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Navigating Violence: Fear and Everyday Life in Colombia and Mexico

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Abstract

Violence and insecurity are often read as totalising narratives of communities in parts of Latin America, flattening the complexity of everyday life and the responses of occupants who suffer from fear. In this article we draw on ethnographic research undertaken in los Altos de Cazucá in Colombia and in San Luis Potosí in Mexico. While both sites are distinct locations with different historic, economic, social and political contexts they share features of communities affected by violence and insecurity: distrust of institutions of the state; rationalisations for managing violence in daily life; and narratives of fear that appear woven through the fabric of conversations. However, fear and violence are not all-encompassing experiences and individuals in both these communities describe practices of navigation of violence that draw on positive communal experiences. This article explores how, in these communities where violence comes to be expected but never normalised, people navigate their everyday lives.

Keywords

Violence; social navigation; Colombia; Mexico; insecurity; everyday life.

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Introduction

Both Colombians and Mexicans have long experienced the effects of violence in their countries. While Colombia's conflict has lasted more than half a century the parties to the conflict, both the leftist guerrillas and the right-wing paramilitary organisations (as well as corrupt state officials) have also become involved in drugs and arms trafficking (Palacios 2006). The consequences of five decades of conflict and violence have been large scale displacement (approximately six million people (Edwards 2016) or approximately one in ten Colombians (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2015) have been displaced due to the conflict), the wide scale abnegation of human rights, underdevelopment, poverty, and the undermining of the government's authority and capacity to serve all its citizens (see, amongst others, Bouvier 2009; Pecaute 2006; Profamilia 2005; Richani 2002; Romero 2007). In parts of the country the state has lost its authority and illegal groups control communities. Since 2012 there has been a peace process underway between the government and the leftist guerrillas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by their Spanish acronym of FARC); however, however, even with a peace deal signed in late 2016 and being implemented, insecurity and inequality will persist in many places.

In Mexico the self-declared war on organised crime and drugs launched by President Felipe Calderón, newly elected in 2006, has seen an unprecedented wave of violence and insecurity convulse the nation (Morris 2009). Following the highly disputed elections Calderón dispatched tens of thousands of military troops and federal police to key narcotic-trafficking states during his presidency, resulting in an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 deaths with a further 26,000 people missing (Gayón 2015; Rosen and Martínez 2014). In more recent years civilians, authorities and journalists have increasingly become the target of the growing insecurity with drug cartels branching out into extortion, human smuggling and kidnapping. This is to the exclusion of the extensive list of violations attributed directly to state forces (Beittel 2011; Human Rights Watch 2015). Similar to Colombia in the 1990s, the Mexican state has lost its monopoly over the use of force which is evidenced by the private armed groups, self-defence groups, corrupt state forces and drug trafficking organisation which also routinely use violence as a tool. As a result Mexican citizens have become trapped in networks of extortion and coercion, in which both state forces and criminal organisations prey with impunity (Magaloni et al. 2015: 28).

In both countries the violence has affected people unevenly but both situations are also characterised by widespread insecurity, the targeting of individuals such as human rights advocates and journalists (Molzahn et al. 2012; Human Rights Watch 2014; Tate 2007), the prevalence of stories of death, torture and violence in print and visual media (Brambila 2014), and the undermining of a sense of security and of rights.

This article draws upon ethnographic research conducted by the authors, one working in an informal community on the outskirts of Colombia's capital Bogotá, and the other in the metropolitan area of San Luis Potosí City, Mexico. While the sites differ in a range of significant ways including size and demographic features, occupants of both communities demonstrate the cost of living with fear and insecurity, the impact of violence, and the techniques people adopt to navigate their daily lives.

We challenge both a flattened narrative of violence as totalising and an understanding of violence as ever normalised, which is sometimes implicit in engagements with the global South. Instead we propose a way of understanding the experiences of structural and direct violence that takes its starting point with the experiences of individuals who have learned to navigate their everyday lives despite, and because of, the insecurity and fear that impacts their lives. We offer this as a way of countering the ideas that these kinds of places that experience violence are *inherently* violent, or that sites of conflict and insecurity in the global South are *intrinsically* or *totally* sites of despair or danger, or that people are nothing more than passive victims in the face of violence in their daily lives. The forms of navigation – of agency and decision-making – that we explore

here are generally mundane; they are practices in everyday life of moving through insecure and unpredictable terrains. The occupants of both communities recognise the challenges of living with violence and, as we discuss below, have developed strategies built on communication with other community members, on-the-spot decision making, and weighing of risk, to become skilled navigators in these contexts. We argue that attention to the often small, everyday agency exercised by individuals offers alternative perceptions of communities and circumstances provided by other research in similar locations and situations where those affected by violence collectively and openly organise against violence. We do not wish to suggest that the individuals in either community are passive; rather, their agency is shaped by their experiences of insecurity and violence and, in different ways, they navigate through and over these uncertain seas.

