a child, [...] [and] you hit [the child] two times with a belt on the back, [...] [and] that child files a claim, you have to go to prison. From there he begins losing principles, from there he begins losing respect for the father.

The exercise of physical punishment is culturally accepted as a necessary disciplinary instrument and an important element in child rearing, and is used as a way to obtain respect by creating obedience based on fear. This is true, whether they are poor or wealthy, single parent or married, and it is internalized as acceptable by the children and youth who suffer by it. Beside from the general acceptance of physical punishment, the family institution has become an unsafe place for many children and youth, as family negligence in form of abuse and abandonment has become commonplace.

⁴⁸ Personal communication, and observations. See more in section "Children and youth".

⁴⁹ See more in section "Children and youth".

Family negligence, the abusing and abandoning of children, was a recurring theme, when I talked with the *pesetas* about their reasons for join a gang. Several of the *pesetas* had been victims of physical and sexual abuse by their parents and relatives, while others were exploited by their parents. Some were left with their grandparents and family members, or abandoned, while others lived with parents who were drug users, drug dealers, or alcoholics. The majority of the *pesetas* stated the feeling of rejection and lack of care from the family as important reasons for entering the gang, because they could achieve a sense of belonging, trust and care in the gang.

Childhood of abuse

“My greatest dream was [...] to be a good person, move forward and have my child and a wife, you know. I never thought [...] that my destiny was going to...” Jorge’s voice silenced as a tear rolled down his face. I met Jorge during my visits in prison, he was in his late twenties and had left the gang some ten years ago. As he wiped away the tears, he explained, “It’s making me remember things, [...] you know, that I haven’t remembered in a long time”.

Jorge continued narrating his childhood story of rejection, abuses, and negligence. When he was six months old, he was left with an aunt as his father had left for the US and his mother lacked the resources to take care of him. He grew up working in the fields with relatives from the age of six. For as long as he could remember, violence and the gangs were a part of his life as there was an ongoing turf war between four gangs in his neighborhood.

I was born, I grew up, and turned into a gang member there. [...] [It was a] place controlled by drugs, there was nothing else there. There were only homies⁵⁰, [and] drug sellers. [...] I say [...] it’s bad luck, [...] because my cousins are gang members. [...] So I have always lived a life like that, even though I didn’t want to. I [...] [used to visit] my grandma and [at her house] I saw a bunch of tattooed people, baldheads, [with] guns. After I saw that, I began liking it. [...] During that time of my childhood, I [also] began seeing how they killed people. I watched several murders, they killed them there [in my neighborhood] and they put them in cars, and went to dispose them.

Many of the childhood stories of the *pesetas* revealed similarities of being born into a life of violence, drugs, and gangs. Several of the *pesetas* had a family member that was involved in

⁵⁰ Gang member.

drug trafficking or was a gang member. Growing up in such environment made it difficult for them to choose another life, even if they wanted to, because that violent life was the only life they knew.

I was amazed by the trust Jorge showed me and of the descriptive details he gave as he continued his story of why he ultimately chose to pursue a life as a gang member. As several of the *pesetas*, Jorge experienced being abused and rejected by his own family. When he was nine years old, an uncle abused him, which ultimately led him to become a gang member:

One of my uncles [...] abused me sexually. [...] [He] brought [...] [my brother and me] to the river and half-crazy⁵¹. [Afterwards] I told my mom that raised me [...] what [had] happened, and she beat me up, and [then] she said to me that at least I didn't die of it, and [she told me] that she wasn't my mom, [and that I shouldn't] be making claims to her [about my uncle]. She told me that my mom had given me away, [...] [and] for her my life didn't mean anything, and whether I died or didn't die, if I ate, or didn't eat, she didn't care at all, at that time, she didn't care.

By telling his mom that raised him (aunt) that he was sexually abused, Jorge was turned into the perpetrator of his own victimization. He suffered a sexual abuse, but his aunt negated his words and dismissed them as nothing more than nonsense. Instead, she punished him by beating him senselessly and simultaneously rejecting him as a son and as a person of any worth. Being a child in Honduras is generally associated with being voiceless, as I came to realize spending a lot of time with children and youth, and through my conversations with the *pesetas*. They are silenced, made obedient, and their voice is neglected as adults generally are suspicious of their words, and even mute and distort their stories to regain their own respect and authority.

Jorge seemed a bit troubled and sad, but willingly continued telling his story “Look, as I also was a little obese”, he began attentively,

I didn't relate much with other normal people, [...] because they made a lot of fun of me. They gave me bad nicknames; ‘how chubby’, ‘how fat’ and so on, and I didn't like that. [...] I practically grew up by myself, and [...] [my aunt] had already upset my mind when she told me that [my mom had given me away], [so] I got into another world. [...] [and]

⁵¹ Half-crazy; Jorge, his brother and uncle were a bit drugged, and the uncle took advantage of the situation and sexually abused Jorge.

I saw that when I was with the gang members they treated me with respect as a child, ‘You boy what will you have? [...] You need this, you this, you that’⁵².

When Jorge was denied his humanness and worthiness through rejection and negligence by his family and then humiliated by other people he “got into another world” as he said, the world of gangs. He was left alone, abandoned with the shame of being a sexually abused, as a boy, and had no power to overcome the shame and to regain his manliness and respect. Being raised in the violent environment Jorge also believed, as the majority do, that getting revenge was the only way to get peace with himself. Consequently, Jorge joined the gang, *Pandilla 18*, to get revenge over his uncle, as well as to take revenge for the death of one of his cousins. More importantly, he knew he would be respected and be treated as an equal by his fellow gang members, and respected by the society at large, because as a violent gang member he would be feared. He chose a violent life chance to avoid the social death (Vigh 2006).

Social marginalization

The stories of Enrique, Antonio, and Jorge reveal the harsh realities experienced by many Honduran children, whose social worth, whether poor or rich, is less to nothing. They are valueless, dehumanized, and disposable (Haslam 2006; NACLA 1994). The routinized and invisible abandonment of children have turned the Honduran childhood into a time of suffering where many have to take care of themselves in a violent and unsafe environment.

The economic, social and political developments the last decades have deepened the economic inequality and social marginalization experienced by children and youth. After the implementation of neoliberal policies, including the structural adjustment program, the inequality increased and the poverty rate rose as the wealth became more concentrated in the hands of a small elite⁵³. The *maquila* industry that emerged led to a major restructuring of gender roles as women increasingly joined the work force, while unemployment increased among men. The men’s traditional role as the family breadwinner gradually changed, which led men to become increasingly involved in delinquencies, and subjected to self-inflicted violence in form of drug addiction and alcohol abuse (Pine 2015).

⁵² In Spanish; “Yo miraba cuando estaba con los pandilleros ellos me trataban de usted siendo un niño, “¿usted niñito que va a querer? Usted necesita esto, usted este, usted el otro”.

⁵³ See more in section “Children and youth”.

The children and youth's subjectivity have become the center of the battlefield of power, recognition, and respect. The society, family, and state systematically deny them a sense of humanness (Haslam 2006), making them invisible and facilitate the acceptance of their oppression. According to Opatow (1990), certain groups are kept "outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply" (p. 1), which facilitate the acceptance of violent acts including genocide and the sense of indifference towards their suffering (Haslam 2006). Despite of their marginalization, I have come to recognize that children and youth are able to demonstrate a remarkable agency within their predicament. The choice of joining a gang, whether a choice made consciously or unwittingly, is to me an active attempt to resist their domination and to reclaim a voice. The only way to escape the oppression is to turn the dominator's tactics of domination around on the dominator himself, using violence, intimidation, and fear against him.

The gangs' use of state tactics of domination, however, have facilitated the creation of a general perception of marginalized youth as violent and deviant in the official discourse, turning them into perpetrators, which allows for further dehumanization (Haslam 2006). Whereas the social institutions exclude them, the gangs give them an alternative to their lived reality; trust, companionship, family, protection, and respect. It is difficult to escape the social death and dehumanization, which lead them to continually move back and forth between being victims and perpetrators of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Stephens 1995).

The system kills

"The system kills", asserted Alicia, a social worker who had worked with gangs and *pesetas* for more than 20 years, as we were discussing the situation of the marginalized youth.

The level of unemployment still increases every day, and where is the opportunity for the new generation? So the people say, 'In some way I will survive' [...] especially if education doesn't exist. Because if there isn't education, right, you grab whatever matter. [...] Imagine people that shouldn't be [committing crimes], but [...] the system marginalizes them. [...] Because the system kills, the education system, the [economic] system, [and] the social system itself kills. [...] And maybe we, who are in another position [in the society], don't understand it like that, but he who is in this [marginalized] position with the doors closed, with the incapability of the church, with the incapability of the government, with the incapability of the society, [it is impossible for us] to

understand these people. [...] Well they [...] [are] at the edge of crime. So generations of delinquents [...] come back over and over again, and the government buys guns to kill each generation that comes, that is not the solution.

Poverty, hunger, and violent oppression cause many more deaths every year than do the gangs, but that is internalized and accepted as normal. As Hage (2003) asserts, “symbolic violence [...] forces us to normalize certain forms of violence and to pathologize others” (s. 72). According to Twain (1983), there existed two “reigns of terror”, the short-term visible violence of resistance responsible for crimes and atrocities leading to the death of thousands, and the other normalized and often invisible violence of the dominator which “none of us have been taught to see” (p. 72), that is responsible for the death of many more. Scapegoating the marginalized youth and condemning their actions facilitated the acceptance of their oppression, through death squads, imprisonment of youth, gaining the people consent of lowering the punishable age and elevating the prison sentence for gang members. It also made it possible for the renewed militarization, which ultimately makes the government strengthen its power.

To justify and gain acceptance for the militarization, nationally and internationally, the government manipulates the homicide rates to create an impression of success, which create a further oppression causing killings more invisible and insignificant. I was discussing the prevalence of violence in Honduras with Juan, a university professor, and he clearly asserted that the homicide rates are manipulated by the government. The most trusted statistics is produced at the Observatory of Violence at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, which uses triangulation techniques to ensure more accurate statistics. Juan explained that,

This statistics [from the Observatory] [...] contradicts with the official statistics from the Ministry of Security. The Observatory has been strongly questioned and attacked by the post-coup governments. [...] At the end of 2014, the Observatory determined in the full year sample that Honduras had more or less about 88, 89 persons assassinated per 100,000 inhabitants, while the central government found that it was only 66.

The reported and publicized statistics from the Observatory was 68 per 100,000 (Observatorio de la Violencia 2015). Thus, due to threats from the government, the observatory reported lower than factual homicide rates giving an impression that militarization has improved security. This coincide with my own experiences when I lived in Honduras, of underreporting of homicides

in Santa Cruz. The Observatory reports local homicide statistics of each neighborhood in Santa Cruz, and several homicides that I know of were not reported in the homicide statistic.

As the militarization has taken place, the marginalized children and youth have experienced increased marginalization, through for instance the introduction of ‘the guardians of the fatherland’, a prevention program where the military teach children and youth about moral principles and ethics (Aguilar 2014). Both a military officer and the coordinator for a prevention program in Santa Cruz agreed that this program was preventive in regards to reducing violence in marginalized areas. Carla, a social worker with over 20 years of experience working with marginalized children and youth, and *pesetas*, argued that it had the opposite effect, she asserted that:

‘The guardians of the fatherland’ [...] is recruiting the children and youth from marginalized zones, right, on behalf of the military. [...] And they give [...] formation supposedly to prevent. But I don’t agree, [...] because the military [...] was not trained to instruct, [and] to educate a child. And the exercises they are doing are military exercises. [...] Moreover, it’s a discrimination of the marginalized children, [...] [and a] trauma to familiarize them with guns, which can’t be a work of peace. The military is instructed to defend the homeland, to kill, indirectly yes to kill, and how are people that were trained like that going to train children?

The marginalized children and youth are turned into victims in the societal struggle for power. Being abandoned and oppressed, some choose the path of the gangs as a mean to survive and resist their oppression. I consider the gang members as active agents who choose to live, to disengage themselves from the social conditions in which have colonized their mind and body (Hage 2003). Though people might believe that they are on a predestined path of destruction, conversing with the *pesetas*, the underlying symbolic importance became evident to me it gave them a meaning in life. Bourdieu (2000) asserts that “there is no worse dispossession, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity” (p. 241). The social exclusion and oppression experienced is turned around to meaningfulness of becoming someone within the social conditions they live.

I came to consider their actions as an active attempt of escaping the social, political, and economic structures that deprived them from living a meaningful life, a lifelong struggle in

search of respect, recognition, and sense of belonging, their rightful demand of humanness and social worth. For them, it comes down to an unsettling choice, entering what Levi (2004) called the grey zone, would they rather want to die a slow painful death as a dehumanized robot, or die in a gang with dignity and respect intact, recognized as a human being?

Sense of belonging

“My childhood was normal until the age of 13 [...] when the gangs came [to the neighborhood]. [...] That was when everyone wanted to join the gangs, understand. So, it was during this time that everyone turned blind to the gangs”, Enrique said. The gangs arrived to his neighborhood at the end of the 1990s, where most of the people, including his father, worked in the nearby of Standard Fruit Company. While his father worked, his mother was home taking care of him and his siblings. He had a good relationship with his family, contrary to many other children. But the sense of belonging, the gang lifestyle, and friendship attracted his attention:

I saw the gang members smoking cigarettes [...] behind the classroom, [and] I had my cigarette. Well, I was very little [...] [thinking] it was cigarette, you know. [...] I approached the corner where the locos⁵⁴ were gathered, and my homie⁵⁵ came to me [with cigarettes]. [...] I began smoking marihuana thinking it was cigarettes, from that day that craziness hit me really ugly, well, [...] [and] I realized that it was not a cigarette, [and] I liked that stuff, and every time I went to school, well, during recess I went to the corner, you know, to smoke.

I heard several stories of children and youth tricked into using drugs. Like Enrique, they are first given free drugs until they become addicted. Thereafter, they are forced to find other ways to obtain it, for instance, by stealing or joining gangs and *bandas*. Enrique continued describing the changes occurring in his life as he began using drugs and spending time with the gang:

I believe that I was a child that was on the right track, because I had goals. And then after I began using drugs, I watched my goals slip away, well, [there were] things that I [no longer] could achieve. [...] There was quite a change in the age when I began using marihuana. [...] [At that time] I liked to always be in the street, in the group [...] I liked

⁵⁴ Gang members

⁵⁵ Gang member

it a lot, a lot, I'm gonna be honest, I mean, I'm embarrassed to say it, but I really, really liked to hang out on the corner with my friends and everything.

In the search for social belonging and friendship Enrique was victimized, but he also found unity and trust:

We were many that began [...] in the gang, we were many and we grew up together. [...] Since we were kids we played soccer, we played with spinning top, we played with marbles, every day. [...] Then the gang came, Mara Salvatrucha, those from El Salvador and began here. [...] All of us joined, [and] everyone felt happy together, well, we had grown up together, and we played ball together, and then we were armed together, we were one group, well, we were all happy together.

I was a street child, a resistolero⁵⁶

In Santa Cruz, it is not uncommon to see children at traffic lights begging for money, washing car windows, or in the streets selling fruit and pastries. Many of these children are exploited by their family or criminal *bandas*. These children are generally forced to be in the streets during the day, but have a place to live⁵⁷. That was also the case for Pedro, whom I met during one of my visits in prison “I had to sell donuts, [...] [together with] one of my sisters”, Pedro told me. Their mother and grandmother made them sell cake and donuts on the street, and as many of the exploited children, they were punished if they did not sell everything. Pedro described their punishment, “Me and my sister were beaten, and afterwards they forced us to eat the donuts that we had left, for dinner or for breakfast”. To protect his sister, Pedro began to steal:

So I began to steal and I said to my sister, ‘Look don’t worry, sell the ones you can. Stay here in the center with my pail and with yours, and I will come [back], I will go and get [some money]’, and I went with a friend of mine and I went to steal. [...] My grandma and stepmom never gave us the love that a child need, well to be able to succeed and aspire, well, I mean rather they used us as horses.