To do this, we briefly introduce the two sites, explain our research processes and situate ourselves as researchers; we then proceed in two parts. In the first part we explore notions of violence and fear to theorise them as complex and ever-changing experiences. While violence can break individuals and communal bonds, it is not a normal or totalising experience. We also forward here a notion of a skilled navigator, drawing on Henrik Vigh's (2009) work. In the second part we explore accounts of structural and direct violence experienced by participants in both Colombia and Mexico and the consequences for their lives. These experiences form the basis for understanding these individuals as skilled navigators of their everyday lives.

In this article we explore how, in these sites, violence, fear and distrust are not extra-ordinary conditions but part of everyday life. In acknowledging this, we do not seek to exoticise the communities presented in this research or reinforce a totalising narrative. Rather, we aspire to prompt more critical reflection on how these topics are described and understood, and argue for the capacity of individuals to *navigate* their everyday lives in ways that respond to and ameliorate the effects of violence and insecurity.

Methodology and acknowledging researcher positionality

Fieldwork sites

In Colombia, the community of los Altos de Cazucá (often referred to simply as Cazucá) is an illegally established community that forms part of Comuna 4 of the municipality of Soacha, on the periphery of Bogotá. There are over 60,000 inhabitants of Comuna 4 (Alcaldía Municipal de Soacha 2008: 8). The Comuna is one of the poorest in Colombia; it is also one of the largest recipient communities for people internally displaced by Colombia's long-running conflict. The poverty and neglect of the community is visible in the lack of paved roads, the ad-hoc construction of houses, presence of rubbish, and lack of communal spaces. Most occupants do not have running water, and access to government services is often complex and fraught. Fear of violence by armed gangs is a constant concern of the occupants, and the violence and altercations between gangs and state forces paint a picture – for those outside the space of the community – of endemic violence and delinquent or threatening occupants. Despite these challenges, such a description is not a totalising account of a community that for the most part is comprised of families trying to live day-to-day, often displaced, negotiating poverty and the absence of state care (see Berents 2015). There is pride in the community and a desire to counter negative narratives.

San Luis Potosí in Mexico is the state capital of San Luis Potosí State and has a population of approximately 772,604 inhabitants. The city is located halfway between Mexico City and the United States border and is in the middle of the triangle formed by Mexico City and the two other largest cities in Mexico, Guadalajara and Monterrey. While the city's central location has made it an attractive location for legitimate investment, its good connections to the tumultuous northern regions, and ready access to the main railroad to the United States has also attracted criminal organisations. The region remained reasonably stable until the drug-related violence increased by 49 per cent in the first four months of 2013, just before and during the fieldwork period (Overseas Security Advisory Council 2013). As a result of this unprecedented increase, San Luis

Potosí was added to the list of Mexico's most dangerous cities in the 2013 National Social Plan of Prevention of Violence and Crime. During daytime, however, the only visible aspect of the violence were the posters of missing persons in the city and the enormous show of force by the many pick-up trucks with masked municipal, state and federal police forces carrying automatic weapons. At a first glance life seemed to continue as normal in the vibrant colonial city centre with its many bookstores, busy public transport and many food carts but, despite this first appearance, the insecurity had seeped through into an underlying layer that deeply impacted everyday life in the form of fear and coping mechanisms. Violence was thus more often a visceral than a visual experience; nonetheless, one that was constantly present and constantly changing. Within this situation San Luis Potosí occupants, the Potosinos, had become knowledgeable and skillful in moving with and through this uncertain environment to continue their daily routines.

Despite the differences between the two communities and their broader contexts, we argue that it is fruitful to bring together the experiences of these two communities to explore occupants' navigation of everyday life in situations of insecurity and unpredictable violence.