⁵⁶ A person who sniff glue.

⁵⁷ Prosecutor in cases with children and youth victims, personal communication, 16.06.2015.

While some children like Pedro are forced to be in the street during the day, other children live in the street. Antonio was one of them. I met Antonio while conducting interviews in prison. He had left the gang three years ago, only a few months after he was incarcerated. He was very attentive and energetic, and eagerly began telling stories of his childhood. He grew up in a drug controlled neighborhood, “there are only drug addicts [...] [in my neighborhood], everyone sells drugs and those who don’t sell they smoke, so everyone is looking [for some way] to survive”, he said. His parents were also drug addicts and sold drugs:

My mom was a junkie, she worked in some bars. My dad [was a] junkie, [and an] alcoholic, there was no union [between them]. I decided to leave when, I was very little, because I saw many things I didn’t like, [when my dad hit my mom]. [...] So, for that reason I decided to look for another life, [and] the people in the market cared for me, treated me differently and they gave me what I didn’t get in my home.

Antonio told his story with sadness in his voice. The only way for him to escape the lived social abandonment and alienation was the streets. His parents did not care for him, as they themselves were on the road towards social destruction. In the streets, Antonio found what he was lacking; love, compassion, protection, and recognition:

I got to know a lady and I was helping her sweep [the floor of] her business. [...] She gave me love and protection, she cared for me, because she said, ‘Stay here’. [...] So I was growing up like that. I didn’t have adequate love from a father that grabbed me and said to me ‘Look child, I will help you. I will put you in school, and you will finish it, and I will come [to] [...] look after you’. [...] Sometimes you grow up alone, well, you get to know that no one cares for you, that there is no one that says anything to you. Because you always need someone to give you a word, [...] [and] say to you, ‘Don’t do that’, ‘that is bad’, ‘this will lead you to this’. [...] I never had the opportunity [...] [that my mom] grabbed me to say ‘son, I love you’, [...] [because] she was there with her large bags of mariguana [sic] and my other brothers over there, and I [was] rolling carracos⁵⁸ [and] selling them for five or ten [lempiras], [...] I mean I couldn’t get love there.

⁵⁸ Marihuana cigarettes.

Abandoned by his parents, Antonio was left to himself. He went to live in the streets at the age of eight, and stayed there for four years:

When [...] I was directly on the street, [...] I didn't want to steal, I say that from my heart, I didn't want to steal. So one of the challenges I learned was how to overcome hunger, I mean I had to do something [to survive] [...] and the only thing I could do was, since I didn't want to steal, was to beg, but when the people saw me looking a little big, ..., they wouldn't give me [money] anymore, so I began stealing. [...] At that time I grabbed the bad habits of marihuana, [and] resistol⁵⁹. I was a street child, a resistolero⁶⁰ as they say.

Living in the streets, Antonio became a thief as a means to survive. He became a perpetrator of everyday violence out of necessity to stay alive. But being a street child also meant living in a hostile environment where he was turned into a victim of violence, both self-inflicted violence in form of drugs, as well as being preyed upon by adults, criminals, and the authorities. Thus, he moved between being a victim and a perpetrator of violence (Stephens 1995). The street children are considered valueless and they are invisible, meaning that exploiting, abusing or killing them passes in silence. Antonio recalled an experience from his life as a street child:

One time some guards grabbed me, [and] like three kids more, and I don't know how, [but] I got away from them, I bit the hand of [...] he who held me, [...] and I got free and then I left, but they raped the other two kids. And imagine a kid—I was doing bad things, because I was already stealing, I assaulted women, but on the streets there are also predators that are looking for these kids.

At night I could barely sleep, until I went to sleep [...] in the garbage dump. [...] We bought the guard and slept about 50 *resistoleros*, and all of us had a dagger, [and] we had stones to defend us. No one could come there to do anything to us.

After four years living in the street, Antonio decided to return to his family. By then, his parents had divorced and had new families. He went back home for a second chance, because he did not want to suffer anymore. He wanted to continue school and become someone:

⁵⁹ Glue

⁶⁰ A person who sniff glue.

I was between 12 and 13 years old [when] [...] I went to find my mom. I spent some time with her, but [...] my mom's new husband wanted to kill me, [so] I had to leave again. From there [...] I went to my dad. [...] I said [to myself], 'During this time many bad things happened, [and] no one looked for me, okay, I will go [back to my dad] and today yes I will study', because I had suffered, I didn't want to suffer anymore.

So when I came to him, I came with my torn backpack and said to him, 'Look, old man, I want to change, I want to leave all this now, put me to study even if it is at night'. [...] [And] he said to me, 'Son, I'm married now, and this woman doesn't accept you. [...] She accepts me with your two younger brothers, but now with you, no, so son I can't destroy my home for you, [...] for what you want'. [...] [I left his house and] I went to the shed were the bus stops, [...] [and] I felt anger, I felt that my dad despised me for a woman. So that filled me with hate, it filled me with resentment, [and] it filled me with rage in my heart. I felt that my heart broke and began realize that my life was not worth anything, because the ones that gave me life were practically rejecting me.

Part 2

Escaping social death: becoming a gang member

After a month of conducting interviews, Carla, a social worker, brought Sarahi and me to visit prison. Until then I had avoided the idea of doing interviews in prison, because I dreaded the demeaning security control I knew I had to go through to enter. A few years back, I visited my friend's husband in prison, and came to experience the humiliating and discriminatory body search practices conducted on female visitors. At that time, I told myself that I would never enter a Honduran prison again.

Back then, as my friends and I arrived to prison, a male friend of mine was shown to the body search cubicle in the entrance. He quickly returned, and assured me that it was a simple standard control. I felt relieved as I entered the cubicle for females, and was struck with disbelief when the female officer asked me to remove my pants and underwear. I could not believe it. In shock and nearly crying I pulled down my pants after continually being asked to do so. 'How is this possible?' I thought to myself. I silently refused to remove my underwear, pretending not to understand her, which I at one point considered more likely, than the actual reality of things. How can this demeaning treatment be acceptable? Looking around me, I realized that I was the only one that found this treatment humiliating and unacceptable, as it seemed to be normalized and accepted by everyone else. I was disturbed, but somehow not surprised by the covert discrimination and humiliation experienced by the women visiting prison.

These women are turned into vulnerable victims of violence and humiliation, as a result of the power struggle that unfolds within the prisons. Carla asserted that the controls were conducted because guards once found a woman with a small pistol hidden in her vagina, and many women also try to bring in drugs the same way. While some of the women choose to smuggle illegalities into prison themselves, others are forced to do so by gangs and *bandas* through intimidation, as Jorge explained:

Let's say that I'm an active gang member, [and] I know that you [...] will come here [to prison] next Monday, I will say to two of my elements⁶¹ 'Look I [want you] to chase this lady alive, [and] you are going to give me a weapon'. [...] So, they will say to you, 'Well, you have a son [...] and look I have his photo, well that boy is in such-and-such place right now, we have him followed. Your mission is for this boy to stay alive, [...] you have to bring that pistol inside. I don't know how you are going to do it, [...] [but] you are going to give it to so-and-so'. [...] Look how simple, right, [...] you'll have to do [...] what they want. So in the end I used you as a puppet.

The gangs, as well as the *bandas*, use intimidation and violence against the general public, to gain power through fear and obedience. The women entering prisons are victimized, and some are unwillingly forced to become perpetrators of violence as the result of the power struggle. These same power actors are also accomplices, as many police officers and guards are paid off, allowing the entry of weapons and drugs into the prisons.

I felt relieved when I realized that the guards let Carla, Sarahi, and me enter the prison without having to pass the body search. After the prison guards had revised our belongings, we entered the prison gate where Jorge awaited us. Jorge, who assisted us while we were conducting interviews with imprisoned *pesetas*, guided us to the room where we could conduct the interviews privately. Ten years had passed since Jorge left the gang. Both his arms were entirely covered in tattoos crossed with x's, to demonstrate that he was a *peseta*, a common practice to avoid being incarcerated for illicit association after the implementation of the Anti-gang law⁶². Jorge led us into a small elongated room, that had no windows or ventilation, and consequently was really hot. As Jorge sat down at a desk placed at one end of the room, Sarahi and I put our plastic chairs in place to sit down, as both chairs did not fit the width of the room.

Social rebirth

"The gang showed me the rules, there were some rules for everyone in 18, well, that was to respect, the things about respect" Jorge said as he was explaining his attraction to the gang. By joining the gang, *Pandilla 18*, he had an opportunity to escape the social death, and become recognized as a human being with social worth. The violent life chance in the gang became an

⁶¹ Gang members

⁶² See more in section: "Development of gangs in Honduras".

alternative path to gain recognition and social meaning (Bourdieu 2000; Vigh 2006). According to Bourdieu, the main instrument that generate a meaningful life is the society, however, as many marginalized children and youth are excluded, they have to look for alternative socialization to gain a meaning to life, social importance, and recognition. After suffering sexual abuse, bullying, and physically and psychological mistreatment by the mother who raised him, the gang gave Jorge what he was deprived of in his life; a sense of belonging, a family and respect:

[In the gang] we are equals, there no one [...] is more than anyone. He can be the sicario, he can be the boss, but there everyone is respected the same. If one of them are disrespectful, it can be the leader, he has to be punished.

Jorge, and several other *pesetas* continually emphasized the importance of equality and respect within the gang. “We are equals”, they said, when describing the gang relationship. Many of the *pesetas* joined the gangs as a mean to escape their lived reality of family negligence, societal oppression, and dehumanization. The gangs gave them an opportunity for an alternative socialization where they gained recognition, and could reclaim respect in the society at large by being violent. Violence, as such, is an important mechanism to gain respect, and generally a necessity to be able to reclaim sense of humanness within their predicament. This can be related to what Bourgois (2003) observed among the Puerto Rican drug sellers in East Harlem, where several of the drug sellers had chosen a violent life as a mean to reclaim respect, which they formerly had been denied as they were socially marginalized and thus recognized as lesser than human. A violent life choice might not only give them back a sense of humanness, but for the marginalized youth it also allows those who have formerly been rejected to gain a sense of belonging and a family that care for them:

The gang was my family, I wanted my family [...] to be strong, we were united, there was union. I mean it’s [not] like having friendships with other people, because many people can say [they are] my friends, but sometimes the friends betray you, but in the gang there is no betrayal, because they kill he who betrays. So to feel this security to have these trustworthy friends [was what attracted me to join the gang].

The gangs offered Enrique, and the other *pesetas*, a relationship based on respect, unity, solidarity, trust, and loyalty, a relationship that were unattainable for them in a society based on mistrust, inequality and hierarchical power relations. Having experienced being betrayed by

someone, many children and youth find it desirable to join a gang where acts of distrust and disrespect are either punished by being beaten or killed. The principles of fear and obedience prevalent in the family institution and society at large, have also been integrated into the gang structure itself. The physical punishment children and youth are subject to from their parents when doing something wrong, can be compared to the intragroup violence suffered by gang members who make mistakes:

[Let's say] I'm the leader, right, [I would say] 'You [...] fought with him, and you lacked respect for him, okay, the two of you [...] get into the middle'. [Then] three homies [...] will give them two, three minutes [...] regulation, some two, three minutes on the ground ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, they kick the shit out of them, and [afterwards I would ask] 'Are you still with resentment?' 'No homie, the thing is this loco', 'Well, yet so resentful?' 'No, now there is no resentment' 'Well, hug each other and give each other the hand, we are family'.

Violence is also incorporated into the intragroup gang relation as an important mechanism of power, respect, and authority, as is the case in the society (Savenije 2009). Contrary to societal principles, equality and respect are equally important in the gang, which means the leader is as much subject of being killed than any other member of the gang if he makes a mistake:

In the gang we are all leaders, all of us have command, just that if I'm the leader [...] I have the first and last word, understand, but because I'm the leader I will not abuse them, or because I'm the leader I will fall in love with my soldier's girlfriend, if I fall in love with my soldier's girlfriend, they'll kill me, [...] if I steal something from my soldier, or from the gang they kill me, if I'm a burden to my gang they kill me.

Physical interpersonal violence is just as normalized in the gang relation as in any relation in the society at large. If a gang member disrespect a fellow gang member, they are either beaten or killed, depending on the severity of the mistake made. The gangs have a set of rules members have to live by, including showing no disrespect for their fellow gang members, to not steal in their neighborhood, and to not share secret information. If someone break the rules they are punished, even the leader. Antonio recalled an experience from when he was a gang member:

Before I retired I was in a meeting⁶³. [...] [That day] there was a leader that was going to die, [...] and they killed him. [...] They said to him, ‘look’, [and] they opened [...] the book of rules, [...] [and] they began, ‘Homie you know that this day’ and they talk their shit and say, ‘Well we’ll read the rules [...] so that you don’t forget that we have to kill you, homie. Okay, the day such and such, at that time, you, homie, so-and-so, you did this and this. [...] You went with that homie, yes, but the homie refused to do it, only you did it’. ‘Yes, homie’ ‘Okay, pass to the center, [and] down on your knees’. He only got down on his knees and like after two seconds [...] one of the small boys, [...] I’m telling you the new ones [...] was left with the machete and ‘fchha’ with both hands and the head fell, and we had to grab the body and hold it there on the ground.

If they follow the rules, joining the gang can give the marginalized children and youth an alternative to escape humiliation, fear, and meaninglessness (Bourdieu 2000; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The gang gives them an opportunity to avert discrimination and exclusion gaining social recognition and respect. The marginalized youth make an active choice when joining a gang, where violence provide them with an opportunity to reclaim a voice, agency and sense of meaning, within the existing social structures (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006). The more violent they are, the more feared and respected they become.

A violent life chance

For many marginalized youth, joining a gang is the only way to avoid dying a slow social death. The youth’ choice to enter a violent life is a strategical, yet often a fatal choice, made based on the opportunities presented to them, to gain and reclaim a social position, and a voice. According to Vigh (2006), in his analysis on youth in Guinea-Bissau, the youth’ involvement in conflicts, “becomes a question of balancing social death with violent life chances” (p. 31). Choosing a violent life chance indicate a remarkable agency among the youth. They actively pursue a path where they are able to escape the repressive structures, at least to some extent, and oppose the power relations that hold them down.

The social exclusion experienced by the marginalized youth in form of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, in addition to the interpersonal oppression of obedience between rich and

⁶³ The gangs gather in a meeting to discuss issues related to the gangs, whether it is new missions or gang members that should be punished for a mistake.

poor, adults and youth, makes it difficult, especially for young men, to fulfil their expected roles as providers and protectors (UNDP 2003) and to gain a respected social position. Gang socialization can be the only way to move into adulthood and gain the social capital of “power, authority and social worth” (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006, p. 12) which characterize the process of becoming an adult. The gangs give an alternative to the meaninglessness and powerlessness experienced by the marginalized youth, and can help them “to internalize and adhere to alternative norms and modes of behavior and play a significant role helping [...] youth acquire a sense of importance, self-esteem and identity” (Vigil 1988, p. 64).