Research process and positionality

Original research for both sites was conducted independently for two different projects and is brought together in conversation here.¹ In both cases the researchers spent several months in the community and adopted ethnographic methods. Such research is predicated on respect for those involved, recognition of expertise of the local community in issues that affect them, and commitment to reflexively engage in the complexity of lived experiences of participants. All names used here are pseudonyms. Both researchers speak Spanish fluently and research was conducted in Spanish in Mexico and Colombia.

In Colombia Helen Berents spent time in the community of los Altos de Cazucá between September and December 2010 participating in daily life through a school in the community and a foundation, *Fundacion Pies Descalzos*, which supported students through school and community engagements. This original research was focused on young people's responses to violence and construction of peace, and thus youth formed the bulk of the fieldwork data quoted here. Observation and, later, interviews with young people, their parents, teachers and guardians as well as other key community figures informed the research.

In Mexico Charlotte ten Have conducted fieldwork between January and March 2013 with the use of participant observation and qualitative focus groups, and individual interviews. The first two months of fieldwork were conducted in San Luis Potosí and the last month in Guanajuato, with frequent visits back to the original fieldwork site. The Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, and the help of Dr Daniel Solís Domínguez were crucial in gaining access to respondents. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the university and two high schools in lower socio-economic suburbs of the city. The original research focused on coping mechanisms in relation to increasing violence.

There are important considerations in undertaking research of this nature, which we acknowledge and respect. As two researchers from the global North (Australia and the Netherlands), conducting research in the global South requires recognition of perhaps uneven power relations and privileges that cannot be 'solved'. There has been excellent research conducted by academics from within these countries about the situations we research, and avoiding extractive, disrespectful research was a key consideration for us both. Engaging with important local research – not to assimilate it or extract that which is useful within our epistemological framework but to challenge our understanding, our assumptions – is part of an academic and creative practice that can perhaps respond to the inadequacies of North-to-South research that remains extractive and colonial.²

Ethnographic research can, to some extent, mediate these expectations as the researcher becomes better understood by the community, as they come to understand the community.³ As part of the social world under study, reflexivity allows us to acknowledge and question what role we play as researchers and beyond (see Gouldner 1971). Recognising our positionality we acknowledge we can never avoid it, and accept that we may be unable to fully move beyond understandings rooted in the traditions of the global North. However, we offer these explorations both in terms of methodological reflexivity here, as well as within our theoretical engagement by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those from Colombia and Mexico who shared parts of their experiences with us, and concede partiality in this endeavour.

Theorising violence, fear and navigation

In this section we explore theorisations of violence and fear, understanding them as neither static nor simplistic but, instead, as complex, kinetic processes which impact people and to which people respond. Violence and fear can silence, debilitate and deconstruct people and relationships (Koonings and Kruijt 1999). However, in this section we also forward a notion of navigation. Building on Vigh's (2009) work, we explore navigation as a way of understanding people's everyday responses to violence and fear. Such a configuration challenges the passive construction implied by 'coping' and, alternatively, recognises agency and capacity. Through this theoretical exploration we arrive at the notion of a skilled navigator, a person who moves through experiences of violence and insecurity by drawing on their knowledge and expertise.

Complex notions of violence and fear

Violence is complex and the ways in which people respond to violence are also complex. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2003: 2) argue that 'violence defies easy categorization', and while violence performed on 'grand' scales such as war, genocide or state-sanctioned oppression are 'graphic and transparent', it is the 'everyday violence of infant mortality, slow starvation, disease, despair, and humiliation that destroys socially marginalized humans with even greater frequency [that] are usually invisible or misrecognized'. We acknowledge that both forms of violence – the 'grand' 'graphic' violence and the 'usually invisible' everyday violence – affect the lives of those in both communities. Violence, then, is not only deliberate and conscious but also arises from systems of oppression that are maintained and condoned through the maintenance of particular social orders (Farmer 2004: 307). Such an understanding is also linked to Galtung's (1990) three pillars of violence. Galtung sees 'direct violence', such as murder or physical abuse, as one pillar. Secondly, 'structural violence' recognises that things such as inequality, repression and exclusion are part of structures that enable violence. Finally, 'cultural violence' for Galtung legitimises direct and structural violence through cultural norms. Galtung (1990: 294) argues that 'direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups-and-downs and cultural violence is an invariant or a permanence remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of basic culture'.