For Enrique entering the gang gave him a sense of importance and meaning to life, where he was able to reclaim symbolic capital through violence. Entering the gang became a “path of social meaningfulness and self-fulfillment in an otherwise meaningless life” (Hage 2003, p. 80), as Hage observed among Palestinian youth suicide bomber, who found meaningfulness in the act of martyrdom. Enrique was attracted to the gang lifestyle, and the power and respect he could gain by being with them. He recalled a conversation he had with one of the El Salvadoran gang members that was a determinant factor for him becoming a gang member:

‘Look we can get the power in this sector, and we can [...] come to control this sector’ [the El Salvadorian gang member said] ‘But what is that, what benefits do it bring?’ ‘No’ he said that ‘We are going to be the meanest’, he said, ‘We will do what will make the people be afraid of us and everything, and [...] no one will come and fuck with us’, he said to me, ‘For reals?’, I said to him, ‘Yes, and look we’ll be able to get weapons [...] and we’ll be able to go out and steal and all that’. [...] ‘For reals?’ I said to him, ‘Yes’.

After many conversations with the *pesetas*, I came to realize that regaining social and symbolic capital including respect, social belonging, and social recognition (Bourdieu 1998), were of utmost importance when joining a gang, and becoming violent was the main path to obtain this capital both within the gang, and in relations to other actors. Enrique continued telling the story of how the El Salvadorian gang member proceeded with his baptism:

Okay, he said to me, ‘look, I will be the only one giving you the baptism’ ‘What is that?’ I said to him, ‘I will beat you up for 13 seconds’, ‘But why?’ ‘Because the baptism is like that so you can enter the gang. I will only do it myself’ he said to me ‘Why?’ I said to him, ‘That’s how it is’, he said to me. So he came and threw me on the ground and beat me up for 13 seconds, and I finished angry, but [...] it was what I wanted.

Generally, the baptism is conducted by several gang members, and it is obligatory for everyone who wants to join the gang, whether it is *MS* or *Pandilla 18*. The requirements for joining the gang, however, differed among the *pesetas*. The majority of the *pesetas* I talked with had to kill someone before joining the gang, while a few joined without having to do anything violent. Sarahi asked Enrique of how he felt when he joined the gang:

“I felt good, because at that time [...] I didn’t know what awaited me belonging to their group, well, I felt happy, I dominated the neighborhood. I was the greatest”. Joining the gang, the youths are generally aware of what they can achieve within the gang, but are somewhat unaware of what the consequences are becoming a gang member, Enrique asserted that:

I didn’t know what awaited me; [the] persecutions, the police, [and] then our rivals. I couldn’t go to my girlfriend’s house anymore, because where my girlfriend lived, was in another neighborhood where the 18 were. [...] So, afterwards I didn’t like it anymore. [...] [Once when I entered the neighborhood, the rivals] raped my girlfriend, [...] [and] they wanted to cut my throat. They raped her, [but] they didn’t kill her, thank God, but they beat me up and everything. And to watch [...] what they were doing to her in front of me, that was the saddest experience, I will never forget it, thank God she is alive [...] I saw horrifying things. [...] Since then a hatred [build up within me], when I caught one of them then I did the same thing to him, I [...] was no longer that kid with another mentality.

Enrique did not realize that entering the gang would lead to a continuous movement between being a victim and a perpetrator of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The experience of being a powerless witness to his girlfriend’s rape, Enrique was not able to perform his expected role as a man protecting her. Consequently, he reacted the only way he knew, by becoming more violent, in an attempt to regain the respect and power he had lost. As he stated, he “was no longer that kid with another mentality”:

I hated these people from 18, I hated them. I still hate them. That is essential when you join [the gang], [...] that is what they tell you [and] put in your mind, and in the heart, the hatred against them, because they are the enemies, understand. [They are] enemies to death, well to death, when they see each other they kill each other, there must not remain one alive.

I came to see the expected gender role of a man as a form of victimization itself, a symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2004) that make marginalized youth consider being violent as the only way to live up to the societal expectations of a man, and simultaneously when choosing a violent life they step into their perceived role in the society as a deviant and dangerous youth. After experiencing the rape of his girlfriend, Enrique became the third ranked leader in the gang, reclaiming his role as a man by assuming a violent and courageous personality, with the responsibility of protecting the gang members:

I was that person that never ran, I was the person that the rival gang always was afraid of. [...] I was the one who decided everything regarding the [...] fights. [...] I was ‘el tercero’⁶⁴. [...] When a situation occurred in another sector that was not our sector, [...] [if] the rival gang all of a sudden were killing the homies, and maybe the homies couldn’t control them, I had to move from one sector to another with [...] those that I chose [to bring], to try to counter what they were doing to the homies in the other sector. Because as they had me, like I said, like one of the [...] evilest persons, I was the one who had most courage.

Reclaiming respect

The gangs give the marginalized youth a possibility of a social rebirth, as I came to see it, achieving positive interpersonal relations and emotions which they generally are negated. The violent life chance of gangs also allows them to reclaim their respect and sense of humanness, in which the family and society at large have rejected them by turning them into valueless human beings. Salazar (1994), whom examined the young *sicarios* in Colombia, states that the marginalized boys use of violence is one method of gaining recognition and respect, saying “This is who we are; we exist!” (p. 27). Antonio illustrated this as he was telling his life story, of his search of being socially recognized as an equally worthy human being.

During my prison visits, Antonio told many painful stories from his childhood, but I believe that these stories also show his agency navigating his difficult situation. He made life choices that optimized his possibilities to avoid the zone of abandonment (Biehl 2013), which he lived in the streets where his existence had no importance and his voice was silenced. When Antonio

⁶⁴ Third ranked leader in the gang, responsible for planning and executing attacks.

was 15 years old he went wetback⁶⁵, to Los Angeles, as many Honduran children and youth do, in search of an economic opportunity and a better life, but he ultimately ended up becoming a gang member:

I came to Los Angeles [...] and coming there I began selling crack on the street, because it was the first thing that emerged to me to survive. [...] From there those from *Pandilla 18* went into my apartment, and they beat me up, they took my money, and they raped my friend's girlfriend. [...] So, as I lived in their neighborhood, that same night I stopped living there and I joined their rival enemies, *MS*. I came to the gangs like that. I was alone there, I had no one, and they gave me friendship.

I joined them just to protect myself, no more than to look for love and understanding. [...] They said to me, 'Do not worry, we will give you everything here. Yes, you [can] have [a] telephone, there is drugs [...] if you want grab some, there is a gun there as well, there is a bicycle there. [In the gang] you do what you want, and you earn money'.

They even said, 'Okay, you know what, we'll go kill those dudes. Do you have balls to kill?' 'I have never killed' I said to him, 'I can if you show me how it is, I think I can do it'. I was in my age [...] I consider that age [...] like the most moronic age of the youth, because you think that you can do everything.

How has killing become a desirable trait among the youth? Antonio called it "the most moronic age of the youth", the age in which the youth search to move into adulthood, a social position characterized by respect and social worth which they are denied due to their marginality (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006). Lack of information, normalization of violence, and the inability to perform their masculine role of breadwinner and protectors makes a violent life choice the only way to obtain this social position. By being violent Antonio regained social worth and recognition among adult, powerful people and the society at large, in addition to making it possible for him to protect himself and regain power and respect:

As I told you I hadn't killed yet, but yes I wanted to experience it, because I saw that they [people] were afraid of those who killed. And many times walking on the street there was someone that was bigger than me and would do 'boom' [put an imaginary gun] in the mouth, [and] in the face and maybe [...] I couldn't defend myself. [...] So I

⁶⁵ Wetback; to immigrate illegally to the US.

bought a 38.5, and my friend said to me when I put it on the waist, [...] ‘Look I’m gonna tell you something, you know what this means, right, it means that you are God now, you have the power to take life’.

Being violent and killing became a necessity for Antonio to escape the experienced insecurity and powerlessness. Antonio reclaimed his authority by owning a gun and becoming a gang member which gave him the ability to protect himself. He was able to revenge the gang members from *Pandilla 18* which he had been unable to fend off before:

We came to [*Pandilla 18*’s] neighborhood and I got off where the gang members were, and I rifed⁶⁶ to them, [...] and at the time they answered, I began shooting. [...] In the beginning when the gun said ‘biiing’, I could hear ‘Ayy’, but from there I didn’t hear [anything], because the gun leaves you deaf, the gunfire leaves you deaf, you can’t hear [anything]. [Afterwards] we got into the car and we left.

After a month of being [with *MS*] I went to do some other stuff with them, always the same, marking the streets, and [...] [when we met] groups of youth [...] I got out brave in the street [...] ‘Hey, what rifas⁶⁷?’ ‘No I’m nothing’ and bom-bom-bom I hit them, ‘I’m from the mara’, [...] and I intimidated them, and I charge them rent so that they were afraid of me, and dreamt of being in my gang and be like me. So, as I was small like them, they [...] would want to be like me. So, [...] they [*MS*] basically jumped me⁶⁸ to be the recruiter of boys.

The exercise of violence gave Antonio a voice in a rather powerless situation, even adults and powerful people who had not acknowledged his existence before, recognized him, and feared him. Becoming violent he improved his social and symbolic capital which allowed him to reclaim respect:

I felt like I was a badass. Many times I summoned a man with full mustache⁶⁹ with my gun, ‘You don’t believe me? Down on your knees’ [I said to him] and I felt good seeing

⁶⁶ The act of provoking another person or group, which generally begins by showing gang hand signs, and always end with a fight.

⁶⁷ The act of provoking another person or group, which generally begins by showing gang hand signs, and always end with a fight.

⁶⁸ Jumped me: a beating by the new gang, the baptism to enter the gang.

⁶⁹ A man with a full mustache; A strong, respected adult man who is considered better than others.

a man with mustache and beard ⁷⁰get down on his knees in front of my feet, of course at a distance because close to me he could take my gun, as I was a youngster.

It is very important to be violent, because when you are violent the people are afraid of you, and more if you are armed, [then you gain] great respect, a path opens up where you walk, the people steps aside and look down. [...] [That] is good, I mean [for] the people that do evil, I say it for me, I felt good when a guy with mustache and beard, [...] even armed [showed me respect]. I pulled my eyes up and they lowered theirs.

Victims or perpetrators of violence?

The lived reality of Antonio reveals a continual movement between being ‘at risk’ as a victim of violence and ‘the risk’ as the perpetrator of violence (Stephens 1995). Antonio chose to enter the gang as a means to avoid the victimization experienced as a child, where he was denied a sense of humanness and respect. His parents did not give him attention, love, and compassion which made him go look for it with other people. However, when he returned to Honduras after four years as a gang member in the US, this changed as he finally experienced being recognized as a person of social worth by his parents:

When I returned my mom was a Christian, and the man she’d had [last time I saw her], she had already left a long time ago, right, [...] and my dad had another lady, my dad was also going to church. [...] When they deported me from the US, [...] I looked for them just to see them because I just wanted to see them, [though] I [still] felt that I hated them. But when I saw their attention [...] right, when someone starts giving you attention and I saw that they began giving me attention.

When my mom saw me again she asked for my forgiveness. [...] When my mom gave me a hug and asked me for forgiveness, she broke down crying over me, I felt that all that hate at that time everything changed, all was erased. I felt that I [...] loved my mom at the bottom of my heart and despite everything I loved my old woman. So it was really complicated because I began to notice my mom’s preoccupation for me [when I] was in the street.

⁷⁰ A man with mustache and beard; A strong, respected adult man who is considered better than others.

Antonio finally obtained recognition from his parents which he had been denied when he was a child, and as he was already a gang member it made it more difficult for him as he noticed the parents' concern for him. Yet, the gang was his life and he continued that path by becoming the leader of the gang in his neighborhood, and thus gain a position where he was respected by the powerful people, and gained recognition as a human being, through actively engaging with them. The gang members are involved in drug sales and traffic, *sicariato*, and extortion, but they are also paid by powerful people such as drug lords, politicians and other elite actors to kill. In the struggle of power, they still fall short to the powerful, but using violence makes them gain respect.

Well, violence is important, [...] because the people that aren't even in the gang respects me. Because even many of the politicians know that I'm the leader and whatever mission they will deal with me. I feel important dealing with important people just because I have respect, and imagine that maybe I'm the leader here, and this city's mayor comes and looks for me [...] and enter my house, [...] and make a deal with me. He comes to look for me to kill a person. So it is a great benefit to have power and respect, yes, because you are dealing with important people. And I said to myself that if I would still have been that fearful young boy, so to speak with bad words, [...] [if] I had continued being that young boy like shit, these guys would have watched me like garbage.

By becoming violent and joining the gang, Antonio was able to achieve the symbolic capital of recognition and respect, and thus be recognized as a human being by the dominator (Bourdieu 1998). “[if] I had continued being that young boy like shit” Antonio said about his life as a child, “these guys would have watched me as garbage”. This illustrate the symbolic power existing between the marginalized and people in power, where not only the powerful people consider the marginalized as lesser humans, but due to internalized dispositions the marginalized themselves come to believe that as well (Bourdieu 1977). Antonio's story reveals the interplay between agency and structure, and how the marginalized youth are able to reclaim respect and humanness, but ultimately cannot escape the social structure of domination.

Reclaiming a sense of humanness

The symbolic violence experienced by the marginalized youth reinforce the process of dehumanization. In the public realm they are represented as deviant and violent which strengthens the symbolic power of the dominant making it easier to gain acceptance for their

elimination, and to allow their deaths to go undisturbed, and become invisible as a means to maintain the existing social order (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The marginalized youth themselves, as the poor in general, underpin this process through the internalization and acceptance that their social worth are of lesser meaning (Bourdieu 1977), and they reinforce the dehumanization of themselves through for instance animalistic dehumanization (Haslam 2006). Many address each other as animals such as dog and donkey; “Ey perro, que pedo?” (Hey dog, what up?). Several people told me that “the Hondurans are donkeys” indicating that they are dumb and ignorant.

Becoming a gang member, Jorge was able to reclaim agency, and warmth, which Haslam (2006) recognize as important traits of humanness. He reclaimed symbolic capital of recognition and respect, and became able to exercise agency and achieve a social position within the existing social structures through the use of violence, revealing the interrelations between agency and structure (Giddens 1979). Violence is associated with power in the Honduran society, and shows courage and authority, and is an important tool within the gang, as well as for use against others. Jorge told how he experienced the entrance into the gang:

They jumped me⁷¹ to become a member in 18, well, there it is 18 minutes, like 18 seconds [beating], well, that I felt was like hours. That movement is rather ugly, violently. But then before they jumped me, well, they tested me, I had to go do a mission, well, I went to kill someone. That is what you do as a kid, and I enjoyed killing my first person.

They sent me [to kill a guy] alone, only [together] with another puntero⁷² as they say, [...] and they gave me [...] a chimba⁷³. [...] Well, good, I killed him and earned points, they gave me my nickname, well I earned the nickname like everything was earned.

“I enjoyed killing my first person” Jorge asserted, he was nine years old at the time. During my talk with him he also told me that he found it exciting to go look for targets, and to see other suffer, because it allowed him to forget about his suffering.

⁷¹ Jumped me; a beating by the new gang, the baptism to enter the gang.

⁷² New member of the gang.

⁷³ Homemade firearm used by the gangs.

Revenge: a satisfaction I felt freed me

Joining the gang Jorge regained a sense of power and voice, and with the help from the gang, directly and indirectly, he gained a position where he was able to get revenge over his uncle, and of the rival gang that killed his cousin right before he entered the gang. Revenge has come to be considered as the sole way to get justice, and in the case of Jorge a way to regain power over his life:

After a month with the same gang members, I told my homies how the situation was and we went to finish all of them [gang⁷⁴ that killed my cousin]. [...] We killed everyone, even their children as well. And we went to dump them in the sea. [...] We had to crack open their stomachs take out the organs, insert stones and then reclose the whole stomach over again, so that the people didn't float or anyone realized it. [...] And we just moored the entrails in a bag with a piece of brick and [dumped it in] the sea. So I say that my satisfaction was this [...] to be able to get the truth from the dude that killed my cousin and I could do the same to the guy that killed my cousin.

Well, this was one of the benefits and also the, the aggression the gang put into me, because I also went to find he who abused me sexually, [and] I could be leader like a learned [in the gang]. There you learn everything like a lot of craziness like [...] torture methods, how to torture people, how to make people suffer, well, [...] for me it was a satisfaction that I felt freed me.

“I could be leader” remained in my mind as Jorge continued telling his story. To me, this illustrate how the experienced powerlessness turned into renewed ability to regain his humanity and role as a man, taking revenge over the man that sexually violated him, which Jorge stated was “a satisfaction that I felt freed me”. It allowed him to ‘free’ himself from the symbolic violence of humiliation and blame that he felt (Bourdieu 2004), which can be related to the case of colonized subjects, where emancipation of the oppressed can be achieved through the death of the oppressor (Sartre 2004). As Sartre (2004) asserts to kill the oppressor “is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppressed at the same time: there remains one dead man, and one free man” (p. 233).

⁷⁴ A small gang that existed in the 1990s.

At 11 years old when I saw my uncle, the ugliest spirit got into me, because then I wanted to do what he did to me with other people, and I also began practice it, because if he did it to me and I didn't do anything to anyone, I had to do it.

My biggest fear [was] that I would die and not be able to do something [to him], that is, die and well not being able to [...] do the same with him as he did to me. [...] But I gave him back the most severe pain, because I said, that guy left me alive and because of that I am what I am. So I can't leave him alive, so I did [my uncle and cousins] wrong and [...] finished [them]. I even got my own cousins because as they were his children, so I began with them, until I got my uncle, understand. [...] [I] cut him into small pieces [...] and ate [him] in person. It was the first time I ate a person, you understand, I had never eaten human meat and it was also the only time I did it. I didn't feel anything because as he did that to me, so I had to do the same. Like that, as they say an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, I say, these guys [in gang] thought me that.

Since [I did] that it's always on my mind, always in the corner, but it doesn't give me much pain anymore, well, like before it made me feel bad, because when I told [it to someone] or when I remembered it, when I was a small boy, well, most of all I did things that I shouldn't do, because when, you know, I remembered that, well, you have to go do evil to someone to not feel so bad.

Being a victim of sexual abuse made Jorge resort to violence as a mean to escape the feeling of blame and humiliation. "it is worse that I know that you only do that to women, and I am not a woman", Jorge said with sadness. The internalized symbolic violence of men being perpetrators of sexual abuse, while women are the sufferers induce a 'double' victimization of men due to "the domination of the dominant by his domination" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004, p. 273).

I killed death

During my talks with Jorge and other *pesetas* it became apparent that the masculine domination victimizes the marginalized men themselves because they are not able to fulfil their expected roles as men (Pine 2015). The exercise of violence makes it possible for them to reclaim respect and humanness within the existing social order, but simultaneously this same exercise of violence maintain the marginalized youth' and gang members' expected position as violent within the social hierarchy:

I was violent because from the age of 10 I was getting more serious with the gang [...] I didn't become the boss of everything [...] [I had] a lot of respect, or to say [I had] a lot of deaths, well, I killed death, it didn't matter whoever it was, whether a kid, woman, man, whatever.

The more murders you have carried out, more power you have [in the gang], the more challenges [you have] with the police [...] and they don't arrest you, [and] the more wrongdoing you commit the stronger I am, more powerful and I am demonstrating the power, well, and you are spreading terror in the neighborhood and everyone knows you. [...] I felt good, well, because no one said anything to me and others were afraid of me.

Jorge "killed death" as he said himself to achieve his position as a well-respected, powerful and feared gang member. Violence became the accessible tool to avoid social death. For Jorge, from the age of ten, death; the power of finding, sometimes torturing, and killing a person became a fascination to avoid his own pain:

Doing wrong, [and] making other people suffer, well, I didn't think of my [own] pain, I didn't feel like crying, well, nothing, I wasn't sad either, like I didn't feel happiness, [...] but yes it causes, like I said, fascination [...] in my heart [...] doing harm and violence.

Torture: a fascination for suffering

The fascination of watching people suffer is not only related to avoidance of internal pain, but it is also a mechanism to gain respect through the creation of fear. Historically, torture have been extensively used as a political mechanism to create fear, especially during 'the lost decade'⁷⁵. I realized, after discussing torture, that the gangs had incorporated many of the mechanisms the government used during the 'lost decade'. Torture is also utilized as an enjoyment and a way to tranquilize the heart by getting revenge. Jorge elaborated on the methods of torture conducted the 'casa locas'⁷⁶:

When they want to torture a person, they want to harass him so that he learns to respect, so they will torture him, the worst torture that they can do to a person, [...] is what happens there. [They cut a person] piece for piece while he is alive, and they put salt so

⁷⁵ See more in section "Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs".

⁷⁶ Private houses belonging to the gangs. In recent years it has become a place where they torture and kill people.

that he doesn't die, they give him medicine so he will stay alive and they leave him for a bit, after they talk with them about the errors he has made. If he has made an error. Sometimes they bring entire families there in the 'casas locas', [...] When they are going to kill many people they buy acid, not acid that are sold [in the store], and they throw them in a barrel with that stuff, well, [after that] they can't find anyone, you can't find anyone and they always die.

Violence is a central aspect of everyday life. "Doing wrong, making other people suffer, well, I didn't think of my pain" Jorge said to me, I thought to myself that there is a deeper meaning to witnessing and making others suffer. For Jorge, witnessing pain and suffering made him avoided thinking of his own suffering; of his abandonment, and the shame, and humiliation of being sexually abused. Inflicting his own pain on others, he felt 'free', at least for a moment, and he felt joy and excitement as for every person he killed or tortured he was able to get back a piece of himself, he was gradually able to reclaim his humanity.

Struggle of power: victims and perpetrators of violence

For Jorge, Antonio, Enrique, and the other *pesetas* I talked with, the exercise of violence became their way to reclaim respect, humanness and social worth, and ultimately gaining social recognition. However, in the search for this, they also gained the position as the main perpetrators of violence, and consequently underpinning the established official discourse of marginalized and gang members being the main perpetrators of violence in the society. While there is no denying that gang members are actors of violence, the notion that they are the main cause for violence, victimize them and only facilitates further dehumanization and elimination.

Born violent

During my conversations with the *pesetas*, and the other social actors, I was taken aback by the general consensus that violent poor and marginalized youth are simply born that way. "He who is born violent, is born violent since he is born" Antonio proclaimed to me, "I entered the gang because, the truth, that came in the blood, you carry that in your blood". This thought of a predestined destiny demonstrate the internalized dispositions, where even the marginalized themselves come to consider their lived reality of violence as being their fault, blaming themselves as being violent (Bourdieu 1977). The symbolic power allows the oppressor's beliefs to become internalized as the reality by the marginalized, without them even recognizing

it as such, which ultimately reinforce the existing oppression, and thus the hierarchical structures of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004).

I discussed the prevalence of violence in Honduras with Mario, a high ranked military officer. Though he also asserted the same belief that some people are born violent, he, however, recognized the socioeconomic situation as a factor of the generation of violence:

There are economic points so to speak, socioeconomic, like we talk about the distribution of wealth. The wealth in our country is distributed in hands of few. [...] Well it also makes the [...] social strata change in our society, and that generate violence. Sometimes it isn't [...] because we biologically are violent, but [...] we can say that one of the causes is sometimes for survival.

The prevalence of violence has increased as the socioeconomic inequality deepened with the implementation of neoliberal policies at the end of the eighties⁷⁷. It further evolved when the gangs emerged in the nineties and the government began to target the gangs directly, with violence and discriminatory laws. Jorge asserted that the authority themselves have a hand in the widespread use of violence:

The government is very short minded, they want to act only with papers, with weapons, [and] they use violence against the active gang members, you understand. [But] if you're not doing anything to a gang member, he will not do anything to you, it's logic, but if you are messing with him, what will he do? He will fuck you up. So the government uses violence against the gangs [...] and the gang member who is already born violent, made to do evil and to die doing evil [will fight back]. [...] Sometimes the actions that you make being active in the gang are actions because [...] they are already predestined. [...] If someone killed a person, you know, and if he killed him with a gun, [with] a shot in the head, they will send you to kill that person, they will ask for the same.

The government has a strong influence on violence because if the government facilitated work or study, and didn't discriminate the gang member, didn't discriminate the people who are tattooed, maybe things had been different. Because even in the gangs many times you try to work or try to study, but when they already mark you off that you are a gang member, then it's like they discriminate you, [...] they stigmatize you. [...] And the

⁷⁷ See more in section "Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs".

government just says, 'Eliminate them', 'Kill them' or 'Lock them up'. [...] When they grab a gang member they nearly kill you by beating you up and if not, well, already captured they put a bullet in the head and that's it. They just did it to a gang member, one gang member less. The government execute and kill gang members, but for these murders no one says anything.

It's the origin where the violence begins, because if you guys enter a gang and a police kills one of my companions I'll go find him and I'll kill him. Then after I killed him, the other police will want to pursue me and it'll bring fire to the war.

I heard several similar accounts of how the authorities' implementation of a 'politic of death', with the Anti-gang law and the 'hidden' use of death squads, worsened the state of violence, as the government directly began targeting the gang members. "It's the origin where the violence begins" Jorge claimed, because the gang members "are already predestined" to be violent and "if you are messing with him" he will try to revenge he who was disrespectful, using violence. Jorge continued by asserting that the authorities are killing gang members and "for these murders no one says anything". An 'invisible genocide' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) is occurring where the killing of marginalized youth has become normalized and invisible.

Animalistic dehumanization

The gang members do not only experience internalized violence of being individuals predestined as violent, but they also are subjects of further victimization and dehumanization in form of being classified as lesser than human by being likened to animals (Haslam 2014). This "animalization", such as being likened to dogs and rats, is a common way to dehumanize marginalized people and more specifically the gang members,

"We must put the entire neighborhood on fire" asserted a woman at a neighborhood meeting in a gang controlled area "so that these rats leave", Marvin, a priest, explained as he wanted to exemplify the desire of elimination, "the people what they want is to eliminate them". "They are like a cancer" another father said to Sarahi and me, "[if] the police don't act directly against them [...] they are not going to be eliminated".

The dehumanization and exclusion experienced by the gang members are not only prevalent among those who live in gang controlled areas, but it is common within societal institutions including in their own families, the church and the authorities. Alicia, who worked many years

with active gang members, experienced the dehumanization and societal indifference to their death up close. Various times, she told us, she had to contact families because their son, a gang member, were killed, and needed someone to take responsibility for the burial:

[Once] a mother said that she wouldn't bury dogs, that she wasn't responsible for that dog [her son]. [...] The society in general, the church for instance, my experience is [...] when they [the gang members] said, 'No, I don't want this life, I want to go to church' for example, [...] [and] we arrived with gang members to church, it was like the devil arrived. One time that they killed a [gang member], we didn't find a place to have a wake for him. [...] We asked the church [if] they [could] give us a place to have a wake, and when we arrived with the dead, [...] 'No! we are worshiping, wait if you want'. [We had] to wait with the corpse [outside].

That's the church, that's the family, the police that is another [story]. The police many times [...] sent gang members to conduct crimes for their testimony, right, and if they didn't do it, [...] they did like a capture, [...] [where] the police planted the drug on the gang members to say that they had been found with drugs, [and] that's why they took them. [...] The society stigmatize them, right, without looking at the causes, without looking why, without making an effort, because it is not that we praise their actions, no [...] they need changes. But [...] there should be an opportunity, right, so the [...] stigmatization, the prejudice, [and] lack of work opportunities in the entire society [and] the penitentiary system as well. [...] The boys are excluded from everything.

Extermination of gang members

The death of gang members, already excluded and dehumanized, have come to be considered as a benefit to the society. The denial of humanness facilitates the acceptance among the ordinary people to "enforce genocidal-crimes against categories of rubbish people" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004, p. 21), including marginalized youth and gang members. The popular perception is that the gang members are evil and deserve to die, and many including Jesús, a family man who was forced to leave his home because of a gang, consider it rightful using death squads against them, to eliminate them:

Look, I think that the same government knows who the bosses of the gang members are, they know. If there was a government like the one that was in 1982-84, when Álvarez

Martínez from the battalion was [president], there wouldn't be gang members, there weren't gang members before, because the government had their own death squads. [...] What have come to ruin the country have been and continues to be the human rights. The human rights are the worst responsible for the many massacres there are, because the human rights, it can be whoever, an assassin, and they defend him.

Jesús, as many others, recognize the human rights as responsible for the public insecurity, blaming it for the intensification of violence. As Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1994) assert in the case of Brazil, the human rights according to some are perceived as a privilege to the gang members and other criminals. The paradox is, however, that while there is a widespread agreement that the gang members deserve to be killed for their violent actions, several support the presence of *banda de sicarios*⁷⁸ and drug traffickers in their neighborhood, functioning as private security upholding justice. "They look after [us] here" asserted Jesús:

The people care for them, because, well, they cleaned the community, well, there were a lot of thieves [in the neighborhood before], and the thieves [have] disappeared, that is to say they showed up dead here, and showed up dead there, [...] no one said it was that guy, [...] but the people knew that they [*banda de sicarios*] were the ones that did it.

The *sicarios* "do not get involved with the people", Jesús pointed out to us, "When the police [...] persecute, the people even hide them". The perception is the gang members are lesser than human and should be punished for their actions, while the *sicarios* are accepted as a form of private security. Even if some are conscious that the *sicarios* also are killers, many still consider them as people that looks after them.

Without a doubt, the contrasting understanding of what is acceptable violence and what is not, is historically grounded. Marginalized youth and others with a critical voice have generally been portrayed as deviant and lesser of human in the public realm, a way for the powerful to regain control. At the same time, the authorities have actively used violence in form of death squads and *sicarios* against the general public as a weapon of power. I gradually came to believe that the acceptance of violence conducted by *sicarios* and the government, and the denial of violence conducted by gang members is a result of the symbolic power held by the dominant power. Hage (2003) asserts that the symbolic power causes some violence to be recognized as

⁷⁸ Groups of hitmen.

legitimate while other to be consider illegitimate based on who hold the dominant power. The acceptance of state violence as legitimate, is thus a result of the internalization of the authorities' world view by the marginalized as deeply integrated dispositions (Bourdieu 1977). This way, the gangs' exercise of violence, even if they use the same tactics as the authorities, is recognized as illegitimate, while the authorities' violent acts against the gang members, are considered legitimate.

Violent authorities

“From the point the police knew that I was a gang member”, Antonio said, “they beat me up. They nearly killed me” he asserted, before he continued describing his experience of victimization by the police:

I would go to a chick that I had, my girlfriend, they would come there every day to grab me. [...] I just arrived and I would sit down on a small bench with her when [she would say] ‘Go, go he called a patrol’ ‘Don’t think about it’, I said to her, [then I was] 24 hours [...] in that thing [custody], [where I was] badly beaten.