Violence also has an emotional component. The threat or risk of violence creates an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. Fear spreads distrust and breaks communal bonds as people fear speaking up and thus suffer further. This self-censorship not only occurs in the public space but also filters into the private sphere. Beyond the direct human suffering caused by conflict and drug-related violence, violence thus also undermines people's sense of security (Morris 2009). In such environments 'fear, like pain, is overwhelmingly present to the person experiencing it, but it may be barely perceptible to anyone else and almost defies objectification. Subjectively the mundane experience of chronic fear wears down one's sensibility to it' (Green 1994: 230). The concept of 'pain', in this sense, is introduced as a bridging notion between violence and fear or, rather, *as part of* a relationship between violence and fear. In such situations pain can be emotional as well as physical. People hide their pain in response to fear and the silencing impact violence can have. Elaine Scarry notes that violence is a silencing act: 'pain does not simply resist language but

actively destroys it' (1985: 4). The threat or previous experience of violence silences people who fear further violence.

Fear of being a victim of violence pervades all the inhabitants of a city. However, the impact is not equally distributed throughout the city's geographic area. The poor, for example, are disproportionately victimised (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002). Green (1994: 227), in writing about Guatemala, argues that fear 'penetrat[es] the social memory' and, thus, rather than being an acute, individualised response, becomes a 'chronic condition'. Such an understanding of fear as linked to violence evidences the complexity of the rubric of insecurity, violence and fear within which the occupants of San Luis Potosí and los Altos de Cazucá exist. In these communities, everyday life is uncertain; while occupants can anticipate violence and insecurity, they cannot predict it. Michael Taussig calls such situations 'the nervous system': 'illusions of order, congealed by fear' (1992: 2) where social life is defined by constant unease, and 'attention towards change in the shape of possible acts of power and social forces' (Vigh 2009: 422). Vigh (2009: 422) explains that the nervous system in Taussig's configuration refers to both an unbalanced system (one that acts nervously) and a 'sensory faculty, constantly focused on movement and necessarily feeling its way through unsettled environments'.

Thus, the violences and insecurity of these environments and the fear and pain provoked are not experienced as acute or isolated episodes. Violence and fear here can be understood as a chronic condition, never *normalised* but as an expected part of daily life. It is important to emphasise violence is not a *totalising* experience – people find multiple ways of responding to and resisting the totalisation of violence, as we discuss below – but part of an ongoing, daily existence, to be managed like chronic pain or malady.

Navigation of everyday violence

The experience of multiple forms of violence and the accompanying fear create an insecure topography, one which people must navigate in their everyday lives. In this, we forward the specific idea of 'navigation' of violence, as distinct from 'coping' or 'normalising' violence. We take the idea from Vigh (2009: 420) who engages the idea of 'social navigation', understood as a concept that:

... highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along.

If we conceive of those impacted by violence and insecurity not as individuals fixed within a landscape in which they are battered by external forces of violence – structural, direct, cultural – but, rather, as individuals and collectives who move through and between an insecure, threatening topography, and who *navigate* social relationships, insecure terrain and unpredictable violence, we recognise that those impacted by violence are not passive. Although they lack structural power to effect large scale change, their everyday navigation is vital to maintaining daily life and resisting violence beyond their control.

Navigation, as Vigh conceives of it, is not only topographical but also temporal. Social navigation 'encompasses both the assessment of the dangers and possibilities of one's present position as well as the process of plotting and attempting to actualise routes into an uncertain and changeable future' (Vigh 2009: 425). This relies on a notion of radical interactivity, of 'motion within motion' that involves 'implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world' (Guyer 2007: 409). It is important to recognise that the landscape, the topography, in which people are navigating is similarly not fixed but constantly shifting. Navigation, in its Latin origins refers to wayfaring on the sea (Vigh 2009) and this gives us an analogy that is useful in

imagining the shifting, swelling, *choppy*, even *stagnant*, ocean of everyday life navigated by individuals and communities. Lefebvre (1991: 91-92) argues for a similar conceptualisation of our social relations and spaces as 'complex mobilities' that form 'convergence[s] of waves and currents'. This is not to minimise the crucial fact that, to extend the metaphor, some individuals have better vessels or find themselves on calmer seas. The 'intensity and visibility of our navigational efforts', argues Vigh, is dependent on 'the speed and/or opacity of social change and our ability to control oncoming movement' (2009: 430). Structural forces can limit this; however, knowledge of a local topography and temporality of violence and insecurity can enable better navigation.