Antonio told me several stories of gang members being victims of violent acts and mistreatment by the police, “I mean the police have always been very violent in this country, they have never respected the human rights here. There are human rights, but it’s like it hadn’t been”. The stories of Antonio and the other *pesetas* illustrated the discriminatory treatment of gang members, which they also experience when they are incarcerated. Ten years ago, Enrique suffered the violence of the prison authorities:

The prison authorities were like some executioners, they massacred the people, [and] they used us, the gang members. [...] Sometimes you couldn’t even recognize my face, because as I fought with the other gang members, or we wanted to jab with daggers and things like that. We grabbed them, well, and afterwards the patrols came with the tremendous bats to hit us, a slaughter but a slaughter, they beat us with a big piece of wood, to make us fall, well, to die.

One time I had a fight from like six in the afternoon and about four in the morning the following day, they [prison guards] were still torturing me, [...] they made me drink two gallons of water and I begged [for them to stop] and they threw me [on the floor] and they resumed. It’s the same, and, well, it looks like that is nothing.

Several *pesetas* described experiences of victimization and mistreatment by the police. They also emphasized that being victimized and made responsible of violence by the authority and police, had turned the gangs more violent as a mean to regain respect. Initially, the gangs, *Pandilla 18* and *MS*, mainly fought each other, but because the authority intervened and clearly stated the goal of eliminating them, they change their ways. Through the implementation of the Anti-gang law they were forced in to hiding, and became more organized and violent, targeting the authority as well:

It was when the war formed [between the police and gang members], when they said gang member and police because [when the police began killing gang members, they began targeting the police]—well like a saying that I always fight, ‘Before they cry in my house they cry in the other’. Before they kill me, I kill whoever, so that my mom doesn’t cry, but that they cry for another person.

Enrique maintained that violence became a weapon to regain respect and recognition:

If they aren’t violent, the people will not be afraid of them. [...] You know back in the 90s the police [...] just came and beat them up and everything. Today the police think before they put a hand on the gang members. When they know it’s an active gang member they will not lay their hands on him, [...] because they know that that dude will kill them, [...] or they’ll send to kill a family member. [...] So now it isn’t the same, for that reason it is necessary with violence, in that world.

Importance of violence

“You have to be violent, if not you are no one”. Enrique said to me with a smile, “Denying violence you’re gone”. Violence has become a fundamentally important instrument for the gangs in their search of respect, and seemingly the only means available for them to challenge the existing hegemonic relations, and thus the distribution of power. Power is generally associated with violence, as the prevalent authoritarian value system has been internalized in every social relation, making the people obedient through the use of violence and fear. The exercise of violence is a tactic of power that facilitate the subjugation and control of others (Hamilton & Sharma 1997). In the gang, the members are able to exercise power, challenging the societal repression of marginalized youth. Therefore, violence is both an instrument of repression and an instrument of resistance.

I came to regard the gangs as actively opposing the existing hegemonic power, with the underlying goal of regaining their sense of humanness, respect, and senses of belonging. Using intimidation, extortion, and violence, the gangs demonstrate that the marginalized exist, which is similar to what Salazar (1994) observed in the case of youth *sicarios* in Colombia, “Juvenile violence became a way in which sectors of traditionally excluded youth [...] sought the recognition of the state and the ‘other’ society” (p. 28). Being violent, the gangs directly challenge the hegemony, however, the existing discursive dominance of the powerful controls the information and knowledge, and have symbolic power over the subjugated mind of the marginalized (Bourdieu 2000). It facilitates the scapegoating of the gang members, even if the authorities themselves, as well as the drug traffic and organized crime is as much responsible for the prevalence of violence.

I realized that the authorities are among the most violent actors in Honduras, the symbolic and discursive power they hold facilitate the acceptance of exercising violence against the gangs, while simultaneously disguising the authorities’ active engagement in violent victimization of the gang members. This ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004) of the marginalized that the actions of the authorities are something else than it is, allows for a ‘invisible genocide’ (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) of marginalized youth to occur silently, and for the authorities, and other social actors to regain more social control. However, as the authorities targeted the gangs, through implementation of the Anti-gang law and other repressive actions, the gangs answered by becoming more organized and more violent (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010). Enrique describes the gangs’ response to discriminatory actions by the government, where the marginalized themselves become the main sufferer in the power struggle:

The gang [...] doesn’t accept Juan Orlando [the current president] nor any other president that turn against them, so what happens? The delinquency comes, [and] the gang [...] begins killing innocent people. You can see many people that show up in plastic bags, people that shouldn’t, but when the gang gets angry, [...] to demonstrate to the president that they have power, they kill [innocent people], they cut them, and they’ll present it to the president.

Enrique proceeded by detailing how the gangs gain power by infiltrating institutions. Several of the *pesetas* and security officers described the infiltration of various state institutions, security forces, and other institutions including banks and universities. Many of these gang

members generally had normal day jobs, but passed on information, and other things of interest, including weapons:

You know that power has different forms, well, [...] we had influence with like three or four police officers. [...] Power is to have contacts, to be able to bring forward the gang. [...] At the time [when I was a gang member] there were like 10 *MS* in the fourth battalion. [...] They brought rifles [to the gang]. [...] The one in charge came to patrol [the neighborhood] with six elements, but the one in charge was *MS*, and all those who came with him were *MS*, and they went to our sector with rifles, ‘Okay, here are these rifles, take them, [and] use them’, [...] So, we knew then that they would come and every situation, and that was power.

“These things are to become great” asserted Enrique, referring to the necessity of violence, corruption and extortion as a way to gain power. The gangs, government, and security forces are all actively engaging in these activities. In the case of extortion, Mario, the military officer, revealed that “The national police began the extortion. They began using the gang members to extort”. However, it is the gang members who are scapegoated, as extortion currently are one of their main activities. Even the public servants actively engage with the gangs using their *sicarios* and are accomplices in extortion. Enrique, stressed that the government and gangs actively engage with each other:

The leadership of the [...] gang members [together] with the leader of the government pay each other like that. The extortion comes from the government to the gang member, the gang member comes and extorts the other and he pays everything to them, now this is one single business. So they are in the same thing, they [gang members] have an understanding with the police [and] the battalion. Everyone has an understanding with a banda, with the *MS* and with Pandilla 18, so the government will never change this, because these things are to become great.

The majority of the *pesetas* and other social actors I talked with pointed out the very close relationship between the gangs and the authorities as partners in crime. Most of them, however, believed that the gang members were deserving of punishment and even death, while there was a wider acceptance for the authority to exercise violence, especially if the targets were to be gang members they had an attitude of indifference; “That is just how it is”.

I should emphasize that my desire is not to obscure the fact that the gang members are perpetrators of violence, but rather to illustrate how the social inequality and oppression victimize the marginalized youth even as gang members. The gang might be a life chance for the marginalized youth avoiding the social death, but it is also a violent path in a continuum of violence. They might be able to achieve respect and power becoming a gang member, but it occurs within the existing hegemonic structures, and ultimately result in the gang members becoming victimized by those in power, being used and blamed for the prevalence of violence.

Part 3

Becoming voiceless again: life as a *Peseta*

As Sarahi and I were entering prison one morning to conduct interviews, we were stuck waiting for Jorge between the two gates leading to the inside of the prison. Standing within the small space between the outer gate safeguarded by prison guards and the inner gate guarded by inmates, I had time to observe the prison life from afar. Watching the treatment and living conditions and from what I already knew about the life of inmates, I came to agree with Alicia, the social worker, “The constitution says that the prisons are rehabilitation centers, but I believe that they are centers of condemnation”. Being a prisoner is to live in complete abandonment, especially for those who are considered being of less worth, such as the *pesetas*. For them prison can be worse than dying, totally abandoned and literally without any opportunities.

In prison the *pesetas*, together with other marginalized, are excluded, exploited and mistreated by the prison authorities and inmates with power. “There is a lot of power in prison” Carla, the social worker who brought us to prison, told us. There is an ‘internal police’ inside consisting of inmates:

There is the president and the vice-president and they are inmates. From there they have their hierarchy that is called the coordinators. Every cell has a coordination, but all those coordinators are friends or go along super well with the people in power.

The inmates in power govern the prison, through exploitation of the marginalized inmates. Becoming a *peseta*, generally means to enter the path of social death again, losing their voice and respect, and becoming invisible. I came to consider the life of a *peseta* as being a life in a zone of social abandonment, where they are forced to live under inhuman conditions characterized by fear and insecurity, being “caught as they are between encompassment and abandonment, memory and nonmemory, life and death” (Biehl 2013, p. 4), with limited opportunity to act. The *pesetas* suffer stigmatization and humiliation on a daily basis, and live in a constant insecurity of being killed and of being recruited in *bandas*. Jorge, as many of the other *pesetas*, have to work for the powerful and people with economic resources in prison a to survive. Carla asserted that,

Sometimes inside the prison [...] [the people with power] force inmates to pay [a] monthly [fee] for cleaning [...] and things like that, which is also against the law. [...] I think that [it] is a business between prison administration and the president [of the inmates]. [...] So if they don't have that money they beat them up. [...] So if you don't have visitors and you don't have work [...] you are practically forced to steal something to sell it, to be able to comply with what they ask you for.

Walking with Jorge through prison, some inmates carefully watched us at a distance. A soft smell of marihuana filled the air, as we passed by the area of the workshops, where a few inmates were in the process of making earrings and necklaces. In front of us clothes were hanging to dry. A group of around fifteen inmates were gathered around a few laundry tubs washing clothes. Carla explained:

There are a few people that works, and they are exploited as well, because [...] the workshops have owners, and the owner lives [on the] outside or lives inside the prison, and they have other people with less power as workers and they pay them like a misery. [...] [Others] survive washing clothes, ironing, doing errands, and cleaning plates.

While most *pesetas* and the marginalized prisoners are utilized by the powerful inmates, the powerful inmates themselves can live a rather acceptable life in prison. Some are owners of businesses and workshops within prison, while some might receive a salary being members in a gang. Inmates with economic resources have the opportunity, for instance, to pay for better comfort in semi-private cells, which is shared with 12 inmates instead of over 20, and have other benefits such as air condition. The *pesetas*, and marginalized in general, however, have to live in room they can barely move in, with up to six beds placed atop of each other. The upper bed, Carla stressed:

It is a bed like [70-centimeter-wide], it has no wall, you can't turn, if you turn you fall 12 meters, [...] and you can end up paraplegic. And that is a stress, for that reason what can they [the authorities] expect from a guy that says 'I don't want to be a gang member anymore', and he has to live in that harassment.

Antonio was already sitting behind the desk waiting for us, when Sarahi and I entered the room. He had covered up his tattoos with a long-sleeve sweater, as he usually did, and had put his hair in a ponytail. He seemed distant when he saw us, but as we sat down he became more attentive.

After we talked for a while about how he was doing, Sarahi turned to ask about the lived experiences as a *peseta*; “How is life in prison?” she asked:

Life of a prisoner is in the hands of God; we are like kids here. Here we eat if they give us, we receive if they bring us, understand, and if not we have to suffer, we are left with nothing more than to resign to the fact that freedom ended here.

There is not like you can learn a skill or something to make a living. The problem here is that you pay collects; water, [and other] things that we pay. If we don't pay we're punished, so it's hard, because like me I don't have visitors, well, I have to wash clothes, wash plates, do something to gain two, three lempiras, [...] to be able to pay it. It is hard, [...] only paying, paying everything. Look they invent things to put now, look right now, they will install air condition in the cell, we have to pay [...] 350 each. Where will I get 350?

I've been adapting my own necessities, [...] I have three pants, a pair of shoes that a friend from prison gave me, I mean if that friend hadn't given those shoes to me, I would only have sandals. [...] [But] when I was with the gang members, I just said to them 'I need this much loco' [...] or if I had problem with someone here, if someone touched me here, well, 'Hey dude, look, I need you to put down a guy'.

The life changes completely for those who become *pesetas*. They leave a life characterized by respect and recognition for a life of social abandonment, where their existence and death do no longer matter. In such a zone of social abandonment “silence is the rule, and the voices of the abandoned are regularly ignored” (Biehl 2013, p. 30), leading the *pesetas* to become recognized as nonhuman. Some of the *pesetas* chose to leave the gang themselves, being aware of what that life could bring, while others were forced to leave. Their lived reality of not being able to reenter the society, due to structural violence in form of social exclusion and humiliation, lead many to reenter the violent life as a mean to survive (Vigh 2006). The prison, which supposedly is rehabilitative, have been taken over by various powers and turned into a place of recruitment and schools of crimes, making the *pesetas* and other marginalized vulnerable of becoming involved with a *banda* or organized crime. José, the social worker at a drug rehabilitation center, illustrated how prisons have become a place of specializing in crime:

The centers for minors like the centers for adults aren't rehabilitative, they are [...] corruptive, I mean the youth that enters a center for minors improves in the crime and if he passes over to prison [...] he graduates in the crime. The centers for minors are the primary specialization in the crime and in the prisons [...] [are] the university of crime.

In prison, the *pesetas* are not only exposed to recruitment, they are also victims of direct physical violence. All *pesetas* have a death sentence hanging over them since leaving a gang is punishable by death, consequently they are also subjected to being killed in prison by active gang members. The active gang members are generally held in cells separate from the other inmates, but if a *peseta* enters these separate areas, he would most likely not come out alive. When Antonio was arrested, he had a friend he wanted to visit in the area of the *MS*, but he was warned if he went in there, he would not come out alive:

Now when I was arrested they brought me to a prison, [there] they just said to me, 'We give you five minutes to withstand'. There is a module I wanted to enter [...] to see a guy, 'If you enter there they'll kill you', a *paisa*⁷⁹ said to me, 'They care more for 18 than for you', he said to me. [...] They would just put your head as wallpaper. [...] 'Look' he said to me, 'don't even suggest that we get inside that module, 17 *pesetas* from *MS*—from you guys from *MS* entered there', he said 'Not one came out alive'.

The *pesetas*, whether incarcerated or not, live in utter marginality. They are exposed to violence as the gangs among others want to see them dead, which make them easy targets for *bandas*, because the *pesetas* have experience of killing at the same time as they are in danger. The *pesetas* are also general perceived as 'garbage', lesser than human, and become victims of repressive actions by the society at large as well as the authorities, in form of humiliation and stigmatization. The dehumanization of the *pesetas*, creates a general attitude of indifference, psychological distance, and lack of empathy towards them, which according to Haslam (2006) are traits that objectify them, and facilitate their oppression and public perception as lesser than human.

Staying in a violent environment is often the only way to stay alive for the *pesetas*, because they receive protection and earn money. I listened to the stories of the *pesetas*, of how they want to change, but generally are forced into delinquency over and over again due to their lived

⁷⁹ Ordinary delinquent.

marginality, insecurity and exclusion, and I thought to myself, when the social structures are working in favor of the *pesetas* to remain violent, what change is really possible for them?

The violent reality of becoming a peseta

As the first day of interviews in prison was coming to an end, I was amazed how many *pesetas* were willing to share their stories. I was a bit concerned whether anyone would want to participate, due to the general societal mistrust, and more so because of the danger they might face talking about the gangs. Thus, I was astonished when I saw several *pesetas* waiting outside the interview room for their turn to tell their stories. Some of the *pesetas* were cautious of what they told us, but most of them, it seemed, had a desire to make known their current lived situation as a *peseta*, of their oppression and experience of violence. I realized that telling their stories were a way for them to reclaim a voice in an otherwise voiceless reality, where they “are deprived of a sense of agency in their own predicament” (Lovell 2006, p. 231). Being *pesetas*, they are silenced and have limited opportunity to be heard without reentering the world of violence. Thus, as Biehl (2013) shows in his analysis of life in zones of social abandonment, despite of “a routine abandonment and silencing, and yet, in spite of all the disregard” (p. 11), the marginalized experience they are able to claim agency when given space to do so, within the societal structures that generally deny them a voice.