We forward this notion of navigation of everyday violence, adopted from Vigh (2009) combined with others, to recognise that those affected by violence and fear are not without capacity to respond, resist and reform their everyday 'seascapes'. Using this notion, which builds from a scaffold of key work in the area of everyday violences and social suffering, we now turn to explore how this manifests in the communities of los Altos de Cazucá and San Luis de Potosí.

Everyday expertise: San Luis Potosí and los Altos de Cazucá

The violence(s) that surround

In both Colombia and Mexico participants have a fraught relationship with the institutions of the state *and* illegal actors. While the police are present in both communities, individuals expressed strong reservations about seeking their help and, in both sites, explained their distrust of agents of the state who frequently not only fail to provide security but often act in ways which exacerbate the insecurity of people. In los Altos de Cazucá most participants mentioned unpredictability of the police and, in San Luis Potosí, respondents tried to avoid having to interact or be confronted with state forces. In Cazucá, a conversation with two young women included the following exchange:

Laura (aged 17 years): ... the police are useless here on the hill (*la loma*). Their only use is as decoration. That's the truth.

Helen: So the police are part of the problem?

Laura: Sometimes ... Because if you go to them with a problem they just say 'so what do you want me to do about it?' and do nothing.

Rosa: (15): It is because the police now, are busy being thieves. They are just thieves dressed like police. Because they also rob you or say you need to pay for help from somewhere else.

Luis, in San Luis Potosí made a similar observation: 'When they become too old to be gang members and are not dead or in jail yet, they become police officers so they can legally fuck with people'.

In San Luis Potosí, as in cities in other countries in the region, few crimes are reported to state officials as a result of the high levels of impunity (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002). In general, only homicides and those crimes that require a judicial report to avoid accusation or to collect private insurance indemnities – as in the case of vehicle theft – are reported. The thousands of other crimes committed against persons are often not reported and do not find their way into the statistics. Crimes are not reported because people consider it useless. It will not help them recover their goods and they do not expect the guilty to be punished (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002). An important side effect of this is that, when official statistics are released, they only represent a fraction of the crimes that are committed and leave out the ones that are not reported. The assumption that crime statistics become totally unreliable in countries where law

enforcement is corrupt, inept or is itself prone to criminal acts is demonstrated here in an unmistakable way. The distrust of police and the state in San Luis Potosí is evident in this exchange with Vanessa:

Charlotte: Do you feel that the government is taking care of you?

Vanessa: Are you kidding, no! Just imagine, to me I am more ... and I live more ... Yes, it frightens me more and makes me more nervous to see a police officer than knowing someone is “bad” because of the abuse of power. Really the state does not give protection in any way, ever. When people come to visit I tell them to be careful, and to be even more careful with the police. There are thousands of cases of people who are in jail for things that never happened ... Or at least things that they passed. And that is what I fear most, because the narcos ... Well, as a woman I fear being raped, I guess ... But if they kill me, well at least then that’s it.

Living in a society afflicted by violent crime is one thing; having to also cope with state institutions that neither deliver nor are transparent, nor can be minimally trusted, aggravates people’s predicaments to such an extent that they avoid protection from the state rather than seek reliable information or protection from it.

In Cazucá the territory is contested by gangs associated with actors in the broader conflict and the security apparatus of the state. This creates severe insecurity for occupants (which oftentimes repeats the insecurity and violence from which they have fled). The police maintain a presence in the community via a van that is parked low on the hillside. Many occupants of Cazucá are deeply sceptical about police willingness to intervene, as indicated above. When the state does intervene, it is often sudden and violent, most often typified by night raids on suspected gang members’ houses that often spill over to violence on the street. In addition to the organised threat of gangs, violence against the property of people is common through robberies at gunpoint or, more commonly, knifepoint, both on the street and in the house, as well as through acts of vandalism. Specific manifestations of violence in an everyday context are a consequence of the ‘pervasive indifference, endemic oppression and sense of abjection that can make a person feel as though he or she is a mere object ... of no account ...’ (Jackson 2002: 44). Other research in Colombia notes that the police were identified as the main source of mistrust. Not only would they not provide ‘formal’ security (that they were meant to do as part of their job) but they would also extort people for bribes, cut deals with local gangs, and become complicit with violent occurrences (McIlwaine and Moser 2007: 131). An individual’s survival depends on their ‘ability to comprehend and manage the logics of bureaucratic processes and evade the official norm’ because the community runs via a ‘chain of legalities and illegalities’ that involve local authority figures and agents of the state (Picon, Arciniegas and Becerra 2006: 14). Such knowledge blurs the distinctions between Galtung’s (1990) forms of violence, with direct violence being enabled by the structural violence due to the abnegation of communities and corruption of officials. For occupants of both researched communities, violence is complex and this knowledge and management of the intertwined manifestations of violence is an aspect of the successful *navigation* of life by occupants in these communities.