Some of the *pesetas* asserted that sharing their stories were in some sense therapeutic to them. Someone listened to them and they were given an opportunity to talk about experiences and memories that they had not or could not talk about with anyone else, because of insecurity and the fear of being betrayed. The majority of the *pesetas* already had *luz verde*⁸⁰, which means that they are targets of being killed by their former gang. They had made a fatal error breaking the gang rules and thus disrespected the gang. Whether it was asking for permission to leave the gang, as Enrique did, or getting involved with another gang member’s girlfriend, as Jorge did, they were given the death penalty as a way for the gang to regain their respect.

Leaving the gang

For Antonio, it was different. When he was incarcerated in 2012, he had already left the gang, though without the awareness of his former gang, where he still pretended to be an active

80 ‘Green light’. The ‘green light’ is given to a gang member that breaks a gang rule, and means that their own gang want to kill them.

member. The last time I met with him, he had three months left in prison, and it was clear that his release terrified him because he was certain that his former gang had to know by then. “Look, I recently retired” he said quietly. He seemed nervous and in some ways scared, when Sarahi asked him about his current position with the gang.

Now that I was arrested in 2012, understand, I wasn’t with them [the gang] anymore, I had departed from them, so practically in 2012 I wasn’t active with them. I also pretend that I’m active with them, [...] and that is my greatest fear now that I get out, because I will get out now, I lack three months. [...] In reality my boss, he who jumped me⁸¹, doesn’t know that I’m open⁸².

He was anxious about his release, knowing that his gang would be waiting for him to kill him. Even if prison is a hostile environment for the *pesetas*, for Antonio it became a form of security from the physical death. He knew what followed with freedom; being persecuted by the gang and most likely tortured and killed if captured. “Do you feel more safe here in prison than outside?”, Sarahi asked him “Of course”, he replied. “Would you prefer staying?” “Well, not a long time, but I would like to stay a bit longer here. Like I said, outside...”. On the outside what awaited him was death and if he was fortunate enough to survive, a life in hiding and insecurity.

I don’t want this life, I don’t want it anymore, but it’s going to cost, as I said, because these guys have realized it now [that I have retired], maybe they will call me when I get out [...] [with] some excuse, well, that’s my fear for them, well, with the faith in God and the force of God I can carry on.

Antonio held on to a slim hope, even if he knew that leaving prison was his death sentence. He had been a gang member and he knew what they do to those who leave the gang. If they found him, they would kill him. And they did find him. A month after his release he was killed by his former gang.

Error of death

The death of a *peseta* is generally invisible and accepted as they lose their social worth and respect as soon as they become a *peseta*. For the authorities and society at large they are

⁸¹ Jumped me; a beating by the new gang, the baptism to enter the gang.

⁸² Left the gang

generally considered lesser than humans, with no ability to change, an even worse, having lost their manliness and courage turning down the violent gang life. In the case of the gangs they are seen as traitors that disrespected the gang rules when they chose to leave or made a fatal error, which is penalized with death.

The gang rules are in some way a safeguard against the general societal breakdown, a mechanism to avoid the relational disintegration due to societal mistrust and deterioration of values, and to avoid the inequality of power. The gangs, however, have incorporated the societal use of violence into the gang structure, which enables control and respect within the gang. This way, it is possible to maintain trust, because if they betray a gang member they are punished, and depending on their action, to death.

Jorge gained the death penalty from his gang at the age of 19, when he made a fatal error. At the time, he was close with the leaders and did anything for the gang. He had no desire to leave the gang life where he had respect, money and friendship, he rather wanted to die for the gang. But he chose to retire when he was made aware that his gang blacklisted him while in prison, and that he was the next on the list to be killed:

I retired because [...] the thing is I got involved with a homie's⁸³ girlfriend, you understand. In the street, I was [...] in her house [...] as a hideout. And the chick seduced me, you understand, and I couldn't stop myself. I mean me and her were [together] and the carnal⁸⁴ was in prison. [...] So I was afraid [that something would happen to us], and I can't stand lying [either], [...] [so] I stopped [seeing her]. But I already knew that it was a death penalty to do this thing, because it was to disrespect my carnal, [and if the gang found out] they would kill her as well. But thank God they did not kill her.

They sent me to prison with the gang and when I was there, I began thinking what a big problem it would be if this loco⁸⁵ caught me. And I always remembered the chick, because when the chick came [...] [to prison] she wanted to come to me, you understand, but her husband was there [...] in another cell. From that time [...] my mind began to sicken, well, I said 'The truth is, he suspects me and he'll put me under investigation and they will slay me'. [...] They began to kill [gang members] inside prison, [...] [they

⁸³ Gang member

⁸⁴ His leader

⁸⁵ Gang member

did] a *limpieza*⁸⁶, they killed six people where I was, six gang members, so the seventh was me, a trusted loco told me, you understand, that was me. So I said, 'Is it better to die in war than die hidden?'

It became a question of being killed in the hands of his friends, the gang, or reenter the path to social death. He chose the latter. He put a cross over his gang tattoos to illustrate that he was a *peseta* and by doing so he also declared war against his gang.

I didn't want this life for my son

Several of the *pesetas* asserted that parenthood made them want to change their ways, as they felt a desire to give their children a better life outside the gang, and to separate them from the violent life style and the obligation of become members. The majority of the gang members had childhood experiences of family negligence, violence, and poverty, and wanted to give their children a life chance they did not have. Enrique was one of them, he asked to leave the gang seven years ago to take care of his son for a while, though he knew what might happen to him. By asking to leave he disrespected the gang and by doing so he put himself and his family in danger of being killed:

I had my woman and my son, my son was one years old [...] and I knew I didn't want this life for my son, because I know the gang members, well, I didn't want him to become a gang member. So I ask [...] the homies for permission [to leave the gang], right, because they had superior rang. I talked to them and [...] they said yes, but I had to do a mission [first], and [...] [then I could] leave the gang and all good.

Like without knowing, always trusting, well, I did the mission. The gang members, well, to show their respect, they killed my woman and my son. So [...] they stripped me for something important. [...] Several have been killed for the same reason, because we don't want to see our children in the gang, right, because I don't want to harm my son, and that is to wish to harm [him]. [...] It [would be] better [to] put a rope around my son and hang him, because getting him involved in the gang I didn't want that [...] I didn't want to show my son that future.

⁸⁶ Killing fellow gang members that have made fatal errors.

It was a bad idea, well, you understand, because I was guided by the love I felt for my wife and did the nonsense, well, I knew it was nonsense. I got her pregnant and they had to pay the consequences.

Enrique's desire to make a better life for his family made him blind to the consequences of leaving the gang. "I knew it was nonsense" he proclaimed, but "I was guided by the love I felt for my wife". It is difficult for the *pesetas* to change their lives even if they want to, as they are subjected to persecution by their gang and suffer dehumanization in form of humiliation and stigmatization by the society at large. The *pesetas*, whether they are in prison or on the streets, live a life in social abandonment, where they are recognized as unwanted and unworthy, which ultimately have allowed for their lives and bodies to become disposable. According to Biehl (2013), the unwanted are directed towards the social death where they "become unknowables, with no human rights and with no one accountable for their condition" (p. 4), they are silenced and forgotten. Their marginal situation and general lack of opportunities in the society, and the experienced insecurity, often force them to join a *banda* for physical and economic security, which was the case of Enrique. He joined a *banda* after seven years as a *peseta* trying to avoid that path.

Insecurity and the spiral of death

Enrique seemed anxious when he talked with Sarahi on the phone. He called to tell her that he had returned to Santa Cruz and was available for a second interview. Sarahi and I had tried several times to get hold of him, but he left Santa Cruz right after our first conversation to take a job in another city. After a couple of months, however, he was fired due to an accident he was in. He tried to continue working an 'honorable' job, to escape the necessity to commit crimes to survive, but his social position as a *peseta* excluded him from most opportunities. He was forced to return to the thing he knew best; violence.

The day of the interview, Enrique called beforehand to ask if we could pick him up at a corner not far from where we conducted the interview, because a friend of his would let him off there. He sounded nervous, but it was not until he stepped out of his friend's car that I realized how scared he really was. He seemed exhausted and frightened, even more so than the first time we met, and he continually scouted the area for any threats and jumping at every little sound he heard. Watching his behavior, it was evident that something had happened since the last time we met.

“I want to leave this now, I don’t want more; drugs, liqueur and streets. I want to be in a place where I can be relaxed” Enrique said with sadness in his voice, when we had arrived to the private house. His eyes were distant and he seemed dejected, knowing that his death was close. He told us that he turned to a *banda* after he lost his job, as a last attempt to escape the inevitable social and physical death that awaited him:

For the system of life, I left those things in the gang, and now I’m a fugitive of them, so I went to save myself, [and took] refuge with these people [banda de sicarios], that are also organized crime, so we steal and we kill people.

Enrique joined the *banda* to stay alive, however it ended up being a choice of an earlier death, because he engaged in a public assassination of a man. The family of the assassinated began persecution Enrique to get revenge, which forced him to return to Santa Cruz to hide. “I have to be careful. I have too much load [now], I can’t bear it anymore. I would like that Jesus Crist came and helped me, and took away this load now”. I jumped as I saw Enrique’s reaction when a motorbike passed the house. He knew someone was looking for him, “I know that one of these days they will kill me, if you understand, because I have too many enemies now”.

Being violent and joining a *banda* was a way to avoid the feeling of powerlessness and at the same time a way to gain protection and earn money. The *bandas* seek out the *pesetas* because of their marginal position in the society and they exploit their need for protection and work to gain people they know have knowledge of killing. However, joining a *banda* can also be recognized as an active choice to avoid the dehumanized social death, grabbing the best option they have to stay alive, both physically and socially (Levi 2004). Being a paid killer or drug trafficker is increasingly considered as a valid employment as a mean to survive:

My life is better now, why? Because I earn money. At the moment I don’t have money, but when I work a couple of days, I earn money. Sometimes 50, 30, 20,000 [lempiras] in one turn. [...] But right now we can’t work because the police don’t let us ..., [as] we are activated. [...] If the police catch us [now] they’ll put us in jail, I would be jailed for at least some 50, 40 years [...] I have five arrest warrants.

Many *pesetas* eventually enter a *banda* as they have no possibilities to reenter and be a part of the society. The *pesetas* are abandoned to themselves living in constant insecurity and by

joining a *banda* they can achieve protection from those who want them dead, as described by Enrique:

We [...] look after our lives. The gang will cut us into pieces now, their sicarios, [because] we know a lot of things about them, so they aren't happy that we have left the gang. [...] [If] they see you they will want to destroy you only because you are peseta. [...] Pesetas that are fighting for their lives must embark on what they know best, sicariato, you know there is no other option, you understand, there is no other option.

Enrique looked frightened and lowered his voice as he heard people talking on the other side of the brick wall. He asked us whether it was possible for anyone to listen to our conversation and we assured him that it was not. If someone was to hear that he was sharing information about the gang and *banda* it would make him even more at risk than he already was. He continued describing the difference between the violent actions in the gang compared to that of the *banda*, "My violence has increased [...] I am with some very, very violent people now, so my violence is more satanic now". Powerful people such as the authorities, mafia and drug traffickers charged them to kill, and thus they have the power to order the killings in certain ways:

I have lived [violence] well lived, because things I had never done, I did them now that I began killing people for money. [...] The thing is in the gang we only came and ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba and finished, and here no, here they sometimes make me cut people into pieces. [...] I'm charging [...] powerful people, [...] [and] they call me, 'Look, I need you to kill [someone] for me, I will send you a photo of this man'. Then he sends me the photo to my phone, [and inform me] it's in this and this place and he gives me the address and everything. [...] At the job, the weapon is [already] there, and everything is there just to go shoot him. So they say to me, 'Look, I want you to bring back a piece of him, you have to bring back that piece, and if not there won't be any pay, to only shoot him in the head, [or] if you shoot him from [the waste] and down there is no pay either'.

The marginalized *pesetas* are victims in the struggle of power and respect, whether it is drug traffickers, authorities or other powerful people. They utilize the marginalized to conduct killings, often grotesquely as a mean to create fear. By paying for these killings they are able to blame the marginalized and incarcerate them if necessary and at the same time avoid being punished themselves. The marginalized including the *peseta* are turned into puppets of the

power machinery and are forced into a spiral of violence to escape the social death. Enrique asserted:

Violence, for me, it's not good, well, [because] I have also received violence against me, I have received a lot of violence; [by] the police and now that I'm involved in a banda. [...] But according to my personality I think that violence isn't good, for me, and these words [...] [if] a loco heard me saying this, he'll say that I can't say that, never, it's words that I can't say.

“It's word that I can't say” said Enrique as he smiled. Violence is an essential part of the collective subjectivity in gangs and *bandas*, but also in the cultural relations of becoming an adult (Pine 2015). I realized that being violent is an important internalized disposition, with a dual function in the power struggle; it is internalized as an important part of the social becoming to gain respect through obedience, which strengthened the power of the dominator. In addition, it normalizes violence in such a way that the dominator can blame the dominated for the violence without the dominated themselves recognizing it for what it is (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004).

When the interview was coming to an end, a sadness filled Enrique's voice as he elaborated on his current dreams, “I would like [...] to be reborn again, to be with my child [...] but I can't go back”. He was aware that his death would come sooner rather than later. Only a couple of weeks after the interview I got a phone call from Sarahi, “It's Enrique” she said. He was found beaten to death in a black plastic bag, close by where I lived. Whether it was his former gang or the people persecuting him that killed him is uncertain. The nature of the murder; being drugged, beaten, and dumped in a black plastic bag, characterize a gang murder, however, it is common that other people imitate gangs to give them the blame. Enrique's death was just one more on the mill of deaths, invisible and quickly forgotten.

Reentering the path of social death

Enrique's death passed by in silence, normalized and accepted, invisible and forgotten. Becoming *pesetas*, is not only characterized by insecurity, but more so by reentering the path of social death. They are deprived of the opportunity to live a meaningful life of recognition and belonging, as the social world no longer recognize them as human beings with any social worth (Bourdieu 2000). Many of them have a desire to leave the life of violence and to take

care of their family in an honorable way, but ultimately they are forced back to a criminal life as a mean to survive.

The *pesetas* are excluded from everyday life and the majority cannot live a normal life. It is nearly impossible for them to get employment due to their gang tattoos and their constant need to be on alert and hidden to avoid being killed. This form of structural violence that they are subjected to is “legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society” (Galtung 1990, p. 292), causing them to become repressed and alienated, which facilitate the justification of their death (Galtung 1990). Even if they want to change, the overall societal oppression and exclusion dehumanizes them, which facilitated the implementation of death politics targeting the *pesetas* directly. The implementation of the Anti-gang law, not only led to the persecution of gang members, but also of *pesetas*, and the government actively use death squads to kill them (Pine 2015). The *pesetas* also suffer mistreatment due to their former position as gang members. Some people who have been victimized by gangs, take revenge on the *pesetas*, since they are incapable of doing the same to gang members.

The *pesetas* are positioned at the bottom of the society and hence are easy targets of repressive actions. Killings of *pesetas*, and gang members for that matter, have become a part of everyday life, it is expected and accepted, and thus makes it difficult to recognize their victimization as targets of “genocide-like crimes” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). Even ordinary people have come to perceive it as acceptable and support violent actions against them, because it is considered necessary to reduce the prevalence of violence. As a result, the *pesetas* are targets of persecution, because even if they have left the gang and want to change, it is generally believed that if you have been a bad person, you will always be bad.

Stigmatization and discrimination

The *pesetas* are subjects of stigmatization and denied a normal identity by the society. They are dehumanized through actions of exclusion, humiliation, and discrimination. As a group they are turned into victims of violence because they are invisible, voiceless, and lack protection. Several *pesetas* told stories of how they willingly and unwillingly returned to delinquency after they became *peseta* to stay alive and to be able to live up to the masculine expectations of taking care of their families. As Pine (2015) observes, the inability of taking on a patriarchal role lead many Honduran men restore to acts of everyday violence, whether it is substance or alcohol abuse, or delinquent actions as a mean to regain their dignity as men. Paradoxically, many

pesetas that want to change, are regularly dehumanized and excluded by the same society they want to reenter, often to the extent that returning to delinquency is the only way to stay alive, socially and economically. Antonio explained that after he became a *peseta* he struggled to get a job because of his past, but was able to get a job as an apprentice mechanic. Despite this job, he quickly saw himself needing to go back to a life of stealing since his income, equivalent of one third of the minimum wage, was not enough to make ends meet:

No one wanted to give me work, so you know what I did? I spent my days in a mechanical workshop, I was learning mechanics and the owner was paying me, I earned 500 a week. But 500 wasn't enough for me, I had a girlfriend, [so] I had to steal at night [...] because I didn't have any other options, I had my girlfriend and my daughter, [...] [and] I had to take care of that cute little girl.

As Antonio continued telling his story, I noticed that some of his arm tattoos were damaged, it seemed as if they were burned. He explained that he had put a cigarette on them as a means to reduce the experienced discrimination by inmates and the society:

The marks [tattoos] that I had here [on my arms], I put a cigarette [on them] so that they wouldn't be that visible, but it is what it is. If you could see [...] there is no part of my body that doesn't have marks. So there is always a prejudice for us, those of us who are tattooed. [...] We are even discriminated in the prisons, the *pesetas*, well, they say to us, 'gang member garbage', and [...] all those things [...] well, for the tattoos. [...] For that reason, here, you will practically always see us with shirt, some [of us], because if we have the tattoos, [...] maybe a guard will say, 'You gang member garbage' and they start to insult [us]. [...] There is always discrimination.

I was surprised by the overt and widespread acceptance of excluding the *pesetas*. They are routinely treated as nonhumans, through animalistic and mechanic dehumanization (Haslam 2014), which allow the people to place them outside the sphere of moral concern (Opotow 1990). The authorities and others exploit the fact that they are defenseless as *pesetas*, which facilitate the exercise of violence against them, without fear of revenge. Antonio asserted that the incarcerated *pesetas* generally have to accept mistreatment and oppression since any resistance might lead to threats and even death:

Look, a normal case; one time I went outside to dispose a barrel, and a police said to me, 'Hey, you were a gang member?' 'Yes' 'Look loco' he said, 'You know what? Ultimately I like the *pesetas* less than the gang members' and he began to splash [with the hose], and so I hid, right, and I took the hose from him and I threw it at him to see what would happen to me. He loosened the gun and he put it like this at me [aiming at my head], but another guy grabbed it.

Maybe I shouldn't even have told it [to the assistant Director], well you understand, but I went to tell [him], [...] [and he] asked me, 'Do you want me to lock you up?' [...] so the only thing I said to him, 'Look, friend you know that I will get out of here one day' 'You will get out of here?' Yes, I threatened him. That is a death threat. [...] I got angry because the thing is he didn't even let me explain to him [...] [what had happened], how the situation was, and [...] he wanted to treat me like a dog just because I had been a gang member, and so if he is going to treat me like that, how can I not get offended by that?

For Antonio, and many others, exercising violence is a source of power, which enable them to act within their predicament. They are also thought to react with violence against disrespect and oppression.

There is a general belief that the *pesetas*, and other former delinquents are not able to change. Oscar, a family father, related to this, "A bad person is always bad, that is my thesis, a bad person will never be good, so for me when a bad person always is bad he will never do something good, right". Another example was a high ranking security who stated that: "Look the delinquent can have the opportunities, he can rehabilitate one day, [while other days he] commit crimes, well, this is the behavior of the delinquent, it is very difficult to change it". These perceptions are forms of symbolic violence that are internalized as a part of the *habitus* of the *pesetas* and the marginalized in general (Bourdieu 1977), ultimately reinforcing their oppression and powerlessness. The challenge is that Oscar and the safety officer are overlooking the fact that the societal structures confine *pesetas*' opportunity to change. How can the delinquents, or *pesetas* change, when they are denied any opportunity to do so? Marvin, a priest, also implicitly portraying the people in the streets as lesser of humans not capable of change. He stressed that a drug addict will not be interested in education, nor to learn an occupation, because they would ultimately end up stealing to get drugs if they were given the chance. Therefore, he argued, it is more helpful to give them food

To me, it clearly reveals the importance of power in every social relation, and how people exert power over the marginalized in a subtle and often unrecognized way. In the case of Marvin, giving food and not education have a dual function, it creates dependence, but it also allows those in power to stay there, by not sharing information that might change the social position of the marginalized. For this reason, even if a delinquent or *peseta* want change, it is nearly impossible because of the constraining social structures that already have them labeled as bad people, incapable of change.

Humiliation

In the streets, well, many people mock. [...] Many people want to, as they know that I was he who never gave in to anyone, now they come and humiliate me, and spit at me and like they look for problems with me.

Enrique explained to illustrate how humiliation had become a part of his everyday life. When people learned that he was a *peseta*, they began humiliating him regularly, knowing that he did not have the collective power of the gang to take revenge. They attacked his masculinity, because as a *peseta* he deviated from the societal expectations of an ideal man, as strong, brave, a provider, and protector (UNDP 2003). Becoming a *peseta*, they were ‘weak’, as they had left the respected life of a violent gang member. The everyday violence of humiliation is often misrecognized because it is normalized (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004).

It is common that the *pesetas* are humiliated in prison by fellow inmates and the authorities. They are considered as lesser than human since they have left their former life as gang members. Jorge elaborated on the treatment in prison:

Here [in prison] it’s really ugly, because they insult you here, [...] they humiliate you, [...] [and] they discriminate you. [...] The same inmates here that aren’t paisas⁸⁷ [...] they discriminate you, [and] they say to you that you are a fucking peseta, what a shit, I don’t know what, and they want to hit you. They take us as a nothing.

Humiliation generate a sense of powerlessness among the victims, making them feel rejected, and worthless. Some *pesetas* are even humiliated and discriminated by their own family, such

⁸⁷ Ordinary delinquents

as Jorge. After being incarcerated for 10 years he had only had visitors a few times, in which one time was when his mom that raised him came and insulted him:

[My family] doesn't talk to me, because I behaved badly with them, they don't want to see me, yes the only one who can stand me a bit is my aunt, because she came to see me one time, [...] [together with] the lady that raised me, but she only came to tell me that I was a misery, well, she began insulting me. [...] My aunt scolded her [...] [and said that] if she [only] came to insult me [she should leave]. She nearly made me cry, this lady. I'd better behave well, because I don't like that anyone makes me cry.

The humiliation is a subtle and more hidden form of everyday violence. It is routinized and accepted, and thus easily becomes invisible, though it might have devastating effect on those who are victims of it (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). Stigmatization, discrimination, and humiliation dehumanize the *pesetas* and exclude them from the 'official story' making them more exposed to directed, but hidden violence including social cleansing.

Social cleansing

After the first interview, Enrique made sure that there would be a second one, as he wanted to tell us about the hidden and invisible oppression experienced by the gang members and *pesetas*. Their death generally passes by in silence as it is normalized. The acceptance of marginalized youth' death, have led "their bodies, their lives, and their deaths" to become "thought of as dispensable" (Scheper-Hughes 2004, p. 175) as Scheper-Hughes observes in case of the disappeared and lost in Brazil. This allows for an 'invisible genocide' to occur, where their deaths have come to be taken for granted. When we eventually met Enrique again, after four months, Enrique explained how the gang members and *pesetas* are victims of a social cleansing process, whereby the government uses extermination groups to kill them⁸⁸. Enrique showed great agency in the limited space given to him:

Maduro [former president] implemented the Antigang law, [...] I wouldn't call [it] Antigang law, but [rather] the extermination law, because it locked some [of the gang members] up and from there [...] paramilitary groups from the government, of former

⁸⁸ See more in section "Violence: historical processes and the development of gangs".

soldiers from the government began killing the gang members. I'm saying it because I lived it and the groups still exist here.

They are dead squads put there by the government. I never had problems with them [...] during the time I was a gang member, but afterwards for money they followed me about three years. [...] I just went out and they followed behind me, wanting to kill me.

The main boss was living [nearby] and [he] was screaming that he could kill whoever he wanted and it is true. [...] [If] someone he maybe already has in sight is passing by, right, ruuup [sound of weapon] he kills him, he discharges with an AK and then he goes to sit down and continues to drink. And [then] the patrol arrives [asking him] [...] 'Carlos what happened here?' 'a thief, take him'. [...] The main one in charge of [...] the public security force can come, and it is like he [Carlos] is the commander there.

The everyday terror perpetrated by the authorities operate hidden from the 'official story' (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013; Lakhani 2016; Pine 2015; Tjaden & Alder 2016). They actively utilize intimidation and violence against the marginalized, which allows them to continue their oppression to gain control, without being recognized for their actions. By blaming the gang members and the *pesetas* for the social problem of violence the authorities disclaim responsibility at the same time as they create a gap between 'us' and 'them'. This way, the gang members and *pesetas* are dehumanized and turned into an 'Other' in the 'official discourse', which facilitated the justification of direct violence against them. Galtung (1990) asserts that "When [the] Other [...] has been successfully converted into an 'it', deprived of humanhood, the stage is set for any type of direct violence, which is then blamed on the victim" and in this manner the "extermination becomes a psychologically possible duty" (p. 295).

The *pesetas*, and the marginalized in general, continually balance between life and death, where the everyday life is characterized by 'invisible genocides' and terror, and the more subtle, but just as serious, slow social death (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The *pesetas*' invisibility and powerlessness facilitate the process of gaining accept for their elimination, because it is misrecognized as something good and necessary to reduce the prevalence of violence. Consequently, many marginalized, and even some *pesetas* and gang members themselves, have come to believe that their elimination is beneficial to the society at large.

Since the 2009 coup d'état the authorities have increasingly applied strategies of terror including social cleansing, intimidation, and violent actions against the marginalized (Human Rights Watch 2010; Tjaden & Alder 2016)⁸⁹, and specifically gang members and other delinquents, to gain control. Enrique further described this development in Santa Cruz:

During the government of Pepe Lobo [former president] was when Carlos gained more power, and he said that, 'I can kill whoever I want, I have the president's order to kill whoever I want' and it is true. That man killed a lot of people in the neighborhood and no one talks because they are afraid.

After the problem I had [with those who followed me], I went to the human right [commission] and I filed a claim, but I never could find witnesses to take them to trail, no one was there, no one. [...] I got hold of witnesses, but [...] just to confirm [...] that what I was saying was true, but they didn't have the courage to present themselves in court, because they knew that when they left the court there would be a complete war, [...] because Carlos would kill them.

Because that poor people are of course afraid that they will massacre their family, [...] [because] in this country the things are only sorted like that, either you are silent or they mute the people, because if you talked they will send someone to kill you.

They followed me for three years [...] they came as far as stopping in front of the church [...] to take me, well, to go kill me. Then someone would find me killed somewhere, [and] I would be one more death, one more murder, this hard is this country. This country is in a total condemnation. From what Juan Orlando [the president] says 'Honduras is changing', Honduras is not changing when there are 15-20 murders on a national level every day. [...] We are worse than at war.

Politics of death

As Enrique stressed, the everyday terror of the authorities have led the country into a "total condemnation". Since the coup d'état in 2009, the political Right have governed, which have increased the influence of the economic elite and the military. The country has been remilitarized in the name of security, with the creation of a military police that have daily patrols

⁸⁹ See more in section, "Violence; historical processes and the development of gangs".

in marginalized areas, often together with other military personnel. With the slogan ‘Estamos cambiando’ (we are changing) (La Prensa 2015b), the current president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, have declared the military police as an important element in his strategy to improve security (NotiHonduras 2015). He proclaims in the ‘official story’ that the implementation of the military police has reduced the homicide rates, even if that contradicts with the reality on the ground.

The president also promotes social programs for the marginalized, including a temporary work program in companies for youth living in high risk areas, building houses for the poor, and handing out free food bags to the poorest (La Prensa 2015b). The temporary work program for marginalized youth, for instance, give a three-month employment, which is just enough time for the marginalized youth to get accustomed to earn a salary, before they lose it again.

These programs, to me, are subtle forms of oppression that officially appears as a helping hand to the marginalized, but ultimately function as a strategy of making them further dependent on those in power. Moreover, it allows the repression of the marginalized youth to pass by in silence, as it uphold the ‘official story’ that Honduras is changing, while on the ground the story in another; there just as much death, oppression and poverty as before⁹⁰. The marginalized youth have become useful as publicity, portrayed both as victims in need of help, and the perpetrators that need to be fought. They are both at risk and the risk (Stephens 1995). Christina, a mother living in a gang controlled area, asserted that the people are blinded by the action of the government:

For me this government has made a chaos. [...] To see the people [are] so blind for a pound of rice [free food bags given by the government] that their dignity is trampled on, because their children are in the street being killed by people who have nothing.

Alicia, one of the social workers, argued that the prevalent politics exclude and persecute the marginalized youth, rather than empower them:

Politics of death is what have been, not a public politic of inclusion, of development, of [...] empowerment. [...] What does the government do? [They get] more police, more guns, [and] more hard laws, so the government is working at the level of effects [...] But why aren't they going to the root of the problem? Why aren't they focusing on; sources

⁹⁰ See more in section “Violence; historical processes and the development of gangs” and “Children and youth”.

of employment, education, participation? No, [...] rather the education must be privatized, and the people don't get education because they don't have money, the poor people, because the majority of the gang members are poor.

The government targets the effects, rather than the causes of violence to remain in power and keep their privileges. They govern the knowledge flow, and thus have the power to withhold information and to generate information, which strengthen their position. This allow them to regulate the behavior of the population, and to target those who try to resist the existent power structure; the youth, and more directly the youth in gangs. The marginalized youth are victimized from the day they are born, and ultimately they are turned into perpetrators in the 'official story', though in reality they balance a fine line between being victims and perpetrators of violence throughout their lives (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). The politics of death used against them, have resulted in more organized gangs who have gained more power through extortion, intimidation, and violence exercised against the marginalized equals⁹¹. Antonio described this:

The government loses power because since they began harassing the gang members, they kill innocent people, collecting more rent⁹², [and] more rent, understand. Now, right, the woman is also paying the consequences, understand, so this is a prison for the society. And what does the government do? [...] If they grab you [gang member], he goes to prison, inside [prison] he will do worse things, because inside is where all the venom of different brains⁹³ are. And [there] you see a lot, you hear a lot, [and] you learn [a lot], and you want to learn new things that you haven't practiced.

But the government do not worry, they endure a lot of violence, [and] they don't stop to think once who provoked all this violence. [...] The truth is that violence will not end as long as poverty doesn't end, as long as discrimination doesn't end, as long as there are people [...] that will abandon their children to chance, recklessly. That is determinant, because a child born poor watches what the other [people] have, [and] he gains ambition [to obtain the same things]. [...] [And at home] he sees his own family [have nothing].

⁹¹ See more in section "Development of gangs in Honduras".

⁹² Extortion

⁹³ Gang leaders

He sees his father arriving, [and] he is hungry, [but] what is that guy going to give him to eat. They don't give me work maybe because of a fucking tattoo.