Expected, but never normal(ised) violence

These experiences of violence and insecurity prompt a sense of fear with which people live. As Green argues, fear becomes a ‘chronic condition’ (1994: 230). In Mexico Vanessa observes how violence comes to be expected but never normalised:

There is a lot of indifference right now when it comes to violence, violence has become a part of us. One more corpse or murder, or to see the police on the street, it has become normal. I knew many friends who are now missing; many. But we

have become indifferent and have learned to live with it. Initially there was a lot of paranoia. Two years ago, for example, there was a motorcycle that made a noise and someone said that it was a shooting. Within seconds it was a mess, people were living in paranoia. We all have experiences, bad experiences. It has happened to us all directly or indirectly. The kind of situation that we are in is very ugly and I think that San Luis Potosí has changed a lot.

Fear breaks the bonds of community and thus violence, which ‘occurs in the contested space of intersubjectivity, [and thus] its most devastating effects are not on individuals *per se* but on the fields of interrelationships that constitute their lifeworlds’ (Jackson 2002: 39, emphasis in original). This breakage of bonds is also translated in a telling Mexican proverb, which states: ‘trust is good but distrust is better’. Proverbs in this sense are the type of cultural products that are also reflected in Galtung’s three pillars of violence, in which direct and structural violence translate into cultural violence. Within a conflict area the experience of these multiple violences are both structural and symbolic, and have profound effects on the respondent’s negotiation of their environment, their relationships and their ‘self’.

In Cazucá, Felipe (aged 16 years) feels the daily experience of violence impacts his ability to see himself as capable of effecting change: ‘The violence, well, I think it affects whoever it wants, no? ... I can’t do anything because the violence never leaves us’, while Brayan Alexander (aged 15 years) highlights how violence becomes normalised and thus difficult to change, despite its damaging consequences:

... and it’s that, there are so many problems and people can’t realise what is normal, like they kill someone and it is ‘normal’. It is because of this we need to solve these problems, the actual situation, because it can change but we need to realise what is wrong to change it.

Thus violence, both structural and direct, also has an emotional, fearful component. Occupants of both Cazucá and San Luis Potosí explain how those elements of insecurity and violence that they cannot control deeply affect their interactions in their daily lives and their understandings of self and community.

It is crucial to recognise that violence and insecurity in both these sites is not *normal* or *normalised*. Narratives that tend towards an explanation of place as inherently violent or predisposed to insecurity create and perpetuate an illusion that violence can and should come to be expected as a *normal part of life*. We strongly reject this reading; while many of the participants in both Colombia and Mexico spoke about the *everyday* violence and how it is an expected part of life, none felt that this was something normalised or which should be accepted as normal within their everyday lives.

Navigating everyday life

We have discussed the concept of navigation as a counter to merely ‘coping’ or ‘normalising’ violence. This idea, developed from Vigh’s work (2009) affirms that individuals are not fixed points on a landscape battered by violences but, rather, individuals in situations of insecurity who navigate topographically and temporally to minimise harm, avoid violence and mitigate fear. Furthermore, we argue that the occupants of los Altos de Cazucá and San Luis Potosí are in fact *skilled navigators*, and have expertise in these topographical and temporal navigations of violence. Occupants must ‘involve themselves in their social worlds’ (Guyer 2007) and thus must embody ‘motion within motion’ to respond to situations as they arise.

In los Altos de Cazucá, decisions by young people and their parents to take alternate paths to school because of information received by neighbours is an example of the skilled navigator at

work. Equally, the networks of information passed on from neighbour to neighbour in Colombia are evidence of sharing expertise to assist other's navigation: 'motion within motion'. While violence and fear can be oppressive, everyday life cannot cease. For Paola Andrea and Alejandro the most difficult thing about living in Cazucá is simply 'to survive [sobrevivir]'. In San Luis Potosí respondents similarly identified adapting many daily activities in attempts to better navigate and predict violence. These included trading expensive cars for cheaper models so as not to draw attention; asking family members to pick up respondents rather than taking a bus or a taxi; avoiding eye contact with police or strangers; avoiding talking publicly about the problems or salary, whether high or low; prompted by fear of extortions or kidnappings, changing social media names into fictional names; and women starting to dress more conservatively. In doing so, respondents skilfully navigate their environment through informed, rationalised and weighted decision-making. Adaptations to navigate violence so that the vital parts of daily life can continue thus occur in many small steps rather than a few big ones.

Martha, in San Luis Potosí, explained: 'you take precautions, right. Because you know that the violence is present but you cannot leave your routine because of fear. So you take your precautions and continue your life, even though something might happen. So you leave anyway and you hope that you return home'. Such navigation requires knowing about the community; about why people might accuse you of doing something; about who, what and which locations to avoid; and how to present yourself.

Activities might temporarily be suspended in the case of violent events that directly affect a community but daily life often resumes again promptly. This occurs not as a negation of risk or a lack of fear but rather the opposite; namely, the importance of the routines of everyday life. When Alejandro in los Altos de Cazucá was asked if he ever felt scared walking to or from school, he explained slowly and clearly – as if it should be self-evident – that he 'can't just stop going to school; how else will things ever change if [he] gives up?'. As a result, young people and their parents used information from neighbours as well as their own expertise about their community to mitigate risk and attempt safe navigation. As Claudia in San Luis Potosí explained:

You can't just stop living your life, you have needs. You have to go to work, you have to continue your life. You have to ... I mean you can learn to live with it ... You have to accept that it can happen to anyone at any time, you can always be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Despite the threat of violence, Claudia recognises that individuals must continue to move through their everyday environments, and that requires certain recognition that even a skilled navigator can fail to escape violence; the oppressive and unpredictable nature of structural and direct violences in these places can frustrate individual efforts.

In this way occupants of both locations sometimes restricted their own movements, avoiding going out. This seemed one of the most used navigation strategies and one of which respondents were consciously aware. Many of the respondents in San Luis Potosí, for example, argued that their lives had not changed, until they discussed precaution-taking. However, avoidance of leaving the home seemingly had an emotional impact that led to awareness about the strategy adapted, and many of the respondents had their own reflections about this. Carlos, for example, stated: 'San Luis is like the world upside down. The murderers, kidnappers and criminals walk freely in the streets and the citizens are locked in the prisons made up by their own houses'. In Colombia, participants also spoke of feeling 'stuck' in their houses, at times unable to leave. In these stories they are navigating dangerous waters by avoiding being on the streets at times when it is potentially risky. But navigation has consequences: people can feel trapped by the violence. Navigation, then, is not a straightforward 'solution' to violence or fear, but rather merely a way of responding to the best of an individual's ability.

Although a large part of the responses by participants in Colombia were about the difficulties and dangers they had become experts in navigating, there was a concurrent series of stories about resilience and hope that challenged a totalising narrative. These efforts stemmed from frustration with the duration of the civil war and the absence of state assistance. One woman in Cazucá described how, since being in this community, she had become more aware of her rights as a person, and noted that, 'because we are all in this [the uncertain situation of daily life] together,' she has built networks of advocacy and resilience with her neighbours and friends. The community of Cazucá, and other communities in Soacha have a history of social organising despite (or sometimes because of) threats of violence (Rodriguez et al. 2009), in particular the Madres de Soacha who protested the kidnap and killing of their sons by government forces at great personal risk (Mateo Medina 2013). This is a more fraught form of navigation because it exposes individuals to risk and retribution but it is also one that these individuals are uniquely skilled in and able to navigate. In the case of San Luis Potosí, where the respondents had been experiencing a steady and shocking increase in violence rather than the long duration of insecurity of those in Cazucá, the sentiments were less optimistic. However, a growing resistance accompanied by a desire to counter the violence through breaking the self-censorship was observed. Claudia, for instance, stated:

Violence is also something that has kept us quiet, I think it is time to talk, to say: you know what, I do not agree. I do not agree with these people who have kept us living in fear; living in fear is an ugly thing. I have certain rules. I do not answer phone numbers that I don't know on the phone or caller ID because they might extort you and sometimes when they ask my name, I give them another name because I have become very suspicious of people. It's like if you go somewhere cool and someone wants to talk to you and you just almost say nothing, things like that. Well it is true that Potosínos are a bit closed, but due to this we have become more hermetic. But I think it is time to talk.