So what will you try? You resort to delinquency. [...] He who has to commit a crime, will commit a crime. [...] If the government give these locos a chance, you understand, to the youth of this time, these people will have a new aspiration. [...] But everything depends on the government, on our government, you know, to give opportunities to the people, not to remove them from this world.

So I say it will be a bit difficult that the government will change the criminality, and [...] if they [...] want to change the criminality, first they have to change themselves. [...] The same president Juan Orlando, look, [he was] grabbing money from the social security for his political campaign. So I say the crime is, yes, we are equal no more than some do it more severe than others, [the gang members] are just doing more violence.

A continuum of violence

I will conclude this chapter with some of the *pesetas*' own reflections about violence, to illuminate the embeddedness of violence in the social structures and relations. As seen, if the *pesetas* have a desire to change, they are constrained by inherent dispositions of violence within themselves (e.g. masculine trait, gain respect and to get recognition) and others (e.g. violent treatment and dehumanization of the *pesetas*) (Bourdieu 1977), and for some it is necessary to return to violence to avoid their physical and social death.

The *pesetas* struggle at the margins between the desire to change, and the social structures of death. As I listened to the life stories of Enrique, Antonio and Jorge, I realized that throughout their lives they have shown great agency navigating their oppression, finding spaces to claim a voice and actively resist hegemonic power. They spoke of violence with a knowing belief that it is destructive and unnecessary, but yet difficult to escape because it is an inherent part of their life, and even more so because the society still perceive them as lesser than humans, that will never change.

Enrique

The general belief that someone who have been violent always will be, prevails in the society at large, creating space of exclusion and dehumanization. Being excluded, the *pesetas* are

basically given no other option than to returned to the life many of them initially escaped from. Even if the societal perception negates the possibility of change, many *pesetas* asserted that when they left the gang, their behavior, attitude, and desire to conduct violence changed, including the desire to kill rival gang members. Enrique recalled a memory that illustrated the change from a violent collective identity in the gang, to a less violent individual identity:

I shared a plate with a guy [once, after I became a *peseta*]. [...] [My gang had] sent me to kill him [when I still was gang member], I killed his friend, because he ran from me, then afterwards this guy looked for me and ‘bam’ he did the same shit to me. And here we were eating and he was telling me this shit, right [...] and I was staring at him and said to him, ‘Hey loco⁹⁴’ I said to him, ‘You wore a shirt like this’ ‘Yes’ ‘Fuck’ I said to him, [...] [and then] he said to me, ‘I don’t give a shit’ and we continued eating, because we are outside the gang now and that’s it. [...] You know why? Because it was the mission, order from the gang, and one who is no longer in the gang, well, we don’t think about doing the mission anymore, or if I see a rival opponent I will kill him.

Antonio

Antonio also struggled with the lack of comprehension from the society at large, hoping to be given space to show that it is possible to change:

When I’m released I would like that the society understand that I have changed, [...] [but] the people have me as an assassin, like, I don’t know, [...] like a cannibal that eats people. [...] [but] I’m a person like any other person with my fears.

He was dreaming of the possibility to attend university, to following his childhood dream of becoming a lawyer.

I’m in prison now. [...] But I say, well, I know the situation of the inmates, I know the prisons, I know every movement. [...] I know how they live, [...] right, and to be able to help them from where I [have] left, how I would like that.

He still had hopes and dreams, as many do not, but he was painfully aware that the dreams were just that, and that the reality that awaited him was another. But he still dreamt, showing

⁹⁴ Gang member

tremendous strength and agency in a zone of social abandonment (Biehl 2013). Even if he was abandoned to a life of exclusion, balancing between life and death, his perception and desire to do violence changed after he became a *peseta*:

Well the difference is big, it's very big, because, look, at times clothes don't make the changes, you understand, [or] the position [in the society] doesn't make the change, you know, but you do it by acts of your heart, [and] your decisions. Because [...] I did many bad things before, many bad things, you know, I really liked it. [...] [But] today I have a wall in front of me, that don't let me [...] think like that anymore, I learned to manage my emotions, you know, to control myself. [...] The better you think to act; you don't need much violence.

I'm calm [...] I consider myself to be a very respectful guy, because I like to respect the people, I don't care if you are tiny, if you are maimed, if you are blind, or whatever, rich, poor I have respect. Because in the passage of life I learned this, that you don't gain respect by doing violence to people, [and] doing harm to the people like I did, you gain respect by giving respect.

Antonio's perception of violence changed, but he still considered violence a necessity for his social and physical survival. Constrained by the internalized dispositions of masculinity and respect (Bourdieu 1977), he tried to avoid violence, but ultimately in some instances he was forced to conduct violence, even if he did not want to:

I'm 60 percent against [violence] and 40 percent in favor. [...] The 40 percent in favor is because of the environment I grew up in; violence. Since my childhood, I began seeing violence [...] [and now that] I'm retired whatever person wants to attack me [because I'm a *peseta*]. [...] I will not allow anyone to bother me just because I'm retired. It's not like they castrated me, that they cut of my balls [when I left the gang], I have courage, you understand.

But there are people that because of my physical appearance [...] won't like me, because [I am a *peseta* and] they [will] say [to me], 'now that I saw that gang member son of a bitch I remembered that one time a gang member assaulted my mom or assaulted my brother, or a gang member put a bullet in my father'. [...] From that point this person even though I want to respect him, and I'm respecting him, he is going to want to

disrespect me [and want to fight me because of what some gang member once did to one of his family members]. So I will choose 40 percent of violence to defend myself, and if I have to kill him in that 40 percent, I will do it again, because he dies before I die, yes it's more to defend my life.

I mean I grew up in a world where if a man touches me, my heart can only be peaceful by killing him, you understand. I grew up in that habit, only death straightens up mistakes. [...] Now in my case I don't want to know anything more about the evil. I have my two daughters and my son and what my dad wasn't for me I want to be for them.

Despite the fact that I did many bad things, I want to change it now, everything, and I want the people to know that even with this appearance of a bad person, inside this appearance there is a heart.

Jorge

As Antonio, Jorge with also struggled an inner battle between the desire to change and the constraining effects of the internalized dispositions:

I still think that [...] violence isn't right. [...] I can say that violence isn't right, but I know myself, you understand, I know what my heart desires, well, [...] peace is the good recommendation. But you know I don't [...] like to lie either, why should I lie only because someone like you two [are here talking to me, why] am I going to say that violence doesn't attract me anymore.

Well, today I think differently, yes, but I [still] want to kill the gang member [that killed a friend of mine] [...] and that is something I had to get off my chest, because I haven't told that to anyone. [...] But I had it here [in my heart], the desires to kill a gang member. I say that is violence itself, that I can't feel okay [before I get revenge], the first time I felt it, I felt good after I did it. [...] Well I think that is the only option even though I know, and I'm conscious that it isn't the only solution there is. [...] I'm in this thing that I want to change, but I also [...] [have] the desire of revenge. [...] [The killing of my friend] is something I never will forget and I don't think I will be able to have peace with it. But I ask for God's force that he removes what I have here inside, because from there I'm in accordance with [the fact] that violence attracts more violence. What good is it doing something wrong?

I don't know, well. Yes, because the more I think of it I have stopped being aggressive. [...] Now to find a solution for my problem, well, I don't use violence anymore, [...] but now I try to talk to my mates [...] and we come to a less conflictive solution, you understand. [...] The truth is, well, [...] on my part I [...] forgive all my enemies, well, but the heart has the last word, and my Father have all the last decisions of everything that will happen.

Jorge illustrated how difficult it is to constantly move in a continuum of violence, with a conflicting desire of change and wanting revenge. His reflections about violence reveal how permeated violence is at every level of society, and of its importance to gain a position of respect, recognition, and power. He ended the last interview by comparing the violence in Honduras to Gandhi, demonstrating how the widespread acceptance and normalization of violence and the internalized symbolic violence makes it highly unlikely for a Honduran man to choose peace over violence, tolerating mistreatment without taking revenge:

Look, [...] I read a story about Gandhi [...] how beautiful, well. And look, he is an admirable man, well, who wouldn't want to be like him, but you know, to endure that they beat you, [and] insult you [like that]—in Honduras, in Honduras I don't think that there are going to be anyone like that.

The social and physical death

A few days after I returned from Honduras, I received a phone call from Sarahi, who informed me about the death of Antonio. The last time I talked to him, he was clinging to a tiny hope of surviving his coming freedom, but was painfully aware of the greater likelihood that his death awaited him when released from prison. As for many other *pesetas*, Antonio's destiny turned out to be just that, he encountered the inevitable and utterly silenced death, as his former gang tracked him down and killed him a month after he got out of prison.

Enrique also suffered a similar destiny, after entering a *banda de sicarios*. A few months after he joined the *banda*, he was persecuted by the family of a man he assassinated, as well as by the police as he had obtained five arrest warrants. Consequently, Enrique returned to Santa Cruz to find protection from the unescapable death. As he had no other place to go, he paid his former gang to let him stay in his neighborhood. This reveals his desperation and lack of options as his former gang also wanted him dead. I never got an insight into how he got permission to stay

there without being killed, but I learned from other *pesetas* that sometimes the gangs allowed some to reenter for a short time, before they ultimately kill them.

The night Enrique was killed, he went out with some friends to a bar in another neighborhood controlled by *MS*, where he was found close by beaten to death, with a lot of drugs in his system the following day. His death was characteristic of a gang killing, however, other people, *bandas* and even the police imitate gang murders as a way to give the gangs the blame, and thus there is no way knowing who really killed him. Enrique's choice to enter the *banda* to get protection from the physical and social death, ultimately ended up being a choice of an earlier death.

Jorge, on the other hand, is still incarcerated, sentenced to 60 years in prison, though he might be released in 20 years due to good behavior. For Jorge the life in prison is a continuous struggle to survive due to his marginalized position as a *peseta*. He cleans plates, washes clothes, and does handicrafts to earn his living, and to be able to pay collects that the powerful actors in the prison demand. Jorge is subjected to reenter the violent life, as he is often offered opportunities of rejoining the gang as a prison hitman or entering criminal *bandas*. These offers can sometimes be tempting due to his lived marginality, however, he tries to leave the violent life and change his ways. For that reason, he began studying and are currently working as a teacher for inmates.

Concluding remarks

I feel like a champion, because I had so many obstacles in my life like you don't have a clue, despite of all the bad I have done, because I did it because of [...] the lack of orientation or advise from someone that educated me, like parents. [...] I lacked the warmth from parents to grow up as a child and as a person, so to speak like a sociable person, because I feel like I grew up on the street like an animal.

Antonio, *peseta*

This study of the lived realities of the *pesetas*, shows how they constantly move along a continuum of violence throughout their lives, shifting between being victims and perpetrators of violence. It illustrates that the marginalized youth, gang members, and *pesetas* actively make choices to increase their life chances within their lived realities, to escape a social and physical death. The marginalized children and youth are often victims of social exclusion, family negligence, and generally recognized as individuals with limited social worth. For many of them, the gangs are the only way to escape social death, and even if it is a violent life chance that generally lead to a quicker physical death, being violent give them recognition and respect, and more so, a sense of social belonging. Entering a gang can give the marginalized children and youth meaning to life, and a way to reclaim their humanness.

A violent life chance, as shown in the study, gives the marginalized youth the opportunity to reclaim respect, and become recognized as human beings with social worth, through the use of violence. In the gang, violence has become an important attribute in the formation of subjectivity, to the extent that the more violent a person is, the more respect he gains. Violence is also a mechanism the gangs use to fight their oppression, and challenge the existing power structure. As gang members, they hold a certain degree of power, and are recognized and respected in the public realm, however within the existing societal structures the authorities hold the dominant power. This facilitates the portrayal of the marginalized youth and gang members as the main perpetrators of violence. Even if the marginalized youth reclaim some sense of humanness becoming a gang member, they continue to suffer dehumanization by being given the main responsibility of violence in the public discourse, which promote the representation of them as the 'Other' and ultimately facilitates the acceptance of their repression and elimination.

The final part of the analysis uncovers the lived realities after leaving a gang. By becoming a *peseta*, they reenter the path to social death, where they are utterly excluded, stigmatized and humiliate due to their former role as gang members. They are further subjected to dehumanization, especially when they choose a less violent life, as being violent is considered to be an important masculine trait. Leaving the gang, whether it is voluntarily or forced, they live in constant insecurity, in danger of being killed by their former gang and others who want them dead. Even the *pesetas* who have a desire to change, are often forced back to a violent life to stay alive.

This study contributes to an increased understanding of the lived realities of marginalized children and youth, gang members and *pesetas* in Honduras by opening a space for their voices to be heard. Their stories show a constant struggle between subjective agency in search of recognition and respect, and the structural oppression that turned them into both victims and perpetrators of violence. For many, a violent life chance in gangs and *banda* is the only way to survive the social death, and gain a position of respect in the society.

The lived reality of the marginalized youth has worsened in recent years as oppression has increased. Since the 2009 coup d'état, the state and other powerful actors have promoted oppressive actions that victimize the marginalized by further favoring privatization, implementing oppressive laws, and encouraging militarization (La Prensa 2015b; NotiHonduras 2015). Consequently, this has increased inequality and the experienced voicelessness. Rather than fighting social exclusion and inequality, the Honduran state has begun a process of remilitarization in the name of security, which give the powerful actors more control. It is portrayed as a necessity and a benefit for the overall society, but ultimately the marginalized youth, are subjected to an increased insecurity through more violent deaths and abuse, and further exclusion (Casa Alianza Honduras 2014; Gutiérrez Rivera 2013).

If the goal is to reduce the current prevalence of violence, it is necessary to gain knowledge of the historical and social reasons for its prevalence, rather than dehumanizing some of its perpetrators. Contrary to the government's condemnation of the marginalized youth and gangs, a social explanation that gives a sense of humanness back to the marginalized, can be effective in increasing the knowledge of social and historical causes for the emergence and prevalence of violence, and gangs. The current focus of the public discourse is to create a divide between 'Us' and the 'Other', between the society at large and the marginalized youth and gang members, which allows for a process of dehumanization, and facilitate the societal acceptance

of their oppression and death. However, by focusing on a social explanation and history where the ‘Other’ is recognized “fundamentally like us”, we have to acknowledge that if we came from the same background as the ‘Other’ we would likely be in the same situation as them (Hage 2003), and by doing so the perpetrator is allowed some of his humanity back.

It is not only marginalized youth identified as violent that suffer state oppression. As I am writing this thesis, a conflict between students and the authorities is unfolding in the wake of the enactment of new academic norms at the largest public university, *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras*. Several hundred students have protested against the new norms, as they consider them one step in the direction of privatization of the university, which will further enhance the exclusion of marginalized youth. The authorities have criminalized their attempt to create spaces where their voices can be heard, which have led to the arrest of many students (Radio Progreso 2016).

It is difficult for marginalized youth to escape the existing structural oppression, and the internalized symbolic violence that allow the powerful actors to shape the public perception of them. However, empowering the marginalized youth and allowing them a voice in the public realm will generate a necessity for the powerful actors to respect and recognize the marginalized youth as human beings with equal social worth, which ultimately challenge the core of the existing power structures.

During my last visit in prison, Antonio reflected upon his changed perception of violence since he became a *peseta*, illustrating how the public perception of a person greatly influence the person’s life course:

I [...] realized that life is like a mirror, if you stop in front of a mirror, [and] [...] laugh with the person in the mirror, that person will laugh, but if you [...] make a bad gesture to that person, that person will also make a bad gesture to you. So now I have learned that in this life you have to give respect to be respected.

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