Fear of violence can shut down individual's capacity to respond. However, in both these communities individuals identify and navigate towards visions of life that affirm capacity for change, although to very different degrees. Such examples demonstrate that navigation can be more than avoidance strategies and can, in some cases, result in organised resistance to violence and insecurity.

While navigation can allow an amelioration or avoidance of violence, it is undertaken because of pervasive and shifting waters that hold the promise of violence and involves risk to the individual. There are many ways in which occupants of both communities have become skilled at the topographical and temporal navigation of their daily lives. While some of these techniques allow for the mitigation of risk so that the vital aspects of daily life can continue to be carried out, at the same time individuals often feel trapped by fear, and avoid leaving the house or limit their movements. Navigation as a form of expression of resilience or hope was more evident in Cazucá because the duration of violence had meant occupants had built networks of capacity building in response to structural violence and state abnegation. In San Luis Potosí, however, respondents spoke less of resilience than of a fear that a new generation was growing up without ever having known peace and therefore not feeling a need to restore it. Fear and violence are not totalising narratives of either community, and skilled navigators wayfind with varying degrees of success on a day-to-day basis. Navigation enables individuals and communities to find ways of moving through and between the insecurity and fear.

Conclusion

Occupants of San Luis Potosí and Cazucá live in contexts of insecurity and risk. Their daily lives are impacted by experiences of insecurity and violence in different forms. Life in communities affected by violence is fraught and challenging but those who live daily in such places are not

inherently powerless victims. Instead they acquire knowledge from many sources – their own experiences; experiences of their neighbours, family and friends; news sources; and stories and rumours – and their ability to judge, ‘read’ the situation and use this information determines how they navigate their daily lives. This knowledge, vital in navigating the unpredictable waters of their communities, is a learned skill which enables manoeuvring in ways that minimise, avoid and mitigate risk and fear. For those outside these places, the environment may seem totalising and impossible to read. However, those who live there have learnt about the local topography and temporality of violence and insecurity through storytelling and experience. This has made them into skilled navigators who are able to read the currents, predict the weather, and set course to sail in these choppy waters. We suggested previously that such violence and fear is unable to be ‘cured’ but rather has to be managed like a chronic condition. It is this management that takes the form of temporal and spatial navigation through, at times, shifting unpredictable waters that makes the skilled navigator.

Violence is complex; it can appear in direct, structural and cultural forms (Galtung 1990), all of which impinge on the lifeworlds of individuals. However, to render an area inherently violent or assumptively predisposed to violence and insecurity flattens and limits understandings of such communities. We have argued through this paper, drawing on Vigh’s (2009) concept of a social navigator, that attention to people’s everyday lives and navigation strategies crucially resists totalising narratives and instead opens new entry points to theorising and responding to violence and fear. Complex violences, including direct violence by organised criminal groups, structural violence of the abnegation of communities or the loss of monopoly of force by the state, and the cultural violence in which assumptions and stereotypes exist about communities and individuals, are reoccurring experiences throughout the global South. We propose that the theoretical intervention we make here, illustrated by our work in Colombia and Mexico, is a starting point to think in more productive ways about violence, fear and the skilled navigation of everyday life. Recognising individuals as skilled navigators is crucial for understanding complex live experiences amidst violence.

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² Research that critiques the issues of academic work driven from the global North include Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s (2014) *Epistemologies of the South*, which argues Western understandings of the world are limited and limiting and forwards an epistemology of the South which rejects Northern epistemologies and grounds knowing in emancipatory action within the South; and Arturo Escobar’s (1995) *Encountering Development*, which encourages ethnographic approaches to explore ways of moving beyond neoliberal frameworks without claiming universality.

³ The contributors to the edited volume by McGee and Pearce (2009) explore in varied detail the complexities of researching violence and violence-affected communities. In the introduction Pearce (2009: 7-8) uses the term ‘navigate’ to describe the actions of the researcher in learning the ‘rules’ or practices of violence in the communities in which they work. We see our own work reflected in this discussion of navigation and becoming skilled; however, in neither situation did we ever fully overcome these obstacles and our navigation was always conditional and choppy. It is useful to include this reflexivity here, and acknowledge the work done by Pearce (2009), Baird (2009) and Wheeler (2009) in drawing it out explicitly in the aforementioned edited volume.

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